Media practices and the challenge of political asymmetries

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In contemporary democracies, the establishment of a public space which is more open and accessible to disadvantaged groups, popular movements and communities is a major challenge. The media are both part of the problem and the solution. On the one hand, they strengthen or even produce divisions and the fragmentation of the public space. On the other, their use by social movements and civil society can establish connections between different social groups, include marginalized populations and regain the public nature of certain issues. Similarly, even if the use of digital resources overcomes obstacles that complicate participation in public debate, all the asymmetries do not disappear with the use of Internet, for instance. Other obstacles stand and it even happens that new asymmetries are produced by differential access to digital resources and by specific skills required by different types of alternative media and social networks.

This number of Observatorio is devoted to media use by social movements and civil society, with special attention to the use of digital resources, in contexts characterized by asymmetries. These latter refer to situations marked by inequalities of resources - be they economic, political, structural - but also by asymmetrical relationships between social actors. This concept derives from Clinical Sociology and Sociology of Organizations approaches (Zaccaï-Reyners, 2006/1; Coleman, 1982) and refers to situations where, on the top of individual possession or access to resources, the balance of power between actors interferes in the nature and quality of the relationship. In this case, this refers particularly to issues and barriers related to an uneven distribution of communication channels that is enhanced by recognition systems that make some voices more legitimate than others (Honneth, 1995). In these systems, members of disadvantaged or counter publics have the worth of their word denied, something that hurts their very status as equal citizens. In her theory of social justice, Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2007) recognized that something more than redistribution (or economic equality) and recognition (or cultural respect) is required to achieve parity of participation, which we take, with her, as a condition for democracy. Axel Honneth emphasizes a struggle for the establishment of "relations of mutual recognition" as a condition for self-realization (Anderson, 1995, p. x). Fraser developed the concept of representation to uncover political asymmetries and it is exactly this point that we explore in these ten articles coming from different parts of the world. How do media practices, mainly based on digital platforms, challenge asymmetries and how do they, sometimes, trigger new ones? The ten contributions gathered in this number address this issue on the basis of empirical research conducted in seven countries (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, France, India, Mexico and Russia) on three continents.

Each one analyses different modalities of media appropriation by social movements and civil society in order to overcome asymmetries. It is interesting to observe how these practices are already attached to struggles of redistribution and recognition within the collective actions developed by each group, be they the fight for land distribution or access to education, for equality of rights, for inclusion and respect to minorities, against capitalism, among others. But they constitute themselves a social and political action (Wolton, 2005) as a kind of repertoire of action based on a logic of visibility. Under this assumption, the balance of power in each society is revealed also by invisibilities and new visibilities, understood as social constructions that build intentionally a line between the existent and the nonexistent (Sousa Santos, 2007).

Some sociologists and NTIC researchers have closely connected the spread of the Internet to a wave of democratization (Dahlgren, 2005; Castells, 2013). Along with the emergence of the Internet, a culture of horizontality, networks and participation was to be diffused worldwide. It would foster democracy and citizens' active participation. However, as we can see in this number, while the Internet has clearly eased and increased the access to alternative information, our public spaces are still fragmented and full of asymmetries. Social media, websites and independent media provide a multitude of alternative information channels. But in the age of Internet, the power of mainstream media and their ability of "manufacturing consent" still remain high (Lima, 2013).

The debate and the solutions led by social actors, following the discussions proposed in the articles of this number, are presented in three following sections of this introduction. The first two of them are organized according to the counter-hegemonic approach and the expressivist approach, that are theoretical currents through which media activism can be analyzed (Cardon & Granjon, 2013) and that we have formulated as the way of reason and the way of subjectivity in the global justice movement (Pleyers, 2010). The third one consists of a brief review of potential new asymmetries, as discussed by the authors. Finally, there is a short section of final considerations.

A counter-hegemonic approach

According to Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon, the counter-hegemonic approach is in the basis of struggles to monitor more specifically mass media productions, their operating modes and ownership structures. It focuses mainly in the denunciation of and struggle against the unequal global distribution of information flows, the cultural hegemony of western media, the search for profit, the biased agenda formatted by the wills and views of the elites and the marginalization of alternative perspectives (Cardon & Granjon, 2013, pp. 16-17). The research studies that underlie the articles of this number were conducted mainly in countries where the share of resources is particularly uneven and analyze the mechanisms, obstacles and challenges of the struggles for access to media – or have this situation as a background. In these contexts, social actors confront the concentration of media ownership nourished by an operating system coherent with this unequal distribution, as observed by a great number of the authors.

