New Media and Peace Activism: the Case of "One Million Voices against FARC"

Nuevos medios y activismo por la paz: el caso de "Un millón de voces contra las FARC"

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Abstract

Recently, the spread of social media has undoubtedly contributed to further increasing the potential of civil society mobilizations. The ease of access to new communication technologies enhances the potential of civic movements, but it is still necessary to focus on the relationship between the creation and stability of digital ties and the sustainability of collective action.

This article aims to examine the first and largest global civil mobilization promoted through a Social Network Site: the massive march on February 4th 2008 against the FARC, the Colombian guerrilla group. The objective is to analyze, several years after the fact, the characteristics and effects of this mobilization, which originated on the web to become a huge global march.

Through the analysis of the literature it presents some reflections on the nature of these new forms of online activism, their potential and limits. Specifically, the case in question comprises a form of collective action that, while displaying impressive speed and the capacity to mobilize many people thanks to the new medium of communication, at the same time reveals its dependence on external actors with the ability to manipulate it for their own ends as well as its weakness in generating a thorough prospect for social change that can truly impact on Columbian society in the long run.

In conclusion the present work shows that, in a complex environment characterized by high levels of conflict, the resources provided by 'revolutionary' new media are not sufficient to achieve concrete social change because the web, like a mirror, simply brings the same contradictions found in real space into a virtual space. Therefore, we suggest looking beyond the emotional impact produced by new media and more carefully analyzing the real dynamics of conflicts and the inevitable 'imbrication' of the digital and non-digital.

Keywords: activism, social media, Colombia, armed conflict, peace.

Resumen

Recientemente, la difusión de los *social media* ha contribuido, sin duda, a aumentar aún más el potencial de las movilizaciones civiles. Y si bien la facilidad de acceso a las nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación aumenta el potencial de los movimientos sociales, de todos modos es necesario centrarse en la relación entre la creación y la estabilidad de las relaciones digitales y la sostenibilidad de la acción colectiva.

El presente artículo se propone examinar la primera y más grande movilización civil global promovida a través de un *social network site* (sitio de red social): la masiva marcha del 4 de febrero de 2008 contra las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), el grupo guerrillero colombiano. El objetivo es analizar, a la distancia de algunos años, las características y los efectos de esta movilización originada en la web y su posterior mutación en una grandiosa marcha a nivel global.

Por medio de un análisis de la literatura se presentan unas reflexiones acerca de la naturaleza de estas nuevas formas de activismo en línea, y de sus potencialidades y límites. En particular, en el caso examinado se observa la presencia de un tipo de acción colectiva que, por un lado, ha mostrado una arrasadora capacidad y velocidad para movilizar tantas personas gracias al nuevo medio de comunicación, pero, por otro, deja al descubierto su dependencia de la acción de actores externos capaces de instrumentalizarla y su debilidad para elaborar una propuesta realizable de cambio social que a largo plazo incida efectivamente sobre la sociedad colombiana.

En conclusión, en este escrito se demuestra cómo en un contexto complejo caracterizado por conflictos de alto nivel, los recursos proporcionados por los nuevos "revolucionarios" medios de comunicación no son suficientes para lograr un objetivo cambio social, porque la red, como un espejo, solo lleva en un espacio virtual las mismas contradicciones del espacio real. Entonces, lo que se sugiere es mirar más allá del impacto emocional producido por los nuevos medios de comunicación y analizar más detenidamente la dinámica real de los conflictos y la inevitable "imbricación" entre lo digital y lo no digital.

Palabras clave: activismo, *social media*, Colombia, conflicto armado, paz.

The "Maratón de Mensajes" (Message Marathon) was one of the many virtual marathons that currently populate the world of social networks. Taking place within the two most used social media (Twitter and Facebook),[1] this recent initiative involved a marathon of messages expressing solidarity with the numerous individuals abducted and held by FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia),[2] the largest guerilla group still active in Colombia. The 'marathon' was organized by the *Colombia Soy Yo* association, a Colombian organization that was born out of the large-scale civil-society mobilizations against FARC on February 4, 2008.[3] This date signals a landmark moment in the history of Colombia and beyond in that it testifies to one of the largest civil mobilizations against an illegal armed group activated thanks to the use of Facebook, the first large social network.[4]

The spectacular march, conducted under the motto "No más secuestros, no más muertes, no más mentiras, no más FARC" (No more abductions, no more deaths, no more lies, no more FARC), involved 165 cities throughout the world and was estimated to have drawn 13 million participants in peaceful public demonstration.[5] This substantial event de-

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1. The virtual marathon took place on the pages of Facebook and Twitter from February 18 to February 23, 2012.

2. FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) is the main guerilla group still active in Colombia. It is a Marxist-Leninist inspired entity that was born in the early 1960s and underwent a profound process of transformation and modernization between the 1980s and 1990s that led to its becoming a real army: in 1994 its ranks included 9,500 combatants and in 1998, at the peak of its growth, the number had risen to 11,330.

3. The Colombian association's official site is www.colombiaSoyYo.org and it is also present on Twitter and Facebook. The association presents itself as a civil society organization born out of the February 2008 demonstration against FARC and established by the event's promoters and organizers. As of today, the official Facebook page (set up, indeed, on February 4, 2008) reports 66,240 "likes" while the Twitter page boasts 5,101 "followers." (last accessed 6/9/2012).

4. Facebook is a social network established by Mark Zuckerberg and launched in the United States in February of 2004. Initially configured as a service network for university students, it was only with its current domain registration of www.facebook.com in the middle of 2005 that Facebook began its global diffusion as a social network open to all internet users.

5. The large march was covered by newspapers in the articles "Marcha contra las FARC, mayor movilización en la historia del país" in *El Tiempo* (2/04/2008) and "En las calles del mundo entero millones de personas le gritaron a las FARC: 'No más secuestros, no más violencia'" in *Semana* (2/04/2008).

veloped out of the creation of a virtual community, "Un millón de voces contra las FARC" (One million voices against FARC), within Facebook, the first and foremost social network to have begun taking the first steps toward global expansion and diffusion in that period.

Today, and especially following the explosion of the so-called "Arab Spring" (the phrase used to refer to the revolts that broke out recently in various North African and Middle Eastern countries[6]), it is impossible to imagine or enact any civil-society mobilization without passing through the new channels of communication opened by information technologies. The revolutionary technological transformations occurring in the informatics and communications sphere of the contemporary "network society" (Castells, 1996) inevitably imply profound social transformation. Indeed, as Castells argues, the novelty of the "Information Age" lies not so much in the form of organization through networks, but rather in the way that new digital network technologies offer social networks unlimited potential in terms of development and scope. The virtual dimension has become an integral part of contemporary reality and the new networked system of horizontal communication is radically altering existing modes of action and interaction. While on one hand this new "social morphology" (Castells, 1996) represents an immense resource for creating interconnections between local and global dimensions and an opportunity to develop so-called "global civil society" (Keane, 2003), on the other hand, however, it is not without its contradictions and problematic elements. As Castells stresses, the new global architecture of the network operates by connecting up so-called "nodes" or, in other words, the points where vital resources such as wealth, power, innovation, culture and people tend to accumulate, sites which essentially correspond to the planet's various metropolitan areas. This network configuration is thus based on a logic of inclusion (and, therefore, of exclusion) that directly depends on the value each "node" holds within the network. Everything outside of the 'node' is automatically excluded and prevented from taking advantage of the resources and benefits the node contains. There is no doubt that the diffusion of "social media" in recent years has contributed to enhancing the potential of the phenomena that Sassen defines as localized activism with a global reach (Sassen, 2006); at the same time, however, it is useful to assess their possible limits and

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6. The phrase "Arab Spring" is used to reference the numerous revolts that broke out in a series of North-African and Middle eastern countries beginning in late 2010/early 2011.

the contradictions inherent in the dominant logic that they inevitably reflect and help to enlarge.

The social media that some scholars have termed Social Network Sites (SNS) (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) allow users to create public profiles and interact with other users, communicating and sharing information thanks to the specific interactivity enabled by Web 2.0. The anti-FARC march in Colombia as well as the 2009 mobilization against President Alvaro Colom in Guatemala (Harlow, 2011) constitute two clear examples of the important role these new technologies have begun to play in modifying, or even creating, new forms of online activism that have the potential to become offline activism. To understand these new modes of collective action, we must begin by engaging with some fundamental concepts in the traditional body of research into social movements that allow us to conduct an initial analysis of their potential and limits. Specifically, it is useful to distinguish between the concepts of collective action and social movement: while collective action is simply a shared course of action aimed at pursuing shared objectives, a social movement is a broader phenomenon, in that it involves a more long-term contestation aimed at achieving social change and thus assumes higher levels of cohesion and available resources (Tilly 1978; Tarrow, 1998).

