

[Draft – please *don't quote* or circulate *without permission*]

Surfing for better democracy

Reflections based on some Latin American experiences¹

1. Introduction

In Latin America frequently tension emerges between governments that tend to ignore the “will of the people” and the people themselves, who on occasions shed their apathy and mobilize. In this context, an active civil society is key to building democracy. In a best-case scenario, civil society organizations can force open the political system and re-establish a link between representatives and those who are represented. Societal organizations with the capacity to engage in –and sustain over time– the politics of protest are becoming increasingly important while digital media could play an important role offering new tools for mobilization. By enhancing the speed, flexibility and reach of information flows, by allowing for communication across large distances in real time, digital media provide the technological infrastructure for the emergence, reinforcement and or renovation of social movements.

In the following pages we would like to explore the extent to which the use of digital media is changing the prevalent patterns of civic and political involvement amongst civil society organizations in Latin America, and the conditions under which social movements take advantage of if in their campaigns. The presentation (i) first, proposes some exploratory hypothesis regarding the extent to which the adoption of digital media could be conditioned by structural and sociodemographic variables, then, (ii) test these hypothesis by analyzing five political campaigns that have been launched in a bid to influence national policy making in Latin America. Finally (iii), the same theoretical approach is analyzed to assess to what extent research in the field needs to rethink existing theoretical approaches and develop new concepts.

¹ Paper prepared for “Online political participation and its critics”, International symposium of the DEL research network (CERTOP-CNRS and UPEC-CEDITEC) Paris, 19-20 June 2013. This paper is based on Welp, Yanina & Wheatley, Jonathan (2012) “The uses of Digital Media for Contentious Politics in Latin America”, in *Digital Media and Political engagement Worldwide. A Comparative Study*, Anduiza, Jensen, Jorba (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

2. Social movements, the Internet and social networks

In Latin America there is a growing body of literature on social movements and new institutions of citizen's participation (offline, in what is known as 'participatory democracy') while studies dealing with digital media are scant and mainly focused on governments and parliamentsⁱ. However, a recent and promising new literature has paid attention to the uses of ICTs for bottom up political participation, such as the study of the potentialities of digital media to open political regimes in countries like Cuba (Hoffmann, 2012), the way in which social media are credited with organizing protesters in countries like Guatemala (Harlow, 2012), mobilizing individuals, like in Chile (Valenzuela, 2012) or helping to promote petitions such as in the experience of Ficha Limpa in Brazil (Breuer and Farooq 2012). Despite concerns related to the digital divide, these works agree on the idea that digital media could have a significant effect on participation given the lower participation costs, the promotion of collective identities and the creation of communities (Garrett 2006).

In a recent work Burch and Leon (forthcoming), show the influence of ICTs on Latin American social movements. The authors stress that through the 1990s and into the new century, international campaigns, networked via the Internet, became one of the main means for organized social movements to establish common goals and commitments and to participate in collectively defined actions. This could be observed also at the national level, given that another feature of the digital media is its capacity for the geographical dissemination of information. Furthermore, strong networks (national and international) can help to protect movements by providing the protest with visibility as has happened in the past with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Mexico, when the international pressure brought about through digital media contact forced the government to negotiate (Tarrow 2005; Jorba and Bimber 2012). Given the previous, it can be assumed that activists could have strong incentives to adopt and use digital media in their practices.

In other words, if social movements are social phenomena based on social networks and resonant frames of collective action, and have developed a capacity to maintain a sustained challenge against powerful opponents, by enhancing the speed, flexibility and reach of information flows, by allowing for communication across large distances in real time, digital networks provide the technological infrastructure for the emergence,

reinforcement and renovation of social movements (Juris 2005; Garret 2006). But, to what extent the use of digital media is changing the prevalent patterns of civic and political involvement in Latin America? And, under which conditions social movements take advantage of digital media in their campaigns? This paper proposes three distinct hypotheses related to internet spread rates, the demographic profile of the campaign members and the organizational features of the movement:

1. First, regarding the attributes of a social system (opportunity structures) that facilitate or constrain movement activity (Garret 2006) we propose a diffusion hypothesis. Digital media allow for the expansion of social movements through the rapid diffusion of information. This way they can gain the “critical mass” needed in order to have a real political impact. Thus, the diffusion hypothesis would state that *campaigns developed in countries with higher levels of internet use among citizens are expected to be more intensive in their use of digital media.*
2. Second, we suggest a demographic hypothesis. The use of digital media by a given social movement depends both on the demographic profile of the movement itself and on the demographic profile of the country. *We expect that amongst certain social groups (the young, urban, non-indigenous, highly educated citizens) the use of such media will be higher.* Garrett's framing process (2006) understood as strategic attempts to craft, disseminate and contest the narratives used to describe a movement is relevant here. Amongst the youth, digital media may be used as a way to renovate politics against traditional modes of vertical, hierarchical communication. Another aspect of the demographic hypothesis is functional: digital media are necessary when the participants in a movement are dispersed geographically in such a way that traditional forms of communication (especially face-to-face contact) are difficult. This is most likely if the public space in which the campaign takes place is large in geographical terms, lacks transport and traditional communications infrastructure, but at the same time has sufficient internet and mobile phone access to make the use of digital media possible.

3. Third, we propose a structural hypothesis. *Digital media, based as it is on many-to-many, reciprocal and non-hierarchical communication will be particularly used in horizontal, non-hierarchical movements.* This is because the “cultural logic of networking” identifies and propagates a set of deeply embedded social and cultural dispositions that orient actors toward building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements; through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision making (Juris 2005). However we also suggest that mobilizing structures which encompass not only formal configurations, such as social movement organizations, but also informal configurations, such as networks of activists (Garret 2006) could promote or inhibit the use of digital media. Horizontal non-hierarchical movements have an organizational logic that is shared by digital networks, as everyone has an equal opportunity to introduce information and to mobilize other actors. At the same time, movements (especially localized movements) in which face-to-face contacts already serve to organize and mobilize a campaign do not require digital media as a fundamental part of their organizational strategy.

3. Citizens seeking to influence the definition of policies

The selected experiences have been promoted by citizens or civil society organizations in order to directly influence the definition of policies, for example by trying to repeal an existing law affecting human rights (the Amnesty Law in Uruguay, organized by the Coordinadora Nacional por la Nulidad de la ley de Caducidad –National Coordinating Body for the Abrogation of the Amnesty Law), by fighting against corruption through the promotion of a new law (Brazil, Campanha Ficha Limpa –Clean Sheet Campaign), by repealing a law that has already been approved (Peru, Contra la Ley de la Selva –against the “Laws of the Jungle”), or by campaigning against industrial enterprises for environmental reasons (“No a la cementera en Los Haitises” in the Dominican Republic –No the Cement Works in Los Haitises–, “No a la papelera” in Argentina –No to the paper pulp mill). (See table 1)

Tabla 1: Description of five political campaigns promoted from the bottom

Campaign	Main goal	Result
No to the paper pulp mill	The assembly of Gualeguaychú (a city of 76,000 inhabitants) was created to oppose the Botnia-UPM's paper pulp mill on the grounds that it was polluting the river. A camp was set up from 2006 to 2009 to prevent traffic from crossing the international Bridge.	The paper pulp mill is still working. Several controls were introduced
Clean Sheet Campaign	In April 2008 the Movement Against Electoral Corruption launched a campaign to improve the profile of candidates to elective positions in the country and in particular to prevent criminals from entering parliament*.	A new law entered into force thanks to the pressure of civil society
Against the Laws of the Jungle	In order to conform to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, in June 2008 the president Alan García approved ten legislative decrees (that had been delegated to him by the Congress) watering down a law on the protection of the Amazon rainforest. The initiators of the protests were indigenous organizations.	After some negotiations the struggle reactivated in 2009**
No the Cement Works in Los Haitises	In May 2009 a government concession granted the Dominican Mining Consortium the right to extract limestone to manufacture cement along the border of the national park Los Haitises. A movement was organized against it for environmental reasons and claiming against corrupt practices.	National and international pressure drove to an external study of environmental impact
National Coordinating Body for the Abrogation of the Amnesty Law	Referendum campaign against the Amnesty Law (Law 15848) which provided an amnesty for those involved in human rights violations during the military dictatorship (Popular initiative, referendum scheduled by October 2009)	The referendum was rejected and the Law is still in force

