Enhancing Civic Engagement in the Digital Age: Global Activism, New Media and the Virtual Public Sphere

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Abstract:
New technologies –Internet, mobile phones, tablets- have the capacity to strengthen civic society and consolidate democracy around the world. Civic engagement and activism have adapted to virtual societies maximizing their organizational linkages and networking skills in an attempt, on the one hand, to consolidate democracy in Western civilization; on the other hand, to promote transition processes in autocratic systems.

Therefore, one of the most innovative effects of digital, transnational activism has been the revitalization of direct, global democracy. Definitely, the interactive capacities of new technologies have enhanced citizen participation and deliberation creating a sort of *virtual agora* or *digital public sphere* where digital citizens discuss worldwide issues of mutual interest. In this discursive space public opinion is formed and exerts influence on political action.

All in all, activism is evolving in this millennium towards global action or global activism. We assist to the trans-nationalization of activist networks. Inspired by altruistic solidarity, social movements have promoted cooperation, found supporters and organized demonstrations and protests worldwide. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, thousands of people have gathered against austerity measures and social injustice –from Toronto, New York, Madrid, Athens, Lisbon, London, etc.-. New media and communication technologies have enhanced collective action. The potential of global activism is to be explored and developed throughout the new millennium.

Keywords: political participation, civic engagement, consotiational democracy, enhanced representation, transnational activism, Internet revolution, *ciber*politics, digital public sphere, hybrid media system,

1.- Preliminary Remarks. Global Activism and the Digital Age

The notion of Global Activism is an intrinsic feature and effect of a globalized world and can evoke two main ideas. On the one hand, it can allude to the rise of social movements and protests which have taken place in different countries and even continents in the last decade, and recently after the austerity measures leading to the financial crisis. On the other hand, it can refer to activists´ coordinated action –often through information and communication technologies- around the world pursuing the same cause.

In order to apprehend this concept, it is convenient to elucidate what is the *digital revolution*, as Global Activism is strongly associated to digital tools and to new media.

The *digital revolution* has often been referred to as the *third industrial revolution* and implies the change from analog mechanical and electronic technology to digital technology, occurred since the 80s throughout the present day. The *digital revolution* is both a manifestation and result of the emergence of information, communication technologies and, thus, inaugurates the *information age*. This revolution entails mass production and widespread use of digital logic circuits, and its derived technologies– i.e., the computer, digital cellular phone, fax machine-. The important technological, social, economic and political consequences brought about explain its revolution-like nature. The *information society* represents the natural environment of this phenomenon.

The term *information society* became popular in 1980 through the work of Japanese sociologist Yoneji Masuda, *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society*. Masuda recalls on the notion of *post-industrial society*, which had been previously coined by Alain Touraine.

As continuation of the industrial society, in the *post-industrial society* information is a decisive factor of economic activity. Certainly, the *pre-industrial society* depends essentially on commodities; the *industrial society* is organized around the use of energy to produce goods; in the *post-industrial society* information -the creation, distribution, use, integration and manipulation- and information technology (IT) are the key elements of the productivity model. Therefore, technologies of information and communication represent the catalyst forces, which have pushed forward and enabled changes in politics, in the structure of society and in work organization. Moreover, people´s capacity to get to know global events and react instantaneously through online communication has transformed the international society in a *global village* (McLuhan, 1964). This "revolution" has marked a new age: the *information age*.

Together with the expression post-industrial society, the information society is often compared or identified with the following concepts: post-fordism, super-industrial society, post-modern society, knowledge society, Information Revolution, Liquid modernity, digital society or network society, among others.

On the whole, new technologies are not only a typical feature of the information society, but also a necessary condition or prerequisite for this society to exist and evolve. Nevertheless, their nature is not "democratic" as information and communication technologies have become another element of stratification among people and countries (the *digital divide*).

Finally, the use of information and communication technologies and strategies has played a major role in political participation, civic engagement and governance processes in this new century. As a matter of fact, contemporary trends on democracy study the use of CIT to enhance citizen participation in democratic processes: E-democracy, E-governance, online politics (Bannister, Connolly, 2012).

2.- Traditional Activism *versus* Current Activism

Global activism finds its roots in traditional forms of protest and social movements. Therefore, it is convenient to examine its origins and initial forms of action in order to comprehend the way it has evolved or, in other words, what is the quintessence of activism in the 21st century.