Indeed, although the ease of accessing and using these new communicational tools surely aids in increasing the potential of civil society movements, we must nonetheless consider some critical issues that have been raised and debated in the literature: 1) The question of unequal access to new technologies, known as the 'digital divide', especially within countries characterized by deep economic and social inequalities, and 2) the relationship between the creation and stability of digital bonds and the sustainability of collective action. In order to avoid potentially partial interpretations that are often excessively optimistic regarding the use of digital technologies, it is therefore necessary to begin from the assumption that no instance of *cyberactivism* (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009) can be understood without a deep analysis of the context in which it originates and develops.

Building on these two significant points of reflection, I seek to analyze the first and largest civil mobilization event carried out thanks to the use of a social network: the impressive march against the Colombian guerilla group FARC that took place primarily in the main Colombian cities on February 4, 2008. This march without doubt achieved historical proportions in terms of the speed with which it was organized, the

large number of people involved and the characteristics of both its 'initiators' and the communication tools they used. Public opinion – and even the political and institutional representatives of various countries[7] – greeted it at the time and continue to represent it as the largest and most spontaneous civil society mobilization against terrorism. However, while this element of novelty is extraordinary and indisputable, the analysis of this civic mobilization must go beyond the most obvious and superficial aspects of the phenomenon in question. Indeed, this initiative must be analyzed more attentively and re-connected to its broader context and the complex societal dynamics that triggered it in order to reveal the possible contradictions and forms of calculated manipulation to which it may have been subject.

From this premise I would hypothesize that the wide resonance and consensus that the demonstration (now called simply "4F") enjoyed in the short run was due to the convergence of a series of factors in a specific historical moment; however, the internal contradictions inherent in these factors immediately prevented it from becoming a true social movement capable of assuming a key role and affecting the country's political scene. Its huge success in terms of national and international media coverage was not matched by an equal degree of success in generating and consolidating a solid civil society movement with the capacity to engage as a valid actor in the peace-building process. The web has surely enlarged and strengthened social movement repertoires of action, but, as some authors argue (Van Laer J. & Van Aelst P., 2009) it is also useful to highlight and reflect on its limitations rather than being seduced by a view that is excessively optimistic and naïve. The elements to be problematized are precisely the ease and speed of digital communication, which often do not coincide with (and sometimes even come into tension with) the actual barriers, both instrumental and substantial, facing various civil society mobilizations. Drawing on Ogburn's famous theory of 'cultural lag' (Ogburn W.F., 1922) one could argue that these are two planes that are closely connected but travel at different speeds: on one level, material culture, and thus technology, advances extremely rapidly; on another level, non-material culture (understood as

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7. The "Un millón de voces" Foundation has organized and participated in several national and international conferences concerning the relationship between new technologies and political participation. See the Foundation's official site: www. millondevoces.org

a set of values, ideologies, etc.) lags behind the former and adapts to it more slowly and with greater difficulty. Making partial use of this concept within a more specific consideration of social movements, it could be argued that the immense opportunity and potential in terms of participation and democratization that new digital technologies (especially social media) offer are still not matched by similar concrete possibilities for change within social structures.[8]

To better understand such a large "facebooked"[9] civil society demonstration, whose aim of bringing thousands of people out into the streets for a specific cause was successful to a degree that went beyond even the initial expectations of its promoters, it is useful to reflect on several crucial issues: the first concerns the nature of this mobilization and its representativeness within civil society as a whole; the second, closely linked to the first, concerns its potential effectiveness in positively impacting the cause it promotes.

The first of these issues calls for a reconstruction of the event's origins, mapping the contours of Colombian society and analyzing the conflictual dynamics at play when the demonstration took place. This task requires a detailed assessment of crucial factors such as the role of governmental institutions, the role of traditional media, and the deep rifts that traverse Colombian civil society. First of all, it is impossible to analyze a civil society mobilization organized through a social network and within a country scarred by deep political, economic and social contradictions as well as decades of armed internal conflict without addressing the impact of the digital divide. To understand if the demonstration assumed the form of a true social movement and, possibly, how representative it might be within Colombian civil society, it is first necessary to identify the differences and imbalances that exist in access to new technologies.

Having mapped the contours of the phenomenon, it is then possible to proceed to the second issue, that of the effectiveness of this collective action; in addition to depending heavily on identity-based factors, collective action can be analyzed in terms of other elements such as the

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8. Authors such as Diani, Tilly, Clark and Themudo and Earl and Schussman are rather pessimistic about the internet's real capacity to create and maintain the necessary bonds of trust that form the basis of any sustainable action of mobilization.

