The evolution of digital activism in Mexico: A story of two movements "EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa"

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How to reference this paper: Ramírez Plascencia, D. (2018). The evolution of digital activism in Mexico: A story of two movements "EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa", *Sphera Publica, 1* (18), 2-14.

Abstract

There is an important tradition in Mexico related to the use of the Internet as a communication strategy for distributing subversive and alternative political discourse since mid-1995, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), named after Manuel Castells as the first "informational guerrilla," until now with the use of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) as optimal spaces to promote alternative social movements such as "I am 132." The purpose of this paper is to make a comparative study in between the movements "EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa." Methodology is based on the comparative analysis of cases through the revision of academic literature and original material generated by activists. It focuses not only on studying their political propositions, but particularly on their tactics and the role played by technology in the construction of their discourse. Final outcomes will show in what way the technological change along the years has conditioned the form by which unsubordinated groups create and spread information and how technological platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have facilitated the communication and social participation of movements, but the research also pretend to understand until which level activists use tactics that have somewhat altered in more than 20 years.

Palabras clave

Digital activism, Mexico, Ayotzinapa, EZLN, social movements.

La evolución del activismo digital en México: una historia de dos movimientos "EZLN" y "43 Ayotzinapa"

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Cómo citar este artículo: Ramírez Plascencia, D. (2018). The evolution of digital activism in Mexico: A story of two movements "EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa", *Sphera Publica, 1* (18), 2-14.

Resumen

Hay una tradición importante en México relacionada con el uso de Internet como estrategia de comunicación para difundir el discurso político subversivo y alternativo que se extiende desde mediados de 1995, con el Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), nombrado por Manuel Castells como el primera "guerrilla informacional", hasta el siglo XXI con la consolidación de las redes sociales como espacios óptimos para la promoción de movimientos alternativos. El trabajo es un estudio comparativo entre los movimientos "EZLN" y "43 Ayotzinapa." La metodología se basa en el análisis comparativo de casos a través de la revisión de la bibliografía existente sobre el tema, así como de los materiales generados por los activistas. La investigación se focaliza no solo en estudiar sus proposiciones políticas, sino particularmente sus tácticas, así como el papel desempeñado por la tecnología en la construcción del discurso de ambos movimientos.

Palabras Clave

Activismo digital, México, Ayotzinapa, EZLN, movimientos sociales.

Introduction

Generally, the term "social movements" remits to a group of individuals that want to achieve their goals by influencing the decision-making process (Opp, 2009). Some of these groups could be political when their goals are related with the control of governmental power, and they could, according to the context and the strategy, alter themselves into belligerent groups or into political parties as well, like the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in South America. Besides military action, activism is the most important action undertaken by movements to challenge the social and political status quo. Activism could embrace confrontational actions and the establishment of cost-effective strategies according to the target (Snow, 2013; González-Bailón y Wang, 2016). Founding a social movement always involves the creation of an organization capable of facing government´s force (Weinstein, 2007). But organization is not the only challenge that every uprising group must face. They should attend the problem of how to finance the movement, how to settle the campaign's logistics, to recruit militants and to generate support from public opinion.

One the most important global changes in the last 20 years is the huge spread and diversification of informational communication technologies. In the mid-nineties of the last century, there were only a few thousand electronic sites and about 16 million users. By now, there are more than 3,000 million Internet users around the world and an unmeasurable number of websites. In the last two decades, the world has witnessed the rise and depreciation of desktop machines and the consolidation of mobile devices and social media. Information technology has changed many aspects of our way of living, doing politics is not an exception. What makes the Internet so crucial to political participation is that it could envelope almost all kinds of ranges and ways of doing political communication, from the pacific and peaceful way to the most radical form (Oates y Gibson, 2006). By now, almost all social, political and even terrorism movements focus many of their efforts on attracting the public attention to their actions and discourse (Pătruţ y Pătruţ, 2014; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

The year of 2011 was very remarkable for online political protest. It was the year of Arab Spring, and the consolidation of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement around the United States and Europe. Those events leave patent examples that social movements will always

