From Internet to the streets:
An approach to activism in Aguascalientes, Mexico

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Abstract

In this paper, I present the main outcomes of an empirical exploration on activism and online communication practices in a Mexican city, on the case of #YoSoy132 Aguascalientes. It is part of a doctoral research in progress, that lies on the theoretical approach of the three degrees of communication and on the methodological perspective of multi-sited ethnography. This experience leads to regard the links between online communication, street action and media coverage, in activism, and the challenging implications for their study.

Keywords

Public expression, online communication, protest, media coverage, activism

The study of online public expression of activists in Aguascalientes, Mexico: A research in progress

The paper presents the outcomes of an empirical exploration on activism and the link among online communication practices, the streets demonstrations, and media coverage, as well as the implications for their study. This experience is part of a doctoral research in progress. This research project addresses to analyze the connection between public space and online communication, by examining participation of activist groups in public space through online expression practices. The research questions are: What factors afford participation of activists in public space, through online expression practices? What is the link between online expression practices, street action and media coverage?

These questions become relevant in our context, because ICT access has been a key issue in international debates about development (Organización de las Naciones Unidas / Unión Internacional de Telecomunicaciones, 2006). Moreover, ICT had been regarded as essential tools of communication and organization in social movements of recent years, such as Arab Spring movements on North Africa countries, Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in United States, #YoSoy132 in Mexico, and others. Understanding online communication in contemporary societies implies the recognition of ICT and its connection with the development, as well as transformation of world schemes of perception and social practices. But also requires questioning those practices and their links, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The main objective of the study is to analyze, from a socio-cultural perspective, the participation of activist groups in public space, through their online public expression practices, to understand —in a local context— the development of global processes of participation, linked with ICT. This global / local tension implies a challenge to the study of activism and communication. On one hand, there are global shared logics. On the other hand, there are significant differences between localities, configuring diverse conditions of access and use of online communication —in technological, economical, socio-cultural, and political dimensions—. David Morley (2012) proposed to locate the studies on a contextual approach, to produce knowledge on technology-in-use. This project incorporates such contextual point of view.

The theoretical approach is based on the three degrees of communication theory: network, mass, interpersonal communication, and the links between them (Jensen, 2010). This proposal let examining the implications of the interrelation of users with media materiality, and the possibilities of differentiated practices and appropriation forms. The methodological approach lies on a qualitative logic, based on multi-sited ethnography (Hine, 2009). The project has been a circular route among theory/methodology reviews and empirical explorations. In fact, this paper recovers a reflexive report from an empirical exploration done in 2012 summer, on the case of #YoSoy132 Aguascalientes, which aim was questioning the relevance and the possibilities of study online communication practices in activism, around a specific event: the emergence of #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico, in May 2012.

#YoSoy132 México and #YoSoy132 Aguascalientes

2012 was an electoral year in Mexico, citizens voted to elect president and legislators. Along most part of twentieth century, Mexico was governed by presidents emerging from the same political party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). That changed in 2000, when a candidate from another party, the *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) won the election. Mexico had two consecutive presidents from that party, Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. But in 2012, the strongest candidate was Enrique Peña Nieto, from the PRI. Many voices, such as the British newspaper *The Guardian*, pointed the links between Peña Nieto and Televisa, the biggest Mexican media group, and a lot of irregularities in the electoral campaign, but most Mexican media didn't report it. In May 11th, the candidate visited a private university at Mexico City, the Universidad Iberoamericana. Students protested against him and questioned his position regarding repression case in Atenco, occurred while he was governor of the State of Mexico. Information was diffused by Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and more.

Most Mexican media reported the visit as a success, while disqualified the protest of students. The fact showed the problems with media coverage. This event detonated new expressions among young people: As a reply, 131 students of that university produced a video, facing the disqualifications. Later, students of another public and private universities, such as ITAM, Tecnológico de Monterrey, CIDE, UNAM and UAM, integrated the #YoSoy132 Movement (I am 132), initially at Mexico City, spreading to other Mexican cities.

On May 19th occurred the first demonstration against Peña Nieto in several Mexican cities. Thus began my empirical exploration on the movement, more intuitive than planned. In a first phase, I did virtual ethnography on Facebook walls, blogs and YouTube channels of the movement, both national and local groups. According with my notes, it is possible to identify two types of publications: 1) statements released for communication and organization purposes, linked to street action, 2) visual/audiovisual productions for social networks diffusion.

This empirical exploration, based on virtual ethnography, let me find an important link between online communication practices, street action and media coverage. Therefore, I decided extend the exploration towards an ethnographic practice on two of the demonstrations, as well media monitoring, on the case of #YoSoy132 Aguascalientes, a cell of the national movement. It was unexpected, because Aguascalientes is a city with a weak civil society, without a protest tradition.

The main outcomes of that empirical exploration were fit into three links: First, the link between online public expression and street action lies in the use of technological tools to communicate and organize the protests in public places, and other activities of the group. Street action eventually became material for the online public expression, when activists published photos, videos and notes of the demonstrations.

The link between street action and media coverage is a key factor, due to people protested on the streets and local media made a different coverage. Also, in protests, people shouted slogans against the biased media coverage —for example, one of the slogans was "No somos uno, no somos diez, pinche

Hidrocálido, cuéntanos bien" ("We aren't one, we aren't ten, damn Hidrocálido, count us well"), in reference to a news item published in that newspaper—.

The link between media coverage and online public expression lies on practices of the activists, who shared and discuss news items on Facebook walls. Two local newspapers covered also the online activity of #YoSoy132 Aguascalientes.

(In)conclusions

The empirical exploration allowed see that, even if the focus of this research on activism is online communication, there are strong links with street action and media coverage. Exploring the links between online and offline action of activists let approach to the practices from their production contexts to public expression. Exploring the link of them with media coverage let find, on one hand, the level of visibility of activism in specific social contexts and, on the other hand, provides elements to problematize online communication practices in terms of power, especially in contexts with high levels of media concentration. Thinking online communication as a one of three degrees of communication implies the recognition of deep links among different actors, contexts, and possibilities of public expression. It is a big challenge to the academic research.

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