



# POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET

**Bernardo Sorj and Sergio Fausto**  
*Editors*

**PLATAFORMA  
DEMOCRÁTICA**



FUNDAÇÃO IFHC | CENTRO EDELSTEIN

# **POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET**

Plataforma Democrática ([www.plataformademocratica.org](http://www.plataformademocratica.org)) is an initiative of the Centro Edelstein de Pesquisas Sociais and the Fundação Fernando Henrique Cardoso, dedicated to strengthening democratic institutions and culture in Latin America through the pluralist debate of ideas on the social and political transformations in the region and worldwide.

Collection: The State of Democracy in Latin America

Directed by Bernardo Sorj (Centro Edelstein de Pesquisas Sociais) and Sergio Fausto (Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation)

Revision: John Wilkinson

Translation: Raymond Maddock

Cover: Brian Solis and Lincon Justo

Graphic design: Lisia Lemes

© Plataforma Democrática

© Bernardo Sorj and Sergio Fausto

São Paulo: Edições Plataforma Democrática, 2016

ISBN: 978-85-92661-01-4

The publication of this book was made possible with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundation, to whom we are extremely grateful. We also would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for supporting the English translation of the book. We would like to stress that these institutions bear no responsibility for the opinions expressed in the book.



All or part of this work may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes free of charge as long as the original publication and its authors are duly acknowledged.

# **POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET**

Bernardo Sorj  
Sergio Fausto

*Editors*





# Summary

---

**09 Preface**

*Bernardo Sorj and Sergio Fausto*

**11 Online/offline: the new fabric of political activism**

*Bernardo Sorj*

**37 Argentina**

*Rocío Annunziata, Emilia Arpini, Tomás Gold and Bárbara Zeifer*

**111 Brazil**

*Rodrigo Savazoni and Kalinca Copello*

**167 Chile**

*Rayén Condeza, Marcelo dos Santos, Alonso Lizama and Paz Vásquez*

**233 Colombia**

*María Paula Martínez and Estefania Avella*

**287 Ecuador**

*Orazio Belletini and Adriana Arellano*

**351 Venezuela**

*Francine Jácome*



# Preface

---

In this book we continue Plataforma Democrática's efforts to contribute towards the debate on the paths of democracy in Latin America and worldwide, focusing on the use made of the new means of communication by political activists and how these in turn influence the ways in which politics is conducted.

Contemporary democracies face enormous challenges: weakened political parties, global processes that redefine the national State's possibilities for action, social inequality and distrust of politicians. All these areas — and others not mentioned — , are colored and influenced by the new communication media.

This book contains 19 case studies taken from six South American countries, presenting a broad range of innovative experiences and their impacts on the ways in which civil society, political parties and governments are organized and act. The cases of cyberactivism analyzed indicate that none of them represents a “silver bullet” — an experience capable of resolving the multiple challenges faced in constructing higher quality, more robust democratic institutions. But they all indicate new possibilities and new challenges for the development of virtuous relations between the traditional forms of participation (both in civil society organizations and in political parties) and activism in the virtual space.

We are at the beginning of a new era, and there is much to learn, to monitor and to analyze. Without ignoring the fact that every attempt at synthesis is partial and temporary, we hope that this book may contribute to

the debate on a subject crucial for the future of democracy. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge the important contribution made by the participants in the workshops in which the preliminary versions of the texts on the diverse countries studied were presented.

**Bernardo Sorj and Sergio Fausto**  
Directors - Plataforma Democrática

# Online/off-line: the new fabric of political activism

Bernardo Sorj<sup>1</sup>

---

This book is dedicated to understanding and analyzing the transformations in political activism in Latin America produced by use of the new communication media. The different chapters are based on the hypothesis developed in a previous work,<sup>2</sup> in which we argued that:

1. We may distinguish three major waves in the formation of civil society in Latin America in the XX and XXI century. The first wave comprised organizations that represented broad social sectors, generally grouped around social and economic or professional interests, whose leaders, in democratic regimes, were chosen by their members. The second wave, whose typical format was that of the NGO, consists of myriad organizations, mostly small, whose legitimacy is sustained by the moral value of the causes they advocate (such as human rights, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, environment etc.) and not a mandate granted by a determined audience. Lastly, the third wave

---

1 Full professor of Sociology, UFRJ (ap), Director of the Centro Edelstein de Pesquisas Sociais and the Plataforma Democrática project.

2 Sorj, B y Sergio, F., *Internet y Movilizaciones Sociales: Transformaciones del Espacio Público y de la Sociedad Civil*, São Paulo: Plataforma Democrática, 2015. Available at: [http://plataformademocratica.org/Arquivos/Internet\\_y\\_Movilizaciones\\_Sociales\\_Transformaciones\\_del\\_Espacio\\_Publico\\_y\\_de\\_la\\_Sociedad\\_Civil.pdf](http://plataformademocratica.org/Arquivos/Internet_y_Movilizaciones_Sociales_Transformaciones_del_Espacio_Publico_y_de_la_Sociedad_Civil.pdf)

is constituted within the virtual world, comprising citizens who issue opinions, mostly of a personal nature, on the social networks. None of these waves eliminate their predecessor; they overlap and influence each other mutually, with each new wave tending to occupy spaces of the previous ones, both in terms of organizational format and in the content of the messages they convey.

2. The impact of the new virtual world may not be dissociated from broader social processes in society and in the political system which, in turn, are affected by the new forms of communication. For example, the social transformations — in the world of work and consumption, individualization processes, the crisis in the ideological frameworks which structured political life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the weakening of political parties — date from before the emergence of communication via the Internet, which is influenced by these preexisting trends, while at the same time modifying them.
3. The bibliography on the effects of the virtual world counterposes “pessimists” and “optimists”. The optimists stress that the communication technologies open up new possibilities for horizontal communication among citizens, diminish communication transaction costs in the public space, accelerate communication and eliminate physical distance enabling people and groups to issue opinions and establish dialogues on an unprecedented scale, reducing the relative importance of the old communication media and opening up new alternative information channels for citizens. The pessimists believe that impacts of the Internet are the impoverishment and polarization of political culture and debate, the destruction of privacy — providing the State and companies with access to databanks which enable the manipulation and control of individuals —, and the illusion of

click activism, which would be a form of catharsis producing little of consequence. They also state that the basic power structures, be it in the offline or online world, remain the same as in the past, dominated by large companies and by political power. We consider that both positions indicate real phenomena and that cyberactivism is influenced by both tendencies.

4. Online and offline worlds cannot be dissociated. The offline world plays a key role in the virtual space, whether through its capacity to intervene directly in the social networks, or through the appropriation of movements of opinion and mobilizations generated and/or promoted by the virtual world. As such, the virtual world and the offline world are profoundly interlinked. The analysis of how they relate, be it through offline actors who initiate virtual movements or intervene in virtual communication, be it at later phases, when the political dynamic is redirected to other spaces, occupies a central place in the studies in this book.

5. In a way, the virtual public space has deepened but also modified certain tendencies, already present in the second wave of civil society, of political fragmentation and the distancing of society from party political life. The new forms of communication tend to eliminate the separation between the public and the private merging the subjective and the public, the personal and the collective, and valuing messaging in which individual malaise and denunciation predominate. If the first wave of civil society was built on political ideologies with visions of the whole of society, and the second around the defense of the most diverse rights, both were sustained by the arguments and world views of a desirable society. In the new communication format dominant in the virtual world, there is a predominance of short messages (or



images) related primarily to contextual situations that mobilize essentially reactive feelings and attitudes.

6. One of the major challenges for the Internet as a public space based on standards of civility is its anonymous nature, that is, the difficulty or impossibility of identifying the authors of messages. An ever-growing number of messages circulate on the Internet produced by robots and trolls (generally professional agents provocateurs, who do not present themselves as such). They are specialized in producing distorted “information” which is presented as if having being written by an ordinary member of the public. These messages are highly effective because they are elaborated based on the preconceptions, affinities and sensitivities of the readers.

In the research presented in this book, we critically confront these hypotheses by means of the analysis of specific cases in order to develop and modify them in the light of new experiences.

The texts analyze 19 case studies in six countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela):

Country	Case studies
Argentina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ni Una Menos</li> <li>• Change.org</li> <li>• Partido de la Red</li> </ul>
Brazil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet Civil Framework</li> <li>• Avaaz</li> <li>• June 2013 Protests</li> <li>• Mídia Ninja</li> </ul>

Chile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student movement</li> <li>• New constitution</li> <li>• Alto Maipo</li> </ul>
Colombia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peasant march</li> <li>• Marcha pela vida</li> <li>• Slutwalk</li> </ul>
Ecuador	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YASunidos</li> <li>• Quito, YO me Apunto</li> <li>• 30-S</li> </ul>
Venezuela	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2014 protests</li> <li>• #SOSVenezuela</li> <li>• Efecto Cocuyo and Crónica Uno</li> </ul>

Here we present some general conclusions based on a comparative analysis, with no intention to synthesize or to substitute for the reading of the chapters in this book, which contain a wealth of information. The case studies were used to illustrate specific topics, although each one extrapolates the field in which it is discussed: street protests, consultation platforms in which the public's opinion is requested, campaigns requesting support or online petitions, changes in the traditional forms of organization of civil society and political parties, and the place of traditional communication media.

It should be stressed that the processes whereby the new offline/online reality is being woven are in an experimental field still in its infancy. The social actors are learning how to use these new instruments, and any effort at generalization, such as the one presented here, requires constant review and updating.

## Direct participation vs. delegation

One particularly interesting case is that of the Partido de la Red (Web Party) in Argentina. Organized in 2012 and based on a small group of people — from the technology and human sciences areas —, the party's proposal was to promote the web as an instrument for deliberation and decision making to which representatives elected for legislative mandates should be submitted. The party does not have a program of substantive proposals, with the exception of promoting use of the web for citizens to deliberate and decide. Therefore, the Partido de la Red may be considered both an organization whose mission is the reform of the political system by means of promoting a democracy with plebiscitary characteristics (although its website speaks of a “hybrid between direct democracy and representative democracy”) and a political party which seeks to occupy positions of power and whose representatives will define their positions on an ad hoc basis, according to the decisions of the majority of the voters, case by case (according to the Partido de la Red, each consultation would involve all citizens, not just party members.) .

As the article shows, the Partido de la Red is discovering the offline world and local realities, where concrete problems known to the public may generate interest and mobilize more immediate responses, as well as the importance of face-to-face coexistence. As the author of the study mentions, quoting one of the party members: “online and offline are interlinked universes”. The party is undergoing an internal process of reflection on the limitations of its experience. However, it is far from reaching all the conclusions: political representation does not occur through collecting individual preferences and transmitting them, without intermediaries, to the political system; decision making, and even more so, the elaboration of programs requires a process of deliberation and negotiation that involves various levels of representation, not being possible to eliminate the intermediary representative institutions, at the risk of subjection to authoritarian manipulation.

The idealizers of the party more recently created an independent foundation, with a professional management and structure, which develops technological resources (software) that promote civic participation. These resources are made available to all interested parties and politicians.

The Partido de la Red has a small number of members and has only participated in one election, in the city of Buenos Aires, without electing any representatives. Perhaps the fact that it did not elect any representatives may be positive, because it gives them more time to further develop and refine their proposal, and to develop, through their foundation, new technological instruments aligned with the party's mission.

New technologies may be important instruments for democratizing and strengthening political parties, and not just for bypassing them. The Partido de la Red is an interesting case because it sought to radicalize the idea of direct democracy and soon came up against the limits imposed by political life in complex societies. From a practical standpoint, the party's proposal as an organization seeking to occupy institutional positions continues to raise questions about how it would function in practice. Might a party which does not have a substantive program, except for the public consultation process, be considered viable or desirable by electors? What degree of discretion would the party representatives have in the formulation and negotiation of laws? What would happen in cases in which participation in the online consultations was very low? Even were it to be decided, at a determined moment, that the party should have a substantive platform, could this be formulated by grouping the proposals receiving the most votes online, without concern for internal coherence and the practical feasibility of the result obtained? And if party members do assume executive positions in the government, what will happen when they have to take decisions that are not approved by the majority of the public but which are fundamental to ensure governance or the protection of minorities? Is it possible to organize a mass party without intermediary institutions that have decision making power? Is it viable, at least given the

current state of technology, to organize a party without offline forums for deliberation? How to guarantee the formation of party leaders? Is there a risk that the founders will end up constituting an oligarchy and, directly or indirectly, become the controllers of the party?

Setting up a “hybrid” format, with elements of direct participation and representation, is the major challenge for the virtual world in its relationship with the world of politics. By not recognizing the problem, there is the risk that forms of direct participation will obscure rather than improve the transparency of decision making mechanisms. The lack of answers to the questions above does not diminish the relevance of the Partido de la Red's experience, which is posited as an experiment rather than a finished project. Moreover, some of its directors do recognize its limitations. In addition the contribution made by its foundation to the development of tools can benefit all the parties and politicians.

To the extent that politics goes beyond from catch-all phrases, indictments or simple yes/no answers, it becomes necessary to combine virtual and face-to-face participation, generating dynamic formats that enable effective mechanisms for the discussion, negotiation and formulation of proposals, in particular in areas that imply a certain level of complexity, technical knowledge, negotiation of interests and conflicts of values. Overcoming the idealization of a virtual world as a democratic space in contrast with an unequal and hierarchical offline world is the first step towards developing answers that enable the consolidation of a new online/offline democratic fabric.

## Online support campaigns

Online support campaigns for specific causes represent the continuation of a long democratic tradition of support for manifestos or petitions requesting changes in legislation. The use of signatures collected online is still not recognized legally in any of the countries in the region. Alternative ways of using this means of online participation to obtain effective results, must, therefore, be explored. In subsequent chapters, we present three case studies of online support campaigning organizations: Avaaz in Brazil, Change.org in Argentina and YASunidos in Ecuador. Avaaz in Brazil and Change.org in Argentina are global organizations of foreign origin and have existed for a number of years. In these countries they have the largest number of followers (people who have signed at least one petition), in absolute numbers in the case of Brazil and relative to the size of the population in Argentina. YASunidos is an isolated experience related to a specific problem.

Avaaz has as its mission the creation of “a better world” and proposes themes such as combating corruption, poverty, armed conflict and climate change.<sup>3</sup> Run in Brazil by a small team of professionals, its principal modus operandi is to seek the highest possible number of supporters for its causes and then to send petitions to public authorities. Generally speaking, questions of global reach or related to international events predominate on the home page of its website. The petitions, written in the form of arguments in defense of a cause, may be proposed by community members, but the team has the power to decide on the priority causes and, most importantly, on the use of its email database, which is not open to the public, to promote these causes.

Avaaz has generated controversy. It is criticized by some for its “click-activism” (a lazy way of engaging in politics) and for being more concerned with garnering a large number of signatures rather than obtaining practical results. The Brazilian case study indicates that these criticisms should be qualified.

---

3 See <<http://www.avaaz.org/po/about.php>>.

Although for some people supporting a cause through Avaaz may produce a cathartic sensation of having done their duty, for others it is a way of getting in touch with and becoming aware of current events, and for many activists offers another field of action for issues of public interest. The Brazilian case shows that at moments of great mobilization, such as the street protests in June 2013, Avaaz constituted an additional resource available on the Internet. In another case, involving the Ficha Limpa Law (to exclude candidates with criminal records from elections), Avaaz provided significant support in the mobilization to get the law approved.

Analysis of Change.org in Argentina shows a very different *modus operandi* to that of Avaaz, although they both have a professional team with the power to prioritize each petition on their websites and control the use of their email lists to promote causes. Change.org does not propose pursuit of a specific agenda. It may carry multiple petitions related to the same subject or even petitions presenting opposite positions. Instead of major international causes, the Change.org petitions are related to local problems faced by individuals or by groups supporting them and are presented in the form of testimonies of the event experienced. Another key difference is the way the support received is processed. Instead of sending a petition at the end of the signature collection process as Avaaz does, each manifestation of support generates an email which is sent directly to the decision maker responsible for the possible solution of the problem, frequently a mid-level employee as opposed to a high-echelon authority.

Change.org's large number of successful campaigns may be attributed to a number of factors, such as the concrete nature of its demands, the format of its petitions, which include the actual experiences of people living the problem, and the effectiveness with which it applies direct pressure on those in a position to provide a solution by sending them emails. Although to an extent they deal with varied audiences, since Change.org does not promote a specific agenda, the effectiveness of its model is unquestionable. In dealing with themes based

on the daily dramas faced by individuals, identification occurs more through emotional appeal than through universal principles and values. This, however, may also constitute Change-org's most vulnerable point. By promoting solutions for situations that frequently deal with personal cases, the success of a petition does not always resolve the problem for all the people affected by the same problem. In some situations personal cases are prioritized and solved to the detriment of others, thus tending to favor the individual rather than the collectivity.

Both cases also reveal an important characteristic or problem of the political culture of the virtual world. In a manner similar to practices in private companies and in political marketing, large online campaign organizations work with profiling. In other words, in order not to overload their followers with an excessive number of emails on the most diverse subjects, these organizations seek to outreach individual according to thematic affinities demonstrated on previous occasions. Therefore, just as in commerce or in political marketing, use of these profiles results in the cognitive solipsism of the internauts, who only receive information (or advertising) based on their preferences, restricting contact with other matters.

The third example of online campaign organizations, the YASunidos collective, is an experience of mobilization in Ecuador to ban the exploitation of oil in the Yasuní National Park. This was supported initially by president Correa, on the condition that the international system would compensate the country financially for forgoing exploitation. Later, when this proved not to be feasible, the president changed his position to one of support for the exploitation of natural resources in the region. , When YASunidos conducted a wide-reaching online and offline campaign to collect signatures in support of a public consultation on the issue, it had to face opposition from the Presidency of the Republic and government members of parliament. The National Electoral Council invalidated a large number of signatures collected offline and the public consultation was prohibited.



To a certain extent, online petitions seek to compensate a deficit in the legitimacy of second wave NGOs, which have neither a mandate nor the explicit support of a specific audience. In this regard, they can be seen to be playing a complementary role. The challenge is to leverage the synergies between the two formats, in spite of the different logics involved: the ongoing long-term work done by the NGOs dedicated to specific questions, and the quantitative impact and the shorter-term approach to enormous variety of issues associated with online platforms. These platforms so face up to the problem of “democratic deficit which, similar, as we shall see, to the “consultation platforms “: generally, the “founders” of a platform, website or virtual community have control over how it works in ways that are not always transparent.

## Consultation platforms

Consultation platforms are dedicated to promoting debate and proposals on specific themes. In this book we present two experiences: one from Brazil , referring to the formulation of legislation for the Internet, and another from Chile, related to the country's new constitution.

The proposal of a Brazilian member of Congress to regulate the Internet unleashed a negative reaction among users and civil society organizations, that considered it to be repressive and at the service of economic groups. In 2009, the Ministry of Justice commissioned a university research center to elaborate a platform to receive inputs from the public, civil society organizations and businesses. The participants in the platform numbered a few thousand. The new proposal, elaborated by the Ministry of Justice based on the contributions received, called the “Internet Civil Framework”, was approved by the Brazilian parliament in 2014 and is currently awaiting regulation.

In the context of discussing a new constitution for Chile under the current Bachelet government, a series of platforms have been created to inform, educate, promote and stimulate public debate and support for various causes. None of these is aimed at elaborating a proposal for the constitution. These activities are complemented by offline actions, such as seminars and activities within the education system. The government, universities, think tanks, foundations and civil society sectors are responsible for the diverse platforms. The impact of these efforts is not clearly measurable and, if we take as a reference one of the main initiatives, *#TuConstitución*, promoted by former president Ricardo Lagos' Fundación Democracia y Desarrollo, the number of people involved is limited. Another dimension tending to fragment the efforts is the diversity of initiatives, which, to a certain extent, have common goals.

The limitations presented by the platforms do not diminish their role in diffusion and experimentation — each presents architectures that use new formats aimed at facilitating participation in virtual spaces. It should also be remembered that the process of elaborating the Chilean constitution is at an early phase and that, possibly, new forms of public consultation and participation using the new communication media might emerge.

The Brazilian case of the Internet Civil Framework is an example of productive collaboration between the government and civil society. This was a mechanism which was effective in diminishing the weight of the lobbies which exert direct influence on the Executive and members of parliament in the formulation of public policy. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that the document represent society's opinion. The consultation served to redistribute the power of influence among the elite groups. Due to the mobilization of alternative groups, the government expanded its room for maneuver, elaborating a more legitimate proposal. The debate on the elaboration of a new Chilean constitution follows a different

model, in which the diverse initiatives pursue varied goals and there is no unified space or single platform for receiving proposals and conveying them to a determined public authority.

## Street protests

The street protests that have occurred in recent years, in the United States, in Spain, in the Middle East and in Brazil, have given rise to an extensive bibliography on a new generation of “the outraged” who, thanks to the new communication media, can communicate freely, horizontally and instantaneously, at times generating protests that put thousands of people on the streets.

The Internet certainly enables instantaneous, horizontal, mass communication calls to action via hashtags and viral messages and images spread in real time. Nevertheless, we should not forget that social explosions have permeated human history and their main characteristic is their unpredictability. Explanations for their possible causes are only encountered afterwards. In the case of the street protests in recent years, the novelty, that is the use of the Internet, has some analysts from understanding the dynamics of the processes that precede and, principally, follow the protests, in part due to the lack of a greater historical time horizon. It is worth emphasizing, therefore, and this is valid for the theme as a whole, that the historians of the present, that is, the sociologists and political scientists, should certainly be attentive to the new, but without forgetting the lessons of the past. The surprise of many analysts with the ramifications of the Arab Spring, or the limited immediate consequences of Occupy Wall Street, which had been hailed by some as the beginning of a new era of democratic participation and which others today disparage as movements incapable of changing history, is the result of a vision that no longer takes into account historical experience. Social explosions

recur in all societies, and their developments have always been controlled or channelized by organizations that have known how to take advantage of or neutralize new situations.

The cases analyzed in this book highlight the variety of factors which have preceded protests, the events themselves and, where possible, their consequences. The case of the Chilean student movement shows the existence of a group that worked hard on offline organization before going to the streets. The movement's demands were incorporated into the program of the Concertación coalition's candidate for president that won the election, and a number of leaders of the movement, which declined sharply in size after the elections, were integrated into the political system as candidates of political parties or members of the government.

In Brazil, the dynamics of the protests in June 2013 were very different. Initiated by a group organized offline comprising mostly radical students, the Movimento Passe Livre took its first steps in 2005, advocating improved urban mobility and free public transport. The protests in June 2013 in São Paulo spread rapidly throughout the country incorporating and being swallowed by the new causes defended by the protesters. Denunciations against corruption, the waste of public money on organizing the World Cup and the poor quality of public services became the main motifs of the protests, carried out without the involvement of political parties and with frequent abuse directed at politicians. Although the text here concentrates on the events in 2013, they may be considered a first phase, which had its continuation in the protests of March and April 2015, now directed fundamentally against president Dilma Rousseff and in favor of the impeachment process. In this new phase, greater space is occupied by organized offline nuclei with a political identification, in general conservative and/or pro-market, who claim to be the main drivers of the protests and seek to present themselves as their spokespersons.

In Venezuela, the protests in 2014 occur within an extremely polarized political context. Driven by growing ill-feeling towards the Bolivarian

government, the protests were convoked via social networks in a decentralized manner. Without the participation of established NGOs and in a context of strong government repression and internal divisions among the opposition, they gradually lost momentum. The political polarization and the street protests reached the Venezuelan diaspora, leading to the emergence of a website and a Facebook page entitled SOS Venezuela. This initiative by Venezuelan activists, many of whom are outside the country, was aimed at attracting international attention to the disorder installed by the government. With the end of the protests, this activity declined, but the SOS Venezuela brand remains active on social networks.

The cases analyzed show a variety of forms of articulation between the political system, the offline groups and the street protests, in which the new communication media play a central role in mustering participants for demonstrations. In Chile, the party-political system proved capable of absorbing the demands and the leaders generated by the student movement. Led by militants mostly from smaller left-wing parties they were able to make their mark on the winning candidate's government program and shift the axis of Chilean politics. The Brazilian case indicates the existence of a malaise in highly varied social sectors (which can be defined as components of a broadly defined middle class), dissatisfied with the political system and parties. Its impact was to mark a turning point for Brazilian politics, in which the streets were taken over by sectors dissatisfied with the government, but also with the political parties and politicians. Only the future will be able to evaluate the importance of this movement, whether it was the effective starting point for major changes in the political system or a social explosion which political and social actors adeptly took advantage of. Lastly, in Venezuela we have a political polarization in which the government plays a central role and various

sectors of the opposition who seek respectively to repress, capture or pacify the street protests. It was a chapter in a broader political drama, the product and reflex of radicalization on the part of the opposition and government.

Are we, in certain cases of street protests, witnessing new social movements or are they “explosions of public opinion”, incapable of consolidation, which does not mean, however, they do not leave marks on society and on their participants? Probably it depends on each case.

## New forms of civil society

There is no single format for defining the impact and relationship between the first and second waves of civil society and the new one under configuration in cyberspace. At the risk of simplification, we may identify a number of different models.

In some of the cases presented in this book, such as the student and the Alto Maipo movements in Chile, the peasant movement in Colombia, the protests in Venezuela and the various platforms related to the elaboration of the Chilean constitution, the actors are first and second wave organizations which use virtual media to reach a broader audience.

A different format combining “old” and “new” politics is provided by the *Marcha pela Vida* (March for Life), promoted by the Colombian politician Antanas Mockus, involving a call to action via the social networks to participate in an event defined as super-partisan. This call, made by a politician to the population as well as to other party leaders, achieved only relative success because, despite its repercussion in the social networks, it was unable to fully differentiate the field of personal party political interests from a message intended to be ecumenical.

Many of the case studies demonstrate a certain incapacity on the part of the traditional NGOs and/or an active effort not to get them involved. In the

case of the *Marcha de Las Putas* (Slutwalk) in Colombia and *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina, we see the emergence of a feminist mobilization that takes place without the involvement of the established organizations dedicated to this cause. Evidently building on a century of struggles for women's rights, the new activists have taken to the streets to defend their "human rights" within a vision that is no longer part of a defined "feminist" discourse, but rather of individuals demanding respect as autonomous human beings.

In the case of the *Ni Una Menos* march in Argentina, the mobilization originated with female journalists opposed to femicide and violence against women, receiving support from known figures in the fields of communication, culture and politics, but NGOs as institutions did not play a relevant role. The success of this mobilization led politicians to capitalize on the event for their own benefit, associating themselves with it through declarations and images of support.

The origin of the Slutwalk in Colombia was more unusual. Promoted by a little known female human rights militant and inspired by a protest held in Canada, it unleashed a movement in the social networks, gaining widespread adhesion and promoting a protest in which a varied range of slogans focused on freedom for people. Held without support from feminist organizations, it was only on a second march that the movement gained the adhesion of one NGO, which incorporated causes of its own interest (the treatment of prostitutes), but participation was now lower. In a later development, the promoter of the marches created her own NGO to ensure the continuity of the initiative after her public visibility waned.

The last of these case studies, *Quito, Yo me Apunto*, presents the experience of a virtual space created in the social networks, with the later inclusion of offline encounters, aimed at developing proposals to improve the quality of life in the Ecuadorian capital and which, through contacts with city authorities, has obtained tangible results. The initiative ended after a change in command in the local government and the systematic disruptive actions of

trolls aimed at its Facebook page, possibly associated with political interests.

These new forms of organization present strengths and weaknesses. In the case of Quito, Yo me Apunto and the Slutwalk, worthy of note is the role played by a single person, this person's power over the initiative, and its dependence on this individual. In the case of the peasant march or Alto Maipo, referred to earlier, the support received from civil society proved important, but largely, it did dissipate in a great extent.

If they do not have the vices of bureaucratization, since they do not plan on continue self-reproducing, the new formats of civil society present fragilities which make permanence over time and the accumulation of knowledge difficult. In this new setting, we have collectives substituting organizations, in which decision-making appears to be the product of open consultation, but which also give the leaders, generally the original promoters of the initiative, an ample margin of discretionary power. NGOs oriented, from their inception, to action in the virtual world, with the objective of garnering support for causes, such as Avaaz and Change.org, address the most diverse subjects, but do not have as their goal a constant dedication to advocating, analyzing or reflecting on specific causes. Generally speaking, we may observe that the NGO traditional format is to a certain extent being questioned by the political culture and by the forms of participation promoted by the virtual world. The new social figure of the movements associated to the Internet is that of the "indignants", or the "outraged" with "collectives" substituting for organizations. The outraged refer to a broad category, which reflects a political culture built on democratic values, but is formed by individuals who do not have a consistent political identity. As a result, the creation of ties which endure beyond the critical moment of action, and the development of an agenda on what would be desirable, are inhibited,



and many times the either turn their backs on or promote an attitude of distrust (to use an euphemism) towards politicians and institutional politics. The “collectives” emphasize the democratic and fluid nature of this new type of organization, where there are no hierarchies or leaders, which as we have seen, is generally not confirmed in practice.

## The role of the traditional communication media

The case studies show that the cyberactivists make an effort to ensure their causes have repercussion in the traditional communication media, although many of them are at times extremely critical of the commercial press. To a certain extent, the traditional media still maintain a capacity to legitimate (or not) the information that circulates in the social networks and/or the social mobilizations unleashed by them. At least two factors explain the ongoing importance of these media: (1) For a large part of the population, the traditional media continue to be the most reliable source of information; (2) However broad its reach, communication via cyberspace is fragmented and still impacts a limited audience.

Relations between the new virtual space and the traditional media are sometimes tense, in some cases, cross-pollination occurs and in others, divergence may prevail. In this book, we present three case studies where the traditional media are overtaken by events and dissatisfaction with them makes room for new formats of professional journalism. In Venezuela, government repression of the communication media led groups of professional journalists to create digital news vehicles: *Efecto Cocuyo* and *Crónica Uno*. During the June 2013 protests in Brazil, *Mídia Ninja*, formed by a group that promotes alternative journalism, was transformed into a channel for transmitting images, in particular of police repression, influencing broad sectors of society, in particular young people. Lastly, analysis of the events on September 30, 2010 in Ecuador during a

police revolt, show how the public started using the social networks, in particular Twitter, to obtain real time information about events, when traditional media websites went off the air and the government took control measures.

## Dependence on commercial social networks

All the case studies indicate that cyberactivism occurs fundamentally through the social networks, in particular Facebook and Twitter, and by means of the transmission of images, principally via YouTube.<sup>4</sup> Even the most ardent critics of these networks use them systematically. Facebook is the main medium for disseminating rather more elaborate messages and contents, and Twitter is particularly useful for transmitting specific information on events and for disseminating watchwords.

The traditional criticism of the mass media claimed that communication was monopolized by the owners, which influenced their agendas. On the other hand, face to face communication has traditionally played an important role, frequently in opposition to the traditional media.

To the extent that large part of the communication taking place in the world occurs via the virtual networks, a new conformation of the public space emerges. A great part of communication, including communication that was formerly conducted face-to-face, now takes place via the social networks, which do not control the content of the messages, but which define the format through which information is organized and later used for commercial purposes. In this way, the format of the networks is directly related to the commercial goal of obtaining as much information as possible about people and their preferences, building user profiles that have great commercial value. In the case of Facebook, for example, this means that the “time line” is a mosaic composed of the most diverse messages, the subject of which changes from second to second and

---

4 Possibly future case studies will indicate the importance of tools such as WhatsApp.

which, in the best of hypotheses, leads to banal comments and “likes” and a mixture of the most diverse subjects, in general banal. Twitter, on the other hand, with its short messages, is far from being a space for public debate.

In short, if on the one hand the social networks enable horizontal communication, on the other, they are structured in a way that does not favor debate based on argumentation, with simplification and polarization predominating. As we have seen, platforms that pursue the development of a more profound exchange are still taking their first steps and have not yet reached a broader public.

## Conclusions: new technologies and the future of democracy

The public arena is not an empty “space” which precedes its occupation by social agents. On the contrary, it is constituted—in both form and content—by political and social organizations and diverse forms of social participation and political communication. As we have argued in this chapter, we are confronting a moment of inflection in which this public space is assuming new forms as the products of shifts in sociability produced by the new means of communication. What is happening in Latin America, with its different national variations and peculiarities, is part of a global phenomenon. In many countries around the world new actors and forms of participation self-proclaimed as the “outraged” or the “indignants” and “collectives”, are emerging and their profiles no longer fit into the traditional sociological categories of class, identity groups and social movements.

The case studies indicate that in regimes having authoritarian tendencies (such as the Venezuela of president Maduro or the Ecuador of president Correa), the State interferes directly in the virtual world, using both legal and discretionary instruments, restricting freedom of expression and resorting to underhand means (such as bots and teams of communication

professionals dedicated to sabotaging opponents' websites, blogs and pages on social networks). It is also in authoritarian situations that the libertarian potential of the web plays an even more decisive role.

Nonetheless, it is not only in authoritarian regimes that the State attempts to control or interfere with the virtual world. Democratic governments are also present in the virtual public space. The financing of "friendly" online news vehicles and blogs with public funds, the monitoring of what happens on the web and the use of bots to inflate the number of followers of presidential tweets and disseminate messages of support have also become widely used tactics.

The expectation that the online world would constitute a space in which citizens empowered by the possibility of directly accessing the public space and communicating in horizontal networks would be more motivated to participate is not confirmed. Certainly, during moments of "social explosion", events that mobilize an entire society, direct, horizontal online communication *en masse* reaches a wide audience and can have important political effects. In general, however political communication continues to be a subject of interest only to a minority. In the social networks, not only do personal messages predominate, but also the "opinion formers" are the pop stars. Regarding political topics, few people relate to and comment on more complex subjects, and normally the reactions are limited to "likes" and short comments, the majority accusatory in nature. Meanwhile consultation platforms dedicated to specific subjects reach very limited segments of society. And we are not considering the phenomenon of digital exclusion, which continues to be significant in the region, in spite of the advances that have occurred in recent years.

In spite of these qualifications, the virtual universe has its own distinctive characteristics, which profoundly transform traditional forms of communication and sociability. It also creates new opportunities for civic communication, which are particularly attractive to the young. Furthermore, it opens up space for a new generation of communicators, transforming the dynamic of the public space and enabling new forms of activism and political

culture. To ensure the democratic nature of these new forms of participation, these instruments need to be transparent, minimizing the effects of anonymity by increasing the public's critical capacity and discernment.

The Internet was, and for many still is, considered an alternative capable of substituting representation with direct participation or, in other words, enabling the elimination of the middleman between the public and government decisions. The case studies presented, whether they be new formats of political parties, of consultation platforms or online campaigns, show the potential and the limitations of the new systems of consultation, direct communication and mobilization of society. The social networks are extremely effective in sending clear and simple messages during moments of mobilization or in addressing isolated questions that demand a binary response. However, as of yet, no one has developed platforms capable of enabling the broader public discussion of complex themes that require efforts of negotiation and synthesis.

In certain visions of virtual democracy, political life would be a permanent consultation of the public. This implies that politics is the aggregate of personal opinions, rather than a collective construction, the product of an argumentative effort and of negotiations that permit not only the creation of consensus, but also to elaborate proposals and visions of the possible and the desired society, all of which require stable organizations capable of processing the debates and ensuring the continuity over time of currents of public opinion.

To date, virtual political communication, to a great extent, has played more the role of a "counter-democracy",<sup>5</sup> expressing ill-feeling related to the core problems afflicting democratic societies, such as social inequality. If it is to evolve beyond being an instrument of social catharsis, it should become capable of transforming democratic institutions and government policies. The

---

5 Characterized by Pierre Rosanvallon as complementary mechanisms to electoral ones, involving criticism and denunciation based on a healthy distrust of politicians and institutions, but which may result in a distancing from the political system expressed in the "apolitical" or "non-political" citizen, leading to the stigmatization of the representative system and ultimately to a destructive form of populism, *La Contre-Démocratie: La Politique à L'âge de la Défiance*. Paris: Seuil, 2006.

great challenge is to articulate the possibilities of virtual participation and street protests in conjunction with representative forms, and ephemeral protests with organizations that are sustained over time. A virtuous relationship between the different forms of communication and organization can help to overcome the distortions in the political culture that currently predominate in the virtual world. This requires organizational innovations on the part of political parties and NGOs that will enable the integration of virtual communication into new forms of organization, participation, mobilization and contact with the public. On the part of the public, this requires learning about the critical use of the Internet, which should start in school, as an instrument for information and political participation.

Each wave of civil society has transformed political institutions and forms of social participation. The first wave promoted workers' rights and access to goods and social services (such as healthcare, education and pensions), leading to a decrease in social inequality and to the social welfare state. The second wave was successful in advancing questions to a certain extent overlooked in the first wave, such as gender relations, the situation of racial and indigenous minorities, the violence of the state and environmental awareness. While it expanded and deepened expectations of equality and the pursuit of recognition and dignity for each citizen, it also proved to be impotent against the increase in social inequality.

The third wave, and here again we insist on repeating, is still in its infancy. Increasingly the web is permeating all human activities and one of its consequences, the creation of a new format of the public space, results in new forms of communication and organization of social relations that affect the diverse types of political activism and their content. This book is an effort to map some aspects of these transformations, showing the diversity, the contradictions and the virtuous possibilities and risks that democracy is presented with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The virtual world is certainly more democratic, to the extent that it has created a broader space for the expression and circulation of opinions, reducing the transactional costs of communication and the mobilization of people. By merging political communication with subjective personal communication it has given rise to a profusion of short messages in which individual emotional states, ill-feeling and denunciation predominate, marginalizing the informed and constructive debate of a positive agenda. If the relative weight of the traditional media has decreased, in the virtual world new harmful influences have emerged, protected by anonymity, by the dependence on social network structures oriented to private economic interests and by the capacity of the state (and companies) to obtain a volume of information about their citizens which would have been the envy of earlier totalitarian regimes.

In summary, with the new communication media we have an enormous expansion of the public space at the same time as there is a loss of substance. Both tendencies coexist and compete with each other. Building a public space capable of neutralizing its harmful uses and leveraging its virtues is the great challenge for cyberactivism, which, as our research has shown, depends on an effort to create solutions that unite both the online and offline worlds, as well as representation and direct participation.

# Argentina

---

Rocío Annunziata

Emilia Arpini

Tomás Gold

Bárbara Zeifer<sup>1</sup>

1. Introduction: the context of civic participation in Argentina
2. Access, use and legal framework of the Internet in Argentina
3. Case studies
  - Case 1: #NiUnaMenos, bodies in the streets
  - Case 2: Partido de la Red, democratic experimentalism
  - Case 3: Change.org, the digital cry
4. Conclusions: online/offline convergences
5. References

---

<sup>1</sup> Rocío Annunziata is a lecturer at the University of Buenos Aires and a researcher at the Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas Científicas e Técnicas (CONICET); Tomás Gold is a doctoral student at the Conselho Nacional de Pesquisas Científicas (CONICET); Emilia Arpini is a doctoral student at the University of Buenos Aires and Bárbara Zeifer is a master's student also at the University of Buenos Aires.



## 1. Introduction: the context of civic participation in Argentina

From the return to democracy in 1983 until the end of the century, civic participation in Argentina was marked by two major groups of actors. Firstly, there were the movements linked with human rights which were innovative in their format and in their demands when compared with the more traditional civil society actors, (unions and political parties), who were also very active in the 1980s. Secondly, as a consequence of the unemployment produced by the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, actors who had long been fundamental on the Argentinian political scene re-emerged and became known as the “*piqueteros*” because of their public actions of blocking Argentina’s main highways. This second group of actors comprised unemployed workers linked with unions, left-wing political parties and autonomous collectives, and their road blocks were aimed at demanding funding from the State (social programs) in the context of the severe economic crisis, poverty and indigence (while subsistence measures such as public canteens, popular restaurants and clothes distribution centers were organized throughout the country).

At the turn of the century, the union of the *piquetero* movements and unorganized citizens whose living standards had worsened significantly, resulted in the famous *cacerolazo* (banging of pots) in December 2001. This massive mobilization was interpreted as a reaction to the freezing of bank deposits, but it also constituted a popular reaction to the state of siege declared by the president. Banging their pots, thousands of Argentines gathered in the Plaza de Mayo and in many cities throughout the country during the protests on December 19 and 20, 2001, crying “*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*” (kick them all out [the politicians], not one should remain), leading to the immediate resignation of the minister of the Economy and the president Fernando de la Rúa, and leaving a number of people dead and injured as a result of police repression. This profound repudiation of all politicians was the apex of the crisis

of representation in Argentina, followed by a social effervescence that drove the emerging explosion in the form of district gatherings during a large part of 2002. In a certain manner, the “pot banging” in December 2001 constituted the last of the movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was the last of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because, in part, those responsible were organized civil society actors, the remains of the organizational forms of the past, such as unions and left-wing parties; and the reaction to the declaration of a state of siege may be seen as heir to the human rights defense movements. It was also the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> century because the other participants were independent individuals who spontaneously joined in the protests against the measure as the images of the protest were transmitted by the media. In December 2001, television was still playing a role similar to the one the social networks would play years later, both in Argentina and in the rest of the world, as disseminators or even generators of mass social mobilizations.

When Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency after the transition of Eduardo Duhalde, diverse changes occurred in relation to the situation at the end of 2001. On the one hand, economic recovery and fatigue had dehydrated the district assemblies, and the policy of inclusion and non-repression transformed many of the *piquetero* movements into pro-government social movements. On the other, the human rights policy implemented from the beginning of the new government had garnered the support of movements such as the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, which became key allies of the emerging Kirchner configuration. During the second Kirchnerist presidency, with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner at the head of the government, new organizations in support of the government emerged at critical conjunctures, such as the conflict with the agricultural sectors in 2008 (the group of intellectuals responsible for the *Carta Abierta* or Open Letter, for example) or the death of Néstor Kirchner in 2010 (the youth movement “La Cámpora”, led by his son Máximo).

In parallel, after the 2001 crisis, at the local level participative instruments began to emerge - and soon expanded - in which local authorities

would invite residents to discuss and decide on local issues. The paradigmatic example was the participatory budget, which emerged first in Rosário and in the capital Buenos Aires in 2002. In 2006, it was also adopted by the municipality of Morón in Buenos Aires province, reaching a further 50 municipalities in the 14 Argentinean provinces in the following years. This policy was further reinforced by the national government's creation of the Argentine Participatory Budget Network in 2008, but the implementation of this participatory mechanism took hold throughout the country regardless of the political leanings or party affiliations of local governments. The impacts of instruments such as participatory budgets (and others such as district councils, thematic consulting councils, participatory strategic planning etc.) were limited in their effects on public living conditions, given their generally limited resources and s their institutional design focused on isolated local or neighborhood problems (Annunziata, 2013).

To this form of participation "granted" by the authorities rather than "won" by society and, oriented mainly to addressing local issues, would be added in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century new cycles of spontaneous protests expressing different manifestations of malaise and repudiation of diverse situations, particularly concerning government decisions or measures. One of the first mobilizations convened by a common citizen involving no slogans, banners or political organizations had been the series of marches for public security organized by Juan Carlos Blumberg in 2004 after the kidnapping and murder of his son Axel. But later mobilizations against specific government decisions were more clearly interpreted as being in opposition to the government, bringing into question their legitimacy as "spontaneous" protests. This was the case with the series of *cacerolazos* between 2012 and 2013, the first protests named after the date on which they took place, underscoring their fleeting and intermittent nature: 13S (September 2012), 8N (November 2012), 18A (April 2013) and 8A (August 2013). These were also the first to be directly convened and promoted by the social networks and to present some

of the more salient characteristics of the contemporary social movements: the (at least apparent) lack of organized actors and official spokespersons, the multiplication of individual slogans and the gathering of heterogeneous groups in the expression of repudiation, the homemade preparation of signs instead of flags and banners etc.

In 2015 a crucial electoral year was beginning in Argentina, not only because the presidential and legislative elections would be held in October, and elections for provincial governors would occur throughout the course of the year, but also because both government and opposition agreed that a new era for the country would begin with the entry into office of a new president, given the impossibility of reelection and, consequently, the end of the twelve years of government by the Kirchner family, with Néstor Kirchner's presidency (2003-2007) and that of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2011 and 2011-2015). The death of the prosecutor investigating the attack on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), Alberto Nisman, at the beginning of 2015, gave rise to a new protest similar to the *cacerolazos* in 2012-2013, convened via the social networks with the hashtag #YoSoyNisman.

Online social participation occurred concomitantly with the rapid growth in access to and use of the new technologies and was increasingly resorted to by civic actors, both pro-government and opposition, which was particularly evident during the last stage of the electoral campaign, when online calls for support for the Kirchnerist candidate Daniel Scioli against his rival Mauricio Macri proliferated. In fact, online civic participation did not only produce manifestations of repudiation or ones narrowly associated with interim political divisions. Of particular note in this context was the #NiUnaMenos protest on June 3, 2015 (3)) in response to violence against women. Neither was online citizen participation limited to calling for participation in protests, with platforms for societal participation being constructed to deliberate on bills of law, such as the Partido de la Red, or to pressure governments to bring about broader social changes, such as Change.org.

In the following pages we will explore these three innovative experiences with the objective of analyzing who these new actors in civic participation are. They emerge from the convergence between the online and offline, and are instructive not only for the way they highlight the virtues or potential of the new information and communication technologies, but also because they reveal the magnitude of the changes they have produced in the civic actors and in forms of participation. It should be noted that the electoral context of 2015 influenced the three cases analyzed in diverse ways: it revealed the tension between the electoral agenda and the civic agenda with the #NiUnaMenos protest, underscoring the absence of the issue of combating violence against women in the proposals of almost all the political parties; it enabled the Partido de la Red to take action to ensure its inclusion in a political scenario in which it could not compete electorally; and it leveraged the petitions on the Change.org platform related to institutional and electoral questions taken up by leaders of the opposition. This specific conjuncture will have ended by the time this work is published, but the emergence of new actors in civic participation will remain at the intersection of the online and offline universes, as will the challenges of a developing a theory for conceptualizing their innovative nature.

## 2. Access, use and the legal framework of the Internet in Argentina

The last Latinobarómetro report revealed highly significant growth in informal civic participation in the Latin American region, outside of institutional channels, providing a favorable terrain for the impact of the Internet and the social networks on participation. According to the report, 1 in every 3 people in the region considers that participating in social networks is a form of political participation. Of the interviewees in Argentina, 22% believe that social networks permit participation in politics; 27% state that social networks create the illusion of participation; and only 12% think that the networks are

inappropriate for political participation (Latinobarómetro, 2015). What these data seem to show is that social networks are increasingly constituting a tool for participation, even if, for many, skepticism in relation to their political impact remains.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the degree of access and use of the Internet to form a realistic view of who the people are who may be included in the forms of participation offered by the social networks and online platforms. The above mentioned Latinobarómetro report indicates that there has been a 15% reduction in the number of people who declare never having used the Internet; in 2015, while the regional average was 46%, in Argentina this number was 38%, positioning the nation among the Latin American countries least affected by so-called “digital exclusion”.<sup>2</sup> However, these data may also offer a distorted view of the distribution of access to new technologies in the country. According to the National Survey on Access and Use of Information and Communication Technologies, between 2011 and 2015, both access to computers and access to the Internet in households increased significantly (from 56.4% to 67% and from 41% to 61.8%, respectively) for the 31 urban agglomerations covered in the survey (INDEC, 2015). Geographical concentration in urban areas and in the more heavily populated provinces, however, continues to be a factor to be taken into account: in September 2014, for example, 13,366,561 residential accesses to the internet were recorded, of which 77.7% were concentrated in the city of Buenos Aires and the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Santa Fé and Mendoza (INDEC, 2014).

Two specific national programs were launched in Argentina to combat digital exclusion. One was the Equality Connect Program, created in April 2010 via Decree n. 459/2010, aimed at promoting digital literacy in information

---

2 Facebook is the most heavily used social network in the region, and Argentina heads this list of countries with 59% usage of this network. Argentina is the third largest online audience in the region, after Brazil and Mexico, with 18.6 million single users (ComScore, 2014). According to the Internet Observatory in Argentina (OIA, 2015), Facebook has 16 million active users per day, and Twitter has 4.7 million active users per month.

and communication technologies (ICT), expanding access to technological resources, with no distinction as to social or economic group or geographical location. The program distributes netbooks<sup>3</sup> nationwide to students and teachers at public secondary and special education schools and teacher training colleges, for use both at school and at home, the objective being to impact the daily lives of families and drive digital inclusion throughout the country. The Connected Argentina National Telecommunications Plan, also launched in 2010, for its part, was presented as an integrated connectivity strategy to improve communication for everyone in the country, with a specific focus on locations more remote from large urban centers, considered less profitable by the telecommunications companies. This involved a proposal to provide the necessary infrastructure and equipment, setting up a sovereign, strategic and secure fiber optic network. The impact of these two policies has not yet been measured, but as mentioned previously, household access to computers and the Internet has grown significantly over the last four years.

The legal framework related specifically to these new technologies is still recent in Argentina. Certain aspects have yet to be regulated and the impact of the existing regulations has yet to be assessed. On December 18, 2014 the Argentina Digital law (27.087) was passed. This declared the development of ICT, telecommunications and associated resources to be of public interest and was also aimed at guaranteeing the neutrality of the networks. One of its most important provisions was legal recognition of the neutrality of the web: “Every user is guaranteed the right to access, use, send, receive or offer any content, application, service or protocol via the Internet with no restriction, discrimination, distinction, blockage, interference, reduction in speed or degradation of service” (art. 56). Similarly, the law considers communications and telecommunications to be “human rights”, declaring that ICT are an “essential and strategic public service”. To a great extent, the law is dedicated to regulating the provision of these services under the Information and

---

3 Up to November 2015, this program had distributed 5,314,950 netbooks nationwide.

Communication Technologies Federal Authority or AFTIC (Autoridad Federal de Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación), an independent, decentralized body of the Executive (art. 77), as well as the Telecommunications and Digitalization Technologies Federal Council (Consejo Federal de Tecnologías de Telecomunicaciones y Digitalización) (art. 85), an agency supporting AFTIC in the formulation of public telecommunications policy. The main functions of AFTIC include: regulating and promoting competition and the efficient development of ITC; deciding on the concession, renewal, extension of licenses, registrations, permits and authorizations for companies; promoting and regulating access to ICT and telecommunications services, including broadband internet, under conditions of effective competition.

Freedom of expression on the Internet and the protection of users' personal data are covered by pre-existing standards, which were adapted but not formulated specifically for the use of the new technologies and the online circulation of information. Regarding the protection of personal data, there is the law 25.326/2000, which created the National Personal Data Protection Directorate (Dirección Nacional de Protección de Datos Personales) and the *habeas data* writ guaranteed by article 43 of the 1994 National Constitution. This law was aimed at protecting personal data in data banks, ensuring individual privacy and the right to control over any information in such data banks. On the other hand, law 26.032, sanctioned on May 18, 2005 established that the "pursuit, receipt, and disclosure of all types of information and ideas by means of internet services is considered to be covered by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression". However, it should be noted that private companies (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube etc.) are important where the freedom of expression of their users is concerned, to the extent that they have the power to remove contents published by users, for example, in the case of discriminatory or explicitly violent messages. But there is no regulation or specific standard as to the criteria for judging such content. The State may not censor any content on the web, but at the same time and for the same reason,



it has no tools to combat censorship by third-parties. In 2010, the National Institute Against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism (INADI), in the Executive sphere, created a Social Network Observatory to combat harassment on the web. Without the power to exclude pages or groups on Facebook, it proposed contacting the Argentinean social networks and the international ones operating in the country to act as users with special powers to denounce discriminatory content or comments in breach of the law.

The challenges evident in regulation show that there is no separation between a “virtual” and a “real” world in terms of citizens’ rights and democratic participation; the connection is permanent with problems in common between the online and offline worlds. Differently from the traditional public space, however, the online world, the new information and communication technologies and, in particular, the social networks boost internet users’ capacity to create content, while at the same time exposing their personal data and privacy more easily. The new public space shares and increases the need for guarantees for civil society and for citizens. Censorship, discrimination, freedom of expression, surveillance by governments or corporations and equal access to services are old problems now emerging in new formats, in greater numbers and in a context of rapid transformation.

### 3. Case studies

#### Case 1: #NiUnaMenos, the bodies in the streets

On June 3, 2015 there was a mass concentration in front of the National Congress (between 150,000 and 200,000 people), and similar protests in more than 120 cities nationwide, based on the slogan #NiUnaMenos (Not one less) against femicide<sup>4</sup> and violence against women. The call to protest arose after a

<sup>4</sup> The term “femicide” refers to the murder of women in function of their gender. The term started appearing in the communication media very recently, substituting the more common expression “crime of passion”. See lavaca.org (2015).

debate on the social networks between the journalists Marcela Ojeda, Florencia Etcheves, Ingrid Beck, Hinde Pomeraniec and Soledad Vallejos, the result of an increase in the number of cases of femicide. The main demonstration was marked by the attendance of relatives of victims of femicide and other cases of gender violence, feminist and women's groups and political organizations. This protest demonstrated the relevance of organized actors, citizens and politicians in the offline world, but also the capacity an event originating in the online world had of generating visibility and inclusion in the public agenda, something that had not been possible through traditional channels. Similarly, the mobilization revealed that the public significance of events like these extrapolates the intentions of their original proponents, generating doubts about the category “organizers”.

The days preceding the enormous protest which assumed the name of the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, had been characterized by reports of new cases of femicide, on top of the dozens of other similar cases reported during 2015. On May 11, the press reported the murder of Suhene Carvalhaes Muñoz, a young woman who was beaten to death by her boyfriend. This coincided with the discovery of the death of Chiara Páez — a pregnant 14-year old who was buried alive —, which caused great social uproar. Upon hearing this, the journalist Marcela Ojeda posed the following question via her Twitter account: “Actresses, female politicians, artists, businesswomen, social references... women, everyone, . Aren't we going to speak out? THEY ARE KILLING US”. This was the origin of the call for the protest that would take place on June 3 using the slogan #NiUnaMenos, with other women journalists joining via their Twitter accounts, and which by May 11 had gone viral on the web.<sup>5</sup>

The initial instigators of the protest were not members of an organized

---

5 As other journalists heading the mobilization observed, the idea arose based on the social commotion generated by the cases of femicide, particularly inflamed by the brutality of the crime involving Chiara Páez (see article by Hinde Pomeraniec in *Página/12*, May 15, 2015), which generated a visceral feeling that something had to be done (see article by Ingrid Beck in *Página/12*, May 15, 2015).

group. Most of them did not know each other personally before the call to protest. There was a group on Facebook which had originated with a reading marathon on March 26 of that year called “*Ni Una Menos*” (not one less). Writers, journalists and relatives of victims of gender violence (such as the mother of Lola Chomnalez and the father of Wanda Taddei, two other young victims) had participated in this group, but only some of the journalists from the group formed on the basis of this new call via Twitter had participated in its activities. The reason for the organization of this reading marathon was related to the cases of femicide involving Daiana García and Andrea Castagna, the first of which generated debate on the social networks after comments alluding to the “provocative” clothes the girl was wearing when the crime was committed. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos<sup>6</sup> was initially used in this group on Facebook. But the viral nature of the group and the mobilization were generated above all via Twitter. As the journalist Paula Rodríguez says, the group on Twitter materialized “right before our eyes” and almost by chance, since it depended on the number of people connected at the moment the journalist Marcela Ojeda posted the comment on her personal account. But many of the initial movers “only met each other personally after the event”.<sup>7</sup> The fact that they were journalists leveraged the potential of the Twitter social network: some of the articulators had a large number of followers, and others had very influential followers.<sup>8</sup>

On May 12 the leading newspapers rapidly gathered numbers and statements from the organization La Casa del Encuentro, a civil organization defending the interests of women which, given the lack of official numbers,

---

6 It is also possible to trace the use of the slogan “Ni una menos” back to the 2011 murder of Susana Chávez Castillo, a Mexican poet and activist supposedly silenced due to the denunciation of crimes and femicide in her country. The original phrase which became viral at that time in the Mexican social networks, from a poem of hers written in 1995, was: “Ni una muerta más” (no more dead women).

7 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

8 Interview with Hinde Pomeranec (Aug. 18, 2015).

maintained femicide statistics for recent years: 1,808 women murdered in function of their gender since 2008. The annual report showed that in 2014 alone, 277 women had been murdered and, in the majority of cases, both the victims and the murderers were adolescents. Every thirty hours a woman was murdered in Argentina simply because she was a woman.

Photos and selfies of famous artists, renowned journalists, political activists and some legislators who had supported the cause since the beginning became viral on the web using the hashtag or watchwords; these included Gabriela Cerruti (FPV deputy for the city of Buenos Aires), Victoria Donda and Margarita Stolbizer (FAP national deputies). The official banner bearing the slogan #NiUnaMenos was one of the three which dominated the protests.. During the month of May, hundreds of personalities, institutions and organizations joined the cause, publishing selfies, promoting the hashtag and the movement.

In the following days, the communication media released news and services related to the issue, ranging from cell phone apps aimed at preventing femicide to interviews with directors of NGOs. They started to investigate older cases of femicide, boosting the visibility of previous activities around this issue (such as the aforementioned Reading Marathon, the activities of militant organizations advocating a law against femicide etc.), and in the meantime the number of public figures committing to the cause multiplied.

The press also began to discuss one of the points that was central to the call for protest, which was based mainly on the effective implementation of law 26.485 addressing the full protection of women. The law defines violence as “any conduct, act or omission that directly or indirectly, publicly or privately, based on unequal relations of power, affects a woman's life, dignity, physical, psychological, sexual or economic integrity, as well as her assets or her personal safety”. However, although the law had been approved by an ample majority on April 1, 2009, it had not been fully regulated, particularly in relation to the National Action Plan for the Prevention, Assistance and Eradication of Violence

against Women. The lack of regulation of this national plan engendered a state of paralysis, since there was a “legal gap” regarding the distinction between femicide and other types of crime. Accordingly, on May 15 a meeting was held between the four original writers and journalists and Fabiana Túñez, of the organization La Casa del Encuentro, to define the official document that would be read out on the day of the protest. The media also began to work with this organization, which was to gradually become a fundamental actor in the transmission of information about femicide. From the beginning of the call process the importance of various aspects of the offline world in boosting the impact of the initiative became clear, such as acknowledgement of the journalists, the treatment they began to receive from the traditional press, as well as the activities of civil society organizations.

The rapid viralization of the hashtag and the call to protest generated discussions in the social networks and the media about the legitimacy of certain actors promoting and assuming ownership of the cause. The support of certain women in the world of the arts whose declarations during their careers had furthered gender inequality was questioned, as was that of television show hosts considered to be sexist. In the social networks there was an increase in the number of memes with captions such as: “To say ‘*Ni una menos*’, you have to stop watching Tinelli”, “... you have to stop calling harassment of women in the street ‘flirting’”, “... you have to stop going to prostitutes, fueling the traffic in women”, “... you have to stop raising helpless princesses and violent young machos”, “... you have to legalize abortion”, “... you have to stop asking why Melina’s dress was so short”. At stake was a tension inherent to many contemporary mobilizations disseminated and multiplied on the internet: to what extent can individuals appropriate an issue online when they have never been involved in it offline? But most importantly: who are the “legitimate” actors entitled to appropriate an issue that does not seem to belong to anyone?

As the days passed, manifestations of support for the mobilization intensified. Institutional actors and politicians declared their support in public

as June 3 approached.<sup>9</sup> But above all it was the political leaders of diverse parties who published selfies under the hashtag #NiUnaMenos. Generally speaking, the entire political spectrum joined in the mobilization to a greater or lesser extent: Daniel Scioli (governor of the province of Buenos Aires and later FPV candidate for president), Ernesto Sanz (president of the UCR party and national senator), Mauricio Macri (head of the government of the city of Buenos Aires and later PRO coalition candidate for president), Elisa Carrió (national UNEN deputy), Nicolás del Caño and Myriam Bregman (national PTS deputies), and Jorge Altamira (former deputy for the city of Buenos Aires and leader of the left-wing front). Sergio Massa (national deputy and Frente Renovadora presidential candidate) got together with 18 mayors from the province of Buenos Aires and on the day prior to the protest posted a photo with Mirta Tundis and other women legislators and militants from his party on his Twitter account. Other institutional actors such as the Catholic Church also joined in the mobilization. Through the Episcopal Commission for Family Pastoral Ministry (CELAf) and Catholic Action Argentina, the church spoke of the need to heed the speeches and actions of the new Pope Francis. The Supreme Court judges Elena Highton de Nolasco and Ricardo Lorenzetti posted a selfie with the hashtag, and judge Highton recorded a video broadcast for the Judicial Information Center (CIF) in which she listed all the judicial channels and support centers available for women under threat.

The different meanings the call to protest acquired as it was re-appropriated by different actors and personalities, were beyond the control of the original instigators. As one of them said: “When you launch a campaign

---

<sup>9</sup> In the week before June 3, the National Senate, the National Interuniversity Council, the Federal Education Council and the Federal Health Council had indicated their adhesion. The media also intensified coverage of the theme on the eve of the protest; they aired interviews or statements from women who had suffered attacks or rape, including Mirta Tundis, a journalist and national deputy from the Frente Renovadora. This interview in particular caused great impact on public opinion, due to the format of a confession about the ill treatment and violence she suffered at the hands of her ex-husband.

like this, you kick the ball off and it's no longer yours".<sup>10</sup> The selection of the "5 points" in the official demand sought to give the mobilization a precise focus, but at the same time one wide-ranging enough to attract a broad public. The five-point document put forward the following demands:

- Implement and monitor the National Action Plan for the Prevention, Assistance and Eradication of Violence against Women with all the resources necessary, as established in law 26.485
- Ensure the victims' access to the Justice system. Each public prosecutor and police station should have trained professionals qualified to receive reports. Cases should be unified in the civil and criminal courts; the victims should have access to a public defense lawyer free of charge during the entire judicial process.
- Elaborate a single incident report for victims of violence against women. Collect and update official femicide statistics. It is necessary to know the problem in order to draft and implement effective public policy.
- Guarantee and improve comprehensive sexual education at all levels of schooling to promote equality and freedom from male chauvinist discrimination and violence. Sensitize and train teachers and principals.
- Ensure protection for the victims of violence. Implement the electronic monitoring of aggressors to prevent the violation of court restraining orders.

For the promoters, the goals were to leave no issue out, but at the same time ensure that the central question of femicide was incorporated

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Hinde Pomeraniec (Aug. 18, 2015).

into the public agenda. In practice this led to postponing certain problems for “future battles”, such as the decriminalization of abortion — which, although a consensus among the instigators, would have alienated a large section of society, in particular the families of the victims of femicide. It was this broad scope of the mobilisation<sup>11</sup> which, for the first time ever in a mobilization involving gender, enabled groups defending the decriminalization of abortion and young people from Catholic schools to protest side by side.<sup>12</sup>

Knowing that they could not fully control the dynamic of the mobilisation, the promoters thought they could at least influence it to a certain extent. They worked consciously to ensure that the mobilization did not assume certain connotations they wanted to avoid: “it ought not to be a march for public security, for the victims or for the “indignant””.<sup>13</sup> They sought, on the contrary, to shape the mobilization as one addressing “the problem of human rights, rather than security”.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the political actors who were joining the mobilization, care was taken to ensure it would not be deemed either pro opposition or pro government, as had happened in previous demonstrations. An effort was also made to prevent it from becoming an anti-political march, and so candidates were not required to leave aside their political banners. As one of the promoters argued, association with a human rights mobilization “is made possible by politics. We did not want it to be apolitical”.<sup>15</sup> As social communicators they had the tools to emphasize certain meanings at the

---

11 Some feminist and women's organizations had been proposing a more radical interpretation of the problem of violence against women in their actions, but they saw the call as an opportunity to boost visibility of the problem and insert it in the public agenda. According to the director of Pan y Rosas, for example, the organization opted to support the cause and to add its own message: “if they interfere with one, we will organize thousands” (interview with Cecilia Mancuso, Oct. 27, 2015).

12 Interview with Hinde Pomeranec (Aug. 18, 2015).

13 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

14 Interview with Micaela Libson (Sep. 17, 2015).

15 Interview with Micaela Libson (Sep. 17, 2015).



expense of others , and they assumed the responsibility of communicating their messages pedagogically.<sup>16</sup> However, the proliferation of re-appropriations of the hashtag and the calls to protest revealed the limitations of the category “organizers” faced with the challenges of prescribing roles in contemporary civic mobilizations. “Many said: ‘give placards to anybody!’, as if they could control who would appear in the photos”, noted one journalist close to the original group of promoters.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, the “5-point” document was also a response or a reaction to the large number of political leaders who “were in the photo”, aimed at forcing them to assume a concrete, public commitment to particular policies, capitalizing on their wish to show their support for the cause. This resulted in the sign with the five points and the hashtag #DeLaFotoALaFirma (from the photo to commitment). In the days prior to the mobilization, the organizers met with leaders of different political forces, specifically to gain commitment from candidates for diverse offices in an election year, as was the case in Argentina in 2015. In this respect, the organizers’ professional connections with the offline world were determinant.<sup>18</sup>

On the eve of the mobilization, president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner used her Twitter account to express her support. However, as part of the media pointed out, she was in an awkward position because responsibility for the non-regulation of the law basically lay with the Executive. Without alluding to the law, the president joined the mobilization. A large attendance was expected,<sup>19</sup>

---

16 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

17 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

18 Just as their professional knowledge enabled them to rapidly develop a strategy around the mobilization which emerged spontaneously, all of them had broad communication experience in distinct media, as one of the organizers observed (interview with Hinde Pomeraniec, Aug. 18, 2015). Paula Rodríguez also underscores the importance of their professional experience, which included their address books as well as use of hashtags and advertising techniques. They were all editors, journalists and communicators in the mass media. The memes shared were meticulously created by professionals (interview with Paula Rodríguez, Sep. 14, 2015).

19 On the same day as the mobilization, the magazine *Página/12* published a survey conducted by the agency *Ibarómetro* about levels of awareness of the hashtag and the mobilization: 75%

but the magnitude June 3 acquired took everyone by surprise.

On June 3, the entrances to the city of Buenos Aires' subway stations carried the message "*Ni Una Menos*" on their illuminated displays. All the newspapers ran at least five or six articles on the protest. 129 meeting points had been arranged throughout the country.<sup>20</sup> All day long the social networks highlighted the "5 points" demanded by the mobilization, and once again the hashtag #DeLaFotoALaFirma went viral. At 2 p.m., people starting arriving at the Praça dos Congressos, the location selected as the epicenter of the protest, although it was only scheduled to begin at 5 p.m. The Argentinean Federal Police deployed only female police officers for the security of the event. And the hashtag #NiUnaMenos invaded the networks, going viral among organizations determined not to miss the chance to demonstrate their support (football clubs, magazines, schools etc.).

One aspect of this mobilization differentiating it from other recent social network driven protests in the country and the region was the visible presence of political organizations and civil society groups as organized actors wielding their flags and banners. Among the political parties, government groups (such as Unidos e Organizados, La Cámpora, Novo Encontro, Unidade Socialista para a Vitória) were present and visible, as were the opposition, in particular leftist groups (including the Partido dos Trabalhadores Socialistas, Partido Operário, Movimento Socialista dos Trabalhadores, Esquerda Socialista, Novo Movimento ao Socialismo, Frente de Esquerda, Autodeterminação e Liberdade). Organized social movements such as the Movimento Livres do Sul and the Movimento Evita also made their presence felt. Among many of the political parties, there

---

of the interviewees knew about the mobilization, 51% intended to participate in it and 61% knew the meaning of the word "femicide".

20 See <[www.lanacion.com.ar/1798115-niunamenos-los-puntos-de-encuentro-para-la-manifestacion-contra-los-femicidios](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1798115-niunamenos-los-puntos-de-encuentro-para-la-manifestacion-contra-los-femicidios)>. In all the provinces there were online encounters for the mobilization. The methodology established for unifying the demands and the mobilizations had worked in the following way: the invitations were sent to [niunamenos@gmail.com](mailto:niunamenos@gmail.com), which the organizers accessed to publish an updated list of the meeting places in the official Twitter (@niunamenos) and Facebook (Ni Una Menos) accounts, for those wanting to participate.

were women's organizations or gender commissions (such as Pan y Rosas or Las Rojas, associated with leftist parties). The same was true of the unions, whose presence was very significant.<sup>21</sup> The pro-government political groups also decided to march to the Palácio da Justiça, to call attention to the fact that responsibility for this issue was shared with the Judiciary. In conjunction with the leftist political groups, these were the most visible organizations in the protest; other leaders participated as individuals rather than as part of a group, taking selfies during the event and posting them immediately on Twitter to attest their presence.<sup>22</sup>

But the political parties, unions and the Catholic Church were not the only organized actors who were present at the protest. Major civil society organizations, such as La Casa del Encuentro and the National Campaign for Legal, Safe and Free Abortion were there alongside a vast number of smaller civil society groups, some defending the victims of femicide and others LGBT causes, student groups, the Buenos Aires Universities Federation (FUBA), cultural centers, groups of theater actors, women's groups from different regions etc. The groups defending the victims of femicide, carrying signs with photographs and the names of the murdered women, played a leading role in the protest, under the tutelage of the organizers.

In spite of the noticeable presence of political parties with their banners, slogans and symbols, they by no means predominated in the protest. Undoubtedly, spontaneous, independent participation was stronger.<sup>23</sup> There

21 Interview with Cecilia Mancuso, Oct. 27, 2015.

22 Several ministers and national congress members from the FPV, Frente Renovadora and UCR took part in the protest. The various candidates for president and many well-known legislators posted photos with banners containing the watchwords, or did this on the days preceding the event. Some of these may be seen at the address <[www.lanacion.com.ar/1798454-los-tuits-de-los-politicos-por-el-niunamenos](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1798454-los-tuits-de-los-politicos-por-el-niunamenos)>. The consultancy El Viral collected statistics online: 687 politicians published photos with a sign with the hashtag #NiUnaMenos: 99 deputies, 34 senators, 180 mayors, 11 governors, 834 civil society organizations (such as clubs, unions and NGOs), 2,137 Argentinean personalities, 280 international personalities (Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia) and 67 artists and designers also participated.

23 The strong male presence at the protest was emphasized and described as "unexpected" by the

were many thousands of individuals and groups, bearing placards with creative phrases alluding to the hashtag, artists giving impromptu performances, nude women with their bodies painted, percussion groups, gigantic allegorical dolls etc. Some attention-grabbing phrases were to be seen on homemade signs such as: “Not letting me walk in peace in the street is violence”, “If he hits you it’s because he doesn’t love you”, “I’m marching for them. Not one less!”, “I belong to nobody”, “They say hitting means love. IT’S A LIE!”, “No more femicide, the State is responsible”, “No more travesticide”, “We are alive”, “No more hypocrisy, the system educates women killers!”, “Illegal abortion is gender violence”, “Without customers there would be no traffic in women”, “Institutional male chauvinism is not indifference, it is complicity”, “Patriarchy: even if you rape and kill me, I will be back”, “Control is not love”, “No is no”, “I want to stop asking if I will be next”, “Neither saint nor whore”, among others. Artistic performances took place spontaneously in different areas of the *Praça dos Congressos*. For example: the Cooperative Lavaca prepared a large banner with the name of each woman murdered, and any participant in the protest could dip their hand in ink and leave a print over the names.<sup>24</sup>

The apex of the protest was the official act at 5 p.m., during which the well-known actors Juan Minujín and Érica Rivas and the cartoonist Maitena Burundarena read the manifesto and the five demands agreed upon beforehand between the organizers and La Casa del Encuentro, on a stage set up especially for this purpose.<sup>25</sup> The Argentine government illuminated all the official buildings and landmarks in the city with violet light. The promoters had decided that instead of politicians, the stage would be occupied by personalities from the world of culture and that the families of the victims of femicide would

---

communication media in the following days.

24 Interview with Claudia Acuña (19 ago. 2015). Another example was the performance of the “garbage woman”, which had also happened during the “Slutwalk”, in which the participants were “bagged” and forced to remain still on the ground to get first hand experience of the gender violence linked with femicide (see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZrEyCeh5nE>>).

25 See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLQSyS8FtBc>>.

also have privileged positions. The organization of an official act, the epicenter of the mobilization, also shows that the promoters had to assume the role of organizers: the positioning of the stage, the sound equipment, the signs on the underground stations and the illumination of public buildings, the selection of the speakers and the people on the stage, as well as security, all entailed planning and forethought as well as coordination with different organizations and authorities,<sup>26</sup> once again demonstrating the relevance of the convergent processes that occurred in the offline environment.

Diverse consultancies estimated that between 150,000 and 200,000 people participated in the act, fully occupying the Praça dos Congressos and the surrounding streets.<sup>27</sup> In other cities around the country, participation was also intense and, in some places, more than one protest took place spontaneously. The protests were similar to those in the city of Buenos Aires, but incorporating the particularities of each province and regional cases of femicide. In smaller towns and villages, where there was no organized militancy, the social networks were of great importance: pages were created on Facebook to mobilize the public. In larger cities the networks were one tool among many, but existing feminist organizations, already used to working together, collaborated on publicizing the protest.<sup>28</sup> After June 3, the magnitude of the mobilization became clear, it had spread to many parts of the country.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the impact of the protest in the city of Buenos Aires, the mobilization in many towns

---

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Hinde Pomeraniec (Aug. 18, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> In the protest in Buenos Aires, worthy of note was the presence of many women from the outskirts of the city, for whom this event represented their first visit to the capital (interview with Cecilia Mancuso, Oct. 27, 2015). Frequently, protests which were similar in some aspects to 3J—in particular, those originating in the social networks—, such as the “pot banging” in 2012–2013 or the mobilization #YoSoyNisman in February 2015, were interpreted as purely urban, middle class phenomena; in this respect, #NiUnaMenos clearly demonstrated its difference.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> The impact throughout the country was felt during the 30th National Women's Encounter, held in Mar del Plata in October 2015, with the participation of 60,000 people (interview with Cecilia Mancuso, Oct. 27, 2015).

and villages exceeded expectations. Compared with the anonymity of a large city, in the villages and settlement of many provinces, participation implied assuming a much greater risk: "In a village, you are a person, not a statistic".<sup>30</sup> Nationwide, around one million people were involved in the mobilization.<sup>31</sup>

The international repercussion was also enormous: the event was reported by the press in diverse countries, ranking the Argentinean initiative among the main cases of online activism in defense of women, such as #FirstHarassed, #EverydaySexism or #YesAllWomen; there were simultaneous protests in Chile and in Uruguay, with strong repercussion in the social networks in Colombia, Mexico and Spain.<sup>32</sup> There were more than 958,000 mentions of the hashtag #NiUnaMenos on Twitter, according to Agustín Giménez, the platform's representative in the region.<sup>33</sup> On the day of the protest, the mentions exceeded 600,000 and at 8p.m. the hashtag had become a global trending topic, with more than 13,400 mentions a minute.

