



## **“Clicktivism” – a form of online activism that is out of touch with reality**

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### **Facebook movements or square movements**

Since the early beginning of the new wave of protest in the Arab world in 2010, some journalists and analysts have described the movements as “Facebook movements” or “revolutions 2.0”. Internet and social media have played an important role in diffusing counter-information and in the first calls for mobilizations.

The Internet and the social networks have without doubt promoted connectedness and the diffusion of the forms, practices and messages of the democratic movements on a national and international scale. Recent mobilizations would have been very different without the dramatic increase of Internet users in the Arab world – more particularly in Egypt (Gerbaudo, 2013) – and in Russia or without the presence of young activists (Mason, 2012) who diffuse their images and demands through YouTube and Facebook, “twittering” on site about an ongoing demonstration, repression or activist camps’ assemblies.

However, in order to understand the role of the Internet in the “Arab revolutions”, the Indignados and Occupy movements or the democratic movements in Russia, Turkey and Brazil, we need to transcend oppositions between the ‘virtual’ world of cyber-activism and the ‘real’ world of mobilization on the streets and squares. Online activism and territorial rootedness, global connections and national frameworks, the use of alternative media and the reference to mass media are congruent rather than opposed.

Beyond the over-emphasis on the power of Internet, recent movements point to three main features of movements of our times.

1. The use of Internet has not led to a predominance of virtual actions and movements over mobilizations in ‘physical space’. On the contrary, since 2011 the occupation of urban public spaces – and more particularly symbolic spaces – has been a major feature of these movements.
2. Though the Internet is a global virtual space, the use of social networks by activists has actually rather contributed to the construction of national and local movements.
3. The social networks and the Internet have not replaced mass media. Alternative and activist media have reached the largest audience when they linked up with mass media.

#### **From the social networks to city squares**

Social networks have come to be seen as privileged spaces of mobilization, of diffusion of information and of exchanges of experiences, to the extent that the Arab revolutions and the wave of civil mobilizations in Brazil have readily been described as “Facebook movements”. However, all over the world, citizens have occupied public spaces to reaffirm their public and political character, re-deploying the meaning and repertoire of “temporary autonomous zones” (Bey, 1997), alter-globalization activists’ camps (Pleyers, 2010, Chapter 3) and spaces of democrat-



ic experimentation. So much so, that the different movements have been identified with the spaces that they occupied: Tahrir in Cairo, la Plaza del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma in Athens, Gezi Park in Istanbul, Zukoti park for Occupy Wall Street, « Occupy Abay » in Moscou or « Occupy Cinelandia » in Rio de Janeiro.

The mobilization in the streets and squares for these movements has often been strengthened by online activism, as for instance the amplification given to a demonstration or an Occupy camp thanks to online diffusion. Manuel Castells (*Networks of outrage and hope*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012) points to the role of social networks as relatively "protected spaces" in the light of authoritarian regimes. Such spaces allow for the construction of "outrage networks" on the basis of which the passage from private and virtual space onto the public space and squares can be achieved.

Furthermore, these movements have multiplied online connections but also have (re-) connected numerous "online activists" with local spaces, meetings and initiatives in their neighbourhood or town. At the same time, in many Occupy camps the use of social networks was such that the experience of the activists was forged both on the site and online.

Yet, the interaction of off- and online activism is not free from tensions. Various case studies points to problems following the divergences between online and "on site" participants in assemblies. In their analysis of off- and online interactions at the Occupy London Stock Exchange, Tamsin Murray-Leach and Sean Dean (2014) note for instance how the schedule of the next meeting determined by a working group gathering online and on site participants was later modified by online activists without consulting the off-line attendees of the meeting.

Activists often condemn "clicktivism" as a form

of online activism that is out of touch with reality and that gives the impression of participation even though it only has a narrow impact on society (Cardon, 2010; Morozov, 2013). Paulo Gerbaudo (2012) reminds us that, in the streets of Cairo as well as in New York, those who occupy the squares insist on being distanced from "those who comment and 'like' on Facebook" and they rally to "get people off the Internet".

#### **Social networks and national movements**

Internet allows to cross borders and go around the world with just a click. Yet, does it liberate citizens and activists from space? The control of Internet and social networks in Ben Ali's Tunisia or in China remind us that the net does not always enable us to escape one's territory. Even without the enforcement of an authoritarian regime, the massive use of social networks by activists of recent movements has paradoxically often contributed to further "nationalising" a mobilization or a wave of opinion rather than internationalizing it. Social networks have thus mainly favoured the spreading of opinions, demands and repertoires of actions on a national level.

The enormous use of social networks has for instance contributed to the creation of indignation camps in all Spanish cities with a population of more than 30,000, establishing a national character to the movement in a country characterized by strong regionalist tendencies. In Mexico, the students of the « #YoSoy132 » movement have galvanized against the support given to current president during the 2012 elections campaign by the two major television corporations. Initiated as an action at one of Mexico City's universities, the movement has immediately found wide appeal thanks to a video posted on YouTube and on social networks. This online enthusiasm has led to demonstrations in each of the country 32 state capitals, testifying a national feature seldom reached by social movements.