work side by side with the use of social media. The use of web 2.0 tools allowed the coordination of activists and the organization of public protest against governments in the Middle East and bankers in the United States (Dahlgren, 2013). When comparing the use of traditional media like the press, television, and broadcasting to the digital one, it is possible to asset that one of the most important differences between them is that the digital media could hold more varied forms of communication than the traditional one (Squire & Gaydos, 2013). The use of the Internet allows the implementation of visual, textual and auditory information that can flow globally in a matter of minutes. But digital media also differs from the traditional one because it permits the interaction and feedback among activists and the general public in a way that is not possible in traditional media (Johannessen, 2012). In spite of the fact that many of the subaltern groups do not have access to the traditional media, the use of social media has had a deep impact in the social movements' strategies, this is mainly because we are dealing with a media that is easy to use, almost cost-free and versatile, and the social movement members could contribute to the cause by using a cheap phone or a computer in a cyber-café (Skoric, Poor, Liao, & Tang, 2011). The XXI century offers new forms of activism encouraged by the use of the Internet. Technologies like social media and mobile devices give a new voice to the novel movements that have emerged in the middle of decolonization and neoliberal processes, many of them generated by young activists that are reluctant to tolerate traditional problems like corruption and insecurity (González, 2017). The last two concepts, decolonization and neoliberalism, should not have been seen as historical events only but as a bundle of economics, ideologies, values and rationalities (Miraftab, 2009). Consequently, when some groups challenge the official regiment in a specific context and country, that is not only a conflict for controlling the physical territory or to overthrow a regime but a conflict that has many battlefields, like the ideological or informational one.

The purpose of this work is to analyze how technological changes have conditioned the use of the Internet for political activism, more in particular, how those variations could be observed on the composition of two important social movements in Mexico separated by almost twenty years: "The EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa." This paper aims to focus not only on their political propositions, but also on their digital strategy. To understand the impact the Internet in spreading their speech, describing the specific social context of every group, and to make an analysis of their discourse. Simple electronic pages with some photos were used in the case of the EZLN and "Memes," verbal or graphic, in the case of the movement "43

Ayotzinapa." Methodology is based on the comparative analysis of cases through the revision of academic literature and original material generated by activists. The results will show in what way this change has conditioned the form of creating and disseminating information for unsubordinated groups. The analysis of both cases will also display how political protests have evolved in the lapse of more than two decades, and also to recognize until which level activists use tactics that have changed little throughout the decades, particularly regarding social movements.

A recount of two movements "EZLN" and "43 Ayozitnapa"

After a long period of self-enclosure, many developing countries in the Global South opened their borders not only to commerce, but to other cultures and ideologies. By 1990, with the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, many ex-communist countries began to expose their economies to the free market and the establishment of democratic regimes. However, this global process encouraged not only integration but poverty and exclusion. After massive procedures of public industries denationalization and the end of the welfare state, many voices raised against governments and international economic powers (Bayat, 2000). By the end of the millennium, some important facts changed the global political agenda. The first one was the application of neoliberalism policies around the world. The other was the process of globalization. This period of time was the blossoming of several international ONGs that have played an important role in trying to spot diverse problems and inequalities around the world like Transparency International. Neoliberal aggressive policies caused the offspring of many social movements that protested against market liberalization and the loss of rights (Gautney, 2010). This was the context in where EZLN emerged.

1994 was a very important year for Mexico. At least three central events marked it with profound political, social and economic changes that have persisted until present days. The first one was the operational start of The North American Free Trade Agreement on January, which removed taxes of products between Mexico, Canada and the United States. The second one was the huge devaluation of Mexican currency, the peso, and the last one was the uprising of the Zapatista movement in the state of Chiapas. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) began its operations in the new year of 1994 by capturing some towns in Chiapas. Most of their militants were indigenous peasants but there were some

intellectuals that served as mediators between them and the public opinion (Unk, 1994). Since the beginning, EZLN claimed that they "use black and red in our uniform as [their] symbol of [their] working people on strike". (General Command of the EZLN, 31 of December 1993). They specified their rejection to follow working for a specific economical system. But the most significant message of their initial communications was when they announced the opening of hostilities for "disabling Mexican federal army." In the ideological field, the EZLN did not have an exclusive dogma though they shared some points with the leftist though. According to their spokesman, El Subcomandante Marcos, EZLN did not have a defined ideology. They are not Marxist, but they declared that the application of the NAFTA treaty was a serious affront against the indigenous way of living.

After an armed opening that endured only a few days, EZLN chose a more conciliatory strategy, and even in the National Democratic Convention that took place in August 1994, they banned those groups that demanded the use of arms for overthrowing the government or wanted the voter's abstention in the upcoming presidential election in 1994 (Johnston, 2000). Along the time, they were consequent with this tactic. They embraced several ideological bases like Marxist rhetoric and maintained a horizontal organization structure in where women played a very important role. Overall, their agenda was a constant appeal to the idea of democracy. Instead of the use of arms, they practiced pacific actions like marches and other kinds of public manifestations, and the use of media to globally spread their message. The Zapatista movement was in many aspects the first subaltern movement that began using the Internet as a weapon, and according to some scholars, it inaugurated a new kind of war, "the netwar" where the possession and distribution of information constitutes a new battlefield (Ronfeldt, Arquilla y Fuller, 1999). And in spite that the use of fire weapons only took place for a few days, the resulting informational war lasted more than a decade, building an important solidary international channel that supported the movement.