The most immediate effect of the mobilization was the increase in the number of reports of violence. Calls to the number 144, the national help line for victims of gender violence, increased from one thousand to 13,700 a day, and the number of calls to the city of Buenos Aires help line tripled. The Supreme Court Domestic Violence Bureau also saw an increase in the number of requests for information, including ones from provincial courts that were unable to access information on certain cases of femicide or criminal records. The mobilization's

---

30 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

31 Interview with Hinde Pomeranec (Aug. 18, 2015).

32 On Nov. 7, 2015 there was a mass mobilization in response to violence against women, which also used the hashtag #NiUnaMenos.

33 Different from other events that divided Twitter (such as the #YoSoyNisman mobilization), particularly between government and opposition (Calvo, 2015), in #NiUnaMenos there was no evidence of polarization. As Analía Gómez Vidal (2015) says: "In a sample of 993,578 tweets published between May 31 and June 6, 2015, it is possible to see how the Twittersphere accompanied those who mobilized for #NiUnaMenos, joining forces rather than dividing them, integrating rather than confronting accounts".

impact on social control over cases of violence against women and the fact that it enabled people to talk about a hitherto invisible problem,<sup>34</sup> not to mention the debates it engendered in primary and secondary schools,<sup>35</sup> probably represent 3J's main achievement<sup>36</sup>, as well as its most long-lasting effect.

The mobilization also triggered rapid reactions from political organizations and actors, who announced measures whose results are still uncertain: the Supreme Court announced the creation of the National Femicide Registry (one of the demands of the promoters of the protest) in coordination with the provincial courts, consisting of a readily accessible online system for the systematic registration of cases; a hitherto unpublicized unit of the national government, the Unit for the Registration, Systematization and Monitoring of Femicide and Homicide Aggravated by Gender, linked with the National Human Rights Secretariat, gained visibility; a bill of law proposing an obligatory course on gender violence before civil marriage was introduced in the Buenos Aires provincial legislature; the city of Buenos Aires legislature approved the creation of police units specialized in domestic violence and an "End Violence against Women Week" (from November 25 to December 1); the Ministry of Health updated and published a new version of the "protocol for caring for persons entitled to the legal interruption of pregnancy", which obliges the public and private health care systems to provide abortions for victims of rape or women whose lives or health is at risk; the Attorney General created the Specialized

---

34 Many women felt encouraged to tell their stories and break their silence on the day of the protest. As Ada Rico, president of the organization La Casa del Encuentro, says: "A woman came up to me, on the other side of the fence. She asked if she could come in. I explained that there were only family members there and asked: 'are you facing some kind of violent situation?'. She answered that she was. I met her again recently in a support group. She said: 'Do you remember me? I was with you in the square on the 3rd'. On this day, she summoned up the courage" (Rodríguez, 2015, p. 168).

35 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sept 14, 2015). The journalist stresses that the greatest impact of 3J is on the younger generations.

36 The organizers also thought this (see the political manifesto on #NiUnaMenos published by the magazine *Anfibia* em <[www.revistaanfibia.com/cronica/un-nuevo-nunca-mas](http://www.revistaanfibia.com/cronica/un-nuevo-nunca-mas)>).

Violence against Women Unit (UFEM) aimed at upgrading investigation strategies and the process of bringing charges in specific crimes committed against women; several provinces announced the creation of databanks on gender violence, the offer of free legal assistance for victims, help centers and halfway houses and awareness programs; the University of Buenos Aires approved the creation of a protocol against gender violence.

The national law n. 26.485 has not yet been regulated by the Executive and no documents on its application are available for public consultation.<sup>37</sup> A significant institutional effect five months after the protest was the conversion into law of a bill for the provision of free legal assistance for victims of violence against women, presented by the senator Juan Manuel Abal Medina.<sup>38</sup>

The protest may possibly have affected some election results, albeit indirectly and on a minor scale. Eleven days after 3J, the provincial election in Santa Fé, essentially a dispute between Miguel Lifschitz (Partido Socialista) and Miguel Del Sel (PRO), ended in favor of the former by a small margin, reversing the results of the opinion polls. Del Sel had been criticized weeks before for male chauvinist comments during his campaign. The consultancy El Viral analyzed comments on the candidate in the social networks, concluding that 98% of them were negative, characterizing him as a misogynist and asking people who had participated in the protest to show coherence and not vote for him.

In an electoral year of considerable significance for the country, the distance between a citizens' agenda and the campaign agenda of a number of candidates became evident. On August 3, shortly before the primary elections, the administrators of the #NiUnaMenos official accounts used Twitter to request that presidential pre-candidates show how they intended to address the issue

---

37 The provinces which had not adhered to law 26.485 continue not to: Córdoba, Salta, San Juan and Misiones.

38 See <[infojusnoticias.gov.ar/nacionales/es-ley-el-proyecto-para-que-victimas-de-violencia-ten-gan-abogados-gratis-10423.html](http://infojusnoticias.gov.ar/nacionales/es-ley-el-proyecto-para-que-victimas-de-violencia-ten-gan-abogados-gratis-10423.html)>.



of gender violence in their proposals by publishing them on their webpages and making them available to the press. The majority posted a direct link to their own online campaign platforms (on the candidates' official pages); others merely limited themselves to expressing support for the five demands made by the organizers of the protest.<sup>39</sup> Some political forces, such as the Frente de Esquerda, sought to differentiate themselves from the presidential candidates leading the polls on this point: "For Scioli, Macri and Massa, #NiUnaMenos is a slogan; for us it is an inalienable position".<sup>40</sup> As the date of the presidential debate grew closer, the organizers of the protest met with representatives of the diverse parties to get them to include the issue of violence against women in their agendas.<sup>41</sup> Even though the political, institutional and electoral effects have so far been minimal, and there were new cases of femicide soon after 3), the major impact has been social and cultural, and the event itself may be interpreted as "a new 'never again'".<sup>42</sup>

There can be no doubt about the role that the social networks played in the creation and escalation of the mobilization and the organizers recognized that Twitter had a much greater impact than Facebook. A Facebook group had been involved in organizing activities, but it was unable to produce the same immediate viral effect that took place via Twitter. According to one of the journalists, the Facebook dynamic was more oriented to the formation of

39 The journalists asked the same of the main candidates for mayor of the city of Buenos Aires, who also responded to the request.

40 *La izquierda diario*, Aug. 6, 2015.

41 For the day of the election, the organizers managed to reach an agreement with the electoral authority Dirección Nacional Electoral to have signs with telephone numbers for reporting gender violence at all the voting stations. The signs said "Voting is our right. Living without violence is, too. #NiUnaMenos".

42 In Argentina, "never again" is the expression which sums up the repudiation of State terror during the military dictatorship. See the political manifesto on #NiUnaMenos published by the magazine *Anfibia* in <[www.revistaanfibia.com/cronica/un-nuevo-nunca-mas](http://www.revistaanfibia.com/cronica/un-nuevo-nunca-mas)>. In addition to being a cross cutting event in terms of human rights issues, it was the first time that women occupied public space as *women* and not as *mothers* (interview with Paula Rodríguez, Sep. 14, 2015).

groups, while Twitter combines the massification effect of a hashtag with the incapacity to control the meaning attributed to it: “after it is published it no longer belongs to you”.<sup>43</sup> Thus a logic involving argumentation and discussion is opposed to one of social leadership. In this respect, another journalist observed that while Facebook entails a closer, more trusted circle, Twitter is public. But the voice here needs to be personal rather than institutional to mobilize people: on Twitter, you have a “personal voice that speaks out loud at other people’s parties”.<sup>44</sup>

But the online world was not the exclusive terrain for the event for a number of reasons. Firstly, offline conditions made possible the great repercussion of the call to protest and influenced the way in which it was developed. The initial organizers were journalists and social communicators recognized both within and outside the social networks; this gave them the specific professional expertise required to conduct an appropriate dissemination strategy, as well as the contacts with political and social actors to organize the event and create pressure for the targeted changes. Additionally, the traditional communication media, both press and television, were kept informed about what was happening in the online space, amplifying the mobilization to an extent that would have otherwise been inconceivable. Secondly, many feminist and women’s organizations, within political parties, unions and civil society, had already been engaged in combating violence against women, albeit on a smaller scale.<sup>45</sup>

Without all this background work, the hashtag launched on Twitter

---

43 Interview with Hinde Pomeraniec (Aug. 18, 2015).

44 Interview with Claudia Acuña (Aug. 19, 2015).

45 Interview with Cecilia Mancuso, Oct. 27, 2015), with Claudia Acuña (Aug. 19, 2015) and with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015). Although, in this respect, Paula Rodríguez also points out that the social networks had previously been working as spaces for the circulation of divergent arguments, in particular in relation to the coverage given by the traditional media to cases of femicide, imputing guilt to the victims.

would not have mobilized these organized actors as quickly as it did;<sup>46</sup> however, only the event created on the social networks was capable of producing an initial reaction of this magnitude and its inclusion on the public agenda. On the other hand, the organizers unexpectedly found themselves required to assume a role of responsibility and social representation. The political actors sought them out, they gave talks in schools and, above all, they themselves began to receive reports, accounts and requests for help, to which they had to respond.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the case, the relationship between the online and offline worlds was characterized by convergence and mutual leverage. The mobilization required that they put their bodies on the line. A journalist close to the initial organizers stresses that from the beginning the objective was to generate a non virtual event, to get people on the streets: “the aim was not to become just a trendy topic”.<sup>48</sup> And, as another one of the activists observes: “In the physical world, you need bodies, and change happens when you have bodies on the streets”.<sup>49</sup>

## Case 2: Partido de la Red, democratic experimentalism

The Partido de la Red was constituted originally with the goal of disputing the 2013 legislative elections in the city of Buenos Aires, but did not obtain enough votes to elect candidates. Its party proposal was totally innovative: the party claimed its legislators would vote on each issue in accordance with deliberation and voting processes executed by means of a web platform created specifically for this purpose. When it did not win any seats,

---

46 Claudia Acuña's interpretation was this: “What emerges is the result, [...] it never starts there, it finishes there, this is it” (interview with Claudia Acuña, 19 ago. 2015).

47 In this respect, the social networks also played a fundamental role. As Paula Rodríguez says: “The Facebook and Twitter accounts were not just for issuing things; they also received things: support, requests for support, pictures, photos” (interview with Paula Rodríguez, Sep. 14, 2015).

48 Interview with Paula Rodríguez (Sep. 14, 2015).

49 Interview with Claudia Acuña (Aug. 19, 2015).

the party reformulated its strategy to create other participative platforms, such as *Demos* (aimed at discussing and voting on bills in the city of Buenos Aires legislative) and *Qué proponen* [what they propose] (a website presenting the proposals of all the candidates in the 2015 elections enabling people to identify the candidate with which they felt the greatest affinity). In parallel, work was begun on developing a territorial strategy with meetings in the districts of the city of Buenos Aires, along the same horizontal lines promoted by the web. The case of the Partido de la Red may show the potential and the limitations of political parties emerging from the online world.

The Partido de la Red emerged as an initiative of a group of entrepreneurs, political scientists, advertising executives, sociologists and web programmers whose idea was to capitalize on the enormous advances in technology to reinforce democracy. This group of friends, acquaintances and colleagues sought to “create a software capable of hacking into the existing party political system and transforming it”.<sup>50</sup> There were five people at the first meeting; in the second, each one of the original participants brought along another person.<sup>51</sup> Their pre-existing personal or professional relationships were determinant in the formation of the party. From the beginning there was an internal tension which would later shape their proposal: on the one hand, the vision of the “technologist” entrepreneurs, more optimistic about the possibilities offered by technology to produce changes in the political system; on the other, the vision of the social scientists, or those with experience working with other political parties, more skeptical about the exclusive virtues of technology. In February 2013, they reached an agreement on the founding manifesto, based on a set of interconnected concepts: #DemocraciaEstancada (stagnated democracy); #Red (network); #Pares (peers); #DemocraciaEnRed (networked democracy); #PartidoDeLaRed (networked party). Their principles

---

<sup>50</sup> See <partidodelared.org>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

were based on the supposition that: democracy is not currently stagnant, but technology has advanced and radically transformed daily life, something that has not yet occurred in the political sphere; therefore it is necessary to think in terms of a networked democracy in which all individuals are and act as peers. From the beginning, the concept of “network” had two interpretations for party members. On the one hand, it referred to the Internet and to an organization that would use this tool to enable civic participation. On the other, “network” evoked the type of party organization they were proposing, horizontal and open, as opposed to the traditional hierarchical and elitist parties. The members referred to themselves as “peers”, seeking to avoid personalism, and to the work teams as the “nodes” in the network.

In principle, the idea was to use the internet to create spaces for civic participation in decision making within the city of Buenos Aires and offer them to political parties and organizations that were interested. However, they soon realized that the initiative was not popular with the traditional parties: “they are groups who have become used to taking decisions behind society’s back, in a concentrated, vertical and personalistic power structure” (Siri, 2015, p. 95). Therefore, they opted to build a new political party to dispute the 2013 legislative elections in the city of Buenos Aires.

The Partido de la Red’s proposal was unprecedented: by means of an application created with the software *DemocracyOS*, developed by members of the party, they intended to list all the bills of law under discussion in the city legislature to enable registered citizens to obtain information, voice their opinion and vote on them; subsequently the legislator elected by the Partido de la Red would vote in accordance with the results of the voting on the platform. Thus, the legislator would be a transparent representative whose only function would be to transmit the results of the votes; in accordance with this proposal it would make no difference if the legislator were a robot or a person.<sup>52</sup> Whatever

---

<sup>52</sup> This possibility was a kind of provocation from the more technologically oriented, rejected by the social scientists, which would never in fact be used in the 2013 campaign.

the case, the idea of representation as it is understood in contemporary democracies would be brought into question with this proposal. As the party members argue: “these tools permit individuals to be their own representatives, eliminating tutelage”.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Partido de la Red’s proposal is its presentation as a party without a defined ideological orientation. Although current political parties and leaders may employ a similar “transideological” discourse or one “beyond ideology”, in the case of the Partido de la Red the question was more profound, given that, if elected, the candidates would be committed to acting in accordance with what society decided via the platform. In his text, Sebastián Zírpolo described the Partido de la Red as a “a party with a method rather than an ideology”, since it did not engage in debate based on ideological positions. Gastón Silberman, another of its founding members responded to this author that “the ideology is that we decide better collectively” (Zírpolo, 2013). But this definition underscored two problems. First, the party would not be characterized by its own initiatives. In fact, it is possible to conceive the experience of the Partido de la Red as a “meta-democratic” experience”: its proposals have more to do with the way democracy works than with concrete policies. Its differential in relation to other political forces was in the importance attributed to societal participation. According to its members’ diagnosis, the current state of political ties meant that improving the relationship between representatives and citizens no longer constituted an option, but rather an obligation. However, the current crisis was related, above all, to “the response to civic participation”.<sup>54</sup> The specific differential of the Partido de la Red was not simply the employment of new technologies in politics, but the fact that, thanks to these, it could be presented as a party that would take society’s decisions seriously: “today a representative can say that

---

53 See <partidodelared.org>.

54 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

he represents society, but later this is just a figment in that person's memory; the Partido de la Red proposes using society's real input".<sup>55</sup> Thus, even if for the members there was "much of the essence in the form",<sup>56</sup> the ideological or political definition was concentrated on the form. The only questions in which the party defended having a substantive agenda were those related to the conditions for its own existence, such as access to public information or the dissemination of technology.<sup>57</sup> The second problem was hypothetical, but was still a challenge for the traditional way of understanding representation: what would happen if a legislator were elected and the majority of the persons registered on the platform voted against this legislator's position or that of the party leaders? The heads of Partido de la Red in the 2013 elections guaranteed that having to vote against their own position in the legislature would not be a problem as long as they were entitled to express the fact that their personal opinion did not correspond to the vote.<sup>58</sup> During its two years of existence, the question of the ideology of the Partido de la Red generated debates among its members, influencing some of its positions, as we shall see further on. Nonetheless, the members continue to emphasize that the non-ideological posture is predominant and, in particular, and that they maintain an open mind about experiences that could be tested in the future. As they themselves pointed out: "the Partido de la Red seemed to set off all the alarms, something that did not happen with the traditional parties, and this makes it difficult to test and experiment with new things".<sup>59</sup>

---

55 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

56 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

57 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

58 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015). However, it should be pointed out that this hypothetical situation avoided considering how representative the votes of users of the platform were and assessing diverse degrees of active commitment: thus, a majority that had discussed just one specific project and disappeared from the scene would have a more effective weight than the party's regular militants.

59 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

Nonetheless, the proposal seemed to lead to totally transparent representation, which called into question the actual idea of representation.<sup>60</sup> This, however, did not contradict its diagnosis and its position on contemporary politics: “with delegation to a formal representative, part of communication is jeopardized”, said one of its members.<sup>61</sup> This was particularly important when considering a less salient aspect, but one which was part of the overall proposal: the possibility the users would have of delegating their vote<sup>62</sup> to other users of the platform to decide on specific problems (it would be possible to delegate one particular vote or all the votes related to a determined subject to another person considered better qualified in this area). Would this mean reopening the gate of delegation to representatives and leaders, but based on epistemic virtues and specialized knowledge rather than politics? For the party members it would be necessary to envisage a user who could vote in the name of others more as a delegate than as a representative, particularly because this prerogative could be withdrawn at any time.<sup>63</sup> For them, the differentiation<sup>64</sup> was not necessarily based on expertise in the subject,<sup>65</sup> but on trust which might be “either technical

---

60 In particular, modern political representation, based on the rejection of the imperative mandate.

61 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

62 This idea is inspired by the experience of the Berlin Pirate Party, whose platform allowed for “superelectors”, actors who, according to the members of the Partido de la Red, have acted responsibly, informing those they represent about their vote (interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

63 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

64 Which also brought into question the maxim of modern democracies: “one person, one vote”.

65 However, it should be noted that the party members recognize an educational function in their proposal. One of the founders, Martín Galanternik, asked: “What kind of civic education are we proposing, if we let people feel that they have participated by the simple fact of having logged on to the platform?” (Sebastián Zírpolo, “Partido de la Red: Los hackers de la política”, *Revista Brando*, 29 jul. 2013). Another founder argued: “For the Partido de la Red’s mission, politics is education, educating people to be more aware of their rights and of the effects of collective decisions” (Agustín Frizzera, “Por qué votar al Partido de la Red”, *Bastión Digital*, Oct. 23, 2015).



or moral” in origin;<sup>66</sup> they also understood that this knowledge could be diverse in its origin, not all of which associated with expertise: a neighbor’s “wisdom based on experience” with respect to the square on the corner of his street is sometimes more valuable than the knowledge of the town planner or the legislator when it comes to taking decisions about this square.<sup>67</sup> Whatever the case, the delegate should never “stop being a peer”. The same discussion about the relationship between “peers” took place inside the party, but without delegation of the vote. One of its members argued: “We don’t shun leadership. We are here to debate representation and the kind of leadership desired. What does not exist is the figure of the uncontested leader”.<sup>68</sup>

This disruptive proposal — binding online participation and transparent representation — led to the beginning of the creation of a formal political party which would face the challenge of finding four thousand members to be able to ensure provisional registration in order to participate in the elections. Simultaneously, the members initiated a campaign to rapidly make their ideas known to the citizens of the city of Buenos Aires. They managed to collect the signatures a little before the elections, in September 2013. The electoral campaign was very characteristic of a young party arising from the social networks. Since they did not have a large budget,<sup>69</sup> they organized a “Comunicación”, a communication marathon to define their strategy,<sup>70</sup> two open sessions that brought 45 people together to generate ideas and develop themes,

---

66 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

67 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

68 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015). For the interviewee, the situations in which the leader is uncontested are ones in which the subject is debated in meetings, but what really matters when it comes to taking a collective decision is the leader’s position.

69 The budget they had came from funds the city of Buenos Aires provided the party with to print the voting slips, in addition to the party founders’ personal funds and a crowdfunding campaign.

70 Inspired by the “hackathons”, meetings in which many programmers get together for 48 hours and work in small teams on the development of information systems (Siri, 2015, p. 214).

signs and spots. Worthy of note among the campaign slogans were: “Everyone in”, “May the web awake” and “On offer: representatives who represent”. Aimed at building a symbol that would attract people’s attention anywhere, that would become viral not only on the social networks but also in the offline public space, they created the “Trojan Horse”.<sup>71</sup> This was to visit all the districts of Buenos Aires, with a megaphone announcing: “Just as the Greeks penetrated the fortress, came out of the horse and opened the gates of the city, we are here to present a strategy for the inhabitants of Buenos Aires to penetrate a fortified legislature. We don’t want all the politicians to leave, we want all the citizens to enter”.<sup>72</sup> Another challenge for the Partido de la Red was raising funds to print the number of voting slips required under Argentinean electoral legislation. To do this they resorted to crowdfunding. In ten days, they managed to raise all the 35,000 pesos required from 280 contributors (Siri, 2015, p. 215). The selection of candidates was another question that had to be resolved during the process; the decision about who would head the list was made by consensus within the party and the “natural” candidates were its founders.

The end of the campaign consisted of the presentation of the Partido de la Red’s online deliberation and voting platform. In the week before the elections, the platform went on the air, simulating what would occur were any of the party’s candidates to be elected. In the words of one of the members: “Our proposal does not consist of promises, but rather actions. Instead of talking about a hypothetical tool, we showed everyone interested how *DemocracyOS* worked with the laws then under passage. This demystified the idea that laws address complex issues requiring specialization or that using an online application was complicated” (Siri, 2015, p. 216).

On deciding to form a political party to dispute elections, the members

---

71 The allusion to the Trojan Horse is also derived from the IT term which refers to a program that is presented in a certain way but executes other tasks in the background (Siri, 2015, p. 214).

72 The Partido de la Red’s Facebook page, Dec. 28, 2013. This slogan alludes to a phrase that became well known during the December 2001 political crisis in Argentina, which went: “*que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*” (out with all [the politicians], we don’t want any left).

of the Partido de la Red faced a series of challenges in the offline world: obtaining provisional registration in just a few months, selecting candidates, raising campaign funding etc. All of these challenges obliged them to test solutions and try out courses of action aligned with their principles. Finally, in the legislative elections held on October 27, 2013, the Partido de la Red obtained 21,943 votes, the ninth highest number among the 27 alternatives,<sup>73</sup> but none of its candidates managed to get elected.

During 2014, the Partido de la Red kept its discussion platform open and updated. Each week the bills of law that would be debated in the legislature were inserted in the platform and people were asked to discuss and vote on them, in an attempt to show how the party would have functioned if it had elected representatives. An analysis of the discussions that took place on the platform during 2014<sup>74</sup> suggests that the majority of the messages were not limited to giving an opinion in favor or against a bill, but proposed suggestions or modifications, something not originally planned for the platform. The members of the Partido de la Red participated actively in these debates. Other messages, fewer in number, fulfilled the function of providing information. In some cases, the data came from specialists in the subject, but in general the personal experiences of individuals affected by the questions addressed in each bill of law predominated. There were also messages questioning the relevance of the topics addressed by the legislature, instead of concentrating time and resources on questions the users of the tool considered to be priorities. Messages questioning the validity and rejecting the legislature as an institution were widespread. The fact is that online deliberation (one of the party's most constitutive demands) continues to be a technical, conceptual and practical problem: messages taking into account or responding to prior communications were rare, others indicated that the users had voted before participating in the

---

73 The Partido de la Red's Facebook page, Dec. 31, 2013.

74 The study was exploratory. Only messages related to bills of law in which more than 300 people had participated were considered (11 bills in all).

discussion, and many were in fact from party members. Tracking conversation topics among the messages was not easy and hardly anybody posted more than one message.

Significantly, however, during 2014 the party had continued to develop the Network Democracy Foundation, (Fundação Democracia em Rede)<sup>75</sup>. Since it was not an election year and no representatives had been elected, activities as a political party were not the party members' main concern. The foundation sought to improve the system, elaborate new initiatives and get in touch with other parties and institutions at local and global level. The foundation is the institution effectively responsible for developing and maintaining the *DemocracyOS* civic participation system, promoting and facilitating its use in different institutional spheres in the city of Buenos Aires and worldwide.<sup>76</sup> As one of the founding members of the party and the foundation states: "we took the fundamental decision to separate the software from the political party: our goal, in fact, is to get all political spaces to incorporate this tool into their practices, not just the Partido de la Red" (Siri, 2015, p. 75). The foundation is a good medium for raising funds to develop the software and is capable of obtaining support from diverse actors. In this sense, the Partido de la Red is simply one of many actors seeking to deploy the *Democracy* tool, with the particularity that the party's proposal implies use in a binding manner where societal decisions are concerned.<sup>77</sup> But other political parties started to employ the software for organizational decision making. Furthermore, condominiums, organized district community associations and other collective actors have

---

75 The foundation has the format of an NGO, it is financed by donations and remuneration for its services. It is run by some founding members of the Partido de la Red and its president is Florencia Polimeni, who was a legislator for the city of Buenos Aires.

76 "We can implement *DemocracyOS* both for internal use and to consult electors about any type of question. [...] In Mexico, the federal government implemented *DemocracyOS* to initiate a debate about its public data policy. And in Tunisia the organization I WATCH used the tool for a debate on the new national constitution with the Tunisians" (Siri, 2015, p. 218).

77 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

increasingly sought to use the tool, with assistance from the foundation.<sup>78</sup>

The initiative called *Demos* was a Fundação Democracia em Rede project. Based on the *DemocracyOS* software, for some weeks during November 2014 the legislature of the city of Buenos Aires made a platform available over which any user could obtain information about the 16 bills of law under debate in the house. Of these only the three considered most relevant would be debated and promptly submitted to a vote by society. The initiative was developed in collaboration with the president of the house and legislators from different parties who had submitted bills of law, although the decisions on the platform were not to be binding. 13,289 Buenos Aires residents accessed the platform, which received a total of 26,833 visits, including users from other cities around the world. The majority were young people aged between 25 and 35 years, and the breakdown between men and women was more evenly distributed than in other participative societal environments — 55% and 45% respectively.<sup>79</sup>

The main medium for disseminating the project was Twitter: 4,569 tweets bore the *Demos*, #YoVoto hashtag. Since this new actor generated suspicion among party political leaders and the intention was that *Demos* should have an institutional presence, it was necessary to negotiate with the different party leaders to get them to include their bills and select the ones they considered most appropriate for discussion on the platform. It was not possible to do this online<sup>80</sup>. It had to be done face to face,<sup>81</sup> knocking on doors, speaking to aides, convincing legislators by bringing into play the diverse political ties each member of the Partido de la Red had. One of the first aspects of *Demos* that demonstrated the importance of interplay between

78 Different from the Partido de la Red, whose organizational structure will be analyzed further ahead, the foundation does have a hierarchical structure comprising a president, a board of directors, an executive board and working groups. However there is a very large overlap between the members of the foundation and the militants of the Partido de la Red.

79 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

80 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

81 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

the online and offline worlds was the inevitable interaction with political and institutional actors.

But even more evident in this respect was the result of the deliberation process and, particularly, the vote. The winning bill, which attracted the highest participation and number of votes, was a bill to improve working conditions for nurses in public hospitals, which had been introduced by Marcelo Ramal, a legislator for the Frente de Esquerda. This bill achieved the participation of 1,434 people, a result made possible because the leaders of the Frente de Esquerda urged their militants to vote and to mobilize, engaging those directly affected by the bill of law by organizing campaigns to publicize the question in hospitals. In the words of one of the members of the Partido de la Red: “an offline group took over the platform”.<sup>82</sup> This was interpreted as proof of the relevance of organized offline actors and of actions undertaken in the offline environment, the “physical correlate”<sup>83</sup> of the success of the online activities.<sup>84</sup> This was also the opinion of some of the representatives who took part in the initiative, such as the legislator of the The Civic Coalition for an Egalitarian Republic, CC-ARI (Coalición Cívica para la Afirmación de una República Igualitaria) and third vice president of the house, whose bill of law seeking an increase in the education budget came in second place in number of votes: “Neither can the cyber-militant substitute the militant, nor can the cyber-legislator substitute the legislator; the networks cannot take the place of the territory and face to face contact, they can only complement them: the incorporation of the new technologies serves to amplify the public space”.<sup>85</sup>

---

82 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

83 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

84 The CC-ARI aired spots on the social networks disseminating the bill they were advocating, but this implied prioritizing another strategy in the online world.

85 Interview with Maximiliano Ferraro (Sep. 22, 2015).

In the case of the deliberation and discussion of the bills, the dynamic was similar to the one described previously in the use of the Partido de la Red platform: deliberation did not attain the depth expected and it was difficult to establish dialogue; although there was a button to respond to comments, the system did not generate notifications, resulting in a reduced number of responses to comments.<sup>86</sup> The commitment assumed by the legislators was to follow up on the three bills elected by popular vote after the consultation. The bill receiving the most votes, which had been awaiting approval by the parliamentary commission responsible for six years, was once again obstructed by the legislature after the *Demos* experience, and did not reach the plenary session; similarly, the bill that came in second place did not pass the commissions. A vote was taken on the bill that came third, but it was not approved. Nevertheless, the main positive effect of the initiative was the fact that society did manage to establish an agenda that diverged from that of the political representatives, providing visibility for bills from small parties that otherwise would not have been the case. However, as one legislator observed, “the ball comes back into the political court”;<sup>87</sup> it is the politicians who see themselves as bound to provide society with some kind of response.

2015 saw a new conjuncture for the Partido de la Red: it was an election year, but the provisional registration they had obtained no longer permitted them to run unless they managed to increase party membership. Thus the members had to implement two strategies simultaneously: firstly to try to reach the number of 4 thousand members required by the city of Buenos Aires Electoral Court; and then, when they realized that it would not be possible to

---

86 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015). The legislator of the CC-ARI, whose bill was also discussed, admitted having participated in the debate, discussing it article by article and responding to questions and criticisms and observed that many who were accompanying the project were well informed (interview with Maximiliano Ferraro, Sep. 22, 2015). One of the significant results for the representatives who submitted their bills for discussion and voting was precisely the receipt of the report prepared by the Fundación Democracia en Red which presented the main positive and negative arguments with regard to these bills.

87 Interview with Maximiliano Ferraro (Sep. 22, 2015).

dispute the 2015 elections, to implement some type of new initiative which would enable them to be a visible actor on the electoral scene even though they were not presenting candidates. The first strategy required a change in the format of the party and the development of a territorial dimension, which we will address further on.

In order to participate in the 2015 electoral process, even without having candidates, the Partido de la Red launched the *Qué proponen* platform, which provided users with information on the public proposals put forward by each of the candidates for executive positions in the city of Buenos Aires and in the Argentinean national elections. The proposals could be filtered by party, by candidate or by subject; it was also possible to visualize which issues drew more proposals from a particular candidate or party. Links were also made available for users to communicate with the candidates via Twitter. *Qué proponen* received more than 600,000 accesses, it was shared more than 9 thousand times on Facebook and there were 1,200 tweets with the link to the platform for the local elections in Buenos Aires. The accesses peaked at 11 a.m. on election day, indicating that people used the platform to obtain information on candidates' positions. These numbers also demonstrate the influence of the Partido de la Red on the election process, in spite of having no candidates.<sup>88</sup>

Based on *Qué proponen* the application *Tu Media Naranja* (your soul-mate) was developed in the city of Buenos Aires. This enabled users to identify the candidates they had greater affinity with based on their interest in proposals related to specific topics. These initiatives are aligned with one of the mottos adopted by the Partido de la Red since its foundation, "we debate ideas, not candidates", and which provoked an impact in an electoral campaign criticized for not debating proposals.<sup>89</sup> To build this platform, the organizers started collecting

---

88 The initiative was mentioned by the press and also imitated, for example, by the newspaper *La Nación*, which proposed a similar tool by which readers could measure their affinity with the diverse candidates.

89 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).



information from the candidates' websites and organizing the information available on the electoral platforms. But as the audience for *Qué proponen* grew, a number of candidates started to contact them (offline) to insert their proposals, and to correct or complement the information provided on them.<sup>90</sup>

Although the challenge of obtaining the number of affiliations required to ensure the party's registration seemed possible in 2015, the ease with which it picked up "likes" and followers in the social networks was not transferred to the offline world. Up to that moment, the party had managed to sign up between 800 and 1,200 members. The Partido de la Red then opted to obtain registration with its sights on the 2017 elections, while in the meantime developing a territorial strategy.

Compared with its original proposal, the decision to hold meetings and constitute territorial cells was a landmark which would have an impact on the political conception of the party. In this respect, the Partido de la Red is notable: while the traditional political parties need to incorporate the new technologies into their communication and the way they operate, the Partido de la Red is heading in the opposite direction, seeking to occupy physical territory and promote face to face contact. The party members' diagnosis was that "attracting people online needs to start offline; this will enable the more intense consolidation of a community";<sup>91</sup> and that, without occupying this territory, the party runs the risk of "losing its sensitivity", which is something that you cannot develop "sitting on the couch at home".<sup>92</sup>

Therefore, they started establishing cells or nodes based on the city of Buenos Aires' 15 administrative divisions or comunas. To date, there are active nodes in comunas 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13 and 14. At the meetings in these nodes<sup>93</sup>, the

90 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

91 Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

92 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

93 On average, 20 people participate in the territorial assemblies. At the same time, the Partido de la Red holds general assemblies in November, in which around 70 people generally participate.

issues discussed may be either related to the comuna and/or to the party in general, but with a local emphasis. They discuss collaboration with district and civil society organizations, propose walks around the district to map the area and identify local problems. By saying that “to know how we can improve living conditions, it is necessary to know how we live”, one of the members of the node for comunas 13 and 14 is alluding to a party whose role is to formulate proposals to improve living conditions for citizens.<sup>94</sup> In fact, it is in these territories that cooperation with other civil society and political organizations emerges, aimed at providing solutions to specific problems. Examples worthy of note are the measures to prevent the closure of a hospital in the Villa Urquiza district, or the relationship initiated with a waste picker cooperative.<sup>95</sup>

In fact, the development of a territorial dimension required that the party review and rethink its aforementioned lack of an ideology. A party member responsible for the territorial strategy stated that this conception was being transformed and that members considered that the party needed its own ideas, even if they were developed using collective online writing mechanisms.<sup>96</sup> Upon coming into contact with the territory, the party was obliged to adopt positions on the problems raised about the districts in the assemblies.<sup>97</sup> In parallel, the party's positioning on the problems or public events in 2013 changed. The foundation document stated that “the Partido de la Red will only adopt positions on questions that affect the minimum conditions for a networked democracy”, but the party's positions on the social networks increased both in number and in the range of topics covered. In 2013, the party's official Facebook page contained only two positions, both related to the conditions

---

94 Participant observation of a territorial assembly in the districts of Belgrano and Núñez and interview with the coordinator, Enrique Elvas (Aug. 22, 2015).

95 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

96 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

97 Participant observation of a territorial assembly in the districts of Belgrano and Núñez and interview with the coordinator, Enrique Elvas (Aug. 22, 2015).

for the existence of a networked democracy. In 2014, seven positions related to various local issues were posted, including more controversial ones, such as the shortage of places in the city of Buenos Aires public school system. Lastly, in 2015 four positions were published, addressing even more controversial issues, such as the death of the prosecutor Alberto Nisman, and the #NiUnaMenos mobilization. Consequently, the definition of ideological positions is one of the points under discussion within the party. For one member, “society is beginning to demand traditional ideological definitions”;<sup>98</sup> for another, the Partido de la Red will need to start adopting ideological positions, but not necessarily in a traditional sense, because it will always be subject to a referendum by society;<sup>99</sup> the fact is that “if you are in the political system, you cannot be an actor who just says yes or no, you have to be proactive, to take the initiative”.<sup>100</sup>

During 2015, the Partido de la Red also modified its internal organizational structure. The executive council in operation in 2013, which was composed of 60 to 70 people who took decisions on all issue in assemblies was replaced in June 2015 by an executive committee consisting of the coordinators of each one of the 7 thematic nodes, as well as the coordinators of the territorial nodes.<sup>101</sup> The sovereign body in terms of responsibility and

98 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

99 From the standpoint of its members, this is perhaps one of the aspects that most differentiates the Partido de la Red from other parties emerging from the web, such as the European Podemos and Movimiento 5 Stelle : “they clearly have charismatic leaders and act like traditional parties in some respects because they are disputing power and have an ideological perspective” (interview with Felipe Muñoz, Sep. 21, 2015). Nevertheless, these experiences are clear references for its proposal: the structure in circles of Podemos inspires its nodal structure, for example (interview with Inti Bonomo, Aug. 31, 2015). At the same time, they have frequent contact with all these experiences by means of the Fundación Democracia en Red: the parties seek the Foundation for assistance, as do the 5 Stelle representatives in the city of Trieste or, in other cases, they themselves assume the development of the code, since it is essentially an open code (interview with Felipe Muñoz, Sep. 21, 2015).

100 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

101 The thematic or functional nodes currently in existence are: Platform (coordinated by Agustín Frizzera, who is responsible for thinking, developing and maintaining the contents on the party's platforms), Finance, Territory (coordinated by Inti Bonomo), Networked parties (relations with

accountability became the General Meeting, in which all members participate. Party members are developing a specific online platform to prepare the themes and discussions for the general meetings, but warn that the general meeting “cannot be replaced by an online one; discussing things face to face offers a higher level of connection, it is different and not necessarily better; the ideal would be a hybrid model that would maximize the advantages of face to face and online communication”.<sup>102</sup>

Another novelty has been the emergence of the Partido de la Red in other locations in the country: La Rioja, Mar del Plata, Rosário, Córdoba, Tandil, Necochea and Lanús.<sup>103</sup> There was discussion about whether there should be a hierarchy which would subordinate the new nodes to the original one in the city of Buenos Aires. The option was made to maintain the organization horizontal, enabling autonomous construction of the Partido de la Red in each location with specific characteristics for each individual context.<sup>104</sup>

Who does the Partido de la Red represent or include? On the one hand, its members say that the platform is a tool for the weak against the powerful, given that the software it has developed is aimed at reducing the cost of participation for everyone.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, it is impossible to conceive a

---

other Partidos de la Red), Membership (coordinated by Gonzalo Arguello), Communication and Organization (coordinated by Martín Galanternik). There are also peripheral nodes, the active ones being Art, Academia, Design, Haiti (corruption of “IT” for information technology) and Software.

102 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

103 In the city of La Rioja the party is a legally constituted organization. The node in Mar del Plata is also very active and developed an application to police the elections, which was also used by the Partido de la Red in the city of Buenos Aires, which thereafter started decentralizing the production of content. The majority of Facebook pages replicate the posts from the Buenos Aires party's original page and provide information on local meetings. Some nodes are personal initiatives with around ten followers.

104 Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015). Nonetheless, the informal hierarchies persist; because of their capacity to speak in public or experience the founders of the party in Buenos Aires are always a reference.

105 Interview with Felipe Muñoz (Sep. 21, 2015).

body of representatives consisting entirely of legislators from the Partido de la Red: other parties are needed to represent those who have no access to or who are unfamiliar with the new technologies.<sup>106</sup> While digital exclusion persists, the Partido de la Red will be deficient in terms of representation and inclusion. In this respect, digital exclusion is a limitation the offline world imposes on the online world.

But from the experience of the Partido de la Red, we have seen that these worlds have to engage in dialogue in several ways: its initiatives imply establishing contacts with other political forces; electoral rules impose the need to seek members based on territory; territory proves to be necessary to boost “sensitivity”; which in turn obliges the party to adopt positions in relation to certain issues and to coordinate actions with other specific actors. In the words of its members: “online and offline are universes that intersect”.<sup>107</sup> But this is a terrain we may refer to as “democratic experimentalism”. What characterizes the Partido de la Red is its experimentalism. This can be seen, in the way the party conceives its internal organization and its positioning towards society or in the development and constant improvement of online applications that foster societal participation. In this, democracy itself is conceived as an experiment, a test, a process of trial and error, because “technology is fleeting, it is tool that is alive”.<sup>108</sup>

### Caso 3: Change.org, the digital cry

Change.org is an online petition platform which has been in place in Argentina since January 2013. It gained relevance rapidly as topics of major public importance started to generate petitions on the platform, examples being the regulation of mandatory presidential debates, the sanction of

---

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Inti Bonomo (Aug. 31, 2015).

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli (Aug. 4, 2015).

healthcare laws, or the demand for policies against gender violence related to the #NiUnaMenos mobilization (among the most recent ones). To date, there have been many positive responses to petitions, as well as significant institutional changes. The main tools for disseminating the petitions originating on this online platform are the social networks, but the relevance that it has acquired has ensured that many of the issues raised have also been reproduced by the traditional communication media. Change.org's great potential for achieving "successes" (positive results in the offline environment) is due to the way in which it exercises pressure on decision makers, but also to the appeal of its use of personal accounts, a predominance of images over impersonal argumentation, and individual experiences in contrast with the positions of organized actors.

In 2007, Change.org emerged in the United States as a blog on questions related to social change. The site had been created by Ben Rattray, a student at Stanford University. Over time, the petitions on the site became more popular (that is, they attracted more traffic) than the actual posts on the blog, leading to its transformation into a platform exclusively dedicated to petitions. The platform rapidly expanded to other countries, starting with England and Australia. In Spain, Change.org ended up merging with an existing platform called Actuable. It was based on this Spanish language version that the website expanded to Latin America. Utilization of the global platform by users in determined countries ended up generating local versions of the website.<sup>109</sup> In January 2013, the website came into operation in Argentina.<sup>110</sup> One of the first petitions created was related to the problem of flooding in the cities of Buenos Aires and La Plata, demanding that the national government build aqueducts

---

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

<sup>110</sup> Change.org is coordinated in Latin America by Susana Fernández Garrido, a bachelor in Information Science, who worked previously at Amnesty International and, in Argentina, by Gastón Wright, a bachelor in Political Science from the University of Toronto. The coordinator of the platform in Argentina is responsible for selecting the local team, whose main mission is to promote the dissemination of the campaigns.

and sewage networks. This petition had been created by a Spanish journalist. In the beginning the platform's links with Spain were strong due to the fact that until 2013 Argentinean users used the Spanish version of Change.org, particularly for animal rights-related petitions.<sup>111</sup> There are currently 2.5 million active users in Argentina (out of a total of 2.9 million) and the greater number of petitions are related to: economic justice (19.1%), animal rights (16.4%), human rights (14.3%), health (13.2%) and the environment (13%).<sup>112</sup>

The platform is defined by its creators as a tool capable of promoting social change through citizens' individual actions. The website states that "Change.org's mission is to empower people everywhere to create the change they want to see".<sup>113</sup> According to the coordinator in Argentina, Change.org was established to empower people to create the changes they want, but without defining *a priori* the type of change. It is a dynamic platform that seeks to influence decision makers and produce concrete results.<sup>114</sup> By focusing on change, it is not a platform that carries petitions related to the status quo, although in some cases requests may arise aimed at preserving a current state where change may pose a threat.<sup>115</sup>

Different from other petition platforms, such as Avaaz, Change.org does not take an institutional position in relation to the petitions, neither does it create

---

111 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

112 Report produced by Change.org and published by the newspaper *La Nación* on Oct. 21, 2015. See <[www.lanacion.com.ar/1838364-changeorg-barometro-sociedad-argentinos-preocupaciones-elecciones](http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1838364-changeorg-barometro-sociedad-argentinos-preocupaciones-elecciones)>. Worldwide, the platform has more than 110 million users in 196 countries.

113 Extract from Terms of Service. See <[www.change.org/policies/terms-of-service](http://www.change.org/policies/terms-of-service)>.

114 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

115 In this respect, the case of the Centro Cultural Kirchner is illustrative, since two petitions were created on the platform about the subject: one to change the name of the cultural center, based on its lack of representativeness in Argentinean society, while the other seeks to maintain the name, in order not to repeat the tactic used by the Argentine military dictatorship of banning references to the name of the former president Juan Domingo Perón.

new petitions itself. The platform prefers the actual users to take the initiative and simply collaborates in the dissemination of the petitions that manage to collect a large number of signatures, without “having a specific agenda”.<sup>116</sup> The Change.org terms of use state: “We are not responsible for the content of our users and do not monitor it. [...] [we do not] support viewpoints, opinions, recommendations or advice published by users”.<sup>117</sup> The platform does not take positions on the petitions, but reserves the right to exclude them in extreme cases, such as when the messages are clearly discriminatory in content.<sup>118</sup>

What is necessary to create or sign a petition? The first step is the creation of a user account. Users must be over 13 years of age, act in their own name and may not conceal their true identity. Each user may initiate a “campaign”, that is, create a specific petition on the platform and promote it via the social networks, via email or other communication media. The platform itself encourages the users to share their petitions, to “mobilize” their friends, family and community. Once created, the user is also encouraged to keep the petition up-to-date, “keeping supporters informed” about the advances and setbacks as regards the objectives of the petition. In addition to being “authors”,

116 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015). The platform collaborates with the dissemination of some petitions by email; it has a mailing list of 2.5 million people, although it generally targets the recipients in accordance with their interests (defined in function of the signature of previous petitions or members’ social profile).

117 Extract from Terms of Service. See <[www.change.org/policies/terms-of-service](http://www.change.org/policies/terms-of-service)>. Another difference is in the method of financing. While Avaaz is an NGO that receives donations from individuals, Change.org has a “social business” model, which is not financed by donations. It has a sustainability strategy based on the sale of “petitions promoted”. This does not mean that Change.org is affiliated with the organizations responsible for these petitions even if it is in favor of them (interview with Gastón Wright, Aug. 10, 2015).

118 The platform establishes that certain petitions may be excluded if they violate the Terms of Service or the Community Directives. In principle, any illegal petition is included in this category. One case is that of protecting authors’ rights. Another case is direct profit: petitions seeking to sell a product or a service. A petition may also be excluded if it is defamatory or if it invades someone’s privacy (e.g.: publishing their personal data). Discourse promoting hate or discrimination that violates human rights, obscene language or the publication of explicit images (that is violent, sexually explicit or offensive) may also lead to exclusion of a petition (interview with Gastón Wright, Aug. 10, 2015). Users may easily report inappropriate content found in a determined petition.



users may also “support” other petitions. In fact, there are three different roles on the platform: 1) the authors; 2) the decision makers, those who the petitions are formally aimed at; and 3) the supporters. The authors may be either individual citizens or organizations. Whereas the decision makers are divided into: a) the state sector: government representatives, civil servants, legislators at various levels of government and members of the Judiciary; b) private companies offering public services; and c) civil society organizations. The petitions may be addressed to several of these actors. There is also a fourth type of petition addressed to more abstract groups, such as “the Argentinians”. However, to a great extent, the success of a petition depends on the precise identification of those responsible for an issue and the decision makers with the legal authority to respond to the petition.<sup>119</sup> Lastly, the supporters may add comments justifying their support and may help to disseminate the petition.<sup>120</sup>

Regarding the type of petition, the platform has diverse categories which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are the “closed petitions”, those not receiving any new signatures. A petition may be closed when the user decides upon this (with or without a public justification) or when it has not been accessed for over a year.<sup>121</sup> Others are the “highlighted” petitions,

---

<sup>119</sup> Interview with María Pazo (Sep. 28, 2015). As this legislative aide observed: “Power is disseminated and it is not clear who is able to respond. This platform enables the organization of the demand and indicates who may decide” (interview with María Pazo, Sep. 28, 2015). For this reason, Change.org frequently helps the proponents to change the recipients when these are not well identified in the initial petition. It is likely that a petition will be more successful if it is addressed to second or third echelon employees who are in fact responsible for the question. Petitions addressed directly to the president or the head of the government are not usually effective. The same is true for petitions addressed to abstract groupings (interview with Gastón Wright, 23 set. 2015). In any case, “knowing who can give me the answer means I am 80% of the way to a solution” (interview with María Pazo, Sep. 28, 2015).

<sup>120</sup> The platform sends active petitions that may be of interest to determined people or profiles who are registered in the Change.org user data bank. Change.org communicates periodically with its users by email, sending general information sheets, news about the petitions it is supporting and others based on these or others accessed previously.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015).

which appear on the Change.org home page; for example, the website team may select petitions which are on the public agenda.<sup>122</sup> Then there are the “popular” petitions, ones that are active and receive signatures constantly and have the most traffic—even though they may not have such a large number of supporters.<sup>123</sup> These petitions may be accessed via the home page and, like the highlighted petitions, they change constantly. Both the highlighted petitions and the popular ones are part of a larger universe: the active petitions, that is, the ones still seeking support. There is also the universe of the successful petitions, the “victories”, which have managed to achieve their main goal.<sup>124</sup>

Argentina is the country that has the most victories in relation to the number of users. Worldwide, 38% of active user petitions were successful during the last three months, while the average in Argentina is 66%. There have been 403 victories in the country.<sup>125</sup> The platform offers important advice to increase the chance of success: it recommends that the petitions be addressed to the person/organization that has the concrete capacity to solve the problem; it recommends that the petitions be accompanied by images and that they tell a personal story.<sup>126</sup> But it is not only the form in which the petition is presented that increases the probability of success: a fundamental aspect is the platform's

---

122 They are not selected by the number of supporters, and include petitions with few supporters, based on a certain counter-majority spirit cultivated by the platform (interview with Gastón Wright, Sep. 23, 2015).

123 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

124 In Argentina, the highest number of victories are concentrated in the health area. The Change.org directors believe that the growth in the number of users in a country means support is achieved more rapidly. But there is no direct relationship between the number of supporters a petition receives and its victory. Most of the victories are among petitions receiving between 15,000 and 70,000 signatures (interview with Gastón Wright, 23 set. 2015).

125 Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015).

126 The recommended format for petitions is as follows: they should start by narrating a personal story of the user, and from there explain the problem affecting the user; use simple, down to earth language; propose solutions and emphasize the importance of obtaining support.

dynamic for exerting pressure on decision makers. Each time a user supports a petition, a message is sent to the email of the decision maker registered as responsible for the cause; not only is the request made public, but so is the name, surname and email of the decision maker, who is then inundated with messages. The pressure is increased via the social networks, through mentions of the decision maker. Twitter is prolific and lends itself very well to this purpose: the authors and supporters can tag the decision makers to boost the delivery of the petition and ensure that he/she receives it directly, or via an aide. The decision makers are responsive due to the high political cost of the public exposure created by the petition; government officials in particular may see the petitions as a threat to their reputation.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, while for the authors and the supporters the cost of participating is very low, for the decision makers the cost of not responding can be much higher.<sup>128</sup>

Change.org has grown tremendously in Argentina (in number of users and victories) since it was launched in 2013<sup>129</sup>. Some petitions on public issues rapidly gained prominence: in April 2013, a petition against the judicial reform under discussion in the country; in May a petition criticizing the homophobic content in questionnaires used for blood donations; in October a petition addressed to the president requesting her intervention to free an Argentinian Greenpeace activist detained in Russia; in November, a petition for a new diabetes law making it mandatory for providers of private and professional health insurance to guarantee coverage for patients. These high impact petitions in the platform's first year generated enormous visibility. From 2014, the number of petitions gaining repercussion in the media and whose topics came into public debate increased dramatically.

It is worth noting that petitions initiated by individual authors are

---

<sup>127</sup> Particularly in the case of municipalities, this fear may be greater because there is more chance that the employees will come across the authors or supporters in the street.

<sup>128</sup> The cost is higher for lower echelon employees (interview with Gastón Wright, 23 set. 2015).

<sup>129</sup> It grew 401% in the first year.

more successful;<sup>130</sup> more so than when the authors are members of some organization or are engaged in actions with civil society or political actors. The more successful cases tend to be ones in which the petition is related to the author's personal history or a singular experience, an approach recommended by the platform.<sup>131</sup> These individual authors include people who have been jeopardized in some way and face a concrete problem; they present the petition themselves or have it presented by a family member. They may be people who tell their own story, but also seek to represent a broader problem through their own example. There are also cases of people who have been jeopardized in some way or other who choose not to focus on their specific case, but rather on a larger group, for example, the local community in which they live, an example being a father who requested that his son's school not be closed due to its proximity to Almirante Brown football stadium. Other instances involving people motivated by a collective cause prominent on the public agenda (such as the request for protection of the team investigating the death of the prosecutor Alberto Nisman; the request for the reinstatement of the prosecutor José María Campagnoli, who had been investigating a case of corruption and was removed from his position; or the implementation of electronic urns in the elections) present the problem from the standpoint of the "common citizen". Alternatively, there are the petitions from civil society organizations, community groups or networks supporting a particular cause, the most common being those related to animal rights and the environment (such as the petition to prohibit greyhound racing in the country, initiated by the network Proyecto Galgo Argentina).

Overall, the majority of the petitions are individual initiatives. In line with the recommendations made by the platform, the predominant narrative

---

<sup>130</sup> Individual authors account for 95%, compared with 5% of authors organized in civic associations. Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

form for the petitions and the one provoking the most impact is storytelling.<sup>132</sup> This tends to generate empathy among potential supporters, differently from the typical register employed in petitions from non-governmental or civil society organizations: “Basically, we consume stories every day”, says the coordinator of Change.org.<sup>133</sup> If it is empathy that mobilizes the supporters, and the threat to their reputation that moves the decision makers, the authors frequently indicate that it is a feeling of indignation that drives them to create a petition.<sup>134</sup>

Even if being a specialist in the subject is not a prerequisite for creating petitions, frequently professional, technical and legal knowledge acquired in the offline environment contributes to their success, even though it is not the platform's objective to transmit messages via texts composed by specialists. Two petitions from 2015 related to electoral legislation in the context of the general elections caused broad repercussion. One of them, which requested the approval of a law obliging candidates to participate in presidential debates, was initiated by the political scientist and university lecturer Diego Muzio. For the Change.org staff, this was an example of a very well-written petition with

---

132 In addition to the story telling, allusions are made to a broad and abstract set of common values, such as “justice”, “plurality”, “human dignity”, “legality” etc. But as the coordinator of Change.org in Argentina puts it: “by telling one's own story, one is also telling the story of other people who may face the same problem, who feel they are reflected in the account. The storytelling is effective because it produces empathy, which is the means of communication chosen by the traditional media. A part of the person's private life is exposed when writing the petition, so participation on this platform remains in a ‘grey zone between the intimate and the public’ (interview with Gastón Wright, Aug. 10, 2015).

133 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015).

134 María Pazo, the author of a request to repair a manhole on a corner in her district, explains that she decided to make the petition when she became indignant about the risk involved in crossing the road; soaking wet from the rain, she entered her house and feeling indignant wrote the petition (interview with María Pazo, Sep. 28, 2015). Natalia Luque also describes that she decided to write the petition after returning home from voting, indignant about the confusion generated by the “*listas sábanas*” [see note 136]. She created the petition while she was eating: “it was to get it off my chest, I wasn't looking for 300,000 supporters” (participant observation of the meeting between the petition author Natalia Luque and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author, Oct. 23, 2015).

pertinent information; it could have been a petition from a non-governmental organization like Poder Ciudadano but, had this been the case, “it would have received 500 signatures”; what contributed to its success was the fact that it was “written by Diego as a normal person who is also a political scientist”.<sup>135</sup> The second petition causing wide-ranging repercussion, which requested the use of the electronic urn in elections, was initiated by a “common citizen”, as she describes herself, a housewife, with no professional experience in this area, no history of political militancy and no prior membership of any organization.<sup>136</sup> In 12 hours, Natalia managed to get more than 25,000 supporters, channeling public indignation against the so called “*lista sábana*”,<sup>137</sup> says the coordinator of Change.org. The expression of indignation, the narrative of a story and its creation at the right moment are elements with which technical know-how or specialized language cannot compete.<sup>138</sup>

There are also cases in the which the actual dynamics of the campaign force the actors to become “specialists” in the subject, from a technical, scientific and legal standpoint, as Germán Montenegro, a layman who created the successful petition about the Transplant Law<sup>139</sup> explained. Diego Muzio adds that although professional or technical knowledge is not necessary to create a petition, it is an important element when giving interviews to the press.<sup>140</sup>

---

135 Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015).

136 Participant observation of the meeting between the petition author Natalia Luque and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author (Oct. 23, 2015).

137 In Argentina the party slip with a closed list found in large plurinominal districts is called the *lista sábana*. The list normally includes candidates for the different levels of government, both Executive and Legislative, one of the reasons why it is heavily criticized. The slip may be up to one meter long.

138 Interview with Gastón Wright (Aug. 10, 2015). The interviewee maintained that, on the contrary: “There are many petitions whose substance is not derived from an intellectual viewpoint, but from the story told by a person”.

139 Interview with Germán Montenegro (Sep. 29, 2015).

140 Interview with Diego Muzio (Sep. 24, 2015).

Germán agreed with him: although he was not a specialist in the subject, he began to study issues related to the law and medicine because, as he argued, when he was contacted by the press or other institutional actors “he had to have the pertinent information”.<sup>141</sup>

Change.org’s impact is leveraged by the repercussion of the petitions in both the social networks<sup>142</sup> and the traditional communication media. The users, authors and supporters usually disseminate their campaigns via the social networks. In the case of Facebook, Change.org permits the association of the user’s account on its platform with their Facebook account, enabling them to share the link to the petition with all their friends and contacts. Without the potential to go viral enabled by the social networks, Change.org would not be capable of achieving the repercussion it does.

This direct connection with the online networks makes Change.org a porous, open platform, as opposed to a closed forum. The traditional communication media (newspapers, radio and television) also boost the repercussion of many campaigns initiated on Change.org., undoubtedly

---

141 Interview with Germán Montenegro (Sep. 29, 2015). The knowledge Germán acquired in the specific question that mobilized him and his experience in the venture he initiated led to his invitation to participate as an independent specialist on councils in the city of Corrientes. Another relevant aspect the author of the petition mentions is the fact that many normal people started to view him as a reference on the subject and to send him private messages asking about how to change their healthcare service provider and some doctors started to give his name as a contact for information about legal aspects of the rights of transplant patients. As we mentioned previously in the case of the organizers of #NiUnaMenos, social leadership built via the social networks led the actors to assume unexpected responsibilities. As such, political know-how and representative qualities may also be developed in the process of the online campaigns and in related offline activities. In the case of Natalia Luque, her concern that the petition should not be seen as either pro or anti government reveals the development of a political perception. “I am neither for or against any politicians, I am in favor of the people, the common citizens [...] Ha! I sound like a politician!”, she said (participant observation of the meeting between the petition author Natalia Luque and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author, Oct. 23, 2015).

142 For example, an analysis of traffic during the interview with the coordinator of Change.org in Argentina shows that 37% of the users came from Facebook, 6% from WhatsApp, 4% had accessed the link by email and 1.7% came from Twitter (interview with Gastón Wright, Aug. 10, 2015).

amplifying their potential.<sup>143</sup> While the platform coordinators and/or the authors of petitions look to the traditional media to expand the visibility of their campaigns, the press also uses Change.org as a source of news and debate.<sup>144</sup> In fact, Change.org frequently maintains intense offline relations with diverse media vehicles and the traffic is two-way, with journalists looking for information from the platform or the platform seeking to publicize high potential petitions by promoting press interviews with the authors<sup>145</sup>.

In addition to driving dissemination, another interesting aspect of the connection Change.org provides to the social networks is the possibility of creating a space for deliberation, debate and an exchange of ideas that the platform itself does not offer. As the coordinator of the platform in Argentina states: "Change.org is not a space for discussion. Any exchange of ideas takes place via social networks such as Facebook".<sup>146</sup> Any comments made on the Change.org platform reinforce the original argument, because the space allows users to report the reasons for their support. But there is no way of expressing contrary opinions on the platform, because it is necessary for the user to support a petition in order to comment on it.

---

143 The press is normally interested in petitions that are aligned with their position for or against the national government. But it may be observed that greater press coverage does not necessarily translate into a successful petition.

144 Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015). The offline relations with the traditional communication media were strengthened, particularly from 2014.

145 Participant observation of the meeting between the petition author Natalia Luque and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author (Oct. 23, 2015).

146 On the official Change.org page on Facebook it is possible to see petitions that do in fact generate debates, with arguments for and against, including some which are derogatory, and the comments may be answered by other users. However, not all the petitions become controversial, some are simply supported by the multiplication of "likes" or brief comments such as "supported", "good luck", "shared", "this is necessary" etc. Other people also comment on their own personal experiences, similar to the case in the petition. It is interesting to note that many of the successful petitions related to resolving an individual problem, such as health issues, produce a flood of petitions from other users in the same situation (interview with Gastón Wright, Aug. 10, 2015).



Politicians who receive petitions do not usually respond via the platform,<sup>147</sup> but through other social networks such as Twitter or Facebook. Civil servants or representatives usually look for less public channels to contact the authors of petitions, seeking to avoid exposure or to initiate negotiations aimed at having the petition withdrawn rapidly.<sup>148</sup> But the platform may be “used strategically” by the political actors who understand its reach. In this regard, it is “not intrinsically oppositionist”, as the Change.org coordinator in Argentina observed<sup>149</sup>.

In the case of political actors, petitions may be addressed to a group of decision makers or representatives, generally in the Legislature. One example is the aforementioned case of Germán Montenegro, author of the successful petition on the Transplant Law, which was addressed to the Chamber of Deputies. There are also petitions addressed to the Judiciary, both at local and national level, as was the case of the petition related to the prosecutor Alberto Nisman, which was sent to the Supreme Court. A number of petitions identify a single recipient, generally in the Executive sphere.

For political actors, the fact that citizens may use a simple tool to send them petitions on issues for which they are responsible (such as the local Executive Power, for example) can work in their favor if they know how to

---

147 The only case of a response from a decision making recipient on the actual platform was that of Facundo Carrillo, president of comuna n. 2 in the city of Buenos Aires, to whom a petition about the repair of a manhole had been addressed. The recipient responded immediately and left his contact details so that neighbors could also send in their complaints. Facundo Carrillo states that he has received several petitions, which he always tries to reply to; however on other occasions he has done so by different means, mainly via the social networks (interview with Facundo Carrillo, Oct. 9, 2015).

148 They also end up contacting the platform itself to request the closure of a petition or to ask it to stop sending notifications about new supporters, demonstrating that Change.org exerts true pressure on them.

149 Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015). We may mention the case of a firework show close to the Buenos Aires zoo, in which employees of the municipal government understood it would be possible to use the platform strategically. Faced with a petition created by an animal rights organization aimed at “raising awareness and providing information on the advance in animal rights in the country”, the then chief of staff and current mayor of the city, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, expressed his support for animal rights via Facebook and Twitter and announced that the show criticized by the authors of the petition had been cancelled.

respond to them. However, it can also put their reputation at risk and interfere with their planning since it does not permit them to present justifications. This is how Facundo Carrillo, president of comuna n. 2 in the city of Buenos Aires and the recipient of several petitions sees it. Even though he considers Change.org to be a valuable tool for society, he stresses that for political actors it can constitute a type of “virtual lynching due to the impotence people feel when confronted with a lack of response from public authorities”. He stated: “sometimes due to public pressure, civil servants are forced to prioritize something which is perhaps not so important”, adding that the platform does not allow the recipient of a petition to clarify all the pending demands he or she is faced with and that responsible public administration must be based on priorities. “The deepest pothole is not the one you see on TV, the one you see on TV is the one that is filled in first. The media have always done this”. From the viewpoint of one civil servant, “it is like jumping the queue [...]; it causes delays in work that is already underway, it diverts resources”.<sup>150</sup>

But if this is the impression that the political actors have, it is also because the offline institutional effects generated by Change.org are very significant. The coordinator in Argentina states that an important aspect of the platform's effectiveness is the fact that the tool is neither intended to change democracy nor question the relationship between representatives and those whom they represent: what it seeks is to offer citizens yet another tool with which to pressure decision makers and produce the social changes the authors want.<sup>151</sup> In general, what Change.org does is “accelerate” institutional processes that are already underway. This becomes clear when the petitions are focused on approving new legislation. Frequently, a petition on Change.org crowns a broader strategy combining online and offline channels. As María Pazo points out, the advantage of garnering support on Change.org is significant because it is free, greatly reducing costs for the public, “but this only works if it is part

---

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Facundo Carrillo (Oct. 9, 2015).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015).

of a broader strategy”.<sup>152</sup> This is also demonstrated by the case of Germán Montenegro, who managed to have the Transplant Law approved. However, before achieving this victory through Change.org, he had organized campaigns via Facebook, met with politicians in the provinces, written letters to ministers, contacted the media and organized protests: this was a process that lasted at least two years before the overall strategy was crowned with the success of the petition on Change.org.<sup>153</sup>

Frequently a determined political conjuncture or maneuver involving political actors may confer prominence that a petition might not otherwise have: Diego Muzio had previously organized a petition on presidential debates which did not cause great repercussion. He created another one in 2015, this time in a context of greater pressure on the actors due to the forthcoming elections and with a bill of law related to electoral debates already on the agenda of the Chamber of Deputies; when the petition rapidly gained significant support, he met with the platform staffers to prepare a press strategy.<sup>154</sup> Actions on the platform should be part of a broader strategy, sometimes preceding the petition and at other times following it. When solution of the problem requires joint action involving various actors, Change.org can help organize support, “but, when the online part is over, then it is back to the offline work with the commissions [...]. The online part is great for the initial impulse but after that, everything happens offline”.<sup>155</sup> When it is a question of one-off, private demands, the response may be more immediate, “but not when the solution requires negotiation and support from several parties, such as in the Legislature or with the different actors in a federation”.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup> Interview with María Pazo (Sep. 28, 2015).

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Germán Montenegro (Sep. 29, 2015).

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Diego Muzio (Sep. 24, 2015).

<sup>155</sup> Interview with María Pazo (Sep. 28, 2015).

<sup>156</sup> Interview with María Pazo (Sep. 28, 2015).

Change.org is inserted into an already existent network of political links. As such, it should be noted that in some cases these same agents of the State may also be interested in promoting concrete public support for determined issues; thus petitions may be used to reinforce a process already underway in legislative arenas. For this reason, offline articulation with political actors may further the potential of petitions initiated by individuals. One of the measures promoted by the platform is the delivery of signatures to the decision makers to generate a public event that boosts the visibility of the problem: if the author of the petition agrees, Change.org is prepared to contact the legislators and the press, reserve a room in Congress, prepare the materials to be used (e.g.: the boxes containing the printed petitions) etc.<sup>157</sup>

Use of the platform frequently accelerates the change intended by the author of the petition in ordinary institutional channels and at other times it may simply bypass them. This is the case with one-off requests, demands whose solution requires just a single action and which generally are aimed at a single decision maker. As María Pazo said about her petition to have a manhole repaired: "I could have gone to the local administration, of course. But I created the petition in five minutes. It is a much easier way to lodge a complaint and to get an answer".<sup>158</sup> Compared with other means of online participation, the actors point out that precise definition of the problem and targeting the correct decision-maker help to bring about tangible institutional results, but the possibility of exerting direct pressure on the decision makers, bringing their reputation into play, also demands very precise objectives.

We have observed that, in a number of ways, the relationship between what occurs online in Change.org and what occurs offline may be determinant:

---

<sup>157</sup> Participant observation of the meeting between the petition author Natalia Luque and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author (Oct. 23, 2015). The signatures on the platform have no legal value, but produce an important symbolic effect in which the authors of the petition deliver boxes containing a copy of the signatures received (interview with Gastón Wright, Sep. 23, 2015).

<sup>158</sup> Interview with María Pazo (Sep. 28, 2015). In the opinion of the interviewee, for the recipient also "it is easier to read on your cell phone than from a pile of papers".

relations with the traditional communication media, articulation between the platform and the public, the involvement of political and institutional actors, the relevance of some precise knowledge of legislation or of technical aspects of the petition in question etc. However, these universes are interconnected and call into question the existence of a clear separation between an online world marked by inconstant links and an offline world characterized by the commitment to “lay one’s body on the line”. As the Change.org coordinator in Argentina said: “On Change.org, you lay your body on the line, and with it your identity, your story and your photo”.<sup>159</sup> But, above all, the platform proves to be an effective channel for producing change when the political system is resistant via traditional channels: “faced with a lack of response and the insignificance an individual may feel, Change.org is a tool that frees you from this impotence; it is like a digital cry”.<sup>160</sup>

## 4. Conclusions: online/offline convergences

The online world constitutes a space from which new actors and ways of participating in society emerge; but, as we have seen in these pages, it is not a world separate from another that exists in parallel outside the web, like a kind of virtual second life compared with an actual first life. Contemporary citizens and politicians exist in one single world, using distinct ways of communicating, interacting and transforming the community. What is unquestionable is that the actors have a new physiognomy: actors who did not exist in an organized form in the offline world are emerging from the web and rapidly learning how to negotiate its offline counterpart; actors we may refer to as “traditional”, organized in associations or political parties, see their identity subverted by the effects of the online world to which they must adapt.

---

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Gastón Wright (Sep. 23, 2015).

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Facundo Carrillo (Oct. 9, 2015).

In this respect, the category “cyberactivism” does not capture the depth of the transformations: permeating our day to day existence, the expansion of the new information and communication technologies makes everyone a potential “cyberactivist”; at the same time, by aspiring to produce effects on the world, their activism is never just “cyber”. Nowadays it is difficult to distinguish between activists and cyberactivists: the new actors participating in society are either simultaneously the two things, or neither.

Nevertheless, in this work we have explored three cases in Argentina in which determined actors are effectively more “active” than others in the online environment. Leaving the hackers aside, Sorj (2015) differentiates two types of cyberactivism: (1) the creators of content; and (2) groups with affinities outside the web, but who use the web for their purposes. In the light of the experiences explored here, it would be pertinent to incorporate at least two other categories into this classification. There are (3) the creators of platforms and software aimed at promoting civic participation, who, by going beyond the creation of content, manage to create spaces in which other citizens produce content, exercising a “metademocratic” role. This is the case of the Partido de la Red and its diverse initiatives and, to a certain extent, also of Change.org, from the viewpoint of those promoting the platform. We also have (4) occasional activists who are not members of groups with affinities in the offline environment. In great part, the success of the #NiUnaMenos initiative is explained by the existence of this type of cyberactivist, as well as other mobilizations with similar characteristics in Argentina and elsewhere. The authors of petitions on Change.org are also occasional activists with no links in the offline world. In the case of #NiUnaMenos, however, different from many of the mobilizations convened by the social networks, the weight of the second type is very significant: many political groups, unions, civic associations, feminist organizations, personalities from the media and the art world mobilized both online and offline, expanding the visibility of existing organizations and actions.

One of the elements that has proved indispensable for understanding these transformations in the forms of social participation is the possibility of abandoning the category “social movements” to describe these experiences. As Sorj (2015) states, the notion of “social movement” itself is no longer clearly delineated and its relations with formal organizations are more ambiguous. Contemporary mobilizations disassociate the identity of actors from their expression in public space: some actors are created in public and are event-actors that exist only in the public sphere; others, who may have a stable organized existence around a particular cause, see their identity modified when acting in the public space. If the social movements were thought of as associations around determined causes, whose actions unfolded over a period of time and whose message was oriented in accordance with the deliberate strategy of its members, the current “citizen movements” are not only more ephemeral but also do not emerge as organized actors and neither are they - nor do they intend to be — the “organizers” of the actions they undertake.

The experience of the #NiUnaMenos mobilization throws light on this aspect and also indicates its limitations: many of the journalists who participated in the call to action met in function of this mobilization and could not have been its “organizers” in the strict sense of the term, they were unable to control the meanings attributed to it or the publication of selfies with the sign and hashtag associated with the demonstration. They were the promoters but, as they stress, the mobilization rapidly “took on its own existence”. However, the experience also showed that they had to assume new responsibilities that began to emerge: contact political actors, and decide on organizational details of the protest, such as security, among other things. This and the majority of similar mobilizations currently underway attribute their legitimacy to their “spontaneous” nature, the fact of being “self-convened”. Thinking of these forms of participation — both those that end with the event and those that persist, continuing with actions related to those that gave rise to their existence — as “civic movements” instead of social movements throws some light on

the fluidity of contemporary actors, in which their multiple belongings and intermingled identities ensure that the figure of the “citizen” prevails over that of any group brought together by a “social” cause.

But in this work we have not exclusively addressed new mobilizations emerging from the web, which are probably the ones that have most attracted the attention of researchers due to their strong public impact. Other experiences such as that of the Partido de la Red or Change.org draw attention to a fact that must also be taken into consideration in the interpretation of contemporary forms of social participation: the online world not only permits expressions of repudiation of situations or policies but also experimentation with and the emergence of *another democracy*, as of yet without a defined content or direction. The metademocratic traits of these experiences and others, including the original and innovative practices that individuals develop in the public space participating in meetings to make decisions and take actions together (the *Indignados* in Spain and the *Occupy* movements are good examples), still require further refinement and conceptualization..

In spite of their specificities, the mobilizations born in the networks and platforms on the web share several characteristics which we may summarize here:

*A) The dissolution of the boundary between the public and the private*, which places *stories* in the foreground. The experiences analyzed show the importance of singular stories, the narration of individual experiences and the exposure of the intimacy of the actors in their various forms. On Twitter “a personal voice” and not an organization is necessary for mobilization, as one of the participants in #NiUnaMenos stated. The same was evident in the petitions created on the Change.org platform, whose potential for mobilization stemmed from the telling of a story with which people could identify and empathize. Political actors also posted selfies with the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, but it



was the statements and the singular stories of the survivors and the families of victims that gained prominence. The names of the victims of femicide were transformed into symbols of a social problem and landmarks in the process of elaborating a new lens through which the problem could be understood. In the case of the Partido de la Red it was possible to observe another manner in which the boundary between the public and the private becomes indistinct: its proposal to introduce technology into politics seeks not to trivialize, but rather to make political activity a part of everyday life for the individual, discussing a bill of law while sharing a photo with friends or voting on a collective action while performing routine daily tasks in private.