Likewise, in Brazil, the massive recourse to social networks by activists coexists with a strong assertion of the national character of the protests, where demonstrators used the national banner and claimed a better future for their country. In Europe, the dynamics of continental Social Forums has declined and been replaced by mostly national movements against austerity such as UK Uncuts, the Spanish Marches to Madrid or the Greek days of actions. Therefore, even though the 2010 mobilisations shared some global dimensions (Pleyers and Glasius, 2013), the massification of the Internet and of its use by activists did not go hand in hand with the decrease of national movements in favor of European and global ones. On the contrary, it is concomitant with the strengthening of the national dimensions of most citizens' protests.

#### **Social networks and mass media**

The Internet has profoundly redefined the way information is produced. The influence of mass media is partly countered by the increase of blogs, micro-blogs and other channels of alternative information. However, they do not replace mass media. Our mediatic landscape is not dominated by the world wide web but by the superposition and linkage of mass media, social networks and online media. In order to understand contemporary movements and their use of new information and communication technologies, our analysis therefore needs to deal also with the role of the mass media and with their interaction with social networks and online media.

This interplay between alternative media and mass media often takes the shape of a confrontation, as the former accuse the latter of conspiring with political and economic elites. In Mexico, the student movement #YoSoy132 took aim at the seat of Televisa, the main media consortium, rather than national institutions, thus condemning the partisan information which fa-

voured one of the candidates of the presidential elections. Likewise, in Brazil, many slogans referred to the role of the media consortium "Globo" and denounced the way it covered the protests. Various demonstrations have subsequently been organized on a regular basis outside the headquarters of "Globo" in Sao Paolo.

The juncture of social networks and mass media played a key role in the mass diffusion of information and images issued by the movements to reach a broader audience. Egyptian activists have posted a dozen short videos exposing the repression and abuses of the police, but these videos were only widely diffused once they were transmitted by Al-Jazeera and as a result reached the suburbs of Cairo (Mason, 2011). Likewise, the demands of the 400 campers at the London Stock exchange have found unexpected relays in the editorials of the Financial Times (21 November 2011) and The Economist (26 November 2011). Even some major Chinese newspapers have conveyed causes expressed by cyber-activists: "The circuit of administrative recourses does not create a buzz. But once I had posted the indication of this procedure on my Weibo account, Chinese media took hold of it" explains a Chinese anti-nuclear activist.

Online media and social networks facilitate the diffusion of information to the mass media, which in turn help to spread it widely and legitimize this information. Furthermore, the line between mass media and participative media has begun to blur. Mainstream media are interacting with the social networks used by the activists, notably by encouraging observers or even the activists themselves to contribute to the newscast and to continually post news, images or opinions on their websites. Conversely, the investigations and information of mass media also feed social media and militant websites. The Mexican movement #YoSoy132 for instance has widely diffused the findings of a Guardian journalist who exposed



the sale of favourable media coverage of the to-be president of Mexico by Televisa, the major Mexican television group.

### Everyday life and public commitment

The false disconnection between activism 'on-line' and 'off-line' points to another questionable disconnection: the one that separates everyday life from politics.

Political participation is often thought about from the analytical angle of a public space disconnected from everyday life (which nowadays includes the Internet), as if only the actions mattered which point to political institutions and find a space in the mass media. Yet, the movements that have marked the beginning of this decade profoundly amalgamate private life and public involvement. The reasons that led many citizens onto the streets were related to their everyday life. In Brazil, the price and organization of public transport sparked off the protests. Likewise, many Russian citizens were angered by humiliations encountered in everyday life and have expressed their indignation towards corruption or the sense of impunity of civil servants or the local police.

The expressive forms of involvement existing in the contemporary movements further contest this separation between the world of everyday life and of citizenship. Friendship and commitment are linked in the viral diffusion of alternative information, of militant experience and of Occupy camps. To express oneself and to live a strong personal experience are an integral part of a form of activism that "does not expect a 'coming out' as was the case with the militant figure that was ready to sacrifice her private life so as to devote herself to the general wellbeing" (Cardon, 2010 :72).

If there is one medium that mixes private life and public involvement and offers a platform for individual expression, then it is social media. On the Facebook or Vkontakte pages of young people concerned about the protests in Brazil or in Moscow, pictures of police abuse against demonstrators follows those of evenings among friends; opinions on the democracy in Brazil were followed by personal messages. This is certainly one of the reasons why mobilized citizens have used Twitter, Facebook and their national equivalents rather than very efficient free software designed by activists to facilitate the organization of movements, the diffusion of information or virtual and participative assemblies.

All these points should not lead to minimize the impact of new technologies and social networks on contemporary actors and societies. Rather, they suggest that attention should be directed towards the interplay of online and offline actions and that the combinations of online activism and public space and the articulation of everyday life and political activism are at the core of activism and social movements of our times.

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