9. Terms such as "to facebook" or "tweet" have entered into common usage, yet another sign of the ever-widening diffusion of this new and revolutionary communicative mode.

actions and roles of external actors, the kind of initiatives it promotes over time, the number of participants and how long and intensely they are involved and, lastly, the aims it might have achieved in relation to its primary focus.

From the "wall" to the streets...

The mobilization "One million voices against FARC" was born from the initiative of a young Colombian engineer, Diego Morales. On the crest of the emotional wave triggered by events involving some FARC prisoners,[10] on January 4, 2008 Morales created a page on the newly-emerged social network Facebook to protest this cruel and inhumane practice and demand the unconditional release of all abductees held by the guerilla group. Though initially addressed to a restricted circle of contacts, the initiative went on to achieve an unexpected level of diffusion, attracting 160,000 supporters within a few days.[11] The potential of new digital technologies and, more specifically, of so-called social media, demonstrated its explosive power and virulence and, thanks to its capacity for catalyzing the attention of a multiplicity of actors both within and outside of Colombian society, gave rise to an extraordinary demonstration on February 4, 2008 that brought an estimated 12 million people on into the streets of 165 cities throughout the world, primarily in Colombia. Given these numbers, the reach of this event certainly cannot be underestimated, obliging us to look closer at the nature of this particular phenomenon. From an initial, superficial reading, it is clear that within Colombian society there exists a wide and dense front of mobilization against a terrorist group that operates in isolation and whose actions, and specifically the tactic of abduction, are labeled as purely criminal acts lacking in any type of political or ideological justification. However, the dynamics of the lengthy Colombian conflict are much more complex, due to both the presence of multiple illegal armed groups and the deep ideological and political rifts that traverse the country's social fabric (Rosato V., 2009). Colombia has been shaped by a conflict that is "chameleonic" (Rosato V., 2010) in terms of the ability that

10. The triggering event concerned the negotiations surrounding the release of the son of Clara Rojas, who was a prisoner of FARC at the time.

11. See the article "Facebook Becomes Catalyst for Causes, Colombian FARC Protest" published February 22, 2008 at www.pbs.org/mediashift

its various actors, both legal and illegal, have shown over the years in adapting to the profound changes occurring at local, national and global levels. The armed conflict that emerged in the sixties between two opposed actors, the state on one side and various guerilla groups on the other, was further complicated in the eighties by the official arrival of paramilitary groups. The Colombian state's long tradition of democracy, at least at the formal level,[12] clashes with the extreme difficulty it has had and continues to have in controlling and performing its institutional functions in some areas of the country. Over time, these gaps have mainly been filled by the two main armed groups: FARC, a Marxist-Leninist-inspired guerilla group, and AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia),[13] a right-wing paramilitary group focused on defending the *status quo*. Over the years, the various governments' attempts to move forward with a process of peace-building have met with failure, succeeding only in achieving limited objectives such as disbanding the smaller guerilla and AUC groups (Leal F., 2006; Restrepo L. A., 2006; Mejía M. E., 2005). Notwithstanding its significant symbolic and political value, the demobilization of AUC that occurred in 2006 under the Uribe government did not effectively rid the country of paramilitary groups – they continue to act undisturbed behind new facades and under new names.[14] As far as FARC is concerned, despite having suffered substantial military defeats over the last few years,[15] it remains a large and highly unified armed

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12. The Republic of Colombia was established in 1886 following a long process of emancipation from Spain and a series of civil wars. It is one of the longest-lived democracies in Latin America, given that it has had only four short-term military governments between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the governments headed by Rafael Urdaneta and José María Melo in the 1800s, the one headed by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in 1953 and the Junta Militar de Gobierno that took power for a single year in 1957.

13. Beginning in 2002, when Uribe was elected to head the country, a significant process of negotiation with AUC was launched that led to a massive demobilization of these illegal armies. In relation to this, see Duncan G. (2006).

14. In an article "Amenazas de paramilitares colombianos en Europa" published October 24, 2008 on the website of the Agencia Prensa Rural (www.prensarural.org), the journalist Ospina writes about the threats that these new paramilitary groups, called *Águilas negras* had made against national and international NGOs and union and student organizations as representatives and embassies of countries such as Canadá, the United States, México, Ecuador, Venezuela, Chile, Brazil and the European Union. These threats reference a supposed complicity between these organizations and institutions and the guerilla project.