*B) Negativity (in differing degrees).* Many of the mobilizations emerging from the web and the “civic movements” present a strong negative bias: not because they are indifferent to the transformations desired or because all their expressions or motivations are negative, but because the heterogeneous nature of the actors and demands makes rejection the driver of cohesion. “No!” and “Enough!” are the predominant expressions in these experiences which, as Sorj (2015) underscores, focus more on what is not wanted than on a proactive agenda. In the experience of #NiUnaMenos, although the organizers sought to give direction to the mobilization and establish an agenda with five positive public policy demands, it was the “no more femicide” which brought together those who were protesting against the fact that the deaths of those adolescents were viewed just like so many other cases of violence—femicide understood as the last possible link in a chain of violence against women in which they were seen as objects, and the repudiation of which implied rejecting harassment in the streets, as well as defending the right to abortion and autonomy over one’s own body. However, this was precisely an

exceptional mobilization compared with others currently underway, given that the negativity neither impeded the existence of a positive agenda nor did it shift the focus from the public policies that would have to be implemented. In this respect, it is necessary to analyze this characterization centered on negativity more closely, as is also the case with the experiences of the Partido de la Red (tools such as *Demos* show that individuals offer suggestions for improving projects instead of just rejecting them) and Change.org (although indignation is the driver of the action, the predominant use of the platform is not to impede, ban, reject or eliminate, but to propose, to legislate and to claim rights that have been violated).

C) *Representation as a problem.* In the cases studied it may be seen that representation appears as a problem. What may be seen, as Sorj (2015) observes is the disappearance of the category leaders in cyberspace. The Partido de la Red shows one possibility: the proposal of a totally transparent representation, which is equivalent to the disappearance of representation. In the case of Change.org, once again it is the “common people”, and not the representatives of political parties or social organizations, who are the protagonists. The representatives see their public reputation put into play on a permanent basis. Although the case of #NiUnaMenos may be understood as a movement “without leaders”, like similar mobilizations, the journalists responsible for its organization became a kind of social leadership. Social communicators, in their diverse formats, in practice fulfill a role of “non-electoral” representation, which has been increasingly attracting the attention of political scientists (Annunziata, 2015). “Non-electoral and non formal representatives” are frequently also the people who choose to mobilize by different means in order to transform a reality that transcends them, like some of the authors of

petitions on Change.org. Sometimes, having some social leadership capital may be translated into a new online leadership; in other cases, leaders born in the online world rapidly gain social recognition. The representation of these forms of participation is a problem: there is a tension between their expansion and pluralization and the risk implied by the informality of ties of responsibility. It is also necessary to point out another risk. As Justin Wedes, one of the participants and spokespersons of *Occupy Wall Street* warns: “Denying that leadership exists in a group is simply refusing to acknowledge its existence, and the benefit of this denial always accrues to those who already have power in society and do not have to ask permission to yield it” (Wedes, 2015, p. 245).

D) *The relevance of knowledge.* Similar to the previous point, the weight of the cognitive dimension may be noted in the experiences observed in relation to the appearance of leadership and success in the intended effects. At first sight, the online world may seem to be one without elites, but the cases we have reported here enable us to note that knowledge—technical, scientific, technological, legal or professional—makes a difference. Mastery of communication and publicity techniques, the drafting of slogans, the design of a campaign, were elements highlighted by the organizers of #NiUnaMenos as fundamental for the success of the call to protest. On Change.org, technical or legal knowledge is not necessary to create a petition; but if it becomes viral, the platform intervenes to identify those directly responsible, the policies in place, and the bills awaiting deliberation in the legislature etc. Some of the authors of petitions, although they were not specialists in the subject when they launched the campaign, acquired expertise during the course of the process. In the Partido de la Red the relevance of knowledge leadership is crystallized

principally in the ties between its members and the mode of internal organization. This does not invalidate the importance of other types of knowledge, which also play a fundamental part, such as the role acquired by the singular stories, as we mentioned previously: the “wisdom of experience” and in its extreme case, the “wisdom of the victim”. Whatever the case, knowledge as capital is revealed to be one of the factors in the offline world which may strongly impact online actions.

*E) The diverse links between the online and the offline.* We have said that knowledge frequently functions as capital which can affect results. But this is only one of the multiple links established between the online and offline worlds in the experiences analyzed. The need for articulation with political actors is another: it is evident in #NiUnaMenos, in the Partido de la Red (particularly with the tool *Demos*) and in Change.org. The journalists’ list of contacts, for example, enabled them to meet with diverse political powers and to demand commitment to the cause. The mobilization capacity of a leftist party with low representation in the legislature enables it to put the bill it defends in first place on an online vote. Articulation involving deputies or senators who have presented bills of law greatly increases the chances of success of a petition on Change.org. There are many more examples, but it is undeniable that no purely online initiative — one that does not establish connections with offline political actors — seems to have a chance of prospering. Other actors with whom interaction is inevitable are the traditional communication media: leveraging, latching onto or obstructing what happens online, the media always intervenes in the processes of civic participation we have described. And we must not forget one of the offline factors that most determines the offline world’s potential

for civic participation: the unfair distribution of access to the new technologies which, although not the most serious case in the region, still persists in Argentina. Public policy to reduce digital exclusion and enable homogeneous access throughout the country and in all social sectors is essential. Although many efforts are currently underway, we still cannot say that the new technologies provide everyone with an equal opportunity to make their voice heard (Breuer & Welp, 2014). There are those who inhabit the intersection of the online and offline world as if they were one, but there are also those who inhabit only one of these worlds. For this reason, we agree with Matías Bianchi when he recommends avoiding “the naiveté of cyber-utopia”. The online world reproduces and even exacerbates the distribution of power, culture and infrastructure existent in the offline world” (Bianchi, 2015, p. 118). But it would be very simplistic, as the experiences analyzed here show, to reduce the kind of connection that may exist between the online and offline worlds to the limits imposed by the latter on the former. In some cases, the offline world is the *boundary* of the online; in others, the offline moves towards the online world; in others, the online world is capable of changing the offline universe and even breaking down some of its limitations, making the former a reconfiguration of the latter; in yet others, the online world is the source of the offline world — of news, events, actors. And frequently, when civic participation is successful, this is the result of the production of a mutual potential between the online and offline universes. The new actors in citizen participation are the product of a convergence between both universes. After an initial surge of utopian enthusiasm related to the potential of the new information and communication technologies, it became evident that, in themselves, they are limited; but it is no less obvious that the action of more traditional organized actors is insufficient and often

remains invisible if it aspires to produce impacts in the contemporary world while ignoring the online world. It is in the *convergence* of these two worlds that the new actors in participation are born and grow.

## 5. References

Annunziata, Rocío. "Sobre las formas no electorales de representación". *Annals of the 12º Congresso da Sociedade Argentina de Análise Política (SAAP)*, Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Mendoza, Aug. 12-15, 2015.

Annunziata, Rocío. "Una propuesta de clasificación de los dispositivos participativos en Argentina". *POSTData - Revista de Reflexión y Análisis Político*, v. 18, n. 2 (Oct. 2013), pp. 247-80, 2013.

Bianchi, Matías. "Desigualdades en América Latina en la era digital". In: Bianchi, Matías; Mancini, Pía (Org.). *¿Qué democracia para el Siglo XXI?* Buenos Aires: Democracia en Red; Asuntos del Sur. 2015.

Breuer, Anita; Welp, Yanina (Org.). *Digital Technologies for Democratic Governance in Latin America: Opportunities and Risks*. Abingdon (United Kingdom): Routledge, 2014.

Calvo, Ernesto. *Anatomía política de Twitter en Argentina: Tuiteando #Nisman*. Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2015.

Corporación Latinobarómetro. *Informe 1995-2015*. Santiago (Chile): Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2015.

Fosk, Alejandro; Christensen, Marcos. *Futuro Digital Argentina 2014: El Repaso del año digital y qué viene para el año que sigue*. Buenos Aires: comScore, 2014.

Frizzera, Agustín. "Por qué votar al Partido de la Red". *Bastión Digital*, Oct. 23, 2013.

Gómez Vidal, Analía. "#NiUnaMenos: unidas y retuiteadas". *Bastión Digital*, Nov. 13, 2015.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos [INDEC]. *Encuesta Nacional sobre Acceso y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (ENTIC): Informe preliminar sobre indicadores básicos de acceso y uso*. Buenos Aires: INDEC, 2015.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos [INDEC]. *Accesos a internet. Tercer trimestre 2014*. Buenos Aires: INDEC, Dec. 16, 2014.

Observatorio de Internet en Argentina [OIA]. "¿Qué hacemos?". Available at: <inter.net.ar/home#!que-hacemos>.

lavaca.org. "Dossier 'Ni Una Menos'". *Revista Mu*, Buenos Aires, v. 9, n. 89, Jun. 2015.

Rodríguez, Paula. *#NiUnaMenos*. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2015.

Siri, Santiago. *Hacktivismo*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2015.

Sorj, Bernardo. "Online/off-line: a nova onda da sociedade civil e a transformação da esfera pública". In: Bernardo Sorj and Sérgio Fausto (Org.). *Internet e mobilizações sociais: transformações do espaço público e da sociedade civil*. São Paulo: Plataforma Democrática, 2015.

Wedes, Justin. "Tiranía del antiliderazgo". In: Bianchi, Matías; Mancini, Pía (Org.). *¿Qué democracia para el Siglo XXI?* Buenos Aires: Democracia en Red; Asuntos del Sur. 2015.

Zírpolo, Sebastián. "Partido de la Red: Los hackers de la política". *Revista Brando*, Jul. 29, 2013.

## Interviews related to #NiUnaMenos

Hinde Pomeraniec, journalist in national publications, one of the organizers of the mobilization on the social networks, Aug 18, 2015

Claudia Acuña, alternative journalist, director of mass organization and active participant in the mobilization, Aug. 19, 2015

Paula Rodríguez, alternative journalist, author of book on #NiUnaMenos, Sep. 14, 2015

Micaela Libson, academic and alternative journalist, one of the organizers of the mobilization, Sep. 17, 2015

Cecilia Mancuso, director of leftist feminist organization Pan y Rosas, participant in the mobilization, Oct. 27, 2015

Participant observation in the presentation of the book #NiUnaMenos by Paula Rodríguez, with the participation of organizing journalists and family member of victims of femicide, Nov. 11, 2015

## Interviews related to Partido de la Red

Agustín Frizzera and Ana Lis Rodríguez Nardelli, directors of the Partido de la Red and the Fundação Democracia em Rede, responsible for the "Platform" and "Academia" nodes respectively, Aug. 4, 2015



Participant observation of a territorial assembly in the districts of Belgrano and Núñez and interview with the coordinator Enrique Elvas, territorial director of the Partido de la Red, Aug. 22, 2015

Inti Bonomo, director of the Partido de la Red, responsible for the "Territory" node, Aug. 31, 2015

Felipe Muñoz, director of the Partido de la Red, coordinator of the *Demos* and *Qué Proponen* experiences, Sep 21, 2015

Maximiliano Ferraro, deputy of the city of Buenos Aires, 3rd vice president of the house, member of the CC-ARI party and participant in the *Demos* initiative, Sep 22, 2015

Interviews related to Change.org

Gastón Wright, director of Change.org in Argentina, Aug.10, 2015

Gastón Wright, second part, Sep. 23, 2015

Diego Muzio, political scientist, author of petition on presidential debates, Sep. 24, 2015

María Pazo, author of petition requesting repair of a manhole close to her home and legislative aide in the National Congress, Sep. 28, 2015

Germán Montenegro, author of petition on Transplant Law, Sep. 29. 2015

Facundo Carrillo, president of comuna n. 2 of the city of Buenos Aires and recipient of María Pazo's petition, the only recipient/decision maker who responded by means of the actual platform, Oct. 9, 2015

Participant observation of a meeting between Natalia Luque, a common citizen who created a petition for the implementation of the electronic urn in the elections, and Change.org to take the signatures to Congress and interview with the author, Oct. 23, 2015

# Brazil

---

Rodrigo Savazoni  
Kalinca Copello<sup>1</sup>

1. Introduction
2. Avvaz and the online mobilizations
3. The Junes and the masses of media: Mídia Ninja
4. The Internet civil framework
5. Final considerations
6. References

---

<sup>1</sup> Rodrigo Savazoni is coordinator of the project Technologies and Alternatives for Promoting Civic Innovation and Digital Culture. Kalinca Copello is a researcher in the area of participation, democracy and technology.

## 1. Introduction

In December 2006, on its traditional front page dedicated to the person of the year, the North American weekly magazine *Time* presented the word *You*, superimposed on a computer screen, followed by the caption: “Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world”<sup>2</sup>. This initiative by one of the most influential representatives of the global mass media showed the enormous power acquired by the users of the new information and communication technologies (NICT) at the beginning of the 20th century and denoted a partial surrender by the traditional media to the transformations in the public sphere driven by the popularization of the computer and the internet. The American magazine's foresight was to gain greater depth in recent years, both worldwide and in Brazil, as we shall see in this study. Moving from the international scene to examine the specificities of the Brazilian situation, this chapter focuses on the transformation in civil society and the public sphere in the country from the standpoint of the interplay between the online/offline worlds, considering these two dimensions as layers which overlap rather than oppose each other in a continuum that delineates the current social environment. This environment is one in which the internet and the digital world reorganize the relations between public actors, transforming old forms of expression and government.

During the first decade of this century, the NICT and access to the world wide web expanded enormously in Brazil. In 2000, there were around 10 million computers in use. In 2013, this number had reached 119 million, or three micros for every five Brazilians. By 2015, the total was 154 million computers, that is 3 for every 4 inhabitants, complemented by 24 million tablets, according to research done by the Fundação Getúlio Vargas.<sup>3</sup> 2015 was the first year in

2 About the cover and the report, see entry in Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_\(Time\\_Person\\_of\\_the\\_Year\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_(Time_Person_of_the_Year)) Accessed July 15, 2015

3 Source: “[eaesp.fgvsp.br/sites/eaesp.fgvsp.br/files/arquivos/pesqti-gvcia2015noticias.docx](http://eaesp.fgvsp.br/sites/eaesp.fgvsp.br/files/arquivos/pesqti-gvcia2015noticias.docx)” Accessed on Aug. 7, 2015

which the number of smartphones exceeded the number of computers in Brazil, both reaching a density of 75% per capita. The survey also indicates that the number of devices connectable to the internet in the country is 306 million, that is 3 devices for every two inhabitants. It is projected that in 2017/2018 Brazil will reach the mark of one computer per inhabitant, which does not mean that coverage will be universal, since some people may have more than one computer. Regarding connection to the world wide web, the numbers are also significant. The number of residential internet users in 2002 was 7.5 million, soaring to 85.6 million people aged 10 or over in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Other surveys indicate that this number may already have passed the mark of 100 million users, meaning that more than half of the Brazilian population is connected.

While the social networks were not part of the usual repertoire of internet users at the beginning of the 2000s, currently they are the main applications in use on the web. Interestingly, Brazil was a pioneer in the use of the social networks, with strong adhesion that began with the creation and diffusion of Orkut by Google from 2004 on. Just five years later Orkut would be overtaken by Facebook, managing to coexist during a number of years as a kind of network for the “new working class”, also known as “class C” by some analysts<sup>5</sup>. In 2014, Google closed down Orkut, based on a strategy of integrating its entire user base around the application Google +.

The end of Orkut made way for the definitive global hegemony of Facebook, which reached 1.4 billion active profiles in 2015. In Brazil, the projected number of profiles in 2015 is 74.8 million, according to the data website Statista ([www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)). This means that Facebook reaches 3 out of every 4 internet users in the country. It is not by chance then that a major part of the political debate now takes place within this American platform, with

---

4 Source: IBGE (<http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/acessoainternet2013/default.shtm>) Acesso em 7. ago. 2015

5 A Classe na Web (<http://midiaboom.com.br/artigos-de-colaboradores/a-classe-c-na-web/>) Accessed on Aug. 12, 2015

Facebook used intensely by new political movements, either to call people to action or to communicate with them. Another phenomenon is also worthy of note: the growing penetration of Whats App, a conversation application for smartphones, which was installed in 56% of the mobile devices in Brazil in 2014, according to Statista.

From the standpoint of civil society, here it is worth recalling the formulation of the sociologist Sergio Amadeu da Silveira, of the Universidade Federal do ABC. In the article *Novas Dimensões da Política: protocolos e códigos na esfera pública interconectada*, Silveira writes about contemporary activism, which emerges or is transformed based on the popularization of the internet. Silveira distinguishes between the fights “on the web” (1) and the fights “of the web” (2). The first form refers to political disputes which use the web as an arena: a battlefield. These are struggles which were already occurring (such as for agrarian reform or feminism) transposed to this new battlefield. The “fights of the web”, on the other hand, are those in defense of the innovative arrangements of the internet, whose commands and control protocols, created by hackers, are essentially based on anonymous navigation and freedom.

It is also worth noting that Silveira makes no distinction between the Brazilian and the international reality, given that the internet, in the terms proposed by Lins Ribeiro (2000) gives rise to an imagined-virtual transnational community.

“But the members of the transnational virtual community, as the children of globalism and the information age, see themselves generating a new world, a situation mediated by high technology in which internet access is transformed at once into a type of post-modern liberation and an experiment in a new democratic medium which enables people to flood the global system with information that controls abuse by the powerful.” (RIBEIRO, 2000, p.184)

This new global civil society, and its Brazilian arm, was already developing pioneering actions through the intensive use of the internet at the

beginning of the 2000s, including participation in the development of its own collaborative tools such as the “Independent Media Center” (IMC) website or the “Ciranda da Informação Independente”, which emerged in the context of the World Social Forum and was used by different digital activist groups. As we will see further on, there is a strong connection between the structured political vision of this period and the actions of movements such as Passe Livre, one of the driving forces behind the June, 2013, protests.

Analyzing the electoral process, there is no record in Brazil of a phenomenon similar to that associated with Barack Obama in the United States. Even so, recognition of the core importance of the internet by leading Brazilian political leaders should be underscored.

In an article published in 2011 entitled *O papel da oposição*, (The role of the opposition) former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso spoke of the key importance of the citizen who, although absent from the party political game, was active via the internet and the social network websites. He even said that an opposition program should address its messages at precisely these actors, which, as we will see, proved to be correct considering the second phase of the June protests and the immense civil revolts that marked the beginning of president Dilma Rousseff’s second term.

In her two presidential candidacies, the former senator Marina Silva would also come close to a model of mobilization/convening aimed at engaging this connected citizen, with some success. After coming third in the 2010 election with around 20 million votes, the ex-senator for the state of Acre initiated the process of building a new party called REDE Sustentabilidade, incorporating the idea of connection among citizens into its name. In the case of former president Lula, a number of actions are worthy of note during his governments, comprehending the policies to promote digital inclusion, such as the Telecentros and the program to reduce the price of computers (Computador para Todos), which improved access for the lower income population, and the strong advocacy of the use of free software – initiatives

which went into reverse as from the first Dilma Rousseff government. Also worth mentioning is the fostering of the creative and cultural use of the internet by the Ministry of Culture under the command of Gilberto Gil and Juca Ferreira, who disseminated the idea of digital culture throughout the country and developed important public policy aimed at digital cultural production, in particular the Digital Culture Action in the Pontos de Cultura. This was a pioneering experience in state-society relations in the country, where the objective was to encourage the autonomy of the agents involved, providing not-for-profit cultural organizations with technological resources and funding. It did, however, suffer from innumerable administrative flaws (many caused by the lack of appropriate legislation for fomenting this type of cultural actor) and the attempts at co-optation orchestrated by program managers.

In spite of these limitations and setbacks, there remains from the Lula period this contribution of the public sector to the articulation of a new field of key actors in the digital world in experiences such as Overmundo, the Circuito Fora do Eixo, the network of Pontos de Cultura, and digital culture. These actors come within the scope of this study, which emphasizes three complementary cases that aid our understanding of the transformations occurring in the public sphere and in civil society: the online mobilization platform Avaaz, the 2013 protests, with emphasis on the role of Mídia NINJA (Narrativas Independentes, Jornalismo e Ação), and the Internet Civil Framework.

To develop these case studies on contemporary phenomena, all of which are on-going and still evolving in the current conjuncture, complementary methods of data collection were used: bibliographical survey, observation and informal and semi-structured interviews with members of Mídia NINJA and the management of Avaaz.

## 2. Avvaz and the online mobilizations

On August 2, 2015, an email signed by Ricken Patel, the Avaaz campaign coordinator, arrived in the inbox of the activism platform's subscribers. The title of the message was different from those we were used to receiving, related to causes as varied as help for Syrian refugees or the approval of legislation in defense of human rights. The title was a request for help: "We need to rebuild Avaaz". Founded in 2007, Avaaz is presented as an online mobilization community aimed at projecting the "voice of civil society into global politics".<sup>6</sup> Active in more than 110 countries, with an online platform available in more than 18 languages, the Avaaz community has grown exponentially, currently having more than 42 million members (known as Avaazers) worldwide. Anyone who signs a petition and agrees to receive campaign information is understood to be a member of the Avaaz community.

Patel's appeal for help was precisely to keep this enormous platform in action, since, as a result of its growth, the technological architecture was beginning to falter. "I have some tough news; the backbone of our community, the technology that connects us to each other in every campaign of hope and change, is buckling." So the organization started to request donations from its collaborators to hire a new team of engineers (in addition to the 17 who continue to maintain the current tool) in order to completely rebuild its participatory infrastructure. According to the campaign coordinator, the target is to take advantage of this "opportunity to build the most powerful technology for social change the world has ever seen". A bold target, but not for Avaaz, which in Brazil has become a synonym of digital mobilization.

Campaigns to collect signatures in support of the most diverse causes have a long tradition in politics. Be it from stalls in the street or going from door to door, these campaigns enable supporters of causes to get in touch with the general public. The internet has made both the dissemination of causes and the

---

6 Avaaz.org, 2015.



collection of signatures a lot easier, in addition to modifying the parameters of social contact and the exchange of ideas that traditional campaigns allowed. On the internet there are a number of sites with mechanisms that enable whoever wants to launch a campaign in support of a cause to do so.<sup>7</sup> When Avaaz began, other online mobilization websites were able to set up networks with a few million users, but none of them have equaled its size, which currently makes Avaaz the most important global organization focused on this type of activity. An aspect to be underscored is that Avaaz transformed the organization of online campaigns into an institutional identity with which millions of members are associated.<sup>8</sup>

The way it works is very simple. Based on the collection of signatures whereby subscribers leave their email address, Avaaz builds a database which constitutes the heart of the institution because it is through this base that it communicates with members, normally to inform them about a new petition or campaign. This is how it produces such impressive results, as we will see further ahead with the description of some cases. Another essential aspect of Avaaz is its financial model. It is a nonprofit organization, financed by donations from members and non-members, refusing funding from governments or private companies.

Part of the money donated goes toward financing the Avaaz team, both in the headquarters in the United States of America (USA), as well as the small

---

7 There are many similar websites, a number of which are active in Brazil. In the Brazilian case, for example, <https://www.change.org/> only includes campaigns related to local issues.

8 Few data and academic works focused on Avaaz were found. Among the texts used, of note was the one by Anastasia Kavada, "Collective action and the social web: Comparing the architecture of Avaaz.org and Openesf.net", in *Communicative approaches to politics and ethics in Europe*, edited by Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Richard Kilborn, Tobias Olsson, Hannu Nieminen, Ebba Sundin, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Tartu University Press, 2009. [http://homepages.vub.ac.be/~ncarpent/suso/reco\\_book5.pdf#page=130](http://homepages.vub.ac.be/~ncarpent/suso/reco_book5.pdf#page=130), 2998. Among those produced in Brazil: João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos, "Tecnologias da comunicação, interação e ação política transnacional na Avaaz." Dissertation (Master's in Communication) - Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2015 and Aline Jacques de Farias Costa, "O Avaaz como ferramenta de mediação das causas sociais na rede", monograph in the Social Communication course at the University of Brasília, 2014;

teams of staffers in determined countries.<sup>9</sup> In 2013, the Avaaz budget reached 11.5 million dollars.<sup>10</sup> On the Avaaz website, there are some brief profiles of some members of the global Avaaz community; however, there is no information about the Avaaz team either in the US or in other locations.

As Anastasia Kavada<sup>11</sup> indicates, Avaaz presents a complex and not always very transparent balance between the characteristics of a traditional organization, where a core team controls some of the basic organizational instruments (including funding, visual resources and the websites), and one that is open to the participation of its members, who propose campaigns and post comments on the Avaaz profile in Facebook. Avaaz also has a Youtube page on which it shares videos produced by members<sup>12</sup>

Avaaz's annual priorities are defined after consulting its members.<sup>13</sup> Up until 2012, the Avaaz team was responsible for deciding on all the community's campaigns<sup>14</sup>. However in September of that year, the organization included a tool on the website which enabled the public to create their own campaigns ("Community Petitions"). The petitions and campaigns always focus on deliverables, such as handing a petition with all the signatures to a member of congress. The criteria Avaaz uses to promote or exclude campaigns proposed by members frequently generate questioning within its network. Various questions are particularly relevant when the exclusion of some campaigns

---

9 Even so, not every country where Avaaz campaigns has an exclusive team financed by the organization. Avaaz also works with local volunteers.

10 Kavada, op.cit. [http://www.avaaz.org/po/avaaz\\_expenses\\_and\\_financial\\_information/](http://www.avaaz.org/po/avaaz_expenses_and_financial_information/)

11 [http://homepages.vub.ac.be/~ncarpent/suso/reco\\_book5.pdf#page=130](http://homepages.vub.ac.be/~ncarpent/suso/reco_book5.pdf#page=130)

12 <https://www.youtube.com/user/AvaazOrg>

13 From the Avaaz website (May 2015) "Every year, Avaaz defines the priorities of the movement by means of surveys among all its members (See the results of the 2014 survey here). The ideas for campaigns are submitted to research and tests on a weekly basis with random samples distributed to 10,000 members, and only the initiatives receiving a strong positive reaction are implemented on a large scale".

14 Some of them are suggested by members of the community or the general public.

proposed by Avaaz members is analyzed. A number of these cases were international<sup>15</sup>. In Brazil, the case of the campaign for the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff is worthy of note.

In 2013, an Avaaz member created a petition to get signatures in favor of the impeachment of the president. The management of the organization decided to remove it from the air alleging that, after conducting a survey among its members, the majority had decided it should be excluded.<sup>16</sup> In 2014, a new petition was created with the same end. In spite of being badly written and having no legal grounding, adhesion to the petition was high, reaching almost two million signatures.<sup>17</sup> Once again, Avaaz asked its members what action should be taken – to exclude or maintain the petition – and this time the result of the survey was different from the previous one:

“...the preliminary results show that the majority of the members do not support this petition, but also believe it should not be taken off the air. This decision is consistent with our community’s history of supporting the discussion of controversial questions and providing a space for debate” (ABRAMOVAY, 2015, in an interview for this study)

In the most part, the Avaaz petitions are focused on current issues – an example being the situation of fleeing refugees adrift in the sea – with special attention to what are considered to be hot topics, ones attracting a lot of public attention – the case of mobilizations around the environment and climate change.<sup>18</sup> Avaaz itself recognizes the proximity between the issues it addresses

15 Such as, for example, positioning in the Russia/Ukraine crisis related to the annexation of Crimea or related to the situation in Syria. See for example <http://jilliancork.com/2012/05/29/on-avaaz/>

16 Interview with Pedro Abramovay on February 05, 2015.

17 [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Impeachment\\_da\\_Presidente\\_Dilma\\_1/?pv=3428](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Impeachment_da_Presidente_Dilma_1/?pv=3428)

18 See for example, the links: [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/mass\\_grave\\_at\\_sea\\_nd\\_loc/?slideshow](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/mass_grave_at_sea_nd_loc/?slideshow) e [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/climate\\_march\\_reportback/](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/climate_march_reportback/) (both accessed on 24/05/2015)

and those in the communication media. This serves to justify the choice of issues, to refer readers to articles in the press and, lastly, to demonstrate Avaaz's impact on the mass media.

In addition to collecting signatures for its petitions, Avaaz runs campaigns to raise donations via crowdfunding, a case in point being the request for donations for victims of the earthquake in Nepal.<sup>19</sup> This type of campaign has gained importance as a means of legitimizing Avaaz, which is concerned about not having its image reduced to that of a mere collector of signatures. In many campaigns, Avaaz encourages other types of measures, such as sending emails or telephoning authorities in the areas at which a petition is aimed.

Some techniques and tools are used to maximize the number of signatures collected. Members of the Avaaz community normally arrive at the page of the petition after receiving an email or a Tweet from the organization or from one of their personal contacts who has passed it on.

The relationship between the Avaaz tool and other social network websites is of key importance. Currently, Facebook is the main bridge through which users access a campaign. According to Bastos dos Santos<sup>20</sup> around 35% of the people who accessed the Avaaz website came from Facebook. This type of connection via personal networks is an important mechanism for expanding Avaaz's field of action, which reinforces a belief among social network managers related to the power of personal ties in online diffusion and mobilization.<sup>21</sup> Another central aspect in the Avaaz mobilization mechanics is the establishment of targets for the number of signatures, encouraging the network of Avaaz users to reach the number proposed. The results panel which shows the number of signatures collected occupies a central position in the visualization of the page. It is also one of the main ways of legitimizing

---

19 See [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/nepal\\_earthquake\\_donate/](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/nepal_earthquake_donate/) - accessed on 23/05/2015

20 João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos, *op.cit.*

21 There are some studies available on the motivational potential of the personal networks.

the website in the eyes of society and other civil society organizations – since maximizing the discourse of its peers is one of the benefits that Avaaz's form of engagement produces. The mobilization tactic also encompasses the immediate inclusion of the signature on a public list, so participants in the petition can visualize their endorsement and the growth in numbers. This function is merely a visual effect, and the signature is not computed until Avaaz receives confirmation via the subscriber's email (except for members who are already registered).<sup>22</sup>

Avaaz uses algorithms to predict behavior based on previous preferences. Some campaigns are tested in up to 20 different formats. The call to action text consists of imperative, striking phrases. This preparation is aimed at maximizing the campaign's chances of going viral.<sup>23</sup>

It is necessary to remember that it is Avaaz's vocation to act on urgent international causes and many of its campaigns are generated abroad (we do not have data on how many are generated by the headquarters or by members in other countries). On the Avaaz website in Portuguese, in the area in which the main campaigns in progress are displayed<sup>24</sup>, there were 18 campaigns, of which only 7 were related to the Brazilian reality.

In the inter-network confrontation which marks the political struggle in the contemporary virtual world, a platform capable of reaching 42 million people is a key asset. Not surprisingly, Avaaz does not give its members access to its enormous email mailing list. When a member creates a campaign through Avaaz, he/she may only disseminate it through their own contacts. It is up to Avaaz – given the large number of campaigns in existence – to decide which will be incorporated into and disseminated throughout the entire network.

---

22 Abramovay adds that the duplication of signatures is verified at the end of the day, which in some cases may result in a decrease in the number signatures initially posted on the petition website. Interview with Pedro Abramovay on February 05, 2015.

23 Interview with Avaaz manager in the United States described in Cadwalladr's article, 2013 #851}

24 Access to the site for this description was in May 2015.

This supports the maxim common among many researchers that control over technology is also a dimension of contemporary politics.

While developing this case study, we perceived that Avaaz habitually collaborates with other groups – including civil society organizations, independent activists and governments – on mobilizations for certain causes. Historical causes conducted by social movements have gained greater attention and public adhesion as a result of Avaaz online petitions. However, the relationship between Avaaz and traditional civil society organizations is not always positive. A recurring criticism about the organization is that it does not get involved in the “real fights” which take place on the ground, but rather acts as a discursive intermediary in these struggles. According to some activists, this generates excessive visibility for Avaaz, rather than furthering the cause in question. For example, during the movement against the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric plant, members of the group Xingu Vivo para Sempre pointed out that although Avaaz promoted the petition against the dam, it was unaware of the actual demands of the residents of Altamira and the indigenous groups that would be affected by the project. It is worth underscoring this criticism because it is a relevant demonstration of the kind of tensions that interplay between online and offline actors produces.

As we indicated, among the countries in which Avaaz operates, Brazil has the largest number of members (around 8.7 million)<sup>25</sup> and online activities within the community.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, Brazil has become an important laboratory for petitions, focused on civic and political mobilization, such as the campaign for the approval of political reform and the Ficha Limpa law, which prevents politicians with a police record from assuming public office. One possible reason for Avaaz’s enormous success in Brazil is the intense use

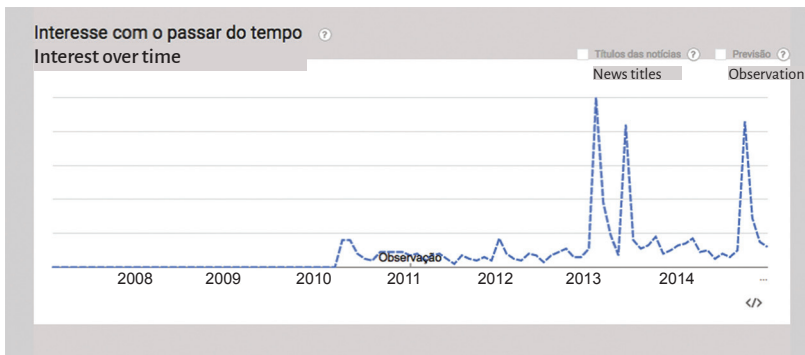
---

<sup>25</sup> Avaaz.org, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Curiously, in spite of being the largest community in the world, Brazilian members contribute little to the organization, and the money collected does not cover the costs of the dedicated Avaaz team in Brazil, Abramovay, 2015.

of the internet in the country. In accordance with studies conducted by Ibope-Nielsen in a number of countries, Brazil is the record holder in use of social network websites and in time spent on the internet. Brazilians spend up to 60% more time connected than inhabitants of other countries.<sup>27</sup> Another possible and complementary explanation is that political activism in Brazil is generally low in intensity and that signing a petition requires little dedication. According to platform staffers in the country, it is possible to identify growth in online political mobilization activities from 2013, during and after the June protests. In this period, the number of members in the Avaaz network in Brazil more than doubled. Prior to this, the largest Avaazer community was in France. The exponential growth of the Avaaz community in times of social convulsion was also seen in the Ukraine and in Russia with the advent of the Crimean crisis. This correlation between growth and periods of intense social mobilization is an aspect to be taken into consideration in the analysis of this phenomenon.

**Figure 1: Search of term 'Avaaz' on Google, in Brazil**



Source: Google Trends

<sup>27</sup> To see the time Brazilians spend on the internet, see the simplified chart published by TechTudo: <http://www.techtudo.com.br/noticias/noticia/2015/06/brasil-gastam-mais-de-650-horas-por-mes-navegando-em-redes-sociais.html>. Accessed on Sep. 11, 2015

The reach of some of the campaigns and mobilizations may be assessed using the statistical tool Google Trends<sup>28</sup>, inserting the term “Avaaz”. According to Abramovay, the first peak in the chart (February 2013) in Figure 1 is related to the campaign requesting the impeachment of the then recently-elected president of the Senate, Renan Calheiros, and the request for the removal of the pastor Marco Feliciano from the presidency of Federal Chamber Human Rights Commission.<sup>29</sup> Whereas the second peak in the chart (June 2013) seems to be directly linked with the protests that occurred during this period. The third more recent peak occurs during the elections in 2014 and, in parallel, during the campaign for the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff.

Both in Brazil and abroad, Avaaz tends to receive heavy criticism. Ahead we will present the most common criticisms, as well as the arguments in defense of the model. We identified four of the most recurrent types of criticism: 1. a couch activism organization; 2. an excessively vertical organization; 3. the limited effects of the petitions; 4. online action undermines offline action.

**Couch activism:** Avaaz is what some authors call a clicktivism organization. The term is used to describe the activists who use digital platforms, including the social networks, to organize protests and to promote campaigns. The definition of initiatives such as those conducted by Avaaz may be confused with other terms like “slacktivism” and “couch activism”. Both terms, used pejoratively, refer to the support given to social causes that makes individuals feel good without having to engage in militancy. Frequently, this type of digital activism is described as having little real effect on the causes supported.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, advocates of platforms such as Avaaz point out that

---

28 Google Trends is a tool that permits a search and statistical analysis of the terms searched on Google in a determined period.

29 Both petitions available at: [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Impeachment\\_do\\_Presidente\\_do\\_Senado\\_Renan\\_Calheiros/?pv=658](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Impeachment_do_Presidente_do_Senado_Renan_Calheiros/?pv=658); [https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Imediata\\_destituicao\\_do\\_Pr\\_Marco\\_Feliciano\\_da\\_Presidencia\\_da\\_Comissao\\_de\\_Direitos\\_Humanos\\_da\\_Camara\\_Federal/](https://secure.avaaz.org/po/petition/Imediata_destituicao_do_Pr_Marco_Feliciano_da_Presidencia_da_Comissao_de_Direitos_Humanos_da_Camara_Federal/) (accessed on 27/05/2015)

30 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/20/avaaz-activism-slacktivism-clicktivism>



this type of digital activism engages individuals and groups who would not normally be interested in or involved in causes. Abramovay believes that Avaaz's role includes "making people who have never cared about politics care about it".<sup>31</sup> One Avaaz campaign organizer states that the "click here" may be the gateway to engagement and militancy.<sup>32</sup> It is not for nothing that Avaaz's main instrument for affirming its legitimacy is the number of "clicks" it obtains.

**Verticality:** for its critics, the vertical nature of the organization is revealed by the fact that Avaaz's main activity is obtaining support from individuals for a cause by means of a petition prepared beforehand by the organization's coordinators and campaign organizers. The only place where community members may effectively debate their positions is on the Avaaz Facebook page.<sup>33</sup> And as innumerable commentators have argued, Facebook is not an instrument that favors constructive, informed dialogue around complex questions. What remains for the Avaazer is an uncritical click accepting the term proposed. As such, the "Avaaz culture" is aligned with a tendency that seems to be in vogue in contemporary politics, which is complaining about the state of things without elaborating (or even being concerned about elaborating) solutions and alternatives for the construction of proactive agendas. In defense of the Avaaz model, it may be argued that even if it is vertical, the tool drives engagement of public opinion, which is volatile and subject to induction. In other words, by engaging this previously silent public opinion through petitions and encouraging these people to use their own social network channels to express their opinions, Avaaz is shifting public opinion from the passive to the active voice, constituting a distinct interface for action in the context of the internet.

---

<sup>31</sup> Abramovay, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Interview described in Nasi, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> According to Abramovay, around 1/3 of the people who sign Avaaz petitions shared them via Facebook.

**Limited effects:** this is a frequent criticism when campaigns do not achieve their objective, as happened in the fight against the election of Renan Calheiros as president of the Senate. The campaign received one and a half million signatures, but was unable to stop the politician from taking office or to force parliament to initiate an impeachment process against him. An Ibope survey commissioned by Avaaz showed that 74% of Brazilians wanted Renan Calheiros to renounce.<sup>34</sup> According to the judge Márlon Reis, idealizer of the Ficha Limpa law, the petition marred the senator's image, but did not have the legal power to dislodge him. The judge adds that more work needs to be done on this type of online petition "in order not to give people the impression that the petitions have more power than they actually do".<sup>35</sup> Even though it did not achieve its main objective of impeding Calheiros from exercising office, the Avaaz petition and the organization's other actions did serious damage to the president of the Senate and resulted in a public debate that was important for understanding the country's political challenges, throwing light on an issue that might otherwise not have been aired. For this reason the criticism about the limited effects of the action is only partially justified because if a number of campaigns do not achieve the results proposed, they do at least help raise public awareness.

It may be noted that Avaaz achieves more impressive results when there is a convergence with other movements in society, as was the case with the public campaign to introduce the Ficha Limpa law. The campaign, led by the judge Márlon Reis and a group of lawyers, was conducted by the MCCE (Movimento de Combate à Corrupção Eleitoral), a movement to fight electoral corruption, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) and dozens of civil society organizations, including political parties such as the PSol (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade). The bill of law proposed making candidates whose term of office has been

---

34 Álvares, 2013.

35 In an informal conversation with the judge Marlon Reis, online, on July 12, 2015.

suspended, who resign to avoid suspension or who have been condemned by a bench of judges, even if they have the right to appeal, ineligible to run in elections for a period of eight years. The signatures were collected offline, because Brazilian legislation does not permit this to be done virtually.<sup>36</sup> More than 1.8 million signatures were collected, exceeding the 1% of the electorate required for presentation to the National Congress as a public initiative, in accordance with the Brazilian constitution. The Ficha Limpa law was approved by the National Congress in 2010 and then sanctioned by president Dilma Rousseff.

Avaaz played an important role in promoting and providing support for the campaign, particularly in the last phase when the bill was passing through Congress. However, some authors wrongly attribute Avaaz with responsibility for the collection of the signatures that led to the bill and to the approval of the law.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that Avaaz itself takes advantage of this “symbolic sequester” of a complex mobilization by not recognizing on its website that the successful online mobilization was preceded by a widespread offline campaign. On its international website, Avaaz only states that the campaign for the approval of the Ficha Limpa law, which it orchestrated in the virtual environment, resulted in the biggest ever online campaign in Brazil. True, but with some details omitted.

“Avaaz members rallied to create the largest online campaign in Brazilian history, culminating in a petition of 2 million signatures, over 500,000 online actions, and tens of thousands of phone calls.”<sup>38</sup> (Avaaz, on-line)

---

36 “In Brazil petitions gain legal value for mandatory voting and modification of legislation only when the signatures are endorsed electronically and when they number more than 1% of the electorate, distributed throughout at least five states in Brazil with not less than three tenths of a percent of the electors in each state, in accordance with article 61 of the federal constitution” Schek (2009) cited in Pinto, 2014.

37 Costa, 2014 and Nassif, 2013.

38 Original: “Avaaz members rallied to create the largest online campaign in Brazilian history, culminating in a petition of 2 million signatures, over 500,000 online actions, and tens of thousands of phone calls.” Avaaz.org, 2015.

Avaaz's relative importance in the collection of the signatures omits the fact that the most part were collected in parishes and dioceses, an indication of the key part played by the CNBB (National Council of Brazilian Bishops), one of the oldest and most powerful Brazilian civil society organizations, which exercised an essential role in the political arrangement that led to approval of the law. A more detailed analysis of this process, therefore, indicates that Avaaz played a secondary role in the offline mobilization, but was fundamental in winning over public opinion by disseminating the existence of the bill on its online platform and the social networks. In this case, therefore, the online/offline alliance was very successful and produced real results. It would be wrong, however, to credit this success exclusively to virtual political activity.

Online action undermines offline action: when online actions are transposed to the offline environment they also quite often result in abject failures. Innumerable online calls to action with the presence of an enormous number of internet users confirmed are unable muster more than a few hundred protesters in urban public spaces. This does in fact occur, but Avaaz's experience shows that the opposite can also be true: offline mobilizations boost interest in the online world. This is verified by the fact mentioned previously that the Avaaz website had a peak of accesses during the June 2013 protests, resulting in technical problems for the site (which the organization is now working on solving). During this period, some petitions already on the website attained record numbers of signatures. In other words, the offline public mobilization increased interest in politics and resulted in more, higher quality online activism. This underscores the fact that it no longer makes sense to think of the online/offline relationship as one of opposites, but rather as constituent elements of the same reality. In a study for the Ford Foundation, the activist and researcher in communication rights, João Brant, at that time spokesman for Intervozes, indicates that the failure of the petitions requesting the suspension of Renan Calheiros and Marco Feliciano contributed to the

political tension Brazil was experiencing at that time.<sup>39</sup> According to Brant, these two events provoked great repercussion and resentment and may have helped to accelerate the protests in 2013.<sup>40</sup>

Returning to the beginning of this section, one month after Patel had sent his email out to the Avaaz network, the organization had received enough in donations to do what it wanted: build a new virtual platform for online mobilization from scratch. According to one of the staffers in Brazil, the organization has already begun to hire a new team of engineers, meaning that Avaaz will be able to grow in the coming years with an even more robust and powerful network infrastructure.

### 3. The junes and the masses of media: *Mídia ninja*

In a book produced by the Ford Foundation, which we mentioned previously, the activist and researcher João Brant uses an intervention made by the journalist Renato Rovai in the heat of the events to the effect that June should in fact should be Junes. In other words, the protests that broke out in Brazil in the first half of 2013 should be understood in the plural, and for this reason they continue to be analyzed by leading researchers in the fields of political and social science in the country. There are innumerable angles from which the events may be viewed, even more so when we incorporate the recent episodes of 2015 into the overall picture, when other protests, specifically in opposition to the Dilma Rousseff government and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores or Workers' Party) hit the streets. The focus of this study is not the detailed discussion of the June protests, but rather one of the protagonists in the demonstrations known as *Mídia NINJA* (acronym in portuguese for

---

<sup>39</sup> Joao Brant indicates different factors that contributed to this mobilization. Among these factors suggested by Brant, some are particularly relevant in the context of this article, such as the example mentioned above, in Brant, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Op. cit.

Independent Narratives, Journalism and Action), a political-media network that distinguished itself by reporting on the events from the viewpoint of the protesters. However, without considering certain aspects of this moment it would not be possible to address the emergence and the activities of Mídia NINJA. For Brant, there are at least twelve elements to the June protests without which it would be impossible to understand why they broke out. These are “the political conjuncture in Brazil, the crisis of representation and political participation, international inspiration, the recent background to the struggle to reduce bus fares, the weight of the question of public transportation, the organization of the FIFA World Cup, the strength of the protest models, the power of the social networks and independent accounts, police violence against protesters and journalists, the delay in government reaction, the activities of the traditional media and lastly the multiple accounts and experiences of the acts themselves.”<sup>41</sup>

The researcher argues that it is possible to divide the protests into two distinct moments, especially if we use the city of São Paulo as a reference. One of them, with a clear national agenda centered on combating the increase in public transportation fares in the main cities nationwide and the major international events to be held in the country, in particular the World Cup and the Olympics, which resulted in the removal of low-income group families from their homes and in public spending considered to be a non-priority, as well as riddled with corruption. From June 17 on, however, the protest agenda shattered into innumerable different demands – and as we will see further ahead online mobilization was key in this turnaround – ranging from anti-corruption, the defense of public education and health, the defeat of the constitutional amendment proposal (PEC) 37, which proposed changes in the operation of the public prosecution (Ministério Público) service, as well as questions about existing political forms, in particular the rejection of parties.

---

41 For a summary of João Brant's Ford Foundation book, read the article “Um ano depois de Junho”, published in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. <http://www.diplomatique.org.br/artigo.php?id=1673>. Accessed on 11.9.2015

It was precisely at this second moment that national mobilization reached its peak, more exactly on June 20, when it is estimated that more than 1.4 million people took to the streets in the main cities in the country, occupying municipal and state chambers and the National Congress in Brasília. The dynamics of this protest, characterized by enormous social heterogeneity and almost inexistent articulation between these agents and traditional political organizations, both on the left and the right, produced a unique type of demonstration that was to be replicated in a more homogeneous and elitist version in the 2015 anti-corruption protests.

The thesis of these two different moments in June is also defended by the researchers Elena Judensnaider, Luciana Lima, Marcelo Pomar and Pablo Ortellado in the book “Vinte Centavos: a luta contra o aumento” (Twenty cents: the struggle against the increase). According to this account, June 17 marks the turning point in this duality, where the first phase is concentrated on the fight against the fare increase, led by the Movimento Passe Livre (MPL), with a “deep feeling for tactics and strategy” (ORTELLADO, 2014, p. 235), and the second is characterized by an “explosion of protests with diffuse demands and no orientation to results” (ORTELLADO, 2014, p. 236). In terms of the social composition of the protests, the work by the University of São Paulo lecturer André Singer in the journal *Novos Estudos*, published by CEBRAP (Centro Brasileiro de Análise Política e Social), provides important clarification. Based on a review of the literature, Singer indicates that in general there are “two viewpoints of the social composition of the events in June”. In the first, the protests would be promoted principally by the middle class (based on an article by Armando Boito). In the second, the emphasis is on the strong presence of the “precariats”, conceptualized as a group of unqualified and semi-qualified workers, mostly young people who entered the labor market early and by the back door. In his article, Singer suggests another hypothesis.

"Analyzing the research available, I would like to suggest a third hypothesis: that it could have simultaneously been the two things, that is, both the expression of a traditional middle class dissatisfied with diverse aspects of the country's reality, and a reflex of what I prefer to call the new proletariat, whose characteristics are similar to those attributed to the precariat by those authors who prefer this denomination: **they are workers, generally young people, who found formal employment during the decade when Lula was in power (2003-2013), but who are poorly paid and subject to high job turnover and bad working conditions.**" (SINGER, 2014)

For the scope of this case study, Singer's hypothesis is important because these young urban workers, the so-called precariat, are intense users of the new information and communication technologies, in particular mobile media<sup>42</sup>. It is no coincidence therefore that traffic on the social network websites exploded during the period, with users addressing political questions in a generalized fashion, in a kind of democratic inclusion that needs to be further studied and understood. An image synthesizing this "new generation" is that of a participant in the protest on June 17 holding a sign saying: "We have come out of Facebook!"<sup>43</sup>

Various analyses during the heat of the June protests took on an atemporal air, as if this outbreak of protests had not been slowly simmering away in the saucepan of the country's political dynamics. In the article "Fragmentos sobre a emergência da política das redes e das ruas" (Fragments on the emergence of the politics of networks and the streets), the researcher Rodrigo Savazoni opposes this tendency, highlighting five aspects of the

---

42 On this subject, see the study "Os novos donos da Internet: Classe C, de Conectados <<<http://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/pt-br/research-studies/novos-donos-internet-classe-c-conectados-brasil.html>>> Accessed on 12.9.2015

43 For further information, read the text of the blog Garotas Geeks entitled "O dia em que nós saímos do Facebook e fomos para as ruas" << <http://www.garotasgeeks.com/o-dia-em-que-nos-saimos-do-facebook-e-fomos-para-as-ruas/>>> Accessed on 11.9.2015



conjuncture leading up to June: (1) a reduction in the space for participation and collaboration in formulating public policy in the transition from Lula to Dilma. Undoubtedly, the significant social inclusion via mass consumption from 2003 to 2010 engendered the need for more and better public services. It is no coincidence therefore that many of the signs carried by protesters in the streets demanded improvements in education, healthcare, public security and transportation; (2) the centrality acquired by the new information and communication technologies that had become popular in recent years, in particular social networks such as Facebook, a true meeting place in contemporary politics; (3) the ascension of a new generation disgruntled with the course of institutional politics; (4) the viral influence of networked revolts, which have spread over the planet since the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the USA, among other important initiatives aimed at developing “room for autonomy”; and (5) the conformation, in the terms described by Castells, of a new kind of militant network, based on interconnected individuals and collectives, as well as anarchist/autonomist political groupings dedicated to working at grass roots level.

Sorj<sup>44</sup> presents a different vision, arguing that during the PT governments, the social movements were demobilized through cooptation, while autonomous leftist groups grew and the malaise of both the new and the traditional middle classes increased. Sorj also stresses that for the protesters the great novelty, in a society which had long remained in a state of political lethargy, the most remarkable experience, was the feeling of empowerment generated by physical presence on and occupation of the streets. Thus, in the context of Brazilian politics, for an important part of the demonstrators the offline protests would have been the major novelty in the events in June, and not the use of virtual communication tools, already thoroughly assimilated by this generation of digital natives (SORJ, 2014).

---

44 Entre o local e o global, in *Rubens Figueiredo (org), June 2013 – A sociedade enfrenta o Estado*. São Paulo: Summus Editorial.

Another aspect of the analyses of the events in June is the fact that many of the accounts were too centered on what happened in São Paulo. In spite of the fact that the protests organized by the Movimento Passe Livre gained enormous visibility in the city of São Paulo, we should remember that there were many “Junes”, which assumed specific characteristics in accordance with each location, such as in Rio de Janeiro where many of the protests were against the state governor, Sérgio Cabral. With this caveat, in analyzing the emergence of the Mídia NINJA in June, it is necessary to mention some episodes which had occurred in the city of São Paulo in preceding years. In particular, there were the street actions undertaken by political-cultural activist networks of different political hues that occurred in 2011 and 2012. This cycle of activism in the networks and in the streets, heavily inspired by the Arab Spring, the 15M movement in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the United States, began with the Churrascão da Gente Diferenciada<sup>45</sup> (Barbecue for the Differentiated), include the Marchas da Maconha, das Vadias and da Liberdade<sup>46</sup> (March for Marijuana, Slutwalk and March for Freedom), followed by the movements #AmorSIMRussomanoNão and #ExisteAmoremSP during the 2012 municipal

---

45 The Churrascão da Gente Diferenciada, held on May 14, 2011, was convened via Facebook, receiving more than 50,000 confirmations. It spread over the social networks, resulting in articles in newspapers and magazines and reports on the radio and television. On the day, between 2 and 4 thousand people congregated in the streets of the traditional São Paulo district, carrying musical instruments and barbecue grills. The protest/derision was organized to contest the residents of Higienópolis in São Paulo, after the residents' association started distributing flyers with messages against the construction of a metro station in the district alleging that it would bring the well-heeled locals into contact with “differentiated” people.

46 The Marcha da Liberdade in São Paulo was held on May 28, 2011. Convened via the internet, the march was a reaction to violent police repression of the Marijuana March, held the previous week on the 21st. On that occasion, the demonstrators were forbidden to carry out the protest by the Federal Supreme Court. The activists reacted by creating a movement for freedom to demonstrate. The first protest involved around 5 thousand people, who marched from Avenida Paulista, along Rua da Consolação to Praça da República. On this occasion, Fora do Eixo tested live transmission equipment, covering the protest in real time, with the journalist Bruno Torturra and the counter-culture theoretician Cláudio Prado as presenters. The coverage had a large online following.

elections<sup>47</sup>. In this period, Circuito Fora do Eixo, the organization that was to give rise to the Mídia NINJA, started to participate intensely in these events, testing an online coverage model that would lead to the live coverage that was to gain prominence in the June protests. Its application in political activities in the city of São Paulo helped fuel the struggles, but it provoked distrust and opposition amongst previously organized agents.<sup>48</sup>

The role of the traditional media in covering the protests also deserves attention. The first demonstrations, between June 6 and 13, received negative coverage in the traditional media – mainly the major newspapers and television stations, which highlighted the “violent actions of the protesters”, frequently labeled as vandals.<sup>49</sup> However, after the June 13 protests in São Paulo, when the Military Police engaged in heavy repression of the demonstrators, resulting in innumerable cases of gratuitous violence against protestors and journalists, the traditional media did an about turn, adhering to the movement of indignation and solidarity which gained strength among sectors of society which had hitherto not been involved in the protests.<sup>50</sup> The internet transmission of images

---

47 The acts #AmorSIMRussomanoNÃO and #ExisteAmoremSP occurred during the first and second rounds of the 2012 electoral campaigns. They were convened via the internet with the purpose of setting an agenda for the city focused on promoting civic values such as cultural and behavioral diversity and opposing the conservative discourse, firstly, of Celso Russomano (PRB), who at one point was ahead in the opinion polls, and the series of prohibitions which had marked Gilberto Kassab's (PSD) term of office in the municipal government. These two protests may be seen as symbols of intervention in the streets, but not only that. It was also a moment in which this new networked actor directly addressed institutional politics, demanding responses from the candidates and impacting macropolitics. Fora do Eixo was directly involved in organizing the two acts, using its cultural production, online mobilization and real time coverage technologies.

48 For information on the political debates that occurred with the ascension of Fora do Eixo, see the book *Movimentos em Marcha* <<<https://emmarcha.milharal.org/>>> Accessed on 13.09.2013.

49 A chart generated from a survey based on mapping the content provided by three 3 national and 3 local newspapers clearly demonstrates that reports on the protests focused on violence and the struggle between the demonstrators and the police. Available at: <http://blog.pagoonex.com/2013/08/24/manifestantes-ou-vandalos-como-a-midia-tradicional-abordou-os-protestos-em-junho-de-2013-no-brasil/> (accessed on 20/05/2015).

50 Brant, 2014, Ortellado, 2013.

of repression, particularly videos and photos showing the indiscriminate use of crowd control bombs, tear gas and rubbers bullets by the police had a powerful effect on public opinion.<sup>51</sup> Undoubtedly this police violence was the catalyst which led to the significant increase in the number of participants in the June 20 protest, when in São Paulo alone more than 300,000 people took to the streets in marches that occupied the city's main thoroughfares, such as Avenida Faria Lima and Avenida Paulista.

With this exponential growth in the protests, coverage by the traditional media underwent a turnaround from a critical position to one of open support. A number of researchers indicate that this new coverage by the traditional media was influenced by and, in turn, influenced the transition in the orientation of the protest agenda and was determinant for the beginning of the second moment in June. In this movement, the traditional media begins to highlight the criticisms against corruption and government policy, which are at the center of the demands vocalized by the protesters. The website *Causa Brasil* demonstrates this phenomenon of the change in the demands coming from the social networks, in which corruption and social policy assume center stage. According to an Ibope poll on the night of June 20, dissatisfaction with corruption and the demand for political changes came in first place (mentioned by 65% of the respondents), while the issue of public transportation came second (with 50%).<sup>52</sup>

This paves the way for us to resume the focus of this study, in which June is analyzed as a vigorous example of online/offline interplay in contemporary politics. If the street protests were marked by a diversity of causes and demands, the same may be said of the networks, based on a compilation of studies on internet user behavior. The research done by Labic (Laboratory of Studies on Image and Cyberculture), at the Federal University of Espírito Santo, mentioned

---

<sup>51</sup> Singer, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Singer, 2013.

previously, concentrated on analyzing the hashtag #vemprarua, one of the most prominent from June 15 to 17. Using a type of methodology that extracts the data produced by this platform and analyzes it with specific software, the Labic research team elaborated a political anthropology of online discourse at this time, marked by an enormous diversity of ideas and political positions. Worthy of note in this study is the key role played by celebrities in the intermediation of information, principally humorists and young actors very popular among the young and the so-called class C. The discourse on the networks also consisted of a high volume of shared images (viral contents such as memes).

The Labic study shows that on June 17, the hashtag #vemprarua totaled 140,000 messages and maintained an average of 20,000 throughout the month. This hashtag was proposed first by the Movimento Passe Livre, which used the chant “Vem, vem, vem pra rua vem, contra o aumento!” (To the streets, against the increase) accompanied by its samba school drum ensemble to get people to join in the protests. The hashtag, therefore, may be considered the virtual correlate of a call to action, a kind of web extension of the cry from the streets. Based on this compilation of more than 500,000 tweets, Labic generated a series of qualifying points, including a catalogue of the hashtags associated with #vemprarua which enabled the design of an analysis of the protesters’ discourse.



Rodrigo Savazoni and Kalinka Copello

Cloud with most used #VemPraRua hashtags from June 15 to 17, 2013

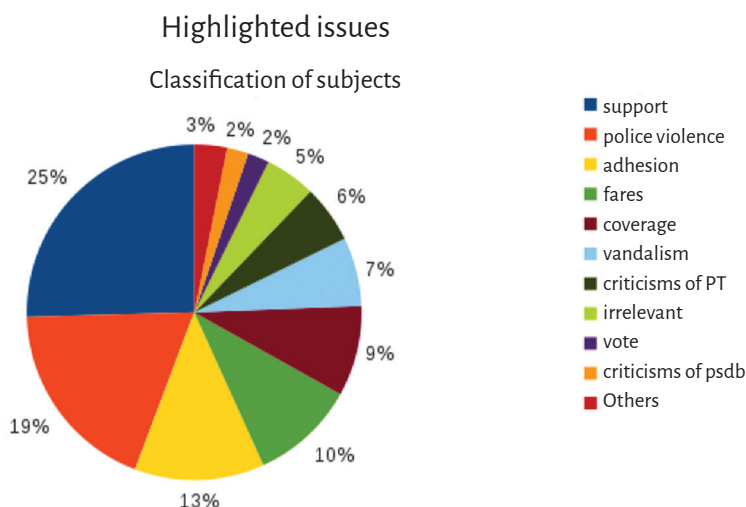


Another study on the behavior of the social networks which merits consideration was produced by the company Interagentes<sup>53</sup> and coordinated by the sociologist Sergio Amadeu da Silveira. In this case, the analysis was based on posts on the social network Facebook, undoubtedly the one most used during the June protests. The team of researchers consisting of Silveira and Thiago Pimentel carried out searches on the social network to capture public mentions of the demonstrations between June 5 and 21, 2013. The sharing of these messages was also analyzed as a means of valuating their repercussion among internet users. Based on the data compiled, actors were attributed two values: hub and authority, the hub having a higher number of links, while the authority is shared more.

This research is based on the premise, exhaustively explored in this work, that in June the networks and the streets made up a hybrid space with actions taking place in the urban space and also on the internet, in particular the social networks. It also demonstrates the great number of themes under discussion in the Facebook arena.

53 To see the complete survey access <http://interagentes.net/?p=62>. Accessed on 12.9.2015

Figure 1: Interagentes study cataloguing the contents collected on Facebook during the June 2013 protests



On June 6, date of the first act against the fare increase in São Paulo, there is already a trend that would be confirmed on the following days. Among the five main authorities, that is, those issuing contents shared on Facebook (in a universe of 10,500 messages compiled by the researchers) we have a traditional media vehicle, the *Estadão* (1) and an alternative one, *Carta Capital* (5), two political groups, the *Movimento Passe Livre* (2) and *Anonymous Brasil* (3) and *Mídia NINJA* (4), already demonstrating the central role this new network had assumed from the beginning of the protests. According to the Interagentes study, *Mídia NINJA* would remain among the top ten authorities within Facebook throughout the entire process in June. As a hub, that is the number of links, *Mídia NINJA* does not stand out. The main focus of attention in this process, during the first phase, is the *Anonymous Brasil* network after the fifth act of protest attention shifts to the *Movimento contra a Corrupção*, already an indication of the emergence of other agendas.



The research presents important conclusions for understanding the online/offline dynamics in contemporary politics. Among these, the fact that “the conversations on the distributed networks were decisive in the formation of micro leaders of the movements and for the emergence of large new nodes of authority”, **such as the groups** Anonymous, Movimento Contra a Corrupção, A Verdade Nua & Crua, Mídia NINJA, among others. The researchers also point out that “the absence of parties, unions and consolidated social movements indicates a new pattern of social mobilization without centralized structures.” This leads them to conclude that the demonstrations “reveal that institutional power and the power of the political structures were hardly decisive when compared with the power of communication of the distributed networks.”

According to this study, Mídia NINJA, was, therefore, one of the major references in June, in conjunction with the new social movements that convened and disseminated the protests, as well as the traditional media, which preserved its relevance in spite of the digital networks. Having emerged as the media arm of Circuito Fora do Eixo, manned by young activists and multimedia operators, Mídia NINJA continues in its efforts to generate visibility for issues and social causes in progress in the country, with emphasis on questions promoted by groups considered to be on the left of the political-ideological spectrum.

To understand Mídia NINJA, it is necessary to start with an explanation of what Circuito Fora do Eixo (FdE), which translates as Off-Axis Circuit, is. According to its idealizers, Fora do Eixo began in 2005, as a group of cultural producers in Cuiabá (Mato Grosso do Sul), Rio Branco (Acre), Uberlândia (Minas Gerais) and Londrina (Paraná). The goal was to organize young people active on the music scene in a collaborative cultural production network. In this context, the priority was self-organization and influence on public policy at local level. Two characteristics distinguish the organization from others in the country. Its members’ option for collective homes, that is communities where they work and live together; and the creation of an alternative economic system, based on the use of social currencies. The members of the networks are young people

who live and work in these collective homes adopting a “collective budget” through which they share their resources and meet their material needs.

In the book *“Os Novos Bárbaros – A Aventura Política do Fora do Eixo”*, Rodrigo Savazoni indicates that the organization was effectively born in 2007, when the first Fora do Eixo congress was held. Over the last eight years, FdE has become a political network working with culture and communication based essentially on two internal processes which feed back into each other on a permanent basis: a nationwide cultural distribution network and a political organization based on digital activism.

Initially limited to locations outside the predominant cultural axis in Brazil, Fora do Eixo reached São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 2011, with the creation of collective homes in these cities. This saw the beginning of the transition from a network focused specifically on culture to a strong emphasis on communication and involvement in political agendas. The intensive use of digital communication, with a strong emphasis on propaganda, is one of the key characteristics of Fora do Eixo, for which reason it may be viewed as an online/offline political mobilization platform at the service of innumerable causes. In *Os Novos Bárbaros*, Savazoni says that in 2012 the network comprised 122 collectives, five homes and 400 partnering collectives. In August 2013, there were 18 collective homes, 91 collectives and around 650 partnering collectives, demonstrating that Fora do Eixo capitalized on the month of June to expand its model of collective homes and strengthen the organization. Its members are mostly university age young people or recent graduates who work with the arts, cultural production and communication. This contingent of agents engaged in cultural production and political articulation is an essential component of Fora do Eixo's strength. There is also an enormous number of partners and other agents who work with the FdE network even if they do not live in the homes. Another key driver of the network's impact is its nationwide presence, since there are collectives associated with the network in every state in the country.

From its outset, Fora do Eixo has developed technologies for managing and communicating over the social networks that have positioned it as a platform for activism with the potential to impact the Brazilian political scene. For precisely this reason, it started to establish partnerships with traditional civil society organizations, social movements, members of the three spheres of government, and even directly with governments more aligned with these movements. Its organizational structure has both horizontal and vertical characteristics. Within the collectives and homes the living arrangements are unconventional, based on friendship and the division of household chores, other tasks and work. However, the internal rules and the FdE charter of principles determine the administrative regime which must be replicated in each collective. The management dynamic is vertical with decisions taken on a joint basis. This is how the simulacrum, the bank, the university, party, media and the project management fronts function.<sup>54</sup> The money necessary for the maintenance and infrastructure of the homes and collectives in which the Fora do Eixo members live is obtained via the provision of services, as well as through public and private finance. The main contextual aspect of the origin of Fora do Eixo is its experience in social participation provided by the Lula government, and it is not by chance that the organization maintains strong links with PT governments.

Mídia NINJA was created by Fora do Eixo in accordance with a strategy the organization denominated “post-brand”, which in effect means fomenting initiatives resulting in the architecture of other networks not associated with the Fora do Eixo brand. Mídia NINJA developed into the organization's most

---

54 The idea of simulacrum is central to understanding Fora do Eixo. Savazoni in *Novos Bárbaros* explains that simulacrum are simulations of the main structural institutions in our society (such as banks, political parties, universities) redesigned with different characteristics to adapt them to the collectivist principles governing the FdE. As such, the FdE “reinvents” these institutions the way it believes they should be to provoke social discussion. The bank simulacrum is responsible for the financial management of the network of collective homes, administering the funds received in currency as well as the circulation and issue of social currencies (time bank). The party simulacrum organizes Fora do Eixo political activities on a local, national and international level.

successful media action, becoming a central element in the FdE strategy to shift from a cultural production network to a networked political action platform. Since its foundation, FdE has been dedicated to developing its own media using resources available on the internet. Initially it had channels on Orkut, discussion lists, chats on MSN, and blogs on Blogger. Around three years ago, the network stepped up the live transmission of its activities. From there, it created Pós-TV, its own internet streaming channel with exclusive programs, mostly debates. The mobilization measures via the social networks, the production of content for blogs and sites, photographic records of political actions, the creation and maintenance of webTV programs, among other initiatives, are coordinated by the abovementioned Media simulacrum which every FdE collective is supposed to have.

Due to its success, Pós-TV was developed into a specific project and attracted as partners experienced journalists, such as the reporter Bruno Torturra, former chief editor of the magazine *Trip*, who became Mídia NINJA's ideologist. Torturra's initial proposal was to set up a professional network of journalists who would use the intelligence network developed by *Fora do Eixo* to distribute the information produced. However, as he recounts in an article published in the magazine *Piauí*, entitled "Por dentro do Furacão NINJA" (Inside Hurricane NINJA), the outbreak of the protests in June threw him and his partners straight into the streets, armed with cell phones and cameras, to record the avalanche of episodes that were to change the recent history of the country, as well as the lives of Mídia NINJA members.

From a narrative viewpoint, NINJA was not actually a novelty. It might be said that this format of producing information in real time with intense use of the new technologies from the angle of the protesters is part of the characteristic *modus operandi* of the social movements of the 21st century. In fact, this has been the case since the end of the 20th century when the anti-globalization movements created the Independent Media Center (IndyMedia) to produce counter-establishment accounts. The NINJA, however, managed

to establish an audience beyond niches, gaining widespread attention with articles published on them in leading newspapers worldwide, such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian*<sup>55</sup>. The network was launched during the World Forum of Free Media held in Tunisia, but really took off during the June protests with live broadcasts via Iphone and TwitCasting of the protests organized by the MPL.

The following paragraphs describe some episodes and feats which characterize Mídia NINJA activities during the June protests and which helped build its reputation.

The arrest of the student Bruno Ferreira Teles: on July 22, 2013, Teles was arresting accused of throwing Molotov cocktails at the police during the protest. The Mídia NINJA team immediately started editing its images and other videos posted on YouTube, producing an account that clearly demonstrated the activist's innocence. Moreover, using images from different angles, the NINJA reporters showed that the student had been the victim of false testimony given by the police. This revelation by NINJA was taken up by the Globo network's *Jornal Nacional* television news program, which had initially bought the official police version. The Globo news item mentioned the NINJA network and used its images<sup>56</sup>.

- In São Paulo on June 18, Mídia NINJA was covering a protest called by the MPL when the São Paulo state military police started hunting down the activists. An enormous number of police chased the protesters through the streets in the downtown area. None of the traditional media were present, but reports of the event began to circulate on the social networks. On this day, the NINJA were in the right place

---

55 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/29/brazil-ninja-reporters-stories-streets>>>Accessed on 13.9.2015

56 Available in: Globo network report on the Mídia NINJA scoop. <<http://g1.globo.com/videos/vj-estudante-presos-durante-manifestacao-no-rio-nao-portava-explosivos/2713906>>. Accessed on: Sep. 11, 2015.

at the right time, and its audience began to grow, reaching peaks of 200,000 people following the streaming. It was as if the public had been transported inside the conflict through this window, from the streets directly to the networks, with no filters. This was the day when the NINJA truly started to attract attention.

- # The arrest of the reporter Carioca: On July 22, Filipe Peçanha, Carioca, a Fora do Eixo member and one of the NINJA reporters, was arrested by the Rio de Janeiro military police while covering the protests. Peçanha was taken away in a police van and held for a number of hours at a police station in the Laranjeiras district. His arrest was broadcast live<sup>57</sup>. The audience accompanied the activist, gaining first hand experience of the tension and anxiety generated by facing the power of the State. Carioca kept his camera on until he was forced to turn it off. Triggered by the internet, other demonstrators made their way to the police station and initiated a protest demanding his release. All of this took place in real time, streamed by other NINJA reporters. On the same evening, Carioca was released, leaving the police station to cries of “Hey Police, release Mídia NINJA!”. This solidarity was a powerful indication that Mídia NINJA represented the voice of the crowd.
- As a result of these episodes, Mídia NINJA became a reference as an alternative news channel, providing live stories with no cuts, showing the public what the wider press seemed to filter. The protesters were transformed into embedded journalists, providing live coverage of the demonstrators’ actions and, particularly, the innumerable scenes of police violence that marked the month of June. Most importantly,

---

57 In April 2014, Mídia NINJA won the Shorty Awards – which the organizers call the “Internet Oscar” - in the Brazil category. The award was shared with the comedy program Porta dos Fundos, with thousands of accesses to its YouTube channel.

for the participants in the demonstrations this became the channel through which they could transmit and share their experiences, transforming the activists into potential journalists.

In these demonstrations, *Mídia NINJA* gained many new collaborators from beyond the ranks of *Fora do Eixo*. These individuals, acting as if they were journalists, produced images, created content and worked with the *NINJA* teams. Often they would meet up in the collective homes and use the *Fora do Eixo* infrastructure. During this period, the network started coordinating a team with dozens of new collaborators to meet the ever urgent demand for communication from the streets. *NINJA* never had the intention of being impartial. As main *Fora do Eixo* and *Mídia NINJA* spokesman Pablo Capilé stated in an interview on the TV program *Roda Viva*, this moment represented the passage from the age of the mass media to the age of the masses of media. According to Capilé, this new moment would constitute a “mosaic of partialities” on the web, which would be more beneficial for democracy than the pursuit of balance and critical distance characteristic of traditional journalism.

*Mídia NINJA* and *Fora do Eixo*, with their huge narrative capacity and their focus on political action by means of communication, were the object of innumerable criticisms, coming both from the traditional media and from other political organizations active in the protests. In particular, the MPL rejected *NINJA* as a medium for the movement. For Pablo Capilé, this quarrel emerged because of the cheerful, colorful and proactive approach that characterizes *Fora do Eixo*, clashing with the rigid sectarian discourse of the MPL. For *Movimento Passe Livre*, *Fora do Eixo* and *Mídia NINJA* were instruments that had been co-opted into the service of the government and business and were therefore not part of the real fight they were leading related to the issue of transportation.

Ortellado, considered to be one of the MPL ideologists, provided the following analysis:

“[The Mídia NINJA/ Fora do Eixo network] have a very sophisticated understanding of the nature of contemporary capitalism. They knew that because they did not have the capacity to be a relevant actor, if they controlled the movement’s communication, they would be able to control the movement, they would control the images through which the movement is represented.”

In spite of the differences in ideological orientation and profile between the activists in the MPL and the FdE, Ortellado’s statement seems to underscore yet again the recurring distinction between what occurs in the real world and what happens on the virtual and communication networks, as if they were dissociated elements of a determined struggle. It is the same criticism we have seen in the case of Avaaz and remains one of the focuses of conflict in the interplay between the offline and online worlds, showing that in the minds of many activists this schism still exists and is an aspect that needs to be further explored.

During the events in June, Mídia NINJA was considered a great success. Most of the young people mobilized by the street protests were looking for different images of the events with which they could identify, in particular those showing amateur journalists using their cell phones to confront the police. Mídia NINJA accompanied the rhythm of the street movements, and waned when they did. Nevertheless, the network continues to work as an activist communication platform, maintaining a coverage portal in partnership with the international network Oximity and developing another movement called #JornalistasLivres (FreeJournalists), which ran a crowdfunding campaign to finance the operation, managing to raise more than R\$ 100,000 in donations.



## 4. The internet civil rights framework

In Brazil, the fights over the web (SILVEIRA, 2009) promoted vigorous organized civil society movements, driven mainly by advocates of free software and freedom of knowledge. This civil society obtained one of the greatest victories ever in bringing about national legislation in defense of the innovative, open, distributed arrangement of the internet: the Internet Civil Rights Framework. This case study will analyze how this civil society group, using a series of online mechanisms for deliberation, mobilization and articulation – as well as a great deal of offline effort – was able to work with governments and parliament and confront different interests to achieve its objective: advanced legislation defending civic rights in cyberspace.

