CAIS

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#Occupy as Contemporary Utopia:

**Rebel Cities and the Importance of
the Occupation Idea for Cyberactivism
and Social Movements Since 2011**

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Cyberactivism, Slacktivism or None of Them?

The internet has been a place for political manifestations since its popularization and initial domestic use started in the late 1990s. Since then, much has changed, but we can attribute numerous activities to cyberactivism. Thus, as a result, the term "cyberactivism" itself can assume different connotations. Here we conceptualize cyberactivism as the activities of articulation, mobilization and content exchange in favor of a cause or set of causes carried out through digital media. Broad reach, speed of dissemination and low propagation costs are some of the advantages offered by cyberactivism. Nevertheless, more than just pragmatic arguments, behind the engagement in such actions lies the urge to be involved in a cause and help it without making much of an effort.

Forms and merits of cyberactivism are a matter of debate. The main criticism is that the mere sharing of content, even when imbued with political character, does not imply political gains. In western or westernized democracies, at least as they have been structured so far, cyberactivism does not possess any political validity *per se*. Successful cyberactivism actions are used to pressure instituted governments, but usually not to obtain direct gains, because such gains depend on complex political systems. This is an argument frequently used to disqualify cyberactivism.

Individuals born from the last decade onwards, at least in western metropolitan cities, will not have lived without accessing digital devices and the internet. Because of that, we can infer that political experience will be more and more pervaded by digital environments, whether related or not to cyberactivism.

„Slacktivism" refers to "sofa activism", a criticism to the so-called inertia of the ones that militate for causes only through the use of digital networks. This criticism deems cyberactivism a minor or less important form of demand. Actually, all these arguments belong to common sense. Observing the major political events that took place in the last decade, it is possible to perceive that they were influenced either directly or indirectly by information flow that circulated online.

In 2011, people from different countries dared to leave their comfort zone and went to the streets to protest. In fact, they presented their objections to political and economic systems, while also exposing their yearnings (Žižek, 2012). Since then, the strength of cyberactivism was evidenced by several movements articulated through social networks (mainly Facebook and Twitter) by independent organizers.

The Tahrir Square occupation (Egypt) started on January 25th, also known as „the Day of Rage". The 15M or Los Indignados rally took place on May 15th in Spain, and the Occupy Wall Street (USA) started on September 17th. All these movements erupted in 2011 and were soon followed by several protests and occupations worldwide. On July 16th, 2012, the Sayonara Genpatsu anti-nuclear rally happened in Japan. 2013 was the year of the Gezi Park uprisings (Turkey) on May 28th and the June Journeys (Brazil) on June 6th. The Sunflower movement broke out the following year in Taiwan, on March 18th, and on September 26th Hong Kong was the stage for Occupy Central.

Tahrir Square, and the movements that succeeded it, revealed the extension of internet mobilization by bringing thousands of people to the streets, even in adverse situations. The ability to drive people out of their homes to the streets is common ground among the listed movements, so it would be unfair to put them under the slacktivism label. Actually, they were – and maybe still are – powerful movements precisely because they were able to make the bridge between online and offline environments. Studying these movements, we realized that perhaps they have achieved some success exactly for the reason that they were able to draw people to the political stage. However, the innate characteristics of most of the movements that we observed were themselves an obstacle to major political or economic gains. All around the world, the power of internet based social movements has been showcased. We say "internet based" because from now on it is necessary to overcome the idea of cyberactivism.

How to Make a Categorization?

At this point it would be interesting to talk about the methodology that we used and the key results of its application. We had to explore a theoretical background in order to survey the concept of internet-based movements and their characteristics. To achieve this, we performed documentary and biblio-graphical research focused on common points that could characterize internet based social movements. The choice for a bibliographical survey was made because of the extension of the corpus and, as a result of this extension, the impossibility to collect primary data, either by the physical or temporal distance of the analyzed movements. We consider internet-based movements to be a field of investigation already developed in sociology, political sciences, communication and computing sciences. Thus, we had vast and high-quality dataset to rely on. As a complementary theoretical-methodological framework we used the actor-network theory (Latour, 2012).