15. In the last four years, several of the group's historical leaders have been killed following various attacks by the Colombian Armed Forces. In addition to Pedro Antonio

group that continues to act undisturbed, pursuing its struggle through the dissemination of a well-defined, if anachronistic, ideological and political discourse.[16]

The result is that even today the country continues to be characterized by deep rifts, the deepest of which can be recognized as the classic opposition between the city and countryside; within a context of armed conflict, this opposition entails a powerful clash between the poor, rural areas directly involved in the violence and the more well-off metropolitan areas that enjoy high levels of security (Waldmann, 2007). To understand the origins and effects of a civil society mobilization such as 4F, an analysis must begin by taking into account these 'two Colombias.' The first task of analysis is therefore identifying who promoted and supported the initiative through the use of the social network and which broader sectors subsequently joined the demonstration. A quick glance at the data surrounding the digital divide at the moment when this original idea was launched clearly shows that a very restricted percentage of Colombians, estimated at approximately one fourth of the population, was able to access the internet and only approximately 3% actually held a contract guaranteeing web access in their own homes.[17] This percentage is composed of mainly young people with high levels of formal education, belonging to the upper-middle classes and living in the metropolitan areas. Diego Morales, the demonstration's main promoter and architect, perfectly represents this segment of the population.[18] Fur-

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Marin (known by the war name 'Manuel Marulanda known as Tirofijo'), who died in March 2008 of disease, Víctor Rojas (called 'Mono Jojoy') was killed in September 2010 and Alfonso Cano was killed in November 2011.

16. It is possible to access all of FARC's public communiqués from the group's official website (www.farc-ep.co as well as from the official Twitter page 'FARC-EP Colombia' (https://twitter.com/#!/FARC_COLOMBIA), which currently reports 9,772 'followers' (last accessed 6/08/2012).

17. In 2008, 25.6% percent of the Colombian population was estimated to use the internet, while only 3.3% were estimated to have access to the web directly from home. These data can be found in the report by the International Telecommunication Union, titled *Measuring the Information Society 2011*, Geneva, 2011.

18. Diego Morales is a young Colombian engineer with an international education and professional training. It is interesting to note the finding reported by Neumayer and Raffl (2008), who use the Human Development Index to locate each of the cities that hosted the February 4th anti-FARC marches and find that nearly all of them belong to the "high" and "middle" rankings, which confirms the claim that the protest was organized by a global elite.

thermore, it is useful to consider that, at that time, the innovative social network platform was just beginning to expand at a global level. I would thus hypothesize that only a restricted circle of internet surfers would have been familiar with this innovative communicative tool. As Castells argues, the logic of exclusion inherent in the new networked social morphology is unmistakable: flows of communication and resources accumulate in the so-called nodes that correspond to the planet's main metropolitan areas and everything outside of them automatically becomes excluded. In the case of the 4F initiative, this profound gap cannot go unnoticed: only the richest and most educated Colombia is able to globally 'connect' and enjoy the resources required for seizing and effectively utilizing the new opportunities offered by this innovative technology; the rural, poor Colombia most heavily affected by the conflict, in contrast, not only remains excluded from this virtual space but must continue to rely on elites in the real, physical world.

I therefore seek to understand what elements contributed to the success of an event originating in the web that went on to successfully develop into an impressive march with international scope. The first and most important element to consider is the resonance that the event enjoyed from the very beginning among traditional media outlets such as television and the press (*El Tiempo*, 2008).[19] For instance, the interview that promoter Diego Morales gave on Caracol, one of the country's main TV networks, represents an emblematic case in this respect: on that day alone, the Facebook group gained an additional 30,000 supporters and the coordination network set up to organize various marches in dozens of cities grew as well. This widespread support from the classic mass communication tools is not only a consequence of the interest triggered by a new 'technique' of civil society mobilization; it should also be understood in relation to a specific national and international context. The promoter's position and the aim of the initiative was very clear: to protest against FARC and, specifically, its brutal practice of kidnapping. More or less consciously, the clear association of conflict=FARC inevitably conveyed a specific political message as well: it exclusively attributed the conflict to this one armed group and its violent practice of

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19. The main Colombian newspaper, *El Tiempo*, systematically followed and reported on the demonstration that was taking form on Facebook. A few of these many articles include: "Detrás de movilización contra FARC en Facebook está un ingeniero civil sin experiencia en política" (01/19/2008), 'Un millón de voces contra las FARC' sigue sumando adeptos desde Colombia para marcha cívica mundial' (01/21/2008).

abducting civilians. Despite its clear and unquestionably peaceful character, the initiative's underlying message thus consisted of a powerful reduction of the armed conflict's complex dynamics that thereby made it extremely easy for the Colombian establishment to utilize the event for its own ends. Sitting president Álvaro Uribe, then in his second term,[20] had already been pursuing a policy shaped by the stigmatization of guerilla groups as narco-terrorists and consequent violent repression without any real will to or possibility of engaging in dialogue. The initiative against FARC thus perfectly matched the interests of the ruling class, which helped it to achieve more widespread and, I might add, decisive support from the main national mass media outlets.