This story begins in 2007. Following an international trend (the *Sinde* law in Spain, the *Hadopi* law in France, among other legislations in the European Union), the Brazilian Congress initiated analysis of a bill of law introduced by the Senator Eduardo Azeredo (PSDB) establishing penalties for cyber crimes. However, in the assessment of a number of cyberactivists the terms of the bill of law presented grave threats to the open arrangement of the internet, causing them to react publicly. In spite of the protests, the “Azeredo law”, which had been proposed in 1999, was moving rapidly towards approval.<sup>58</sup> The project for the bill of law (PL 84/99) proposed the establishment of a legislation which in the opinion of its opponents would criminalize a number of activities for internet users.<sup>59</sup> Specialists critical of the project pointed out that the Azeredo law intended to transform routine activities such as transferring songs from an iPod to a computer into a crime punishable with a prison sentence<sup>60</sup> With a highly restrictive and punitive approach, activities such as unlocking a cellular

---

<sup>58</sup> Taking this name from its rapporteur and most dedicated advocate, the deputy Eduardo Azeredo (PSDB-MG).

<sup>59</sup> Lemos, 201.

<sup>60</sup> Silveira, 2014.

telephone to transfer it from one carrier to another, among others, would be considered to be crimes.<sup>61</sup>

The discussion of the bill of law generated intense civil society mobilization, involving academics and lawyers. In allusion to the military dictatorship's Institutional Act nº5 implanted in 1968, which drastically restricted civil rights during this period, the bill was nicknamed "AI-5 digital". Cyberactivists then created an online petition<sup>62</sup> (at a time when Avaaz did not yet exist) to mobilize the public against the bill.<sup>63</sup> The online petition was a success. It received more than 150,000 signatures, drew public attention to the problem and persuaded some members of congress to react and organize a first public hearing to debate AI-5 Digital.

At this moment, the cyberactivist network took measures to promote a reaction to the bill. Analyses and criticisms began to appear in blogs and in the social networks, in particular on Twitter, at that time used almost exclusively by nerds and geeks. In 2008, the "Mega Não"<sup>64</sup> campaign was initiated, bringing together an enormous and diverse network of activists. This campaign was responsible for countless digital mobilization actions as well as offline protests, such as a flashmob on São Paulo's Avenida Paulista. It also led to new public hearings in Brasília, such as the one held in November 2008, in which it was possible to note that many sectors of the federal government were opposed to the bill of law, favoring legislation that defended the rights of internet users.<sup>65</sup>

In April 2009, different organized civil society groups in Rio Grande do Sul, including the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), unions and the Free Software

---

61 Abramovay, 2014. Lemos, 2014.

62 On the website [www.petitiononline.com](http://www.petitiononline.com), which is no longer active.

63 The online petition was created by André Lemos, lecturer in Communication at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA); João Caribé, digital activist; and Sergio Amadeu, sociologist and advocate of free software in Brazil {Ferreira, 2014 #893}.

64 <https://meganao.wordpress.com/o-mega-nao/>

65 Góes, 2008. Sampaio, 2013.

Association, responsible for the organization of the International Free Software Festival, sent a letter to the Minister of Justice demanding the interruption of the passage of the Azeredo Law.<sup>66</sup> In June of the same year, these same activists managed to get the then president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to speak at the 10th International Free Software Festival in Porto Alegre, where the main civil society agents defending a free internet would be present. Accompanied by his Chief of Staff, Dilma Rousseff, and the minister of Justice, Tarso Genro, Lula spoke about society's generalized dissatisfaction with the bill, recognizing the risk the Azeredo law posed of promoting online censorship.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to opposing the Azeredo law, the cyberactivists also complained of the lack of a legal framework to protect internet users in the country. The inexistence of a legal framework permitted each judge to deal with cases involving the web in a discretionary manner, frequently contradicting positions taken in similar cases handled by their peers. At this moment, the idea of preparing a legal framework for the internet began to crystallize among a number of activists, an idea also advocated by president Lula in his speech at the International Free Software Festival.

"This law we have is not projected to correct abuse of the internet. In reality, it is aimed at introducing censorship. What we need to do, comrade Tarso Genro, is to perhaps change the Civil Code, or to change whatever. What we need to do is to make the people working with this digital issue, with the internet, accountable. To make them accountable, but not to prohibit or condemn them." (LULA, 2010)

With this, the Ministry of Justice was charged with proposing a set of civil rights for regulating the internet in Brazil.<sup>68</sup> The Ministry of Justice's

---

<sup>66</sup> Ferreira, 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Abramovay, 2014; Ferreira, 2014 .

<sup>68</sup> Lemos, 2014.

Legislative Affairs area, then headed by Pedro Abramovay (who would later be the director of Avaaz in Brazil between March 2012 and July 2013), established a partnership with the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) Institute of Technology and Society to provide consulting services aimed at developing a new bill of law.<sup>69</sup> It was at this point that the idea of setting up an online collaborative process to decide on the Internet Civil Framework emerged. This was to be developed as a transparent, open network that would engage cyberactivist civil society in drafting the new law.<sup>70</sup>

In 2009, the Ministry of Culture (MinC) had created the Fórum da Cultura Digital Brasileira (Brazilian Digital Culture Forum), which had involved the development of the first ever social network website aimed at formulating public policy ([www.culturadigital.br](http://www.culturadigital.br)). As a result of this, the MinC and its collaborators were invited to contribute to the Civil Framework technological platform, for which the Ministry of Justice was responsible, with support from the Fundação Getúlio Vargas. This team of digital culture technicians then developed a platform that was hosted at the address [www.culturadigital.br/marcocivil](http://www.culturadigital.br/marcocivil). It is interesting to note that the CulturaDigital.Br network was intended to be a new vehicle for drafting public policy, involving open discussion processes. It was maintained by an innovative public-private arrangement involving the Ministry of Culture, the Rede Nacional de Ensino e Pesquisa (RNP) and the Casa da Cultura Digital and undoubtedly represented an important example of societal innovation.

The debate and drafting of the proposal over the platform occurred in two stages. In the first consultation cycle, the debate was centered on listening to what internet users had to say about the principles that should govern the web in Brazil. After the first set of contributions, the Ministry of Justice and FGV teams set about drafting a white paper which consisted of a pre-proposal

---

69 It also received support from the Ministry of Culture (MinC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs {Steibel, 2014}

70 [www.culturadigital.org/marcocivil](http://www.culturadigital.org/marcocivil)

for the bill of law. This was then discussed again, topic by topic, in a second round of virtual consultation. The Ministry of Justice was responsible for the coordination of the process and the final proposal of the Civil Framework, which was completed within the established timeframe.

The idea of using a virtual platform attracted enormous international attention, but also generated distrust among some activist sectors. The goal of the platform created jointly between the hackers and the lawyers was to create a collaborative environment for the formulation of a proposal by society. A model that amplified the deliberation process and that put an end to the traditional (and not very democratic) process of decision making behind closed doors. The initiative received support from innumerable progressive groups, but was also came under criticism from sectors previously mobilized against the Azeredo law. According to Steibel, this resistance was due to the fact that the proposal for the Platform was considered to be top-down, while the mobilization against the Azeredo law had been a bottom-up movement.<sup>71</sup> The resistance may have been one of the reasons for the low level of participation in the first stage of consultation. Moreover, the low level of diversity and representativeness of the groups in the debate suggests that only specialists in the area with a high level of expertise were really involved in providing the fundamentals for the Civil framework.<sup>72</sup>

It should be underscored, however, that the Civil Framework tool is considered to be a pioneer in digital participation technologies in Brazil. Inspired by the model known as web 2.0, it was developed using Wordpress software (a variation called BuddyPress for social networks), which integrates blogs, RSS Feeds and other social networks, such as Twitter. In pursuit of a larger number of qualified contributions to the process, the team responsible for the consultation undertook the online mapping of contributions made on other

---

71 Steibel, 2014

72 According to Sampaio et al, there were 130 participants, with almost a third of the messages being sent by only two individuals (Sampaio, 2013).

platforms and included them in their final synthesis of these collaborations gathered from Twitter profiles and activist blogs. This material was incorporated into the White Paper discussed in the second phase of the process.

The second phase of the collaborative process of drafting the Civil Framework was marked by more virulent disputes among the different stakeholders. It should be noted here that the process achieved a degree of transparency rarely seen in public consultations. All of the contributions from all the participants were visualized in real time. Even more important, the Ministry of Justice barred any possibility of interest groups interfering in the discussion by means of “hidden” proposals (that is, not introduced via the online platform). When the association of internet providers or the Federal Police attempted to make proposals “outside” the network, in direct contact with the Ministry of Justice, they were encouraged by the managers to channel their proposals via the platform,<sup>73</sup> at the risk of not having them considered officially. As a result, the second phase of the mobilization managed to inspire trust among different stakeholders, such as members of parliament, academics, lawyers and civil society participants. At the end of the process, the platform had received more than 2,000 contributions, which were processed and attached to the final document sent to the National Congress in 2011.

This is where the legislative stage of the Civil Framework began, in which the process innovations took the back seat while the bill was submitted to the tenuous transparency of the workings of the Brazilian parliament. In function of the many interests in opposition to the legislation and in spite of constant vigilance on the part of civil society in support of its approval, the Civil Framework remained in the drawer until June 2013, when the ex-employee of the US National Security Agency (NSA), Edward Snowden, revealed that the agency had been spying on the Brazilian government, and more specifically on the president of the Republic, information that generated enormous repercussion in the country.

---

73 Abramovay, 2014.

At that moment, as Ronaldo Lemos commented, “the most serious and most comprehensive reaction the Brazilian State could muster was the Internet Civil Framework”. Mobilization for approval of the legislation was resumed by civil society, but the imminent approval of the bill led private interest groups to seek alterations in the proposal. The telecommunications industry lobby was focused on the neutrality of the web. The reaction of the private sector produced rare cohesion among the Brazilian cyberactivist groups, who, with some isolated criticisms of the bill, took up the defense of the draft of the Civil Framework sent to Congress by the Brazilian government.

A new phase of the public dispute surrounding the bill began at this time, with widespread mobilization of public opinion via the social networks, in particular Facebook. A number of campaigns, online petitions, videos and memes related to the Internet Civil Framework were created. Diverse civil society organizations other than the cyberactivists engaged in this process, such as the union federation Central Única dos Trabalhadores and the consumer defense body Instituto de Defesa do Consumidor (IDEC). New groups that had not even existed when the mobilizations began in 2007, joined the struggle, as was the case of the Meu Rio network. This local network encouraged its members to defend a free internet based on the belief that principles such as web neutrality were of fundamental importance to ensure the rights of its members and society as a whole.

The pressure from different social sectors certainly helped ensure the approval of the Civil Framework that same month (not, however, without some small alterations to the original proposal).<sup>74</sup> The Internet Civil Framework, approved by the Senate and sanctioned by the president of Brazil in April 2014, is considered to be one of the most advanced laws guaranteeing civil rights on the internet in the world.<sup>75</sup> The regulation of the law is currently

---

74 To ensure approval in the Chamber of Deputies, the rapporteur Alessandro Molon had to incorporate some provisions related to privacy into the bill.

75 Silveira, 2014.

open to public debate via the same portal, along the same lines upon which it was built.<sup>76</sup>

There were three distinct moments in the mobilization for the Civil Framework: (1) advocacy to create the framework; (2) online decision making to formulate the law; (3) advocacy for its approval. In the first stage, civil society's reaction to a proposed law that fostered censorship was fundamental in generating demand for a framework that represented society. This is evidenced by the public petition that as far back as 2008 managed to collect more than 150,000 signatures. In the second stage, more technical in nature, public participation on the whole was lower, with a concentration of specialists and interest groups involved in formulating the bill of law. If the methodology employed was not able to produce a response representative of society as a whole, it was exemplary in terms of participation and collaboration. In the third stage, civil society, reinforced by numerous new actors, used the internet intensively to mobilize public opinion, once again, in favor of the proposal and prevent the efforts of corporate interests to water it down. When the Civil Framework bill of law was voted and approved by Congress, an internet governance event called Arena NET Mundial was taking place in São Paulo. Many of the activists who had been heavily involved in developing this legislation were present at the event and had the opportunity to commemorate this important victory for cyberactivism.

## 5. Final considerations

The study of these three cases confirms the hypothesis that contemporary politics is characterized by the interplay between the online/offline worlds to the extent that it is no longer possible to delineate where each of the two dimensions begins and ends. Currently, in online/offline modulation

---

<sup>76</sup> The consultation is in its second phase and is available on the portal <http://culturadigital.br/marcocivil/debate/>



these two dimensions of reality merge, producing a new socio-political and cultural context which signals a profound transformation in the public sphere and in activism. Particularly deserving of note is the transition in the traditional forms of organization of civil society, which are making room for a networked model of activism. The theoretical references above help us to understand that politics requires new types of expertise, such as mastery of the tools of virtual communication, the management and utilization of social networks, and the capacity to develop symbolic narratives for digital media that engage citizens (organized or not). In this sense, building networks and developing mass intercommunication is the principal means of gaining power in the interlinked public sphere, which digital activists, be it the operators of Avaaz, Mídia NINJA or the Civil Framework show they know very well..

The actions of these groups also pose a series of questions in relation to transformations of the public sphere in the digital context. These questions should be understood as indications of the challenges we face in order to reinforce democracy in Brazil.

**Process x outcome:** what does this new form of politics, based on the interplay between offline/online, produce in terms of outcomes? And what route does it follow to achieve them? Taking Avaaz as an example, we may reflect on the accomplishments and limitations of “virtual participation”, not only in terms of the relative effectiveness of the petitions, but more importantly the challenges posed for the constitution of a democratic model of organization of civil society. To what extent has an organization like Avaaz managed to create a governance model that is not controlled by a small group, as normally occurs with the traditional NGOs? And, in the cases in which it achieves widespread participation, how to ensure that its principles are maintained, as in the controversial case of the petition for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, which was precisely the case in which Avaaz Brazil reached its highest number of supporters? Here we return to a long-standing question in the field of activism, which is the process/outcome dichotomy. A question that is still open but which

is highly relevant considering the degree of exhaustion of traditional forms of political participation.

**Which agenda?:** The June protests, as well as the demonstrations against president Dilma Rousseff and the PT, have a striking characteristic: they do not propose an alternative agenda or policy. Instead of mobilizing to demand structural changes, the demonstrators seem to resort to protests to encounter a quick fix for their demands. Krastev describes this kind of protest as follows:

“Demonstrators like being together, they enjoy fighting together, but they do not have a collective project. It is a revolution brought by indignation and led by hope in which everyone feels tempted to participate.”<sup>77</sup>

The lack of leaders and the actual refusal of political or organizational representation by many activists may result in a lack of capacity to collaborate to achieve concrete results. One question that arises is whether the broad range of digital tools, including the social networks that were widely used to bring the demonstrators to the streets, may be used to confer greater unity on the movement. Or also, if it would not be the case of seeking to develop innovations that might fulfill the role of producing more program-oriented actions in order to drive the advance of democracy.

**The centrality and the limits of Facebook:** the three case studies prove the central role played by Facebook in the provision of information, mobilization and organization. Although we noted that each of the groupings analyzed used this social network website in distinct ways, it may be affirmed that Facebook was the main channel for disseminating causes and mobilizing people for the Civil framework, for the June protests and continues to be key for the Avaaz campaigns.

In the case of the Mídia NINJA, Facebook is used as one of its main channels for disseminating the information it produces. The Mídia NINJA

---

<sup>77</sup> Krastev, 2014.

managed to bring their independent journalism to a diverse audience by means of this social network's website. Without a doubt the tool is adept at promoting the viral spread of causes due to its large number of users and very simple mechanisms for sharing information. In the case of the construction and approval of the Civil Framework in the Senate and in the Avaaz campaigns, Facebook was useful in the dynamics of driving participation.

On the other hand, using the process which occurred in June as a reference, in which use of Facebook was intense, we may detect some limitations to this tool. Its technological configurations in determined contexts may exacerbate differences and generate attrition. A study of how the algorithms which control the news feeds to users work showed that the formulas used tend to expose "more news that reflects what we think and reduce our exposure to what we disagree with".<sup>78</sup> This creates barriers to the approximation of individuals who have "different viewpoints".

The Facebook filter bubble was very evident during the 2014 elections in Brazil. Posts and 'discussions' on Facebook seem to have impeded the development of informed debate, heightening tensions between the different parties. In parallel, there is a strong indication that this dynamic generated less social interaction, as well as causing a great deal of confrontation, distancing individuals and discussion groups.

During the June protests, Facebook seems not to have contributed as a platform for deliberation and collaboration in building agendas, nor for developing more robust links around common agendas. The diverse agendas and causes proposed by the demonstrators dissipated into promises and isolated actions (many of which were reversible). And the victories achieved, such as the cancellation of the fare increase in the main cities in the country, were not consolidated, since the increase was applied in the following years, with no new reaction from the opposition.

---

<sup>78</sup> Lemos, 2015.

## Online and offline in the constitution of the networks

The case of the Civil Framework has some peculiarities. The debate that preceded the law in defense of civil rights in a digital context shows a different kind of cyberactivism, built on the participation of people and organizations with specific qualifications to make informed contributions to the debate and the formulation of legislation.

There are two important lessons to be learned from this experience: (1) when online and offline action is undertaken in a balanced manner it can be truly powerful. The collaboration involving organized civil society, a government open to dialogue and willing to take charge of the agenda and a cohesive group of specialists (centered on FGV) produced a virtuous dynamic; (2) when it is a question of preparing a well informed proposal having a large number of participants is not the decisive element. What is most important is the inclusion of people who are qualified to argue in the debate. This does not prevent laymen from presenting their contributions by means of informed and participative debate. Different public interests and positions are able to exert greater influence in the decision making process when they are transformed into concrete proposals. This is more likely to occur if the proposal is produced by a cohesive (and consequently small) nucleus of people. It is not a question of opposing this model to that of campaigns involving large numbers of people, because being different they are basically synergetic (there is a moment in the Civil Framework when, with the proposal ready, it was fundamental to gain the support of the largest number of people possible). With the Civil Framework, what is most interesting is the fact that all the stages of the process involved networking in different ways. In the first stage, the proposed bill of law was constructed in a network by means of online deliberation. When it was going through the legislature, social pressure was exercised on parliament in the same way.

A long journey: what the experiences analyzed show is that there is no single format of cyberactivism capable of responding to the various models available for participating in a democratic society. The creation of a new relationship between political parties and the virtual world, civic education, promoting dialogue between diverse positions, critical reflection, participation in elaborating government proposals, among so many other questions, will require the development of new instruments, allying innovation in the virtual world with offline activities. The transformations necessary have to occur at all levels, ranging from the education system through to political institutions. However, one movement is necessary to ensure the maintenance of a free and open internet so that the tendency to colonize cyberspace demonstrated by economic and antidemocratic interests does not thrive. The defenders of democracy need to pay close attention to the exponential growth of a limited number of corporations concentrating the attention of internet users and to the surveillance activities conducted by the more developed nations, particularly the United States, since these may prevent the internet from fulfilling its potential for emancipation and turn it into an instrument of control over people. The online world's limitations in building consensus should also be recognised, and the architecture of proprietary social networks, such as Facebook, has clearly exacerbated the difficulties, creating barriers to the approximation of individuals with different viewpoints.

The transformations brought about by digital culture now demand a capacity of innovation on the part of organized civil society which, with few exceptions, has so far proved to be less dynamic than private companies or the State. Thus the importance of investing in initiatives oriented to civic innovation that strengthen social cohesion and help confront the encroachments of the market and the efforts to establish control over citizens by anti-democratic states.

## 6. Bibliographical references

Abramovay, P. (2014). O Marco Civil e a política dos netos. *Brasil Post* [Online], 19/02/2014. Available: [http://www.brasilpost.com.br/pedro-abramovay/o-marco-civil-e-a-politic\\_b\\_4810634.html](http://www.brasilpost.com.br/pedro-abramovay/o-marco-civil-e-a-politic_b_4810634.html) [Accessed 01/06/2015].

Abramovay, P. (2015). Personal interview on 05/02/2015. Rio de Janeiro. [Audio recording in possession of author].

Álvares, D. (2013). 74% dos Brasileiros querem a renúncia de Renan, mostra pesquisa Ibope. *Estadão* [Online], 08/03/2013. Available: <http://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,74-dos-brasileiros-querem-renuncia-de-renan-mostra-pesquisa-ibope,1006121> [Accessed 04/05/2015].

Avaaz.org. (2015a). *Highlights: Brazil: "Ficha Limpa"* [Online]. Available: <http://www.avaaz.org/en/highlights.php> [Accessed 07/06/2015].

Avaaz.org. (2015b). *Quem Somos* [Online]. Available: <http://www.avaaz.org/po/about.php> [Accessed 19/02/2015].

Brant, J. (2014). Política e Comunicação nas Jornadas de Junho: Uma análise sobre os protestos de junho de 2013 no Brasil e sua relação com as mídias tradicionais e com a Internet. Ford Foundation.

Cadwalladr, C. (2013). Inside Avaaz – can online activism really change the world? *The Guardian* [Online], 17 November 2013. Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/nov/17/avaaz-online-activism-can-it-change-the-world> [Accessed 26/12/2014].

Capilé, P. (2015). Interview with the author on 11/02/2015. Rio de Janeiro. [Audio recording in possession of author].

Costa, A. J. d. F. (2014). *A Avaaz como Ferramenta de Mediação das Causas Sociais na Rede*. Graduação, Universidade de Brasília.

Ferreira, J. N. (2014). Building the Marco Civil: A Brief Review of Brazil's Internet Regulation History. In: BIDDLE, E. R., LEMOS, R. & PRICE, M. (eds.) *Stakes are High: Essays on Brazil and the Future of the Global Internet* Internet Policy Observatory.

G1. (2013). Inquérito diz que manifestante preso no Rio não portava coquetel molotov. *G1* [Online], 24/07/2013. Available: <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2013/07/>

inquerito-diz-que-manifestante-presno-no-rio-nao-portava-coquetel-molotov.html [Accessed 14/03/2015].

Góes, P. (2008). Brasil: Protesto relâmpago contra a Lei Azeredo. *Global Voices* [Online]. Available from: <http://pt.globalvoicesonline.org/2008/11/16/brasil-protesto-relampago-contra-a-lei-azeredo/%5D>.

Kavada, A. (2010). Activism Transforms Digital: The Social Movement Perspective. In: JOYCE, M. (ed.) *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*. New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.

Krastev, I. (2014). *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lemos, R. (2014). O Marco Civil como símbolo do desejo por inovação no Brasil. In: LEITE, G. S. & LEMOS, R. (eds.) *O Marco Civil da Internet*. Rio de Janeiro: Atlas.

Lemos, R. (2015). Precisamos falar dos algoritmos. *Folha de São Paulo* [Online], 19/05/2015. Available: <http://observatoriodaimprensa.com.br/e-noticias/precisamos-falar-dos-algoritmos/> [Accessed 20/05/2015].

Mídia NINJA. *Quem Somos* [Online]. Available: <https://ninja.oximity.com/partner/ninja/about> [Accessed 05/06/2015].

*Movimento Passe Livre* (2013). Roda Viva: Entrevista com o Movimento Passe Livre. [audiovisual]. Available: <https://http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6T-EavCiRE> [Accessed 17/04/2015].

Nasi, L. (2013). *Ativismo mediado na rede Avaaz: os limites de um modelo informacional*. Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos

Nassif, L. (2013). Avaaz, golpe ou verdade? *Luís Nassif Online* [Online]. Available from: <http://jornalgggn.com.br/blog/luisnassif/avaaz-golpe-ou-verdade?> 2015].

Nunes, R. (2013). Juin N'est Pas Fini. *Les Temps Modernes: Brésil 2013 l'année qui ne s'achève pas*, 678. 4-23.

Ortellado, P. (2013a). L'antiparti: Autonomie et stratégie dans le "movimento Passe Livre". *Les Temps Modernes: Brésil 2013 l'année qui ne s'achève pas*, 678. 24-36.

Ortellado, P. (2013b). Pablo Ortellado: experiência do MPL é aprendizado para o movimento autônomo não só no Brasil como no mundo. Available from: <http://>

coletivodar.org/2013/09/pablo-ortellado-experiencia-do-mpl-e-aprendizado-para-o-movimento-autonomo-nao-so-do-brasil-como-do-mundo/ 22/02/2015].

Passarinho, N. (2014). ONG entrega 340 mil assinaturas de apoio à votação do Marco Civil. *G1* [Online], 25/03/2014. Available: <http://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2014/03/ong-entrega-340-mil-assinaturas-de-apoio-votacao-do-marco-civil.html> [Accessed 13/06/2015].

Pinto, R. A. D. M. (2014). Ciberativismo e a Avaaz: petições públicas online como forma de e-participação, paper presented at Anais do V Seminário Nacional Sociologia & Política, Curitiba, PR, May 14, 15 and 16, 2014.

Sampaio, R. C., Bragatto, R. C. & Nicolás, M. A. (2013). Inovadora e democrática. Mas e aí? Uma análise da primeira fase da consulta online sobre o Marco Civil da Internet. *In: V Congresso da Compólitica*, May 8 to 10, 2013, Curitiba, PR.

Savazoni, R. (2014). *Os novos bárbaros: a aventura política do fora do eixo*. Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano Editora.

Segurado, R. (2011). Entre a regulamentação e a censura do ciberespaço. *Ponto-e-virgula*, 9. 52-70.

Silveira, S. A. d. (2014a). Marco civil e a proteção da privacidade. (158) Available: [http://comciencia.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1519-76542014000400008&lng=pt&nrm=iso](http://comciencia.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1519-76542014000400008&lng=pt&nrm=iso)

Silveira, S. A. d. (2014b). Sérgio Amadeu: Marco Civil corre perigo com Aécio. *Portal Forum* [Online], October 13, 2014. Available: <http://www.revistaforum.com.br/blog/2014/10/sergio-amadeu-com-aecio-conquistas-marco-civil-estao-em-perigo/> [Accessed 22/05/2015].

Singer, A. (2013a). Brasil, junho de 2013: Classes e ideologias cruzadas. *Novos Estudos - CEBRAP*. (97) 23-40.

Singer, A. (2013b). Classes e ideologias cruzadas. *Brasil de Fato* [Online], 10/12/2013. Available: <http://www.brasildefato.com.br/node/26944> [Accessed 24/03/2015].

Sorj, B. (2014). Entre o local e o global. *In: Figueiredo R.(org)*, June 2013 – A sociedade enfrenta o Estado. São Paulo: Summus Editorial.

Steibel, F. (2012). Ferramentas web 2.0 e o design de consultas públicas online: o caso do Marco Civil Regulatório. *In: Anais da XXI Compós*, June 2012 Juiz de Fora. 1-16.



Steibel, F. (2014). O portal da consulta pública do Marco Civil da Internet. *In*: LEITE, G. S. & LEMOS, R. (eds.) *O Marco Civil da Internet*. Rio de Janeiro: Atlas.

Wikipedia. Centro de Mídia Independente. Available: [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centro\\_de\\_M%C3%ADdia\\_Independente](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centro_de_M%C3%ADdia_Independente) [Accessed 05/06/2015]

# Chile

---

Rayén Condeza

Marcelo dos Santos

Alonso Lizama

Paz Vásquez<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

## 2. Access, use and legal framework of the internet in Chile

## 3. Case studies

Case 1: 2011 student mobilization for education

Case 2: No Alto Maipo

Case 3: The constituent process

## 4. Conclusions

## 5. References

---

<sup>1</sup> Rayén Condeza (PhD) is a lecturer and researcher at the Communication Faculty of the Catholic University of Chile (PUC) and director of the Master's program in Social Communication, also addressing Communication and Education. Marcelo dos Santos is a National Science and Technology Commission (Conicyt-Chile) doctoral grantee in Communication Sciences at PUC. Alonso Lizama, a graduate in history from PUC, studies Journalism for graduates at the same institution. Paz Vásquez, a graduate in Arts and Humanities (PUC), has a Master's degree in Press studies from the same university.

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter recent transformations in the public space in Chile will be explored through analysis of two cases of collective action (the student demonstrations in 2011 and the civic movement against the Alto Maipo hydroelectric plants) and one case of social participation in the elaboration of a new constitution for the country, announced in 2015. All were conducted by different civil society actors who employed both online and offline spaces and logics in their actions, ranging from collective action to connective action (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012; Hopke, 2015).

The 2011 student demonstration symbolizes the desire to confront one of the main inequalities the Chilean people experience on a day to day basis. It is not by chance that since the 2006 “Penguin Revolution”, a movement that demanded free, quality education in the country, the issue of education had been central to the demands of different civil society actors. For Puga (2011), the stratification of education in Chile is a mechanism that reproduces social inequality in the context of accelerated economic growth. Moreover, the Chilean students’ social participation took place within a context of great discontent with the traditional political parties active in Chile and in the rest of the region (Schuster, 2008), a process that has been manifest since 1990 and is particularly pronounced among the young.

The second case, involving protests against the development of a project for hydroelectric plants in the Alto Maipo district in the Andes range, within the Santiago metropolitan region, is compounded by the prior problem of the privatization of basic healthcare services and of a key resource such as water, which has been affecting supply to millions of Santiago residents. This project is being developed within the context of over-exploitation of water in a major part of the country’s hydrographic basins, above all in the northern and central regions, for extractive activities such as mining (Mundaca, 2015). The main organization involved in the fight against the construction of the hydroelectric

plant analyzed in this paper is the Coordinadora Ciudadana Ríos del Maipo ([www.riosdelmaipo.cl](http://www.riosdelmaipo.cl)) which, in addition to organizing offline initiatives and maintaining a web platform, uses the Facebook and Twitter social networks.

In the third case, in 2015 a constituent process was announced for the elaboration of a new constitution. It should be noted that Chile is governed by its 1980 Constitution, created without the participation of congress during the military dictatorship. After the return to democracy, this charter was subject to some minor reforms, but a number of its original authoritarian characteristics remain in force. The center-left and part of the center-right of the political spectrum consider it to be legitimate. On October 13, 2015, president Michelle Bachelet addressed the nation about the beginning of a constituent process in a public announcement over the national radio and television network at a peak audience time. This had been one of her campaign promises and one of the pillars of structural reform in her government program, which also includes educational, tax and healthcare reform. One of her principal arguments in initiating this process was that “Chile needs a new and better Constitution, one that is rooted in democracy and that expresses the people's wishes, a legitimate Constitution that is respected by everyone, making it a driver of national unity”. She also stated that “the process of elaborating a new Constitution is already underway. It began when millions of Chilean citizens demonstrated their desire for change at the urns”. The announcement of the constituent process by the Nova Maioria coalition government was received with demonstrations both of support and criticisms, triggering initiatives to promote dialogue, debate and civic education on a new constitutional text for Chile. The proposal led to the emergence of different experiences aimed at addressing the content, engaging varied offline and online forms of communication and participation. As Sorj (2015) states:

“Instead of treating the social networks as a self-centered world in which communication acquires a necessarily democratic character, we should treat

the online and offline universe as interconnected subsystems between which, in the passage from one to the other, individuals and organizations (re)appear, with their conflicts and varied capacities in terms of initiative, power, values and interests that were already present, albeit generally hidden, in the world of the web” (p. 15).

## 2. Access, use and legal framework of the Internet in Chile

According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2015) 2015 global information technology report — whose index measures how economies use the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies to increase competitiveness and well-being —, Chile comes in 38th place out of a total of 143 countries,<sup>2</sup> having risen five places in the index.

Internet World Stats statistics indicate that in 2014 Chile was the country with the third highest internet penetration rate in Latin America (66.5%, compared with the average of 54.7% in the region and 70% in Europe). Other studies project 70% internet penetration in Chile<sup>3</sup> by 2018, although according to the Digital Country Index,<sup>4</sup> this had already been reached in 2015 (70.2% of the Chilean population, compared with an average of 80% for the OECD countries). As may be seen in chart 1, in common with other countries in Latin America, there is still a great deal of room for growth in mobile internet access in Chile.

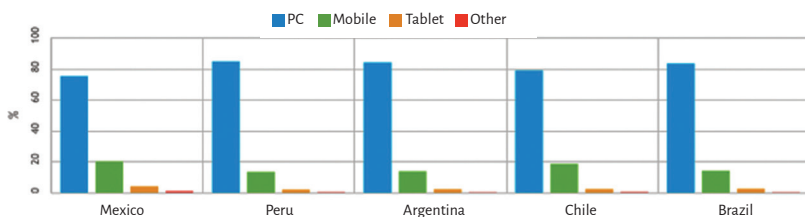
---

2 World Economic Forum [WEF], *Global Information Technology Report 2015*. Geneva: WEF; INSEAD, 2015. Available at: <reports.weforum.org/global-information-technology-report-2015/economies/#economy=CHL>.

3 See <www.telesemana.com/blog/2015/02/16/estadisticas-internet-en-america-latina-solo-chile-superara-el-70-de-penetracion-en-2018>.

4 IAB Chile, *Tendencias internacionales en mercados móviles 2015*. Santiago (Chile): IAB Chile, 2015.

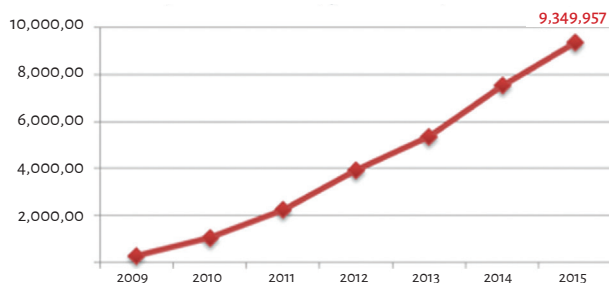
Chart 1: Share (%) in pages viewed from different devices in 2014 in Latin America



Source: comScore

The Chilean Telecommunications Sub-Secretariat (Subtel, 2015) projects an accelerated increase in 3G mobile telephones in the coming years, following continuous growth over the last five years (see chart 2). In fact, more than 30% of the cellular phones sold at Christmas 2010 were smartphones.<sup>5</sup>

Chart 2: Growth in 3G connections via mobile devices in Chile in the last five years

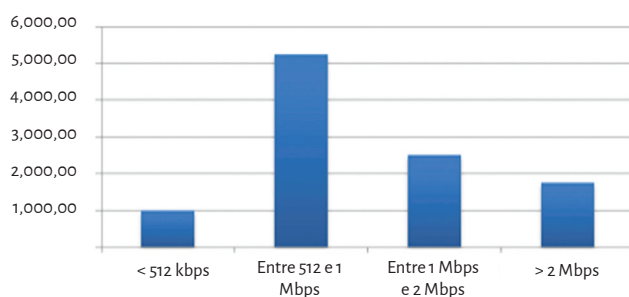


Source: Subtel (2015).

<sup>5</sup> See <[diario.latercera.com/2011/01/04/01/contenido/negocios/10-55073-9-smartphones-expli-can-mas-de-30-de-celulares-vendidos-en-navidad.shtml](http://diario.latercera.com/2011/01/04/01/contenido/negocios/10-55073-9-smartphones-expli-can-mas-de-30-de-celulares-vendidos-en-navidad.shtml)>.

Similarly, the mobile telephony market has become more competitive over the last five years, with the entry of new players in a segment originally dominated by only three companies. Furthermore, the number portability law (law n. 20.741) was approved, enabling users to change carrier while maintaining the same telephone number since January 2012. Nevertheless, in June 2015 the three main mobile carriers accounted for 95.3% of the 3G and 4G mobile internet market. 50% of the mobile connections range from 512 kbps to 1 Mbps in speed (see chart 3).

**Chart 3: Mobile connection speed in Chile**



Source: Subtel

Other recent internet statistics (Subtel, 2015) indicate the following trends:

- In June 2015, the mark of 12 million internet accesses was reached, 19.4% up on the previous year, with almost 2 million new accesses
- Fixed and mobile (3G and 4G) telephony penetration rose from 56.9 per 100 inhabitants in June 2014 to 66.8 per 100 inhabitants in June 2015 (a growth of 9.9 percentage points)

- 78.3% of internet accesses occur via mobile telephony, indicating growth in navigation via smartphone and a decrease in mobile access via USB modem
- Accesses via 4G technology (high speed mobile access) passed the mark of one million connections, growing 24% in the last quarter of 2015
- In the same period, and for the first time, there were around 100,000 fewer accesses via 3G technology (-1% from March to June 2015)
- Connections via smartphone increased 28.1% over the last twelve months
- In June 2015, fixed internet penetration was 14.5 connections per 100 inhabitants
- Of the total fixed internet connections, 86.9% correspond to households and 13.1% to the commercial segment

If we add to this the number of mobile 3G connections in June 2015 (9,349,957) compared with just over 2 million connections in 2011 (Subtel, 2015), it might be said that Chilean society is ever more connected, mobile and online. However, there is still a major abyss in digital communication, a reflection of the country's social inequality.

## Digital exclusion: source of inequality

The 2015 Ministry of Economy report on digital exclusion in Chile reveals that it is three times greater in poorer households than in those with a higher income. While 82% of the highest quintile have access to the internet, only 20% of the households in the poorest quintile do. In the second lowest income



quintile, 42% of households have internet access, in the third, 49.6% and in the fourth, 59.2%.<sup>6</sup> As the Digital Country Foundation (Stager & Núñez, 2015) points out, digital exclusion by socio-economic stratum has not decreased over the last four years, exacerbating differences in relation to the higher deciles, while the economic dimension continues to be one of the main determinants of probability of access to the internet.

In terms of gender gap, men (59.4%) use the internet more than women (56.4%). There are more connections in urban regions than in rural ones (Stager & Núñez, 2015). There is a 28.8 percentage point difference in favor of the cities: 61.6% against 32.8% in the countryside. For these same authors, digital exclusion between socio-economic groups has increased over recent years. Lack of skills continues to be a determinant factor and the difference between age groups is significant: at 18 years of age, 90% use the internet, while 90% of people aged 70 years do not. They also state that having a student in the household significantly increases the chances of internet use for the rest of the family group. In this case, there is a difference of more than 11 percentage points in internet use by other members of the household where there is a student in residence. Data from the Ministry of the Economy show that “just 5.4% of entrepreneurs who have only basic education use the internet, compared with 80% of those with higher education.”<sup>7</sup> According to the Chilean Ministry of Education (2013), 46.9% of primary and secondary students have basic knowledge of how to use information and communication technologies, 51.3% have intermediate-level knowledge and 1.8%, advanced level. Comparing results by socio-economic level, 71.4% of students from the lowest socio-economic level have only basic knowledge, compared with 11.6% of students from the highest socio-economic level. Acquisition of the skills to use these technologies is related to socio-economic differences. In general

6 See <[www.latercera.com/noticia/negocios/2015/07/655-637424-9-brecha-digital-se-triplica-entre-hogares-mas-pobres-y-de-mayores-ingresos.shtml](http://www.latercera.com/noticia/negocios/2015/07/655-637424-9-brecha-digital-se-triplica-entre-hogares-mas-pobres-y-de-mayores-ingresos.shtml)>.

7 “Digital productivity: opportunity for the SMEs” Seminar. Organized by CEPAL and País Digital, Santiago (Chile), Apr. 22, 2014. Words of the Sub-secretariat of the Economy, Chile.

terms, the results indicate that students have developed the skills necessary to communicate with their peers and to search for information in digital media. However, there is a much lower percentage of the more complex cognitive skills necessary to process and generate information.

## Access to social networks

According to comScore (2013),<sup>8</sup> Chile is tenth worldwide in the highest average number of hours dedicated to the social networks, particularly Facebook. According to the University of Navarra Business School Information Society Index (ISI), elaborated by the international consultancy Everis (ISI, 2012),<sup>9</sup> the country would have the highest Facebook penetration rate in the world (around 497 active users per thousand inhabitants), beating the United States (493) and the United Kingdom (480). However, Socialbakers (2013)<sup>10</sup> believes that the number is even higher (9.5 million users), with penetration at around 56.8% of the population.

Facebook Media for Latin America sustains that, in 2015, 11 million people accessed this network in Chile every month. This is equivalent to stating that 9 out of every 10 people who have internet access in Chile were Facebook users in that year.<sup>11</sup> However, the company does not provide information on the number of profiles people have on Facebook, which may differ significantly from this projection. Although smaller, Twitter had a penetration of 13% to 15%

---

8 See <[www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com)>.

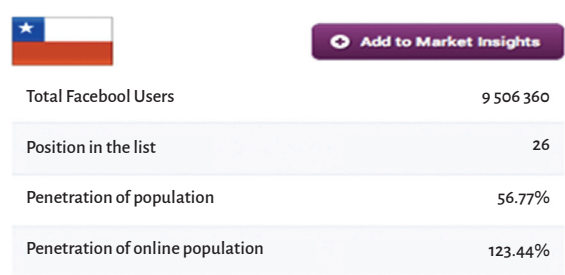
9 See <[www.everis.com/chile/es-CL/sala-de-prensa/noticias/Paginas/chile-encabeza-penetracion-redes-sociales-en-el-mundo.aspx](http://www.everis.com/chile/es-CL/sala-de-prensa/noticias/Paginas/chile-encabeza-penetracion-redes-sociales-en-el-mundo.aspx)>.

10 See <[www.socialbakers.com/blog/2068-socialbakers-2013-a-year-in-review](http://www.socialbakers.com/blog/2068-socialbakers-2013-a-year-in-review)>.

11 Joaquín Santelices, "Director de Facebook Media: 'Los chilenos tienen un alto uso de nuestra red y esto les va a ayudar'". *La Tercera*, 1 dez. 2015. Available at: <[www.latercera.com/noticia/tendencias/2015/12/659-658284-9-director-de-facebook-media-los-chilenos-tienen-un-alto-uso-de-nuestra-red-y-esto.shtml](http://www.latercera.com/noticia/tendencias/2015/12/659-658284-9-director-de-facebook-media-los-chilenos-tienen-un-alto-uso-de-nuestra-red-y-esto.shtml)>.

among Chilean internet users in 2012 (IAB Chile, 2012).<sup>12</sup> World Economic Forum data (WEF, 2015) indicate that Twitter penetration in Chile in 2014 was around 1.7 million users per day, although the country is not one of the most active users on the continent (Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, United States and Canada). Other reports using comScore data (2013) show web page access from different types of device in Chile. Regarding penetration and use of social networks, Chile comes tenth in the average number of hours spent on the social networks: 7.2 hours/month (the global average is 5.8 hours/month), representing over a third of the total number of hours spent online (37%).

Figure 1: Facebook penetration in Chile



Source: Socialbakers (2013).

As occurs with cellular telephones, there are more accounts on Facebook than there are Chilean internet users, between 120% and 130%, although this includes corporate profiles, false profiles and inactive accounts, among others. It is estimated that around 7 million accounts are used regularly, representing penetration of approximately 70% among users with internet access, whose number is estimated at 10 million Chileans.

Regarding Twitter, to an extent it may be considered an “elitist” social network. Among all internet users in Chile — with a household penetration

12 IAB Chile, *Cifras de mercado industria móvil*. Santiago (Chile): IAB Chile, 2012.

of 64.2% in March 2015 according to Subtel (2015) —, only 13% (Casen, 2009; Palacios, 2012) or 30% (SemioCast, 2012; Dawson, 2012) are Twitter users, depending on the source and method utilized.<sup>13</sup> Differently from Facebook, as long as the user does not explicitly opt to keep his content private, Twitter is an open network, meaning everything there may be shared and may generate conversations. The restriction on the number of characters favors succinct and pragmatic communication. It enables the user to mention other accounts by means of the symbol “@” followed by the user name, and to use the symbol “#” before an expression to add all the comments on a determined subject, such as an event or campaign. Even though its penetration is much lower than that of Facebook or YouTube, it is a tool used heavily by opinion leaders, journalists, politicians, activists, researchers and other relevant actors. Thus, analyzing the ranking of those considered to be the 100 most influential tweeters in Chile, prepared by a company that analyzes social network trends,<sup>14</sup> it may be noted that it comprises the communication media, journalists, politicians, television programs and public services (civil defense, the Santiago subway system or consumer defense bodies).

Chileans are avid users of the YouTube platform. According to comScore (2011), they watch on average 144 videos per month, or almost five per person per day. Of these, approximately 60% are hosted on this Google platform. Blogs do not reach so many users, but have an impressive reach of 72.3%, with an average of 16.5 minutes a month. This platform can be very useful in different contexts and for different purposes, including: low cost/ low budget campaigns; as a complement to offline campaigns; as a stimulus to get people to help in diffusion; as a space for dialogue through comments; for the publication of statements; and as an alternative channel to television.

13 The parameter varies if only the active accounts (that have published a tweet in the last year, for example) are considered or the absolute total of accounts created, in addition to the criteria for associating an account with a country, because this information is not obligatory for creating an account on Twitter. This may explain the differences in percentage (13% and 30%).

14 See <[www.quanticoTrends.com/ranking-chile](http://www.quanticoTrends.com/ranking-chile)>. Ranking for May 2015.

## The Internet Legal Framework

The first communication via the internet in Chile took place in January 1992 between Santiago and Maryland in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Public service webpages began to appear in 1998, based on the work done by the new Information and Communication Technologies Commission during the Eduardo Frei government (1994-2000). This was one of the predecessors to electronic government or e-government in the country, currently overseen by the Modernization and Digital Government Unit, part of the General Secretariat of the Presidency. According to the Chilean Communication Sub-Secretariat, 92% of the country's schools had internet access in 2012.

In Chile, the telephony and telecommunications service operators are private and the installation, operation and exploitation of these services are regulated by law 18.168/1982 and its later amendments. According to the NGO Derechos Digitales, protection against surveillance and the interception of private communication is explicitly guaranteed under the country's Constitution, as is the protection of personal data (law 19.628/1999, related to the right to privacy, with its later amendments). Protection against the interception of communications by other private organizations is covered by the country's legislation, in particular articles of the penal code, which is fully applicable to communication via the internet.

With respect to the internet civil framework in Chile, there is the law 20.453, dated August 2010, which determines the neutrality of the web.<sup>16</sup> Its provisions establish that internet services should be provided under a regime of free competition, and that providers of such services, applications and content may not practice any form of arbitrary discrimination or restriction. The law stipulates that telecommunications service concessionaires providing services to internet access providers and the access providers themselves may

15 See <[www.fayerwayer.com/2012/01/internet-en-chile-20-anos-despues](http://www.fayerwayer.com/2012/01/internet-en-chile-20-anos-despues)>.

16 See <[www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=1016570&buscar=NEUTRALIDAD+DE+RED](http://www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=1016570&buscar=NEUTRALIDAD+DE+RED)>.

not arbitrarily interrupt, discriminate against, interfere with or otherwise restrict the right of any internet user to utilize, receive or offer any legal content, application or service over the internet, or any other type of legal activity or use executed over the web. However, “any measures or actions necessary to manage traffic or the network itself may be executed within the authorized limits as long as they do not impede free competition. The concessionaires and providers must preserve user privacy, provide protection against viruses and ensure network security. They may block access to determined contents, applications or services only at the express request and liability of the user. Under no circumstances should any interruption or restriction of this nature arbitrarily affect service providers and applications that use the internet”. The law also determines that the right of a user to incorporate or use any kind of instrument, device or apparatus on the internet may not be restricted, as long as these are legal and do not cause damage or interfere with service quality.

### 3. Case studies

#### Case 1: 2011 student mobilization for education

The demonstrations for education in 2011 correspond to a process that lasted from April to September of that year in defense of free, quality public education. Differently from the so-called “Penguin Revolution” in 2006 (its predecessor and precursor, exclusively involving secondary school students), the 2011 protests were led mainly by university students and were supported by a broader segment of society. Thus the mobilizations in 2006 and 2011 represent the reconfiguration of the interchange between generations and the emergence of new actors who drive social transformation in democracy based on a new logic within the context of a connected society. In addition to being a generation of activists born under a democratic regime, it is one permeated by its digital surroundings and therefore an active part of what Quintana (2010)

qualifies as the juvenile cybercultures. This implies situating these young people in a determined time, the here and now, the owners of their own cultural expressions that stem not only from the pursuit of a personal and social identity, but also from the desire to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture of the adults to which they are subordinated (Baeza, 2003).

Between 1988 (year of the plebiscite for the maintenance or not of the military government) and the 2009 presidential election, the participation of young people aged between 18 and 29 years in elections dropped from 35% to 9% (Injuv, 2012). In spite of this lack of interest in traditional politics, the 2011 student movement coincided with and was related to a series of other civic mobilizations, as described by the columnist and historian Sergio Grez (2011), qualifying this situation as a new awakening of social movements:<sup>17</sup>

“During the course of this year the social movements in Chile have acted rapidly, forcefully and persistently. A brief and incomplete summary of the events would have to include the regional protest in Magalhães, the mobilizations against the huge HidroAysén project, the marches for the right to sexual diversity, the general strikes in Calama, the protests in Arica, the strikes by workers in the copper industry (state and private), the strikes by civil servants, without forgetting the Mapuches’ struggles to get their lands back and recover their autonomy and freedom. But, undoubtedly, the most massive and the greatest social, cultural and political effects have been brought about by the movement for public education, the backbone and main component of which is the students”.

In fact, a survey of the social mobilizations conducted by Azócar (2011) shows that during the year 2011 there were hundreds of street protests of the most diverse kinds. The first big march for education took place on May 12, 2011,

---

17 Sergio Grez Toso, “Un nuevo amanecer de los movimientos sociales en Chile”. *The Clinic*, Sep. 5, 2011. Available at: <[www.theclinic.cl/2011/09/05/un-nuevo-amanecer-de-los-movimientos-sociales-en-chile](http://www.theclinic.cl/2011/09/05/un-nuevo-amanecer-de-los-movimientos-sociales-en-chile)>.

which coincided with the march against the HidroAysén hydroelectric plant by the Huilliche and Mapuche peoples, seeking to restore their dignity and adding their voice to the protests against other hydroelectric plants in different regions in Chile.<sup>18</sup> It was not by chance that in June 2011, the press revealed that the Sebastián Piñera government had decided to monitor comments made about it on Twitter and on the other social networks. This service was provided by the company Brandmetric, and included information about people's location when they published their comments on digital platforms.<sup>19</sup> The journalists' association criticized this practice and asked the Transparency Council to review it.

According to Alberto Mayol,

"One of the fundaments of the 2011 student movement is the problem of injustice in the education model, but it also undertakes a societal diagnosis and questions a structure combining the public and private sectors. This tension provides the backdrop, but also the horizon for the public debate in the country in 2011. The questioning was based on inefficiencies and the social imbalance which had existed for years but were not expressed due to the political subjectivity characteristic of the transition the country was undergoing, which acted as an obstacle to radical contestation. This subjectivity was modified by a change in the conjuncture in 2011 and it is possible to anticipate an increase in the importance of this issue and a questioning of the specific way public and private education are combined in the model Chile has established for the coming years"<sup>20</sup>.

According to Fernández-Labbé (2013), the mobilization covered an extensive part of the country. There were 52 days of simultaneous protests in

18 See survey prepared by Azócar (2011). Available at: <[www.albertomayol.cl](http://www.albertomayol.cl)>.

19 See <[www.latercera.com/noticia/politica/2011/06/674-374379-9-polemica-genera-anuncio-de-monitoreo-de-debates-online-por-parte-del-gobierno.shtml](http://www.latercera.com/noticia/politica/2011/06/674-374379-9-polemica-genera-anuncio-de-monitoreo-de-debates-online-por-parte-del-gobierno.shtml)>.

20 Quotation from his personal webpage. Available at: <[www.albertomayol.cl](http://www.albertomayol.cl)>.



Santiago and in other regions (especially the regional capitals); 47 days with protests in Santiago alone and 25 days with protests in the other regions. This demonstrates the importance of understanding precisely and at first hand the communications capable of sustaining this movement and reinventing it over time.

The movement's main demand was that education be recognized and assured as a social right. Its slogans were “free education”, “no more profit” and “quality education”. Like the preceding movement in 2006 (the secondary student revolution or the “Penguin Revolution”), it attracted international interest. In 2006, the Social Block for Education,<sup>21</sup> comprising the spokespersons of university students, secondary students, teachers, teachers’ associations, parents’ associations and promoters sustained the demand for social participation:

“The current LOCE [Constitutional Organic Education Law], approved during the dictatorship and later supported by the Concertación governments, is not only lacking in legitimacy, it also dismantled public education in Chile, introducing the logic of private initiative in education. The educational reform underway since the mid-1990s is also characterized by processes that exclude the public. This time, the technical vision adopted killed the hopes and expectations of participating held by different sectors of society. The political authorities did not question the legitimacy or the perverse effects produced by the law or by the Political Constitution approved during the dictatorship” (p. 2).

After the Penguin Revolution some of the leaders of the Social Block took part in the Presidential Advisory Council on Educational Quality, constituted the same year by president Michelle Bachelet after the demonstrations led by

---

21 Bloque Social pela Educación, *La crisis educativa en Chile: Diagnóstico y Propuestas*. Santiago (Chile): Chilean Observatory of Educational Policies [OPECH], 2006. Available at <[www.opech.cl/bibliografico/calidad\\_equidad/Documento\\_Bloque\\_Social\\_Noviembre.pdf](http://www.opech.cl/bibliografico/calidad_equidad/Documento_Bloque_Social_Noviembre.pdf)>.

adolescents in public secondary schools had ended. They believed it would be necessary to eliminate the free market model in education imposed by the dictatorship as from 1981 in order to reinstate education as a social right. Opening the debate on education implied the participation of society “as a fundamental part of the solution for the current crisis in the education system”. This same logic is projected over time to later mobilizations around education.

To address the online/offline communications and actions used during 2011, this study is based on interviews conducted with the leaders of the movement with a view to understanding their interpretation of the strategies employed.<sup>22</sup>

During the protests the student leaders and spokespersons had to act directly (in meetings) and indirectly (through the press) to communicate with authorities, political representatives, journalists and even with their own families (all of whom were more used to a logic of communication involving politics and the traditional media). In this respect, as the interviewees state, the goals of the student movement were more difficult to achieve, as they had to deal with a negative image and ran the risk of being stereotyped as “kids”, “brats”, “subversive” and “inexperienced” in relation to the reforms they were demanding in education, clichés that may be easily disseminated and generalized via the press.

---

22 1) Giorgio Jackson, president of the Student Federation of the Catholic University of Chile (PUC) in 2011 and spokesman for CONFECH, Confederation of Chilean Students. Graduate in Civil Engineering from PUC. Independent deputy for district 22, downtown Santiago (2014-2018). Permanent member of the public security and education commissions, as well as founder of the left wing political movement *Revolución Democrática*, in process of conversion to a political party since 2015. He was elected that year as one of the most promising politicians. 2) Camilo Ballesteros, national director of the social organizations division of the General Secretariat of the Government (SEGEJOB) and ex-president of the Student Federation of the University of Santiago (USACH, 2011). Bachelor in Physical Education and member of the Communist Party. 3) Alfredo Vielma, national spokesman of the Secondary Student Coordination Assembly (ACES, 2011). 4) Freddy Fuentes, national spokesman of the National Secondary Student Coordination (CONES, 2011). 5) Auska Ovando, graduate in Journalism from PUC, Chile and responsible for communication for the PUC Student Federation in 2011. Camila Vallejo, president of the University of Chile Student Federation in 2011 and Chilean Communist Party deputy for district 26, comuna Florida (2014-2018), did not respond to several requests.

## The experience of the secondary students' spokespersons: the need to be on the traditional media's agenda

For Alfredo Vielma, national spokesman for the Secondary Student Coordination Assembly (ACES), the public is unaware of the role the secondary students played in organizing the movement. "We had already been working on the student question for years. 2011 was the result of work that had been underway for some time. I don't know if the general public, the analysts or sociologists are going to believe that this movement emerged spontaneously", he adds. This prior work on the changes necessary in education was presented in the form of a national proposal, available on the internet.<sup>23</sup> A news item<sup>24</sup> published about the 250 public secondary schools occupied in June 2011 indicates that between December 2010 and March 2011, secondary students in the metropolitan region had become organized, and their leaders had visited more than 200 secondary schools in Santiago, in addition to drafting a petition delivered to the then sub-secretary of education on behalf part of FEMES (Santiago Metropolitan Federation). The demands in the petition included an end to piecemeal solutions, improved quality in technical schools (which did not meet labor market requirements), a free annual student card, the withdrawal of schools from municipal administration and the reform of the Constitution (more specifically, the demand was that municipal schools be managed by the Ministry of Education and that article 19 of the Carta Magna be modified to guarantee that education would be the State's duty). In this respect, it is interesting to observe some similarities between the reasons for and the context of the offline emergence of the 2011 movement and the Penguin movement in 2006: the beginning of a new government, the delivery of documents to authorities and prior meetings with representatives of the

23 Available at <[www.opech.cl/comunicaciones/2012/05/aces\\_final.pdf](http://www.opech.cl/comunicaciones/2012/05/aces_final.pdf)>.

24 Christian Palma, "Secundarios se organizaron en verano y dirigentes visitaron más de 200 colegios de Santiago". *La Tercera*, Jun. 19 jun, 2011.

Ministry of Education to discuss improvements in the quality of education which were not in fact concluded (Condeza, 2009):

“Since April 2005, during the Ricardo Lagos government, secondary public school students had held general meetings to discuss education and propose solutions to improve the quality of education. In November, 2005 they presented a 27-page document to the Ministry of Education authorities. In the text, the students started by identifying the problem: ‘In 2003, 58% of enrollments were concentrated in municipal public schools, 72.6% of which were located in poorer districts. Therefore, it is correct to affirm that there is a direct relationship between municipal education and poverty’. In the same proposal it is possible to observe how the student leaders consider themselves to be legitimate actors in establishing a dialogue with the authorities in order to reach a joint solution for the problems affecting them: ‘Evidently in such an important question as education, the students do not have the capacity to take major decisions by themselves. It is equally obvious that these decisions should not be taken by small groups. This requires creating spaces for decision making that take into account the views and the positions of all those involved. For this reason, we propose the organization of a Constituent Assembly with the specific objective of formulating the LOCE. We hereby present the position assumed by the students in relation to this question’. The authorities assured the students that in March 2006 they would discuss the proposals with them, which did not happen. The LOCE, or Constitutional Organic Education Law, was passed by the military government in March 1990, when there was no Congress, and it was published on the day before the delivery of the presidential sash to Patricio Aylwin, the democratic candidate representing Concertación, the coalition of pro-democratic parties at that time. The LOCE remained in force for sixteen years, in other words, during three democratic governments, until the mobilization of the secondary school students” (Condeza, 2009, p. 72).

Along the same lines, the ex-spokesman of the movement, Alfredo Vielma, was visibly irritated when asked about the studies which associate the call to the protests in 2011 with the use of social networks like Facebook, to the point of calling them “rubbish”, and states:

“Sincerely, that is a lack of respect. We started working on the organization of a massive mobilization in 2009. At school, very few of those who became leaders did much studying. In reality, we worked on political organization. Many of us were from militant political backgrounds, so we had very particular viewpoints. We were Marxists, and even though we knew the movement we wanted would not become a Marxist or a revolutionary movement, we believed that social agitation was an important tool for reestablishing people's fundamental rights. That was how we were in 2009, there were a lot of people, and our job was to build the student organizations, and more importantly, majority movements that could drive reform or structural transformations within the country”.

It was based on this logic and in the context of that time that the ex-leader explained the foundation of ACES at a regional level in 2010 and its replication at national level throughout 2011, occupying 20 or 30 high schools on the same day. “So it sounds illogical to me that this might be considered a ‘Facebook revolution’”, he states. With respect to those who attribute leadership to the university students, he reminds us that the first call to action came from ACES in April and not in May of that year. “It took place at 10 o'clock in the Praça dos Heróis, a pretty vague protest about the free annual school pass, a demand which was met, about the rebuilding of the schools (after the 2010 earthquake), which was also met, and the end of the University Entrance Exam (PSU)”.

One of the main problems the secondary school leaders faced in terms of online communication strategies, was their relative invisibility compared with the press coverage given to the actions and opinions of the university students in the traditional media. If the “Penguin Revolution” in 2006 had projected

the adolescents at that time as active and relevant actors who highlighted the question of free, quality education in the public agenda and the press, in 2011 the coordinated participation of university student leaders from the major Chilean universities under the auspices of CONFECH (Confederation of Students of Chile) and their arguments in favor of public education and against profit put them in the forefront, where they received permanent press attention. For the two main adolescent leaders at the time (Alfredo Vielma and Freddy Fuentes, national spokesmen for ACES [Secondary Student Coordination Assembly] and CONES [National Secondary Student Coordination] respectively), a presence in the traditional media became a key communication goal not only so that the country would be aware of their demands, but also to give the movement legitimacy.

In 2011, Alfredo Vielma,<sup>25</sup> who declares greater affinity with the left and who had been spokesman for his school Miguel Luis Amunátegui while in his third year, was elected the ACES national spokesperson in a national meeting. According to him, being spokesperson means exercising “empowered representation”. “I did not lead anyone. They led me”, which meant that “everything I said had been approved previously”. This representation was put to the test precisely when he communicated through the press, a process for which he prepared beforehand and managed to master over time, recognizing the responsibility involved in addressing a nationwide audience:

“We knew we had to be always in control of the interview. For example, I knew if they spoke about bread, I had to talk about jelly, I talked about jelly even if they mentioned the word bread [...]. Even though our message was always addressed specifically to the students, for us the idea of the ‘Chilean people’ was very important. Even if we did not speak to them all the time, we knew which social stratum we were addressing. So our messages were always oriented to them. If the message was important for the students, it was also of value for the public authorities, for the old lady who might be watching”.

---

25 Interview conducted by Rayén Condeza, Marco Jaramillo and Alonso Lizama.

He recalls two of the pillars of the communication strategy decided : “one was evidently to highlight the importance of the work done by the student movement and the other was to show the prevalence of our organization”. One of the first decisions of the adolescent leaders was to organize commissions. These included a press committee, in charge of coordinating press conferences, communication with journalists, sending releases to news agencies such as UPI, and monitoring the press on a daily basis.<sup>26</sup> He comments that in 2011 it was not possible to be on the move and read a newspaper or watch a TV channel as it is today with high speed mobile connections and transmissions over different platforms.

Positioning in relation to the press was also affected by the fact that the other student organizations were also vying to represent the students. Even so, Vielma adds, the government itself tried to characterize the secondary student movement as a “bunch of alienated kids”. For this reason, their press declarations were aimed at providing “scoops”, giving the press new information to ensure ongoing coverage. They paid special attention to the daily print newspapers and their online editions, although they knew consumption of this media was lower, for the following reason:

“The newspapers are Chile’s political thermometer, in other words, they frequently carry news that the television does not. Additionally, they engage in more relevant debates and represent different political viewpoints. We knew that *La Tercera* represented the liberal right and *El Mercurio* the conservative right. As such, we could gauge the viewpoint of the power structure, the oligarchy and the different political and business groups that these media represent in relation to our actions. It was not so important to track the popular or left-wing press because we knew what they thought. We used these papers for propaganda because they let us make certain comments that would later

---

26 They clearly remember how important the radio was, especially the stations that always covered the question, such as ADN, BioBio and Cooperativa, in this order.

support some Internet campaigns or would throw a more favorable light on the movement".<sup>27</sup>

Even so, they created the newspaper *El Irreverente* to provide information about ACES activities related to the mobilization. It was sold on newsstands for 300 Chilean pesos. Regarding online platforms, ACES created a YouTube channel, ACES TV,<sup>28</sup> with different objectives: 1) to better publicize their demands by means of short videos (an average of two minutes); 2) for calls to action related to different protests, providing details about the actions; 3) to record and demonstrate support for the movement from public or popular personalities. Email was fundamental, in particular for providing information that could not be passed on by word of mouth or in writing. Like Skype: "email was a nationwide form of communication which substituted convening protesters face to face. As a group we had no funds. We worked hard and sometimes we made two nationwide calls to protest a month". This was also a role played by SMS messaging, particularly during the discussions convened by the government. He states that few of the adolescent leaders had smartphones at that time.

With respect to Facebook, he thinks that to a certain extent this social network was part of the student movement's identity, but more in a testimonial capacity, "because it was there that police violence and the abuses committed by the State were publicized. For us it was fundamental, because evidently this kind of news did not come out in the traditional media. This was the main content, but we also used the platform for calls to protest. The images and electronic signs the students produced themselves went viral and were also important in this case", he adds, giving the example of the group Facebook *Mobilizados 2011*, managed by a friend.

---

27 They also sought representation in online newspapers, "as many as possible", such as *El Dínamo*, *El Mostrador*, *The Clinic* or *El Ciudadano*.

28 Video produced by ACES TV and posted on YouTube convening a national strike for free education on October 18 and 19. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBgWDWFBQFM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBgWDWFBQFM)>.



When the protests began, Freddy Fuentes,<sup>29</sup> a law student at the private university Andrés Bello, who at the time of the interview was working in the control center of a Transantiago<sup>30</sup> company to pay for his studies, was a third-year secondary student and president of the academic center of the Liceo de Aplicación school in Santiago. He was nominated national spokesperson for CONES. One of the first offline tasks he undertook was to work with five other academic center presidents on organizing the occupation of their schools. Later he naturally assumed the role of organizing press conferences, developing the agendas for these conferences, calling journalists, as well as taking charge of the organization and participating in marches with other student leaders. It was here that he felt the first and key difference between the secondary students and the university federations: the lack of funding to put a professional in charge of press relations and communication. Similarly, he recognizes how important the help provided by the FECH (University of Chile Student Federation) press counsel was in convening journalists on certain occasions.<sup>31</sup>

Managing the traditional political militancy of some leaders and students in 2011 was one aspect the organizers of the secondary student movement took care of, since there was concern that the political parties might want to act as intermediaries and start influencing decisions and shaping the form the mobilization was acquiring, he adds.<sup>32</sup> He also remembers participating in conferences organized in conjunction with CONFECU and FEUC (Catholic University Student Federation), when the university students convened the communication media:

---

29 Interview conducted by Rayén Condeza, Marco Jaramillo and Alonso Lizama.

30 Santiago metropolitan transportation system.

31 He calls the leaders and spokespersons of the other Santiago high schools “emblematic”, a term he uses to refer to those best organized regarding communication: Instituto Nacional, Liceo 1 for women, the Carmela Carvajal school, Liceo 7, Tajamar and INBA.

32 Although at this time he was not a member of a political group, he considers himself to be center-left.

"It was fundamental to point out the difference between our message and theirs. This was one of the most important things we stressed during the press conferences. The cause of free education was something we all respected, it was like our battle cry. But we also had secondary questions, such as the municipal issue or the public transportation pass for students, a whole bunch of things that tended to become invisible in the press conferences in which we appeared with the university students. So we made a point of highlighting them in the agenda".

One of the main difficulties the secondary student organization had was keeping up the pace of the offline calls for the national meetings (in the beginning they met every two weeks in Santiago) during the mobilization process, which lasted for months. Gradually an effort was made to decentralize this practice and to go out to the different regions, as the university students did that year, because, as the saying goes in Chile, where more than 40% of the population is concentrated in the metropolitan region, Santiago is Chile.

Although relations with the press were cordial, he adds that a certain distance was maintained, and there was a certain ambivalence, principally in the assemblies, which were central for the organization and the consensual decision making process:

"Initially, we did not let the press take part in the assemblies. If they wanted a declaration, they had to wait outside. There were also times when we needed to have the press there, because we needed to communicate what had been decided in the assembly. It was difficult trying to make sure they did not get angry with us. And we knew that if we didn't give them a declaration when they wanted one, they would not be around when we needed them. We discussed this a number of times".

It is interesting to note the opposing work dynamics of the journalists and the student spokespersons at the same event—the reporters were looking

for a news item that they needed to circulate rapidly; for the students, this was about a strategic decision that represented their position and would affect the movement — and how this tension made them mutually necessary in the context of the social mobilizations. Freddy Fuentes illustrated this with the example of the journalists' request for him to comment on a declaration by a minister. "They would say: 'What do you think of the minister's comment, are you going to accept it or not?'. It was difficult to explain that, although he was the spokesman, he couldn't say anything immediately after hearing what the minister had said. Since the student movement was so big, this information would have to be put before the national assembly, the national assembly would have to consult the regions, the diverse federations would have to take it to the student academic centers, who would have to discuss it with their grass roots". Another source of tension was running the risk of losing his legitimacy among those he represented as a result of his attempts to ensure the movement appeared in the media. The value of decisions discussed with the grass roots was very important to ensure that the movement could be sustained over time, he says. However, at moments when the movement was at risk of losing its intensity, for example as the Copa America tournament drew near or when the Ministry of Education brought forward the winter school holidays, the leaders decided to take every measure possible to remain in the news, to the point of allowing the Chilevisión television channel news program *En la Mira* to participate in the assemblies.

We let them in, but evidently while it was being recorded we did not discuss the most important subjects. We played around and made jokes in order to get media coverage. We were on the program and we also did some recordings outside the school after the assembly. This kept both sides happy [...] For us it was always clear that the press was a necessary evil".

The leader also attributes the beginning of the organization of the 2011 secondary student mobilization to the offline dimension, specifically to a meeting called by the Ministry of Education and the National Youth Institute (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud). He recalls that on this occasion diverse leaders from the regions and Santiago met at Cajón del Maipo at the government's invitation. In January 2011, they decided to organize their own national meeting. Firstly, this addressed basically what was on the slate for the coming year says Fuentes; however, the meeting engaged in a "critical analysis of the concrete achievements in education since the 2006 Penguin Revolution". The general diagnosis was that student movements in Chile move in cycles and that it had been five years since the last significant one, without any advances in the transformations desired or improvements in the quality of education. The first decision adopted that summer, he reports, was to organize the movement on a national level so that they could act collectively. The target was to mobilize the same number or more students than in 2006. The decision was taken to initiate the march in May, without however managing to get press coverage. Based on their analysis and to a great extent to attract the attention of the media and the authorities, they decided to occupy schools, as the Penguins had done in 2006, to guarantee coverage and to ensure the public were aware of the students' demands, Fuentes adds.

Presence in the national media, in particular on open television and in the news, was to a certain extent used by the national coordination to appeal to the public. The television allowed them to address regional teaching establishments, especially in the most extreme regions of the country, such as Punta Arenas, legitimizing them in the eyes of their peers. It enabled them to inform people, particularly their parents and the authorities, about what was happening.

In addition to gaining experience in convening protests and making their demands known, this contact helped them to learn how to communicate with the different types of media. Being succinct on television, preparing spots for

radio or knowing to how to respond rapidly to journalists were valuable assets. And they had to do this without losing sight of the purpose of an interview or the message to be transmitted. “We learned and prepared a speech, and then recorded it”. The following were common elements in their discourse:

“Mainly to ensure we conveyed the message we wanted to. To explain why we were doing this, the objective, what we wanted to achieve. And I think the most important thing was to transmit the idea that we were being responsible. We were aware that we were not university students, that we were secondary students, and that behind us were our parents who saw us as kids who just did not want to study. So we always tried to convey this message of responsibility about what we were doing. We were very concerned about what the average housewife thought of us. That was really important”.

As we have seen, for Freddy Fuentes offline communication carried more weight than its online counterpart in the movement's organization and communication, although he recognizes that they used Facebook for disseminating news and convening protests, the reason for which they created a CONES page, which still exists today.<sup>33</sup> As for his mobile phone, “at most I would take pictures, the technology level was zero”. He adds:

“We learned how to use each type of media. We knew when we had to contact the radio stations, the TV channels, the newspapers, and we knew when we had to call everyone. The most important events, like making decisions, making public declarations addressed directly to the authorities, convening people, press conferences. If something important happened on a particular day (a response from a ministry, a message or confrontations with the police in a flash protest), the quickest way was to contact the media that responded faster, like radio stations or the press, who would call us and take a statement by

---

33 See <[www.facebook.com/coneschile](http://www.facebook.com/coneschile)>.

telephone. In five minutes the news would be on the internet and a day later it would appear in the papers. These were the quicker ways. It was more difficult to appear on television”.

Twitter, on which he opened an account in October 2010, was used to comment on or to deny imprecise or contradictory information about the movement, he adds.<sup>34</sup>

## The experience of online/offline organization according to the university student leaders

Giorgio Jackson,<sup>35</sup> 28, a civil engineering graduate from PUC (Pontificia Universidade Católica -PUC) Chile, specialized in information technology, was president of FEUC in 2011, representing NAU, the left-wing Nova Ação Universitária movement that was created at the Catholic University in 2008. He is currently an independent deputy in the 2014-2018 legislature. We spoke to him at his district headquarters<sup>36</sup> located in the Concha y Toro district in downtown Santiago, an area that looks as if it has not changed since the beginning of the 20th century.

In terms of online/offline communication in the student movement in 2011, he believes that during 2009-2010 there were a series of offline actions that migrated rapidly to the online environment, such as assemblies, grass roots discussions and the elaboration of documents nationwide. This involved different universities and culminated in a highly detailed analysis of the state of education.

---

<sup>34</sup> See <[twitter.com/freddyfuentesm](https://twitter.com/freddyfuentesm)>.

<sup>35</sup> Interview conducted by Rayén Condeza, Paz Vásquez, Alonso Lizama and Marcelo Santos.

<sup>36</sup> See <[www.giorgiojackson.cl/participa/sede-distrital](http://www.giorgiojackson.cl/participa/sede-distrital)>.

Regarding the online dimension of the movement, he and other university student leaders<sup>37</sup> decided to use the digital platforms as a communication strategy to broaden this diagnosis on a national level, addressing everyone concerned in a straightforward manner. The strategy was launched in April aimed at preparing the ground for the first mobilization that was to take place before May 21 (the day the President would be reporting to Congress and the country via a nationwide radio and television broadcast). “Our aim was to let people know why we were protesting and to give our discontent some direction”, he explains. To do this, they worked with specialists in communication and design, young people they knew from university, to shape this diagnosis into results oriented ideas that would be communicated based on principles of marketing.

The main ideas to be converted into action principles were the following: in education a part of the population was at a disadvantage. Excluded from the system, these people were angry; on the other hand, there were those who benefited from the system and who might feel guilty about their privileged situation. This led to one of the first action fronts for the petition and the call to action, revolving around segregation, unequal access and differences in the quality of education. The second item was indebtedness, seeking to portray how students’ families felt about this, leading to the adoption of a platform in favor of free public education. The third front addressed exploitation, referring not only to the low quality of education, but also to the fact that it generated a profit.

Jackson recalls that this group of communicators and designers synthesized these guiding ideas and the main themes in the petition in one overarching concept with which people could identify, an inclusive core idea. What was in question in 2011, he argues firstly “was the future of each and every one of us”, adding that “there is no future without education”. The ex

---

37 Camilo Ballesteros from USACH, Nataly Espinoza from PUC, Valparaíso, Paul Flor from the Fedrico Santa María Technical University and Pedro Glatz from PUC.