Computer Networks were crucial to consolidate a net of international solidarity with the EZLN movement. Information technology allowed the establishment of some conferences between the EZLN and similar social moments in other latitudes. Along the year of 1996, a series of special meetings were accomplished using e-mail and the support of incipient synchronic communications technologies (Cleaver, 1998). This technology gave a wider impulse to the voices of indigenous people involved in the subaltern group (Cleaver, 1998). Their message surpasses the traditional media filters and it reached a world-wide public that could know

and support the cause. As we know, the military conflict lasted only a few days, but the Zapatista's Internet strategy permitted that their political campaign remains until present days. This was in part because electronic communications allowed to save and replicate their ideas, no matter the traditional media, and in part because of their ability to merchandize the image of the Subcomandante Marcos as an icon of rebellion against the neoliberalist policies. When a social movement appears, it has certain political goals, most of the time it consists on eliminating a regiment, to make a coup, or sometimes they only want to get some grants from the official government. In some cases, after the advent of original conflict, some of them try to search a different strategy, a more pacifist way of getting their aims. This was the case of many groups that after being a former guerrilla, they created political parties (Deonandan, Close y Prevost, 2007). In the case of Zapatistas (EZLN), they began as a guerrilla but soon after the irruption in the social scenery, they chose to leave the arms and to take a more pacifistic path. In the following passages, it will be possible to observe how two decades of advances in the field of communication expanded the possibilities of using the Internet as a weapon for alternative movements. But these new possibilities present important challenges for social movements as well. The use of the Internet is an important asset, but it must be used along with traditional strategies like marches, pickets and some other old-fashioned ways of doing activism. This is the case of the "43 Ayotzinapa" movement.

In spite of the fact that in the state of Guerrero in Mexico, there are some world-famous beaches like Acapulco and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo that generate huge economic outcomes from tourism, many people in the state live in plain poverty. Guerrero is one of the states with the lowest ranges of development in Mexico. This context has caused ideological radicalization amid some sectors. Some places in Guerrero have been perfect spots for the development of Marxists and left movements (Krauze, 2014). This was the case of Ayotzinapa Teachers' College, in where students take part in political actions against local and national authorities. The kidnap and murder of the students that will be described in the next paragraphs was, according to official reports, a reprisal to a previous manifestation against Iguala county authorities.

Between the midnight of September 26 and 27 of 2014, in the small village of Iguala in the state of Guerrero, several students were murdered, and 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College were kidnaped, killed and burned outside the village, near Cocula´s

public dump field. According to the official investigation, this atrocious act was committed by the crime organization called "Guerreros Unidos" (United Warriors) and ordered by Iguala's mayor, José Luis Abarca Velázquez and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa. However, many social protests have claimed that this was only a partial version of the event, and there are many other actors involved like the national army and the federal government that took part in this happening. The movement has encompassed under the slogan of "43 Ayotzinapa," as a reference of the 43 lost students. This slogan is used not only in artworks and cards but also in the form of electronic memes and as a hash-tag on Twitter.

After the happening, the news spread very fast over the social networks. On Twitter, the reaction was massive (Ferguson, 2014). The protesters took advantage of the social media platforms to boost the movement. In only a few days, the trending topics on Twitter were "Ayotzinapa," "Iguala," and "Abarca." Most of the activism pro "43 Ayotzinapa" was made using social networks and Internet websites, these actions involved the massive replication of short messages and the share of links to news and information (Observatorio estudiantil de medios de comunicación, 2014). In October 2014, about 100,000 users on Twitter shared almost 311,000 messages about the topic. The peak of the moment came with the hash-tag #Yamecansé (I am tired), that emerged when the Mexican general attorney Murillo Karam said that "He was tired of searching the 43 students," was a world-wide trending topic with 2,830,000 shares (Ramírez, 2014). However, no matter the efforts, some years after the Ayotzinapa tragedy, there have been just little advances in order to clarify the event and to bring some justice to the families.

In spite of the fact that the movement has not faded, after almost four years it looks weaker and there are little hopes that the real truth about the events will ever see the light. However, this case shows some valuable lessons regarding social media activism: even a strong online reaction does not necessary translate into massive and huge street protests that could undermine a government or to force a president to resign. When we talk about a "digital revolution," as some media called the "43 Ayotzinapa" movement, we are assuming that only with the use of social media it is possible to achieve an important political change (Gallegos, 2015). Of course, technology helps to organize and to gain resources, but after the incipient digital reaction, all movements must resolve the perennial problem of how to convert "likes" and "replies" into a more substantial and material support for the cause, and in what way to deal with the reality of facing the "enemy" in a "brick and mortar" battlefield,

as the case of the "Arab Spring" (Anderson, 2011). Another difficulty to subaltern movements is how to change the main strategy before a new social context. The Zapatista rebellion made a quick shift from conflict to dialogue. This change was possible thanks to the use of the Internet. Their media strategy helped to coordinate the activists and spread the message around the world, especially in between Mexican migrants in the United States and among anti-globalization activists (Martinez 2001: 347). The impulse of international public opinion facilitated that both actors, the government and EZLN, could dialogue and resolve the discrepancies in a peaceful way.