In addition, the unexpected resonance that the event achieved at an international level might also be explained in reference to the convergence of a series of factors. The first can be directly attributed to the widespread tension arising from the 'post-9/11' scenario at a global level. From the very beginning, the full-blown war that the West declared against international terrorism contributed to shaping worldwide public opinion in such a way that all illegal armed groups active in various conflict-ridden contexts throughout the planet were re-interpreted and generalized through a purely 'terroristic' lens.[21] In the case of Colombia and specifically in relation to FARC, this sudden shift is evident: FARC has gone from an illegal, armed group making political claims to a terrorist group driven by exclusively criminal interests. In addition to this picture, it is also important to take into account the international uproar triggered by the abduction of a well-known figure, French-Colombian citizen and 2002 Presidential candidate Íngrid Betancourt,[22] along with three US citizens.[23] The direct involvement of two Western powers as influential as France and the United States caused international public

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20. Álvaro Uribe was elected president of the Colombian government for the first time in 2002 and later re-elected in 2006. His second term came to its regular end in 2010.
21. Due to this particular international scenario, both the USA and the EU include these illegal groups (FARC, ELN and AUC) in their lists of terrorist organizations. See the "2001 Report on Foreign Terrorist Organizations" published October 5, 2001 by the Director of the Counterterrorism Office, Department of State, Washington.
22. Íngrid Betancourt, Colombian presidential candidate in 2002 for the "Verde Oxígeno" party, was abducted on February 22, 2002 during her electoral campaign.
23. The three US contractors abducted by FARC on February 13, 2003 were later freed on July 2, 2008 during the operation known as "Operación Jaque" together with 12 other prisoners, including Íngrid Betancourt.

opinion to focus its attention for the first time on FARC and its cruel tactics of abduction, failing to note, however, that this tool has always been used by Colombian guerilla groups to pursue their struggles. Since their emergence, FARC and other guerilla groups have used kidnapping as a source of financing; over time, however, and especially since narco-trafficking has become their main source of funding, this tactic has increasingly assumed a 'political' valence: abduction victims, mainly Colombian armed forces operatives captured during military operations but also political representatives, are considered prisoners of war.[24] As evidence of this, FARC has always held a large number of prisoners, numbering in the hundreds, the periods of captivity have always been very long and negotiations for their release have always been conducted within a larger, public political strategy.[25]

...and from the streets to the 'wall'

The huge impact and global resonance achieved by the F4 mobilization demonstrate that the development of *mass self-communication* is becoming an extraordinary and useful medium for social movements and their actions. Indeed, as Castells argues, technology neither gives rise to movements nor simply constitutes a tool at their disposal; rather, it takes the shape of a true social structure within which power relations are in a constant state of change (Castells M., 2007). This means that an analysis of this new space of communication must take into account the powerful bonds that exist between mass media and networked media, as well as the increasingly complex relations established between the various political, social and mediatic actors. If on one hand the development of horizontal communication offers huge opportunities to social movements and in general to the different activism forms, on the other hand this development is increasingly 'slipped into' the movements from within by those who hold power. Not only are institutions, govern-

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24. In their official communiqués, FARC always uses the term "prisoner of war". See the site www.farc-ep.co

25. There are negotiations currently underway for the release of the prisoners held by the guerilla groups, conducted through the intermediation of the ex-senator Piedad Córdoba and Marleny Orjuela, a representative of civil society peace movements and director of the ASFAMIPAZ NGO. In its public communications, FARC claims to want to cease using the technique of kidnapping, a declaration that obviously forms part of their specific political strategy.