CONFECH spokesman adds that based on this message it was expected that the first demonstration on May 12 would be well attended, with some 30 thousand people expected in Santiago. In fact, the number was much higher, with more than 50,000 people in the streets in the capital alone.<sup>38</sup> However, for Jackson this result and later ones cannot be attributed exclusively to this previously planned communication strategy. Attendance was boosted by other malaises expressed on the social networks and carried on to the streets, such as the massive discontent that resulted in the march against the HidroAysén hydroelectric plant.

In relation to online resources, this leader developed the habit of monitoring the social networks in order to get a feeling for what was being said about the movement, in particular on Twitter. He was more interested in the qualitative (criticisms of the movement, the retweets and the tweeters) rather than the quantitative aspects, although he also took the latter into consideration. After a time, and depending on how often the movement appeared in the newspapers and other media, he developed what he calls “common media sense”. This helped refine the production of personalized spots for each medium: “In the beginning we made mistakes. What we said appeared in the press, but we learned to discern the media’s intentions and to take care”. According to Jackson, another element that helped the movement appear in the traditional media was awareness of the importance of the preparations related to the question of education, specifically the diagnosis and the studies undertaken beforehand. He recalls that some of the online tools used to drive online activism among the university students in 2011 were Facebook and to a certain extent Twitter, although at that particular moment, in his opinion the coverage in the traditional media had a much greater effect on the movement. The production of online communication was considered to be just

---

38 For further details about the call to action for the May 12, 2011 march, see the website of the University of Chile Social Studies Center at <[cesocuchile.wordpress.com/especial-movilizaciones/cronologia-de-las-movilizaciones-2011](http://cesocuchile.wordpress.com/especial-movilizaciones/cronologia-de-las-movilizaciones-2011)>.



as important as the posters and leaflets handed out and exhibited in offline spaces. These latter were not expensive and were distributed in high schools and in universities with the objective of providing on the spot information and convening people. Although Jackson thinks that the use of YouTube was important because generally speaking audiovisual resources stimulate a more emotional response, he did not make much of the various flashmobs that occurred in offline spaces and were rapidly disseminated online, frequently going viral during the course of the year.

These creative hybrid practices were a novelty compared with those used in the 2006 Penguin movement, perhaps due to the fact that the communication-action repertoire (Meunier & Condeza, 2013) was much more limited in its 2.0 online dimension than in 2011. One flashmob that became famous was the reproduction of the Michael Jackson choreography in *Thriller for education* in front of the presidential La Moneda palace. This was performed by hundreds of students, many of whom did not know each other, but who organized the event via Facebook, by posting signs in the universities and by posting video tutorials on YouTube so that people could practice the choreography and perform it on the appointed day. Another flashmob, the *Kiss-in for education*, turned into an international mobilization for education in Chile, being reproduced simultaneously in a number of countries in support of the student movement. There were other innovative social mobilization actions, such as the uninterrupted 1,800-hour (75-day) run for education around La Moneda, in which anyone who wanted to could hoist a flag on a human post to symbolize the millions of dollars necessary to provide free quality education in the country.

However, Giorgio Jackson thinks that work on the ground was and continues to be very important, as is the presence of the students in the press agenda. From his experience, the power of television is also highly significant. He agrees with the hypothesis that the airplane crash in the Juan Fernández archipelago in September 2011, which caused the death of the public television

variety program presenter Felipe Camiroaga, four TVN colleagues of his and sixteen other people who were to participate in the post 2010 tsunami reconstruction, further eclipsed the already decadent student movement, partially because it had stopped receiving media coverage. In fact, Camiroaga had publicly declared his opposition to a thermoelectric plant in a forestry reserve on television and on the social networks, which had generated significant public repercussion.

YouTube exercised an interesting role during the demonstrations for education in 2011. A number of videos were produced and aired, ranging from statements, interviews, flashmobs, and domestic and international campaigns in support of the students. The YouTube campaigns include #YOAPOYOALOSESTUDIANTES (I support the students), a 5-minute video featuring Chilean actors<sup>39</sup> which generated other variants, such as ones with Chilean journalists, Chilean communicators and Chilean actresses. There was a global version of this campaign with the video *Global voices for the rehabilitation of public education in Chile: international support for the movement for Chilean education*.<sup>40</sup> This video, with simultaneous translation into Spanish, featured intellectuals and researchers from diverse countries<sup>41</sup> speaking in favor of public education and in support of the student movement, while presenting pertinent information on what was happening in Chile, such as: “In Chile all the universities charge fees and only 16% of total spending on higher education comes from public funding. Meanwhile in the OECD countries public spending is equivalent to 72% of the higher education budget and many universities do not charge fees”. And “enrollment in public schools dropped from 75% to 42% between 1982 and 2009. Between 1996 and 2009, 707 municipal schools were

---

39 See <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOaAnlw7DjQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOaAnlw7DjQ)>.

40 See <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIPTIILZEkk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIPTIILZEkk)>.

41 Such as Stephen Ball, researcher in educational policy at the University of London, Antonio Olmedo, from the University of Granada, Tristan McCowen, Vincent Carpentier and Esther Leslie, lecturers in higher education policy at the University of London, Daniel Noemi from the University of Michigan and Ananda Grinkaurt from UNICAMP, among others.

closed and 2,540 subsidized private schools were opened”.

Camilo Ballesteros, 28, is a member of the Chilean Communist Party. In 2011 he was president of the Student's Federation at the University of Santiago, where he graduated in Physical Education. Ballasteros talked to the team of interviewers<sup>42</sup> at the La Moneda palace, where he now works as national director of the social organizations division of the General Secretariat of the Government of Chile. He also attributes the initial organization of the university student movement to a complex web of events ranging from the discussions that led to the diagnosis of Chilean Education in January 2001, undertaken offline, and its transposition to the digital campaign mentioned previously by Giorgio Jackson.<sup>43</sup> He states that this campaign was aimed at generating awareness (as the adolescents had done during the demonstrations for education in 2006) and focused on issues such as guilt and anger, expressed in questions such as “how come some people can study and others cannot?” or “if I borrow \$100 to study, why do I owe so much more than \$100 at the end?”. He also referred to the key support received from the economist Manuel Riesco of the National Center of Alternative Development Studies (CENDA)<sup>44</sup>, who conducted an analysis and provided data for a position on the problem of indebtedness caused by student loans, which persists until today.

Regarding the use of online media to convene offline demonstrations, he recalls his experience as a student leader at his university, where he built up a data base during volunteer work, with information on around five thousand students, including them as friends on a fan page to ensure information reached as many students as possible. Before 2011 internal communication channels were used, such as university magazines and newspapers, or specific

---

42 Interview conducted by Rayén Condeza, Paz Vásquez and Alonso Lizama.

43 He recalls that these people soon started working in the Dialoga Foundation (a think tank linked with the former president Michelle Bachelet, at that time director of UN Women), in particular in the young leaders school.

44 See <[www.cendachile.cl](http://www.cendachile.cl)>.

communication strategies were employed in important events. An example he cites was during the new student induction week at the University of Santiago, at which the pop band *Los Tres* was invited to play. By prior arrangement, in the middle of the show the leader was invited onstage by the band's vocalist to talk about the students' demands for education and to issue a call to action.

According to Ballesteros, his relations with the communication media led to important, direct learning about how the newspapers, radio and television operate. This enabled him to distinguish and identify his audience, always trying to keep it as broad as possible. It was important to take positions against violence; however, he recalls that there were many different viewpoints on this in CONFECH. He also believes that something important happened in 2011 in terms of online/offline activism with the emergence of many forms of mobilization giving very diverse interest groups the opportunity to participate in heterogeneous spaces for collective action, such as concerts, kiss-ins and pot-banging sessions. He adds that the use of the social networks gave rise to new forms of communication, such as memes, as well as new expressions, such as "trolling".<sup>45</sup>

It is interesting to note that the current situation of both Giorgio Jackson and Camilo Ballesteros may be a consequence of their online/offline activities during the movement. Less than five years later, they are no longer students or university student leaders and both now hold important public positions (member of parliament and director of the division of a ministry, respectively), traditionally occupied by more experienced politicians or civil servants. In other words, they are now part of the system. Both agree that to produce some necessary transformations it is important to dispute and win more powerful positions. In this respect, Ballesteros tried to become an elected representative, but lost the election (he ran for mayor of the Estación Central district in Santiago). He accepted the job as director of the division of social

---

45 Term describing a popular internet practice involving intentionally provoking website or social network users to generate controversy.

organizations in the current government because it is linked with territorial work to which he believes he can make a concrete contribution. He says that viewing the 2011 movement for education in perspective, it is probable that as student leaders they raised people's expectations too high and failed to deliver; they helped people believe that a group of students could change everything, which was not the case, he adds.

The interview with the two 2011 university student leaders was complemented by one with Auska Ovando,<sup>46</sup> a graduate in journalism from PUC Chile. We thought it would be interesting to review the communication strategies employed during the mobilizations based on her experience as the person in charge of communication for the university's student federation, FEUC.

She started this work in June 2011 when she was in her last year of Journalism at the Communication Faculty, and the directors of the Federation felt that they were overloaded and would need someone to deal specifically with the press. At this moment, the student movement was already underway, the students were motivated by the cause and did not need to be "mobilized" to protest. She recalls that there was a collective awareness that 2011 was an important year and that nobody wanted to be left out of things. She recognizes that she had no experience in strategic communication; she had never studied associated subjects and it was not her area of specialization. In the beginning, she was not clear about what functions she was supposed to perform. People were already creating and making posters and leaflets, believing that they were important for engaging the students and getting the public's attention. One of the first things she did was to visit the Ministry of Education to get to know the journalists from the traditional media (newspapers and radio) who were covering the student question.

In the Federation there were meetings to organize things prior to each major event (that is, before each march, which were then taking place on a weekly

---

46 Interview conducted by Paz Vásquez via Skype, because Auska Ovando is on a master's program in Sociology in the United Kingdom with a grant from the Chilean government.

basis). These meetings were used to define the message to be transmitted, a kind of “action protocol”, although it was not yet called this and comprehension about what they were doing was not complete. Everything was very “organic”, focused on getting things done from one day to the other, she explains. Additionally, she recognizes that since these student leaders came from a more academic university environment, the goal was to translate the information for the general public, “to use a simple, straightforward language” she explains, “so that everyone could understand”. As such, her work was focused on getting these leaders “to understand the purpose of speaking to the communication media”. She also used to talk to Giorgio Jackson about the messages to be tweeted; additionally there were daily lunchtime debates, discussions or forums at the university. She recalls that in the patio of the Communications Faculty there was an “open microphone” on which the students could give their opinion about the movement’s demands. That is, a “public” discussion was generated inside the university. The next step was to go outside the university to get people’s attention. “To produce indignation on an individual level”, she reported. The site <teestancagando.cl> was created. This is described as a “cybernetic diffusion initiative for the 2011 student movement” born in the University of Chile.<sup>47</sup> They also made an attempt to make the technical educational terms used by the authorities (such as AFI,<sup>48</sup> basic transfers etc.) intelligible to the public. Their main objective in communication was to transmit a “teatime message”.<sup>49</sup> “Our major victory was seeing our issues being discussed around the table in people’s homes”. Teatime implied a time for conversation between the different generations, where emotions predominate, she states.

---

47 Website currently available at <teestancagando.tumblr.com>, or on Twitter at <twitter.com/teestancagando>.

48 AFI are indirect fiscal transfers from the State to the universities per student approved based on their score in the entrance exam. When this work was being prepared, Congress was discussing the redistribution of this type of basic transfer to higher education institutions.

49 “*La once*” is a moment when the family gets together at the end of the day to have a snack, which in many homes substitutes dinner.

The disturbances that occurred during the marches, which were given broad negative coverage by the press, were an issue that they were never able to resolve. Diverse offline demonstration strategies were adopted such as those used in the protests against the Vietnam War (remaining seated on the ground, for example) or forming barriers to cordon off violent demonstrators and ones wearing masks), but they were never very effective, she said. They developed post-march pep talks along the lines of “Don’t lose your focus. We are fighting for something more important”, underscoring the injustice of the system. Ovando says that slogans were created highlighting this message. Lastly, she says, Giorgio Jackson adopted the strategy (certainly more spontaneous) of describing these disturbances as the “the final scene of the film, not the whole film”, taking advantage of this moment to discuss the meaning of this feeling of anger, explaining that the anger accumulated due to this unfair system just poured out at the end of the marches. With this, the disturbances became more an element of social discontent to support the students’ message. Whether the message was effective or not, they are not sure. The versatility of her functions was so great that they included making sure that the leaders woke up on time to participate in 7 a.m. radio and television interviews.

As may be seen from the student leaders’ analysis of their communication strategies, the logics of online and offline communication are constantly intermeshed, although there is one sphere that of the media which is attributed with fundamental importance. This finding helps enrich previous studies which, based on research conducted among young people aged from 18 and 29 years after the 2011 protests, reveal a positive relationship between the use of the social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and participation both in the 2011 student movement and in the protest against the construction of power plants in Patagonia during the same period, even when other relevant variables, such as interest in politics, ideology and degree of confidence, are controlled (Scherman, Arriagada & Valenzuela, 2015).

## Case 2: No Alto Maipo

In recent years, Latin America has been ripe territory for the exploration and extraction of minerals, and Chile is the country with the best investment climate.<sup>50</sup> No Alto Maipo is a civic movement whose main active node is the organization Ríos del Maipo ([www.riosdelmaipo.cl](http://www.riosdelmaipo.cl), @NoAltoMaipo on Twitter and *NoAlProyectoAltoMaipo* on Facebook) which, since 2007, has opposed the construction of the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project, scheduled to come into operation in 2017, in the public offline space, in the media and online. The project is headed by the North American multinational AES Gener and Antofagasta Minerals, representing the business group belonging to the Luksic family, which in 2015 was among the 100 largest fortunes on the planet according to the Forbes ranking, and the largest in Chile.

The project, which later incorporated the sanitation company Aguas Andinas,<sup>51</sup> consists of the construction of two run-of-the-river hydroelectric plants which in order to function need to extract water from three rivers located in the Andes range in the Santiago metropolitan region, seventy kilometers from the city. In 2015, the project was 20% concluded. The movement against the Alto Maipo construction consists mostly of inhabitants of this rural area in the district of San José de Maipo which in accordance with the 2002 census had a population of around 13,000 people. In 2001 the district was declared a zone of interest for tourism by the Chilean National Tourism Service and has a number of national parks. In this, it was preceded by the district of Puente Alto, which in recent years has seen an expressive increase in the construction of residential housing.

Most of the power generated in Cajón del Maipo will be transmitted to the Luksic Group's mining operation Los Pelambres, located in another

50 According to the América Latina Nodal news agency. See <[www.nodal.org](http://www.nodal.org)>.

51 Eduardo Frei's democratic government (1994-1999) initiated the process of privatizing several companies responsible for water supplies, reserving only a small part for the State (Mundaca, 2015).



region of Chile and whose mining activities have already jeopardized some neighboring regions. The metropolitan region in which the project is located is home to 40.2% of the country's population according to the latest census (2012), and it is precisely these bodies of water and glaciers that the inhabitants of the metropolitan zone use for their domestic water supply. Additionally around 120,000 hectares of agricultural land depend on the Maipo river for irrigation. The project's critics argue that the manner in which it was approved — irregularly, as they demonstrated to a parliamentary enquiry commission opened in the Chamber of Deputies, which recognized the irregularities and inconsistencies in 2009 —, will have an irreversible effect on the entire Cajón del Maipo ecosystem. According to their spokeswoman, Marcela Mella, the parliamentary enquiry commission denounced the project in 2001, concluding that the Alto Maipo Hydroelectric Project (PHAM) was approved with multiple irregularities.<sup>52</sup> In 2012 the environmental protection agency fined the company for violation of the law. The Chilean Medical Council<sup>53</sup> has made public pronouncements against the Alto Maipo project, after diverse analyses conducted by its environment department on the ground water in areas near the site showed that it systematically discharges high levels of arsenic, lead, manganese and nickel, cancerigenous substances, without prompting any responses from the Ministry of Health in the media. The project will channel the water extracted from the sources over a distance of seventy kilometers through an underground tunnel ten meters in diameter. Advocates for the project argue that since it will return the water downriver, there will be no environmental impact and guarantee that the project is in compliance with all the required technical and environmental standards and

---

52 See <[ciperchile.cl/radar/alto-maipo-autoridad-ambiental-inicio-sanciones-contra-aes-generantes-de-supuesta-responsabilidad-por-aluvion-en-cajon-del-maipo](http://ciperchile.cl/radar/alto-maipo-autoridad-ambiental-inicio-sanciones-contra-aes-generantes-de-supuesta-responsabilidad-por-aluvion-en-cajon-del-maipo)> e <[www.revistabagual.cl/2015/12/gran-marcha-nacional-por-el-agua-de.html](http://www.revistabagual.cl/2015/12/gran-marcha-nacional-por-el-agua-de.html)>.

53 Study coordinated by Andrei Tchernitchin, president of the council's environmental department. See <[www.24horas.cl/nacional/estudio-del-colegio-medico-revela-elementos-toxicos-en-agua-del-cajon-del-maipo-1909785](http://www.24horas.cl/nacional/estudio-del-colegio-medico-revela-elementos-toxicos-en-agua-del-cajon-del-maipo-1909785)>.

regulations. Here, we are dealing with two diametrically opposed visions of the same fact.

In analyzing this case it is relevant to consider that the activism involves a civic movement directly affected by the problem, including local NGOs, with support from international environmental NGOs (Ulianova & Estenssoro, 2012). In this respect, it may be observed that the organization Ríos del Maipo (which itself coordinates more than 80 organizations that advocate on water issues in different locations in Chile) is engaged with international environmental protection organizations. For example, one of the most recent campaigns run by Greenpeace, in which the No Alto Maipo movement participates, is the República Glaciar ([republicaglaci.cl](http://republicaglaci.cl)). More precisely, the inhabitants of the region and activists contrary to Alto Maipo complain that the construction of the run-of-the-river plants is affecting glaciers and national parks in the name of an evil called “development” to supply privately owned extraction processes entailing intensive water use in another region., in this case a mining operation further to the north of Santiago.

## There are two sides in this question.

On the one hand there are the local citizens, principally the inhabitants of Cajón del Maipo, of varied ages and professions: tourist operators, agricultural producers, peasants, owners of agricultural lands or reservations, shepherds, artisans, sportsmen with an international reputation (e.g.: rafting), mountain climbers, cyclists, alternative therapists, traditional families, as well as feminist, community and social organizations. United against this project, on different occasions all of these groups have taken measures to stop the trucks from reaching the construction site in the mountain range. Workers whose families have protested against the project have been jeopardized in this process.<sup>54</sup> On

---

54 See [www.riosdelmaipo.cl/2015/11/19/alto-maipo-toma-represalias-contra-trabajadores-cuyas-familias-participan-en-protestas-en-contra-de-la-empresa](http://www.riosdelmaipo.cl/2015/11/19/alto-maipo-toma-represalias-contra-trabajadores-cuyas-familias-participan-en-protestas-en-contra-de-la-empresa).

the other hand, there is a group of multinational and Chilean companies (AES Gener, Antofagasta Minerals and, more recently, Aguas Andinas, which supplies Santiago residents with drinking water). These companies state that they generate jobs and invest in local and community development in the region through corporate social responsibility measures. Additionally, they are backed by the power of corporate lobbying and media advertising (the Luksic Group is a majority shareholder in Canal 13 and associated companies). Lastly, seventy kilometers downstream there are more than 7 million inhabitants in addition to whoever may happen to be visiting the city who, in their great majority, have no idea that this project exists and that the water that they drink daily is being affected by the construction of the Alto Maipo complex. According to the Chilean Medical Council, in 50 years it will no longer be possible to drink the water from these rivers. In this struggle, which is much more complex than a fight between David and Goliath, it is also necessary to factor in journalists and the public authorities. According to members of the movement, with very few exceptions, the press and public opinion show very little concern about this controversy.

With respect to online and offline activities, in the case of Alto Maipo we concentrated on analyzing real time exchanges and overlaps in communication in the national family march in defense of water which took place on December 5, 2015 in Santiago. According to the organizers, more than 30,000 people participated, whereas the authorities estimated attendance at around 5,000 people. More specifically the team of researchers was divided between the different online and offline spaces occupied by the march: street ethnography of the march, accompaniment and analysis of communication on Twitter and monitoring of coverage of the demonstration in the communication media.

In a conversation prior to the December 2015 march, held in their customary meeting place in Cajón del Maipo, leaders of the Ríos del Maipo movement — including its spokeswoman Marcela Mella — reflected on the importance of ensuring that this mobilization would be successful. For this

reason they preferred not to grant interviews related to the call to protest since these might be used against them, as had happened on previous occasions. It was clear that they attribute great importance to coverage of the movement as an opportunity to reveal the true nature of the project through the traditional media, believing society is unaware of it.<sup>55</sup> For them, journalism and traditional media coverage represent spaces for forming public opinion, disseminating information to society and convening people. They argue that in spite of the fact that the Chilean people are entitled to transparent and reliable information about the project, they do not receive it. This is particularly true for the inhabitants of Santiago, who are ignorant about a project which does not include offsetting or mitigation strategies and which “could cause irreparable damage for our children and grandchildren” as well as for the ecosystem. In this context, they resort to alternative electronic means, to local newspapers, as well as personal contacts and education, albeit on a small scale. Manríquez (2015) studied media coverage of the issue between December 2013 and October 2014. Of a total of 143 news items in 13 different communication media, 73 spoke directly about the project. Analysis indicates that press coverage of the issue is concentrated more on the demonstrations against the hydroelectric plant than on information about the actual project.

One of the exceptions which gave No Alto Maipo more air time was the Chilevisión channel program *En La Mira*, screened on June 24, 2014 at a peak viewing hour. On the same channel, *Tolerancia Cero*, a recently discontinued program focused on current events and politics with a staunch following among key opinion formers had Marcela Mella as a guest in October 2014. The report in the *En La Mira* program led to a formal complaint to the National Television Council (CNTV) by AES Gener. The company claimed that the public's right to plural sources of information had been violated, since the program

---

55 In fact, as mentioned before, the Luksic Group has a 67% stake in one of the three national open television channels, Canal 13, in addition to the Bank of Chile, one of the main advertisers. PUC Chile owns the remainder of the stock of the channel.

had presented “tendentious and incomplete information about the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project”. The council accepted the denouncement and presented accusations against Chilevisión, which was unsuccessful in contesting these. The channel's executives and lawyers then decided to appeal to the Supreme Court. The country's highest court announced its sentence a year later in October 2015, deciding that the sanction applied by the CNTV “was unjustified because people have a right to issue opinions and provide information”. The decision also determined that “the National Television Council had interfered in the constitutional right to freedom in a manner not sanctioned by the law”.

The organizers of the December 5, 2015 demonstration were hoping to improve on the 25,000 demonstrators they had mustered for the last march in July 2015, reaching the mark of 30,000 people (although they also dreamed of matching the figure achieved by the 2011 national demonstration against the HidroAysén project, organized by Patagonia Sin Represas, which had brought together 150,000 people in different cities in Chile). The organization's communications team updated its main official information platform, its webpage, as well as its Facebook<sup>56</sup> and Twitter accounts (#PorElAguaDeStgo, @NoAltoMaipo) and a YouTube channel, with videos such as “#RealChile - Episodio Alto Maipo” (portraying the previous marches against the project) and “MONTAÑAS v/s CIUDAD - Drone (NO HIDROELECTRICAS) Chile”. As the title of the latter video indicates, it used drone technology to contrast the landscape of the mountain range with the grey aspect and the pollution that characterize Santiago. RealChile is presented as a space dedicated to portraying Chile's awakening to environmental issues, showing diverse environmental and social conflicts installed from the north to the south of the country, including water-related issues.

The call to protest was on the movement's webpage banner ([www.riosdelmaipo.cl](http://www.riosdelmaipo.cl), *Salvemos el río Maipo*, administered by the organization Ríos del Maipo) and on the social networks (“On the streets on December 5. For

<sup>56</sup> See <[www.facebook.com/NoAlProyectoAltoMaipo](http://www.facebook.com/NoAlProyectoAltoMaipo)>.

Santiago's water supply. No to Alto Maipo now!"). It was also publicized by means of stickers on cars and signs in community centers and in the windows of houses and apartments. The protest was scheduled for 11 o'clock in the Plaza Itálica, the main venue for this and other social mobilizations in Santiago in recent years. The call for December 5 was followed by news items denouncing the project on the organization's official website. These included: "Santiago only has a guaranteed water supply until next winter, says president of Aguas Andinas" (July 9, 2015); "Alto Maipo intervenes in election in Alfalfal" (Oct. 26, 2015); "Alto Maipo discharges gravel with arsenic in Alto Aucayes" (Oct. 27, 2015) and "Mayor of San José de Maipo, Luis Pezoa, fined for not carrying out mineral aggregate tender" (Nov. 13, 2015), and so on. The last posts before the actual demonstration in December 2015 highlight the more than 80 social organizations intending to participate in the march, now called the Great Family March for Water. Videos were also produced on YouTube urging people to participate in the march (using the hashtags #DigoNoAltoMaipo and #YoMarchoEl5 as a background).

Some of the members of Ríos del Maipo are active tweeters and act as public opinion formers on this platform. This is the case of Nathalie Joignant, a university lecturer and assistant researcher at the Natural Resource Economy center at the University of Chile, a leader who has professional expertise. She started on Twitter in July 2009 and ends her profile (@Natajoignant) description with the hashtag #NoAltoMaipo. In November 2015, she had 707 followers, 464 likes and 5,059 tweets, and after the December 5 march, this had risen to 731 followers, she herself was following another 874 people and there were 5,109 tweets. In linear, quantitative terms, the numbers do not indicate a great shift, but this changes when the web's capacity for propagation is taken into account. Each follower is a node in the potential network, amplifying the complexity of the network surrounding the Alto Maipo issue, with repercussions in other online and offline spaces. The No Alto Maipo network is also boosted by other online platforms, such as Veo Verde, Greenpeace Chile and Avaaz Chile, which replicate and multiply the

actions undertaken by Ríos del Maipo and other social organizations opposed to the project.

As is to be expected, AER Gener, whose slogan is “reliable energy”, uses its website ([www.gener.cl](http://www.gener.cl)) as a source of institutional information about the company. The website also provides information on the company's social responsibility measures for the community, such as creating jobs and funding community development projects by means of agreements with district associations and the municipality. The company informs that it has a budget of “130 million pesos for a 30-year period to promote and develop production and service activities that generate jobs, to support various sporting activities, to further education and training, to drive social development and implant infrastructure for use by the community” (2012).

In more recent news items on the website there are reports on the company's presence at the traditional El Relvo feast (October 5, 2015), presenting corporate information accompanied by a photograph of a banner with the text “El Relvo supports Alto Maipo”, with mentions of massive assistance and stands providing information on the company. In other words, AES Gener is presented as being associated with economic and cultural development on a local and even national level. The institutional website also offers booklets that point out the benefits of the construction of the plant and the low impact its entry into operation will have on the ecosystem. Another decision related to the company's strategic communication is the presence of former ministers on its board of directors.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, Ríos del Maipo, in addition to having an active, renovated website, pursues recognition from non-governmental organizations such as International Rivers. In the offline environment, the organization participated in a visit by a Chilean delegation to the United States for a meeting

---

57 In 2014, the chairman of the board was Jorge Rodríguez Grossi, an economist, who had been deacon of the Economics and Business Faculty of the Alberto Hurtado Jesuit University and three times minister (Economy, Energy and Mining) in the Ricardo Lagos government in 2001. In 2015, he was nominated president of the Banco Estado (Chilean State Bank) by the government.

with the Treasury Department at the end of October 2015, at which it requested monitoring of AES Gener's actions in Chile.

## The December 5 march

There is no single estimate of the number of participants in the demonstration against Alto Maipo on December 5. During the protest, the animators on a sound truck led by a group of women senators from the Cajón region said they had been informed that there were around 40,000 people. "Hold up your banners! We will send these photos to the minister Máximo Pacheco. Listen to us: 'we don't want Cajón del Maipo full of reservoirs'". Families, individuals, secondary school and university students, artists, members of social organizations, people dressed up in costumes, cyclists, sympathizers, collectives, members of the Chilean actors and artists union, representatives of water and coastal protection committees from all over Chile and sportsmen and women repeated the refrain. Later, Ríos del Maipo reduced the estimate to 30,000 participants, while the government put it at 5,000. The march was covered by national television channels (Chilevisión, CNN Chile and teleSUR), traditional and online daily newspapers (*La Tercera* and *El Mercurio*, the former with an article and the latter with a photograph and caption, as well as *The Clinic*), popular radio stations (Bío Bío, Cooperativa, University of Chile). However, the information was concise. As was to be expected, none of the media covered the entire demonstration, only the main events, with the exception of one television team which accompanied the mobilization from start to finish, as well as a drone, supposedly organized by Ríos del Maipo, which overflowed the march.

Dozens of representatives of social organizations from the north to the south of the country traveled to Santiago especially to participate in the march and were invited to climb up on the sound truck to explain why they were there



and describe what was happening in their own region, the aim being to project water use as a national issue. From the north, the spokesperson for Coordination for the Defense of the River Loa spoke about how the river had been exploited to the point of exhaustion by mining companies. “We will get our water back”, people cried repeatedly. This dynamic involving representatives from all over Chile was maintained from the Plaza Itálica until the demonstration was within a few meters of La Moneda, when the event culminated in a speech by the spokeswoman Marcela Mella. Due to lack of space it is impossible to list all these organizations here. Participants included representatives of the movement *Marca tu Voto*, the Constituent Assembly and *Sidarte*, the Chilean actors union, as well as the *Partido Socialista* deputy Daniel Melo who, according to the organizers, has supported the movement since the beginning. There were also some *Cajón del Maipo* councillors “who will not lower their guard, who have realized what is going on and who will fulfill the role for which they were elected”. The Constituent Assembly representative commemorated the fact that “the public presents its demands and refuses to take a secondary role in decisions affecting its future. We are here today in defense of our water. We are faced with a nation preying on our resources, in a conspiracy with a group of conservatives who intend to maintain their privileges at the cost of the present and future of all of us who live in this country. All these issues stem from a constitutional framework that permits such abuses. All these issues arose in a country of which we were part when the constitution was drafted. For this reason, today we want to say out loud, [...] that we need a constituent assembly, because this is the only way we can prevent privileged groups from appropriating this country for themselves. Chile belongs to each and every one of us”.

The representative also made a specific appeal to publicize the march over the social networks: “the number of people here is incredible, many more than in the other marches. Since we do not want this to be invisible, let’s flood the social networks. Use Twitter, use Facebook, use whatever means you can to

comment, to show photos, to make statements, to show people that Santiago has awakened!". "Alto Maipo, criminal project, arsenic and lead in the capital", the protesters chanted. It was also possible to hear slogans decrying the Trans-Pacific Agreement, as well as references to the Right to Water movement.

But what was happening on the social networks, in particular on Twitter? We accompanied the hashtag #NoAltoMaipo, which already existed and was not created ad hoc for the December 5 demonstration, as was the case with the hashtag #PorElAguaDeStgo. The frequency of use of #NoAltoMaipo was far greater during the week of the march (December 2 to December 8, compared with the other hashtags, with 1,649 users and 7,623 connections, compared with 352 and 1,296 respectively for the second most used hashtag (#PorElAguaDeStgo). On the day of the march, an important peak of activity was observed during the afternoon (the march began around midday), with almost 600 messages at this moment and two more moderate but significant peaks: on the day before and on the day after. We also tracked social relation indicators based on mentions (@usuario) or retweets (RT). It was observed that of the 10 main users who centralized and mediated the relations, the main movers (with the exception of the principal organizer, the user @NoAltoMaipo) are individual activists, that is, common users. They were neither organizations nor the press. This analysis also enabled measurement of the impact of the combination of the number of followers and their relevance in terms of network connectivity, discussed previously in this paper. For example, it is possible to have fewer followers on Twitter but to provoke a significant impact on network connectivity and, consequently, boost diffusion. This was the case with @Catalina\_Valpo, who helped disseminate the event from another region outside Santiago (Valparaíso) and with @ginniasa, an activist and opinion former in Aysén (the extreme south of Chile).

The study of the December 5 march enabled understanding of the complex interplay among the distinct communication dynamics coexisting in a popular mobilization such as the No Alto Maipo movement, which attempts

to make its presence felt in the public space, provide information and educate society, given the limited coverage and provision of information by the traditional media about the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project.

### Case 3: The constituent process

In April 2015, president Michelle Bachelet (2014-2018) announced that a constituent process to rewrite and approve a new constitution for Chile would be initiated that year. The current charter dates back to 1980. It was created during the military regime and approved by plebiscite in a state that did not enjoy the rule of law or the guarantee of individual liberty. In spite of the modifications introduced during the later democratic governments, a number of sectors of society are in favor of drafting a new constitution for the country. This was one of the promises made by the center-left *Neuva Mayoria* coalition candidate during her campaign for a second term. After the elections, over the national radio and television network president Bachelet declared:<sup>58</sup>

“The demand for a new fundamental charter is neither the whim of specialists nor the obsession of elites motivated by ideology. It is a long-standing goal pursued by democratic sectors and currently supported by a large number of political, social, youth, regional, union, and gender organizations, as well as representatives of indigenous peoples, based on questions that had been raised previously”.

Among the criticisms of political sectors opposed to the announced measure are the low turnout in the elections which returned Bachelet to power. Additionally, the announcement was made in a tense political and social climate, in the midst of investigations into the illegal financing of the

---

58 See [www.gob.cl/2015/10/13/discurso-de-la-presidenta-de-la-republica-al-anunciar-el-proceso-constituyente](http://www.gob.cl/2015/10/13/discurso-de-la-presidenta-de-la-republica-al-anunciar-el-proceso-constituyente).

political campaigns of deputies and senators from diverse political sectors, as well as suspicions of criminal conspiracy in different circles which also directly implicated the president's family. Since the announcement of the constituent by the president, interest on the part of journalists has resulted in extensive coverage by the communication media, as well as monitoring of the intended timetable for this process.<sup>59</sup> The communication and educational measures proposed by the government, as well as the work done by the council of civic observers, may be viewed on the digital platform *Una Constitución para Chile* ([www.unaconstitucionparachile.cl](http://www.unaconstitucionparachile.cl)) developed by the government around the theme: "For a Constitution debated under a democratic regime for new generations of citizens". This explains the mechanism of the constituent and the elements of a fundamental charter by means of videos and a "constitutional dictionary" illustrated with animated characters. The platform has a Twitter account (@Constitucion\_CL).

What do civil society and social organizations think about this? Different public opinion polls conducted between 2013 and 2015 indicate a clear public preference for a new constitution, with the majority tending to prefer a Constituent Assembly as the mechanism for developing it. According to a nationwide survey on social values conducted by the University of Santiago (USACH, 2015), 51.1% of the respondents prefer that the task be undertaken by a Constituent Assembly and that the text be ratified by plebiscite, while 17% think this Assembly should be convened and constituted by social organizations. A

---

59 The constituent process announced comprises 5 phases: 1) A public civic education and communication campaign about the process, consisting of videos, spots, an explanatory website "constitucionario" (available at <[constitucionario.cl](http://constitucionario.cl)>) and explanatory guides produced by the government; 2) Establishment of a council of civic observers to ensure that the dialogues "will be free and plural, conducted transparently, without any type of pressure or distortion"; 3) Public dialogues nationwide at local, provincial and regional level (between March and October 2016); 4) Delivery of the proposals elaborated by the society from which the president will draft the proposed Constitution to be sent to Congress in 2017; and 5) Congress should vote on the reform of the 1980 Charter and empower the next legislature (2018-2022) to choose between 4 alternatives as to who will decide on the new Constitution: Congress, a mixed constituent convention (members of parliament and the public), a Constituent Assembly comprising members of the public or a plebiscite.

minority (2.6%) believe that this mission should be the exclusive competence of the country's legislators. In summary, 68.1% of the respondents believe that the ideal method for drafting a new constitution is through a Constituent Assembly.

Different non-governmental organizations had been actively engaged in this question since well before the presidential announcement, using offline, online and organized forms of mobilization, as well as the press. The demand for a new constitution had also been incorporated into the student protests in and after 2011. In 2013, an open encounter had been organized in Congress, involving academics, constitutional lawyers, social leaders and representatives of center-left constituent mobilization initiatives, with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Chile 21 Foundation. Comparisons of similar processes in Colombia, Ecuador, Spain and Brazil were presented. The encounter, whose theme was "New Republic: manifesto for a plebiscite for a new Constitution", resulted in the book *Plebiscito para una Nueva Constitución*, available free of charge on the Internet.<sup>60</sup> Inviting readers to support a petition for a plebiscite, it argued: "we have had almost a quarter of a century of democracy with a Constitution inherited from a dictatorship. It is urgent to repair this fundamental deficit in the Chilean transition, which constitutes a debt to the country's future generations".

Although it is not the case in Chile, there are specific international experiences involving public participation based on the construction of online platforms to reform the constitution, considered to an extent to be experiences in online activism. This was the case of Iceland in 2011. By means of a platform developed specifically for this purpose, Icelanders were able to consult the new articles proposed by the constitutional council responsible for the reform process on a weekly basis and comment on them. In the Icelandic model, the proposed texts were also published on Facebook and on Twitter. Periodically, interviews with each of the 25 members of the constitutional council were

60 See <[issuu.com/nuevarepublica/docs/libro\\_plebiscito\\_nueva\\_constituci\\_](http://issuu.com/nuevarepublica/docs/libro_plebiscito_nueva_constituci_)>.

posted on YouTube, and a visual record of the councilors' work was posted on Flickr. In addition to the aforementioned Chilean government website, after the announcement of a constituent process, a number of experiences involving offline and online activities emerged. These were basically of two types: civic movements<sup>61</sup> and movements promoted by foundations or study centers. There follow descriptions of the experiences which exhibited greater offline/online activity during the research phase.

## Civic initiatives: Marca AC, Marca tu Voto and Poder Social Constituyente

Marca AC, or Marca Assembleia Constituinte, is a pluralist civic initiative in favor of a constituent assembly which became widely known in the communication media, on the internet and on the social networks in 2013 against the backdrop of the presidential and parliamentary campaign that year. The organizations behind the initiative resorted to viral educational videos to explain this political movement to the public. The videos show actions involving people in different parts of the country and underscore the need for changes in the current Constitution, incorporating issues such as the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, the right of the public to decide on the use of

---

61 Updated in varying degrees and not detailed in this chapter, there are: 1) *Plebiscito Ahora* ([plebiscitoahora.cl](http://plebiscitoahora.cl)), an online platform organized by around 20 social organizations to collect signatures and invite other social organizations to support the organization of a plebiscite and substitution of the fundamental charter; 2) *Asamblea Constituyente* ([asambleaconstituyente.cl](http://asambleaconstituyente.cl)) is defined as a virtual information community. To vote it is necessary to register; the platform saw considerable activity in 2013; 3) *Constituyente Social* ([constituyente.cl](http://constituyente.cl)) its slogan is "society's and the peoples' route to a social constituent"; 4) *Constituyente Chile* ([constituyentechile.cl](http://constituyentechile.cl)), by the Chilean Movement for a Constituent Assembly, this consists of a platform providing information about different civic movements and actions nationwide in favor of a constituent assembly. It also offers different forums for debate in diverse cities and provides information on international congresses, such as the 6th International Constitutional Reform Congress held in Panama in November 2015, in which Chile was a presenter, together with Panama, Catalonia, Greece, Ecuador and Spain; e 5) *Poder Social Constituyente* ([podersocialxac.wordpress.com](http://podersocialxac.wordpress.com)), which is presented as a "coordinated initiative of citizens, social movements and organizations working for a constituent assembly".

natural resources, the importance of a plebiscite and social participation, among others. The objective was to get Chileans to write the letters “AC” on their voting slips in the elections, assuring them that this would not invalidate their vote and would enable the number of electors who preferred this option to be counted. The campaign was launched in May 2013 with the engagement of well known personalities from the social, academic and cultural milieu. Volunteers represented the movement at political rallies throughout the country. The social organizations participating in *Marca tu Voto* had already made their presence felt in the demonstrations for education in 2011, since for their leaders changing the constitution was the best way to guarantee free public education and the right to healthcare. In fact, supporters of the movement included the main university student leaders from the 2011 and 2012 demonstrations, as well as poets, actors, comedians and writers. The campaign utilized Twitter (@marcatuvoto), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/Marcatuvoto](http://www.facebook.com/Marcatuvoto)) and the internet website [movimientoporlaconstituyente.cl](http://movimientoporlaconstituyente.cl), which is no longer active. Marca AC has appeared on Twitter as Asamblea Constituyente since August 2013 (@Marca\_AC) and usually retweets the Spanish movement Podemos (@ahorapodemos). Although Marca AC has its own profile on the internet, it is part of the Poder Social Constituyente movement, created in 2014 and which, in turn, includes more than 150 non-governmental organizations, social movements, cultural centers and individual supporters. It is defined as follows by the Chilean edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, which supports this form of constitutional reform:

“It is new kind of diverse and open movement, comprising social, student and workers’ organizations, residents’ movements, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, supporters of sexual diversity and citizens who demand a binding, democratic constitutional process via a constituent assembly. It engages diverse forces and people who have worked towards this cause — including Marca AC, Foro Social por la AC, Wiki AC and Constituyente

Concepción — and is open to whoever wants to contribute towards making this dream of social transformation come true so that we may achieve the definitive democracy the country expects”.

One of the first actions of this newly created social movement, which also took part in the 2014 National March for the Constituent Assembly, was the delivery of its manifesto entitled “Without AC there is no new Constitution” to the La Moneda palace. Another offline communication strategy that it has deployed since its foundation is the organization of diverse civic encounters around the country. Instead of a website, it has a blog on WordPress and a Facebook account ([www.facebook.com/podersocialAC](http://www.facebook.com/podersocialAC)). The strategy used by the movement in this case was to organize successive marches all over Chile during a four-day period from November 21 to November 24 to guarantee widespread diffusion and remain on the radar of the communication media for longer.

## Foundations and study centers: Tu Constitución and La Lupa de la Constitución

Tu Constitución ([tuconstitucion.cl](http://tuconstitucion.cl)), whose motto is “your dreams, our future”, is a project promoted by former president Ricardo Lagos’ (2000–2006) Democracy and Development Foundation ([www.fdd.cl](http://www.fdd.cl)). He launched the web platform during a press conference on March 24, 2015, stating that “technology now enables us to do what was not possible previously, and we should take advantage of the advances made this century to further social participation”. At the end of the process, scheduled for the first half of 2016, a constitutional text based on the contributions received will be delivered to president Bachelet. Analyzing the press news on the platform’s website, there is broad coverage of the launch, although there is greater emphasis on the platform’s



association with Lagos as director of the initiative than on the idea advocated by the organizers, that this is a cross cutting civic participation initiative. This journalistic angle was intensified in the course of 2015, as illustrated by the title of an article published on November 29, 2015, a Sunday, the day when Chileans devote the most time to reading newspapers: “Former president Lagos establishes constitutional proposal for March”. According to the project director,<sup>62</sup> however, Tu Constitución is a digital participation platform seeking to gather contributions from society for a new constitutional text and to capitalize on the opportunities technology offers for democratic processes in terms of coordinating collective intelligence. In an interview with the Chilean newspaper *La Nación*, he declares:

“We are not drafting a constitution. We are collecting the opinions of Chilean citizens and bringing together their ideas for a new constitution [...]. The objective is that society will express its own ideas, wishes and dreams related to the Constitution, and to which we refer using the metaphor ‘everyone’s home’, which is the place where we feel protected”.

The core concept is the crowdsourcing of ideas applied to political processes, which can enhance democracy because, “for the first time ever digital technologies enable us to harness the power and the knowledge dispersed throughout society to collaborate on projects on a previously unimaginable scale”, says the foundation’s project director Luis Santana. To participate it is necessary to register on the platform, which functions as a repository rather than promoting interaction between people. The professional team is divided into three areas: 1) citizenship and networks; 2) communications and digital platform; and 3) legal and content area. Upon entering the platform there is the message “Send in your proposals for the new Fundamental Charter, so that it will also be Your Constitution”. The contents received are analyzed by historians

---

62 Gonzalo Cowley. The project receives funding from the Fundación Telefónica.

and political scientists, charged with classifying the ideas into 7 macro themes and some 100 sub-themes, based on a pre-established framework that comprehends the entire constitution (such as nationality, citizenship, constitutional guarantees, education, decentralization, reform mechanisms, among others). On a periodic basis, all these public contributions are sent to a steering council consisting of 16 constitutional lawyers, academics and researchers from nine universities and study centers. The council is chaired by Ricardo Lagos.<sup>63</sup>

At first sight, *Tu Constitución* seems to be an exclusively online initiative. However, it also works with civil society by organizing civic education workshops and providing information on the project in situ. This is the responsibility of staffers in the citizenship area, who work with diverse kinds of organizations, most of which are located in the Santiago metropolitan region. The platform also organizes specific thematic debates to encourage society to present opinions, as well as conducting periodic public opinion surveys on different matters. The staffers in this area argue that although it is possible to reach different audiences via the internet and to get people to participate at different moments, in accordance with their individual motivations and opinions, face to face work is fundamental. They make a point of clarifying that one of the limitations is deliberative illusion, whereby people believe that their opinion will be translated into decision making. For this reason, they consider that analyzing people's ideas is important, so that they may feel that their contribution has been taken into account.

To participate on the platform, share ideas, carry out online consultations or engage in debates it is necessary to register on the website or to use a social network user account, unless one is a member of one of the 81 social organizations or institutions the citizenship area team intends to

---

63 This aspect of the project was not without controversy. One of the guest constitutional lawyers, Fernando Atria, resigned from the council claiming that the direction of its work had changed, deviating from its initial objective. The former president commented on his resignation in the press.

contact for field work (15 study centers, 66 organizations and collectives). These organizations are selected in accordance with thematic agendas in areas such as science and technology, decentralization, the disabled, sexual diversity, education, childhood, laicism, the environment, animal rights, immigration, the constituent movement, gender equality, political participation, citizenship, transparency, poverty, health and volunteer work. The members of these organizations may send in their contributions by mail, by email or they may create a user profile on the platform. The organizations' contributions may be made in the name of a group or an individual. Regarding participation by gender on the platform, according to data supplied by Tu Constitución, in November 2015 there were more men (60.8%) than women (39.2%). Although the platform is accessible from the entire country (and planet), 66% of the accesses come from the metropolitan region, followed by Valparaíso, Bio Bio, Maule and Araucanía. This undoubtedly indicates limitations in terms of the objectives established for the project, given that online interaction is still very centralized. Up to November 2015, the platform had received 80,000 accesses with 29,000 interactions. The age group with the most participants is from 25-34 years (around 25%), followed by 35-44 years (around 18%). Close to 15% of the users are in the age groups from 18-24 and 55-64 years, followed by the 45-54 year age group. The least frequent users are those aged over 65 years. Close to 10% of the accesses come from abroad (United States, France, Spain and Argentina, among others). In terms of the social networks, up until September 2015 there had been 392,000 tweet impressions, 15,455 visits to the profile, 1,714,941 post impressions on Facebook and 12,807 clicks on the posts.

The webpage comprises different sections: a constitutional glossary for reference, an area defined as a collaborative platform to collect proposals for a new constitution and a media section with news clippings and contact information for journalists. Further down there are diverse opinions, surveys, as well as what is known as a dream box. There is also an offline dream box. This is a cardboard box that can be left in a company, organization or community to

receive people's "dreams", which must be written down on paper and delivered for analysis by project staffers. Another section is the constitutional timeline, that presents the different constitutions and their modifications, which are available for download. There is also a section with news, videos of participants, documents regarding constitutional questions and a section on Chile's constitutional history, which may be downloaded. The platform has more than 20 quick online surveys. For a time it also hosted the project *La Constitución que Yo Quiero* (The Constitution I Want ([laconstitucionqueyoquiero.cl](http://laconstitucionqueyoquiero.cl))),<sup>64</sup> a contest for primary and secondary school teachers and students sponsored by Unicef, the Organization of Ibero-American States and the Fundación Chile, aimed at promoting civic education for the younger generations through discussion of the Chilean political system.

The *La Lupa de la Constitución* ([lalupadelaconstitucion.cl](http://lalupadelaconstitucion.cl)) platform, which has a Creative Commons license, was created as a direct response to the announcement of the constituent process by president Michelle Bachelet in October 2015. Its sections include one on the commitments undertaken by the president and their current status. The site has ten sections: "beginning", "Constitution", "government", "law", "news", "opinions", "vote", "opinion columns", "us" and "downloads". Its goal is described as follows:

In recent years the creation of social participation tools and mechanisms has added more value for society. This has meant that the public demands more from governments and that political systems have become more transparent and participative. This is why the Universidad del Desarrollo (University of

---

<sup>64</sup> The project was initiated in 2013 with 27 schools participating. It was promoted by Núcleo Milenio para el Estudio de Estatalidad y la Democracia en América Latina, the PUC Chile Education Faculty and the National Library of Congress. It was directed by Juan Pablo Luna and Ana María Farías, both political scientists with PhDs from PUC Chile. In 2015, it received 96 proposals from schools at different levels, although there were few participants in the student organization category and there were four winners. According to Farías (2015), the platform helped to more than triple the number of proposals, by posting videos on YouTube to encourage participation, as well as using Facebook and Twitter to publicize the initiative among children, adolescents and teachers.

Development) created Lupa de la Constitución (Constitutional Magnifying Glass), a digital social participation platform which aims to contribute to public debate about constitutional matters, with the overall objective of fostering societal participation.

The objective is to contribute to the discussion about the creation of a new constitution, foster social participation and civic education by means of infographs and short videos. Users may vote and present their ideas and opinions about what they would like to see included in a new constitution. The main innovation on this platform, linked with the Universidad del Desarrollo, is its alliance with communication media, including the television channel CNN Chile and the radio station Rádio Bío Bío, which help in the task of tracking progress towards fulfillment of the commitments announced by the government in relation to the proposed constitutional reform. Although it is necessary to register on the website in order to send in an idea, the “opinion” section shows some of the contributions received and allows people to vote on them. An example of one of the ideas receiving the most votes concerns the wish for a federative system: “I would like Chile to be more decentralized, but in a manner that fully benefits the country [...]. If Chile were divided into states, each state would be better prepared to deal with any situation that arises”. Another proposal receiving many votes is one whereby politicians would be subject to the same conditions as any other worker, their pay would be docked if they missed work and they would be dismissed for unjustified absences. Yet another suggests that all legal decrees should be defined and proposed by society. Some participants include a photograph in their profile, enabling their identification. The documents available for download are specialized articles published recently in scientific and other types of journals. In the “Constitution” section there is the sub-section “other constitutions of the world”. This includes a map that enables the user to click on countries that have undergone constituent processes and learn about their particularities. The interactive map

was prepared using the tool infogr.am, which enables the creation of letters and infographs and is used by Transparency International, by *Huffington Post*, *Euronews* and the University of Cambridge, among others. There is a special section providing a comparative analysis of Latin American constitutions. It is also possible to subscribe to a newsletter. All the website contents may be shared via Facebook and via YouTube.

## 4. Conclusions

Analysis of the use of online/offline communication and organization in the 2011 student movements shows that, although the adolescent and university students used the repertoire of communication instruments at their disposal indistinctly in both spaces to promote association and to organize the movement, as well as to communicate with people and persuade them to participate, this usage was not linear (as if the online world preceded the offline or vice-versa), but simultaneous and indivisible. For a young, connected activist, the public sphere is probably not situated or constructed exclusively offline, as is perhaps still the case for the “times and spaces of traditional politics” (Portillo et al., 2012). Traditional politics concentrated and to a large extent continues to concentrate its time and its communication primarily on traditional media and on the material physical world. For the young, in comparison, the public sphere is not only mixed (material-immaterial, offline-online). For them, this mix cannot be undone. An attempt to understand their communication-action strategies cannot be made based either on a sequential or chronological interpretation (switch online, switch offline, mixed switch). In other words, for them the public space is in a permanent state of contingent co-construction, depending on the action which is in play (convening, denouncing, debating, negotiating, resolving, coexisting with other movements and demands etc.). In this respect, the more limited access the secondary students had to online

resources in 2011 in comparison with the university students (for example, lower access to smartphones due to the high cost), the fact that they did not have press counsels like the journalists contracted by the student associations (as was the case with the university federations at the University of Chile, the Catholic University and CONFECH), in addition to the priority accorded to Twitter by the university students as a new sphere of communication for opinion formers, may partially explain why the spokespersons of the secondary students associations felt marginalized in terms of news coverage and the news agenda.

Nevertheless, there are two cross-cutting elements to which both the secondary student leaders and the university student leaders attribute great importance for the success of the movement. First, the offline work on diagnosis and the formulation of proposals translated into an inclusive message which made the people invited to participate in the movement feel that they were represented. Second, the role played by the traditional communication media in informing the public and encouraging discussion and even support for the movement (more important than a “like” or signatures in one of the social network configurations), in other words, their role in shaping the opinion of common citizens, who still operate preponderantly in accordance with an offline logic, the political thermometer, as one of the secondary school leaders put it. This is particularly relevant given that these media, despite losing the exclusiveness in the representation of reality that they once enjoyed, now and more than ever, help drive the articulation of two generations, the digital native students and that part of the population that still constitutes the majority (authorities, families), whose symbolic references and reality continue to be those of the traditional media.

No Alto Maipo represents a process of online and offline organization related to environmental activism which has difficulty attracting the attention of the traditional media, as occurs with the majority of environmental movements in other countries in the region. Their actions, with few exceptions,

when covered by the traditional press, are reported superficially with the focus on the actual demonstration. Frequently this means that these actions are ignored by the Chilean press, while receiving coverage from the press in other countries or through international organizations. Once they attract this international attention, the Chilean media then pays attention to them. What seems to be in play here in terms of communication is control over the media's information agenda to ensure the success of these civic activists. As Ulianova and Estenssoro (2012) state in their analysis of the emergence of the environmental issue in the Chilean social and political space, although we have witnessed new forms of association and new political actors in this area, extensive media presence and connections with international networks are still necessary for them to voice their demands on a global level.

With respect to the experience of the constituent process, whose beginning should not be reduced to the presidential announcement in October 2015, going back as it does to the activism of dozens of civil society organizations over a number of years, the online environment appears as an important complement to identity of these organizations enabling them to exist materially as active organizations. However, as we saw, there is a certain chaos in cyberspace when one attempts to identify the different movements and their viewpoints. This confusion is heightened when an internet user interested in participating realizes that a determined website has not been updated, a complicating factor in the online world. The emergence of two large online platforms was also discussed, one a former president's think tank (*Tu Constitución*) and the other organized by a private university (*La Lupa de la Constitución*). Editorially, the former may be identified with the center-left and the latter with the center right. Both are presented as spaces for social participation, but in practice *Tu Constitución* operates more as a temporary repository (lasting one year) for users' contributions and the questions they deem relevant for the discussion of a new constitution for Chile. These contributions are not made public and will be used as inputs to produce a joint document to be announced to the country



at the end of the process. As such, it was inevitable that this platform would be associated with the figure of the former president, which is precisely what the press has done. In the second case, *La Lupa de la Constitución*, there is an option to share part of contributors' ideas about the new constitution and, above all, the decision to form an alliance with the most representative and most trusted mass communication media in terms of independence, impartiality and plurality of information, as is the case with CNN Chile (Chile is the only country in Latin America to have its own CNN channel) and the radio station *Rádío Bío Bío*, a traditional means of communication whose credibility among Chileans was boosted during the 2010 earthquake and tidal wave.

As may be seen in the three cases selected and as Sorj and Fausto (2015) affirm, the impact of the internet on communication and social mobilization in the public sphere in general and in civil society in particular, does not necessarily revolutionize forms of political participation, neither is it able to recreate democratic institutions. Instead, what is observed is a complexity of heterogeneous, interconnected actors engaged in an offline/online transformation that can only be understood in terms of their combinations. (Sorj, 2015). However, in the third wave of social movements described by Sorj, that using cyberspace as a core element of its public activities, in the three cases analyzed, the importance of journalists and the coverage provided by the traditional media for the activists involved in these movements must be recognized, as least up until this moment.

## 5. References

Baeza, Jorge. "Culturas Juveniles: Acercamiento Bibliográfico". *Revista Medellín*, v. 29, n. 113, 2003. pp. 7-39.

Bennet, W. Lance; Segerberg, Alexandra. "The logic of connective action". *Information, Communication & Society*, v. 15, n. 5, 2012. pp. 739-768.

Condeza, Rayén. "Las estrategias de comunicación de los adolescentes". *Cuadernos de información*, n. 24, 2009. pp. 69-80.

Fernández-Labbé, Juan. *La Protesta Social en Chile (2006-2011): Conflicto Social y Repertorios de Acción en Torno a los Movimientos Estudiantil, Mapuche y Ambiental*. Working Papers GIGAPP. Madri: Instituto Universitario Ortega y Gasset, 2013.

Fernández-Labbé, Juan. "Movimiento estudiantil en Chile 2011: repertorios de acción, marcos de acción colectiva, impactos y desafíos para la política pública". *Circunstancia*, v. 11, n. 31, 2013.

Hopke, Jill. "Occupy is not a place: A cross-case comparison of the 15M and Occupy movements". *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New media Technologies*, 0-0, 2015. pp. 1-20.

Instituto Nacional de Juventud [INJUV]. *Séptima encuesta nacional de juventud*. Santiago (Chile): INJUV, 2012.

Meunier, Dominique; Condeza, Rayén. "Le mouvement 2.0 des lycéens chiliens de mai 2006: Usages des Tics et action collective". *Terminal, Technologie de l'information, culture Société*, n. 111, 2012. pp. 33-48.

Ministerio de Educación. *SimceTIC: Informe de resultados*. Santiago: Mineduc, 2013.

Moraga, Pilar. "Principio 10 y desarrollo eléctrico: Participación y acceso a la justicia en miras a la implementación de tribunales especializados". *Revista de Derecho de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso*, n. 39, 2012. pp. 291-317.

Mundaca, Rodrigo. *La Privatización de las Aguas en Chile: Causas y Resistencias*. Santiago: América en movimiento, 2015. Available at: <americaenmovimiento.cl/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/agua-03-introduccion1.pdf>.

Portillo, Maricela; Urteaga, Maritza; González, Yanko; Aguilera, Óscar; Feixa, Carles. "De la generación X a la generación @. Trazos transicionales e identidades juveniles en

América Latina". *Última década*, v. 20, n. 37, 2012. pp. 137-174.

Puga, Ismael. "Escuela y estratificación social en Chile: ¿cuáles es el rol de la municipalización y la educación particular subvencionada en la reproducción de la desigualdad social?". *Estudios Pedagógicos*, v. 37, n. 2, 2011. pp. 213-232.

Quintana, Antonio. "De la cultura juvenil a la ciber cultura juvenil. Más allá del prefijo de ciber". *Ciber cultura juvenil, Revista IDEP*, n. 18, 2010. pp. 77-93.

Scherman, Andrés; Arriagada, Arturo; Valenzuela, Sebastián. "Student and Environmental Protests in Chile: The Role of Social Media". *Politics*, v. 35, n. 2, 2015. pp. 151-171. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9256.1207.

Schuster, Martín. "La desafección de los chilenos con los partidos políticos: Diferencias entre jóvenes y el resto de la población". *Observatorio electoral*, v. 1, n. 7, 2008.

Sorj, Bernardo. "Online / off-line: a nova onda da sociedade civil e a transformação da esfera pública". In: Bernardo Sorj and Sérgio Fausto (Org.). *Internet e mobilizações sociais: transformações do espaço público e da sociedade civil*. São Paulo: Plataforma Democrática, 2015.

Subsecretaría de Telecomunicaciones [Subtel]. *Encuesta Nacional de Acceso y Usos de Internet*. Santiago (Chile): Subtel, 2015. Available at: <[www.subtel.gob.cl/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Presentacion\\_Final\\_Sexta\\_Encuesta\\_vers\\_16102015.pdf](http://www.subtel.gob.cl/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/Presentacion_Final_Sexta_Encuesta_vers_16102015.pdf)>.

Stager, Matías; Núñez, Juan Luis. *Uso de Internet en Chile: La Otra Brecha que nos Divide*. Santiago (Chile): Centro de Estudios Digitales/Fundación País Digital, 2015.

Universidad de Santiago de Chile [USACH] (2015). *Estudio de valores sociales. Síntesis de resultados. Medición enero 2015*. Available at: <[www.fae.usach.cl/fae/docs/estudioDeValores/EstudioValoresSociales01-2015.pdf](http://www.fae.usach.cl/fae/docs/estudioDeValores/EstudioValoresSociales01-2015.pdf)>.

# Colombia

---

María Paula Martínez<sup>1</sup>

Estefanía Avella Bermúdez<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

## 2. Overview of the legal and political environment in which civil society operates, including cyberspace

## 3. Case studies

Case 1: The National Farmers' Strike (PNA)

Case 2: La Marcha de las Putas (The Slut Walk)

Case 3: La Marcha por la Vida (The March for Life)

## 4. Final considerations

## 5. References

---

1 Political scientist and journalist. Lecturer at the Journalism Study Center at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá. Co-author of the report *Mapping Digital Media* (OSF). Creator of the website MediosenColombia.com. Grantee on the Chicas Poderosas program in 2015. Email: mp.martinez132@uniandes.edu.co

2 Anthropologist and political scientist. Digital media journalist at Cerosetenta. Email: me.avella1083@uniandes.edu.co

## 1. Introduction

The new constitution of Colombia<sup>3</sup>, dating from 1991, defined the country as heterogeneous, multiethnic and multi-religious,<sup>4</sup> as a social state based on the rule of law and as a pluralist, participative democratic republic which promotes equality in favor of groups that are discriminated against or marginalized. The new Charter also instituted mechanisms for direct democratic participation (such as referenda, plebiscites and local meetings open to the community) and legitimized social movements as political actors. In spite of this, even though the constitution created and guaranteed spaces for social mobilization, it should be recognized that the structure of civil society goes back to the early 20th century when the first social organizations emerged, more specifically the workers' unions whose principal means of protest were strikes. According to the researcher Francisco Hernández, "the first unions and the first strikes involved specialized workers, such as railway employees, glassmakers, industrial workers, tailors, cobblers, carpenter, woodworkers etc."<sup>5</sup> In the second half of the century, with the implementation of the National Front (alternation of the presidency between two opposing political parties),<sup>6</sup> different forms of civil society played active roles at specific moments. For the historian Mauricio Archila, in the decades preceding the 1991 Constitution, society did not remain passive and witnessed social conflict when confronted with of inequality and social exclusion; he recognizes that even indigenous groups and women — despite their low visibility — broadened the spectrum of

3 Colombian Political Constitution, section I, art. 1. Available at: <[www.senado.gov.co/images/stories/Informacion\\_General/constitucion\\_politica.pdf](http://www.senado.gov.co/images/stories/Informacion_General/constitucion_politica.pdf)>.

4 Until then, the 1886 Constitution defined Colombia as a Catholic State (art. 38).

5 Francisco Hernández, *Sindicalismo en Colombia: Implicaciones Sociales y Políticas*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidade Javeriana, 2004. p. 60.

6 The National Front is understood as the period between 1958 and 1974, during which the Conservative and Liberal parties alternated in power every four years. This alternation brought a period of bipartisan violence to an end, but excluded the other parties.

social conflict in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Social movements in Colombia have to a large extent been determined by the country's political and economic dynamics, which have hindered their consolidation and even more so their permanence over time. In relation to this, Archila states: "the deinstitutionalization of social action and its precarious autonomy, threatened further by diverse manifestations of violence, are decisive realities that demonstrate the fragility of our social movements. Although responsibility for this situation does not rest exclusively with the State, because to an extent this depends on the social actors and their allies, this is the result of its selective power and disproportionate presence".<sup>8</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and principally in the years before the 1991 Constitution, social protests were a constant in Colombia, but these could hardly be described as consolidated social movements. "Even though they involved important sectors of society, the union organizations were not strong enough to overcome the frailty of the social actors. This was not because they were divided or decentralized or did not operate nationwide, [but] because some organizational structures were deficient in terms of representativeness",<sup>9</sup> said Archila. More recently, at the beginning of this century and under the new Constitution, social movements and NGOs have gained visibility in function of their resistance to the changes imposed by a context of neoliberal globalization. With the Plan Colombia<sup>10</sup>,

7 Mauricio Archila, *Idas y Venidas, Vueltas y Revueltas: Protestas sociales en Colombia 1958-1990*. Bogotá: Cinep, 2005. p. 215.

8 Ibid., pp. 373-4.

9 Ibid., pp. 470-1.

10 During the Andrés Pastrana government (1998-2002) a bilateral agreement called Plan Colombia was signed between the United States and Colombia. Since 1999, the US government has offered economic assistance mainly to intensify the war against drugs and to expand and consolidate the government's presence in the country and improve living conditions for more vulnerable Colombians by means of social and economic opportunities. The plan continued during the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez and completed 15 years at the beginning of 2016. In the context of the peace process, the alliance changed direction and in accordance with the agreement between president Juan Manuel Santos and Barack Obama, signed in January 2016, from 2017 North American aid will be directed to post-conflict initiatives, in particular the process of removing land mines.

the signature of diverse free trade treaties and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA),<sup>11</sup> social movements both in Colombia and abroad intensified their protests.<sup>12</sup> Even so, the armed conflict has influenced the recent process of social reorganization in the country. Violence produces negative effects, with murders, the dislocation and exile of leaders and activists, and the weakening of these organizations, which in some cases tend to disappear. But Archila says that this same violence provoked “courageous responses from the social actors. [...] People continue to resist, although conditions are difficult.”<sup>13</sup>

In Colombia, social struggles have also been affected by the internal armed conflict — the oldest in Latin America. This has dominated internal politics and triggered struggles and protests on the part of civil society, which is opposed to the violence, to the negative effects of the government's attempts to mitigate the conflict and to institutional attempts to promote economic and social development that benefits foreign investors in detriment to Colombian industry.<sup>14</sup> According to the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (Cinep), new forms of struggle have been emerging in the country, such as civil disobedience and resistance to the armed conflict.<sup>15</sup> A clear example of

---

11 The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) addresses the expansion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to the other states on the continent, with the exception of Cuba. Colombia ratified the agreement with the signatories to NAFTA (United States, Mexico and Canada).

12 Mauricio Archila, “Los movimientos sociales en la encrucijada del siglo XXI”. In: Francisco Leal Buitrago (Org.), *En la encrucijada: Colombia en el siglo XXI*. Bogotá: Grupo editorial Norma, 2006. p. 281.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

14 According to the National Association of Financial Institutions (ANIF), the balance of the free trade agreements in 2013-2014 was negative for the country. Not only did the amount exported drop in the twelve months preceding March 2015, but also the impact of the trade flow was felt in key industries in the country. See <[www.elnuevosiglo.com.co/articulos/6-2015-exportaciones-v%C3%ADa-tlc-cayeron-en-el-%C3%BAltimo-a%C3%B1o.html](http://www.elnuevosiglo.com.co/articulos/6-2015-exportaciones-v%C3%ADa-tlc-cayeron-en-el-%C3%BAltimo-a%C3%B1o.html)>.

15 Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular [Cinep], *Luchas sociales en Colombia*, 2013. Bogotá: Cinep/Programa por la paz, 2014. p. 558. Available at: <[comosoc.org/IMG/pdf/informe\\_especial\\_cinep\\_protestas\\_2013.pdf](http://comosoc.org/IMG/pdf/informe_especial_cinep_protestas_2013.pdf)>.

this is precisely the massive march on February 4, 2008, in which twelve million Colombians participated. Closing down avenues, wielding posters, with their white shirts and a spirit of collective indignation, these protesters transformed social mobilization in Colombia. It was different not only because of the massive adhesion throughout the country and even in other countries, but also due to the fact that it originated on Facebook, initiated by a common internet user.

On this day, the largest newspaper in the country, *El Tiempo*, wrote:

“History will tell that the first large march undertaken simultaneously in different parts of the planet and convened by a social network (Facebook) was against the Farc, a ‘terrorist’ group accused of kidnappings and murders in Colombia, with millions of people demonstrating, peacefully on all the continents”.<sup>16</sup>

At that time Facebook had been in existence for four years in the United States, and the Spanish language version was only a year old. Soon it would be the turn of the Arab Spring in 2010, Occupy in 2011 and other social movements and campaigns that began to flourish in cyberspace, demonstrating the existence of a new form of public mass meeting. In Colombia, the internet would once again demonstrate its power with the presidential campaign of Antanas Mockus in 2010, producing the digital phenomenon of politics 2.0, known as the “green wave”.

In a country with historically high levels of abstention from voting — around 60% —, the Green Party's electoral campaign drove an unprecedented digital mobilization, attracting young people who, on their own initiative, produced flashmobs,<sup>17</sup> digital pieces, videos, images etc., converting the social

16 “Marcha contra las Farc, mayormovilización en la historia del país”. *El Tiempo*, Feb. 4, 2008. Consulted on Oct. 20, 2015. Available at: <[www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-3945957](http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-3945957)>.

17 Flashmob is a new concept (2003) referring to lightning fast collective acts. An unusual or unexpected action or intervention in the public space which disperses rapidly.



networks into open spaces for political expression. A community atmosphere was created in the networks in support of an atypical candidate in Colombian politics, coming neither from a political family nor having the support of the traditional parties. Mockus, who is an academic of Lithuanian descent, the former president of the National University of Colombia and the creator of the NGO Corpovisionarios,<sup>18</sup> was transformed into an “anti-political” politician, who enjoyed and still enjoys great appeal among sectors of the young population through the social networks.

More recently, the peace process the government is engaged in with the Farc guerillas in Havana, Cuba has been a fundamental part of the transformation of Colombian civil society. Since the talks were initiated in 2012, a five-point agenda has been under negotiation, one of which is related to political participation. This point involves discussions about the rights of social movements and guarantees for social mobilization in the country. The “General Agreement for the termination of the conflict and the construction of a stable, lasting peace” recognizes the need to offer the political opposition guarantees. Moreover, the joint draft of this point in the agenda, ratified in 2013,<sup>19</sup> states that democracy should be broadened to permit the emergence of new forces on the political and social scene in order to enrich debate and deliberation on the country’s problems as a means of constructing and consolidating the peace. This involves guarantees, enabling different social and political organizations and movements to work on and express their interests via different means, including social protest. According to these pre-agreements, mobilizations and protests are considered to be legitimate forms of political action that further inclusion and critical citizenship in the same way as the active exercise

---

18 Corpovisionarios is an NGO created by Antanas Mockus aimed at conducting cross-disciplinary research into civic culture. This organization was responsible for developing and organizing the 2015 March for Life.

19 Colombia and Farc-EP, *Participación política: apertura democrática para construir la paz*. Habana, Cuba: Mesa de conversaciones para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera en Colombia, 2013.

of freedom of expression.<sup>20</sup> Although the 1991 Constitution provided for the recognition and expansion of citizens' rights and, in particular, the protection of minorities or marginalized groups, the ratification of the peace agreements has implied greater promotion of political pluralism, as well as organizations, social movements and their leaders, all of which require guarantees and new spaces for action.

In this context of shaping and transforming Colombian civil society — which, more recently has been determined by the peace talks —, movements and mobilizations have been developing which have introduced new forms of protest employing technological advances in a context of local, regional and global interconnection. This is the case of the three mobilizations that will be discussed in this chapter.

## 2. Overview of the legal and political environment in which civil society operates, including cyberspace

Colombia is a country with 48 million inhabitants located in the north of South America, bordering on Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela and Brazil. With a GDP of US\$ 377.7 million, according to the World Bank,<sup>21</sup> it is the third largest economy in South America, after Brazil and Argentina, with the second highest growth rate in recent years. Colombia has one of the most stable democracies in the region, with a government elected by popular vote almost uninterruptedly since the end of the 19th century. However, it is a democracy at war, which for 50 years has suffered an internal armed guerilla conflict, and

20 Eleonora Rabinovich, "Protesta, derechos y libertad de expresión". In: Eleonora Rabinovich, Ana Lucía Magrini and Omar Rincón, *"Vamos a portarnos mal": Protesta social y libertad de expresión en América Latina*. Bogotá: Centro de Competencia en Comunicación para América Latina/ Friedrich Ebert Foundation [C3FES], 2011. p. 17.

21 World Bank, "Datos Colombia". Consulted on Nov. 10, 2015. Available at: <datos.bancomundial.org/pais/Colombia>.

is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 53.5.<sup>22</sup>

The 1991 Constitution created the Constitutional Court to guarantee the integrity and supremacy of the constitutional charter. Through its decisions — the majority of which defend the principles of equality, human dignity and the free development of personality —, it has proven to be favorable to civil society. According to the researcher Esteban Restrepo, the Court's decisions have employed a “linguistic arsenal [commonplace and inclusive] that permits the formation and strengthening of more permanent social movements that tend to contest and dismantle the more deeply rooted structures of social oppression”.<sup>23</sup> Since it was created there has been an increase in the number of social struggles occurring on an annual basis in Colombia which, in recent years, have equaled the figures recorded for 1975. According to the Cinep report, during 2014 there were 1,025 protests, indicating a high level of mobilization, high levels of social participation and broad visibility for the participants in these struggles.<sup>24</sup>

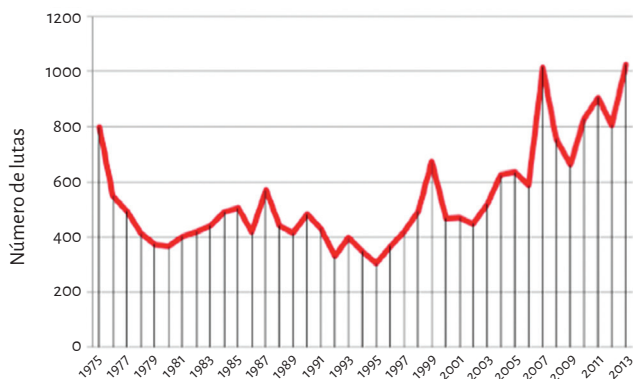
---

22 World Bank. “Gini Index”. Consulted on Nov. 12, 2015. Available at: <datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SI.POV.GINI>.

23 Esteban Restrepo, “Reforma constitucional y progreso social: ‘Constitucionalización de la vida cotidiana’ en Colombia”. In: *Sela (Seminario en Latinoamérica de Teoría Constitucional y Política) Papers*, n. 14. New Haven, United States: Yale Law School, 2002. Consulted on Oct. 12, 2015. Available at: <digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yls\_sela/14>.