Concentration can be configured as a high prevalence of private ownership combined with relevant barriers to the development of community and alternative media. In Mexico, from where two articles come, 94% of

TV frequencies are controlled by Televisa and TV Azteca, the first being the largest media corporation in Latin America. In Brazil, the reference for other three articles, 11 families own most of media outlets in the country, while thousands of applications for community radio stations stand without proper consideration. This framework is generally associated with a collusion between political and economic elites with media owners and/or managers, which is translated into an information production favorable to the preservation of the dominant order (see Navarro, Flores-Marquez, and Suzina, in this number).

It can also be associated with preventing certain social groups taking part in mainstream newsroom teams, as Floriane Zaslavski reveals in the case of the *dalit* community in India. Her article shows that, besides the huge control of mainstream media by upper-classes in the country, members of the *dalit* community rarely pass from the stage of job interviews for media corporations and that inside the latter there is a fear that *dalit* journalists would not accept to "play the game" like the others. These mechanisms do not hurt the parity of participation, but the participation itself, as they try to prevent the rise of a plurality of voices in the public debate by denying a fair distribution of channels. Additionally, both the concentration of property, including the collusion with elites, like the control of newsrooms, result in damages to the autonomy of media and, consequently, to the definition of public issues.

In this situation, it is possible to say that the emergence of digital culture has actually produced changes, considering that "the entry barriers in the Internet industry are much lower than in the traditional communication industry" (Castells, 2013, p. xx). All the articles reveal a strategic and mostly successful use of digital resources in order to improve presence in the public sphere. The low cost of equipment and the abundance of available platforms amplify the possibilities of setting up a medium, allowing marginalized groups and counter publics to take part or improve their participation in the media sphere with their own initiatives. In Brazil, for instance, Ana Suzina has studied 55 media initiatives led by social movements and community associations all over the country. She observed that, on the top of economic advantages that concretely benefit the improvement of media practices, digital platforms also overcome legal barriers that avoid or make hard the process of creating a community radio or television. This change in the redistribution patterns produces multiple effects regarding asymmetric relationships.

In general, media practices – not only those based on digital platforms – contribute to the recovery of the voice of social actors (see Zaslavsky, and Suzina, in this number). Saying that they 'recover' the voice means that this voice was already there and highlights the power of visibility to counter the mainstream hegemony, which is based on a constructed false homogeneity. At this point, while focusing in the issues of redistribution and recognition, the articles in this number point to the problem of invisibility but also to poor visibility.

Concerning the issue of invisibility, some of the authors approach how media are used by social actors to make their struggles visible. Dorismilda Flores-Marquez researched two local associations in the region of Aguascalientes, in Mexico; one dedicated to animal protection and another focusing on the promotion of reading. She reveals how both associations develop media strategies for making their objectives and actions known to society, assuming that this will bring support but also impact upon the construction of public problems. This kind of expectative is also shared by social actors approached by Ksenia Ermoshina in France and Russia. Studying the phenomenon of civic hacking as an element of change, she presents several cases where the codification of individual problems, often invisible, takes part in a collective construction of social problems and potential solutions, giving place to what she calls as a "civic expertise".

These two articles engage with another one, written by Paola Madrid Sartoretto, in a discussion regarding the impact of digital technologies on media practices applied in longstanding social movements and civic mobilizations. They bring to light the challenges to establish and sustainable oppositional discourses that propose new public issues or new perspectives to issues already placed in the public debate. Sartoretto argues that one of the biggest challenges of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) is to produce and circulate "counter-information", or to counter-balance mainstream media reporting.

Ermoshina's article brings up another promise – or aspiration – of the struggle against invisibility, that is the civic vigilance, which is, on its turn, connected to another Mexican contribution in this number, coming from Fabiola Navarro. Both discuss the potential of digital media as an action of direct perception of what is going wrong. The cases analyzed by Ermoshina are civic apps, built by coders in association with social movements, NGOs and individual citizens, that make possible for anyone to register a problem and include it in a databank that can be used to lobby decision makers. According to her analysis, individual problems gain in power while represented among thousands of other similar cases registered in the apps, so that, for instance, "every pothole becomes part of a struggle against corruption".

Navarro also insists on this power of making visible elements that were hidden before, based on a "trust worthiness" built upon the authority of true experiences that provide empathy. She studied the #Yosoy132 movement, a mobilization that arose from the Mexican presidential election in 2012 and is seen as one example of how digital social conversation can strengthen citizenship and challenge the opacity of authoritarian regimes. These authors defend the power of visibility for its capacity of making available alternative narratives. Media outlets are seen, then, as "enunciation devices" (Cefaï, 2013) capable of translating experiences and perceptions into these narratives.

