Chapter 4
Radical Political Communication and Social Media: The Case of the Mexican #YoSoy132

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to analyze the practices of radical political communication within the context of social mobilizations whose emergence and initial spreading are inherently associated to social media. On the basis of a case study -the #YoSoy132, a university student mobilization during the 2012 electoral campaign in Mexico- the text analyzes the main uses of social media as part of the mobilizations and the interrelationships between online (communication) and offline collective action. The author concludes that, despite the importance of social media and the collective actions based on their use, even the participants recognize the necessity of going beyond the online space. Although social media pluralize the actors of political communication and even force its traditional actors to participate in alternative communication spaces, collective communicative action cannot be confined to the digital space, but it must be understood within the processes of social mobilization, in all its articulations and mediations.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing role of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) in everyday practices of communication in general and, particularly, in political communication, has become a relevant topic of research in contemporary societies (Bentivegna, 2006). At the same time, social movements and mobilizations have also become a relevant issue for social theories and research. In the articulation of these two trends, the analyses on the ICTs have underlined, on the one hand, its contribution for enabling processes of participation and democratic dynamics and, on the other hand, have criticized certain tendencies to a technological determinism. Those debates have increased with the emergence of social media, associated to openness, freedom and horizontality and a richer user experience and an architecture of participation (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9879-6.ch004
Social mobilizations put in practice a significant appropriation of ICTs as part of their collective action that has been associated to the emergence of new cyber-based repertoires of contention and the development of horizontal forms of organization by those collective actors. This tendency leads to the peculiarities of the political communication as part of this collective phenomena. In that regard, the chapter aims to critically analyze the appropriation of social media as resources for radical political communication within the context of social mobilizations by people who are not traditional political militants. Radical political communication refers to the specifically sociopolitical-oriented communicative practices by counterhegemonic groups, that aim at explicitly questioning and challenging the mainstream political communication — i.e., the political communication by institutional hegemonic groups, such as political parties.

If social movements are counter-institutions — this is, absolute negations of the institutions that try to configure another institutional regime, alternative to the modern one (Alonso, 1986) — that give a significant importance to the communicative dimension (Kavada, 2005), then these collective actors may be considered as particularly challenging agents against the practices of communication by institutional political groups. Social movements have traditionally associated with practices of alternative communication (Alfaro, 2000), a notion that has been widely discussed. From a complex perspective, alternative communication refers to a participatory communicational model and, consequently: 1) it cannot be understood in terms of a communicational or technical alternative, nor a simple alternative use of media; and 2) “true alternative political communication projects” must have “a globalizing presence at the macro-political level” (Capriles, 2006, p. 305).

In that regard, radical political communication: 1) implies a participatory model of alternative communication; 2) overcomes an understanding of the communicational practices of social mobilizations and movements that is limited to a “citizen” and “non political” nature, a tendency derived from certain simplistic conceptualizations of these collective agents that place them out from politics; 3) goes beyond traditional concepts of radical political communication that are based on a very simple communication model and accept the idea that “whomsoever possesses the senders can control the throughs of humans” (Autonome a.f.r.i.k.a gruppe, 2003, p. 87); and 4) implies also an alternative understanding of politics, not as the activity associated with the traditional political agents such as political parties, but as “a space of accumulation of social, cultural and directly political forces” (Sader, 2001).

From this perspective, the text examines the main tendencies and dimensions mediating the online practices of digital radical political communication, in particular the online/offline tension, through the study of a relevant case of use of social media in the context of an electoral campaign: the Mexican #YoSoy132 (English: #Iam132). This was a mobilization led by students from both private and public universities that took place against the then presidential candidate of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, English: Institutional Revolutionary Party) and current Mexican President, Enrique Peña Nieto, during the 2012 electoral campaign. The analysis focuses on the period between 23 May and 1 July 2012, when the #YoSoy132 published its foundational statement and elections were held, respectively. During this period, mobilizations and the electoral campaign coincided in time.

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Social movements and mobilizations put in practice, as part of their collective action, certain repertoires of contention (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1995), a notion that firstly focused on “public display of disruptive
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