ments and powerful groups not caught unprepared by this new mode of social movement action, they are continually optimizing their techniques of control for managing and taking advantage of these new forms of communication (Van Laer J. and Van Aelst P., 2009). One exemplary case in point is the term "spinternet," used to indicate the trend (mainly on the part of authoritarian governments) toward a 'soft' use of the web: to conduct their activities of propaganda, it is strategically more effective for institutions to insert themselves inside the new mechanism than it would be to attempt to censure it (Morozov E., 2011). In the case of the "One million voices against FARC" demonstration, the Colombian government showed a clear ability to exploit and strategically utilize an initiative born from the ground up that offered the advantage of using the new and unexpected potential of a social network. In fact, the Democratic Alternative Pole, the country's main opposition party, denounced this manipulation from the very beginning, claiming that the event would only have served to further polarize society. As evidence of the deeply fractured character of Colombian society, not only was there an immediate response in the form of a counter-protest denouncing the phenomenon of paramilitary groups,[26] but numerous spaces of unilateral protest against paramilitarism also sprang up within the social networks themselves.[27]

It was therefore not only the opposition but also large swathes of the civil population and socially active organizations that stigmatized and criticized the initiative which, though declaring itself apolitical, peaceful and opposed to any form of political manipulation, did in fact propose a rather unrealistic solution to the problem.[28] One of the demon-

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26. In response to the February 4, 2008 march against FARC, a counter-march to protest the crimes committed by paramilitary groups was immediately organized for March 6, 2008.

27. Many websites and pages on various social networks have been created to denounce the crimes committed by paramilitary groups. These include: *Verdad Abierta* (www.verdadabierta.com), which is also present on Twitter and counts 20,149 followers and on Facebook with 2,630 'likes' (last accessed 6/08/2012).

28. It was not only the political representatives of the opposition that openly declared their opposition to the demonstration; they were also joined by the populations of the areas most heavily controlled by the guerillas and the prisoner's family members. The common concern was that the march would further undermine the equilibrium achieved up to that point and risk undermining all the efforts made toward developing a humanitarian agreement. Among the many articles published in *El Tiempo* and the weekly *Semana*, see the following examples: "Huila no marchará contra FARC" (*El*

stration's organizers clearly expressed this position in an interview: "A Colombia free of FARC. Neither in favor of the humanitarian agreement nor a military ransoming of the abductees".[29] This declaration clearly sums up the sterility of the initiative and the impossibility of its affecting or contributing to the resolution of the conflict: it did not aim to raise awareness or pressure the government or institutions into pursuing a policy of dialogue, and neither did it aim to undertake a policy of harsh repression. Implicitly, it would have implied the unconditional surrender of FARC, a rather improbable and far-fetched possibility given the guerilla group's deeply rooted presence in local areas. The ambiguity of the initial message immediately gave way to a clear political bias on the part of the promoters. Indeed, this hypothesis can be confirmed by analyzing the "One million voices against FARC" Facebook page, which currently represents the official page of the original "Un millón de voces contra las FARC" mobilization that organized the February 4, 2008 demonstration. The stated mission of the Foundation is to "plan strategies for eradicating terrorism in Colombia by levering the social power generated by the past city marches to raise the consciousness and awareness of society regarding the actions of these illegal armed organizations."[30] However, reading the comments and "posts" (articles, photos and videos) published in the last few years, the only observable sentiment is a strong and unilateral critique of FARC, a partisan attack directed exclusively at the actors, institutions and public figures, who have been accused of supporting, siding with or sympathizing with the terrorist group.[31] One gets the impression that this tool of communication, once successfully used to catalyze the enormous desire for peace that

Tiempo 01/28/2008), "Dirigido a los marchantes de Facebook" (*El Tiempo* 01/28/2008), La marcha del 4 de febrero contra las FARC nació como un foro en Internet y ya está en 163 ciudades (*El Tiempo* 01/31/2008), (*Semana* 2/8/2008).

29. This statement was published in the article "Organizadores de la marcha del 4 de febrero rechazan lo que llaman 'el oportunismo del uribismo'" in the weekly *Semana* on February 8, 2008.

30. Facebook page "One million voices against FARC" www.facebook.com/onemillionvoices (last accessed 6/08/2012).

31. The pages and social network spaces administered by the demonstration promoters ('One million voices against FARC', 'Un millón de voces contra las FARC', 'Millón de voces' e 'Colombia Soy Yo') also include comments and articles expressing opposition to Venezuelan president Chavez and former Colombian senator Piedad Córdoba, accusing them of supporting FARC and going so far as to attack the Supreme Court of Justice on the accusation that it has sided with exponents of the illegal armed group.

unites nearly all Colombians, has instead become a nitpicking pipeline for political rhetoric. Even the sometimes harsh and violent language used by both page administrators and 'followers' is a strong indication of the bias and rigidity used to address the issue of armed struggle.[32] In my opinion, this position not only fails to constructively contribute to the search for a positive and durable pacification strategy, it also dangerously risks feeding into conflictual dynamics and exacerbating the rifts dividing Colombian society.

