# EDITORIAL

# CITIZENS' ORGANIZATIONS IN THE KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION SOCIETY: NEW MEDIA, NEW FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Patricio Cabello Cádiz*

Our relationship with the media and with the sources that inform the public opinion is changing. Its transformation has occurred in line with the transformation in the forms and dynamics of social organization, with the emergence of new socio-technical hybrids serving politics, and with the productive and creating praxis resulting from collective action. Traditional media, concentrated on easily identifiable socioeconomic groups, give way to new forms of communication that emerge as citizens' initiatives rather than as products. This is not a simple amplification of individual archetypes, but an activation of forms of collective organization that seem to fill the void left by the crisis of representation of institutional politics, which is observed in countries with authoritarian regimes as in developed countries living in democracy. We can argue that this change of focus of media communication is undoubtedly one of the most significant changes in recent years.

It is astounding to review what the intellectuals in the social sciences thought about these changes. Initially, we rushed to demonize everything that came from areas that we still call "virtual" as if they had no real existence. Academically, we turned emerging social networks into symbols of the banality of a consumeristic, hedonistic, and bourgeois youth. The most moralistic ones, both from the left and the right, were scandalized by teenagers' selfies that seemed to underpin their complex process of identity construction through endless self-generated images, many of which were replicates of other erotically charged images showcased by traditional media, especially television. Parents then threw themselves on a desperate hunt for online stalkers, who, like "the man with the sack"[1] running free in the new online dimension, invaded the intimacy of families (Cabello, 2013).

However, neither in the developed world nor in Latin America we managed to give real significance to the process of transformation of the forms of socialization, to understand that these new forms of communication are necessarily entwined with new forms of social organization. We were

* Ph.D. in social psychology. Associate professor for the School of Journalism at Universidad Católica de Valparaíso and Professor for the School of Psychology and the Master´s Program in Community Praxis and Socio-political Thinking at Universidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano, Chile.

[1] This comes from the Spanish term "El hombre del saco". With this term the author probably refers to social and legal outcasts living in the streets who presumably are potential child kidnappers or molesters.

thinking about the new media with the models built for the old, which already frightened us with their alleged potential to influence subjects considered more suggestible: the children and the poor.

Ours is not a mere interest in social networks, settled in and fused with our daily activities, a phenomenon widely investigated by different authors in the developed world (boyd, 2014). We seek to understand the forms of power organization and production in late modernity, by integrating in our analyses the role of technologies used for information, exchange, and political action. These new media seem grounded in the neo-tribalism described by Maffesolli (1990, 2007), facilitating contact, integration, and identification with collective action. These forms of integration give an emotional, communicative, and organizational support to the construction of alternative political participation, as opposed to discredited forms of institutionalized politics from traditional parties, which, according to Salazar (2012), have abandoned their role as representatives of the sovereign mandate bestowed by the citizenry.

Citizen organizations are felt in Latin America and the world. To understand their strength we need to understand how they have grown from spaces of affectivity, collaboration, and exchange, thus connecting the virtual with the geographical, the individual with the collective, the micro with the macro, and the local with the global. We must approach public radio and television stations, digital media, and social networks that enable the coordination of collective action and the dissemination of their activities. These initiatives of citizen journalism come to the rescue of the right to information and promote the reconstruction of the social fabric damaged by the need to survive in the neoliberal capitalism.

We have seen the record of the protests in Egypt (Eaton, 2013, El-Nawawy y Khamis, 2013), Syria (Ghrer, 2013; Harkin, 2013), Morocco (Darif, 2012) and, in general, in what has been called *the Arab Spring*, a wave of demonstrations whose management and dissemination through the internet (Ben Moussa, 2013) transformed them into global phenomena. It is not only about the construction of news, but about the contact with the realities of others, distant and similar at the same time. This situation transforms our expectations, not only of journalism but also of the social sciences, since, like the poet, blacksmith and welder, thousands of thoughtful voices, taking advantage of the amplification supplied by the media, venture their analysis, generate content, and become opinion leaders.

This is how we got to know the story of the Syrian blacksmith and welder Aboud Saeed, who became a writer and poet of the dissidence:

> all that bullshit about the revolution that has been published in the newspapers, in the media or on Facebook is useless. Chances are that Aleppo and its surroundings will be washed away and that we will be annihilated or thrown out of here. We will learn the art of horror, that art of shaking, the art of dodging, running, and swearing (2013, p.65).