2.1.- Traditional Activism. Origins and Evolution

It has originally crystallized in the *classic* manifestations of political participation: voting, party affiliation and associations. At this respect, Verba, Nie and Kim qualify voting, campaigning, community organizations and individual outreach activities, as basic forms of political participation. The Pew Charitable Trusts (2006) exemplifies the various forms civic engagement can take: individual volunteerism, organizational involvement, electoral participation, efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community, solve a problem, interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

Traditional activism has evolved throughout History and expressed through demonstrations, consumer boycotts, signing petitions... Protest and mobilization are "later" forms of civic compromise. The literature of the early years drew a clear distinction between conventional modes of political participation and protest. The most recent form of this evolutionary transforming process is digital activism or global or transnational activism.

Protest and Social Movements

A protest group is by definition collective action of individuals aimed at achieving a set of common goals through influencing the decisions of a target. A social movement is a form of protest group that has, on the one hand, some degree of formal organization; on the other hand, a higher number of members. As a result, the more members a protest group has, the closest it gets to the concept of social movement (Opp, 2009). Scholars maintain that most definitions of social movement contain the following elements: the goals or objectives to accomplish, the organizational dimension, a degree of temporal continuity, development of institutional activity -"lobbying", political and extra institutional, i.e., demonstrations- (Snow and Olliver, 1995).

A rigorous study of social protests, such as petitions, demonstrations, consumer-boycotts, highlights the sharp significance they attained in the 80's and how nowadays they represent an important mechanism of political mobilization.
Barnes and Kaase describe five criteria to identify protest activism: signing petitions, attending legal demonstrations, exercise the right to go on strike and occupy factories or buildings (California, 1979).

Pacific protest has been widely accepted as a form of political expression aiming at reforming laws, influencing political processes, revisiting patterns of social behavior. We can find its roots in Ghandi philosophy and testimony, or in the American Civil Rights Movement (1950-1970).

In post-industrial societies protests occur not only among students and younger generations, but also reach middle-aged segments of population -professional people with a university degree-.

2.2- Activism in the 21st Century

The environmental movement in the 90s marks the start of a new era for civic engagement. It was associated to mass demonstrations and protests coinciding with the summits or *fora* where world leaders discussed, negotiated and reached agreements on "green" issues.

More recently, the "Arab Spring", "Indignados" in Madrid, "Occupy Wall Street" and other revolts in Europe opposing austerity measures and cuts on social policies, offer the current version of civic action.

Although each of these movements responds to particular causes and presents distinct features, some common, unifying elements can be distinguished. They all use New Technologies, the Internet, in various ways to achieve goals. The formulas *digital politics*, *Internet politics* and *digital activism* express this trend, which exemplifies in electronic voting, digital campaigns, chat-rooms, or virtual mobilization through Facebook and Twitter.

Certainly, the new tools of social media have reinvented social activism (Gladwell, 2010). In his Foreword to *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements"*, Peter Daulgren reveals the key aspect of digital activism when he alludes to the implications that ICTs information and communication technologies have for various forms of social movements in the 21st century.

Considering activism in a wide sense, the formula digital activism refers to contemporary forms of political participation strongly anchored in tools and mechanisms provided by the Internet -new social media-. While traditional forms of civic engagement have lost force, new modes of participation have emerged and flowered since the 70´s. Public concern for the environment and subsequent action in favor are a good example of this new wave of social movements, transnational policy networks, Internet or digital activism. In short, civic compromise is not dead. It has transformed itself in terms of the *who* –the agents or collective organizations-, *what* –the range of strategies implemented- and *where* –the targets or goals focused- (Inglehart, 1997).

Digital Activism converges with Global activism when opponents around the globe share a common goal and coordinate themselves in order to achieve it (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Gerlach, 2001; Lichbach & Almeida, 2001; Rheingold, 2002). Most of these groups are convinced that global corporations and transnational economic regimes have eluded government policies and regulations concerning labor, environment, human rights, etc., shaping a political stage, beyond normal legislative, electoral, and regulatory processes, that Beck (2000) calls sub-politics.

The Internet, social networks are indispensable to attain mutual targets, considering that members or supporters of these social movements might find

themselves in different continents. For example, in terms of time and tactics, when they convoke protests simultaneously around the world.