But there is still poor visibility, which is discussed in some articles as a bias built around negative stereotypes in the effort to denigrate the collective actions in question. In her study about the use of media by the *dalit* community in India, Zaslavsky points out that their main problem concerning mainstream media is the negative approach towards them. The analysis reveals the construction of what she calls as a monolithic discourse about the *dalit* community, associating its members with violence and crime, and contributing to a perspective of victimization of the whole group. This path of homogeneity, which weaken collectives and hurt the parity of participation, has been challenged by the use of media. Camila Ponce Lara and Natalia Miranda present their study about the student movement of 2011 in Chile. They report how the use of flashmobs transformed another monolithic perspective of a violent mobilization – as the students were originally depicted by authorities and mainstream media – into a legitimate and well-coordinated action that achieved to engage supporters from all sectors of Chilean society, establishing what the authors describe as "networks of trust" (see also Galindo, and Navarro, in this number).

The discussion around invisibility and poor visibility refers, then, to the construction of "reality effects" (Mauger, 2009) that have the power of defining the nature of social groups and social issues. The news making process becomes an arena for symbolic contests (mis)guided by the rules of ownership, political and economic influences – including advertising –, profile of newsroom members and internal debates around editorial approaches (Sedel, 2009) (Arrueta, 2010). Consequently, the participation of audiences, especially those who are depicted by the stories, and their appropriation of "enunciation devices" play a central role.

In this sense, this special issue suggests that attention should be directed towards the interplay of alternative and mainstream media. The Internet has profoundly redefined the way information is produced. The

influence of mass media is partly countered by the increase of blogs, micro-blogs and other channels of alternative information. However, they do not replace mass media. A high visibility of any actor or action still depends on them (see Galindo, Navarro, Paton, Suzina, Ponce Lara and Miranda, in this number). As pointed by Gustavo Cardoso (2012), our media landscape is not dominated by the world wide web but by the superposition and linkage of mass media, social networks and online media. In order to understand contemporary movements and their use of new information and communication technologies, our analysis therefore needs to deal also with the role of the mass media and with their interaction with social networks and online media.

The global influence – or pattern – of events such the Arab Spring, Indignados and Occupy movements was observed in many of the studies presented in the articles. They refer to a dynamic of alternating from any visibility on mainstream media, huge visibility on social networks, and then visibility on mainstream media. Liliana Galindo shows how it was the case in two mobilizations in Latin America, the student movement MANE in Colombia, and the Ocuppy movement in São Paulo, Brazil. She calls these mobilizations part of an "invisible spring", making reference to a pattern of social construction of invisibility that digital resources helped to break down (see also Navarro, Flores-Marquez, Lapa and Cardoso, Ponce Lara and Miranda, in this number).

These reflections reveal clearly the relevance of taking each society's own social stratification systems into account while analyzing the impact of media and especially digital media in social protest and processes of change. The article written by Tiago Lapa and Gustavo Cardoso brings a discussion about the role of social media in political participation, based on an online survey applied in 17 countries. For the authors, considering variables such as socioeconomic status, literacy skills and digital divides is important for avoiding overgeneralizations and, mainly, to observe the protagonist role of individuals in these dynamics. They argue that people, not media, must be in the center of the analysis.

The remark is particularly pertinent in studies approaching movements that apply violence as a repertoire of action, as it is the case presented by Nathalie Paton. She argues that "expressive violence" has the potential to turn individual claims into public issues and that digital platforms increase the potential of visibility looked for by these actors. Paton takes school shootings as her case study and discuss how participative media renew the modalities of adhering to and developing social contestation, as some actors involved in such actions claim to represent a social movement. Equally critical to the mainstream narrative, they value the circumventing of filters made possible by digital media outlets, that allow them to spread their information on the basis of many to many (Castells, 2013).

Therefore, the amplification of the access to media channels interferes in the construction of mainstream – and hegemonic – narratives. The changes in the levels of property, production and distribution of information, based on social mediated networks produces a "growing disruption of old narratives" and the emergence of "new institutional settings" based on the integration of and exchanges between individual and collective experiences coming from generally marginalized sectors of society (Cardoso, 2012). To recover voice means, in these terms, recovering the condition of subject in relation to history (see Navarro, Paton, and Lapa and Cardoso, in this number), as we evoke the representation's symbolic meaning as proposed by Fraser. It grasps a political space unjustly framed, challenging "the denial of political voice to those who are cast outside the universe of those who 'count'" (Fraser, 2007, p. 147). The experiences analyzed in these

articles reveal a struggle that is challenging the patterns of the parity of participation and the issue of representation can be considered, then, to be directly related to the dispute around world visions.

