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Dossier "Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach"

New media and protest in hybrid societies

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Submission date: March 2009
Accepted in: April 2009
Published in: May 2009

RECOMMENDED CITATION:
MELIÁN, Virginia (2009). "New media and protest in hybrid societies". In: E. ARDÈVOL, A. ROIG (coords.). "Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach" [online dossier]. *Digithum*. Iss. 11. UOC. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy].
<link to document>
ISSN 1575-2275

Abstract
The relationship between new social movements, especially those located in the global South, and their online media has often been discussed in terms of empowerment via a newly achieved global reach and subsequent extended networking capabilities beyond the locality. Less frequent is the analysis of the relationship between internet and social movements within societies characterized by a digital divide, product of unequal social, economic and political conditions. In this paper I explore the tensions between local, national and global forms of civil engagement in the online media produced by a new social movement opposed to the installation of two mega paper mills on the border between Argentina and Uruguay. The analysis shows that the relationship between this movement and its online media practices draws on "glocal" forms of civic engagement with empowering impact within the locality.

Keywords
internet, new media, empowerment, activist media, global, local

Resum
La relació entre els nous moviments socials, especialment els que estan ubicats al Sud Global, i els seus mitjans en línia sovint ha estat objecte d'estudi en termes d'apoderament, gràcies a un nou abast global i les subsegüents capacitats de xarxes esteses més enllà de la localitat. Però l'anàlisi de la relació entre internet i els moviments socials dins de societats caracteritzades per la bretxa digital, producte de condicions socials, econòmiques i polítiques desiguals, és menys freqüent. En aquest article analitzo les tensions entre les formes locals, nacionals i globals de participació civil en els mitjans en línia produïts per un nou moviment social que s'oposava a la instal·lació de dues grans fàbriques de paper a la frontera entre l'Argentina i l'Uruguai. L'anàlisi mostra que la relació entre aquest moviment i les seves pràctiques mediàtiques en línia se serveix de formes «glocals» de participació cívica amb impacte d'apoderament dins de la localitat.

Paraules clau
internet, nous mitjans, apoderament, *media*, activisme, global, local

Several media scholars have explored how the internet potentially enhances new social movements by the creation of alternative spaces for political action and the possibilities of networking on a global basis (Atton, 2004; Bennet, 2003; Couldry *et al*., 2003; Downing *et al*., 2001). Academic research on activism has argued that the internet potentially facilitates oppositional discourses that seek to challenge dominant discourses by bringing excluded issues and identities to the fore (McCaughey *et al*., 2003; Meikle, 2002; Webster, 2001).

Bennet has further argued that the internet has been conductive to enhancing the power of global activist movements. He signals that the flexibility, diversity, and scale of these leaderless and inclusive networks are suited to the multidirectional capabilities of internet. Downing *et al*. add that the internet "gives a more rapid dissemination and exchange of ideas and interpretations than ever before in the history of grassroots movements" (Downing, 2001, p. 203). The internet provides a "set of processes that supplement and multiply opportunities for sociality, community, knowledge construction and direct political action" (Atton, 2004. p. 133).

The Zapatista movement has often been taken as an example of one of the first potent demonstrations of autonomous electronic communication. Castells called it the *first informational guerrilla movement* (Castells, 1997, p. 79). According to Downing *et al*., the case has shown the potential of "radical internet communication" for social change and the emergence of "new spheres of communicative action by people's movements" (Downing, 2001, p. 201). Beyond the case of the Zapatista movement, there is not much written on social movements and the internet in Latin America in English. Pitman, however, signals the existence of a longer history of "grassroots internet" in the region before the Zapatista case (Taylor *et al*., 2007).

The reawakening of civil society and social movements in the region in the past two decades (Feinberg *et al*., 2006) along with certain expansion of internet usage, especially in the wealthier Southern Cone, makes relevant the rather unexplored issue of internet practices of civil society actors in the context of post-authoritarian democracies, characterized by unequal social, political and economic factors, including unequal internet access patterns.

In this paper I explore the tensions between the representation of local, national and global forms of civil engagement on the website of the civil and environmental movement called "Sí a la vida / No a la papelera" (Yes to life / No to the paper mill)[1]. The movement surges against the installation of two mega paper mills on the Uruguayan border of the Uruguay River. I have analyzed the variations in the webpage from 2005 until February 2008.

Drawing on Atton's definition of *alternative media*, I understand the creation and maintenance of the analyzed website as the mediated outcome of a flexible process with communication goals fed by members of the movement. It provides a contestant vision, a form of representation of "popular oppositional culture" and in that sense is a form of "alternative media". The mediated output of this movement represents a mediation of a contesting vision. Although there are no studies on how mainstream media in Argentina and Uruguay have dealt with the issue, previous media studies in the region indicate they tend to privilege dominant discourses, giving less space to dissenting or minority voices (Lawson *et al*., 2005) like the ones represented in this website.