More than four years later, the outcomes of the large F4 demonstration are clear: not only has it not developed into a true social movement active in the country's political scene, the conflictual situation remains stalled. In his theory of 'catnet,' Tilly identified two main variables that can be used to establish the degree of cohesion and mobilizing capacity of a movement: *catness* and *netness*. The first, derived from the term category, indicates the identitarian element, that is, the features connected to a particular identity-based category (class, gender, etc.); the latter derives from the term net, indicating the networks of voluntary socialization. I would argue that, despite its size and global resonance, the "One million voices against FARC" mobilization turned out to be a rather ephemeral event precisely because it was not produced by a strong and cohesive collective action and, above all, because it was not the expression of a specific category of identity. It was thus a collective action that was successful but limited to a single event and not comparable to the actions of a social movement, which involve long-term contestation aimed at producing social change (Tilly, 1978). Together with the other contributing factors outlined above, the ease and speed of information exchange enabled by the internet surely played a decisive role in catalyzing the attention of large sectors of Colombian society, in facilitating communication and organization and therefore in ensuring the event's success. However, as Van Laer and Van Aelst caution, the prospect of pursuing political and social change exclusively through the opportunities offered by the internet is illusory. The web has undoubtedly enlarged and strengthened the repertoire of action for social movements; howev-

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32. In addition to sarcastic comments about the public figures accused of sympathizing with FARC, there is often a kind of language that at times expresses an attitude of open hostility. For example, comments on the killing of FARC leader Alfonso Cano used phrases such as "Hoy fue abatido..." or "la lucha logra otra victoria..."

er, as Tilly argues, it does not have the potential to overturn this repertoire (Tilly, 2004b). If the mobilization is not simultaneously characterized by high levels of catness and netness, it is not likely to give rise to significant and effective action. A real and profound involvement in the cause and strong bonds of trust among members are indispensible for creating a sustainable network of activists. The internet is only a tool, and according to some scholars, not even a very strong one (Diani, 2000; Tilly C., 2004b; Clark & Themudo, 2003; Earl & Schussman, 2003); it cannot substitute for classical protest actions, it can only complement them.

In the long term, a single online collective action that is not generated by a pre-existing movement reveals all of its weaknesses: as I have shown, the event was initially triggered by circumstances that were practically 'random' and 'unexpected,' themselves the result of both the opportunities provided by new forms of communication and the actions of external actors with the ability to manipulate unfolding events for their own ends. Initially, the promoters' objective as described on their Facebook page was only to express their objection to the guerilla group, and it was not until a month later, within a discussion forum, that growing support led to the idea of a large international march. It is important not to underestimate this element because it reveals the deep contradiction between the event's weakness in terms of identity and the ability to develop a thorough prospect for social change on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the impressive capacity of this communicative medium to mobilize so many people so quickly.

This is why a huge mobilization such as "One million voices against FARC," originating in the fertile terrain of the web and capable of bringing millions of people out into the streets of the world, currently remains as nothing more than a series of "likes" and "followers" within biased social network pages. Though the event was greeted as a demonstration of the enormous and wonderful opportunities offered by new communication technologies, it has displayed all its limits and revealed their exclusively instrumental nature. As this analysis has thoroughly demonstrated, in complex contexts characterized by high levels of conflict, the resources provided by new media – though themselves revolutionary – are not sufficient for bringing about concrete social change. The web only serves to transport the same contradictions characterizing physical space into a virtual space, and frequently even serves to amplify them through the activation of mechanisms that are dangerous and dif-

ficult to control.[33] A consideration of this particular case can therefore contribute to more cautious interpretations of similar events, demonstrating the importance of going beyond the emotional impact these new media may produce to analyze in more depth the specific contexts and actual conflictual dynamics in question.

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33. There is a disturbing tendency for gangs and armed groups to use social networks to intimidate or threaten the population. For instance, in one case that made the news, a "death list" was published on Facebook in August 2010 with the names of 69 people. After its posting, three of the young people named in the list were actually murdered in Puerto Asís, a city in the south of Colombia (see http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/25/colombian-youths-flee-facebook-hitlist-after-three-deaths.html (last accessed 6/08/2012).

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