An expressivist approach

The expressivist approach also takes into consideration media activism as a counter power, but it highlights the importance of using media to trigger emancipation, mainly through the way of empowerment, reflexivity, experience and re-appropriation of speech (Cardon & Granjon, 2013, p. 18) (Pleyers, 2010, p. 35-105) (Rodriguez, 2016). In this sense, the articles in this number propose some reflections focusing on issues such as the construction of communities, the perception of belonging to a group or to society, and the relation to a territory. All these approaches may be associated with a debate around the articulation between online and offline practices.

From her research conducted within *dalit* communities in India, Zaslavsky shows that the use of media, especially those based on digital platforms, helps the community to build a common identity within a social group that is, itself, composed of several assemblages united by different professional practices, geographical situations etc. According to the author, the step forward is the passage from the diffusion of information to dialogue and, then, to a communitarian discourse. It is interesting to observe how this case, as well as others reported in the articles, reveals a permanent moving between what Zaslavsky describes as the "geometrical space of the concrete world" and the "relational space of cyberspace". In this sense, there is no technological determinism. The exchanges established on digital platforms build communities that take over territorial barriers but serve equally to organize and anchor actions in the very concrete territory where events take place, and then to re-nourish the exchanges (see Galindo, Paton, Lapa and Cardoso, and Ponce Lara and Miranda, in this number).

A previous thematic dossier on Internet usage in contemporary social movements (Réseaux No. 181, December 2013, coordinated by Geoffrey Pleyers) has shown that an analysis of public space and contemporary social movements must take into account both the logic of collective action and those of the "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) (Gerbaudo, 2013) but also (and especially) their interactions. Today it is in the joint and cross-fertilization between everyday life and politics, between the internet world and the public squares, between social networks and militant spaces, that claims are expressed and mobilizations and social movements emerge to affirm citizenship and build public space.

This key helps to understand collective actions where the use of media takes a central role. Social platforms, especially social networks such as Facebook, were identified as main instruments for the organization of actions in the cases analyzed by Galindo, in Colombia and in Brazil, by Ponce Lara and Miranda, in Chile (see also Lapa and Cardoso, in this number). After being able to diffuse their own information and break down the barriers and stereotypes of mainstream media, as discussed above, these social movements were capable of mobilizing masses of people who were moved by their creativity and reports of personal experiences (see also Navarro, in this number). Ponce Lara and Miranda talk about the creation of new

"imagined communities", based on identification and a sense of belonging. The "networks of trust" are built upon a collective intelligence born in and for the collective action.

The cases analyzed by Ermoshina in France and Russia reveal similar perspectives. Behind civic coding, there are individual experiences that are shared and give place to a collective knowledge that, in turn, empowers each citizen. The author talks about an important connection between technology, people and problems. This is the case for French and Russian citizens reporting troubles on a mobile application, but also the situation of students mobilizing society to the right to education through flashmobs (see Ponce Lara and Miranda, in this number), or activists calling attention to violence against animals through social networks (see Flores-Marquez, in this number), or even young people taking part in violent acts and feeling integrated in the society through access to a public speech (see Paton, in this number). Such individual experiences are shared, which allow a progressive collective knowledge building and a sense of community that, in turn, empowers each citizen.

The shareable character of the networked culture allows "the social construction of the value of being part of a wider network, where common values can be shared and autonomy is constructed" (Cardoso, 2012, pp. 201-202). As personal experiences gain in power, the appropriation of media transform the actors into news producers but also into news themselves, allowing a subjective storytelling to take part in the construction of a collective intelligence and of national or international history (see Navarro, in this number). Data collected by Lapa and Cardoso about political participation allow the authors to go further and argue that in network society, "people are the message". This is where the solution to the unequal distribution of communication channels touches more directly the issue of representation, understood as a problem of asymmetries.

Digital resources applied to media initiatives make it possible to redistribute channels of communication, recognize voices from diverse actors, and through the enlargement of access to all these production of narratives, they can challenge the deficits of representation. It may be, therefore, a step forward to the parity of participation as it enables alternative actors – in the sense of actors that are not used to being considered as sources of knowledge – to have a say about their lives but also about the general social arrangement. The articles in this number discuss media practices that are concretely pushing this potential and revealing its power as well as its limits.

New asymmetries?