24 Cinep, op. cit., p. 555.

Chart 1: Incidence of social struggles in Colombia (1975-2013)



Source: Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular [Cinep], *Luchas sociales en Colombia*, 2013. Bogotá: Cinep/Programa por la paz, 2014. p. 556.

The forms of mobilization include strikes, hunger strikes, invasions, roadblocks, civil disturbances, occupation of buildings, resistance and marches (the latter were more prevalent in 2013: 58%). Regarding the sectors of the population who have led mobilizations in the country, since the 1990s there has been a relative decrease in the visibility of rural and wage-earning actors, accompanied by an increase in sectors such as the self-employed and city dwellers.<sup>25</sup> Thus between 1975 and 2010 wage-earners (including manual workers and employees) and rural workers (encompassing laborers, tenant farmers and owners of mid-sized properties) had led 27% and 16% of the struggles respectively, differently from urban residents (ordinary individuals promoting actions), who led 23% of the protests in these years, and the self-employed, responsible for 5%. Students (both secondary and university level)

<sup>25</sup> According to Martha Cecilia García, co-author of the Cinep report published in 2014, in characterizing the actors leading the social struggle in Colombia, reference is made to wage earners, that is formally employed workers receiving a salary and registered in the social security system, and to self-employed workers.

accounted for 14% of these disputes. In contrast, according to the most recent numbers (2013), rural workers were behind 12% of the protests, wage earners, 17%, the self-employed, 11%, and city dwellers, 32%.<sup>26</sup>

With respect to the digital panorama in the country, it should be noted that the internet arrived in Colombia in May 1994. Three years after the introduction of the Political Constitution, it arrived at a moment when Colombia was facing a peak in corruption and in the activities of drug traffickers, the guerillas and extreme right-wing paramilitary groups. Information and communication technologies (ICT) represented the promise of happiness; the first five years (1994-1998) passed without major transformations beyond the proliferation of computers and the relative popularization of the internet in the cities. In 2000, Colombia inaugurated its first broadband transmission line via fiber optic connection and mobile phones began to proliferate. In 2008, the mobile internet started to gain popularity based on the backbone provided by the cellular telephony carriers. With the expansion of mobile telephony and the new social networks, in 2010 the government started to implement the “Viva Digital” plan, aimed at increasing connectivity nationwide and driving a series of technological advances to promote transparency and to provide digital services.

The number of internet users in Colombia has grown significantly in recent years. According to the latest report from the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies (MinTic) (2015),<sup>27</sup> there are currently 10.7 million broadband subscribers in Colombia, representing an increase of over 200% compared with 2010, when there were only 3 million; however, only 40% of the country has this kind of connection. According to the Communications Regulatory Commission (CRC) and data from the Unified Information System (SIUST), 38.1% of Colombian households have internet access. With respect to

---

<sup>26</sup> Cinep, op. cit., p. 556.

<sup>27</sup> Comisión de Regulación de Comunicaciones [CRC], *Informe de Industria del Sector TIC septiembre de 2015*. Bogotá: CRC, 2014. p. 30. Available at: <colombiatic.mintic.gov.co/602/articles-13464\_archivo\_pdf.pdf>.

individuals, there are 10.6 internet subscribers per 100 inhabitants, and 56.6 per 100 in the case of mobile internet.<sup>28</sup> The World Bank states that 53 out of every 100 Colombians are internet “users”.<sup>29</sup>

Mobile telephony, on the other hand, has a penetration of more than 115%, with over 55 million lines in operation. The number of computers in households is still relatively low: according to the CRC, in 2014 only 27.5% of households had a desk top computer, 24.2% had a laptop, and 13.3% a tablet.<sup>30</sup>

According to the digital statistics website Internet World Stats, in 2015 the number of Facebook users in Latin America was over 290 million people.<sup>31</sup> Within the region, Colombia comes in fourth place in absolute numbers, with 28.5 million people, after Argentina, with 34 million, Mexico, with 60 million, and Brazil, with 117 million (2015). This makes Facebook the most popular network in the region (as in the rest of the world) and the fastest growing one.<sup>32</sup> According to comScore, in 2014 Colombia had a total of 11.5 million single monthly visitors to Facebook, putting it far ahead of other networks, such as LinkedIn, with 3.8 million, Twitter, with 2.6 million and Google+, with 2.5 million.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Global Web Index, the Latin American region is second in the total number of internet users who use Twitter, coming after the Middle East and Africa. In Colombia, according to the MinTic, the social networks

---

28 Ibid., p. 6.

29 World Banks, “Datos usuarios de internet”. Consulted on Nov. 10, 2015. Available at: <datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/IT.NET.USER.P2>.

30 CRC, op. cit., p. 31.

31 Internet World Stats, “Internet users in Latin America November 2015”. Consulted on Dec. 10, 2015. Available at: <www.internetworldstats.com/stats10.htm>.

32 Internet World Stats, “Internet Users in the Americas by Geographic Regions – November 30, 2015”. Consulted on Dec. 10, 2015. Available at: <www.internetworldstats.com/stats2.htm>.

33 comScore, Futuro Digital Colombia. Bogota: comScore, 2014. p. 20. Available at: <www.comscore.com/lat/Insights/Presentations-and-Whitepapers/2014/2014-Digital-Future-in-Focus-Colombia>.

are the most popular activity among internet users, accounting for 63.2% of usage, followed by obtaining information, with 61.7%, and email and instant messaging programs, with 57.6%.<sup>34</sup> According to comScore, Colombia comes in first place in access to the social networks in relation to the total number of webpages visited, with 55.4%, followed by Brazil, with 53.6%, and Uruguay, with 50.6%.<sup>35</sup> In January 2016, president Santos had just over 4 million followers on his Twitter account (@JuanManSantos) with more than 10,000 tweets published. He joined this network in August 2009, prior to his victory in the 2010 elections. He publishes around three tweets per day. In 2012, Colombia came in 12th place among the countries with the highest number of Twitter accounts, according to a Semiocast study.<sup>36</sup> In the same study, in 2012, president Juan Manuel Santos came in 8th place among the 10 most popular ruling leaders on Twitter. The list contained four other leaders in the region: Dilma Rousseff, Cristina Fernández, Enrique Peña Nieto and Hugo Chávez.

Three social mobilizations which occurred in this digital context will be analyzed in the following pages: the National Farmers' Strike (PNA), the Marcha de las Putas (Slut Walk) and the Marcha por la Vida (March for Life). These three mobilizations invaded cyberspace, imposed themselves in the face of the power of the media and the government and were transformed into major phenomena on the streets. They were supported by e-citizens and activists, by the press and by politicians. They took over the streets with their signs and their passion, and invaded the web with their memes,<sup>37</sup> videos and myriad tweets.

---

34 CRC, op. cit., p. 32.

35 comScore, op. cit., p. 18.

36 CRC, op. cit., p. 32.

37 Memes are digital creations, normally satirical or humorous photographs or videos that are widely shared over the social networks and the internet in general.

### 3. Case studies

#### Case 1: The National Farmers' Strike (PNA)

The National Farmers' Strike (PNA) involved a series of rural workers' mobilizations that took place in the second half of 2013 in Colombia, a year after the presidential and legislative elections and while the government and the Farc were discussing the agricultural question in negotiations in Havana. The strike involved protests and the shutdown of streets and highways in different locations in the country, with the participation of a number of unions from different sectors. For the first time, in addition to the 200,000 agricultural workers who protested, many other people — especially urban internet users — supported a hitherto invisible, marginalized movement, initially via the social networks and later on the streets. Prior to the Farmers' national strike, in February 2013 there had been an initial strike involving coffee workers, followed on June 10, 2013 by a large mobilization in the north of the country in the region of Catatumbo<sup>38</sup> (in the Northern department of Santander), in which farmers and agricultural workers took to the streets to protest against neglect on the part of the government, which in itself was nothing new in Colombia. The novelty was to emerge later with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and e-activism in general connecting the city and the countryside as never before.

The National Farmers' Strike began on August 19, 2013 in the rural areas of the country. The intention to mobilize on the part of workers in a number of agricultural sectors — initially on coffee plantations — had been announced two months earlier, and the government, as well as potato, rice, onion and milk producers, truckers, miners, among others, knew that there was no stopping the movement. The protest was to be against what César Jerez, leader of the

---

<sup>38</sup> Catatumbo is a zone in the north of the country consisting of 11 municipalities, bordering on Venezuela. Because of its climate and its geographical location, with extensive cultivation of coca and large oil, coal and uranium reserves, it has been disputed by armed groups for decades.



agricultural workers in Catatumbo and the national strike, called the ruin of the rural economy and small producers due to the macroeconomic policies adopted by the government: “the consolidation of these policies with the free trade agreement (signed with United States in 2011) affected all these producers and agricultural workers and was the main cause of the protests”.<sup>39</sup>

As the researcher Carolina Cepeda states, the rural movement, in common with all social movements, shares the idea of social transformation given the background of the country's historical conflicts over land and this sector of society's discontent with Columbian macroeconomic policies. For this reason, Jerez emphasizes that “the agricultural strike in Catatumbo and the agrarian strikes in 2013-2014 are a protest against the model”. They represent a struggle against the status quo, demanding changes in a certain sector — in this case the government — and they seek to bring about a real transformation. With respect to this kind of protest, Cepeda adds: “they cannot just be supported by small discussion groups, nor by isolated actions of a few of those involved. They need to grow, ensuring that sympathizers are converted into activists. That way they will be transformed from a movement based on conflict to one based on consensus, which does not mean consensus with the authorities, but with the rest of society”.<sup>40</sup> This was precisely the backdrop to the National Farmers' Strike in 2013.

Although it had been announced that the march would be peaceful, on the second day the National Highways Institute (Invias) reported 15 highways occupied and blocked by the demonstrators and 61 people arrested for causing disturbances.<sup>41</sup> The most complicated region was the department of Boyacá in the interior of the country. Guillermo Prieto La Rotta, better known as Pirry,

---

39 César Jerez, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Oct. 8, 2015.

40 Carolina Cepeda, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 31, 2015.

41 “Bloqueadas 15 vías en segundo día de paro”. *El Espectador*, 20 ago. 2013. Consulted on Oct. 20, 2015. Available at: <[www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/bloqueadas-15-vias-segundo-dia-del-paro-agrario-articulo-441112](http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/bloqueadas-15-vias-segundo-dia-del-paro-agrario-articulo-441112)>.

a native of this region and a well known television journalist, described the strike as follows: “police chaos, acts of vandalism, cities under siege, deserted highways, blocked routes, empty stores, millions of liters of milk poured down the drains. The governability of the country brought into question in the midst of speeches, *cacerolazos* and confrontations”.<sup>42</sup>

On the fourth day of the protests, the number of highways blocked had increased to 30 nationwide and 15,000 police had been deployed throughout the country to control the protests. The acts of violence and the confrontations between the police and demonstrators were monopolizing media attention, which was limited to broadcasting news about the protests. In the social networks, by contrast, messages and petitions in support of the agricultural workers were beginning to circulate. When the strike was a week old, and finally negotiations had begun between the farmers' leaders and the government, the first “*cacerolazo*” broke out, involving between 40 to 50 thousand people in the Plaza Bolívar in the city of Tunja. The social networks were the medium chosen for convening the participants and for transmitting the protests live via videos and comments, in particular on Twitter.

---

42 *La rebelión de las ruanas, mentiras y verdades, sonrío el paro campesino*. Director: Guillermo Prieto La Rotta. Especiales Pirry. Canal RCN. 2013. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NBgdrBBEn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NBgdrBBEn4)>.

Figure 1: Cacerolazo in Tunja, Boyacá, via Twitter



The initiative was soon replicated in other cities in the country. On the night of August 26, around 5,000 people congregated in the Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá and from that moment on the protests in the city became a constant. The same happened in Manizales, Girardot, Medellín, Armenia and Cali in the following days. At that moment, the social networks became a space for uniting people and for providing coverage of the mobilizations taking place throughout the country (both by the public and the communication media).

Figure 2: Cacerolazo in Bogota, via Twitter



On August 29, a number of organizations convened the march in Bogota. Students played a leading role and the starting points for the protest that would culminate in the Plaza Bolívar in the capital were decided in the universities. The mobilization was characterized by disturbances in the city center. The tense climate surrounding the protest generated instability in the talks between the different parties. The government argued that the excesses being committed all over the country were proof of the political motivations behind the farmers' demands, associated with the leftist movement *Marcha Patriótica*.<sup>43</sup> The leaders

<sup>43</sup> The *Marcha Patriótica* Political and Social Movement (MAPA) began on July 20, 2010, during the bicentennial celebration of Colombia's independence. It is defined as a popular movement inspired by the historical legacy of the struggles of the Colombian people. Its goals include

of the agricultural movements denied these accusations. However, it should be emphasized that the rural workers and the problems related to land and agriculture are part of the Farc's political agenda. It is also necessary to position the mobilization in a broader political context, because the marches related to the Farmers' Strike took place in the midst of a crisis in the peace talks underway in Havana on the days on which agricultural reform was under discussion.<sup>44</sup>

The agricultural movements that participated in the marches nationwide were not spontaneous groups, but grass roots organizations that have proven organizational and mobilization capacity. The agricultural leaders convened and mobilized their union via traditional channels —distant from the internet—, but thanks to the web, they were able to generate empathy among people not involved in the conflict and not a party to the sector's demands. Moreover, they used digital platforms to denounce cases of police abuse during the highway blockages. For the researcher Carolina Cepeda it is clear “that the agricultural workers marched because this was their only way to publicize the conflict, the state of things. The general public, on the contrary, did not offer support in function of what the agricultural workers were suffering, because the problems they suffered were different. Nevertheless people were able to understand what the conflict was about and to take sides with it”.<sup>45</sup> For this reason the messages on the social networks and the calls to protest in the cities

---

promoting and boosting different forms of organizations and mobilization all over Colombia, regardless of the sector, degree of representation or size.

44 One of the first questions dealt with in the Havana talks was Agrarian Reform (Reforma Agraria Integral or RRI in the Spanish acronym), a project which in the previous agreements between the government and the Farc was defined as the basis for structural transformation in agriculture, considered “determinant in driving regional integration and equitable social and economic development in the country. Reform should seek to transform the rural reality in Colombia, integrate the different regions, eradicate poverty, promote equality and ensure full civic rights and, consequently, guarantee that the conflict is not repeated and that violence is eradicated”. Joint draft dated June 6, 2014. Consulted on Jan. 21, 2016. Available at: <[www.naiz.eus/eu/hemeroteca/gara/editions/2014-09-26/hemeroteca\\_articles/el-gobierno-y-las-FARC-publican-sus-acuerdos-para-mayor-transparencia](http://www.naiz.eus/eu/hemeroteca/gara/editions/2014-09-26/hemeroteca_articles/el-gobierno-y-las-FARC-publican-sus-acuerdos-para-mayor-transparencia)>.

45 Carolina Cepeda, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 31, 2015.

contained phrases such as “Solidarity with the agricultural workers, let us rebel and gain some dignity in August! We are going to protest all over Colombia, because the Colombian countryside represents the entire nation!”.

The agricultural worker organizations that participated were offline-based social movements that were demonstrating their discontent with government policies and were demanding change. What was new was the fact that for the first time their message was being spread via the internet. According to César Jerez, founder of the NGO Prensa Rural, in the 2013 protests “for the first time ever the entire country witnessed a mobilization methodology which originated in the cities via the social networks”.<sup>46</sup> There were more than 20 days of nationwide protests which, according to *Mesa Nacional Agropecuaria y Popular de Interlocución y Acuerdo* (MIA), brought together more than 200,000 agricultural workers in 17 departments and on 40 highways throughout the country. According to Jerez, thanks to the strike, for the first time ever a part of Colombian society and public opinion were able to understand the underlying land-related structural problem in association with the armed conflict. For Jerez, the development of the Farmers’ Strike was a reflex of four fundamental elements in the Colombian conflict which have existed for decades: “the problem of access to land, the problem of the formalization of rural land deeds, the problem of development that generates poverty, inequality and exclusion and also the problem of territorial organization”.<sup>47</sup>

In terms of visibility and the capacity to influence, the strike made it clear that today the internet provides social movements with a megaphone. The role played by the traditional communication media continues to be important, but they are no longer an exclusive medium with a monopoly on information. Now the agricultural workers can share their message rapidly and on a massive scale. Jerez states that part of his work consisted of deconstructing the official

---

46 César Jerez, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogotá, Oct. 8, 2015.

47 Op. cit., p. 37.

discourse by means of the social networks: “During the farmers’ strike I spent two hours a day on Twitter trying to revert what was appearing in the media. I was one of the leaders of the strike, and I had to use the social networks to counter media manipulation. This was the reason the official communication media were forced to come to us”.

Another example that illustrates the role played by the social networks occurred on the day the strike began, when president Santos included one of the most politically costly phrases of his government in a pronouncement: “this so-called agricultural strike does not exist”.<sup>48</sup> At that moment, the urban population showed its support for the countryside as never before. The networks were filled with images of the roadblocks and disturbances and the hashtag #ElTalParoSiExiste (The So-Called Strike Does Exist) became a trend not only on Twitter but throughout the country.

It should be stressed that the networks were not determinant for the development of the marches in rural areas, but they played a key role in the support that came from the cities. Jerez recognizes that the initial communication dynamics for the Farmers’ Strike were conducted traditionally, from agricultural worker to agricultural worker by means of assemblies and meetings between leaders and communities, but gradually they gained a foothold in cyberspace: “the rural world is one thing, the city is another. In the countryside you don’t have a signal, so it is difficult to communicate, but in the cities you have the social networks”. Once the protests got going, the web became a tool which facilitated the dissemination of information and was later used to coordinate actions, mainly in the cities. According to César Pachón, the potato producers’ leader, in the strike, “the social networks were used to contest the official discourse and to ‘debunk the lies’ [...]”. For me and for the agricultural movement [...], one of the strengths of the social movements lies in the fact that the social networks are managing to force the communication media to

48 In 2013, one week after National Farmers’ Strike had begun, Juan Manuel Santos declared: “This so called national farmers’ strike does not exist”. See <[www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/santos-el-paro-nacional-agrario-no-existe/355264-3](http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/santos-el-paro-nacional-agrario-no-existe/355264-3)>.

be more neutral”.<sup>49</sup> The social networks were the means of communicating with people who are not active in any organization and who represent the majority of Colombian society. It was precisely through the social networks that, once the agricultural workers were in the streets, the agrarian movements were able to respond to what for them was “disinformation coming from the communication media”, which were merely repeating the official government discourse.

With respect to online/offline relations in the Farmers’ Strike there is a unique characteristic distinguishing it from the other marches analyzed in this work. In a large part of the countryside, where the roadblocks were erected, internet access is very poor or inexistent. Participants in the movement talk about trying to find a signal on mountain tops and recall the precarious conditions of access and the low level of technology in general. However, this did not constitute an obstacle to using the web. The leaders of the farmers’ movement found ways to communicate with the countryside without the need for intermediaries during the 20 days of protests. Tweets came in from the over the mountains, the television news programs showed images of the roadblocks taken with mobile phones and there was an abundance of messages. Information flowed during a couple of weeks until gradually the protest was firmly installed in the public sphere. In the social networks the hashtags #ParoPapero (potato producer strike), #ParoAgrario (agricultural strike), #NoMas970 (no to resolution 970/2010) and #MePongoLaRuana (I wear the *ruana*) proliferated. Facebook showed images of people wearing the “*ruana*”, a kind of poncho worn by the Colombian rural population. Very soon, events were being created on Facebook, as well as calls to participate in marches in the cities. In Antioquia (in the northeast of the country) the event “August 26: Great National Pacific *Cacerolazo*: 7 pm. Medellín” was created on Facebook. 744 people confirmed their attendance, another 292 responded “maybe” and the invitation for the event was sent out to 18,000 people. In Manizales,

49 *El tal campo sí existe: los medios y la protesta social*. Director: César Pachón. Canal Capital. 2014. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=snNVSuoUd9A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snNVSuoUd9A)>.



an event was arranged for August 29 entitled “National *Cacerolazo*. The Strike Does Exist!!!”. 27 thousand people received invitations for this event, of which 2,000 confirmed their presence and 552 responded “maybe”. For the same day, another protest was convened for the morning in Bogota. It was called the “Great Demonstration in Support of the National Farmers’ and Popular Strike”, with a total of 10,000 people invited, of whom 777 confirmed their presence and 189 responded “maybe”.

Figure : Open event on Facebook, August 29, 2013



The Farmers’ leaders started to send out messages via their Twitter accounts and their Facebook profiles. For example, César Jerez, the leader from Catatumbo, has 5,935 followers on his Twitter account (@CesarJerezM). César Pachón, one of the representatives of the potato producers from Boyacá, has 36,700 followers on his Twitter account (@cesarpachonagro) and 61,499 people “liked” his Facebook page. So there were the agricultural workers in the mountains and the students in the cities. A number of NGOs and union

movements also joined the cause, including the Colombia National Indigenous Organization (ONIC) and the union federation Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT).

On August 31, the dismantling of roadblocks on some highways was initiated in order to speed up negotiations with the government. From the beginning of September, the pace of the protests began to slow down as agreements between the strikers and the government took shape. A start was made to negotiations between government representatives and the farmers' leaders in the different departments of the country to discuss questions such as finance and credit, overseas trade, agricultural inputs, association, as well as environmental and human rights issues. The Farmers' Strike eased off gradually, and the government announced that it was willing to negotiate the National Pact for Agriculture and Rural Development, which would address a number of the strikers' demands. By September 10, all of the highways in the country had been liberated and, two days later the president launched a package of decrees for the agricultural sector. The protests ended after 20 days, amidst reports of police violence and abuse. The negotiations continued during the following month, but progress was difficult. Soon the agricultural workers began to signal their discontent and threatened to resume the protests. In December and in the first months of 2014, a number of agricultural workers took to the streets again to protest and to demand that the government fulfill the terms of the agreement.

In the first week of December, a new demonstration was convened in Bogota on behalf of the agricultural workers to protest against the non-fulfillment of the agreements between the agricultural movements and president Santos. The participants in this march were not Bogota residents but some two thousand agricultural workers from different departments around the country. At the beginning of 2014, it was announced that the leaders of the agricultural workers would call for a new strike by the end of April. In spite of the government's efforts to contain the situation, on April 28 there were

demonstrations in 10 departments in the country, less than a month before the presidential elections.

During this process, some leaders and participants in the Farmers' strike drew closer to a number of political parties and were included in party candidate lists for the legislative elections. The Polo Democrático Alternativo, Partido Verde, Partido Conservador, Partido de U (Partido Social de Unidad Nacional) and Unión Patriótica put a number of leaders of the 2013 and 2014 strikes on their candidate lists. The Polo Democrático party included seven<sup>50</sup> candidates on its list for the Chamber of Deputies and another seven<sup>51</sup> on its list for the Senate. This was due to a question of ideological proximity and the party's historical links with multiple union organizations. The Partido Verde, which had actively supported the Farmers' strike, invited César Pachón to join its list. He declined the invitation, intending to run as an independent candidate, but eventually desisted. The Partido Conservador and the Partido de U each included one agricultural leader in their respective lists.

In the end, of the approximately 25 strike participants who became candidates only one was elected: Alberto Castilla, agricultural leader for the Polo Democrático Alternativo was elected as a senator for the 2014-2018 legislature. This demonstrates the generally frail relations between political parties and the social movements and provides further proof of the already evident crisis of representation affecting political parties in Colombia. According to the researcher Catalina Jiménez, "the low number of votes obtained by the leaders of the protests after the successful mobilization of just a few months earlier was

---

50 People involved in the mobilizations who were listed as candidates for the Chamber of Deputies: Óscar Gutierrez, Dignidad Cafetera (Caldas); Rubén Darío Gómez, leader of Conaminercol (Antioquia); Walter Benavides, Dignidad Papera (Boyacá); Alonso Osorio, agricultural leader and coffee grower (Cauca); Germán Suárez, mineworkers' leader (Boyacá); Omar Acevedo, Dignidad Cacaotera (Santander); and John Fredy Muñoz, mineworkers' leader (Caldas).

51 People involved in the mobilizations who were listed as candidates for the Senate: Alberto Castilla, agricultural leader; José Isauro Román, cocoa growers' leader; Fredy Mosquera, coffee growers' leader; Plinio Hernández, potato growers' leader; Luís Alfonso Calderón, milk producers' leader; Iván Rodríguez, agricultural leader.

due to a lack of organizational capacity in maintaining the support they had achieved”.<sup>52</sup>

In 2014, Santos was reelected in an atmosphere of optimism and confidence generated by the talks with the Farc, and the Farmers’ Strike faded from the press agenda. On a symbolic level, the strike brought the question of injustice to the surface, increasing public awareness of the agricultural workers’ situation, an issue which had hitherto been remote to most. It moved people and generated indignation on a national level. In the political field, it led to a certain solidarity with the agricultural workers, which was strategic given the possibility of the signature and ratification of a peace agreement in 2016. In the digital world, the movement proved that it was capable of taking advantage of the speed and the low costs enabled by the web to disseminate its message and eliminate its dependence on the traditional communication media.

## Case 2: La Marcha de las Putas(Slut Walk)

La “Marcha de las Putas” was the name given to the Colombian version of the Slut Walks, a mobilization that was replicated in more than 30 countries worldwide. It started in Canada in 2011, when a number of women protested against the words of a police officer who declared that “women should avoid dressing like sluts as a precaution against sexual assault”. The first Slut Walk in Colombia was held on February 25, 2012. The communication media reported that around 2,000<sup>53</sup> people participated in nine cities in the country; Bogotá had the largest turn out, with 700 people.<sup>54</sup> The initiative was repeated in 2013,

52 Catalina Jiménez, “Movilización social y partidos políticos durante las elecciones 2014: ¿qué relación tienen?”. In: Fredy Barrero and Margarita Batle (Org.), *Elecciones en Colombia 2014, ¿representaciones fragmentadas?*. Bogotá: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2014. p. 282.

53 The leader of the mobilization, Mar Candela, claims that the total number of participants in the first rally was 5 thousand.

54 Milena Sarralde, “Este es mi cuerpo y se respeta, gritaron mujeres en marcha nacional”. *El Tiempo*, Feb. 16, 2012. Consulted on Oct. 25, 2015. Available at: <[www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-11219502](http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-11219502)>.

with one thousand participants in three cities and again in 2014, with more than 3,500 people participating in Bogotá. The calls for each one of the rallies were made over Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

In Colombia, the role of spokeswoman was assumed by Marcela (Mar) Candela Castilla, a woman who had hitherto been a human rights activist working for social justice focused on women's issues but without being a militant feminist. She says that the trigger was the murder of prostitutes that she knew in Bogotá and in whose memory she decided to create a crime hotline "Las mujeres que gritan en silencio" (Women who scream in silence) for female sex workers who suffered assaults. Candela said "that on seeing the reception to the crime line I started searching on the networks to find a way to get the message out there. I found the slut walk in Mexico and got in touch with Eddie Hernández, the march's lawyer in that country [...]. I said I wasn't a feminist but gave her my reasons for wanting to bring the march to Colombia". So far three marches have been organized in the country, in 2012, 2013 and 2014. These have been transformed into an online and offline opportunity to talk publicly about women's role in society, the woman's body, abortion and different gender stereotypes.

"The social networks have been driving the Slut Walk and the Feminismo Artesanal movement, the two causes I have been advocating in the country for more than four years", said Mar Candela. The call for the first Slut Walk started in June 2011, when I assumed leadership of the cause and created the profile on Facebook: Official Convening of the Slut Walk in Colombia (see figure 4). The first post is a text explaining the word "slut" and is signed by Mar Candela, as are most of the reflections she frequently posts on the Facebook pages of the events and the rally profiles she has created over the last four years. This first post had 27 likes, was shared 11 times and received 2 comments. In 2015, this page had 507 followers. Although this mobilization is organized on an international level, each country adapts it to its own context and social,

political and cultural conditions. Even though the original rally in Toronto was not aimed at defending the rights of prostitutes or advocating feminism, having a more social and political angle, in most countries the protest promotes feminist ideas. In Colombia, the message adopted is that no women should be subject to assault or aggression. “What most impacted me about the Canadian policeman’s comment was what it implied: ‘all sluts deserve to be raped’. Here a slut is any woman who decides whether to cover her body or not. So my motto is that we are all sluts until proven otherwise and that Colombia is a whorehouse par excellence”.<sup>55</sup>

Figure 4: Community page on Facebook, 2011



This type of declaration led some Colombian feminist organizations to reject the rally and question Mar Candela's leadership of the movement. However, the first rally went ahead and it was disseminated via the social networks, as well as receiving some coverage in Colombian and international communication media. Mar Candela stresses that she sought support among

55 Mar Candela, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogotá, Sep. 21, 2015.

different niches and social groups, including the right wing and the church. She invited clerics and priests, the LGBTI community and prostitutes, whom she contacted personally to explain the objectives of the rally and to try to persuade them to participate. To do this, she employed a strategy that had already been used in Peru: an acronym based on the Spanish word for whores: P.U.T.A.S.: “por una transformación autentica social” (for an authentic social transformation).

This way, she was able to involve “all these people who would otherwise not understand why the word ‘puta’ was being used as a slogan for a rally”. On February 25, 2012, Mar Candela and another two thousand people marched in Bucaramanga, Barranquilla, San Andrés, Medellín, Manizales, Tunja, Pereira, Villavicencio and Bogota. “Although almost half of the people on the streets were banging drums and shaking tambourines and shouting ‘this rally is a farce’, [...] the 2012 march was like a revolutionary carnival because it achieved its objective of uniting society beyond all ideological boundaries”, said Mar Candela. Like the later versions, the rally was performative in nature: women parading without any clothes on and men dressed as women. They carried signs with images and watchwords — which some people found grotesque — that provoked reflection and conveyed a very clear message: no woman should be subject to aggression. In spite of this, the message generated and continues to generate questioning and negative reactions. “People always shout at us ‘get dressed!’ and ‘we would support you if you had clothes on’, and this leads to confrontation with the protesters”, said Candela.

Participation in 2013 was lower. Initially the rally was convened in six cities, but in the end it took place in only three of them. “In 2013 I remember saying that I thought participation would decrease every year because there would be greater resistance to the rally, and that is precisely what happened”, said Mar Candela. It is estimated that one thousand people protested in the streets of Bogota. There were no estimates for Cali and Cartagena. Both in 2013 and 2014 there were fewer social groups in the rallies and these were less diverse. “There were no longer any priests or nuns. These different social groups

did not take part this time because of the experience they had had on the first march", says the spokeswoman. In 2014, participation was lower and did not attract so much media attention. "I realized that the Slut Walk was no longer so important for the press, it was no longer in vogue. That frightened me".<sup>56</sup> Even so, in partnership with the organization PARCES ONG ("Pares en Acción-Reacción Contra la Exclusión Social", which translates as Peers in Action-Reaction Against Social Exclusion) and with support from the Bogota city government, the march was finally held on May 31 of that year. "The only one who opened any doors for me was the mayor (of Bogota) Gustavo Petro. He financed everything, but this was not in exchange for any political commitment as critics claimed at that time", she says. The city government agreed to pay for the official signs for the protests, which bore the same messages as in the previous rallies. However, one civil servant ordered the posters to be printed without the word "slut", considering it aggressive. Mar Candela reacted, protesting against this prohibition using a Twitter account until the impasse was resolved and the signs were reprinted with the original message and wording.

Every year different profiles were created for these mobilizations on Twitter and on Facebook. There would be a constant flow of content for a number of months, followed by the end of the activities. The movement's followers are dispersed throughout different profiles: on Facebook there are three pages with a total of over 16 thousand followers; on Twitter there are several accounts (e.g.: @femi\_artesanal, @marchaputas\_col). According to Mar Candela, she is the person behind all these accounts. Activity on Twitter began on February 21, 2012, when the account @marchadeputas\_col was created and the first call to protest was published using 104 characters: "1,000 marching to say that no is no, nobody can touch us without permission. 2012 Slut Walk Colombia". From the day this account was created until the eve of the rally, tweets were posted inviting people to take part and explaining its goals: "No is no", "I am as free as a whore", "naked or clothed, we are decide about our own lives", "We are all

---

<sup>56</sup> Mar Candela, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Sep. 21, 2015.



whores by profession”, “No to gender violence”. During the marches there was no social network activity. Differently from the Farmers’ Strike and the March for Life demonstrations, there were no tweets, photos or messages for this rally. The day of the march was totally offline, with all the action taking place on the streets as opposed to the internet. Days later, on March 14, 2012, the same account was used to announce the creation of the Slut Walk organization in Colombia. It was constituted by Mar Candela, who took charge of organizing and coordinating the movement in the country every year. In one tweet, the organization is defined as “a legally constituted initiative to combat harassment and violence”. After this, the account was only reactivated two years later for the call to the 2014 rally. In February 2013, Mar Candela created an event on Facebook called “Second edition of the Slut Walk in Colombia 6/04/2013”. From a total of 8,000 people who were invited, a thousand confirmed their presence and 449 responded “maybe”.

Figure 5: Groups on Facebook

**Movimiento Internacional Feminismo Artesanal**

12 889 personnes aiment ça  
Gabriel Corredor Aristizábal

Inviter des amis à aimer cette Page

**À PROPOS**

- Por una sociedad donde hombres y mujeres vivamos iguales en derechos, opciones, libertades y diferentes en humanidad pero por sobre todas las cosas libres
- Demandar le site web de Movimiento Internacional Feminismo Artesanal

**Message sur le mur**  
Exprimez-vous

**Movimiento Internacional Feminismo Artesanal**  
4 octobre, 01:25 · @

La escuela del cuerpo de Feminismo Artesanal se esta tejiendo con hilos de sudor, lagrimas y esfuerzos extremos. Con puntadas que pinchan el cuerpo y superan obstáculos.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8-5JK0USA>

**La marcha de las putas en Colombia**

permiso. ii  
**LA MARCHA DE LAS PUTAS ( Por Una Transformación Auténtica Social )**

**La marcha de las putas en Colombia**  
Communauté

1487 personnes aiment ça

Inviter des amis à aimer cette Page

**À PROPOS**

- MARCHA DE LAS PUTAS EN COLOMBIA  
VERSIÓN 2014

**Statut** **Photo/vidéo**

Ecrivez quelque chose sur cette Page...

**La marcha de las putas en Colombia** a partagé un lien.  
2 septembre · @

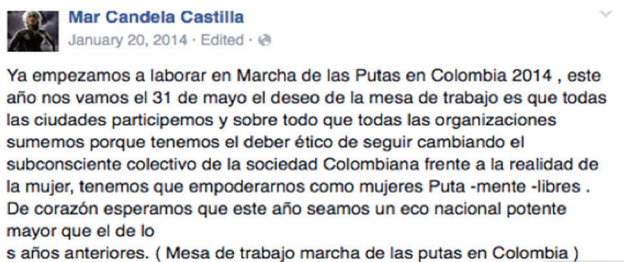
There was also a call for this march via the Twitter account @femi\_artesanal.

The call for the third edition took place via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, where two short videos were posted and received around 8,000 views (6,340 for one and 1,188 for the other). This time, dissemination on Twitter began in February 2014 via the account @marchaputas\_col, with a 106 character tweet that said “Convened for May 31, 2014. We are the whore you gave birth to. No is no, nobody touches us without permission”. On Facebook, the group “Slut Walk in Colombia” was created. This has 3,251 members and was responsible for publicizing and convening participants for the 2014 march (see figure 6). For this mobilization, Mar Candela used her personal Facebook account, publishing an initial message about the organization of the third edition of the rally in January 2014. According to Candela: “the networks have been the soul of this movement, without them it would not have reached the traditional communication media, for example [...]. The networks have been fundamental for overcoming resistance and for driving activism. Without them the work on the streets would be invisible; we might just as well be protesting inside a garage without the social networks”.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, the activist says that over the last four years she has spent more than ten hours a day on the social networks answering followers’ questions and providing information through her own accounts and those created for the different rallies and for Feminismo Artesanal. Mar Candela claims that the movement consists of more than 100,000 thousand people on the social networks and has been in place since the first edition.

---

57 Mar Candela, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Sep 21, 2015.

Figure 6: Call by Mar Candela on Facebook for 2014 rally



The Slut March in Colombia was not organized or led by feminists. It was a mobilization which united many non militant women around the question of the woman's body. Some of them defended prostitutes, others defended abortion and yet others were against male chauvinism in general. The only NGO that took part in one of the rallies was PARCES ONG, an organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of vulnerable individuals and communities. According to its executive director Alejandro Lanz: "PARCES wanted to be part of the mobilization, but from a different angle. Mar Candela always used the motto 'to be a whore is to be free', but there was no visible participation of women who in fact exercise this profession. So our proposal was to participate in the march with women who identify themselves as sex workers to advocate for their right to prostitute themselves".<sup>58</sup> For this march, the NGO used the official slogan of the mobilization on its own Facebook page — which has 5,890 likes — and on its Twitter account (@PARCESong) — which has 1,997 followers. The organization wanted to join the rally not only to engage women sex workers, but also for a very specific cause: in memory of and to further the cause of Wanda Fox, a trans woman who was murdered in the Santafé district of Bogotá for advocating the rights of sex workers. The 2014 edition of the Slut Walk was not so unified. Although PARCES had supported the organization

<sup>58</sup> Alejandro Lanz, interviewed by Estefanía Avella. Bogotá, Oct. 9, 2015.

of the mobilization, Mar Candela maintained her traditional line, while the NGO concentrated on advocating for the rights of sex workers. The two parties did this by protesting on different streets, following different routes. In spite of the differences, Mar Candela states that the participation of PARCES made one of her dreams come true: “to have a lot of prostitutes in the rally and, more importantly, ones who were not ashamed to say they were prostitutes”.

From the very beginning, Mar Candela had proposed to organize the rally for ten years in a row, but she recognizes that this will not be easy. For 2015, she had planned to hold it in October, but this was not possible due to a question of logistics. PARCES had also shown interest in supporting the organization of this fourth march, but its executive director, Alejandro Lanz, believes that the ideas and goals of the mobilization should be more clearly defined. He also argues that this is a space which should not be lost because it enables the participation of a key group for society. Mar Candela herself says that she will continue to lead the initiative and will do everything possible to develop it further because “the march has stimulated a new vision of feminism in Colombia. This is a homespun feminism that encourages resistance based on each woman's specific reality and rejects traditional dogmatic feminism. [...] Homespun feminism is for women who do not consider themselves to be feminists”.

The internet was the basis for the creation of this e-community of new feminists. Candela was able to take the international concept (via the web) and convert into a local tendency. The online world helped to reduce costs and the time involved in organization. It was also the best medium for disseminating the movement's provocative messages with women exhibiting their breasts and messaging what had been censored by the traditional media. E-activism was key in the development of the rally and in the consolidation of this proposal on the streets. After exposure on the web, a social movement and a campaign emerged, boosting the visibility and the legitimacy of this non traditional feminist discourse. Candela is not a classic advocate of the gender struggle,

and her mobilization was not supported by the classic feminist organizations. What she managed to do was to raise awareness around a collective sentiment at a moment in which new forms of sexuality and discussions about the human body are gaining space on the Colombian political scene and in the country's culture. This rally was not a massive street mobilization, but its symbolic impact was significant. In relation to this, Catalina Jiménez states: "in a country that calls itself secular, but in reality is not, being willing to organize a rally which places the figure of the whore at the center of attention is disruptive in the best sense of the word".<sup>59</sup> It is a mobilization which, as a question of principle, occupies the networks and uses their logic to publish photos of nude bodies and messages, considered aggressive by some, that have little space in the traditional communication media. It then goes to the streets in a rally which is in reality a performance. Jiménez adds that "it is a rally in which the body is converted into the ultimate tool or the ultimate repertoire, because nudity in public is a challenge".<sup>60</sup> It is a rally that made use of the virtual space and the social networks to reinforce its message, using confrontational language and images of bare breasts.

In Colombia it may be defined as an irreverent rally against the positions of the country's Catholic right-wing. It highlights the struggle on the part of the new sexualities which have gained space in the legal arena, but which still lose out on the streets and in the country's male chauvinist and homophobic culture.

### Case 3: La Marcha por la Vida (The March for Life)

On March 8, 2015, 120,000 people marched in the streets under the slogan "life is sacred". In the offline space, the event took place simultaneously

---

<sup>59</sup> Catalina Jiménez, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 14, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

in 25 cities worldwide and in 36 Colombian municipalities.<sup>61</sup> In the online world, on Facebook from a total of 98,973 people invited, 15,041 confirmed their presence and another 1,955 users responded “maybe”. The Twitter account @VidaMarzo8 had 2,817 followers, compared with 131 on Instagram. During the mobilization process for the protest there were 55,093 tweets with the hashtag #VidaMarzo8; 44,052 using the hashtag #YoMarchoPorLaVida and 29,312 using the hashtag #MarchaPorLaVida. 23 videos were published on YouTube, being viewed 10,668 times. On Facebook, the 15 videos published were viewed 153,442 times, and the four spots on SoundCloud received 4,363 visits.<sup>62</sup>

On January 13, 2015, the former mayor and ex presidential candidate Antanas Mockus invited the Columbian people to march together “for life”. He also used Twitter to invite two politicians to participate. They were enemies and representatives of two opposing currents of thought: the former right-wing president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) — who did not join the march — and the senator Iván Cepeda Castro of the left-wing party Polo Democrático Alternativo. Mockus convened the march with an 118 character tweet in which he marked the accounts of these two politicians. He also included a link to a promotional video and initiated the hashtag #Vida4F, through which other users could give their opinions. It was retweeted 155 times and marked as favorite 93 times.

Figure 7: Tweet of call to march



61 Jorge Torres, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 18, 2015.

62 The official report on march drafted by Daniel Romero, who was interviewed for this work on Sep. 2, 2015, in Bogota.

The link was to a video in which Mockus spoke about the objective of the march:

“At various moments Iván Cepeda and the former president Álvaro Uribe have helped protect Columbians’ lives. The lives of both of them should be respected, appreciated and valued for what they have done and for what they can do. [...] I invite them to march with us on a historical day for Colombia, this February 4; we will march for life because the life of each and every Colombian is valuable”.

The video was also published in his Facebook profile. Here it received 5,400 likes and was shared by around 2,000 people. On this social network, Antanas Mockus has 870,000 “friends”, very close to the audience on his Twitter account (@AntanasMockus), which numbers some 850,000 followers. On this same day, some of the traditional communication media published this news item and Mockus spoke to a number of reporters in public. On the days preceding the launch of the march, it was already evident that there was a digital strategy behind the event. The website <lavidaessagrada.com> was created and accounts were opened on the social networks Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and SoundCloud.<sup>63</sup> In some cases, the accounts used belonged to Mockus, who remained at the center of the mobilization until it was over.

---

<sup>63</sup> In August 2015, the march's Twitter account reached 2,660 followers. Additionally, there were another 500 people on two parallel accounts created for marches outside Bogota, one for the March for Life in Cali (@VidaMarzo8Cali) and the other for the March for Life in New York City (@VidaMarzo8NYC).



Figure 8: The march's official Twitter account



At that moment, the peace talks had just been resumed after one of their worst crises, triggered by the kidnapping of the army general Rubén Darío Alzate.<sup>64</sup> There were no elections at the time. The legislative elections had taken place a few months beforehand. The year had begun with the news of the resumption of the talks between the Farc and the government, and at that particular moment polarization between those who supported a negotiated solution to the conflict and the critics of the process was evident.

In addition to the political context that Mockus was able to capitalize on, there was a precedent in the huge demonstration against the Farc that had taken place on February 4, 2008, when 12 million Colombians had taken to the streets to protest about the violence of the guerilla movement. This was the reason Mockus had chosen February 4, 2015 for the rally. However, these rallies were not the same, and the idea of using the date was criticized by many political sectors. As a result the march was rescheduled for March 8, International

<sup>64</sup> In November 2014 General Rubén Darío Alzate, Corporal Jorge Rodríguez Contreras and the lawyer Gloria Urrego, a special project consultant to the army, were kidnapped by the Farc in the department of Chocó. As a consequence, the peace talks were suspended for 15 days. They were resumed after mediation by the peace process intermediaries, Cuba and Norway.

Women's Day. The 2008 march had been the initiative of an indignant young internet user from Barranquilla who had created a group on Facebook; the 2015 rally was convened by a former mayor, ex-candidate for president and well-known academic. The first rally was anonymous, rapidly becoming political and attracting widespread media attention. The second was never anonymous; it was mainstream from the start. The two rallies became politicized, but in different ways. The 2008 protest against the Farc had been criticized by sectors of the left for being pro-Uribe. It had focused on condemning the Farc, ignoring other forms of violence including that of the extreme right-wing paramilitary groups. The 2015 mobilization was sabotaged by Uribe, who claimed that it was a publicity campaign financed by the Santos government to legitimize the peace process. In the symbolic universe, one was a rally against violence (the indignant) and the other was in favor of peace (the hopeful).

In the March for Life, the social networks helped convene people around the same theme. They created messages with a personal tone, Mockus's, that was addressed to the general public. Internally, the networks were used to coordinate the volunteers and organize the rallies in different cities nationwide. As Jorge Torres, a researcher at the NGO *Corpovisionarios* and one of the organizers of the rally, said: "the social networks functioned as a link between people in different regions. Many of the people working as volunteers had never been to a local government office or coordinated anything similar and, through the networks, we gave them instructions about what had to be done. We had to teach them how to speak to the police, to the fire brigade and to the health departments. This whole process was conducted digitally".<sup>65</sup>

But this was not the first time that Mockus had used the social networks. In 2010, when he ran for the presidency, he was more successful in using the internet than the other candidates. Similar to Barack Obama's campaign the previous year, Mockus initiated a new way of running online campaigns in the country. As Omar Rincón said: "Mockus was successful on the web for almost

---

<sup>65</sup> Jorge Torres, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 18, 2015.

the same reasons that he failed on television: because he doesn't think in a linear fashion, he offers 'links' to other related subjects, and these are open rather than closed ideas; [...] he doesn't establish boundaries between the public and the private; [...] he uses images and symbols, [...] he is transparent and [...], rather than offering top down solutions, he encourages collective action. In other words, he thinks like the internet".<sup>66</sup>

The "green wave", as the most innovative phenomenon of the 2.0 political culture in the country became known, introduced new ways of exercising citizenship through online participation mechanisms and the creation of a feeling of community around change, but differently from North America, Mockus was unable to translate this into victory at the urns. However, the 2010 campaign tactics were repeated in 2015 in a social rather than political context, and helped promote the March for Life. Many of the volunteers who participated in this second moment had started to follow Mockus during the presidential elections. So, as Jorge Torres says, "if there is anyone who can produce mobilization via the social networks, it is Antanas Mockus. People speak via the social networks and this is where the professor managed to establish a connection with society".<sup>67</sup>

Without a doubt, the March for Life was an innovative rally because of its more sophisticated use of the social networks on the internet. The Facebook "Donate your status" application was used, enabling march organizers to publish messages on the timelines of people who accepted the proposal.<sup>68</sup> With this campaign they obtained a total of 1,874 voluntary donors in less than twenty days. Ten messages were published, one every two days, and the organizers estimated that each message potentially reached one million

---

66 Omar Rincón, "Mucho ciberactivismo... pocos votos. Antanas Mockus y el partido verde colombiano". *Nueva sociedad: democracia y política en América Latina*, out. 2011. Available at: <nuso.org/articulo/mucho-ciberactivismo-pocos-votos-antanas-mockus-y-el-partido-verde-colombiano>.

67 Jorge Torres, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 18, 2015.

68 This enables an algorithm to publish messages randomly on the users' timeline.

readers, supposing, perhaps rather optimistically, that each donor had an average of 550 friends on Facebook who read the messages. Additionally, the NGO Corpovisionarios invested 800,000 Colombian pesos in advertising on Facebook, with funds that came mostly from donations to the march.

Figure 9: Example of a message published using the application “Donate your status”



Twitter storms or ad hoc campaigns were also organized, inviting users of this network to post messages about varied aspects of the march based on questions such as, “what would Colombia be like if life were sacred?” This was done several times using the hashtag #MiTitularDelFuturo, which became a trending topic in the country with 3,100 tweets, and #NoQuieroOtroTitularAsí, a trending topic in Bogota with 1,700 tweets. On March 7, the hashtag #YoMarchoPorLaVida was created, generating 44,052 tweets, and becoming a trending topic in Colombia throughout the day on March 8 until the end of the rally. The same happened with #MarchaPorLaVida (44,052 tweets) and #VidaMarzo8 (55,093 tweets).

Figure 10: Examples de “Twitter storms”



Additionally, the application Twibbon was enabled, permitting people to edit their profile image on Facebook and Twitter, superimposing the text “#VIDAMARZO8” on the image.<sup>69</sup> Users were invited to put a photo on their timelines holding a sign with “life is sacred” written on it and to publish videos explaining their reasons for doing so. Television artists and politicians accepted the invitation, including the former president of Uruguay Pepe Mujica, who published a photo of himself and his wife holding the sign. The website <lavidaessagrada.com> was created, providing a countdown to the day of the march and giving general information about the objectives and the route to be followed. All of the social network publications were programmed in advance under the supervision of Daniel Romero, a Corpovisionarios staffer. The target was to publish between four and five posts a day on Facebook and between 10 and 20 on Twitter, although sometimes this number was higher when there was any last minute news or anything new to report. As Romero put it, “the initial digital strategy was to make it seem like a civic march, and we succeeded.”<sup>70</sup>

69 See <twibbon.com/support/vidamarzo8>.

70 Daniel Romero, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogotá, Sep. 2, 2015.

Figure 11: Site “Life is sacred”



The demonstration took place on March 8, 2015 in 25 cities worldwide and in 36 Colombian municipalities. It received support from the press, from the government of president Santos and from other politicians and their respective parties. It was also joined by non-governmental organizations, workers and unions. The official number of participants in the marches in different locations was 120,000 people.<sup>71</sup> However, according to the organizers, the count was not conducted rigorously everywhere and the number could have been higher. The March for Life sought the renewal of a value Mockus considers fundamental for a discussion of what Colombian society will be like when the conflict has ended. The demonstration involved a great deal of digital activism and the physical presence on the streets was significant. At least twenty or thirty people marched in support in Lithuania, London and Paris. People showed solidarity over the social networks and demonstrated their support in the streets.

The March for Life was convened and organized over the social networks and sought to be viewed as a public mobilization, but the leadership of Antanas Mockus and the NGO Corpovisionarios was determinant. Mockus is a public

<sup>71</sup> Jorge Torres, interviewed by María Paula Martínez and Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 18, 2015.

figure with widespread recognition in the offline world which he seeks to translate to the online universe. He is not a common internet user trying to build up an e-community, but rather a politician, supported by his own NGO, who capitalized on a specific conjuncture. Although the online mobilization may be considered a success, the same cannot be said of the offline rally. Compared with the anti-Farc march in 2008, it may be deemed a failure: 120,000 compared with 12 million people. But this difference is also related to the context and the contradictions existent in the current political conjuncture in Colombia, which affect people's willingness to demonstrate in the streets. According to the specialist in social mobilizations Carolina Cepeda, "in 2008, public opinion was aligned against the Farc, in view of the democratic security proposed by Uribe. The March for Life, however, occurred during the peace process, at a time when public opinion is still very divided. While a majority are in favor of the peace talks, I think that a significant part of the population is still against them [...]. Moreover, many want peace but are not necessarily in favor of this government or of the way the peace process is being conducted. This tends to divide people and undermine their capacity for mobilization".<sup>72</sup>

Undoubtedly, after so many years of armed conflict, the nation as a whole desires peace. But the ways of mobilizing around this vary greatly. The March for Life may be considered to be a political mobilization in some way disguised as a social rally that got society speaking about peace on the social networks and, during an entire day, on the streets. This worked as a kind of collective catharsis, provoking a more symbolic rather than real impact and, in view of the national context, the support in the media was important in helping to legitimize the peace agreements. Nevertheless, the symbolic difference between marching for or marching against something should be taken into account. When civil society marches against the State, it does so against a legitimate institution with the purpose of pressuring for change. When it is done in favor of a value or an emotion, the force of the march is also transformed.

---

72 Carolina Cepeda, interviewed by Estefanía Avella. Bogota, Aug. 31, 2015.

There are key differences between the marches in February 2008 and March 2015 in terms of structure, political context and the reasons for demonstrating but, according to Cepeda, they had one aspect in common: they were not aimed at contestation and did not make demands on the political system or on the government. They were rallies that did not question the status quo. On the contrary, they were aligned with the government's thinking and served to reinforce the collective mindset: "the march against the Farc was in rejection of the crimes committed by the guerillas, but did not contest the established power nor point out its mistakes. The same was true for the March for Life. This mobilization reinforced an idea that the government also seeks to promote".

The March for Life may be understood as a social mobilization, but not as a movement. According to Cepeda, the difference is: "a mobilization can be spontaneous, lasting a short while, bringing together people who may never again talk about or be interested in the issue in question, while a movement is a collective actor". She also explains that the March for Life is a mobilization that "seeks to display its slogan, which has always been in defense of life, the reason for which it is very welcome, but beyond this it does not offer tools to go any further, to promote debate or to expand the agenda. Without detracting from its merit, it is rather limited". This type of march is not structured as a social movement, it does not produce lasting social ties and does not seek to change the status quo; on the contrary, it is more symbolic, related to the collective mindset regarding violence, death, life. This was a march that produced a cyber-community which contributed to the public debate on peace and to legitimizing the government's intentions for the peace negotiations in Havana.



## 4. Final considerations

Since the invention of the Internet, the world has seen the advent of what Manuel Castells calls the “network society”, characterized by a system of “mass communication, based on interactive and multi-directional horizontal networks”, that have been transforming social movements in the 21st century. New actors and new forms of social participation have emerged, acting in a public sphere which, permeated by technology, is more open, more heterogeneous and, to a great extent, more complex. The network society is in constant transformation and presents contradictions between the democratic potential characteristic of the internet and unequal access to the web by individuals.

Currently in Colombia most of the public are hopeful about a possible end to the armed conflict with the Farc, while another part is skeptical about the guerilla movement's transition to civilian life. Beyond this question there is the fact that the country is in a state of transition and after the conflict new political movements will arise, opposition groups will grow stronger, there will be reforms in agriculture and growth in the representation of traditionally marginalized groups in the public agenda: indigenous peoples, afro-descendants, rural populations and women. The digital world will continue to expand, representing an ever growing space for social participation. This will imply new opportunities, but also new risks. Digital rights, web neutrality and governance of the internet are challenges that are currently under discussion on a global level and will determine how internet users will act in the future. As Nelson Remolina, of the Ibero-American Data Protection Observatory notes: “cyberspace is not immune to the authorities or to local regulation. However, its cross-border characteristic does present authorities with challenges and will require the reformulation of legal systems, whose standards and jurisdictions in some cases are limited by geographical territory. Cyberspace is eroding and disintegrating these limits. The authorities and regulators need to rethink their

legal frameworks in order to operate efficiently in cyberspace. The world has changed and it is no longer possible to just carry on doing more of the same thing".<sup>73</sup>

Lastly, in the light of the three mobilizations chosen for this chapter, it may be concluded that:

**1) The Internet, as the basic setting of the online world, is not determinant for the emergence of these marches.** More than 20 years after the invention of the internet it is possible to affirm that digital culture, like other forms of culture, entails rituals, is intangible and operates below the surface. Based on the analysis of the rallies in this chapter, it may be inferred that nowadays old forms of protest combine constantly with new forms of digital mobilization. There is a convergence between the online and offline, where the internet is not a determinant factor for the emergence of the protests but is transformed into a significant arena for their development. The transformation resulting from the creation of the web does not mean a change in political life, but rather the inauguration of a new public space and the emergence of a new public opinion with more direct and more heterogeneous forms of participation.

**2) The web is a sounding box.** In a country like Colombia—in which the communication media are spread thinly and the market is concentrated—, the internet is transformed into an effective tool for expanding the media agenda, providing visibility and a window of opportunity that the rallies are able to capitalize on. In the mobilizations studied, the internet played a crucial role in disseminating information instantaneously at a low cost. It helped in the constitution of local,

---

73 Nelson Remolina, interviewed by Santiago La Rotta, *El Espectador*, Aug. 20, 2015. Available at: <[www.elspectador.com/tecnologia/un-mundo-sin-secretos-digitales-articulo-580297](http://www.elspectador.com/tecnologia/un-mundo-sin-secretos-digitales-articulo-580297)>.

national and international digital communities that were able to maintain a constant flow of information, generating such an impact that the traditional communication media had no option but to capture what was circulating on the social networks and web and transform it into mainstream news.

**3) The web and more specifically the social networks do not substitute the traditional communication media.** With their simple language, instantaneous nature and nodal as opposed to centralized structure, the social networks are transformed into a useful complement “for cutting through the armor plating that the local private and public symbolic powers attempt to erect around the truth”. The social networks enable a constant flow of information in which the role played by leaders determines neither access nor participation. The internet and the social networks are a system of nodes which lead to the creation of cybercommunities that are capable of rapidly and organically forming into groups. As such, the online universe has been transformed into a window of opportunity for changing the dynamics of participation. As Omar Rincón recognizes, “the digital networks have arrived and have enabled individuals to exist in public. They permit freedom of expression and the management of civic rights without the need for legal “authorization” to voice opinions. Before we had the streets, now we have the digital highway”.

**4) There is no single form of online-offline relationship in the social movements.** Although in all the cases analyzed it is evident that both worlds converge and that the boundary between them is not clearly delineated, the relationship between the street and the web depends on multiple factors and the ways in which each contributes to public debate and the creation of cyber-communities are not constant. In the

case of the March for Life, its message of hope helped legitimize the government's peace process in the midst of a crisis. Its online strategy produced a street rally which was aimed at providing legitimacy for the government discourse. In contrast, the Farmer's Strike generated a crisis in the government, driving a debate about the need for social change and new policies for agriculture. Its traditional offline dynamic consisting of roadblocks and *cacerolazos* led to the emergence of a cyber-community which provided wide-ranging support. The Slut Walk initially generated a digital community around the issue in hand, which sought legitimacy in a street protest and attempted to lead the public debate on abortion and the role of women. Finally, after three consecutive years of marches, its leader constituted an offline social movement.

While new types of actors who shift between the online and offline universes have emerged, some of the traditional characteristics of mobilization have disappeared. The old hierarchies have become obsolete, as has the division between the public and the private. There is no vertical power structure, but rather a horizontal terrain of dynamic participation in which anonymity predominates. The figure of the leader continues to be important, as was evident in the role played by Antanas Mockus in the March for Life, but it is not indispensable for the creation of a cyber-community. Although the weight of support from public figures in the offline universe may constitute an advantage in the online world, on the internet new actors can emerge who, despite their anonymity, can represent tough competition. Collective meaning is created easily online, but continues to strive for legitimacy in the offline world, in the terrain of risk and confrontation. The online universe is a safe and comfortable space for protest, producing weak and ephemeral links, in contrast with the traditional terrain of physical presence in the streets.

The dynamics of the protests vary. As we have seen in the protests

analyzed here, the street and the web alternate. In the March for Life and the Slut Walk, the web came first, followed by the street, while in the Farmers' Strike, first it was the streets and then the web. Colombia currently has a high level of digital exclusion, but is developing telling means of combating this. Cellular telephone penetration is widespread, and the cell phone has become an easy and popular way of navigating the internet. In terms of social movements, the internet offers strategic advantages for organizations with limited resources. It reduces costs, shortens distances and permits rapid action. The rapid and inexpensive dissemination of messages produces a snowball effect that no other communication media can replicate. On the internet, neither the limit of "local" nor the concept of "private" is clear. A personal feeling may become collective with a simple click and with this, a local rally may be transformed into a national or global event, as happened with the Farmers' Strike. Or inversely, an international cause may be adopted by local communities, as was the case with the Slut Walk, which originated in Canada and was replicated in a number of cities worldwide.

**5) The participation of NGOs is still very important, but perhaps less visible than in the pre-internet age.** Behind the Farmers' Strike there were a number of NGOs which, during the last decade helped process the demands of different sectors; however, during the strike their activities did not attract much media coverage, or, it might be said that their activities were eclipsed by those of the cybercommunity of Colombians who supported the agricultural workers. Nonetheless, relations between the participants and the social movements and NGOs did not decrease. César Jerez, one of the strike leaders interviewed for this study, is the creator of Prensa Rural, an NGO that advocates for the agricultural workers' rights and works with other organizations and unions. In the case of the March for Life, the NGO Corpovisionarios,

created and directed by Antanas Mockus, provided the rally with support and legitimacy from the beginning. On the other hand, in the case of the Slut Walk, no major NGOs maintained continuous links with the mobilization process, and this is perhaps one of the most important differences. While the other two had political and media support, the Slut Walk was more a movement of international opinion that caught the attention of elements in Bogota society and was transformed into a street rally. Its leader does not have the weight of a César Jerez, César Pachón or Antanas Mockus, either on the internet or in the streets. Its idealizer, Mar Candela, is a woman who, from the anonymity of the web, managed to organize a social mobilization that has been repeated three times in the country.

**6) New actors, rapid deserters.** In the context of convergence explained previously, individuals are transformed into activists by a click. The digital networks permit individuals to support diverse causes in a sporadic, media-oriented manner. In the three marches studied here, the phenomenon of shared photos with signs bearing catchphrases (“the strike does exist”, “march for life” or “slutty woman, free mind”). However, frequently this digital adhesion is not transferred to the offline world, to the streets. It remains in the online universe, characterized by fragile, ephemeral relationships. People who go out into the streets know that risk, face to face confrontation and collective action create strong bonds and a more enduring feeling of community.

## 5. References

ARCHILA, Mauricio. *Idas y Venidas, Vueltas y Revueltas: Protestas Sociales en Colombia 1958-1990*. Bogotá: Cinep, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Los movimientos sociales en la encrucijada del siglo XXI". In: BUITRAGO, Francisco Leal (Org.). *En la Encrucijada: Colombia en el Siglo XXI*. Bogotá: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006.

BANCO MUNDIAL. "Usuarios de Internet (por cada 100 personas)". Consulted on Nov. 10, 2015. Available at: <datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/IT.NET.USER.P2>.

"BLOQUEADAS 15 vías en segundo día del paro agrario". *El Espectador*, Aug. 20, 2013. Available at: <www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/bloqueadas-15-vias-segundo-dia-del-paro-agrario-articulo-441112>.

CASTELLS, Manuel. *Redes de Indignación y Esperanza: Los Movimientos Sociales en la Era de Internet*. Madri: Alianza Editorial, 2012. [Brazilian edition: *Redes de indignação e esperança: Movimentos sociais na era da internet*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2013.]

Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular [CINEP]. *Luchas sociales en Colombia*, 2013. Bogotá: Cinep/Programa por la paz, 2014. Available at: <comosoc.org/IMG/pdf/informe\_especial\_cinep\_protestas\_2013.pdf>.

COMSCORE. *Futuro Digital Colombia 2014*. Bogotá: comScore, 2014. Available at: <www.comscore.com/lat/Insights/Presentations-and-Whitepapers/2014/2014-Digital-Future-in-Focus-Colombia>.

COLOMBIA. *Constitución Política de Colombia*. Available at: <www.senado.gov.co/images/stories/Informacion\_General/constitucion\_politica.pdf>.

\_\_\_\_\_; FARC-EP. *Participación política: apertura democrática para construir la paz*. Havana, Cuba: Mesa de conversaciones para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera en Colombia, 2013.

Comisión de Regulación de Comunicaciones [CRC]. *Informe de Industria del Sector TIC septiembre de 2015*. Bogotá: CRC, 2014. Available at: <colombiatic.mintic.gov.co/602/articles-13464\_archivo\_pdf.pdf>.

EL TAL CAMPO sí existe: los medios y la protesta social. Director: César Pachón. Canal Capital. 2014. Available at: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=snNVSuoUd9A>.

HERNÁNDEZ, Francisco. *Sindicalismo en Colombia: Implicaciones sociales y políticas*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2004.

ICARZA, Roberto. "La televisión pública en la era de la argumentación". In: Instituto de Estudios sobre Comunicación RTA (Ord.). *Pensar la Televisión Pública: ¿Qué modelos para América Latina?*. Buenos Aires: La Crujía, 2013.

JIMÉNEZ, Catalina. "Movilización social y partidos políticos durante las elecciones 2014: ¿qué relación tienen?". In: Fredy Barrero and Margarita Batle (Org.), *Elecciones en Colombia 2014, ¿representaciones fragmentadas?*. Bogotá: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2014.

LA REBELIÓN de las ruanas, mentiras y verdades, sonrío el paro campesino. Director: Guillermo Prieto La Rotta. Especiales Pirry. Canal RCN. 2013. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NBgdrBBEn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NBgdrBBEn4)>.

LA ROTTA, Santiago. "Un mundo sin secretos digitales". *El Espectador*, Aug. 20, 2015. Available at: <[www.elespectador.com/tecnologia/un-mundo-sin-secretos-digitales-articulo-580297](http://www.elespectador.com/tecnologia/un-mundo-sin-secretos-digitales-articulo-580297)>.

"MÁS de 30 vías bloqueadas por protestas campesinas". *El Espectador*, Aug. 22, 2013. Available at: <[www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/mas-de-30-vias-bloqueadas-protestas-campesinas-articulo-441725](http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/mas-de-30-vias-bloqueadas-protestas-campesinas-articulo-441725)>.

PEÑARRREDONDA, José Luis. "Chateadores, domingueros, y 'rolos': las cifras de los twitters en Colombia". *Enter.co*, Sep. 14, 2012. Available at: <[www.enter.co/cultura-digital/redes-sociales/cifras-twitter-colombia](http://www.enter.co/cultura-digital/redes-sociales/cifras-twitter-colombia)>.

RABINOVICH, Eleonora. "Protesta, derechos y libertad de expresión". In: RABINOVICH, Eleonora; MAGRINI, Ana Lucía; RINCÓN, Omar. *Vamos a portarnos mal: Protesta social y libertad de expresión en América Latina*. Bogotá: Centro de Competencia en Comunicación para América Latina/ Friedrich Ebert Foundation [C3FES], 2011.

RESTREPO, Esteban. "Reforma constitucional y progreso social: 'Constitucionalización de la vida cotidiana' en Colombia". In: *Sela (Seminario en Latinoamérica de Teoría Constitucional y Política) Papers*, n. 14. New Haven, United States: Yale Law School, 2002. Consulted on Oct. 12, 2015. Available at: <[digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yls\\_sela/14](http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yls_sela/14)>.

RINCÓN, Omar. "Redes digitales: catarsis colectiva y frustración política". *Razón Pública*, Apr. 20, 2015. Consulted on Nov. 11, 2015. Available at: <[www.razonpublica.com/index.php/econom%C3%ADa-y-sociedad/8402-redes-digitales-catarsis-colectiva-y-frustraci%C3%ADn.html](http://www.razonpublica.com/index.php/econom%C3%ADa-y-sociedad/8402-redes-digitales-catarsis-colectiva-y-frustraci%C3%ADn.html)>.



SARRALDE, Milena. "Este es mi cuerpo y se respeta, gritaron mujeres en marcha nacional". *El Tiempo*, Feb. 16, 2012. Consulted on Oct. 25, 2015. Available at: <[www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-11219502](http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-11219502)>.

# Ecuador

---

Orazio Bellettini

Adriana Arellano<sup>1</sup>

1. Introduction

2. Case studies

Case 1: September 30 (30-S)

Case 2: “Quito YOMeAPUNTO” collective

Case 3: YASunidos

3. Some final reflections

4. References

---

<sup>1</sup> Orazio Bellettini is the Executive Director of the Grupo Faro and Adriana Arellano is the Research Director of the Grupo Faro. The authors would like to thank Hugo Carrión for the elaboration of the September 30 case study.

# 1. Introduction

In Ecuador and in other Latin American countries, there has been an expansion in the functions and in the size of the State in recent years. This expansion has been legitimized by the idea that Latin American societies need to increase the supply of public goods as an integral part of the development process, which implies a greater state presence.

The growth in the material and symbolic presence of the State in Ecuador has occurred in such a manner that, in some cases, it has reduced the room for maneuver of other societal actors, including civil society organizations. In other words, the State-civil society relationship in Ecuador appears to have developed into a zero sum game, in which the strengthening of the State occurs at the cost of weakening other sectors of society (Bellettini, 2013).

An example of this is the recent reform undertaken in telecommunications in Ecuador. The country's Communications law was approved in June 2013. In accordance with the principles set forth in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, the law recognizes communication as a human right and seeks to ensure broad access with the guarantee of diversity and plurality, for which reason it establishes the need to regulate the communication media to ensure alignment with public interests.

However, the Communication law also incorporates mechanisms to control who may communicate and the contents of the communication process. This entailed the creation of an Information and Communication Regulatory and Development Council as a regulatory body comprising a representative from the Executive, from the National Childhood and Adolescence Council (CNNA in the Spanish acronym), from the decentralized autonomous governments (GAD) and the Public Defenders Office, institutions which are financed by the State. The law provides for a consulting council and a citizens' council, but their role is not yet clear and their decisions are not binding.

In the two years since the Communication law came into force, the

controlling body, the Communication Superintendency (SECOM), has applied sanctions to 198 private communication media. The body has filed 506 suits and published 313 resolutions, 185 of which have resulted in economic sanctions that have generated more than US\$ 200,000 for the state coffers (Constante, 2015).

In summary, the new Communication law is supposed to democratize access to the communication channels for different sectors of society, but its application depends almost exclusively on one actor, the State, putting its real capacity to achieve the proposed objective at risk and, in practice, limiting the capacity of other actors to disseminate their viewpoints on the issues under discussion in Ecuador.

In parallel, in recent years the Ecuadorian government approved regulations aimed at civil society organizations which, although they include the creation of a fund to finance the work done by these bodies and a training program to develop their members, reduce their capacity to participate in debates on public policy. For example, article 30 of Executive Decree n. 16 stipulates that a civil society organization may be dissolved if it participates in “activities that interfere with key state public policies or activities that disturb the peace”.

This legal framework would seem to reflect the new relations of power between the State and civil society, characterized by the reduction of space for autonomous participation in the deliberation of themes debated in the public sphere. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that in Ecuador there would be an expansion in the use of online spaces as a means of enabling participation in a relatively more open space. However, when considering this hypothesis, it should be noted that even though digital illiteracy in Ecuador was reduced from 33.6% in 2009 to 14.3% in 2014 (“46%...”, 2015), more than half the population does not have internet access, which could constitute a barrier preventing the virtual world from becoming a space for participation.<sup>2</sup>

---

2 According to official statistics, 46% of the population have internet access or have a computer, laptop or smartphone.

However, there are more than 16 million users of mobile telephony services, while the numbers for fixed telephony have stabilized at around 2 million, representing respectively 110% and 15% of the population (Supertel, 2014). Access to cellular telephony, one of the highest rates in Latin America, has enabled both the spontaneous and planned use of online mobilization and participation strategies, some of which will be analyzed in this chapter.

To better understand the interactions between the online and offline world in Ecuador, we will present some recent experiences of participation and civil society organizations that combine both these spaces to play an active role in the public sphere, participating in social, economic and political processes that are fundamental for democracy and for the country's development.

The experiences described will be analyzed and then some conclusions will be drawn, followed by recommendations to promote what Sorj (2015) called virtuous forms of relationship between online and offline communication, which enable the combination of the spaces opened by cyberspace with participation in the traditional spaces so that they may enrich each other mutually and promote participation by civil society at a time when the increased State presence makes this more necessary than ever.

## 2. Case studies

There follow three case studies of recent experiences of civil society participation in Ecuador which combined offline and online strategies to establish a presence in the public sphere and influence key moments in the country's recent history.

## Case 1: September 30 (30-S)

### Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) represent a new means of generating and communicating information for society. ICT permit individuals to access and produce information and establish horizontal relationships, gradually dismantling the form in which information has traditionally been accessed via the communication media.

The influence of the ICT became evident on September 30, 2010 (30-S), when a police protest over labor claims put Ecuador's democratic institutions to the test, in addition to civil rights such as freedom of expression and access to information. Unfortunately, episodes of instability have been a constant in Ecuador's history—social mobilizations have toppled presidents—; however, police insubordination was undoubtedly without precedent in the country.

The traditional media, such as radio and television, were the first to communicate what was happening in the country. The newspapers circulated information about the uprising on their webpages. However, the traditional media soon found themselves restricted when they were obliged to toe the State line, broadcasting only government controlled content in a national network. In parallel, the newspaper websites were overloaded due to the number of users seeking information. The traditional and analog communication media did not have the capacity to adapt to the incipient digital society. The information and communication technologies enabled the formation of networks in which society interacted, organized and produced information, constituting an option that enabled the public to obtain information and issue opinions.

Much of the information generated on 30-S may be found on the Internet, particularly on the social networks, enabling the configuration and construction of the country's digital memory. Unfortunately, part of the information generated on this day has been lost and cannot be recovered, a fact

that demonstrates the fragility of electronic media, which one of the fathers of the internet, Vint Cerf, refers to as the “digital dark age”, when future generations would not have records of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ghosh, 2015).

## Evolution

### Chronology of events

On September 29, 2010, the National Assembly prepared the ground for a presidential veto by approving the Civil Service Organic Law (LOSEP), which introduced parity for state employees and eliminated additional remuneration in the form of bonuses, increments for length of service or anniversaries, functional allowances or other mechanisms.

The approval of the law generated malaise among members of the National Police, although according to the then Minister of the Interior, Gustavo Jalk, and the Commander in Chief, Freddy Martínez, there had been a widespread campaign to explain the benefits of the law within the force. On September 30, 2010, between 7 and 8 o'clock in the morning, around 800 officers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Quito Regiment of the National Police stopped work. The mutiny was broadcast over the main communication media, in particular radio and television. It was evident that senior authorities had been unable to control the situation and that the chain of command had been broken.

From approximately 8:30 a.m., members of the Armed Forces at the Quito Air Base took over and closed down the Mariscal Sucre Airport, with some 150 airmen<sup>3</sup> blocking the runways. There were signs of military discontent in the vicinity of the Ministry of Defense in the city's La Recoleta region, with protests involving lower ranking troops.

---

3 On April 8, 2015, the First Penal Court at Pichincha passed a verdict of guilty on 63 members of the Ecuadorian Air Force (FAE) involved in the closure of the airport during the 30-S uprising. Their sentences varied from 8 to 12 years.