Empirical studies are needed on the relationship between the mediated content and the local, national and global dimensions involved. This is relevant especially when considering that "the significance of internet use proceeds not from a solipsist and technocratic desideratum of value […] but from 'locally contextualized (practices of) consumption and production'" (Tacci, 2000, p. 293 in Atton, 2004, p. 150).

Mixed internet use patterns

A "digital divide" framed by general socio-economic inequalities is the first thing that comes to mind when trying to explain the lack of academic studies on the relationship of internet and new social movements in the region. Despite a usage rate growth of 342.5% between 2000 and 2005, the internet does not reach the majority of the people.[2] Still, more than 79 million people had internet access in South America, Central America and the Caribbean in 2005.[3] The Southern Cone has the highest internet penetration rates with Argentina having an internet penetration rate of over 26%, (ten million people) and Uruguay of 21% (680,000 people, almost one third of its population)[4] in 2005.

Moreover, grassroots organizations have been making use of internet from early stages contributing to a nuanced picture of internet practices (Taylor *et al*., 2007). Usage has also been facilitated by free *telecentros* and cyber cafés, a widespread cheaper option in the Southern Cone. Finally, the recent launch of the Ceibal program in Uruguay that provides a laptop with internet access to every child in public schools takes the issue of usage to a new dimension.

1. My translation.
2. Internet World Stats Internet Usage and World Population Statistics updated for March 31, 2006. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>) [Accessed: November, 2007].
3. Idem.
4. Internet World Stats. South America Internet Usage and Population Statistics. Chile had the highest internet penetration rate of 35.7% or 5.6 million people in 2005. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>) [Accessed: November 2007].

Taking social protest online

The construction of two mega paper mills on the East coast of the Uruguay River, the geographical and political border between Argentina and Uruguay, gained general public awareness through mainstream media in both countries when 30,000 people on April 30, 2005 blockaded the General San Martín international bridge. Since then, a conflict has grown defined by opposed visions on environmental, social, economic and legal aspects by different social and political actors within and across national frontiers. After failing to achieve a diplomatic solution, these countries have involved the International Court of Justice of The Hague, the Mercosur and the King of Spain, Juan Carlos de Borbón, in order to solve their differences. The conflict is framed by a larger discussion on the economic, environmental and labor impacts of the forest production model implemented in South America in the last decades (Merlinski, 2008, p. 2).

Although the street blockade tactic, *corte de ruta* or *piquete*, has been a typical instrument of protest used by Argentinean new social movements in the last decade, associated with lower rates of trust in the established political system (Merlinski, 2008, p. 4), this was the first time Argentineans and Uruguayans blockaded an international bridge. It also signalled the birth of a particular social movement against the installation of two pulp mills by the Finland-based company Botnia and the Spain-based Ence. The movement is generally inscribed in the logic of protest groups that have emerged since the 1990s with no formal, but temporary, memberships that come together for a specific purpose. Grouped in the catchall term *new social movement*, they tend to have a loose or network type of organization and no leaders or hierarchy (Atton, 2004; Bennet, 2003).

The movement has a horizontal structure as important decisions such as the blockades have been made in assemblies by direct vote. Yet, there is a smaller group of people that perform different tasks and are more visible in the mainstream media. The movement is neither formally linked to any political party nor other established group. It was formally born right after this first blockade. With roots in the Argentinean border region of Gualeguaychú, the Asamblea Ciudadana Ambiental de Gualeguaychú has been the driving force supported by the NGO Grupo Guayubirá, part of the Uruguayan Environmental National Network (Red Nacional Ambiental), and two similar Asambleas in the Argentinean border cities Colón and Concordia. The international NGO Greenpeace has also supported the movement (Merlinski, 2008, p. 3).

As with other similar protests in the region, traditional "micro-mobilization" tactics consisting of face-to-face communication, flyers and meetings were used to raise awareness (Merlinski, 2008, p. 3). However, the early publication of a website and its active updating during the years to come shows the incorporation of the internet in the toolbox of the movement from its early stages. This is not the first time, as alternative channels of information spread in the form of email with contesting messages, followed by forums and websites during the institutional crisis of 2001 (Pietro *et al*., 2007). Yet, this is the first analyzed website of a social movement in the region. The website was created on April 6, 2005, a few weeks before the first blockade and is still online as of the writing of this article. As the official media of the movement, it has been regularly updated, although more frequently during 2006 and 2007 when the campaigning was more intense. After the opening of one of the plant mills in December 2007, it has been updated somewhat less frequently.[5] It has involved an important number of people. The number of visitors has ranged from 337,991 in April 2006 to 539,430 in November 2007, according to the website's counter. The internet traffic information website Alexa counted 156,000 visitors in September 2008 when the conflict was declining; among them 43.3% were logging on from Argentina, 6.7% from Uruguay and 50.0% from other countries.[6]

The website has gone through three main different formats in terms of structure, functions and look, probably as a consequence of varying degrees of engagement practices and in relation to the development of the conflict. This is an indication of the changing character of the media practices of the movement's members in terms of involvement.

