

Digital activism and its contribution to political decentralization

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In this short text, I intend to discuss the potentiality of digital activism manifested in digital social networks for social participation and political decentralization, a cross-cutting theme that is addressed by Fontes in his text “Social Networks and Governance in Health”.

The debate on political decentralization runs across distinct disciplines. I take as a reference the reflection of sociology that focuses on decentralization as a mechanism for the empowerment of civil society, strengthening participation and citizenship. In this perspective, the social realm of political decentralization translates into social participation in public management, in a set of forms and resources to enable groups to decide on the public agenda's issues, allowing the community (or groups) to express their will in decision-making spaces, supervision and social control of public management services and projects¹. My view is directed to the role of activism that is expressed and organized in digital social networks and is, thus, linked to digital sociability and conforms to the rationale of cyberculture².

Digital social relationships provide a new dimension to the debate of contemporary social networks, either by allowing the suspension of geographical boundaries, by virtuality that materializes non-presence realities, the extensive and rapid dissemination of all sorts of information and ideologies, or the possibility of association (which may be ephemeral or lasting) around shared experiences and/or ideas^{2,3}.

The idea of creating virtual communities of meaning, in fact, is the basis of what is meant by web 2.0 and social networks that arise from it. If the sociological notions of belonging, legacy, territorial and identity-related ties delineated communities in the non-virtual world, on the internet, such ties are much more fleeting. However, even these “weak links” or provisional ones have an unequivocal power of influence and dissemination of ideas^{4,5}.

Digital social networks are underpinned by a technological base that allows the collection of all sorts of information from their users, identifying potential consumption profiles⁶. Thus, it allows the exhibition of goods whose spectrum ranges from the announcement of products and services to the provision of candidates for public office, whose campaigns will be formatted to please the opinions

and tastes expressed in the virtual networks. In social networks, one can even actively seek out voters according to a specific political profile, such as the case denounced in the last US election, whose use of Facebook information would have served to outline psychological profiles of Internet users and shaped Donald Trump's campaign.

Of all existing internet associations, social activism will also gain new expressions from the network connections provided by the digital media disseminated via the internet. As some authors observe, the concept of digital activism or cyber-activism harbors some distinct phenomena, although they have some synergy between them.

Digital social networks enable campaigns, petitions, advocacy of various causes, pressure lobbies for the approval or rejection of laws, dissemination of information about facts of political interest under various versions (whether official or dissident), as well as the establishment of different political groups. An example of the power of one of these forms of activist action is the recent case of the approval of the Brazilian Clean Criminal Record Law (*Lei da Ficha Limpa*), with more than two million signatures collected online by Avaaz. Avaaz.org, which was founded in 2007, was joined by a global civil society advocacy group (Res Publica) and an American online activist group (MoveOn.org). As of 2012, it creates a petition website, allowing any user to make their petition and achieve online adherence. Similarly, movements, stakeholders and political actions that have no space in traditional media gain visibility in the virtual media, strengthening civil society on a global scale, even claiming that the internet would constitute a new political sphere (Norris, 2001 apud Villela⁷).

Digital activism is for some scholars something different from hacker-activism since the central perspective of hacking action would not be to influence collectively in the conformation of a public agenda. However, other authors argue that it is the most radical, and even effective strategy to undermine established political and economic regimes⁸.

Some provocations may be formulated to warm our thinking about digital activism and its

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influence to political decentralization and perhaps network governance: would digital social networks lead only to “passive” activism, although intense and passionate, or would function as bases of offline action? Do they create or only reproduce existing social movements? Do they voice out individualized agendas or produce network actions? Can they intervene in public agendas or are these waterproof?

The common sense idea that digital activism would be “couch activism” has been challenged since the early days of using networks to organize, disseminate, and call for political action. So it was with the inaugural digital activism carried out by the Zapatista Mexican movement (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in 1996. In a paradigmatic way, the innovative experience of the Battle of Seattle in 1999, which brought through social networks thousands of demonstrators from different backgrounds around a broad range of demands (health and access to services, work, environmental agendas, identity-related, and so forth) that shared an anti-capitalist protest and its globalization processes. So it was with the set of protesting demonstrations against Arab totalitarian regimes (2010), with the 15M (2011) in Madrid, the Occupy (2011) in the USA, and so were the demonstrations of June 2013 in Brazil^{9,10}. These experiments unequivocally reveal that digital activism has a broad capacity for aggregation, mass mobilization, street performance and has a complementary character to face-to-face activism. Moreover, more than that, it allows congregating concurrently several fronts of struggle, with cross-cutting interests and agendas, propitiating the connectivity of a network of agendas.