* The law was expected to prevent politicians who have been convicted of serious crimes, such as racism, rape, drug trafficking or misuse of public funds, corruption or murder, from running in elections and attaining, if elected, immunity from prosecution (given the number of candidates or MPs in such situation, was unexpected the approval of the Law by the one which will be affected by that)

**Towards the end of August, Peru's Congress agreed to vote on the law's possible repeal –on the condition that protesters unblock roads and suspend demonstrations. The Decree Law (DL) 1015 was repealed (effectively abolishing the special regime under which land and forests were managed the native communities). However, the Congress retained DL 1013 (centralizing environmental policy by creating a new ministry of the environment), also strongly opposed by indigenous groups, thus, the struggle was reactivated.

To test our hypothesis we selected cases from countries showing diversity both in terms of the level of internet diffusion (relatively high in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay; and relatively low in the Dominican Republic and Peru) and in terms of the age and social status of the groups that spearheaded the campaigns (mainly youth in the Dominican Republic, mainly middle-aged, middle-class activists in Argentina and Uruguay, a relatively young activist intelligentsia in Brazil, relatively poor, indigenous rural communities in Peru). The experiences also diverge according to the objectives, strategies and actors involved. Finally, the political contexts of each case as well as the networks used to mobilize are diverse (see table 2). In one case, traditional organizations such as labour unions and political parties

played a dominant role (Uruguay); in another a broad network of organizations worked together to promote a particular issue (Brazil); in the third case the campaign was promoted spontaneously by a network of groups in which young people played a key role (Dominican Republic); the fourth was motivated by the reaction of civil society in one particular city (Argentina); in the final case the protest was initiated and developed by indigenous movements (Peru)ⁱⁱ.

Table 2. Key features of the five cases corresponding to the three hypotheses

Country/ Campaign	Internet Users		Internet diffusion	Demographic profile of users	Structure of the movement	Intensity of digital media uses
	ITU ¹	IWS ²				
Argentina No a la papelera	30,4	64,4	Relatively High	Middle age, middle class	Horizontal, assemblies as forum to take decisions. High level of coordination	Middle, oriented towards dissemination
Brazil Campanha Ficha Limpa	39,2	37,8	Relatively High	Young, professionals, well educated, middle class, urban	Horizontal with a high level of coordination. Decentralization of activities.	High, oriented towards dissemination, mobilization, pressure, etc.
Dominican Republic No a la cementera en Los Haitises	27,7	27,0	Relatively Low	Young, urban, middle class together with more traditional organizations	Horizontal without systematic methods to take decisions nor a unique strategy but complementary actions.	High, oriented towards dissemination, to establish national and international networks, and to organize activities
Peru Contra la Ley de la Selva	26,7	30,5	Relatively Low	Indigenous, rural, more marginalized population groups	With elected representatives from affected communities	Low, basic information on the website
Uruguay Coordinadora Nacional por la Nulidad de la ley de Caducidad	55	52,8	Relatively High	Middle age, middle class, led by members of labour unions and political parties	Horizontal	Middle, mainly oriented towards dissemination

Source: own elaboration based on data from (1) International Telecommunication Union, 2009 and (2) Internet World Stats, 2010.

As findings, our study shows that neither the diffusion hypothesis, nor the structural hypothesis can be considered sufficient conditions to fully explain the extent to which digital media is used in protest campaigns. The campaigns in Uruguay and Argentina, where levels of internet diffusion are relatively high, used digital media much less than the campaign in the Dominican Republic, where connectivity is rather low. However, the relatively high levels of internet diffusion in Brazil may well have helped the online campaign to obtain the “critical mass” of signatures that allowed the law proposed by the Clean Sheet movement to reach congress. In terms of the structural hypothesis, the Argentinean campaign, and to a lesser extent the Peruvian campaign, were based on a horizontal, non-hierarchical principle

of organization, but this was not reflected in greater online activity or the greater use of digital media.