"Glocal" civic engagement

The analysis of the website shows practices of online engagement or activism that rely on and are supported by the potential global reach associated with internet. For instance, the webpage provided a list of e-mails of the heads of Botnia and Ence and of World Bank employees responsible for granting loans to these companies in order to build the pulp mills, which was used to "email bomb" these people as a means of protest. In addition, digital postcards available on the website were used by people to send information to others on the issue in a clear way of promoting a digital form of raising awareness among those interested in spreading information beyond territorial constraints. Also, the page called *Communicate the campaigns*, added later on, offered pre-structured text ready to be emailed in order to raise awareness.

The inclusion of a debate forum in the early version of the website exemplifies how global and local dimensions have intertwined in specific ways. During the first months the website had a forum for discussion where people could publish their opinions and debate on the construction of the pulp mill. It could potentially have been used by anyone interested and able to read

5. Visit: <http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.noalapapelera.com> [Accessed: Sept. 16, 2008].
6. Visit: <http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details/noalapapelera.com.ar> [Accessed Sept: 15, 2008].

and write Spanish. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the forum was actually not developed by the movement itself but by a local radio station. In effect, the website used the forum developed by a local radio station by linking to it. The latest comments were shown on the main portal and those who wanted to make a comment clicked on a linked to the actual forum published on the radio's website.

Another way in which the movement represents its transnational relationships is the publication of encouraging messages from organizations with similar concerns in other countries. For instance, in the early version of the website, the publication of a supporting message from the Asociación por la Defensa de la Ría, a NGO concerned with the environmental consequences of a paper mill in Northern Spain, exemplifies how the movement makes explicit its relationships with organizations with similar concerns in other regions of the world via its website. Another example of this sort of legitimizing practice by the recognition of other similar organizations is the page *Observatory* where information on similar organizations in Spain and Chile are published. Beyond the actual linkages with these organizations, which are actually a way to represent closeness in the distance, it also has a legitimating effect for those reading about these connections.

Another example of how the website serves as a platform to reproduce and document the movement's forms of civil engagement is the use of clickable images, designed as digital posters, instead of being glued on the walls of buildings, published on the website. These provocative illustrations appeal to life risk feelings within the locality, such as, for instance, the image of a pregnant woman carrying a baby wearing a gas mask or the one with a face divided in two, with a smiling, blond child surrounded by a green valley on the one side and a skull immersed in black fumes and chimneys on the other. These clickable images are provocative invitations to action and to encourage debate associated with feelings of life risk within the locality. However, one may even look at them in their glocal polarity as they provoke debate, action or both within a potential global platform (see images below).

Images 1 and 2. Sample of digital posters of the campaign.

Finally, the question of the potential global reach of the messages published by the website, at least in terms of what is thinkable to publish, is exemplified by a press release published in 2006 addressed to the Presidents of Uruguay, Argentina, Finland and Spain. Beyond the actual content of the text, the imagined possibility that this kind of message could actually be read by national authorities becomes suddenly closer than if published in a paper-based magazine distributed hand to hand within the locality.

Offline civil engagement supported by the website

From the practices performed or supported via the website that imply civil engagement within the locality, it can be firstly named the uploading of images, such as photographs, illustrations and films made by non-professional people living in the area. There are hundreds of images published in the website, seen by thousands and even commented on by some. The documentation of the different manifestations by activists with non-professional cameras is a form of engagement and also of empowerment, at least regarding the representation of an alternative mediated vision of the activists, different from the one produced by mainstream media institutions. Associated with this is the way the website is used on several occasions to respond to accusations voiced through mainstream media.

The digital invitation to blockade the bridge on December 30, 2005 and join in a massive *peña*, a well-known local popular fest that involves food and music, represents one of many other examples of this linkage between how the digital content not only seeks to promote online engagement, but a physical one within the locality. Even the associated information on transport facilities, arranged by supporters borrowing buses and trucks to get to the physical protest, signals the importance of the website for the offline protests, transforming it into a sort of billboard, but easier to update and distribute among many.

Final remarks

The movement's online media has used online civic engagement strategies that fit previous academic discussions. The use of internet expands the possibilities of civil engagement beyond the local. However, the movement's media practices also show its importance as a means of empowerment within the locality both by online and offline civic protests addressed and generated locally. Based on this case, theories of empowerment due to multiplied global reach and networking capabilities do not solely account for explaining the relationship between internet and social movements' media in the context of these particular societies.

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