In a declaration on the program “Testemunhos do 30 de setembro”, shown by the Teleamazonas channel, a soldier explained the reason for the protest:

*Question from the journalist Gissela Bayona: “You are supposed to follow orders, not make decisions. What’s happened to your obedience, your discipline?”*

*Response from soldier: “We are fed up. They have been playing us along for some time now. They’ve been telling us they are going to raise our salaries for three years, and nothing. So now we intend to do something about it. We are going to stop work and protest, because the government is against us.”*

As with the police force, in the armed forces campaigns had been conducted to explain the law, according to the Minister of Defense, Javier Ponce, and the Armed Forces Commander, General Ernesto González.

In this atmosphere of revolt and discontent, at 9:15 president Rafael Correa arrived at the barracks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Quito Regiment. Although at that moment it was not possible to foresee the outcome, it was not unusual for the president to attempt to resolve conflicts in this hands-on manner. On its first attempt, the presidential motorcade was unable to enter the barracks, and fearing a violent reaction on the part of the protesters, it turned back. A second attempt to talk to the police was made later, but the overall mood made this impossible. It was impossible to guarantee the president’s safety. González (2014) states that “the Rear Admiral of the Chief of Staff warned that the president would be at risk. Correa had intended to talk directly to the police officers, but he was greeted with tear gas and profanities”.

Dialogue was impossible and, meanwhile, the country watched the efforts to remove the president from the barracks in real time on television. These led to violence and physical aggression in which Correa was injured and was obliged to seek refuge and treatment in the Police hospital, located next to the barracks. From this moment on, media attention centered on the president’s health.



The police in Guayaquil also demonstrated in support of their colleagues in Quito. The slogans used included: “We’re on strike” and “Today we won’t work”. The strike was accompanied by the looting of commercial establishments.

The police protest was replicated in a number of other cities, further aggravating the situation nationwide. Roads were blocked, tires were burned and there were attacks on the public by those whose duty it was to protect them.

The National Assembly was taken over by part of the police guard, who refused entry to members of Congress and journalists. Government members of Congress managed to enter by force and then claimed that the police were allowing opposition congressmen to enter. The president of the National Assembly, Fernando Cordero, was overseas, for which reason the vice president Irina Cabezas took charge of the situation.

This declaration by Colonel Rolando Tapia illustrates the situation in the National Assembly:

*I may say, ladies and gentlemen, that I am still in command of the police here in the Assembly, but I must also declare that I fully agree with the position my fellow police officers have adopted. (Teleamazonas, 2011)*

In the barracks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Quito Regiment, the National Assembly and other parts of the city, the aggression against the journalists who were covering events escalated from insults and the confiscation of equipment to physical assault. Both the private and public communication media were reporting on events in spite of the precarious conditions in which they were working.

At around midday, the president gave an interview to the Rádio Pública radio station, explaining the situation he and his entourage were in. The police formed a commission to talk to the president, vocalizing their demand for transparent dialogue. However, the images broadcast conveyed a climate of uncertainty and suspicion.

Due to the closure of Quito Airport, the vice president Lenin Moreno was unable to get to the city. He declared his support for the president from Guayaquil. Similarly, the president of the National Assembly, who was in Spain, declared his support for Correa in an interview via Skype.

At 13:21, the Executive Decree n. 488<sup>4</sup> was signed, declaring a state of emergency, mobilizing the armed forces and establishing a mandatory monopoly over the national radio and television network for an indefinite period.<sup>5</sup>

From 14:00, the communication media were subordinated to the national network. In the streets of Quito, most of the public was in favor of the government. Government supporters congregated in the Plaza de la Independencia and at the Carondelet Palace, the seat of the government. The Minister of Foreign Relations, Ricardo Patino, made an appeal to rescue the president from the Police hospital:

*"My brave colleagues, together we must rescue the president from the Police Hospital."*  
(Teleamazonas, 2011)

Pro-government demonstrators arrived at the 1<sup>st</sup> Quito Regiment barracks and were turned away by the striking police officers. In other parts of Quito there were confrontations between Correa's supporters and opponents (Ecuavisa, 2011).

At around 16:00, opposition congressmen called a press conference in which they requested an amnesty for all the police officers and members of the armed forces involved in the uprising.

At around 18:00, the soldiers who had taken control of the Air Base announced that they had reached an agreement and allowed the airport to reopen.

---

4 According to the presidential decree information system, the document was signed digitally on September 30, 2010 at 13:21:43.

5 Item 4 of article 165 of the Ecuadorian Constitution establishes that the president may "exercise prior censorship of the social communication media exclusively in a state of emergency or when state security is at risk".

At 19:00, opposition demonstrators forced entry into the headquarters of the state communication media, demanding that their opinions be broadcast. At this, transmissions were switched from EcuadorTV to the GamaTV channel, which had been taken over by the state in 2008. This centralized transmission was maintained until the private channels started broadcasting the operations to rescue president Correa using their own signals. There is no evidence that the national network had been suspended.

At around 20:00, military forces arrived at the Police hospital together with an elite force of the National Police, the Intervention and Rescue Group (GIR), one of the few police units that had not rebelled; they carried out the rescue of the president.

Finally, at 21:30 the president was escorted from the Police hospital, with the caravan taking him to the Carondelet Palace coming under fire from the protesters.

## Mandatory national radio and television network for an indefinite period

There follows an analysis of the national communication media network decreed by the government, which remained in force until the private media started broadcasting president Correa's exit from the Police hospital using their own signals.

In the documentary *Muchedumbre 30-S* [30-S crowd] the Secretary of Communication explains why the decision to form a mandatory national network for an indefinite period was taken:

*"I could see from the university stationary store where we had taken cover that there was looting in Guayaquil, looting in Quevedo, that the vice president of the Republic was unable to land because the airport had been taken over. I immediately rang my sub-*

*secretary, who was in the Carondelet Palace, and ordered everything to be prepared to form a compulsory national media network for an indefinite period of time, subject to the president's authorization." (Muchedumbre 30-S, 2011)*

The radio and television communication media which until that moment had been broadcasting information about events in real time from different cities around the country, were ordered by the government to integrate their signals with that of the public channel EcuadorTV.

From the moment the national network was established, the communication media continuously broadcast the information released by the government, limiting public access to broad, plural sources of information. Although it limited access to information and generated malaise, as a communication strategy to demonstrate support for the government, the measure proved effective.

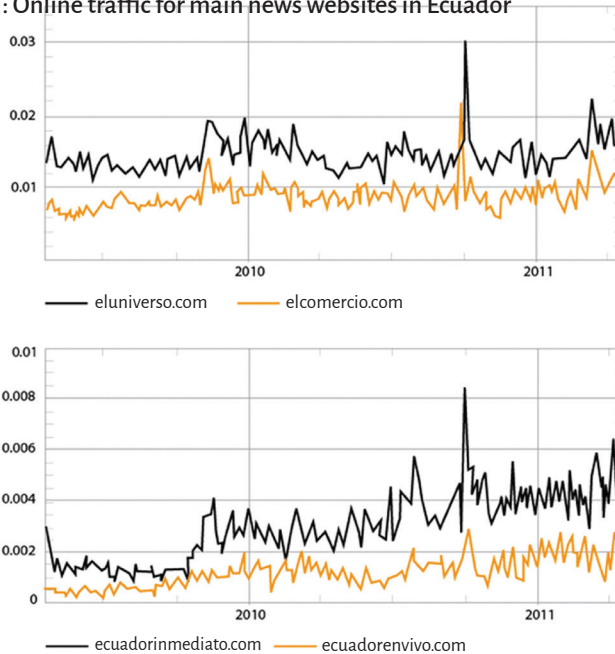
## Use of ICT

In this particular episode, the ICT made a decisive contribution to providing open access to information, and was transformed into an alternative communication channel. Events were not only broadcast by the traditional communication media, that is radio and television. Information was also circulating on the social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook. The traffic on the main digital newspapers caused their websites to crash due to the high demand. An exception was the digital newspaper *EcuadorInmediato* ([ecuadorinmediato.com](http://ecuadorinmediato.com)) which demonstrated great agility in modifying its format and remaining on the air. Newspapers such as *El Hoy* and *El Comercio* were limited to transmitting via Twitter because their websites had crashed.

The following charts show the online traffic for the main news websites in Ecuador. The peak corresponds to the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, when the highest

internet access rates were recorded. The statistics were obtained from the website Alexa (alexa.com) and show the daily traffic on the websites of four vehicles: *El Universo* (www.eluniverso.com), *El Comercio* (www.elcomercio.com), *EcuadorInmediato* (ecuadorinmediato.com) and *ecuadorenvivo* (ecuadorenvivo.com). The lines represent each website's traffic as a percentage of global traffic. It may be noted therefore that the normal traffic for the newspaper *El Universo*, at around 0.014% of global traffic, doubled on September 30, reaching 0.030%.

Figure 1: Online traffic for main news websites in Ecuador



The journalists and others who were inside the National Police hospital used Twitter to provide information on what was happening there, as was the case of Susana Morán from the daily *El Comercio*. She used her personal account

(@susanamorg) to make live transmissions by means of tweets and videos, even asking for help from nearby tweeters to charge the battery of her cell phone. One of her tweets:

"I am in a bathroom at the hospital, all I can hear is shots and more shots, many of my fellow journalists are still downstairs". Available at <[twitter.com/susanamorg/status/26037749529](https://twitter.com/susanamorg/status/26037749529)>.

The work of the journalists was made difficult by police repression. A number of journalists and other members of the public were assaulted and had their tapes, batteries, camera memory cards and cell phone cards confiscated.

Radio stations and television channels were broadcasting the evolution of events from the early hours of September 30. The broadcasts were not limited to the barracks of the Quito regiment: they were transmitted from various points where the news was happening. Consequently many videos continue to be posted on social networks such as YouTube as testimonials to the events on this day, providing information and enabling people to draw their own conclusions about what happened.

While he was retained in the hospital, President Rafael Correa managed to communicate with the public and with his ministers by means of telephone interviews given to state communication media, describing the situation he was in. Meanwhile, government ministers and secretaries tried to pacify the public, reassuring them that no rights were being violated.

An important aspect during the events of the day was the issue of the decree establishing a state of emergency. It was signed (electronically) at 13:21 on September 30, and the news was circulating on Twitter by 13:37:<sup>6</sup>

---

6 "Government declares state of emergency". Available at <[twitter.com/Presidencia\\_Ec/status/26004680445](https://twitter.com/Presidencia_Ec/status/26004680445)>.



From the moment the national network was established, the public only had access to one version of events, which was favorable to the government. Images of support were repeated together with a speech by the vice president Lenín Moreno, who reiterated his support for the president and insisted the Correa was governing from the hospital. The commander of the armed forces also made declarations of support for the government, but not before requesting a review of the law. During six hours, the public watched and heard manifestations of support for the regime, speeches by ministers and letters of support from international organizations such as the OAS and Unasul, which backed Correa and pleaded with the demonstrators to refrain from violence.

Internationally events were broadcast more openly by the correspondents of the international networks.

However, no broadcasts of public manifestations of support for the police were allowed. This occurred only after the headquarters of the state media were invaded and journalists and presenters were obliged to interview the protesters. After they had managed to obtain an interview, transmission by EcuadorTV was interrupted and replaced by the signal from the GamaTV channel, also owned by the State.

Meanwhile mobile telephony allowed people to communicate with their families about what was happening and the situation they were in. Similarly, journalists were able to report on events to their respective media.

Undoubtedly, the social networks democratized access to information. Journalists and members of the public transmitted information in a real manifestation of freedom of expression and open access thanks to the social networks. Twitter was transformed into one of the main sources of information and a forum for debate.

## Twitter: a civic alternative for accessing information

In 2010, the penetration of internet access in Ecuador was no more than 20%, compared with over 60% today, according to official Ministry of Telecommunication and Information (MINTEL) statistics. The social networks were becoming a popular means of communication among internet users. When compared with Facebook, Twitter was not so heavily used, but the events of 30-S demonstrated the great efficiency and impact of the service it provided.

Twitter enabled people with internet access to obtain information about the events taking place on 30-S: news, photos and videos about what was happening and not being shown by the television channels came in from different cities nationwide. This information was replicated by individuals, who were converted into a network of reporters on the events underway.

Twitter also enabled open debate and the expression of opinions, something which did not happen in the traditional media. Tweets were also replicated on Facebook, another space that enabled the democratization of information on a national and international level.

One of the most notable phenomena related to Twitter on 30-S was the formation of a network of individuals with a common goal and interests, a self-convening, supportive network.

An interesting characteristic of the social networks is reaffirmation, for example sharing information with friends on Facebook or retweeting feeds by followers on Twitter. On the latter, topics are consolidated into trending topics,



the hashtags most utilized by users worldwide. A content that does not receive responses or cause repercussion is considered unimportant. The volume of traffic for some of the Ecuadorian hashtags on September 30 positioned them among the most used in the world in 2010.

On September 30, the digital world of the social networks was divided between those who were receiving information and those who were producing it. The messages were originating both from institutional accounts and from individuals.

The information produced was generated from diverse locations and covered the different events underway:

1. **@Pablooski**: "Problems in Ecuador!!! Police and armed forces on strike" (*Problemas en Ecuador!!! Los policías y militares en huelga*)
2. **@carlosvictorm**: "I am on the KLM flight from Quito and we're not going anywhere! The armed forces are occupying the airport!" (*Estoy embarcado en el vuelo de KLM en Quito y el vuelo no sale! Militares se toman el aeropuerto!*)
3. **@menesesportatil**: "With trembling hands, the driver says: we must remain calm" (*La conductora, con las manos temblando, dice: es un momento de mantener la calma.*)
4. **@menesesportatil**: "There is not just one side to this, says the demonstrator. The drivers: terrified" (*Estamos aquí para decir que no hay un solo lado, dice la manifestante. Los conductores: helados.*)
5. **@susanamorg**: "Chaos in the hospital. The special forces are here. The doors of the hospital where Correa is have closed again. The situation is very tense" (*Caos en el hospital. Llegó el GIR. Cerraron otra vez las puertas del hospital donde aún sigue Correa. Hay mucha tensión.*)

The public and politicians issued opinions on the social networks:

6. **@pedritortizjr**: “DEAR POLICE. LEARN FROM THE CRIMINALS: THEY WORK 24/7” (*SEÑORES POLICÍAS, APRENDAN DE LOS DELINCUENTES: ELLOS TRABAJAN 24/7*)
7. **@CarlosVerareal**: “Bravo, police! Bravo!!! It's not enough to get rid of your submissive commanders: you deserve respect and should not to be punished!” (¡Bravo policías dignos! ¡¡Bravooo!! *No basta sacar la cúpula sumisa: ¡que les garanticen respeto y no los sancionen por ser dignos!*)
8. **@JoseYtur**: “Why did Teleamazonas go off the [national] network?” (¡¿Por qué Teleamazonas se salió de la cadena?!)
9. **@Juanleon89**: “Never seen such an interesting Espoli - El Nacional [Quito football teams] match” (*Nunca un Espoli - El Nacional fue tan interesante.*)
10. **@josemarialeonc**: “Police up in arms for State handouts: tomorrow, Ecuador — whatever happens — will be worse off” (*Situación de guerra por prebendas estatales de la policía: Mañana, el Ecuador -pase lo que pase- será un peor país.*)

During the events of 30-S, Internet users in Ecuador concentrated on Twitter to find out and to tell about what was happening around them. This phenomenon was multiplied when the government imposed a mandatory national communication media network which lasted for hours and prohibited all the television channels from providing information about what was going on in the country.

Among all the information circulating on Twitter, two or three hashtags were used to identify messages providing information on the situation. There

was a great deal of confusion, which made it necessary to have a single, short, self-explanatory identifier to consolidate everything that was being published. Then, Eduardo Arcos (@earcos), administrator of the blog Hipertextual (hipertextual.com), published the following tweet:<sup>7</sup>



As Eduardo Arcos says in his blog, this hashtag seemed like a good idea because it was a simple way of grouping together all the tweets and news about what was happening at that moment, as had happened during other historical international events such as 9/11 (September 11, 2001) and 3/11 (March 11, 2004), related to the tragic episodes in the United States and Spain.

Worthy of note is that since July 2012, the expressions “30S”, “30-S” and “Forbidden to forget” have been the exclusive preserve of the government and will remain so until May 2022, since they have been filed with the Ecuadorian Institute of Intellectual Property (IEPI).

After the expression “30-S” became popular, the legal limits and implications of using the phrases registered by the government are not clear, because there are communication media and social network users who continue to employ these terms without any problems, while others prefer not to use them.

According to an official IEPI communication, the expressions patented by the government “are State assets and were requested to identify specific services or campaigns”. The communication also mentions article 218 of the

7 “I propose #30S as a hashtag to identify what is happening in Ecuador”. Available at <twitter.com/earcos/status/26001332756>.

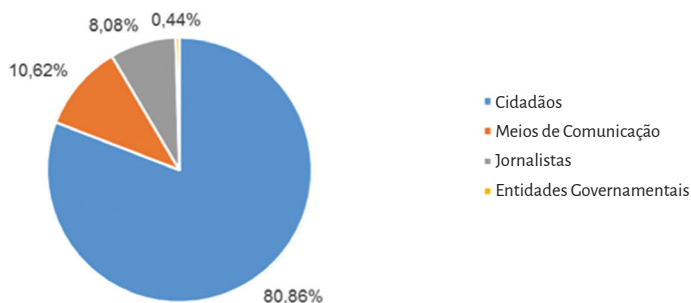
Intellectual Property Law which states “any person may use the expressions as long as this is done in good faith and does not violate rights” (use in good faith means when such use does not confuse, mislead or cause association on the part of the consumer).

However, information and opinions continue to circulate on the social networks, a space in which citizens, political actors, journalists and anyone with access to the internet may interact in the virtual community, transmitting and generating contents that demonstrate that 30-S is an event that Ecuador has not yet overcome and which for the Correa government is still a highly sensitive issue.

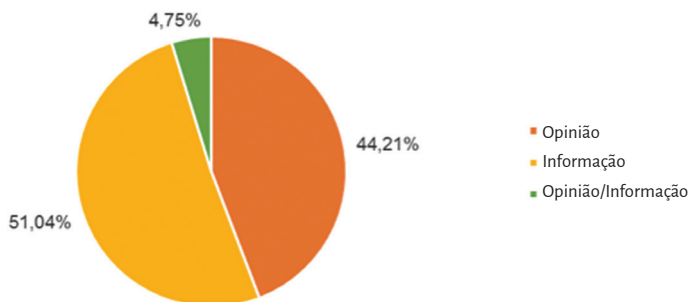
## Quantitative analysis of Twitter participation

Based on the 7,477 tweets that circulated in the first 48 hours after the police mutiny began, the Twitter platform stands out as the tool people used to stay informed, as shown in the figure below (Belén Albornoz & Rosales, 2012).

More than 80% of the information and opinions shared on Twitter was generated or retweeted by individuals. In terms of origin, 41.3% of the users were from abroad and 8.5% from Ecuador; it was not possible to determine where the remaining 31% came from. The following chart shows the number of Twitter messages by origin:

**Figure 2: Origin of Twitter messages on 30-S**

In terms of production, around 70% were original messages and the remaining 30% had been shared or retweeted. The messages were divided into three categories: messages expressing opinion, messages providing information and mixed messages (opinion/information).

**Figure 3: Types of message on Twitter on 30-S**

## The offline reality and cyberspace

According to the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, we lead a dual life: the online and the offline define our modernity. Following Bauman's reasoning, we can imagine two parallel and complementary but distinct paths for the events on 30-S. The first took place in the streets, with the protests by the police and later by the general public, which ended up with scenes of violence in which hundreds were hurt and a number were killed. Five years on, these offline events have still not been clarified. On the other hand, there are the events that unfolded on virtual platforms, communicating a digital reality and online facts that enabled a different experience of the same phenomenon.

There are differing viewpoints, such as that of Nathan Jungerson, founder of the Cyborgology blog ([thesocietypages.org/cyborgology](http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology)), who in a 2011 post presented the concept of digital dualism for the first time. This posits the separation of the offline and online world into two distinct realities. Analysis of the author's arguments reveals that the reason he coined this new term was to find a name for what he considers to be a "fallacy".<sup>8</sup>

His argument addresses people who frequently use the words online and offline to describe their experience outside and inside the digital world. In the author's opinion, the line that separates the two worlds is a fallacious argument that cannot be justified in a world dominated by the new technologies. In its place, he proposes the concept of "augmented reality" to define his own perspective on the strongly interlinked physical and digital worlds.

According to this perspective, what happened on the digital networks on 30-S was an extension of the network, based on the amplification of reality. Therefore, it is not a question of different phenomena, but an augmented reality,

---

8 "Dualismo digital: el antagonismo entre el mundo offline y online". *TICbeat*, Aug. 14, 2014. Available at: <[www.ticbeat.com/tecnologias/dualismo-digital-el-antagonismo-entre-el-mundo-offline-online](http://www.ticbeat.com/tecnologias/dualismo-digital-el-antagonismo-entre-el-mundo-offline-online)>.

perhaps a product of the actual dynamics that produce the electronic media and the ICT which, undoubtedly, permit the establishment of an immediate, interactive and interoperated communication, that is, operated and shared by various authors.

To contrast the episodes that occurred in the offline reality with episodes and information produced in cyberspace, there follows a timeline with the main events that marked 30-S.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Chronology of offline and online events on 30-S

Timeline	Offline	Online
7:00 to 9:00	Around 800 police officers gather at the 1 <sup>st</sup> Quito Regiment barracks to protest against the Organic Civil Service law (LOSEP) approved by the Assembly the previous night. Burned tires and anti-government slogans signal their discontent.	
9:00 to 10:00	There were also disturbances in the National Assembly. Thirty officers from the police guard block the entry of members of congress.	Tweeters from all over the country provide information about the situation in Tulcán, Babahoyo, Loja, Yaguachi, Guayaquil, Cuenca, Machala and other cities. Many offer opinions in favor of or against Correa, but they also provide information about what was not being shown on television: the closure of streets and bank branches, robberies, looting etc.

9 Extracts of offline episodes from Ecuavisa website ([www.ecuavisa.com](http://www.ecuavisa.com)).

Timeline	Offline	Online
10:00 to 12:00	<p>President Rafael Correa goes to the barracks. He states that he will not revoke the new law, which irritates the police officers. In parallel, at the old Mariscal Sucre airport in Quito, around 400 members of the Ecuadorian Air Force (FAE) join the protest and occupy the runway.</p> <p>10:20: The situation at the barracks becomes chaotic. When he tries to leave, Correa is subject to assault.</p>	<p>11:40: Susana Morán (@susanamorg): "The northern section of the Panamericana highway at Carapungo is blocked by police" (<i>Panamericana norte, a la altura de Carapungo, está bloqueada por la #policiaec</i>)</p> <p>People without Twitter accounts request information from connected tweeters, who pass this on to their colleagues. A civic journalism with the sole objective of providing information emerges.</p>
12:00 to 13:00	The head of state leaves the barracks for the National Police hospital to receive medical attention. Hours later, the president announces that he is in forced confinement inside the hospital.	12:49: Eduardo Arcos (@earcos) proposes the hashtag #30S to identify the day's events.
13:21	A state of emergency is declared, authorizing intervention by the armed forces.	President Correa signs decree n. 488 digitally, declaring a state of emergency.
13:37		The Presidency of the Republic (@Presidencia_EC) announces the state of emergency via Twitter, already using the hashtag #30S.
13:42	In the area outside the hospital supporters of the president confront the police, resulting in the first victim, the university student Juan Pablo Bolaños	Websites of a number of communication media are congested and crash repeatedly. Television networks were not broadcasting over the internet; a few radio stations use the internet.
14:05	Radio and TV stations are obliged to join the national broadcasting network indefinitely	



Timeline	Offline	Online
17:00 to 20:00	<p>The president is on the third floor of the building, under the protection of the Police Special Operations Group (GOE)</p> <p>Reporters and journalists are repressed by the police. A number of journalists and members of the public are assaulted and have their equipment confiscated.</p>	<p>17:17: Susana Morán (@susanamorg): "An injured police officer has just arrived at the Police hospital. Correa is still on the third floor" (<i>Un #policiaec herido acaba de ingresar al Hospital de la Policía. Correa sigue en el tercer piso del hospital</i>)</p> <p>18:41: Susana Morán (@susanamorg): "The police are surrounding the hospital. They won't let me take photos" (<i>La #policiaec está acorralada en las afueras del hospital. No me dejan tomar fotos</i>)</p>
20:00 to 23:00	<p>The operation to rescue the president begins, involving approximately 900 soldiers from elite army groups</p> <p>20:47: the insurgent police react to the presence of the soldiers and the first incidents begin.</p> <p>21:10: Correa leaves the hospital in a wheelchair. With this, the exchange of gunfire intensifies.</p> <p>23:05: The president arrives at the Carondelet Palace, where he makes a speech to thousands of supporters</p>	<p>22:02: Susana Morán (@susanamorg): "An Intervention and Rescue Group police officer has just been killed, the Ecuadorian flag is draped over his body at the Police hospital. The shooting continues" (<i>Acaba de fallecer un policía del GIR, lo cubrieron con la bandera del Ecuador en el hospital de la policía. Sigue la balacera</i>)</p> <p>23:07: Susana Morán (@susanamorg): "The area outside the Police hospital is littered with rocks, bullet shells, burned tires, shards of glass. It looks desolate" (<i>En los exteriores del hospital de la #policiaec hay piedras, casquillos de bala, llantas quemadas, vidrios. Es un panorama desolador</i>)</p>

Conclusions and some reflections on the case

30-S demonstrated the capacity of information and communication technologies to function as alternative communication tools and to democratize access to information. On the social networks, individuals interact dynamically, providing information about events and rupturing the vertical relationship with the traditional communication media, in which they are mere spectators.

During 30-S, the social networks permitted people to exchange information with each other and to express their viewpoints, either in favor or against what was happening. The social networks were transformed into civic opinion platforms, in contrast with the national network, which broadcast messages in favor of the government.

Twitter, in particular, was fundamental in transmitting information and airing people's opinions about the events on 30-S. Countering expectations, Facebook did not play a leading role in events, even though it had a larger number of users. Possibly Twitter's simpler and more dynamic format explains why it was used more.

The internet enabled people to learn about an event like 30-S in real time and on a global level. Unfortunately, this alternative communication space was not used by the traditional communication media on this occasion because they did not perceive the internet's potential to provide information not only locally but also globally. However, five years later, the communication media are exploiting the potential of ICT more effectively.

Information and communication technologies enable new forms of relationship in political, economic, social and cultural environments. People interact directly with their representatives. They express their opinions about their leaders, which means that the government needs to know how to deal with the criticisms it receives in the virtual world, understanding that this is a new and different form of communication between government and society. It represents the construction of a new type of society which requires different forms of organization, communication and information.

The frailty of the electronic media is also evident, because an important part of the information produced during 30-S may no longer be accessed because most of the videos documenting the event are stored on platforms such as YouTube. It is important to understand that content published on the social networks belongs to the companies that manage the platforms and not to the people who contribute by storing information on them.

The repository of video and audio recordings and other documents stored on the social networks and on the internet in general has been transformed into a historical memory of the events on 30-S. The information and communication technologies enable observation of the events, realities and occurrences which permit the formulation of analyses about this lamentable day in the country's history. However, a large part of the information generated on this day may no longer be found.

## Case 2: The “Quito, Yo me Apunto” Collective

### Introduction

The civic collective “Quito, Yo me Apunto” [Quito, I participate] was created in the virtual world in February 2011 in response to the interest and commitment of Quito residents in developing a democratic and participatory “governance” process for the Quito Metropolitan area based on the facilities offered by information and communication technologies (ICT), in particular the social networks.

With more than 4,600 members, the collective managed to include questions such as urban development, security, alternative means of transport, among others, on the public agenda.

### Evolution and roles

The collective was conceived as a space to permit Quito residents to express their opinions and make proposals related to the challenges faced by society, as well as the policies implemented by the local administration.

This occurred in part because of the “Quito Municipal authorities’ limited acceptance of societal participation”.<sup>10</sup> From this standpoint, the collective

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with María Sara Jijón, founder of the collective. Quito, May 29, 2015.

started by establishing itself as a space in which the public could channel its discontent about certain decisions taken by the local administration, as well as the lack of communication channels between the city hall and city residents.

According to the founder, María Sara Jijón, three weeks after the group was established, its approximately three hundred members decided that it was necessary to complement the virtual exchanges with face-to-face meetings> They, therefore, arranged a meeting to define the collective's mission and principles, the issues to be prioritized and a means of regulating the issues to be worked on. The first face-to-face meetings, in which some of the founders participated, enabled them to agree on some details, such as the four principles that would guide their activities, including the non-promotion of business or commercial interests (advertising goods and services) and non-adoption of a party political position or positions that undermined people's dignity.

Moreover, the face-to-face meetings enabled the identification of the most important topics for the collective, which are detailed here:

- 1. Urban mobility:** The collective decided to address questions such as the causes and effects of the growth of the number of cars in the city, the coverage and quality of public transportation, the state of sidewalks and other kinds of infrastructure used by pedestrians, to mention some of the most important.
- 2. Environment:** From the beginning, the collective was proposed as a space where the public could express its opinions about environmentally sustainable urban development and present concrete proposals to achieve this goal, including the implantation of a solid waste recycling system, hitherto inexistent in the city, urban horticultural activities and the conservation of green areas.
- 3. Culture:** According to the founder, in this area, as in most of the others, the collective started by addressing grievances and denunciations. In

this virtual space, a number of members declared opposition to the proposal by the municipal administration to change the city of Quito's anthem. Later, seeking to develop a more proactive role, the collective decided it should visit different districts in the city as a means of reviving and disseminating their history as part of a strategy to help revive the identity of Quito residents.

- 4. Security:** The virtual space created by the collective also permitted the collection of information about thefts and other threats to public security in different parts of the city. It also enabled the development of proposals aimed at increasing security in Quito.

The collective was created as an open group on Facebook. It was managed by seven people, who voluntarily dedicated part of their time to mediating the content shared by participants in accordance with the rules the group had adopted. Both its online presence and the offline spaces generated by the collective were funded using financial and non-financial contributions made by members.

During the first meetings, the group agreed to maintain the collective as an informal space that would not be incorporated as a legal entity, as a way of ensuring greater flexibility and dynamism. According to the founder, this decision was discussed again by collective members in the following years, particularly when opportunities for financing arose that could only be used if the organization were constituted legally.

The decision was made to maintain the collective as an informal organization which, in the opinion of members, gave it greater independence and reduced the risk of it being closed down by the government based Decree n. 16, which governs civil society organizations and establishes that they may be dissolved if they interfere in key Ecuadorian state public policies.

Analyzing the reasons for which it was founded and the dynamics of the processes it promoted in relation to formulating public policy and driving

public participation in local administration, the following roles played by the collective “Quito, Yo me Apunto” may be identified:

- 1. Gathering and diffusion of information:** One role it exercised from the beginning was gathering and disseminating information related to different questions, ranging from the misuse of official city hall vehicles to the history of Quito districts.
- 2. Interchange and learning:** In an interview, the founder of the collective stated that it had members who were highly specialized in areas considered to be priorities. This enabled very productive exchanges between members, particularly during the initial phase, when everything published on its Facebook notice board was public. Due to attacks which accused the collective of promoting party political interests in opposition to the municipal administration, the decision was taken to have group administrators assess and approve comments before they were made public.
- 3. Influence on local politics:** Given that some authorities from the city's local government became members of the collective, a number of its proposals have been adopted by the local administration. This is the case with the notion of sustainable mobility and urban ecology, which enabled the rapid implementation of policies to promote alternative means of transportation, such as the use of bicycles, and ecological measures like urban horticultural gardens.

These public policy proposals emerged from offline spaces in the headquarters of a foundation located in a building in one of the city's parks, use of which had been granted to the collective in previous years by the local government. The spaces were named “Quito talks” and “Quito proposes” and in accordance with the collective's founder, María Sara Jijón, the offline meeting places were a perfect complement to the exchange of ideas and proposals

taking place online. This was because they enabled a more in-depth exchange of ideas that could be “distilled” and transformed into concrete proposals which, in many cases, were sent to the local authorities and made public via the media.

In 2013, after a series of what members deemed to be attacks by hired trolls, the collective took decisions which affected the dynamics in place since the beginning.<sup>11</sup> First, the group was closed, meaning that only members could publish content and comments.

Additionally, when the municipal government announced that it would start charging the foundation for the space in which the face-to-face meetings were held, the collective decided to reduce the frequency of these meetings. Both these measures negatively impacted the collective's capacity to construct proposals which, as mentioned previously, benefited from offline interaction, as well as the growth in number of members.

## Conclusions and some reflections about the case

The experience of the collective “Quito, Yo me Apunto” shows the relevance of the phrase “*All politics is local*”, attributed to the former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas “Tip” O'Neill, both in the online and the offline worlds

Differently from debates on national, regional or global questions, which are more ethereal, ideological and diffuse by nature, most of the topics discussed in this collective were related to concrete challenges in urban administration, such as mobility, the state of public spaces and security. One element that stands out in the debates undertaken in the collective is the existence of concrete proposals on how to deal with the public problems

---

<sup>11</sup> In internet jargon, a troll is someone who publishes messages that are irrelevant, provocative or out of context in an online community, such as a discussion forum, chat room or blog, with the intention of upsetting or provoking an emotional response in people, aimed at altering the normal flow of conversation about a subject or setting users against each other (Wikipédia, 2015).

identified by its members. Since some of the members are specialists in questions of urban administration, this enabled a high level technical dialogue which, in the opinion of the founder, helped form a critical mass of individuals with informed opinions about the key dimensions of managing the city.<sup>12</sup>

However, the fact that the collective saw the need to create the “Ecuador, yo me apunto” [Ecuador, I participate] space to address emerging national questions, shows the importance of these questions and the difficulty in separating the national from the local level, which creates a fluid dynamic in which both levels interact and influence each other mutually and permanently.

## Case 3: YASunidos

### Introduction

Traditionally environmental activism in Ecuador, as in many parts of the world, is undertaken mostly by young people who are committed to efforts to conserve the environment via mobilization, street demonstrations and public protests, convened by handing out leaflets, mouth to mouth invitation and the use of graffiti to denounce abuses and to publicize their cause. In recent years, these groups have adapted their traditional *modus operandi* to incorporate the use of technological tools, the internet and the social networks in order to raise awareness, mobilize people and organize protests.

The use of the social networks and the internet is becoming a key element in environmental activism, particularly considering that the young are the age group that most use the internet and the social networks. According to 2010 statistics (INEC, 2013), the heaviest internet users are aged between 16 and 24 years (64.9%), followed by the 25 to 34 year age group (46.2%).

The case presented here analyzes the experience of an environmental collective in Ecuador and the relationship between online strategies and offline

---

<sup>12</sup> Interview with María Sara Jijón, founder of the collective. Quito, May 29, 2015.



mobilization promoted to collect signatures for the organization of a public consultation. According to Earl and Kimport (2011), e-activism is a continuum that ranges from *e-mobilization*, which consists of using internet and social network tools to convene offline mobilizations, to *e-tactics*, which include online and offline components; these do not require the physical presence of the participants and organizers and constitute online forms of protest and disagreement (e.g.: online petitions, sending letters to authorities), as well as *e-movements*, in which the organization and participation in the movement occurs exclusively online. The following will refer to this continuum, identifying the relations between the offline and online.

## Precursors

There follows a description of the events that preceded the creation of the YASunidos movement, which comprise:

### The “Amazonía por la Vida” Campaign

The “Amazonía por la Vida” [Amazon for life] campaign began in 1989, with the participation of environmental and human rights organizations in Ecuador. The campaign emerged in response to the need for the organization and promotion of initiatives to confront extractivist activities in the Amazon and to defend the inhabitants of the region. The main goals of the campaign were raising awareness and providing information about environmental problems in the Amazon region, developing strategies to prevent degradation of the environment and living conditions in the region and to encourage these inhabitants to identify solutions for their local environmental issues.

From the beginning, the campaign established a civil society organization with a center to monitor the exploitation of oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It produced reports on the impacts of extractivist activities, reported

violations, coordinated mobilization and organized a symbolic petition, publicized on billboards nationwide, to collect signatures in schools, high schools and universities for the protection of the Amazon territory. From 2007, with the introduction of the government initiative Yasuní-ITT for the conservation of the Yasuní National Park, the “Amazonía por la Vida” campaign focused on becoming the civil society voice for promoting this initiative.

At that time, the campaign had difficulty in accessing the tradition communication media. It used its website and a mailing strategy with a database of ten thousand contacts to promote awareness, convene and mobilize the public to participate in a series of offline activities, such as: fairs called “utopias”, where innovations in power generation were displayed (alternative energy supplied by machines powered by bicycles), agro-ecology and alternatives to fossil fuels; artistic events known as the “full moon ceremony”, an ancestral ritual of connection with nature, with the participation of artists, among other activities.

### **The Yasuní-ITT initiative to conserve the Yasuní National Park**

In 2007, during the Rafael Correa administration, the government promoted the Yasuní-ITT initiative, a proposal developed by civil society<sup>13</sup> aimed at preventing the exploitation of the reserves of 846 million barrels of oil in the Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini fields located in the Yasuní National Park in the province of Orellana. This park, which was created in 1979 (in accordance with the ministry agreement n. 322) and covers an area of 982,000 hectares, is the nucleus of the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (recognized by UNESCO in 1989). It is classified as having one of the highest levels of biodiversity on the planet (Bass et al., 2010), with more tree species in each hectare than in the whole of North America (MTPF/UNDP, 2012). In addition to its enormous variety of flora and fauna, the Yasuní National Park is also home to the last two uncontacted

<sup>13</sup> It is not easy to discover the origins of the initiative. It is known that it arose based on proposals from non-governmental organizations, academia and civil society in the 1980s (El Universo, 2010).

indigenous communities in Ecuador: the Tagaeri and the Taromenane. This is not the first time that communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon have been impacted by oil and timber extraction, activities which have increased in this part of the Amazon jungle in recent decades (Izko, 2012).

The Yasuní-ITT initiative was aimed at combating climate change, protecting the region's high biodiversity and maintaining the voluntary isolation of the uncontacted indigenous peoples through the proposition of new equitable and sustainable development models for the country. As compensation for not extracting the oil (which represents 20% of the country's oil reserves), the Ecuadorian government requested compensation totaling 3.6 billion dollars, estimated to be worth half of what the country would receive if it exploited the reserve. It also proposed that this money should be used to drive the country's transition to a post-oil economy through the development of alternative renewable energy sources, the protection of ecosystems and preservation areas, the reforestation of degraded areas and the promotion of social development and employment in sustainability-related areas.

At that time, the government's initiative was the most innovative environmental conservation proposal in the world, the intention being to preserve isolated peoples and biodiversity, as well as to promote carbon sequestration and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. It generated considerable interest and debate, in particular in a number of European countries. However, five years after the launch of the plan and ongoing efforts to raise the targeted funds, on August 15, 2012 President Rafael Correa announced the end of the Yasuní-ITT project, accompanied by the decision to exploit the oil reserves in the national park. The decision was justified by the fact that the initiative had only managed to raise 13.3 million dollars (0.37% of the projected amount).

The president asked the National Assembly to prioritize the exploitation of blocks 31 and 43 of the Yasuní National Park. On October 4, 2013, the National Assembly published the following resolution:

1. It is in the nation's interest to exploit these blocks, while occupying not more than one thousandth of the total area of the park. Production will be administered by the State, with investment in park management and in the production of the crude oil, subject to monitoring, control, and periodic reporting and the guarantee of the rights of local communities.
2. The area inhabited by the Tagaeri-Taromenane is to be exempted from the exploitation of oil.
3. The funds raised by the exploitation of blocks 31 and 43 are to be used to transform the country's production matrix and energy matrix and to construct a knowledge-based society. Furthermore, the following priorities will be observed: the Amazon, conservation, emissions reduction, the protection of forests and reserves, the mitigation of pollution in rivers and the promotion of an agrarian revolution.
4. The Executive is urged to introduce a bill of law promoting a special regime for the Amazon.
5. The crude oil extracted from the region is to be processed outside the area of the Yasuní National Park and should be refined in accordance with the highest environmental standards.
6. The Executive is urged to promote a regional policy to protect isolated indigenous and recently contacted peoples.

### **The “YASunidos” collective**

With the presidential decision to terminate the Yasuní-ITT initiative, the people and organizations involved in the “Amazon for Life” movement decided to form the YASunidos collective as a non-partisan, autonomous social movement engaging groups with diverse aims but with a shared interest in

ensuring that the oil reserves remain in the ground.

The collective, comprising diverse environmental organizations, artists, urban cyclists, among others, as well as young people who had participated individually in the “Amazon for Life” campaign, established the target of collecting 583,324 signatures (5% of the registered electorate) by April 2014 to carry out a public consultation on the exploitation of oil in the Yasuní National Park. It should be noted that in parallel a group called the “Amazon Defense Front” had also started the collection of signatures for a public consultation, although the question it was asking was whether the Ecuadorians would agree to prohibit all extractivist activities and projects that would affect the *Pacha Mama* [in Inca mythology the “Mother Earth”], such as oil and gas exploration and mining, among others. Later, a third initiative emerged: “Yasuní Sí” [Yasuní yes], promoted by the collective “Amazonía Vive” [Amazon lives]. This group supported the exploitation of oil and deliberately used a very similar petition form to the YASunidos one; however, it did not demand a public consultation to proceed with the exploitation.

If YASunidos managed to collect the number of signatures required by the National Electoral Council (CNE), the consultation would be held between April and May 2014.

## Evolution

### YASunidos online and offline activity

YASunidos started work emphasizing the importance of communication. Differently from the “Amazon for Life” campaign, YASunidos not only used its webpage and mailing list, which had thirty thousand names when the collective was formed,<sup>14</sup> but also had easier access to the media, which were interested in its activities and the difficulties and facilities the collective was encountering

14 By way of comparison, the newspaper with the highest circulation in Ecuador, the *El Comercio*, has a print run of 55,000 on weekdays, 80,000 on Saturdays and 150,000 on Sundays.

in the political sphere. Moreover, aware of the predominant age group in the collective —17 to 30 years —, YASunidos focused particularly on the social networks (Facebook and Twitter) to reach young Ecuadorians.

On October 15, 2013, the YASunidos collective initiated measures to raise the required 583,324 signatures within 180 days. These efforts were focused on e-mobilization and e-tactics. In terms of e-mobilization, the group created visual campaigns aimed at stimulating awareness to get signatures for the public consultation, participating in large events that highlighted the issue and denounced irregularities. These were publicized mainly via Facebook and Twitter, with Facebook having more followers (currently more than 26,000, compared with a little over 13,000 on Twitter). The e-tactics were concentrated on civic protests by means of posts, tweets and, principally, videos in which the collective publicized the opposition it was facing in its effort to collect signatures. The collective also used paid advertising on Facebook, segmenting the campaigns in accordance with the desired target public.

All of these online activities were linked with the offline efforts to garner support by circulating signature forms. The efforts to collect signatures were conducted on both an individual and collective level. The Collective's leaders distributed signature forms for young people to circulate to their colleagues and family members, in addition to organizing events in public venues (such as stadiums, shopping centers, music shows and public parks) to collect new signatures.

Throughout the process, a number of groups used the initiative's logo to confuse people and to collect signatures for the opposite cause. In view of these counter measures and episodes in which the group suffered violent opposition in public areas, the collective members started to use mobile phones to film such incidents and immediately post them on the social networks. According to the members of the collective, the most viral posts, that is, the ones most shared and receiving the most views, were precisely those showing violent incidents or cases of identity theft by opposing groups.

Finally, on April 12, 2014, the YASunidos collective delivered 757,623 signatures to the national electoral council (CNE). Online and offline activities continued during the signature verification process. During this time, YASunidos conducted campaigns to warn the public about possible irregularities. It continued its public mobilization, emphasizing the denunciation of irregularities, holding press conferences and organizing public demonstrations.

In May 2014, the CNE announced that it had rejected around 200,000 signatures and another 30,000 had been identified as having been repeated (some more than once). It accepted only 359,761 of the signatures as valid, a number insufficient to conduct the public consultation. The collective maintained its online and offline activities to create awareness, mobilize people and denounce irregularities. YASunidos maintained its appeals for the public consultation in national and international forums, while establishing a broad agenda to maintain the struggle for environmental conservation based on the following priorities: protection of the isolated peoples in the Yasuní National Park, opposition to the exploitation of minerals and oil in the territories and monitoring of extractivist activities in the country.

## Analysis

The following table summarizes the main events in the signature collection process conducted by YASunidos and the data on the evolution in the number of followers on its Twitter account:

Table 2: Chronology of the events in the collection of signatures by YASunidos

Date	Event	# followers Twitter
Aug. 14, 2013	Creation of Facebook page called "No toquen el Yasuní" [Don't touch Yasuní]	
Aug. 15, 2013	Via Decree n. 74, the Presidency of the Republic terminates the Yasuní-ITT initiative and proposes the exploitation of 1% of the surface area of the Yasuní National Park	
Aug. 15, 2013	The "Don't touch Yasuní" page supports the decision to exploit Yasuní	
Aug. 17, 2013	Executive Decree n. 84, amends the previous decree, enabling the exploitation of 1/1000th of the park's area	
Aug. 18, 2013	The YASunidos collective is created	
Aug. 22, 2013	YASunidos presents the question on which it will request a public consultation via a petition to the Constitutional Court	
Aug. 23, 2013	President Rafael Correa requests that the exploitation of oil in blocks 31 and 43 in the park be considered of national interest (in accordance with article 407 of the Constitution)	
Aug. 23, 2013	Via Twitter the president declares that: "There are groups that are politicizing the Yasuní-ITT question (...) and manipulating young people"	
Aug. 27, 2013	Demonstrations in defense of Yasuní (and denunciations of police repression)	
Aug. 28, 2013	The legal affairs secretary of the Presidency proposes regulating the social networks in cases of offence or defamation	
Aug. 29, 2013	Creation of YASunidos account on Twitter	0
Sep. 13 2013	33 mayors in the Amazon region form the "Amazon Total Defense Region" (FDTA) and request that the Constitutional Court permit a public consultation on the exploitation of Yasuní	314
Sep. 17, 2013	The National Assembly revises the report for the first debate on the declaration of the exploitation of the ITT as being of national interest	442
Sep. 20, 2013	The National Assembly initiates the second debate on the declaration of the exploitation of the ITT as being of national interest	



Date	Event	# followers Twitter
Sep. 25, 2013	In the absence of a response from the government bureaucracy, the collective requests authorization of the forms for the collection of signatures from the Constitutional Court	
Oct. 3, 2013	With a majority of 108 votes, the National Assembly declares the exploitation of the Ishpingo, Tiputini and Tambococha fields in Yasuní National Park to be of national interest, making 18 recommendations about such exploitation to the Executive	1,041
Oct. 8, 2013	The National Electoral Council (CNE) authorizes the delivery of the forms to the FDTA	1,218
Oct. 14, 2013	The CNE trains and qualifies 50 YASunidos members	
15 out. 2013	The CNE delivers the forms to YASunidos and the 180-day period for the collection of signatures begins	1,353
Oct. 30, 2013	During his weekly pronouncement on radio and TV ( <i>Enlace Ciudadano</i> ), the president mentions the participation of YASunidos collective members in the Amazon women's march and their support for the protest. He announces the termination of the Pachamama Foundation*	1,957
Dec. 4, 2013	The newspaper <i>El Telégrafo</i> publishes a series of articles alleging violent acts by collective members	
Mar. 5, 2014	The collectives convenes a press conference in which it presents 60,000 forms with 480,000 signatures	3,037
Mar. 8, 2014	The YASunidos form is published in the newspaper <i>El Comercio</i>	
Mar. 2, 2014	Other collectives start to use the Yasunidos logos and visual identity to collect signatures in favor of exploitation in the park	

\* At the end of 2013, the Ecuadorian Ministry of the Environment used the Ministry Agreement n. 125, dated December 4, 2013, to dissolve the Pachamama Foundation, based on Executive Decree n. 16, which permits the dissolution of civil society organizations that intervene in public policy or threaten internal state security or disturb the peace, in response to a protest during the 11th Southeastern region oil licensing round, in which acts of violence were reported.

Date	Event	# followers Twitter
Mar. 13, 2014	The collective calls a press conference to denounce the harassment and persecution of members	
Mar. 12, 2014	The collective delivers 757,623 signatures to the CNE	5,308
Apr. 16, 2014	YASunidos reports that the CNE did not open the boxes containing forms with signatures in the presence of a member of the collective	
17 abr. 2014	The process of validating the signatures is initiated in a military installation, without the presence of collective members	
Apr. 21, 2014	Meeting between YASunidos members and the CNE in an attempt to resolve differences	
Apr. 30, 2014	The collective denounces irregularities and states that it will not endorse the process, considering it fraudulent	6,666
May 1, 2014	The process of verifying the signatures begins; the seals are opened without the approval or supervision of collective members	6,727
May 3 2014	The CNE publishes a note in the press informing that there are doubts about 50,000 signatures, which will be verified by a handwriting specialist	
May 6 2014	In a press conference, the CNE announces that 230,000 of the 599,103 signatures had failed to pass the verification stage	
May 9, 2014	YASunidos holds a press conference in which it announces suspicion of fraud	
May 14, 2014	YASunidos delivers an appeal to the CNE	
May 29, 2014	Academics from the National Polytechnic School and the University Andina Simón Bolívar present a statistical analysis which indicates that the collective has the necessary number of signatures	
Jun. 13, 2014	The CNE contests the appeal, accepting 10,000 of the almost 500,000 signatures rejected	
Jun. 18, 2014	The collective holds a press conference accusing the CNE of fraud related to the deadline for the appeal and appeals to the Electoral Court	
Jun. 27, 2014	The Electoral Court rejects the collective's appeal, declaring that it had missed the deadline	

Date	Event	# followers Twitter
Jul. 9, 2014	The collective announces that it will request help from international courts and that it will not appeal to the Constitutional Court, considering its independence questionable	

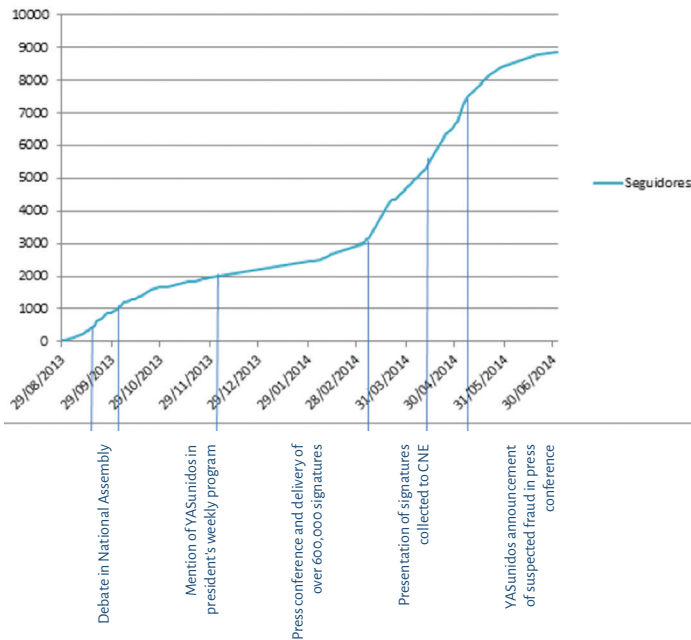
**Note:** Prepared by authors using data from YASunidos, Twitter Counter and the Colectivo de Investigación y Acción Psicosocial (2015).

Analyzing the progress in the offline signature collection process and comparing it with what was happening online — the growth in the number of followers on Twitter —, it may be noted how at key moments the former influenced the latter (see the following chart). However, it may also be noted that the signature collection process advanced with relatively few online followers (three thousand at the time of the press conference where the 600,000 signatures collected were presented). In spite of this, in the last weeks of signature collection, in parallel with the press conference and the publication of the signature form in a major newspaper, the number of Twitter followers grew steadily.<sup>15</sup>

It should also be noted that during the signature verification process and the later denunciation of irregularities in the process by YASunidos via the social networks and the traditional media, the number of followers continued to grow.

<sup>15</sup> It was only possible to access analytical data for followers on Twitter and not on Facebook.

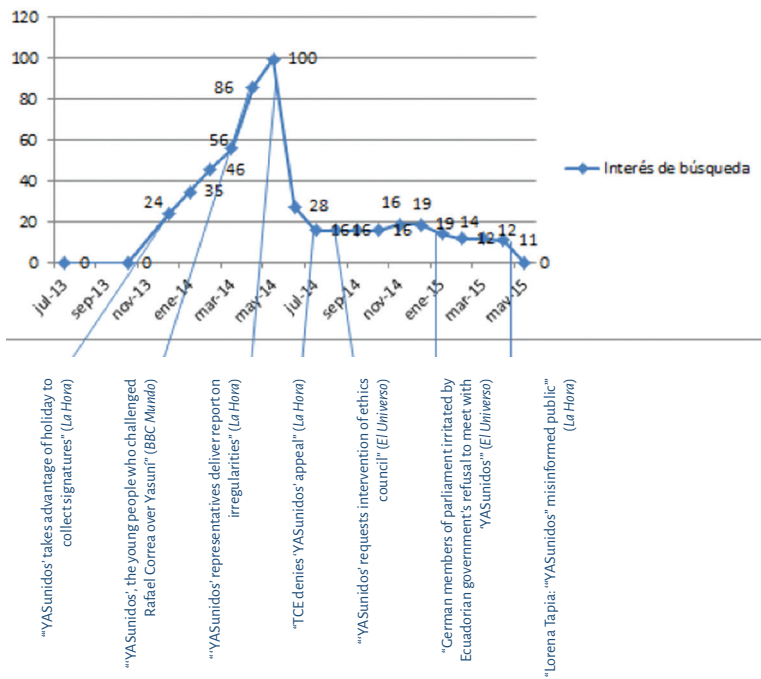
Figure 4: @Yasunidos growth on Twitter



Note: Prepared by authors based on YASunidos and Twitter Counter data.

Comparing Google searches with the trending news items in the search system, it may be seen that the highest volume of searches for “YASunidos” took place after the news that the collective had published a report on irregularities in the signature verification process. These data confirm what members of the collective reported: that there was greater interest and traffic at the times that YASunidos reported irregularities and used the social networks to disseminate these denunciations.

Figure 5: Volume of searches for “YASunidos” on Google



Notas:

1. Prepared by authors based on Google Trends data.
2. The numbers represent the volume of searches relative to the highest point in the chart, which is given a rating value of 100. The data are normalized, they are not absolute numbers. When there are not enough data, the point on the chart receives a rating value of 0.

## Conclusions

In the case of YASunidos and its efforts to collect signatures for a public consultation, the cyberactivism involved e-mobilization and e-tactics, but did not constitute an e-movement. This is due mainly to the fact that the collection of signatures must be physical, not permitting a 100% online movement — although other countries might accept some kind of digital signature. However,

the symbolic value represented by the physical act of signing a petition should not be discounted when compared with a mere “click” or the signature of an online petition in which there is no face-to-face interaction and in which the person signing the petition may feel remote from whoever is responsible for the petition.

Figure 6: YASunidos Cyberactivism



Note: Prepared by authors.

YASunidos's success in collecting signatures should not be attributed exclusively to its online activities. This is a collective that had already accumulated considerable social capital based on the “Amazon for Life” campaign, and initiated its activities with a contact base of 30,000 people, equivalent to a little over half the print run of the newspaper with the highest weekday circulation in Ecuador. The initiative built upon the work carried out previously by the “Amazon for Life” campaign, which had promoted initiatives to protect the Yasuní National Park and to publicize the government's Yasuní-ITT proposal. Consequently, it was not necessary for YASunidos to establish an initial positioning on the importance of conserving the national park.

For this reason and in accordance with the analysis of the growth in the number of Twitter followers and the reflections of collective members, the social networks provided support for the dissemination of their initiatives and for publicizing signature collection events. However, most importantly, they also constituted spaces for the denunciation of irregularities both in the signature collection process and in the verification of these signatures by the electoral authorities. The more than 700,000 signatures collected were the result of important offline efforts which in turn depended on online mobilization. But they also reflected a political context in which various sectors of society were unhappy with the country's government and considered signing the petition a channel for expressing this.

It is important to underscore YASunidos' capacity to overcome a recurring gap between social organizations and movements on the one hand and technology and advertising on the other. In the experience analyzed, the collective not only prioritized the use of the social networks, but also made use of advertising on these networks, adapting to the dynamics of this medium, rapidly reporting different events, in particular the denunciation of irregularities. Furthermore, YASunidos quickly grasped the reach of the different networks in Ecuador, where Facebook leads with 91.1% of total accesses, compared with 4.6% for Twitter (StatCounter), concentrating its online efforts on the former.

The YASunidos initiative is also notable in that it was an online/offline mobilization that incorporated democratic processes by interacting with the electoral authorities to request a public consultation. This was different from past mobilizations, which had developed with the objective of removing a government from power.

Also worthy of note in the YASunidos case is the online/offline mobilization on the part of the country's government and other actors as a means of confronting the collective. The following activities were observed in the online and offline worlds:

- The appearance of the webpage “Don’t touch Yasuní” one day before the presidential announcement of the decision to exploit the oil reserves in the national park. This strategy is known as *astroturfing* (Quaglia, 2014) — an advertising or publicity technique which is disguised as a spontaneous mass expression, concealing the originator of the message — using an online strategy to manipulate a social trend.
- Tweets from the president and governmental officials against groups who “politicized” the decision to exploit the oil.
- The proposal of the secretary for legal affairs to regulate the social networks in the event of offense or defamation.
- The appearance of groups in favor of the exploitation of the oil, who started collecting signatures for a public consultation with a question completely contrary to the one proposed by YASunidos, but using the collective’s logo and images on the forms, sowing confusion among the public.
- Reports on the existence of government-run trolling centers, that is, teams paid to oppose YASunidos and to issue inflammatory opinions contrary to those of the collective on the social networks, with repeated posts using determined hashtags to position the issue among the trending topics on Twitter (“Los trolls...”, 2014; “El supuesto...”, 2012).

Lastly, YASunidos members report a series of learnings from the collective’s experience during the campaign:

- The Yasuní-ITT initiative could have received greater international support if e-tactics had been deployed to raise funds from individuals and institutions rather than seeking government handouts. It is likely that the target amount would not have been reached, but the effort



would have generated support that could to an extent have saved the initiative.

- Similarly, an online global petition in parallel with the physical collection of signatures in Ecuador could have attracted international attention and support for the collective's cause.
- Regarding the social networks, a broader agenda of priorities would have permitted the collective to have reached new audiences.
- The success in collecting signatures was to a great extent due more to the offline actions than their online counterparts. The online activity provided support for the collective members' activities and represented a space for reporting irregularities, attracting the attention of the public and the traditional media.
- The initiative to collect signatures benefited from a favorable conjuncture, including the interest and willingness of the traditional media to cover the YASunidos collective's activities. On other occasions, similar initiatives experienced great difficulty in accessing the traditional media to publicize their activities.

### 3. Some final reflections

Based on the analysis of the case studies, we present some reflections about the relationship between the online and offline spaces in the Ecuadorian reality, which provide a basis for the preliminary conclusions and recommendations. ..

## 1. Mass auto-communication

The 2014 Confidence Barometer, which includes Argentina, Brazil and Mexico as a sample for Latin America, reveals that in 80% of these countries society trusts the traditional media less than it did in 2013. The data show a decrease of around eight percentage points in the confidence index, according to the Public News Agency of Ecuador and South America (Agencia Pública de Noticias del Ecuador e Suramérica - Andes).<sup>16</sup> The study shows that in terms of confidence level, the media come below companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In comparison, the levels of confidence in the digital communication media increased.

Additionally, the report showed that society trusts the digital media and the social networks more than it does the press, radio and television, a trend that has been present since 2006. Also in accordance with the report, 60% of the population of the Latin American countries that participated in the study trust the social networks: "For example, via the social networks, it is possible to hold a politician, a government accountable. Digital activism enables an individual to complain and to make demands on companies and on public services"

In Ecuador the situation is no different. According to research conducted by the Journalism School of the Universidad de los Hemisferios, on average, less than half of the interviewees consider that the information offered by the media is always or nearly always clear, truthful, reliable and impartial (Vásconez Dávalos, 2010).

The dissemination of the use of the new ICT enabled the emergence of what Castells (2010) called "mass auto-communication", a process whereby the traditional intermediaries, the media, are eliminated and substituted by the users or receivers, who are transformed into emitters thanks to the powerful information exchange system enabled by the web.

---

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.andes.info.ec/es/noticias/medios-comunicacion-digital-tienen-mas-confianza-tradicionales-segun-estudio.htm>

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in a country like Ecuador, where the mass communication media enjoy low credibility, which encourages people to seek non-traditional information sources. Mass auto-communication confirms the prognosis made by Toffler in the 1970s, when he foresaw that technologies would permit consumers to be transformed into producers, or “prosumers”, as he called them (1980).

The phenomenon of mass auto-communication was tangible in the case of September 30 when, after the establishment of the mandatory national radio and television network for an indefinite period—which in practice meant the curtailment of the traditional media as a source of information not coming from the government—the public opted to become emitters of news about the events taking place on that day.

Castells is right when he argues that the masses are a concept we should understand in the plural and not the singular. This is also evident in the case of 30-S: a number of groups were organized, clusters of ideologically proximate individuals who feed off each other, with very little evidence of “cross pollination” between the different groups, which is reflected in a fragmentation existing in the “real” public sphere.

It should also be noted that in spite of the potential for democratization and elimination of intermediaries offered by the virtual spaces, not all of the country's population is able to participate due to the significant digital gap existent in Ecuador, both in terms of access to infrastructure (computer or smartphone) and communication channels, resulting from the continued high cost of internet access in the country.

For this reason it is essential to capitalize on a positive aspect of the new communication law in Ecuador, which institutionalized the target of having community communication media represent at least one third of the total media. This could represent a concrete strategy for enabling mass auto-communication, with the provision of a larger number of tools to ensure that this goal is reached more effectively and more democratically. The result

would be more organized and permanent journalistic and communications experiences working independently within civil society to occupy the social networks with more civically oriented content.

## 2. The digital Leviathan

However, not all the actors in the public sphere have the same power when it comes to participating in decision making processes. Between January 2005 and March 2006, the Ecuadorian State, through the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, published an inaccurate inflation rate due to a fault in a system used by the authority to perform the calculations. Carrillo and Shahe Emran (2009) studied this “natural experiment”, analyzing the effect this information had on households, influencing families’ consumption, saving and investment decisions, considering the inconsistency between the information they received from the State and the evolution of prices as perceived on a day to day basis. The authors of the study concluded that the State had a significant capacity to mold people’s mindsets, modify their preferences and shape their behavior.

This capacity to shape reality becomes even greater in the digital age. The Ecuadorian government has established a communication strategy which is much more intensive than it was in the past using both the state communication media and the social networks.

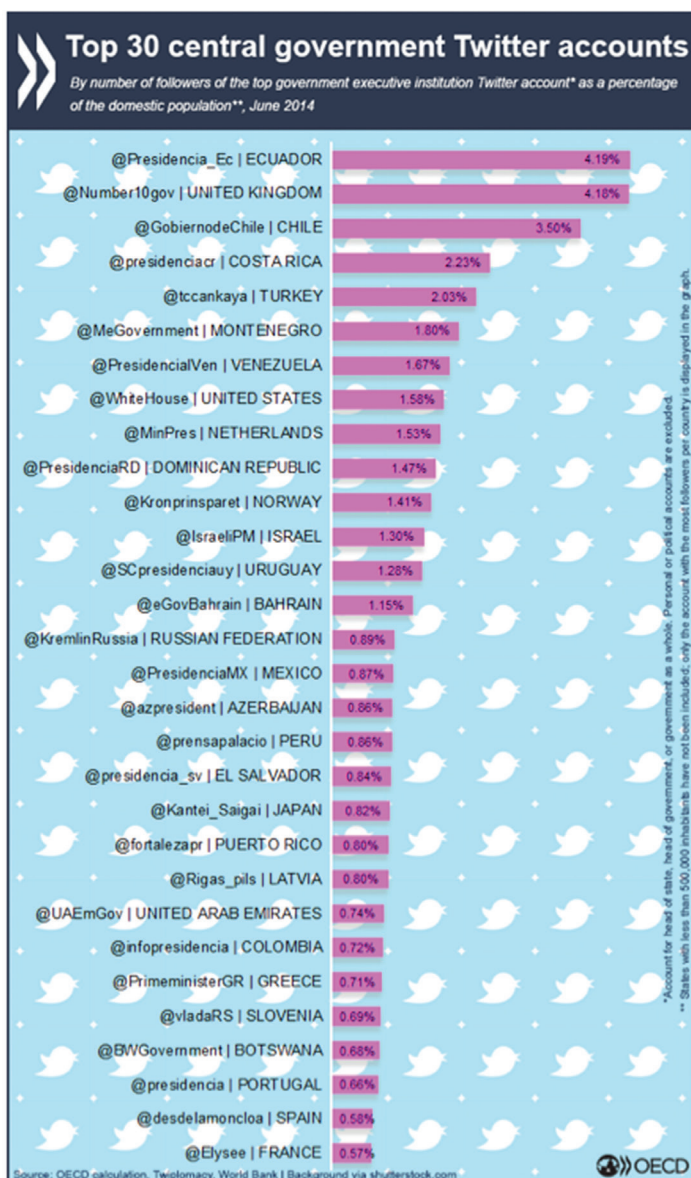
The three cases demonstrate the importance of the State’s presence in the virtual public sphere. A tangible expression of the level of use of these tools was verified in the 30-S case, when the president signed Executive Decree n. 488 electronically, establishing a state of emergency. This decision, communicated via the social networks, gave the Communication Secretary the power to eliminate the presence of the conventional media for a number of hours and establish a monopoly in communication at a very critical moment for Ecuadorian democracy.

In the case of the “Quito, Yo me Apunto” collective, the State participated using public employees both from the central government and from the city of Quito. These civil servants published opinions about the questions under debate and supposedly used trolls which, according to some members of the collective, would appear when issues that were sensitive for the municipal administration arose, the goal being to interfere in dialogue.

This shows that governments perceive the power the social networks have to leverage the capacity of individuals and groups to influence the public agenda, the process of formulating public policy and the organization of collective actions.

An OECD study analyzes the use of the social networks by public authorities in 34 countries, the strategies they use most, and the visible results of the presence of these authorities in the virtual world (Mickoleit, 2014). The study reveals the growth in use of the Internet and the social networks by the Ecuadorian government. As shown in figure 7, in 2014 the Twitter account of the Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador (@Presidencia\_EC) had 659,099 followers, representing 4.2% of the country's population. This account had the fourth highest number of followers among the 34 countries that participated in the study. According to a study done by the author, the Presidency publishes an average of 18.2 tweets per day, higher than the average in the countries analyzed.

Figure 7: Comparison of central governments with the highest number of followers on Twitter



Source: Mickoleit (2014).

It should be noted that in Ecuador, as in a number of other countries in the sample, the office holders have more followers than the institutions they represent. For example, the president of the Republic's Twitter account (@MashiRafael) has the equivalent of 10.1% of the Ecuadorian population as followers, more than double the number of the Presidency's account.

Apparently, governments and their institutions and authorities are seeking to promote the disintermediation in communication that we analyzed in the previous section, establishing a more direct connection with the public. Although it has not been possible to find statistics on the tweets sent by the public to the Presidency of the Republic it has been determined that this medium is used to channel requests, complaints and proposals, which could reflect a democracy intermediated by the institutions traditionally responsible for such functions, such as political parties, the public authorities and NGOs.

The government also participates in the virtual world via electronic portals. The portal of the Presidency of the Republic ([www.presidencia.gob.ec](http://www.presidencia.gob.ec)) contains a wide range of multimedia content, links to associated portals, such as the state communication media, as well as to the president's weekly video program, in which he informs the public about his administration.

However, this is not the only portal promoted by the Presidency. There is also the portal Somos+ ([somosmas.ec](http://somosmas.ec)), defined "as a support community for the Civic Revolution", a political movement founded by the president. This portal has exercised the function of receiving reports about messages criticizing the government and of promoting a collective defense of both the Correa administration and the government party.

On a number of occasions the government has manifested its right to defend itself against supposed defamation which promotes disinformation and tarnishes the reputation and honor of authorities and civil servants. While recognizing everyone's right to defend their dignity and honor, not all actors have the same relative weight in the public sphere and given their level of

public exposure government authorities should be more open to criticism than individuals who do not exercise this type of function.

Within a democratic regime, power should be exercised responsibly. And since this power has grown upon contact with the virtual world, State authorities need to exercise even greater prudence in view of their greater political, economic and symbolic resources and increased exposure and presence in the public sphere.

### 3. Is the new “agora” digital?

The growing complexity of modern life makes it increasingly difficult for people to find the time and other resources necessary to participate in offline strategies aimed at influencing the public agenda. Given this, the new communication technologies promise a space that enables online participation in questions of public interest.

A founder of the “Quito, Yo me Apunto” collective mentioned that one of the factors explaining the success of the virtual space in generating participation in questions on the public agenda is that it enables people to live their normal lives, that is, work and family and at the end of the day use their computers and a small portion of their free time to share their opinions about the city’s problems and potential solutions with others.<sup>17</sup>

Worthy of note are experiences such as Avaaz ([www.avaaz.org](http://www.avaaz.org)), a community of more than 40 million people which has mobilized around causes as diverse as saving the Amazon, combating corruption in FIFA or decreasing the amount of homework given to children by means of online petitions that enable a speed and diversity which would be practically impossible using offline strategies.

This could indicate that the virtual world is expanding in response to the limitations imposed by the specialization of labor and the proportion of

---

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mauricio Alvarado Dávila, a Quito-born historian and cyberactivist.



time modern life demands for activities valued by the market. Following this reasoning, we may hypothesize that the new “agora” — a reference to the space in which the citizens of Ancient Greece met to debate and decide on subjects related to the *polis* — will be increasingly virtual.

Both in the case of YASunidos and the collective “Quito, Yo me Apunto” it was evident that online activity was neither sufficient to insert these issues into the public agenda, nor to form the critical mass of people necessary to influence public policy.

In the YASunidos case, online spaces were very useful in disseminating information about the impact of government decisions on the indigenous peoples and the biodiversity in the national park and, consequently, generating support for the proposal of a public consultation to prevent the exploitation of oil in the region. However, the process of collecting more than 600,000 signatures from people all over Ecuador would not have occurred without the offline spaces organized in parks and public squares that brought the issue home to the public, and produced the results obtained.

Something similar happened in the case of the “Quito, Yo me Apunto” collective. As described in the case study, in just a few weeks, its members decided to hold face-to-face meetings to “generate the trust that is only possible when you know people personally”. From this perspective, a preliminary conclusion may be drawn that, even though an important part of the agora may occur via the virtual media, the face-to-face spaces are indispensable not only for exchanging ideas, but also for developing the actions required to actually change reality. The case studies seem to suggest the existence of a complementary relationship between the online and offline, which has enabled the emergence of a new agora, enriched by the multiple possibilities generated by the combination of the digital and face-to-face worlds, where individuals may participate in both dimensions, enriching the public deliberation process and ultimately building a more dynamic, plural and vibrant public sphere in which a greater number of actors

may contribute to constructing the public agenda in a more participative and democratic manner.

However, the evidence provided by this study also permits an alternative hypothesis. The evidence in the cases analyzed suggests not only that the online participatory spaces need offline spaces, but something even more radical: the growth of virtual spaces as a possibility for participation may be reducing the dimension and the dynamism of the agora instead of expanding them. The two interviewees from the “Quito, Yo me Apunto” collective agreed that many people who used to participate in mobilizations when there were fewer online spaces than there are today no longer take part in these offline activities because by sharing an opinion or proposal on Facebook or on Twitter, they feel that they have already done their part.

In the case of 30-S, the government's appeal for people to defend the regime on the streets did not result in a physical presence. There was a repercussion in the online world, with the circulation of thousands of opinions, but this was not reflected in offline spaces, which would have permitted a higher level of deliberation about the complex political crisis that Ecuador experienced during this period.

This phenomenon would not appear to be exclusive to Ecuador. The study “The Structure of Online Activism”, which analyzed the virtual campaign “Save Darfur”, determined that fewer than 1% of the approximately 1.2 million people who signed the online petition complemented this with something that would reflect a true commitment to the cause (making a donation or communicating with decision makers, to mention some examples cited by the researchers). The authors' conclusion is that digital activism “conjures the illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing” (Lewis, Gray & Meierhenrich, 2014).

Along the same lines, as shown in the 30-S case, Bauman (2012) states that the internet also produces an effect of “saturation” in the public sphere, with multiple superficial comments that reduce the chance of a more in-depth

debate and impoverish the quality and pluralism of public deliberation. Moreover, differently from the offline world, where it is more difficult to filter other peoples' opinions, the web permits us to choose who we want to talk to, which, consequently, may reduce our exposure to opinions different from our own.

Thus, this author argues that the internet and the virtual world diminish our capacity to listen to and to comprehend others. This leads to an impoverishment in dialogue, in navigating diversity and in appreciating different arguments and allowing them to influence our own, which would enable us to build societies that are not only more democratic, but also better able to discern the realities by which they are governed.

Does the virtual world contribute to or obstruct plurality, the intensity of participation and the quality of public decision making? The cases analyzed in Ecuador show that the online world is a powerful medium for disseminating information and for mobilizing interest to to participate in a cause. The evidence shows that online strategies are able to reach the younger and higher income segments of the population, contributing to the increased participation of certain groups, but not the whole of society.

Its impact on the quality of public decision making is more uncertain. Experiences such as those of the "Quito, Yo me Apunto" collective show the impact of the virtual space for the exchange of ideas and the construction of proposals oriented to the development of the city. In the YASunidos and 30-S initiatives, the social networks and, in a more general sense, the virtual world, helped to disseminate information, but there is no evidence that that they produced a process of debate or analysis of ideas that contributed to the generation of a collective intelligence. What is clear in the three cases is that sometimes the online interacted with the offline world in a planned and at other times in an unpredictable manner, producing combined effects that neither of the two dimensions would have generated alone.

As a final reflection, the evidence from this study permits the conclusion that we should analyze the online–offline not as two separate worlds but rather

as spaces that interconnect with each other continuously in a complex manner, recognizing that power exists both in the networks and in the streets and squares, although it is expressed in a distinct way in each of these spheres.

The challenge perhaps is to accept that both the online and offline modify social structure and relationships, each with dynamics that are simultaneously autonomous and interconnected. Analysis of the cases in Ecuador suggests that when offline spaces are reduced, the online world expands and vice-versa, forming interactions that complement each other synergistically.