Another issue at hand is whether digital social networks are only a tool, a means of expression and dissemination of existing social movements or allow the establishment of new movements. What has been seen is that these spaces strengthen already well-known social movements, that interlocutors in networks articulated in synergetic agendas are on the rise, as well as that new movements that were once silenced or made invisible, strengthening the local agendas in an expression of multicultural cosmopolitanism¹¹. An example of the global health activism experience that incorporates local agendas is the People’s Health Movement (PHM), whose articulation of various groups pleads and voices out different health demands. The PHM has created worldwide reports on health conditions and actions and gained spaces of influence within the very World Health Organization. However, if it strengthens already

established social movements and those hitherto silenced, a study on activist blogs reveals that the digital mechanisms of political participation do not dispense with the mediation of organized civil society institutions, even though they allow the participation of independent actors in the arena of debate⁷. The author concludes that the gain of the internet is, in the end, to increase the circulation of information, but does not replace the traditional mechanisms of participation. In other words, social networks allow, above all, greater dissemination of counter-hegemonic ideas and media, which broadens the scope of information and resources for decision-making and choices.

However, it is not possible to stop at a naive reading. We are not even referring to the issue of digital inclusion, since 32% of Brazilians, especially the poorest, still do not have access to the internet¹². We talk about the power relationships that circulate in the digital environment, because even on the internet, in its supposed freedom of expression, the official media and its interlocutors also predominate there, translating a communication that is not entirely democratic. On the other hand, the architecture of the digital platforms also does not allow such a vigorous debate between people with divergent opinions. Algorithmic associations lead us to see more often the postings of those who have already shown some interest or affinity, through “likes”, “comments” or sending “emoticons”, leading us to circulate in the space of “equals”. In this poor exercise of dialogue with the different (and opponents in ideas), even when “unwanted” posts eventually appear, we still have the various features of “blocking”, “stop following”, “silencing” its transmitter. Thus, we are increasingly less engaged in dialogue, enunciation of arguments to convince (fundamental to political action!) and respectful listening to our political opponents or those who disagree with us. Digital activism is also not exempt from market linkages. Let me mention something recent: the blog called “Bloggers for health. Blogs and social networks also promote health” which held its second meeting, with more than 200 digital health activists; it has substantial sponsorship from the pharmaceutical industry. One should bear in mind that activism actions can also be based on conservative, fundamentalist, racist, homophobic, and other attitudes.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that access to information that previously had no circulation in the dominant media allows the elevation and qualification of the political debate, increasing the probability of social control over the use of public funds and political and management decisions

concerning the implementation of solutions to the identified problems. Not to mention that it allows the circulation of identity-related expressions, sexuality, corporality and morality ways different from the “established ones”, suggesting other micro- and macro-political agendas in health, other governance (which I have not had time to debate here). The so-called “public opinion” as a diffuse political stakeholder that is taken into consideration in the formulation of public agendas is also influenced by digital activism actions. However, there seems to be a limit to this field of influence that concerns the permeability of political regimes in hearing other voices, whether coming from the streets or on the internet. No doubt this porosity is also circumstantial and “elastic”; it may aim to the next elections, popular support, and the like, but it also tells us something more structural, that is, of a

democratic, or civic culture, as mentioned by Fontes, that truly respects and fosters the participatory practices of citizens and social organizations and takes their demands and suggestions seriously, or shows that we are dealing with asymmetrical, authoritarian, political-institutional cultures that remain deaf and self-centered. However, I think that the debates around the political projects of government (on all realms of life and health, whether from self-government or public affairs), that travel borderless between online spaces and face-to-face interactions, produce a powerful, mobilizing movement of a political becoming, favor and strengthen the expression of new actors. I believe that this information traffic, living expressions, and opinions, qualifies the political debate, although there is a risk of increasing intolerance around “communities of equals”.

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