The demographic hypothesis, on the other hand, is at least partly borne out. In the Dominican campaign and to a certain extent in the Brazilian case as well, young people were very actively involved and it was they who helped organize the campaigns through the innovative use of digital media. The Brazilian campaign also shows that digital media can play a key role when the movement is dispersed across a wide territory in which the possibilities for face-to-face contact are limited. The campaign against the cement factory in Los Haitises National Park in the Dominican Republic is also illustrative in terms of this hypothesis: youth involvement meant that the campaign made extensive use of the internet despite the fact that the overall level of internet use in the country as a whole was rather low. In the Uruguayan and Argentinean campaigns, where activists were predominantly middle-aged, however, these methods played only a secondary role, despite internet use in these two countries is actually rather high. In addition to the fact that these activists may be less familiar with digital media than their younger counterparts, middle-aged, middle class activists in two of Latin America's most developed countries have at their disposal a tried and tested repertoire of traditional campaigning techniques that they can rely on, which younger and poorer activists in less developed countries may lack. However, the flipside of this is what we observed in Peru; poor, rural and disenfranchised communities simply lack sufficient access to new technologies to be able to use them for political campaigning. Only supporters not directly involved in the struggle used digital media to spread their opinions in the country and abroad.

The political context and the perceived efficacy of strategies also play an important role. A well-known repertoire of actions that campaigners have at their disposal can reinforce a preference for traditional strategies. Last, we can say that in relatively mature democracies, digital media serve to reinforce existing political institutions rather than substitute them, while in unstable democracies and systems in which official institutions are weak or dysfunctional, they may constitute an alternative mechanism of political participation and may therefore appear more attractive.

5. Discussion of the theoretical and methodological approach.

Going directly to the point: “Can we analyse online political participation through the lenses of theoretical approaches traditionally used in social sciences?” The main goal of the research that I have presented here was to understand the extent to which digital media are used by social movements engaged in political campaigns. We did not need to deal with questions such as what participation is or what online participation is. According with a common understanding, we assumed that the selected campaigns were politically mobilized. We identified a demand and a movement-more or less organized, seeking to influence the political system, and then we observed how and to what extent they were incorporating digital media in their political activities. We need new concepts for doing it? In this case the answer is clear: No.

In my opinion, studies on new technologies sometimes focus on the technology itself, losing sight of other dimensions of social phenomena, often more important. Allow me to bring an example from the e-government studies which predominate some years ago. Most of these studies were conducted by a deterministic perspective oriented towards identifying the *impacts* of ITC in the administration. Many were centred on analysing the digitalisation of services and processes of the Public Administration, placing special emphasis on comparative studies of websites. However, a weakness come from supplying partial and indirect evidence of the transformation taking place in a given administration because, with few exceptions, they focus solely on the external transformations (front office) visible in the portals ignoring internal transformations as well as the use, and the users. Other studies focused on best practices put too much emphasis on the design of initiatives, without special consideration of their uses or the overall results of the processes of incorporating technology. Why were so successful considering the number of studies published under that umbrella? Because is easier to conduct this type of research in terms of time and resources, while the website studies allow for large comparisons, something which sometimes seems to be a value *per se* in some fields of knowledge. However, these studies were not the most appropriate to understand in deep the public administrative reform.

Societies evolve, change, are renewed in processes that can be assessed as positive or negative depending of the (ideological) position of the observer. New phenomena -such as the globalization, the network society, etc.- require new concepts or the reformulation of old

concepts to be defined. Even in consolidated research areas (not as our still emerging field of e-politics) social change leads to the development of new concepts and theories. To analyse political participation should lead to analyse objectives, strategies and results, and does not matter if this is offline, online or a mix while the necessity (or not) of new concepts will be a result of the link between the research question and the empirical approach. For instance, AVAAZ operates exclusively online, but if their work arrives to be successful, the consequence is a new law or the repeal of an existing one or whatever with an effect on a given system. Thus, If I want to study to what extent such movement has an impact probably I will be able to deal with it using the lens I normally use. In few words, my research is focus on traditional questions of political sciences –consolidation or reinforcement of democracy, opening of regimes, reinforcement of transparency and accountability--. I consider ICTs for politics as a part of my general concerns and do not need to change my lenses (not in a different way than when I study an institution of participatory democracy) to try to understand what is happening.