The "Internet dynamics" that make transnational activism possible amplify and economize communication in political organizations (Agre, 2001). As a matter of fact, the impact of digital tools benefits both older, more conventional, better-funded political organizations and newer, resource-poor organizations. For the first ones, the Internet amplifies and reduces the cost of pre-existing communication routine; for the latter, the Internet presence is powerful (Norris, 2001)

In short, the scale or dimension of transnational activism is global. Among other features, it presents networked complexity, openness to diverse political identities, and capacity to sacrifice ideological integration for pragmatic political gain (Bennett, 2003).

3.- *Liquid* affection, weak ties: the adverse side of digital activism

Considering the major role online dynamics and `tactics´ play in global activism, it is necessary to explore the nature of the links created by virtual tools among Internet users. This issue directly appeals to the character of digital culture. Thus, it deals with affection, emotion, feeling in and off the cyberspace. The central question is to what extent the personal bonds born, developed and conveyed through the net can result in effective activism. Certainly, new media facilitate activism and even in a more diverse, rich way allowing for all sorts of individual choices. At this respect, Wellman describes "networked individualism" as the ease of establishing personal links that enable people to join more diverse and more numerous political communities than they would ordinarily join in the material world (Wellman, 2000).

However, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, based on connections with people often never met in person, are said to generate weak ties. Although some scholars stress the cohesive powers of weak ties (Granovetter), some others argue that social networks´ linkages are not likely to result in high-risk activism (Gladwell).

Moreover, this sort of online, loosely linked structures lack hierarchy, which is again an indispensable element for high-risk activism. On some occasions ideology of these networks is weak too.

Finally, it has been also pointed out that web-activism or Internet politics have little likelihood to reach the apathetic or uninterested. They exercise influence among those already engaged in political affairs in the same way traditional forms of political communication –newspapers, radio, TV- do.

I recall Bauman´s brilliant line of reasoning on liquid modernity and on the frailty of human bonds as a metaphor to depict the fragile nature of digital ties and the "liquid" affection originated. I doubt that online tools can be effective by themselves without conventional ways of mobilization. At this point of my research, the use of new technologies of information and communication has had great impact, but together with classic activism. The potential these

channels have for social change will work out to complement and enhance traditional forms of civic engagement.

5.- Digital Tools and the Global Public Sphere
What are the digital tools relevant to activists? These tools are essentially computers and mobile phones. Computers enable to connect to all Internet applications. On the contrary, simple mobile phones allow only texting and calling. Yet, the eruption of smart phones and tablets has enlarged the potential and capacity of mobile phones making them more similar to computers and, thus, vital for social change (Joyce, 2010).

Joss Hands makes emphasis on mobile devices. He shows the importance of "speed" –of communication, decision-making and tactical shifts- in the context of mobilization and direct action. At this respect, he recognizes that the introduction of mobile communications –either a simple mobile phone, a more sophisticated `smart-phone´, or other networked mobile computing devices- has had a major impact for the faster coordination and organization of this kind of activities, which he describes as `mobil(e)stion´.

Indeed, digital technologies offer new forms of horizontal and vertical communication that promote civic engagement and deliberative democracy (Norris, 2001). Internet has meant a revolution for democracy as well, due to its global dimension and its immediate effects in real time. Certainly, the "web" offers unexpected opportunities in the areas of information, communication, and political mobilization around the globe, in addition to the well-known electronic voting. Moreover, Internet dynamics are ideal for new social movements that have used this tool to publicize ideas and proposals, to gather supporters around the world, or to galvanize transnational strategies by establishing virtual forums open to all who wish to back up such actions. Through the network, you can become a member of pressure groups, join organizations, contribute with funds, receive emails about political issues and make proposals to the authorities, intervene in "online" discussions, circulate electronic petitions, pass on announcements or activities, call for demonstrations.

Castells supports the same line of reasoning in his second volume of the *Information Age Trilogy: the Power of Identity*. He examines the role of social movements and resistance in the network society and choses the Zapatistas to this purpose, defining them as `the first informational guerilla movement´. Castells comes to the conclusion that the use of new technologies -the Internet- allowed the Zapatistas to diffuse information throughout the world instantly, and to develop a network of support groups whose efforts crystallized in a movement of international public opinion.

