No, it did Not Grow Up because of the Internet: The Emergence of 2011’s Student Mobilization in Chile

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ABSTRACT

While there is a general agreement on the contribution that Internet has implied for social mobilisation regarding information and networked sociability, there is a strand sustaining that the web and new technologies of communication have the power to liberate people, introduce democracy and democratize nations. In this paper, the author deals with these perspectives with a special focus on Latin America and Latin American quests for democracy. Taking the case of the Chilean students movement of 2011, he describes and analyses a set of “old” and basic communicative practices located within the walled intimacy of houses, occupied schools and assemblies. This description and analysis brings to the fore mediations that being at the very emergence of the movement, underlies and exceeds the Internet, providing elements to light up what technological determinisms shadow: the senses and sensibilities displayed in practices looking for voice, participation and recognition in the middle of neoliberal democracies.

Keywords: Internet, Latin America, Mobilization, Neoliberal Democracies, Technological Determinisms

INTRODUCTION

From the vast amount of literature that in the last two decades has been focused on the contributions of the Internet for social and political mobilization there are two broad agreements. The first points that Internet has increased the chance to spread information (Della Porta and Mosca, 2009) in autonomous ways (Couldry, 2010) from grassroots positions allowing alternative, international, interpersonal
and broadcast communication (Klein, 2000 Kavada, 2005) thus gaining power in contexts where protest activities and alternative media “were severely constrained or silenced” (Norris, 2002: 208). A second agreement lies in the conditions set by the Internet to enable a certain type of networked sociability (Papacharissi, 2011, Castells, 2012) that allow decentralized (Kavada, 2010), connective (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) and faster processes of insurgence (Castells, 2009), in front of old ways of organizer-centred logics of collective action (Marwell and Oliver, 1993). Both coexist today.

Along with these two broad agreements it has come a narrative that going from the legitimate surprise to the blatant fantasy has expressed that new social movements and contemporary mobilizations owe their birth, existence and success to the Internet. Reviving the never ending –and always updating- shortcut of technological determinism, scholars, media and cultural industries have praised the Internet as the way to change the world raising the idea that anyone –with some basic skills- can create revolution from a computer or mobile phone.

What are these approaches missing? When dealing with social movements and focusing on Internet as the way to understand mobilizations, these approaches miss contexts and mediations: Contexts that surround the origins of a particular uprising –like a weak democracy, a narrow and mostly privatized public space and a neoliberal economic model, in the Chilean case- and mediations that are the ways that citizenry creates and embraces to –within and outside mainstream institutions- generate voice, participation and recognition.

Thus in this paper I want to get out from the fascination on the Internet and its determinisms to put back the focus on contemporary citizen sensibilities that manifest people’s will to take part in the political through varied ways, including certainly –but not being the only one or the most important- new technologies of information. To do so I will first assess three attributed features of the Internet with special attention on Latin America: the alleged chance to create revolution from mobile phones, the emancipation ideal in the context of cultural industries, and the democratizing potential of new technologies of information. Afterwards I will move the sight into one set of communicative practices that Chilean students displayed during the mobilization of 2011, identifying in that mobilization affective, personal, social and organizational mediations that are before, within, over and after the Internet. Thus I will be able to trace the senses and sensibilities displayed in the quest for voice, participation and recognition of ways to intervene in the political, beyond the pathways posed by a Latin American modern democracy.
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