Literature

- Araya Moreno, Eduardo and Diego Barria Traverso. 2009. E-Participación en el senado chileno: ¿aplicaciones deliberativas? *Convergencia* 16(51): 239-68.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 2003. Communicating global activism. *Information. Communication & Society* 6(2): 143-68.
- Hoffmann, Bert (2012) “Civil society in the digital age: how the Internet changes state-society relations in authoritarian regimes. The case of Cuba”, in: Francesco Cavatorta (Hrsg.), *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule. A comparative perspective*, London/New York: Routledge, 219-244
- Braga, S. 2009. Internet and representative institutions in Brazil: information technology in Brazilian Houses of Representatives (2007-2011). In *Joint Sessions of Workshops, ECPR/European Consortium for Political Research, Lisboa, ECPR*.
- Breuer, A. and Farooq, B. (2012) *Online Political Participation: Slacktivism or Efficiency Increased Activism? Evidence from the Brazilian Ficha Limpa Campaign*, Working Paper.

- Burch, S. & León, O. (forthcoming) “Social movements, democratic participation and ICTs”, in *Digital Technologies for Democratic Governance in Latin America Opportunities and Risks*, Breuer and Welp.
- Garrett, Kelly. 2006. Protest in an information Society: a review of literature on social movements and new ICTs. *Information, Communication & Society* 9(2): 202–24.
- Harlow, S. (2012). Social media and social movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline. *New Media & Society*, 14, 225–243.
- Jorba and Bimber (2012) “The Impact of Digital Media on citizenship in a global perspective”, in *Digital Media and Political engagement Worldwide. A Comparative Study*, Anduiza, Jensen, Jorba (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Juris, Jeffrey. 2005. The New Digital Media and Activist Networking within Anti–Corporate Globalization Movements. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 597(1): 189-208.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 2005. *The New Transnational Activism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Valenzuela, S. (2012). La protesta en la era de Facebook: Manifestaciones juveniles y uso de redes sociales en Chile 2009-2011 [Protesting in the Facebook era: Youth manifestation and social media use in Chile 2009-2011]. In A. Scherman (ed.), *Jóvenes, participación y medios 2011* (pp. 20-29). Santiago, Chile: UDP.
- Welp, Yanina. 2008. América Latina en la era del gobierno electrónico. Análisis de la introducción de nuevas tecnologías para la mejora de la democracia y el gobierno. *Revista del CLAD Reforma y Democracia* 41, <http://www.clad.org/portal/publicaciones-del-clad/revista-clad-reforma-democracia/articulos/041-junio-2008>.
- 2011. "Bridging the Political Gap? The adoption of ICTs for the improvement of Latin American Parliamentary democracy", in Zahid Sobaci (ed.), *E-Parliament and ICT-Based Legislation: Concept, Experience and Lessons*, IGI Global Publisher.
- Welp, Yanina & Wheatley, Jonathan (2012) “The uses of Digital Media for Contentious Politics in Latin America”, in *Digital Media and Political engagement Worldwide. A Comparative Study*, Anduiza, Jensen, Jorba (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

i See for instance Araya Moreno and Barria Traverso, 2009; Braga, 2009; Welp, 2008, 2011

ii **Methodological note:** A first step after the selection of campaigns was the systematic analysis of their digital media use (webs, blogs and online social networking services such as Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, Sonico, Hi5 and Orku). This allowed us to see how these different devices were used as well as the extent to which different groups, webs and blogs were interlinked. A second step in the research process involved in-depth interviews. To select the interviewees we proceed in different ways: contacting the creators of blogs, identifying people on the relevant websites or in social networks; through previous personal contact with members of some of the campaigns; approaching political commentators in each country and eliciting new contacts from those interviewed (snowball sampling). These processes also informed the research process as in some cases personal and traditional telephone contact were important while in others email, chat or internet phone conversations played a more important role. Interviews were developed around a set of guiding questions which in some cases led on to a discussion of other issues (semi-structured interviews with some open questions). The core of guiding questions was designed to find out (1) the virtual spaces built or used to promote the campaign; (2) the influence of the digital divide on the digital media strategy; (3) the intensity of digital media used to promote activities such as dissemination of information, mobilization, debate, etc. -intense, occasional, scant or null-; (4) interaction with mass media; (5) the role played by digital media in the campaign (complementary or alternative to more traditional forms of media); (6) the process of decision making inside the movement; (7) general assessment of how digital media is used for campaign development. Finally, secondary sources (including newspapers and official documents such as laws or official reports) were used to contextualize each movement.