A more complete vision of the offline and online world will enable us to understand that a public sphere is emerging in which society has at its disposal new spaces, strategies and mechanisms permitting participation in the construction of its present and future.

## 4. References

"46% de la población tiene acceso a internet". *El Universo*, May 20, 2015. Available at: <[www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2015/05/20/nota/4892016/46-poblacion-tiene-acceso-internet](http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2015/05/20/nota/4892016/46-poblacion-tiene-acceso-internet)>.

BASS, Margot S. et al. Importancia de la Conservación Global del Yasuní National Park. *PLoS ONE*, v. 5, n. 1, 2010.

BELÉN ALBORNOZ, María; ROSALES, Ricardo. "Periodismo Ciudadano y Twitter: El caso del 30-S ecuatoriano". *Versión Estudios de Comunicación y Política*, n. 30 (Oct. 2012), pp. 91-101, 2012.

BELLETTINI, O. *Sociedad civil y bienes públicos*. Documentos de Trabajo n. 3. Quito: Grupo FARO, 2013.

CARRILLO, Paul E.; SHAHE EMRAN, M. "Public Information and Household Expectations in Developing Countries: Evidence from a Natural Experiment". *SSRN*, Apr. 24, 2009. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1394500.

CASTELLS, Manuel. *Comunicación y poder*. Madri: Alianza Editorial, 2010.

CASTELLS, Manuel. *La Sociedad Red: Una Visión Global*. Madri: Alianza Editorial, 2006.

CERVANTES, Byron. "Trece años del golpe de Estado y caída de Mahuad". *PP El Verdadero*, Quito, Jan. 21, 2013. Available at: <[www.ppelverdadero.com.ec/pp-al-dia/item/trece-anos-del-golpe-de-estado-y-caida-de-mahuad.html](http://www.ppelverdadero.com.ec/pp-al-dia/item/trece-anos-del-golpe-de-estado-y-caida-de-mahuad.html)>.

COLECTIVO DE INVESTIGACIÓN Y ACCIÓN PSICOSOCIAL. *Estrategias de represión y control social del Estado ecuatoriano: Informe psicosocial en el caso YASUNIDOS*. Quito, 2015. Available at: <<https://accionpsicosocial.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/informe-psicosocial-en-el-caso-yasunidos.pdf>>.

CONSTANTE, Soraya. "Ecuador ha sancionado casi 200 medios en dos años". *El País*, Jun. 25, 2015. Available at: <[internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/06/24/actualidad/1435177369\\_550550.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/06/24/actualidad/1435177369_550550.html)>.

CORONEL SALAS, Gabriela M.; MIER SANMARTÍN, Aura C. "Impacto de Twitter en Ecuador, Caso 30S". In: 10th Ibero-American Conference on Systems, Cybernetics and Informatics –CISCI 2011. Orlando, Florida (USA): IIIS, 2011.

EARL, Jennifer; KIMPORT, Katrina. *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet*

Age. Cambridge, MA (EUA): MIT Press, 2011.

ECUAVISA. 30S *Programa La Televisión* [vídeo]. [Quito]: Ecuavisa, 2011. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=27jAj3bH8Yo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27jAj3bH8Yo)>.

ECUAVISA. *La Batalla de Abril* [vídeo]. [Quito]: Ecuavisa, 2005. Available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR\\_yrj0Bo9E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR_yrj0Bo9E)>.

"EL SUPUESTO 'troll center' tuvo en su mira a EL COMERCIO". *El Comercio*, Mar. 1, 2012. Available at: <[www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/supuesto-troll-center-tuvo-mira.html](http://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/supuesto-troll-center-tuvo-mira.html)>.

ENJOLRAS, Bernard; STEEN-JOHNSEN, Kari; WOLLEBÆK, Dag. "How do social media change the conditions for civic and political mobilization?". In: III International Conference on Democracy as Idea and Practice. Oslo: Universidade de Oslo, 2012.

ECUADOR. Acuerdo Ministerial n. 322. Registro Oficial n. 69. Quito, Nov. 20, 1979.

ECUADOR. Acuerdo Ministerial n. 350. Quito, Dec. 4, 2013. Available at: <[www.ministeriointerior.gob.ec/wpcontent/uploads/2013/12/acuerdo\\_ministerio\\_ambiente.pdf](http://www.ministeriointerior.gob.ec/wpcontent/uploads/2013/12/acuerdo_ministerio_ambiente.pdf)>.

ECUADOR. Ley Orgánica de Servicio Público (LOSEP). Registro Oficial 294. Quito: Oct. 6, 2010.

"ES VANIDOSO arrogarse la idea del Yasuní, Falconí". *El Universo*, Feb. 4, 2010. Available at: <[www.eluniverso.com/2010/02/04/1/1355/es-vanidoso-arrogarse-idea-yasuni-falconi.html](http://www.eluniverso.com/2010/02/04/1/1355/es-vanidoso-arrogarse-idea-yasuni-falconi.html)>.

GHOSH, Pallab. "El padre de internet predice una 'era oscura digital'". *BBC*, Feb. 13, 2015. Available at: <[www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/02/150213\\_tecnologia\\_era\\_oscura\\_digital\\_lv](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/02/150213_tecnologia_era_oscura_digital_lv)>.

GONZÁLEZ, Ernesto. *Testimonio de un Comandante*. [S.l.: s.n.], 2014.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos [INEC]. *Ecuador en Cifras: Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicaciones (TIC'S) 2013*. Quito: INEC, 2013. Available at: <[www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/web-inec/Estadisticas\\_Sociales/TIC/Resultados\\_principales\\_140515.Tic.pdf](http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/web-inec/Estadisticas_Sociales/TIC/Resultados_principales_140515.Tic.pdf)>.

IZKO, Xavier. *La frontera invisible: procesos extractivos, infraestructura y ambiente en la Amazonía ecuatoriana (2010-2030)*. Quito: Iniciativa para la Conservación de la Amazonía Andina [ICAA], 2012. Available at: <[www.scribd.com/doc/93835695/Informe-Amazonia](http://www.scribd.com/doc/93835695/Informe-Amazonia)>.

Ecuatoriana-Xavier-Izko>.

LEWIS, Kevin; GRAY, Kurt; MEIERHENRICH, Jens. "The Structure of Online Activism". *Sociological Science*, v. 1, n. 1 (Feb. 2014), pp. 1-9, 2014. DOI: 10.15195/v1.a1.

"LOS TROLLS generan la autocensura". *La Hora*, p. B-4, Apr. 13, 2014.

MICKOLEIT, Arthur. *Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends, Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers*. OECD Working Papers on Public Governance n. 26. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014.

MUCHEDUMBRE 30-S. Director: Rodolfo Muñoz. Production: Rodolfo Muñoz Comunicadores Asociados. [Quito]: Rodolfo Muñoz Comunicadores Asociados, 2011. 1 DVD (90 min), widescreen, color. Available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoWRIDUjxwg&list=PLEDE292C19684D569](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AoWRIDUjxwg&list=PLEDE292C19684D569)>.

Multi-Partner Trust Fund/United Nations Development Program [MPTF/UNDP]. *Informe Anual 2012 del Fondo Fiduciario Yasuní ITT*. New York, 2012. Available at: <[mptf.undp.org/document/download/11427](http://mptf.undp.org/document/download/11427)>.

NTN24. *Ecuador recuerda el 30-S como uno de los días más negros de su historia* [vídeo]. [Bogotá]: NTN24, 2011. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHyjcpZ5hgQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHyjcpZ5hgQ)>.

PAZ Y MIÑO, Juan. *Insubordinación o Golpe*. Quito: Abya Yala, 2011.

PEIXOTO, Tiago. "e-Participatory Budgeting: e-Democracy from theory to success?". SSRN, Sep. 25, 2008. DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1273554.

PUTNAM, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

QUAGLIA, Juan. "El astroturfing, una nueva forma de mentir". *Huffington Post*, Jan. 13, 2014. Available at: <[www.huffingtonpost.es/juan-quaglia/el-astroturfing-una-nueva-forma-de-mentir\\_b\\_4560165.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.es/juan-quaglia/el-astroturfing-una-nueva-forma-de-mentir_b_4560165.html)>.

"SEIS HORAS en las que el país recibió solo la versión oficial". *El Universo*, Oct. 17, 2010. Available at: <[www.eluniverso.com/2010/10/17/1/1355/seis-horas-pais-recibio-solo-version-oficial.html](http://www.eluniverso.com/2010/10/17/1/1355/seis-horas-pais-recibio-solo-version-oficial.html)>. Accessed in March 2015.

SHULMAN, Stuart W. "The Case Against Mass E-mails: Perverse Incentives and Low Quality Public Participation in U.S. Federal Rulemaking". *Policy & Internet*, v. 1, n. 1, pp. 23-53, 2009. DOI: 10.2202/1944-2866.1010.

SIERRA, Natalia et al. 3OS "*Fuego a Discreción*". Quito: Artes Gráficas Silva, 2011.

Sorj, B., "On'line/off-line: a nova onda da sociedade civil e a transformação da esfera pública". In Sorj, B. & S. Fausto (orgs). *Internet e mobilizações sociais: transformações do espaço público e da sociedade civil*, São Paulo, Plataforma Democrática, 2015.

Teleamazonas. ESPECIAL 3OS [vídeo]. [Quito]: Teleamazonas, 2011. Available at: <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbci4r5zj2M&index=3&list=PL5ED477E61D447007](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbci4r5zj2M&index=3&list=PL5ED477E61D447007)>.

TOFFLER, Alvin. *The third wave*. Nova York: Morrow, 1980. [Ed. bras.: *A terceira onda*. São Paulo: Record, 2001.]

VÁSCONEZ DÁVALOS, Irene. "La credibilidad de los medios de comunicación en el Ecuador: Reflejo de un periodismo de calidad". *Revista ComHumanitas*, Quito, v. 1, n. 1, pp. 173-182, 2010.



## Webpages, social networks and web resources consulted

YASunidos Twitter account. Available at: <[twitter.com/Yasunidos](https://twitter.com/Yasunidos)>.

Google Trends. Available at: <<https://www.google.com/trends/explore?q=yasunidos>>.

“YASunidos” Facebook page. Available at: <[www.facebook.com/YASunidos](https://www.facebook.com/YASunidos)>.

“No Toquen el Yasuní” page on Facebook. Available at: <[www.facebook.com/notoquenelyasuni](https://www.facebook.com/notoquenelyasuni)>.

StatCounter. *Top 7 Desktop, Tablet & Console Social Media Sites in Ecuador from May 2014 to May 2015*. Available at: <[gs.statcounter.com/#social\\_media-EC-monthly-201405-201505-bar](https://gs.statcounter.com/#social_media-EC-monthly-201405-201505-bar)>.

Twitter Counter. Available at <[twittercounter.com](https://twittercounter.com)>.

YASunidos. Available at <[www.yasunidos.org](https://www.yasunidos.org)>.

# Venezuela

---

Francine Jácome<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

## 2. Case studies

Case 1: Cycle of protests from February to June 2014

Case 2: #SOSVenezuela: Denunciation and warning for the international community

Case 3: Alternative journalism: Efeito Cocuyo and Crónica Uno

## 3. Conclusion

## 4. References

---

<sup>1</sup> Executive director of the Venezuelan Institute of Social and Political Studies (Instituto Venezolano de Estudios Sociales e Políticos).

## 1. Introduction

In Venezuela, relations between civil society organizations (CSOs), political parties and the State have been undergoing significant transformation. The components of cyberspace in particular have been playing an increasingly important role in the political polarization the country is experiencing. As a result, cyberspace also reflects this polarization.

Our perspective here is based on the situation of civil society organizations after seventeen years of a regime dominated by a single party, in which there has been a deterioration in democratic institutions and in the independence of the state powers. Our main focus in this document is on the political and social conflicts in 2014, on the role of the alternative media and, in accordance with Sorj's (2015) proposition, the relationship between online and offline initiatives.

For this reason, the work is divided into two sections. In the first part, we present a brief analysis of the last seventeen years of the Venezuelan regime, including a synthesis of the debates on democracy and the relations between civil society, the state and the political parties. Secondly, we look at the regulatory frameworks governing the communication media, the activities of civil society organizations and participation in these organizations.

The second part includes three case studies, chosen to present the problems experienced with protests in the country and the growing need for the development of alternative channels of information and communication. The first case covers the wave of protests in Venezuela in the first half of 2014 and the relationship between the use of the social networks and different offline activities.

The second case shows how #SOSVenezuela led to a series of initiatives on the social networks and, in some cases, how these mobilized protests and demonstrations. Of particular importance in this case is the international focus. The different initiatives, in particular during the protests in the first half of 2014, sought international visibility for events in Venezuela.

The third case identifies the new digital communication media being developed on the internet, in particular the social networks, making a comparison between the alternative media platforms *Efecto Cocuyo* and *Crónica Uno*, the latter an initiative by the civil society organization Espacio Público.

Lastly, we reflect on the challenges the social networks present for the civil society organizations, the new regulatory frameworks which could, in the short term, limit the use of the social networks, as well as the alternative proposals to reinforce democratic institutions.

## I. The Venezuelan regime, seventeen years on

### Debates on democracy

Venezuela is the most striking case of democratic deterioration in South America, with tendencies that were classified as personalist and authoritarian during the terms of the deceased president Hugo Chávez. Just over two years into the mandate of his successor, president Maduro (April 2013 to August 2015), the situation has deteriorated even further, evident in increased militarism and repression. Denounced by both Venezuelan and foreign leaders as a government with a democratic façade employing dictatorial and even totalitarian means, the Bolivarian model has provoked debate about the meaning of democracy not only in Venezuela but in the entire region.

Bolivarianism has introduced a false dichotomy between representative democracy (liberal) and participative democracy. The constitutional and legal frameworks built since 1999 in Venezuela and later in other countries, have expanded the use of mechanisms such as referenda. In Venezuela, there are three types: deliberative (for example, the referendum for the 1999 Constitution), consultative (such as the one on constitutional reform held in 2009 to permit unlimited re-election), and the recall of electoral mandates (the presidential recall referendum in 2004). By mid- 2015, all had been used on a

national level by means of special electoral petitions. Although they claim to be participative—they may be convened by the public, which at times has resulted in significant inclusion—, in practice, they have frequently been promoted and controlled from the top down, often limiting individual and community autonomy.

After seventeen years of “revolution”, what is the state of democracy in the country? In general terms, Vivas (2015) points out that Venezuela is experiencing a new form of autocratic regime that seeks to conserve a semblance of democratic legitimacy. It has been classified as a regime that is semi-authoritarian, a non-liberal democracy or a competitive authoritarian democracy. This work employs the definition elaborated by Corrales (2015) of a hybrid or competitive authoritarian democracy.

This regime's main characteristic is the fact that the governing party competes in elections in which it generally wins. Differently from the traditional authoritarian regime, the product of coups, the president of the republic gradually acquires a series of powers that enable government without checks, counterweights or transparency. The use of enabling laws, which permit government and legislation by decree, has been emblematic over the last sixteen years. In 14 years, president Chávez had four enabling laws passed by the National Assembly, while the current president has enacted two in his two years in office.

Corrales points out that in the Venezuelan case, growing authoritarianism has increasingly depended on the reduction or loss of independence of the different powers, in particular the Judiciary, resulting in the use, abuse and non-exercise of the rule of law. The Judiciary is at the service of the Executive, which has permitted the development of a legal framework enabling it to dominate the two other powers and intervene in the private sector. This, in turn, has led to what the government itself calls a situation of “communication hegemony”, whereby it increasingly dominates the communication media.

Similarly, Corrales (2015) considers the government's loss of capacity to control the results of elections, particularly since 2012, another key driver

of the growing authoritarianism in the country. While the government of the deceased president Hugo Chávez held a comfortable 20% margin over the opposition, this changed dramatically in the April 2013 presidential election, when this difference was reduced to 1.4%.<sup>2</sup>

According to Corrales (2015), a third element which has permitted the growing authoritarianism of the Venezuelan regime, especially since the current president came to power, is the lack of pressure from governments of other countries, particularly in Latin America. On most occasions, Latin American governments, although they may have expressed “concern” about the situation in Venezuela, have not taken positions in support of democracy or human rights. In a way, they have ended up providing tacit support for the regime, as evidenced by recent declarations in the European Union (EU) and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit in Brussels and in the June 12 meeting between the president of Brazil and the president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, who also met with former president Lula.

## The State-civil society relationship

Currently, the main form of participation incentivized by the government regime is via the communal councils and the establishment of communal power. These are organizations managed from “above”; they are dependent on government funding, which is then channeled to their respective communities. They are developed within a model intended to eliminate the intermediation of non-government actors, such as political parties, unions and professional or business groups, establishing as it were, a direct relationship between the Executive power (strongly dependent on the presidency) and grass roots communities.

---

2 In this context, it should be noted that in the last parliamentary elections held on December 6, 2015, the opposition obtained a historical victory, winning 109 seats, against 55 for the government party.

With respect to the participation of civil society organizations in the formulation and execution of public policy, according to the government discourse, public policy is defined in conjunction with the communal councils, which decide on projects for their communities. These are then funded by the government and implemented jointly.

Most critics allege that such projects are imposed by the government, are not transparent and are aimed essentially at garnering political support. There have been many denunciations of corruption in relation to these councils in recent years (Tablante and Tarre, 2013; [transparencia.org.ve](http://transparencia.org.ve)). In the 2014 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Venezuela came in 161<sup>st</sup> place among the 175 countries assessed. (<http://www.transparency.org/country#VEN>).

The strategy of promoting new structures and organizations with the objective of establishing government hegemony has been accompanied by a series of decisions and legal measures aimed at limiting the participation of autonomous social organizations and movements. Among the main laws and regulations sanctioned to limit the right of association and manifestation (Gómez, 2015; Provea, 2015; van Berkel and Jácome, 2009) are:

- Draft of the International Cooperation Law (2005): this was the first initiative to restrict the participation of civil society organizations. Its main objectives included: (1) the creation of a registry of civil society organizations receiving overseas funding; (2) the creation of a common fund for all international cooperation to be administered by the government, which would be responsible for choosing the projects that would receive the funding in accordance with the priorities established in the government's national plan.
- Civil society organizations and networks, principally those with representatives from the international community, mobilized

against this, demanding talks with the government. The lobbying was effective and the National Assembly, at the time totally under government control, did not send the bill for a second reading and for approval. Nonetheless, the government may still resume the passage and approval of this law.

- From 2010, measures were approved which in practice may be used to restrict and even criminalize the activities of civil society organizations and the right of association.
- Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination (December 2010): this contains ten articles and, in accordance with the government, is aimed at protecting the exercise of political sovereignty and national self-determination against foreign interference.
- However, it prohibits international financing of “organizations having political ends, organizations defending political rights or individuals who execute political activities, as well as the participation of overseas nationals who, by means of financing from these organizations, may represent a threat to the stability and the operation of institutions in the country”.
- Public participation and commune laws: indicating entities established by and dependent on the central government as the only valid civil society organizations. The objective is the cooptation of the social organizations. These are: the Organic Popular Power Law (2010), the Organic Law of Popular and Public Planning (2010), the Organic Law of Social Auditing (2010); and the Organic Law of the Communes (2010).
- The Organic Law on Organized Crime and Financing of Terrorism (February 2012): the definition of terrorism is ambiguous and is



determined by the government. It permits the interception of personal communication, electronic messaging and banking transactions.

- The organic criminal procedure code (2012): this prohibits civil society organizations defending human rights from participating in the defense of cases involving violations of human rights.
- Elimination of exemption from income tax for cooperatives, civic associations and foundations (2014).
- Constitutional Court of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (April 24, 2014): this determines the suspension of the guarantee of the right to peaceful demonstration established in the 1999 Constitution. It determines the need for prior authorization from the competent authorities.
- Decree 1.471 (January 2015): this establishes the People's Protection System (SP3), encouraging the public to participate in the intelligence service.
- Ministry of Defense Resolution 008610 (January 2015): this authorizes agents of the state to employ lethal weapons in demonstrations. It also permits all armed forces employees to act in the maintenance of public order.

In addition to these laws and standards, there is the series of informal organizations promoted with the purpose of “defending the revolution”. Of note during 2014 were:

- Anti-coup people's commands
- Student and peasant militias
- Special brigade against groups causing violence (BEGV, June 2014)

Two new institutions were also created in the 2013/2014 period:

- Strategic Center for the Safety and Protection of the Homeland (Cesppa), linked directly to the presidency and commanded by a general.
- The National Bolivarian Armed Forces Shock Troop (FANB), created exclusively to deal with protests and demonstrations that threaten the stability of the country.

Just three among many examples off how this legal-institutional framework aimed at limiting the rights of association and participation guaranteed in the 1999 Constitution will be mentioned. Initially, the 2012 reform of the criminal procedure code prevented lawyers from human rights civil society organizations from defending people arrested during the protests in the first half of 2014. During this same period, the law on combating organized crime and financing terrorism permitted the interception of communications.

Thirdly, the April 24, 2014 decision of the Constitutional Court was used repeatedly during a period lasting over a year to limit the right to protest peacefully. Local authorities supporting the government denied permission for protests and rallies to be held in their jurisdictions. In Caracas, an emblematic case was the local government of the municipality of Libertador, which denied all the requests made by the opposition coalition Mesa da Unidade Democrática (MUD) to organize meetings or rallies between April 2014 and August 2015.

These formal legal and constitutional rules were complemented by the creation of the extra-judicial figure of the “cooperating patriot”. Accepted by the courts, the cooperating patriot is permitted to make anonymous denunciations and is accepted as a “faceless witness”.

One of the main targets of this legal and institutional framework has been human rights defense organizations, especially those with an

international presence. One of the most active in this area is the Organization of American States, but Unasur, the Union of South American Nations has also come under fire. Particularly worthy of mention was the partial exit of the Inter-American Human Rights System from the country in 2012. These organizations published independent reports aired in different instances of the UN in 2015, leading to attempts on the part of the government to discredit them.

These new structures promoted with the aim of establishing the hegemony of the government, as well as the legal restrictions to the right of association and participation, have led to reactions on the part of civil society and to the emergence of new organizations and new forms of protest. As a result, currently in Venezuela, civil society has not been able to escape from the political polarization that the country is experiencing.

## The situation of the traditional media and the social networks

One of the government's fundamental strategies over the last seventeen years has been to build a "communication hegemony". In parallel, it has been denouncing constant attacks, disinformation campaigns and the participation of the private press in conspiracies against its political project. In response, a number of different restrictive legal mechanisms have been used to expand the penetration of official channels both in the communication media and in the social networks.

The growing restrictions on the traditional media have included legal measures, restrictions on the importation of paper for printing, withholding government advertising (the main driver of the economy), purchase of news vehicles to change their editorial line, prohibition of coverage of government actions by private media etc. In summary, the mechanisms used have been: (1) limiting licenses for radio and television broadcasters; (2) restricting the supply

of paper ; (3) withholding advertising by government agencies; (4) fines against the press; (5) promoting the purchase of communications companies by groups close to the government (The Economist, 2015).

The legal framework which has enabled increasing control over the communication media includes (Corrales, 2015; IPYS, 2015):

- The Organic Telecommunications law (2000), which authorized the cancellation or suspension of radio and television concessions in accordance with “national interests”.
- The Radio and Television Social Responsibility law (2004), or *Ley Resorte*, which prohibits the dissemination of information that “promotes or incites” hatred or violence. The definition of the terms of the law allows the authorities ample room for discretion. In 2010, the law was amplified to encompass the internet.
- The reform of the Penal Code (2005), which expanded the definition of contempt to make “disrespect” for civil servants illegal, a definition which also permits abundant room for discretion. The reform also limited the possibility of using public areas for demonstrations.
- The decision of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice's Political-Administrative Court (August 2014), establishing that access to public information should not be “abusive” — requests for information should not obstruct the workings of public administration.
- The decision of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (December 2014) that telecommunications-related information is a state secret. The release of some information could be considered a threat to the nation's security.
- The Ministry of Defense resolution 009723 (May 7, 2015), creating the Joint Cyber Defense Directorate.

In the case of the main open television channels, this has led to self-censorship, which has translated into non coverage of political events, a lack of programming analyzing the country's political, economic and social reality, and no interviews with social and political actors opposed to the government.

In his study, Corrales (2015) shows that in 2014 there was a reduction of approximately 50% in the number of independent newspapers and television stations. Therefore, large sectors of the population are receiving information via channels that are increasingly controlled by the government or its main political party, the Partido Socialista Unido da Venezuela (PSUV).

On July 3, 2015, the director of the research institute Datanálisis, Luis Vicente León, presented the results of the “News penetration and consumption study” (at the 5 2.0 Web Encounter organized by Espacio Público). According to the report, 40% of the respondents believe that there is press censorship, especially on television and, to a lesser degree, on the internet. Of these, approximately 70% think the censorship is conducted by the government, followed by self-censorship. This raises questions about public access to news, since the main medium by which the public receives information is open television, followed by subscription television and by the Facebook social network.

The government not only exercises “communication hegemony”, limiting freedom of expression considerably, but also practices “self-censorship” by not disclosing information and performance indicators related to the economy, services and healthcare. There are no updated data from PDVSA (the Venezuelan state oil company), the National Institute of Statistics (INE) or the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV). A key example is the fact that the Central Bank has not published data on inflation, scarcity and shortages since the end of 2014, although it is obliged to do so by law on a monthly basis. It conceals information on the serious economic and social crisis the country is experiencing. In the healthcare area, for example, no statistics are available on infectious diseases, vaccinations and other information of public interest.

Regarding internet access, the National Telecommunications Commission's (Conatel) final report for 2014 ([www.conatel.gob.ve/estadisticas-anales-y-trimestrales](http://www.conatel.gob.ve/estadisticas-anales-y-trimestrales)) concludes that there are 15,960,691 users in the country, with penetration standing at 60.33%. The commission points out that from the third quarter of 2014 it changed its measurement methodology to include all mobile telephone users who have a data plan. Officially, subscribers to internet services total 3,693,310. The data are not discriminated by social sector, but access is concentrated mainly in the urban zones of the most heavily populated states of Miranda and Zulia, as well as in the capital Caracas. Access is much lower in the country's interior, particularly in rural areas.

In recent years there has been a significant migration to the social networks. In Venezuela, this is not related exclusively to the availability of access to the new technologies, but also represents an attempt to get around governmental barriers to information. Luis Vicente León (2.0 Web Encounter) indicated that in terms of finding information on the internet, "Facebook is the most important medium". According to a survey, 52% of people get information from this network, compared with 22.6% who rely on Twitter. The so-called "digital natives" (young people) identify much less with print media and the radio. The survey also indicates that 66% of respondents use the internet on a daily basis.

The Datanálisis study concludes that in addition to being in vogue, the social networks enjoy broad acceptance because they are perceived as being a space in which people may air their opinions and participate. In view of the economic, political and social situation, León explains that Twitter has become the most important medium for those who feel they are being censured, particularly political leaders who do not have access to the traditional media. According to Szichman (2015), the leader of the opposition Henrique Capriles has 5.1 million followers on Twitter, compared with president Maduro's 2.3 million.

According to the analyst Iria Puyosa (2015), the Venezuelan government has expanded its presence on the social networks with party political content.

An example is the Red Patria [Homeland Network] ([redpatria.org.ve](http://redpatria.org.ve)), whose services include Mochuelo (Owl), which permits the public to report violations and monitors denunciations from a "situation room" (Puyosa, 2015, p. 16). This is essentially an instrument that facilitates government surveillance of internet users. She also indicates that the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) started reporting people's activities on the web to the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEBIN), a political police force. An analysis of the accounts of the different government institutions shows that they are used more for party purposes than for fostering e-government.

In addition to the control it exercises over audiovisual media, the social networks and the press at national level, the Venezuelan government has also enabled the creation of regional networks of influence. Among the traditional communication media, the most important is the television channel TeleSur, which has other governments in the region as partners but in practice is run by the Venezuelan government. Similarly, international digital platforms have been developed with financing from the government. In this respect, Sorj (2015) highlights the importance of transparency laws related to the use of public funds to finance communication media, which should also apply to the direct and indirect support governments give to their sympathizers on the internet.

Additionally, as will be seen further ahead, the government disseminates three times more news on Twitter than its opponents do, thanks to the use of bots.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, between March and April 2015 the government headed the campaign #ObamaRepealTheExecutiveOrder to repeal the sanctions applied to seven Venezuelan employees for human rights violations and corruption (Szichman, 2015). However, the intended offline delivery of the petition during the 7<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Americas in Panama did not take place.

---

3 Accounts that are created and operated automatically without human intervention. They are robots, ghost users who, in the case of Twitter, retweet messages automatically (von Bergen, 2015). They use mechanisms to generate trending topics (hot subjects) artificially. In Venezuela, this is done by the Bolivarian Communication and Information System (SiBCI) and by the "government machine". It is centralized on a bureaucratic propaganda apparatus and is not related to grass roots network activists (Puyosa, 2015).

Regarding the relationship between the traditional media and the social networks, an important finding of the Datanálisis study is that the radio and the written press generate a great deal of content for the internet media. They play an important role in establishing the information agendas for virtual media such as *Noticias 24* ([www.noticias24.com](http://www.noticias24.com)) and *La Patilla* ([www.lapatilla.com](http://www.lapatilla.com)), which are leaders among the news portals. The political orientation of the latter is opposed to the government.

This situation has made Venezuela one of the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean which puts up the most obstacles to access to public information and permits less and less space for freedom of expression. Furthermore, there has been an expansion in the criminalization of protests and demonstrations by social sectors. Relations between the state and civil society are growing more and more tense as the repression of dissent grows.

Within this context, the social networks, with their advantages and their limitations, have begun to play an increasingly important role. They have been transformed into an alternative medium of information, as well as disinformation. In parallel, use of this medium has been subject to growing repression on the part of the state.

From 2014, the economic, political and social crisis in the country worsened. This generated conflicts and violence, evident both in the offline protests and demonstrations in different sectors, as well as online in the social networks. In the context of competitive authoritarianism, this work will focus on two main indicators: restrictions to the right of association, participation and freedom of expression and access to public information. Three cases studies will be presented to exemplify these.



## 2. Case studies

### Case 1: Cycle of protests from February-June 2014

#### Origins

There were two fundamental drivers behind the 2014 political and social mobilizations. Firstly there was the presidential election in April 2013, called after the death of Hugo Chávez. The difference between the government and opposition candidates was 1.4%, leading to accusations of electoral fraud. Possible mobilizations aimed at clarifying these claims were avoided due to fear of violent repression. In second place came the municipal elections in December of the same year. In quantitative terms, the opposition was not successful, due to the reduced number of municipalities in which they occurred. Qualitatively, however, the opposition did well in most of the local governments in the most heavily populated urban centers in the country.

Between January and June 2014, Venezuela was the setting for an important cycle of protests. Some interviewees (Gómez, 2015; van Berkel, 2015) pointed out that there was a significant political motivation behind the high levels of conflict in 2014, principally in the first six months of the year. Nevertheless, unquestionably the growing social crisis also influenced the demonstrations.

The 2014 Venezuelan Education-Action in Human Rights Program Report (Provea, 2015) indicates that this cycle was atypical, combining political protests with social and economic grievances. The document highlights the fact that the economic and social crisis worsened in 2014, leading to the reversal of social gains achieved in previous years. At the end of the year, inflation stood at 68.5%, reaching 102.2% in the foods segment, generating important setbacks in the reduction of poverty. The study “Condiciones de Vida de la Población Venezolana 2014” [Living conditions of the Venezuelan population in 2014], conducted by diverse universities, estimated that 48.4% of Venezuelan

households live below the poverty line. If this trend is maintained, it is projected that by the end of 2015 the country will have the same number of poor people that it had in 2000.

To understand the political dynamics of events in 2014, it is necessary to recall the creation of the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable) [MUD] in January 2008. This was a coalition involving the main opposition parties which emerged after the crisis that involved its predecessor, the Coordinadora Democrática (Democratic Coordinator - CD). The responses to the 2012 and 2013 election results generated different reactions, which crystallized more clearly starting in 2014.

On the one hand, there was a sector consisting of several parties and leaders aligned with the MUD, which insisted on an electoral solution for the growing conflict in the country. On the other, a group centered on three political leaders (Leopoldo López, Voluntad Popular party, Antonio Ledezma, Alianza Bravo Pueblo party, and María Corina Machado, Vente Venezuela party) decided to launch what it called “La Salida” [The Wayout]. This strategy was based on the conclusion that the country was being ruled by a dictatorship, and that it was necessary to generate an immediate solution. The group was extremely active, using the social networks to coordinate the diverse actors and mobilize for protests, using the hashtag #lasalida. Moreover, the group expanded its agenda to include not only the proposal to remove president Maduro, but also to address the country's economic problems, with a particular focus on the growing shortages and insecurity.

## Evolution

The initial trigger for the protests in the first half of 2014 was urban violence. The protests began in the University of Táchira after an attempted rape and soon spread to other universities. With the arrest of a number of student

leaders, some of whom were incarcerated in maximum security prisons, the release of the detained students was added to the issue of violence. In a student rally to commemorate Students' Day in Caracas on February 12, the first three deaths occurred. This led to an intensification of the protests.

The protest agenda was expanded and diversified, with the inclusion of the call for the resignation of president Maduro, the release of the detained students, the end of repression, as well as demands related to the shortages, problems in public utilities (water and electricity) and violence.

**Timeline of the protests from February to June 2014<sup>4</sup>:**

Date	Events	Online
Feb. 4 to 11	Protests in universities in Táchira, Caracas, Mérida, Zulia and Coro. Students arrested	
Feb. 12 to Jun. 1	Marches and protests in 38 cities	
Feb. 12	Youth Day marches. In Caracas, pro-government and opposition marches. First deaths (3). Disturbances and violence. Court orders arrest of Voluntad Popular (VP) leader, Leopoldo López for the crimes of terrorism, incitement to violence, damage to property, homicide, among others	Conatel orders suspension of broadcasting by the Colombian channel NTN24 for its coverage of the unrest, arguing that it is fomenting violence
Feb. 13	Protests demanding the release of the arrested students continue in various parts of the country, roadblocks are set up on a number of streets. Protests and demonstrations in support of the government are also organized	

4 Source: <es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Cronolog%C3%ADa\_de\_las\_manifestaciones\_en\_Venezuela\_de\_2014>.

Date	Events	Online
Feb. 14		Twitter announces that service has been blocked by the government. The state telephony company CANTV denies responsibility for failure of the network. Exchange of accusations between the government and media about hacked Twitter accounts (e.g.: @NTN24ve, @PartidoPSUV)
Feb. 18	Demonstrations and surrender of VP leader Leopoldo López to the military authorities	
Feb. 22	Demonstrations "for peace" both by opposition (organized by MUD) and pro-government factions	
Feb. 26	"Silent March" convened by wife of VP leader, Leopoldo López; government organized mobilization of agricultural and indigenous groups in Caracas	Leopoldo López's wife convenes demonstrations in several parts of the country via Twitter
Feb. 27	Government organizes National Peace Conference	
Feb. 28	2nd meeting of National Peace Conference; diverse business sectors participate	
Mar. 12	Pro-government student march for student Peace Conference	
Mar. 13	Ruling by Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ): mayors must ensure free passage and prevent barricades on public thoroughfares. Decision will be used to arrest, prosecute and remove two opposition mayors from office (San Cristóbal, in Táchira, and San Diego, in Carabobo)	
Apr. 14	Televised meeting of beginning of dialogue between government and MUD representatives. Sponsored by three Unasul foreign ministers (Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador) and the Papal Nuncio. Goal: to end violence. This was the only public dialogue	
Apr. 15	First working session with the vice president to continue talks	

Date	Events	Online
Apr. 18	Private meeting between MUD and the three Unasul foreign ministers and Papal Nuncio. Goal: to explain reasons for suspension of talks with the government	
Apr. to May	Establishment of "peace camps" in several regions of country. In Caracas, the most emblematic are: in front of the UNDP office, in the Plaza Alfredo Sadel and Plaza Bolívar de Chacao	
Apr. 24	TSJ decision: any peaceful concentration, demonstration or protest must have prior authorization from authorities (mayors or governors)	
May 8	Operation by Bolivarian National Guard and Bolivarian National Police to dismantle student camps. Mass arrests	
May 12	Mobilizations nationwide to commemorate three months of protests (Feb. 12-May 12)	
May 19	Department of State, Justice and Peace creates special brigade to counter violent groups	
May 22	18 public and private universities initiate 24-hour strike demanding the release of the arrested students	
May 30		Student movement convenes rally for June 1 via Twitter to protest against arrest of young people in demonstrations
Jun. 1	"Marcha dos valentes" (march of the brave)	

According to the Provea 2014 annual report (2015), 93% of the demonstrations were peaceful. They took place in at least sixteen states, and participation is estimated at around 800,000 people nationwide. Some of the online calls to protest went viral while others were ignored. The key forms of protest were: rallies, concentrations, vigils, meetings and camps. Although they were in a minority, the "barricades" (*guarimbas*)<sup>5</sup> received greater media

<sup>5</sup> Roadblocks to stop traffic.

coverage. However, Provea estimates that only 2.5% of the demonstrators (around 20,000 people) used barriers to block traffic.

According to the country's Attorney General, 43 people were killed, over a hundred injured and more than 3,000 were arrested in this cycle of protests. The NGO Foro Penal claims that 75 people remain under arrest. Within this context, an unprecedented experience in the country was the use of the social networks, in particular Twitter, to provide information on the whereabouts of people arrested by the Bolivarian National Guard and the Bolivarian National Police during the diverse protests and demonstrations. Accounts which were particularly active in this process were @CDH\_UCAB (Human Rights Center of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello), @\_Provea (Venezuelan Education-Action in Human Rights Program), @PorHumanidad (Venezuelan Penal Forum, a human rights NGO) and @espaciopublico (an NGO that advocates for freedom of expression and access to information).

## Conclusion

Both the online and offline components of this cycle of protests and demonstrations were characterized by decentralization and improvisation, with little chance of being sustained over a long period of time. Many of the protests were conducted in an improvised manner by groups of neighbors, students and young people rather than by consolidated civil society organizations. And, as Luis Gómez (2015) emphasizes, “‘new’ organizations contributed little to the process”.

The social networks were important in the calls to protest for different rallies during the course of 2014. The 2014 Provea annual report (2015) highlights the production of a “model effect”, which permitted the diffusion of protest mechanisms that were replicated in other parts of the country.

An important conclusion of the Provea report was that new characteristics were observed in the 2014 demonstrations. They were

“decentralized, diversified, convened via the social networks, and mostly they were peaceful” (p. 319). It also notes that the government maintained the same tendencies seen in previous years of not respecting the principles of freedom of association and participation in meetings set forth in the 1999 Constitution, as well as continuing to discriminate against its political opponents.

The majority of the specialists we interviewed emphasize that the 2014 cycle of protests revolved around two fundamental axes. Firstly, they were closely linked with the proposal made by a sector of the political opposition: *La Salida* (The Wayout). Deborah van Berkel (2015) observed that instead of creating a new dynamic, it reflected a “political dynamic conducted by a segment of the traditional opposition forces”.

Secondly, there were spontaneous protests on the part of several sectors. Some of these were promoted by grass roots organizations such as freight haulage associations and residential organizations focused on specific issues such as urban violence, deficient public services and problems related shortages (Gómez, 2015).

Regarding the co-opting of these movements by other actors, such as the government or opposition parties, there were three main interpretations on the part of the interviewees. Firstly, the consolidated civil society organizations maintained their autonomy because they had well defined objectives and strategies. Most of the consolidated civil society organizations and networks did not respond to the calls to protest.

Secondly, during this cycle many of the leaders, in particular in the student movement, were associated with political parties such as *Voluntad Popular* and the *Vente Venezuela* movement, and thus did not represent autonomous sectors in the movement. Thirdly, movements such as the “victims of the barricades [*guarimbas*]<sup>6</sup> were created by and still maintain close relations with the government (Gómez, 2015), reflecting a lack of independence.

6 Traditionally in an indigenous language *guarimba* means “territory”. Based on a children's game it was to denote a refuge, a place in which to avoid capture. For many years it has been used in protests to denote the barricades used to block the roads and stop traffic.

However, with these indications of cooptation, the specialists interviewed also pointed out that the demonstrations could represent signs of an opportunity to overcome political polarization through talks between sectors that identify neither with the government nor the opposition (Uzcátegui, 2015; Torrealba, 2015). This would be a medium term prospect given that the protests and demonstrations are still viewed through the lens of “Chavism vs. anti-Chavism” (Uzcátegui, 2015). Uzcátegui (2015) stated that the death of president Chávez created space for the emergence of other forms of participation and mobilization not linked with the two poles that had predominated during the previous seventeen years, reflected in decentralized civic mobilizations such as those seen during 2014, to which neither the government nor the opposition know how to respond adequately. In this post-Chávez era, Uzcátegui (2015) mentions the importance of the “nem-nem” (“neither-nor”: neither Chavists, nor anti-Chavists) and a possible renaissance of autonomous social movements.

However, Pedro Pablo Peñaloza (2015) argues that the absence of institutionalization and the ongoing polarization make the construction of an autonomous space difficult in the short term. The creation of this autonomous space is further complicated by the administrative, legal and fiscal limitations imposed by the government (Torrealba, 2015).

The responses of the specialists interviewed indicate three distinct fundamental mechanisms used to respond to the growth in social and political conflict in the first half of 2014.

### **Repression**

- Surveillance and aggression towards people not supporting the government project
- Provocation and escalation of confrontation
- Promotion of political violence
- Symbolic and physical intimidation; exemplary punishment (Uzcátegui, 2015)



- Militarization and installation of a police state (Uzcátegui, 2015)

Provea (2015) states that 2014 saw an increase in social and political conflict, which drew non-democratic responses and, in particular, a growth in militarization and the disqualification of the work done by NGOs. A fundamental element was the delegation of security and public order functions to civilian groups close to the government. The cases in which paramilitary groups and armed civilians were used to control protests and reestablish territorial control were notorious. According to Provea, a “police state” is being installed through the cooptation of social organizations to perform security functions.

For Provea and for a number of the interviewees the growth in use of the figure of the “internal enemy” to justify the repression of demonstrators, opponents or individuals who disagree with government policy is seen as serious.

Furthermore, the Provea report condemned the excessive use of force during the protests. Most of the denunciations relate to the Bolivarian National Guard, a component of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB), and include the use of firearms and toxic substances, torture, cruel and inhuman treatment expressly prohibited under the 1999 Constitution.

Provea also reports that in 2014 there were 2,015 victims of violation of personal integrity, an increase of 480.9% compared with the previous year. Reports of torture increased by 137%, with 185 victims reported in 2014. Cases of cruel and inhuman treatment increased by 147% compared with 2013, while the number of people injured grew 284.9% over the previous year. Most of these cases occurred during the 2014 demonstrations.

Provea (2015) states that it received reports of 3,459 cases of violation of individual freedom during the demonstrations and workers’ strikes, representing 96.2% of the total violations of individual freedom during 2014, accompanied by a 974% increase in the number of arrests during demonstrations compared with 2013.

## Judicial

- Criminalization of dissidence and protests
- Judicial persecution
- Utilization of the civilian and military justice systems; use of characterizations such as “betrayal of the homeland”, “terrorism” and “destabilization of public order”
- Attempts to curtail sources of funding for civil society organizations and to criminalize those receiving international cooperation

Regarding the protests between February and May 2014, the Provea 2014 annual report (2015) indicates that 3,459 people were prosecuted in the criminal courts for participating in the demonstrations. More arrests were made in 2014 than during all the protests in the previous 25 years. According to Provea, in 2014 there were six cases and ten victims of arrest or deprivation of liberty for political reasons, an increase of 1,000% compared with 2013.

However, the Provea 2014 annual report (2015) points out that the media and the social networks exaggerated the incidence of violence in the protests. This exaggeration provided the government with an excuse for violent repression, demonstrating “the absence of a democratic culture which generates conditions that enable the full exercise of the right to public demonstration” (p. 25).

## Communication

- Disqualification of autonomous civil society organizations
- “Silence”, ignoring demands and reports

A key factor emphasized by a number of specialists is the “invisibility” of the protests and opposition sectors, principally due to ever tighter government control over the media.

The response from most of the political sectors aligned with the MUD was focused on the parliamentary elections, which the National Electoral Council later announced for December 6, 2015. Luis Gómez (2015) argued that a number of the MUD parties demonstrated their concern about the approach adopted in the La Salida (The Wayout) strategy, particularly regarding the possibility of infiltrated agents inciting demonstrators to violence during peaceful protests, something which did in fact happen on a number of occasions. Gómez noted that the parties who promoted these protests demonstrated limited capacity to orientate the different groups due to the spontaneous nature of these events and their lack of organization. This was soon to lead to frustration and would end in passivity. The proposal of a Citizens' Congress and the collection of signatures to initiate the establishment of a constituent assembly were not successful.

There was a consensus among the interviewees that the cycle of protests in the first half of 2014 was primarily associated with the La Salida strategy and that the majority of civil society organizations and political parties did not participate. They are not expected to have a greater impact on the country's future political dynamics (Gómez, 2015), but they did pave the way for the government to stigmatize the civil society organizations, in particular those dedicated to defending human rights. Similarly, the specialists agreed that there is little chance that the spontaneous movements will be converted into organized and influential actors in the short term. They believe that, even faced with multiple institutional and legal hurdles and government hostility, the more consolidated civil society organizations will continue to operate.

Rafael Uzcátegui (2015) indicated that currently any mobilization or protest is seen as a threat by the government. This works against the development of new social actors, given that the tendency is to promote confrontation rather than generate positive proposals. The most important thing the civil society organizations and new actors can do is to develop critical mass with which to generate conditions that will enable a democratic

transition, currently the most promising scenario given the economic, political and social crisis. A change in “organizational thinking” is necessary for the future reconstruction of autonomous movements. Civil society organizations need to be reinforced internally and to define their objectives in order to develop strategies with which to address the State (Peñaloza, 2015).

The student movement played an important role in the 2014 mobilizations. The Corrales study (2014) indicates that the government developed a discourse whereby leadership of the mobilizations is attributed to middle class students. However, Corrales observes that diverse sectors of society were involved. Even more importantly, contrary to what happened during the three terms of president Chávez, president Maduro proved incapable of mobilizing popular support in his defense. In spite of having state forces at his disposal, in particular the Bolivarian National Guard, he was still forced to resort to paramilitary groups (known as “collectives”).

In this respect, it is important to consider the role played by these groups of armed civilians in repressing the demonstrations. Cases were reported of young people from poorer classes being executed for participating in students movements opposed to the government. Classes closer to the base of the social pyramid witnessed political control by paramilitary groups to counter social mobilizations and protests.

In accordance with the latest results of research done by the UCAB Center of Political Studies, the institutions that have over 50% of public approval include, in the following order, the student movement, the universities and the churches. Other institutions such as the national government and the local governments, the media, political parties and the National Armed Forces receive less than 50%.

In this period of conflict there were two events that were expected to help overcome the polarization and confrontation and pave the way towards constructive dialogue. The first of these was the short-lived attempt at mediation by Unasul in conjunction with the Catholic Church. After this

failed, attention turned to the political renovation of the National Assembly in December 2014. Similarly, the need to fill vacancies in the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and to renew the ranks in the areas of the Attorney General, the Controllershship General and the Public Defender represented an opportunity to create a space for dialogue, to reach consensus and to initiate a process of ensuring autonomy for the State powers.

However, both opportunities were frustrated by the government. After a first televised meeting between representatives of the government and the opposition, little progress was made in establishing dialogue. Notwithstanding several later visits by the secretary general of Unasul and the *troika* of foreign ministers (Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador), talks were not resumed in spite of the social and economic crisis the country was facing.

In the second case, the government did not promote dialogue, much less seek consensus. As on previous occasions, with its parliamentary majority and dominion over the TSJ, it imposed its own candidates for all the positions. A policy reminiscent of Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, where changes are made so that everything remains the same.

## Case 2: #SOSVenezuela: Denunciation and an alert to the international community

### Origins

An internet search shows that the first mention came from a Venezuelan in Barcelona, Spain, who created S.O.S. Venezuela on June 7, 2009. It announced the creation of a blog, observing that this represented a new movement. It received few hits, and there was nothing to suggest that in 2014 SOSVenezuela would be transformed into a key symbol of the cycle of protests in the country.

Everything would seem to indicate that it started as a hashtag created to accompany the protests that had begun in February and the repression by the

armed forces. This was the beginning of #SOSVenezuela. The case is interesting for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, it was adopted openly by different groups, by individuals and even by the political party Voluntad Popular. In a number of cases, it was used to convene protests and demonstration via the social networks. As such, a series of unrelated initiatives were developed under the umbrella S.O.S Venezuela.

Secondly, to a large extent the hashtag #SOSVenezuela served as an alert to the international community. It was used widely to make denunciations and to obtain support from abroad, as well as to call on Venezuelans in different countries to protest. S.O.S is an international emergency code indicating that help is needed urgently. Consequently, the message was that Venezuela needed urgent help, given the economic, political and social crisis the country was facing, accompanied by growing State repression.

## Evolution

As mentioned, the code was adopted by different actors during the protests which began in February 2014. S.O.S Venezuela was used on different social networks as a hashtag — on Twitter, on Facebook pages and even for videos on YouTube. The peak of activity for these initiatives was concentrated between February and June 2014, but a number of them are still active.

As we will see ahead, in some cases the social networks were used to convene people and to provide information about protests and demonstrations<sup>7</sup>. In others, SOSVenezuela was used more for online denunciations about the situation in the country. The most important social networks used during this period were webpages, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The most active users included:

---

7 S.O.S was used especially between February and April. A video on YouTube dated April 21 shows president Maduro's response, although it is not clear whether this was based on a lack of information or a joke on his part. It seems to confuse S.O.S with the verbal form "sos" (be) in Argentinean Spanish: "SOS Venezuela. Eh? I would say fascist: you aren't Venezuela, you're gringos".

## Webpages:

### **sosvenezuela.info**

This is a webpage providing information about events in Venezuela, especially during the protests in the first half of 2014. It is a portal in Spanish and English. It was created in 2014 and, based on the classified advertisements section in the Spanish version, it may be inferred that it was created by Venezuelans in Florida in the United States, where there is a large Venezuelan community.

The two key items on the page are the opinion and news sections; all the posts are signed. It is rather difficult to differentiate between these sections because the news items tend to reflect the authors' opinions about events in Venezuela. It should be noted that the English version has not been updated for over a year. By the conclusion of this text, the last update had been on August 31, 2015.

### **www.sosvenezuela.com**

The only content on this page is a message from the imprisoned director of the Voluntad Popular party, Leopoldo López. It is a video that was recorded and widely publicized in March, before López initiated a hunger strike.

### **www.sosvenezuela.net**

Content from 2013. The page has not been updated.

## Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/sosvenezuela2014](http://www.facebook.com/sosvenezuela2014)



This is the most active initiative which seems to be part of a global movement. The webpage describes its mission as follows:

*SOS Worldwide is an independent non-profit organization that increases the visibility of public debate around human rights abuses worldwide through the use of innovative social media strategies by utilizing proven networks of analysts, technologists, journalists, advocates and lawyers to reduce the resources, time and financial constraints that would otherwise prevent their voices from being heard.*

The page indicates that S.O.S Venezuela is the first project of this global initiative and that it has been very successful. Most of its publications are articles from varied sources about events in Venezuela. At the conclusion of this text, the latest publication addressed the problem of shortages and scarcity in the country's interior. The page had almost 220,000 likes.



[www.facebook.com/sosvenezuelaamerica](http://www.facebook.com/sosvenezuelaamerica) (SOS Venezuela of America)

This was created on February 24, 2014 to support and publicize the #SOSVenezuela movement among Venezuelans living in different cities in the United States. Diverse individuals who maintain a presence on the internet were invited to contribute content. At the conclusion of this text, the latest publication was from May 1 (Labor Day), when the page's profile was changed. The last post prior to this was on July 24, 2014, with a summary of an article from the *Wall Street Journal* about the beginning of the trial of the arrested Voluntad Popular leader, Leopoldo López.

Its activities peaked during the period of protests between February and June. The most important online calls to protest were:

Date	Demonstration/protest
June 24	March convened by the Voluntad Popular party in Caracas
May 24	March for the 100 days of protests, organized nationwide
April 16	Calendar of protests during Easter Week
March 22	Voluntad Popular demonstration

The Facebook page content may be broken down into three major categories. Firstly, there are videos of confrontations between demonstrators and State forces. Secondly, both visual materials and comments about the activities of the Voluntad Popular leader Leopoldo López are included and, to a lesser extent, the Vente Venezuela leader, María Corina Machado. The third comprises videos portraying specific individual situations (e.g.: “Trip to Freedom Miami-Washington, D.C. In Venezuela. May 9, #SOS Venezuela”), as well as reproductions of different media news items.

Worthy of note in this Facebook account are the reduced number of comments and the low volume of shared content.

## Twitter:

### #SOSVENEZUELA

Desangra Venezuela [Venezuela Bleeds] (@SOSvenezuela). The account has just over seven thousand followers and continues to be updated regularly.

Here it is interesting to note that S.O.S Venezuela is run individually by a series of different people. They include @orlansoco (SOS VENEZUELA), who has more than 6,000 followers, and @jeanhirzel (SOS Venezuela) with around 200 followers.

The account has also used the tool Zello to form an online chat group: @ZelloVzlaSOS, which is called the Venezuela SOS channel.

## YouTube:

### SOS Venezuela

GabrielaMonteroTV

24 de febrero de 2014

## Conclusion

As observed by Sorj (2015), the SOSVenezuela exemplifies the short-term nature of some online movements that peak during periods of conflict and are used to promote offline activities, but later practically disappear. It may be seen that the most permanent activity is via Twitter. As Sorj argues, purely online campaigns do not appear to produce important direct effects on the political sphere, although the use of virtual media to organize and mobilize street demonstrations is more effective. Thus, a review of the different online spaces shows a decrease in their activities after the end of the cycle of protests in the first half of 2014. It should be noted how S.O.S Venezuela was intimately

associated with the political protests against the government. Although the social protests, also decentralized and pulverized, increased in the first eight months of 2015 ([www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve](http://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve)) most of the social networks that use #SOSVenezuela did not participate in disseminating them.

## Case 3: Alternative journalism: *Efecto Cocuyo* and *Crónica Uno*

### Origins

In a report, Arocha (2015) notes that since 2009, 63 press vehicles were closed as a result of government pressure and, in the case of print media, due to lack of paper. This happened principally in the states in which the opposition has been stronger. In the last five years, 25 vehicles have changed hands. In many cases, the identity of the new owners is unknown, but the changes in editorial line tend to indicate that they have close ties with the government.

This trend has led an ever smaller number of independent press organs. According to the 2014 report of the Venezuelan office of the Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS) (2015), there is an “information blackout” in the country. Public authorities are responsible for most of the violations of freedom of expression, with the Executive accounting for 85.8% of them.

The IPYS also notes internal censorship on the part of management in a number of press vehicles. Moreover, during the protests in early 2014 there was an internet blackout with the partial blockage of communications, the worst hit network being Twitter. The IPYS reports that at least 454 webpages were blocked in Venezuela.

This situation was compounded by the defamation campaigns run by the official media and the government and moves to criminalize the foreign press. During the cycle of demonstrations coverage was suppressed and journalists and their teams were arrested. The media most affected were

private Venezuelan organizations, followed by foreign ones. In terms of media format, government repression focused primarily on restricting print media, with television coming in second place.

This growing curtailment of conventional media stimulated an increase in the use of cyberspace. Online information became the main alternative means of communication. Within this context, the principal virtual spaces started to specialize. Some of these aggregate news, such as *La Patilla* ([www.lapatilla.com](http://www.lapatilla.com)), others provide analyses, as is the case of *Prodavinci* ([prodavinci.com](http://prodavinci.com)). In parallel, portals focused on investigative journalism such as *Poderopedia* ([www.poderopedia.org](http://www.poderopedia.org)), *Armando* ([www.armando.info](http://www.armando.info)) and *Efecto Cocuyo* ([www.efectococuyo.corm](http://www.efectococuyo.corm)) started to emerge.

Political polarization is also to be found in the social networks. The Maduro government developed a series of portals both national and international in scope. On a national level, it currently has *Contrapunto* ([contrapunto.com](http://contrapunto.com)) and *Misión Verdad* ([misionverdad.com](http://misionverdad.com)). It should also be noted that the government's most important portal until around six months ago, *Aporrea* ([www.aporrea.org](http://www.aporrea.org)), currently reflects the internal dissidence to be found within Chavism. IPYS observes that this transition from print to digital media has occurred much more in function of the country's political situation rather than any commercial strategy.

## Evolution

Here we present the cases of alternative media that initiated their activities in the first months of 2015. One is *Efecto Cocuyo*, more oriented to an intellectual middle class audience, and the other is *Crónica Uno*, an initiative by the civil society organization Espacio Público, aimed more at the working classes. Both adopt formats that enable the development and dissemination of journalism via the web.

### Efecto Cocuyo ([www.efectococuyo.com](http://www.efectococuyo.com), @efectococuyo)

This project emerged in response to the government's "communication hegemony" which, as commented previously, involves censorship, self-censorship and the acquisition of media vehicles by government sympathizers. It is aimed at providing independent journalism via digital media. Given the general information blackout in the country, it adopted the slogan "journalism that illuminates".

Efecto Cocuyo came into operation in January 2015 defined as a venture run by journalists. Its two women founders have broad experience in the newspaper industry in Venezuela, having received awards and significant recognition. Laura Weffer worked for the newspapers *El Nacional* and *Tal Cual* and left *Últimas Noticias*, the highest circulation national daily, after producing an investigative report on the February 2014 protests. This article was censored by a director of the newspaper, leading to her decision to resign. Luz Mely Reyes had been director of *Diario 2001* which she also left in the beginning of 2014 after being sued because of an article on problems in gasoline supply and distribution.

*Efecto Cocuyo* initiated its activities on Twitter on January 8, 2015. One year later, it has more than 76,000 followers. On January 22<sup>nd</sup> of the same year the portal ([www.efectococuyo.com](http://www.efectococuyo.com)) was launched, and now Efecto Cocuyo is found on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, in addition to electronic mail.

The central focus of this project is the production of independent journalism based on investigation, analysis and explanation of the facts. The editors place special emphasis on reviving ethics in journalism and are seeking to hire young journalists. By March 2015, they had built a team comprising 8 additional reporters.

Efecto Cocuyo does not aggregate news. The content consists of reports, reviews, investigations, analyses and opinion pieces produced by the team. Some of its notes are signed collectively as @efectococuyo, others carry individual bylines.

It has six main sections. As a reflection of the situation in the country, the three most important are:

1. **Efecto Cocuyo:** this is main section, containing daily news, special reports and investigative notes, which are later included in the specialized sections.
2. **Politikom:** as the name indicates, this section is dedicated to political news and analysis on both a domestic and international level. One of the main topics addressed is freedom of expression.
3. **La Cartera:** this includes both domestic and international economic news, focusing principally on items affecting Venezuela. It provides data and statistics about multilateral organizations and the international financial system.

The others are:

4. **La Humanidad:** this provides news on social topics (education, health, security, among others), community activities and personal statements about different events. This section provided broad coverage of the protests between February and June 2014.
5. **La Peña:** this includes opinion pieces and analysis, as well as interviews with specialists from different areas.
6. **Cocuyo Electoral 6D:** aimed at providing information on the parliamentary elections on December 6, 2015.

The portal is located in Venezuela. The way in which the project was financed was unprecedented in the country. To ensure independence, the

founders did not look to Venezuelan or overseas business groups for financing. Instead they sought micro-financing as a more effective means of guaranteeing sustainability. They conducted a campaign called #apoyoefectococuyo (support for *Efecto Cocuyo*) to obtain funding both locally and abroad. One of the directors stated that they had raised enough to fund the operation throughout 2015.

Inside the country they organized an innovative campaign to raise money among the poorer population of Caracas.<sup>8</sup> In addition to seeking contributions, they conducted a series of offline activities aimed at publicizing the project and its online profile.

The initiative also involved a number of projects to organize the following activities:<sup>9</sup>

- Creation of a training center for journalists. They believe it is fundamental to include professionals from outside Caracas. In 2015, they organized a summer school in partnership with the Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB), focused on journalism using cell phones.<sup>10</sup>
- Establishment of partnerships with other press organs to cover the parliamentary elections on December 6, 2015.
- The sale of products such as podcasts, as well as the organization of conferences and talks.

As may be seen, the initiative is oriented to investigative journalism and to a public that believes that the traditional media no longer provide reliable information about the Venezuelan reality, in particular because of government censorship and self-censorship.

---

8 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELgr5uEBJ8k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELgr5uEBJ8k)

9 Weiss, Jessica, "New site *Efecto Cocuyo* takes on independent reporting in Venezuela", *International Journalists' Network*, March 18, 2015. Available at: <[ijnet.org/en/blog/new-site-efecto-cocuyo-takes-independent-reporting-venezuela](http://ijnet.org/en/blog/new-site-efecto-cocuyo-takes-independent-reporting-venezuela)>.

10 [www.efectococuyo.com/apoyoalperiodismo/efecto-cocuyo-y-la-ucab-te-invitan-a-postular-te-al-taller-periodismo-con-telefono-movil](http://www.efectococuyo.com/apoyoalperiodismo/efecto-cocuyo-y-la-ucab-te-invitan-a-postular-te-al-taller-periodismo-con-telefono-movil)

## Crónica Uno ([www.cronica.uno](http://www.cronica.uno), @CronicaUno)

*Crónica Uno*, whose motto is “tell it like it is” emerged with the goal of reflecting in a more detailed manner what is going on among the working classes. The project, which began in 2015, also involves a group of journalists and is coordinated by the civil society organization Espacio Público. In their Twitter account, which at the conclusion of this text had almost 25,000 followers, the managers state that they are “dedicated to providing the true facts about what happens in the country’s communities, without censorship or pressure”.

Its web page is divided into five sections:

- 1. Events:** this is divided into three sub-sections — *Así lo vivieron* [this is how it was], *Hay que saberlo* [you need to know] and *Ojo Pela'o* [Watch out]. Instead of the reports on crimes and other incidents favored by the traditional press, it focuses on testimonials of people living in insecure conditions, information aimed at preventing violence and the identification of regions and mechanisms used by criminal groups.
- 2. Community:** this provides testimonials from members of varied communities in the following subject areas: *Nuestro Barrio* [our district], *Emprendedores*, *En Clases* [Entrepreneurs in class], *Vida y Salud* [life and health] and *Zona Pública* [public areas]. The section highlights proactive community members, portraying their successes and positive actions.
- 3. Economy:** aimed at explaining the country’s economic situation and how it affects the working classes, as well as providing tips on making ends meet. It is divided into three sub-sections: *Mi Monedero* [my pocket], *Grandes Cuentas* [macroeconomics] and *En Gotas* [understanding the economy].



- 4. Politics:** this provides information and discussion around five themes: *Parlamentarias 2015* [2015 parliamentary elections], *Nacionales* [national issues], *Justicia* [justice], *Debate Democrático* [democratic debate] and *Yo Participo* [how to participate].
- 5. Sports:** focused on news about baseball and football.

Crónica Uno is also on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Flickr.

## Conclusion

The new alternative media have developed in response to increasing government domination of the traditional media and its expansion into the social networks with the support of significant financial, technological and human resources. It is difficult to foresee what will happen to these media in the future. Much will depend on the political circumstances in the country and the extent to which these alternative media are able to overcome obstacles such as limited resources. In general terms, the situation casts some doubts as to their sustainability.

## 3. Final reflections

### The challenges facing the social networks in the context of competitive authoritarianism

There are two perspectives on the use of the social networks by civil society organizations. Firstly, their importance for these new actors, in particular the student movement and young people, is unquestionable. Rafael Uzcátegui (2015) noted that new organizations have emerged making significant use of the social networks, but facing limitations in the production of content.

Secondly, use of the social networks by established civil society organizations and more traditional actors is still “timid and incipient”, because it is generally unsystematic and is limited to particular moments involving denunciations or support for campaigns (van Berkel, 2015). The civil society organizations need to use the social networks effectively in order to improve their messaging because, under the present circumstances, it is the only channel they have to communicate with the public and with decision makers (Peñaloza, 2015).

In this context, various authors (Uzcátegui, 2015; Gómez, 2015; Torrealba, 2015) emphasize the fact that the government exercises an almost complete monopoly over internet access and that access to the internet is not universal, particularly in rural areas, which are deficient in infrastructure. Furthermore, Venezuela has “one of the lowest connection speeds on the continent (less than 2 Mbps)” (Torrealba, 2015). In general terms, there are problems with the quality of the broadband service provided by the state company CANTV, which is the provider for around 80% of the users in the country.

The government has also developed two strategies to limit the influence of the social networks and civil society organizations. The first is to promote “opacity and lack of autonomy in cyberspace” (Gómez, 2015) fundamentally by means of three mechanisms:

- The judicial persecution and imprisonment of people expressing their opinions on Twitter.
- Control over internet access. In practice, the government has blocked access to different web pages, for example news websites (NTN24) or websites that provide parallel market exchange rates for foreign currencies (e.g.: DolarToday).
- Expansion of the Radio and Television Social Responsibility law (RESORTE) to include electronic media. An example is the legal action

taken against the directors of *La Patilla* for reproducing news from foreign sources.

The second is the rapid expansion of government presence on the social networks. Von Bergen (2015) mentions the use of the hashtag #tropa by a group that transmits government messages via Twitter, as well as *La Iguana TV* (laiguana.tv), one of the most heavily visited news portals with government ties. The author also notes that “the mechanisms used are not very transparent, including bots and accounts managed by a troop of cybernetic militants”. These mechanisms enable the government to position its hashtags among the most important in the political arena: where the government share is 71.4%, compared with only 28.6% for its opponents.

Thus the government employs an apparently important strategy to maintain its virtual followers but one that, according to research, does not translate into a real impact on the public. Some estimates show that the audience for government portals is low. This is an important example of the difference between offline and online influence.

As was noted previously, there is no doubt that political polarization is present on the social networks. Some of the more radical sectors of the opposition are highly active and it may be said that they conduct politics online. Gómez (2015) mentions the ResistenciaVenezuela (@ResistenciaV58) group, which has more than 92,000 followers. Provea has more than 120,000 followers, the UCAB Human Rights Center has 37,500 followers, while COFAVIC, an NGO that advocates the protection and promotion of human rights, has just under 27,000.

Another key factor is the growing possibility of online censorship. While in many countries the promotion of legislation to ensure freedom on the internet is considered important, Venezuela is swimming against this current, striving to regulate the social networks to enable control and repression (Díaz, 2015).

For some time, both the Attorney General and the Venezuelan president have been making declarations about the need to regulate use of the social networks to combat what they denominate as messages generated in a “dirty war” which defame the government and provoke “anguish” in the public.

There is the risk that existing legal restrictions which limit freedom of expression and access to public information may be extended to the social networks. Regarding this, Díaz (2015) indicates the possibility of the extension to the social networks of regulations against “crimes of opinion”, which encompass offending, defaming and disobeying civil servants and government officials, as well as disturbing the peace.

This risk is compounded by the creation of the new category of “digital crimes”. Of the eight people arrested because of messages published on Twitter between August and October 2014 (Nederr, 2015; von Bergen, 2015), five are still being detained by the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (Sebin). The accusations leveled against them by the regime include transmitting messages of hate, offense, conspiracy and unwarranted access to the accounts of third-parties (hacking). These charges constitute political use of the law to repress government opponents.

Other signs indicating future regulation on the part of the State (IPYS, 2015; von Bergen, 2015) are:

- On March 26, 2015, the Public Prosecution service declared that the social networks should be regulated. It stated that the “Internet cannot be a lawless territory: all activities occurring in the country must be submitted to legal regulation” (von Bergen, 2015).
- On April 8, 2015, the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MinCI) organized a training course for security agents to monitor the social networks.

- On June 22, 2015, the president of the National Electoral Council (CNE) affirmed that the social networks produce “disinformation and lies that create a neurosis in society, generating alienation and disunity”.

## Lessons from the Venezuelan case

There are two fundamental lessons to be learned regarding the use of alternative media in Venezuela. The first is that faced with the closure of democratic channels of expression, new online spaces emerge, assuming a key role in the diffusion of proposals and ideas in opposition to the government. A more recent process driven by the growing curtailment of access to information is leading to the formation of partnerships between alternative media. For example, in function of the 2015 parliamentary elections diverse digital media have integrated their resources to provide information and analysis over a number of platforms, such as: *TalCual*, *El Pitazo*, *Runrun.es* and *Crónica Uno*.

The second point concerns the alert in the Provea 2014 annual report (2015) about the expansion of coverage of violent protests, used by the government to disseminate the idea that the demonstrations in general were violent. According to this document only 7% of the protests involved violence. The NGO points out this kind of report helped “set people against people, boosting the potential for political violence” (p. 331). While limiting the spaces for peaceful demonstrations, the government incites violent protests, multiplying the potential for human rights violations.

## Proposals for the Venezuelan case

The recommendations presented here were compiled essentially based on the interviews conducted with journalists, specialists and representatives of civil society organizations.

### **Legal framework**

- Eliminate the regulatory frameworks of the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) and those established by other areas in an attempt to control telecommunications
- Approve the Transparency and Access to Public Information law
- Establish standards that protect users' rights
- Dismantle censorship mechanisms
- Reform the laws which limit freedom of expression and the right to organize and participate in peaceful demonstrations
- Create legal frameworks aligned with the 1999 Constitution and international human rights standards

### **Development of online communication**

- Promote initiatives to develop communication projects based on internet use
- Demand institutional support to ensure universal access to the internet
- Eliminate the state monopoly over access to cyberspace
- Establish open data and electronic government mechanisms that enable effective social control and online access to public information
- Develop adequate infrastructure
- Create digital literacy programs and involve civil society organizations in this process

### **The right to participation and peaceful demonstrations**

- Provide safe public spaces in which new organizational forms based on the social networks may interact and “mature politically”
- Ensure a climate of trust in which the public may freely exercise the right to peaceful demonstration, freedom of association and participation in meetings

- Reconstruct the country's formal democratic institutions
- Develop citizenship
- Establish channels of dialogue for national reconciliation and an amnesty to free political and social leaders

## 4. References

### Documents

Arocha, Juan Pablo. "De la hegemonía a la dictadura comunicacional", *TalCual*, Jun. 26, 2015.

Corrales, Javier. "Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela". *Journal of Democracy*, v. 26, n. 2 (Apr. 2015).

Corrales, Javier. "Venezuela's Middle Ground". *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 2014. Available at: <[foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/22/Venezuelas-middle-ground](http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/22/Venezuelas-middle-ground)>.

Díaz Hernández, Marianne. "#Venezuela // ¿Es necesario regular las redes sociales?". *Prodavinci*, Apr. 6, 2015. Available at: <[prodavinci.com/blogs/es-necesario-regular-las-redes-sociales-por-marianne-diaz-hernandez](http://prodavinci.com/blogs/es-necesario-regular-las-redes-sociales-por-marianne-diaz-hernandez)>.

"The Economist: El gobierno de Maduro acosa a la prensa y se censura a sí mismo". *La Patilla*, Apr. 1, 2015. Available at: <[www.lapatilla.com/site/2015/04/01/the-economist-el-gobierno-de-maduro-acosa-a-la-prensa-y-se-censura-a-si-mismo](http://www.lapatilla.com/site/2015/04/01/the-economist-el-gobierno-de-maduro-acosa-a-la-prensa-y-se-censura-a-si-mismo)>.

Instituto Prensa y Sociedad [IPYS]. *Informe Anual IPYS Venezuela 2014: La desinformación y la opacidad condicionan al periodismo*, Feb. 2015. Available at: <[ipysvenezuela.org/2015/02/27/reporte-anual-ipys-venezuela-2014-la-desinformacion-y-la-opacidad-condicionan-al-periodismo](http://ipysvenezuela.org/2015/02/27/reporte-anual-ipys-venezuela-2014-la-desinformacion-y-la-opacidad-condicionan-al-periodismo)>.

"Maduro se lanzará a la calle si la oposición gana en la AN". *El Nacional*, Jun. 22, 2015. Available at: <[www.el-nacional.com/politica/Maduro-lanzara-calle-oposicion-AN\\_o\\_651535042.html](http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/Maduro-lanzara-calle-oposicion-AN_o_651535042.html)>.

Nederr, Sofía. "Opinar por Twitter se convirtió en delito". *El Nacional*, Feb. 15, 2015. Available at: <[www.el-nacional.com/politica/Opinar-Twitter-convirtio-delito\\_o\\_574742635.html](http://www.el-nacional.com/politica/Opinar-Twitter-convirtio-delito_o_574742635.html)>.

Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos [Provea]. *Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Venezuela: Informe Anual enero-diciembre 2014*. Caracas: Provea, 2015. Available at: <[www.derechos.org/ve/informe-anual-2014](http://www.derechos.org/ve/informe-anual-2014)>.

Puyosa, Iria. "La presencia del gobierno en la web social ha sido política y partidista". In: Jesús Alberto Yajure and Mariengracia Chirinos. *Reportes IPYS: El ejército calibre 2.0*. Caracas: IPYS, Jun. 2015. Available at: <<https://readymag.com/u44850477/215773/81>>.

Szichman, Mario. "Salvados por Twitter". *The Financial Times*, Mar. 31, 2015. Available at: <[www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/visor.aspx?Id=114721&tipo=REP](http://www.talcualdigital.com/Nota/visor.aspx?Id=114721&tipo=REP)>.



Sorj, Bernardo. "Online / off-line: a nova onda da sociedade civil e a transformação da esfera pública". In: Bernardo Sorj and Sérgio Fausto (Org.). *Internet e mobilizações sociais: transformações do espaço público e da sociedade civil*. São Paulo: Plataforma Democrática, 2015.

Tablante, Carlos and Tarre, Marcos. "Estado delincuente: cómo actúa la delincuencia organizada en Venezuela". *La Hoja del Norte*, 2013.

Van Berkel, Deborah and Jácome, Francine. "Gobernabilidad Democrática y Sociedad Civil en Venezuela". Caracas: INVESP/Sinergia, 2009.

Von Bergen, Franz. "Maduro lucha por ser *trending topic*". *El Nacional*, Jun. 28, 2015.

## Interviews

Luis Gómez, lecturer at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Jun. 2015.

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, journalist, Jun. 2015.

Luisa Torrealba, journalist and lecturer at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, Jun. 2015.

Rafael Uzcátegui, coordinator of Provea, Jun. 2015.

Deborah van Berkel, executive president, Sinergia, Jun. 2015.