The hope invested in new technologies is not a novelty. Every new technical support brings along with it a new promise of more inclusion and participation. The radio would break down the barriers of illiteracy and, in the combination of its local roots and its large geographical diffusion, would allow all excluded groups to express their thoughts (Cheval, 2006). With television, images enlarged the possibilities of witnessing the world. And even inside each type of media, every evolution improves the horizons. In the 1970s, the already consolidated film industry incorporated technologies, such as mobile and portable units. They were received as the solution to passivity and ways to introduce participatory mechanisms in film-making, which gave birth

to what was called "intervention cinema" (Cardon & Granjon, 2013, p. 41). All articles in this number reveal a continuum of these dynamics of hope.

Just like those mostly welcomed technological improvements, digital resources have promoted changes already recognizable, as we have seen above. But if it is true that they amplify the access to the right to communication, it does not happen in the same conditions for all the actors (Peruzzo, 2005). After dismissing a possible idea of a technical determinism, highlighting the important articulation between online and offline actions, as well as the significance of people in these processes, many articles also point out the risk of the emergence of new kinds of asymmetries coming from the evolution of digital culture. This is especially relevant in countries where asymmetrical relationships are already in place, such as most of those where the research reported in this number took place.

Again, the issue of redistribution persists. The access to internet connection is unequal and poor regions are the last to get it. Observing several cases in different regions of Brazil, Suzina was confronted with situations where community media outlets were diffusing information to international audiences through the Internet while the community around had little or very low levels of connection. Flores-Marquez observes another perverse effect of the spread of digital access. According to her research, in many parts of the world, digitalization has served to increase the concentration of media, meaning that huge conglomerates were able to put in place several other outlets, while media activists still confront strong economic, political and technical limitations. These situations are especially relevant while many authors indicated that, despite the improvement of access to a public speech, through digital platforms, mainstream media are still the heart of the geography of attention. The reflections suggest that infrastructural developments and legal rules – or even public policies – may be required to allow media activists to fully experience their power.

Zaslavsky reports that, despite trusting in the power of internet and recognizing an already present contribution, social actors in India identify online activists as a kind of "techno-elite". A similar preoccupation is presented by Ermoshina with a potential distinction between those who are able to manage the code processing and those who are reduced to the role of users. Sartoretto brings to light how the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement militants present ambivalent views towards platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and towards the dynamics of digital communication. For them, the benefits of digital culture come along with a risk to the organic collective character of the movement posed by individualistic digital social media platforms. According to Suzina's observations, there is still a challenge to confront in the field of improving participation through digital resources in community media practices, which means developing a media culture that integrates better the audiences or the users and stimulates every citizen to be a content producer.

It seems that the same debate that nourishes the differences between those in the hegemonic approach and those in the expressivist approach has a place here. Is the ownership of a channel or the access to a technology enough to change the balance of power? As suggested by Fraser and supported by most of the articles in this number, redistribution and recognition are essential conditions, but seems to require something more to change the patterns of representation, regarding political asymmetries. The digital culture provides an open door to connect those two perspectives, while improving the redistribution of channels – or at least making it easier – and allowing social groups and even individuals to express themselves to large audiences. The parity of participation needs a step forward that is related to the

recognition of each narrative, taken as a world vision, as legitimate for recognizing both its existence as well as its capacity for intervening in the general social order.

Final considerations

The articles in this issue point to a potential capacity of integration and visibility of disadvantaged and counter groups in the public debate through media use. Media activism appears, then, as an essential strategy to "make visible" (Sousa Santos, 2006) collectives, problems and issues that remain invisible – or negatively depicted – in the mainstream media, and consequently, in the general public space. But the interference of community and alternative media goes beyond countering media exclusion. Their very existence reveals a structure of economic and social exclusion that produces an "abyssal thinking", meaning the marginalization of different, of the diversity and dialectic character of beings and of ideas (Sousa Santos, 2007). The issue of visibility turns into a struggle around the construction and dissemination of world visions. These articles approach struggles and mobilizations happening in seven different countries that have something in common: they fight political asymmetries, that are based on and nourished by structural and cultural inequalities, and try to establish or improve the parity of participation through media practices. Digital resources have been increasingly employed in order to break down barriers that avoid these voices being listened to and, as much as they become available, as they become relevant as carriers of alternative narratives.

The impact of increased access to the media sphere or to contents of social and alternative media networks is not limited to the opening of additional channels. It transforms social movements, citizens and other actors of civil society into legitimate sources of information, questions the dominant patterns of production of knowledge, and challenges the power relations within the societies in which media play a major role.

Their emergence suggests the construction of a new information ecology (Nardi & O'Day, 2000) (Treré, 2011), where the power of mainstream media starts to be shared with alternative media that provide other world visions. In this context, mobilizations and initiatives in the communities, in the squares and in the streets, are the necessary basis to make online actions and alternative narratives able to question the prevailing order.

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