Surfing for better democracy
Reflections based on some Latin American experiences

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Main goal

By analyzing five political campaigns that have been launched in a bid to influence national policy making, this presentation *explores the conditions under which social movements take advantage of digital media in their campaigns and the specific characteristics of the political context that condition the way digital media are used.*

Campaign	Main goal
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.
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*.
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.
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.
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)

Hypotheses

1. 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. According with the **DEMOGRAPHIC HYPOTHESIS** we expect that amongst certain social groups (the young, urban, non-indigenous, highly educated citizens) the use of such media will be higher.

3. The **STRUCTURAL HYPOTHESIS** states that digital media, based as it is on many-to-many, reciprocal and non-hierarchical communication will be particularly used in horizontal, non-hierarchical movements.

Country/Campaign	Internet diffusion	Demographic profile of users	Structure of the movement	Intensity of digital media uses
Argentina No a la papelera	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	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	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	Relatively Low	Indigenous, rural, more marginalized population groups	With elected representatives from affected communities	Low, basic information on the website
Uruguay Nulidad de la ley de Caducidad	Relatively High	Middle age, middle class, led by members of labour unions and political parties	Horizontal	Middle, mainly oriented towards dissemination

Methodology:

- **systematic analysis of their digital media use** (webs, blogs and online social networking services such as Twitter, Facebook, ...)
- **In–depth interviews**. 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.

Findings

➢ **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.

➢ 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. 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.

➢ **The political context and the perceived efficacy of strategies also play an important role**.

"Can we analyse online political participation through the lenses of theoretical approaches traditionally used in social sciences?"

Thanks/ Merci!

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