One big difference between the two movements is that the EZLN could endure a campaign with the help of an emerging technology, the Internet, that lasted for many years. The "43 Ayotzinapa movement" began losing force after some months (Hidalgo, 2015) in spite of the big reaction in social networks, and the street and online protests commemorating the first anniversary in September, 2015. This could be explained regarding two factors: one is that in spite of the fact that the Ayotzinapa movement could embrace many online and offline supporters, there were many groups that took advantage of the public attention so, although they supported the movement, they used its publicity to reclaim their own agenda, this was the case of some syndicates and political parties. In the case of the ELZN, thanks to the Internet, the figure of the Sub-commander Marcos become a symbol that embraced many other claims and moments under the EZLN banner. One of the most important facts that secured the success of the EZLN movement was without doubt the international effect of its spokesperson. Marcos turned out as an icon of the fight versus neoliberalism. His images travelled around the world and they were merchandized in the form of dolls, cards, t-shirts and such items (Haddu, 2012). His texts and communications voyaged around the world and were read by thousands in electronic and paper format. The Zapatistas used very well the rhetoric of the indigenous cause, and the images of masked militants with guns and rifles spread widely around the world. The "43 Ayotzinapa," on the contrary, was not able to find an iconic emblem that could have a strong, international and enduring impact as other contemporary social movements like "Anonymous." Another factor that compromised the success of "43 Ayotzinapa" is that, in a certain manner, the movement was a victim of their own success. A problem with the trending topics in spaces like Twitter is that they are very powerful while they are alive, unfortunately their popularity only lasts for some weeks or even days. They are competing with other, banal or not, topics that flow around the net. On social networks, when one topic arises, it just begins to decrease. The movement suffered

with the fact of identifying a central objective as well, the EZLN was very successful in recognizing a common problem in their campaign: Neoliberalism, and they established their campaign under this aim. But in the case of "43 of Ayotzinapa." They claimed very different and sometimes divergent objectives. From "finding the 43 students alive," "The end of violence," "The end of impunity of the narco-state," "the renounce of the Mexican President" and so on (Poncela, 2015). On the contrary, The Zapatistas achieved an informational war where the main point was not "settled on Chiapas or the indigenous movement" only, but in the global problem of neoliberalism and free commerce" (Burbach, Jeffries, y Robinson, 2001). In this case, the use of a wider objective "neoliberalism" helped to extend the movement internationally and to gain support to "defeat" a more common and well-known enemy. Whenever economical liberation policies where established by governments, there was an angry population that empathized with the EZLN's agenda.

Conclusion

When studying the two social movements, the "EZLN" and "43 Ayotzinapa," it is evident that almost 20 years of distance in between both has settled important changes about the ways of displaying activist discourse on the Internet, however the two cases shared some particularities: both made an extensive use of information technology to spread their identity messages, both appealed to local and international help to get resources, and both incorporated the claim of profound political changes in México as one important goal in their campaign. The two cases, however, must be seen as examples of a galore of many digital and subaltern movements that have germinated as a result of a conflicting and interconnected reality. Sometimes social movements emerged as a response to economic and political crises, like the Zapatistas and occasionally as a consequence of a social tragedy, like the case of the "43 Ayotzinapa" movement.

A more connected world leads to the conformation of intercommunicated social movements. For that reason, marketing the movement and having a successful advertising for the campaign is the motive that one crusade gets more attention and resources than others and not necessarily because the nature of the cause they fight for. In this context, the figure of one leader becomes essential for the subsistence of the movement. This was the case of Ernesto "Che" Guevara or "The Subcomandante Marcos." Social movements have been

forced to change their strategies because of their necessity of attracting global concerns about their political agenda (Betz, 2012). However, as media becomes more important for society, these groups are more conscious that the key fact is not the protest by itself but how to attract the media spotlight (Betz, 2012). Since governments and alternative movements were conscious of the importance and potentialities of this new communication media, the fight for censoring and evading barriers have led them to a new kind of fight, a virtual one. However, having a website or a profile on Facebook is not enough. Actually, an effective activism embraces both traditional and innovative elements. The role of "physical" and "digital" supporters, the creation of international solidarity chains, the economic backing and the creation of memes and bots are equally imperative components. For the next decades these elements will be an indelible mark for assembling political engagement in the Global South.

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