Not only digital technologies facilitate mobilization, but they also favor the strengthening of the "public sphere" in both their *cyber* and global dimensions. Mass media and new technologies foster connections, sharing views, exchanging ideas, arguing and discussion among world citizens. They contribute to the creation of a *global civic society*, which operates in a *virtual public sphere* or *virtual agora.* Citizen deliberation -expressed through digital

tools and social networks- has "enlarged" the `habermasian´ notion of public space. The public sphere is now global and not necessarily limited to the physicality of a space. It can also occur virtually: either based on micro media (e-mail lists) or on middle media Internet channels (blogs, organization sites, e-zines).

To sum up, some other authors stress the Internet capacity to create new forms of democratic public spheres and, what´s more, to support the already existing ones (Buchstein, 1997).

5.- Global Activism and the "Hybrid Media System"
In an attempt to describe the current state of the media system, we observe `interactions between old media and new media, and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizations´. This is a "hybrid media system" based upon the principles of adaptation and interdependence among actors (Chadwick, 2011).

The world of Politics –political communication, campaigning, mobilization- has gone through major change as new media have emerged. Digital activism inserts itself in this dual, hybrid context and benefits from it: firstly, because it is inherent to digital activism the use of Internet tools and new technologies; secondly, because of the parallel interaction between traditional-old activism and digital-new activism.

To sum up, digital activism fortifies democratic participation and civic engagement. It results in greater achievements when it operates on a complementary basis with traditional activism. In other words, the virtual mechanisms facilitate mobilization of individuals but don´t drive social change (Keck, Sikkink, 1998). The real or physical mobilization –not just online- is needed to promote that end. For instance, the ten thousands protesters that took the streets in Moldova in Spring 2009 were brought together through Twitter. In short, we advocate for this holistic perspective when approaching civic engagement in the 21st century.

6.- Concluding Remarks
New technologies –Internet, mobile phones, tablets- have the capacity to strengthen civic society and consolidate democracy around the world. In postindustrial societies, significant institutions of representative democracy –parliaments, political parties, government departments- have established web sites where they outline their goals and tasks, put official documents, release updates and announcements. These web pages enhance government transparency and accountability. Regarding political parties, online instruments have contributed to fundraising, to improve management and organization, to diffuse ideas or publicize electoral programs.

Campaigning and voting have substantially benefitted from the whole potential of digital technologies.
Indeed, the development of social media and digital marketing strategies in the 2008 Barack Obama campaign has transformed the classic mechanisms of political communication. In the recent 2012 presidential election, both

candidates –Barack Obama and Mitt Romney- have made special emphasis on *cyber* politics.

Electronic voting technology has been improved and become rather popular in the last decade. As a result, countries such as the United Kingdom, Estonia, Switzerland have implemented this voting system in governmental elections and referenda. E-voting has also been used in Canada municipal elections and primary elections in the United States and France

In transitional regimes digital tools have had a gigantic influence in the promotion of democratic change. The use of Twitter in the coordination of different revolutions and protests has resulted in the locution *Twitter Revolution* (Morozov, 2009). At this respect, it is convenient to mention civil opposition against fraudulent voting in Moldova (2009), Iranian election protests (2009-2010), and the dissolution of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia (2010-2011) and Egypt (2011).

Civic engagement and activism have also adapted to virtual societies maximizing their organizational linkages and networking skills in an attempt, on the one hand, to consolidate democracy in Western civilization; on the other hand, to promote transition processes in autocratic systems.

One of the most innovative effects of the digital revolution has been the revitalization of direct, global democracy. Definitely, the interactive capacities of new technologies have enhanced citizen participation and deliberation creating a sort of *virtual agora* or *digital public sphere* where digital citizens discuss worldwide issues of mutual interest. In this discursive space public opinion is formed and exerts influence on political action. Yet, there is no need to speculate about supposed tension between representative democracy and direct democracy after digital politics. Direct democracy is not going to replace representative governance. On the contrary, digital techniques can nurture deliberation and discursive methods of decision-making, which will invigorate political participation both through representative and participatory channels.

Finally, activism is evolving in this millennium towards global action or global activism. We assist to the trans-nationalization of activist networks. Inspired by altruistic solidarity, social movements have promoted cooperation, found supporters and organized demonstrations and protests worldwide. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, thousands of people have gathered against austerity measures and social injustice –from Toronto, New York, Madrid, Athens, Lisbon, London, etc.-. New media and communication technologies have enhanced collective action. The potential of global activism is to be explored and developed throughout the new millennium.

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