In Latin America, we find the role of ICTs in the demonstration of high school students in Chile in 2006, when the rudimentary social networks of the time became networks of exchange, political information, and coordination at the service of a social mass mobilization. These movements were reactivated in 2011, this time coordinated through more advanced mobile technologies, ultimately producing a social mobilization so strong that it settled the debate over fundamental rights such as education and health that had been ignored until then in the political agenda. Thus, the public was able to produce not only the diagnosis of the problem but the solution to it: the imperative need of intervening to create a more equitable society through a tax reform and a constitutional amendment (Torres y Costa, 2012; Torres, 2013; Sánchez y Torres, 2014). The tools for this change seem to be on the table. As a result of these mobilizations, three representatives of the Chilean student movement were elected deputies. In Colombia we find the fascinating case of Antanas Mockus campaign in the 2010 presidential election, that Rincón (2011) portrayed as "the most important cyber-activist phenomenon in Latin America" (p. 69). We have also seen how political authorities frightfully react to the activation and communication of citizens, thereby recognizing the power of these forms of coordination. For instance, in the case of the protests in Brazil in 2013, a political scene in which the groups in power controlled the mass media, it was possible to observe how police repression particularly focused on confiscating mobile phones that could record the abuses and show the actual size of the demonstrations (Castañeda, 2014).

In Spain, the 15M movement has shown how digital media have coordinated collective action in public spaces, and how they have generated a series of platforms that have allowed them to even experiment with forms of digital democracy, creating a deliberative system outside the established politics, through the slogan "You do not represent us" (Taibo, 2011; Hernandez, Robles y Martínez, 2012). The results of such a move have recently been shown in the European Parliament elections, during which the movement *Podemos* (We Can), emerged from these bases, brought to the front citizens´ strength against bipartisanism.

We certainly have a long way to go in terms of learning and experience. We still find very difficult to abandon traditional notions anchored to old ways of citizenship, community and political action. It's unfortunate, but these changes evince the ever-growing gap between observation and intellectual production. We fruitlessly try to describe and interpret phenomena at a time when facts change at a rate that makes them ungraspable.

If we analyze the institutional development of research centers, universities, and agencies for academic dissemination, we will clearly see that the temporality of our institutions is out of phase with the timing of social change, to the point that a huge arsenal of public policies and private initiatives to promote the production of knowledge about society appears useless.

This is not a death sentence, but the description of a starting point. We hope that in the near future we will be able to approach these issues seriously and in depth, to extend our knowledge of the territory covered by this wave of social change in which people, citizen organizations, and their media come to the rescue of the deteriorated political and social fabric of our time.

# References

Ben Moussa, M. (2013). From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture, 9*(2), 47-70.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Cabello, P. (2013). A qualitative approach to the use of ICTs and its risks among socially disadvantaged early adolescents and adolescents in Madrid. *Communications, 38*(1), 61-83.

Castañeda, M. (2014). As manifestações de 2013: imbricamentos Sociotécnicos e perspectivas. En: Cava, B y Cocco, G. *Amanhã vai ser maior. O levante da multidão no ano que não terminou* (pp. 107-118). Brasil: Annablume.

Darif, M. (2012). Morocco: a reformist monarchy? *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, (3), 82-103.

Eaton, T. (2013). Internet Activism and the Egyptian Uprisings: Transforming Online Dissent into the Offline World. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, *9*(2), 3-24.

El-Nawawy, M. y Khamis, S. (2013). *Egyptian Revolution 2.0. Political Blogging, Civic Engagement, and Citizen Journalism*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ghrer, H. (2013). Social Media and the Syrian Revolution. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, *9*(2), 115-122.

Harkin, J. (2013). Is it Possible to Understand the Syrian Revolution through the Prism of Social Media? *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, *9*(2), 95-114.

Hernández, E., Robles, M. C. y Martínez, J. B. (2012) Jóvenes interactivos y culturas cívicas: sentido educativo, mediático y político del 15M. *Comunicar*, (40), 59-67.

Maffesoli, M. (1990). *El tiempo de las tribus*. Barcelona: Icaria.

Maffesoli, M. (2007). *En el crisol de las apariencias: para una* ética *de la estética*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.

Mayol, A. (2012). *No al lucro.* Santiago: Debate.

Rincón, O. (2011). Mucho ciberactivismo... pocos votos. Antanas Mockus y el Partido Verde colombiano. *Nueva Sociedad,* (235), 74-89.

Saeed, A. (2013). *Yo el más inteligente de Facebook.* Buenos Aires: Mardulce.

Salazar, G. (2012). *Movimientos sociales en Chile: trayectoria histórica y proyección política*. Santiago: Uqbar.

Sánchez, J. C. y Torres, R. (2014). *Juventud, memoria y movilización en América Latina contemporánea*. Santiago: Ril.

Taibo, C. (2011). *Nada será como antes. Sobre el movimiento 15 M* (pp. 38-46). Madrid: Catarata.

Torres, R. y Costa, P. (2012). Uso e impacto de las redes sociales de internet en sobre las movilizaciones sociales juveniles ¿hacia nuevas formas de organización colectiva? En P. Cabello, M. D. Souza, y C. Del Valle, *Medios, Edades y Cultura* (pp. 117-138). Temuco: Universidad de La Frontera.

Torres, R. (2013). Desigualdad Socioeducativa y movilización estudiantil: emergencia del problema público educativo en el  Chile del Bicentenario. *Crítica y Emancipación,* (10), 171-214