Chapter 24

Empowering People Using Twitter: The Case of Mexico’s Internet Tax

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence of the impact that Twitter has on empowering Mexican people and transforming social protests. This technological tool enables citizens to force political actors and electronic media to take a proper position on certain issues. The aim of this chapter is to explore the uses and misuses of Twitter in Mexican online protests, and in common citizen-user interactions. The main outcome is an explanatory model of e-participation as a possible explanation of this phenomenon and the promotion of some ideas to use Twitter in a proper way. This chapter is organized in five major sections. First, the introduction reviews the origins and fundamental principles of Twitter and social interaction. Section two describes the model of online participation. Section three presents the Internet tax case in Mexico, named: “necessary Internet.” Section four discusses the outcomes and possible implications of citizens’ empowerment through Twitter using the model. Section five provides insights into future research in this field.

INTRODUCTION

The social protest has a long tradition in world history, from the Middle Ages when people started thinking about democracy and human rights, to the French Revolution in 1789 when the Social Contract was made, and the concept of citizen was mentioned, indeed ever since then numerous social protests have taken place.

We can mention that the social protest has different origins, from a political perspective such as protests against an established government, like the Russian Socialist March in 1917, or the social protest in China against Chiang Kai Sek,
looking for a socialist change; this social protest over streets derived from a revolution and violence.

Other social protests with an ideological content have also changed history, starting with the Hitler era, when Germans were convinced to affiliate to the Nazi Party and launch the Second World War. On the other side Mahatma Gandhi, in India, and his peaceful social protests forced the independence of his country from the domination of the United Kingdom.

The social movement field of research has much work on the different democracies and countries around the world. Starting with environmental social protests (Schwartzman, Alencar, Zarin, & Santos Souza, 2010), the poor movement of workers in Brazil (Campbell, Cornish, Gibbs, & Scott, 2010) along with food and agronomic experts (Starr, 2010) – and with political movements linked with political parties (Schwartz, 2010; Arce, 2010), or the revival of the socialist movement in France (Le Queux & Sainsaulieu, 2010). Research by Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner, & Fleury-Steiner (2010) shows the evolution of a dialogue between black female victims using the Internet that evolved to become a social protest.

By using the Internet social movement protests have evolved into more organized global political protests around the world (Feixa, Pereira, & Juris, 2009), in particular social protests against multinational companies (Martin & Kracher, 2008). Nowadays, online tools help to organize social protests (Wall, 2007), like the 1999s “Battle of Seattle” which saw more than 70,000 protestors come together by means of online organizing to take on the World Trade Organization (Mccaughey & Ayers, 2003). Are social movements changing because of technology? This question is difficult to answer, however, research like Earl (2006) analyzes online activist tactics (online petitioning, boycotting, emailing and letter writing campaigns), and Friedland & Rogerson’s (2009) literary review of the use of the Internet on social movements provides evidence of the existence of this new path of research.

In Mexico a normal social protest closes main streets and causes traffic congestion that makes authorities pay attention and at least listen to the protesters. In 1968 a movement in Mexico City caused a violent riot and a bloody massacre of students yet the motive remains unclear. In 1998 and 2000 social protests after election results against electoral fraud and a fair counting of votes, created a massive consciousness in Mexican politics. However, the first online protest using technology emerged from the Chiapas State in 1994, with the indigenous Zapatista movement using email to diffuse their ideas around the world and sending massive emails to newspapers and opinion leaders.

The use of information technology and communications (ITCs) creates a new kind of behavior, and social protests which started on the streets (Mosca, 2010) are now are evolving on the web. The Mexican online protest of #InternetNecesario leads that direction, and poses the research question of this study: Is Twitter changing the way Mexicans protest? Complementary questions that this research tries to solve are: Is Twitter empowering Mexicans to protest online? How can Twitter empower Mexicans to make their protest online?

In order to answer these questions, we develop a research model that links the theoretical background of online protests with cyberactivism and recent Twitter research. This model analyzes the case of #InternetNecesario to provide evidence that supports our answers. This chapter presents the introduction of the research problem, the second section concerns Twitter research and cyberactivism, followed by a third section that elaborates on the model of analysis as a methodology and finally the analysis of the Mexican case, with some suggestions and future research comments.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Twitter has been a 140-character explosion for micro-blogging. The use of blogs as part of the Web 2.0 has not been as explosive as the use of Twitter