Articles in academic journals, conference papers, presentations, books and book chapters were considered in order to identify some of the internet-based movements that gained worldwide notoriety. We began our search for material in which the term "occupy" was mentioned, along with the terms "internet", "network" and "social movements". We also decided to consider only articles written in English, which would be more relevant for international audiences, as proposed by Kırlıdoğ (2017).

Though the echoes of Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street can still be heard several years later, we decided to end our list in 2014. This decision was made considering changes in the functioning of social networks, especially Facebook, and the fact that they can exert an impact over internet-based movements. Also, political and economic systems became aware of these movements and were able to co-opt some of them.

As a result, we can list the main characteristics of the internet-based social movements that we studied: (1) nonviolence; (2) criticism towards the economic system; (3) diffuse demands; (4) capability of accommodating individual demands; (5) pro-democracy; (6) anti-corruption; (7) transnationalism; (8) emotional appeal; (9) outraged youth; (10) horizontality; (11) nonpartisanism; and (12) fragile bonds. Taken alone, these characteristics are not restricted to internet- based social movements. Yet, it is their juxtaposition that makes these movements unique.

It was also almost impossible to achieve objective results. We noted that none of the movements completely fulfilled their original expectations. Sometimes it was even hard to identify their expectations and aims. When faced with opposing forces, the weaknesses of these movements are exposed, thus promoting their decline. After some time, they can also be co-opted or repressed by the political and economic systems. Of course, not all movements present the full set of these characteristics, and they do not always happen at the same time. Yet, they are recurrent in all analyzed cases.

The Occupy movements around the world articulate identities and networks of common interests that transcend local issues. The participants of these movements use computers and mobile devices to show discontentment against some specificities of contemporary capitalism. Žižek (2013) denounces the widespread malaise against the system, which is equally evident in the Tahrir Square occupation, the 15M, the Occupy Wall Street, the Sayonara Genpatsu rally, the Gezi Park, the June Journeys, the Sunflower movement and the Occupy Central.

It does not seem to be at random that a general idea of dystopia has been evoked by demonstrators in several different contexts. There is a very generalized criticism, identified with dystopia, that the system oppresses individuals in search of utopia, some freedom, quality of life, novelty and fresh air. In this pursue, the occupation of public spaces appears as a position statement, and resistance should be organized on a citywide scale (Harvey, 2012).

From Techno-Utopia to Techno-Dystopia: Some Considerations

Digital Media was a fundamental, but not the only form of communication used by social movements during the last few years. Influenced by Castells (2012) several authors are focusing more on the feeling of hope than onthe feeling of outrage. Indeed, we could notice a certain inclination towards a discourse based on utopia, which indicates that the authors share the same enthusiasm with the movements that they analyze.

Considering the actor-network theory, these nodal points can be human or non-human. Facebook – considered here as an actor –, was the main platform used by protesters at Tahrir Square, Occupy Wall Street, 15M, Gezi Park and the June Journeys because of the ease of use and high potential to reach crowds. Realizing its own potential, Facebook was already changed in September 2012, when an algorithm started to decide what users see first in their "feeds". By the time the change was made, it focused on reducing views of non-promoted posts. The reason behind that – or at least the alleged reason – was to maximize the amount of paid advertising on the platform, increasing Facebook's profits.

In the early years of Facebook, it was only necessary to "like" a page to receive its actualizations. Now the algorithm sorts what one sees and delivers content for the user based on "relevance" criteria. From 2012 to 2017 this system became stricter. Only very attentive users of Facebook realized, that, in order to receive diverse content, they needed to be active members of the platform. But even that is not a guarantee. Facebook has received accusations of "hiding" posts and pages since the algorithm changed in 2012 (Cyberbuzz, 2014). If it really happens, and how it works, is uncertain. The fact is that, for economic reasons, but also arguably for political and ideological ones, social networks can control more and more what we see.

If broad outreach, dissemination speed and low cost were once considered some of the advantages offered by cyberactivism, these should be re-evaluated given the new restrictions imposed by commercial platforms. The limitations by themselves cannot be considered a risk for individuals and movements. Nonetheless, there certainly are risks implied not only in the use of commercial platforms, but on the internet itself, depending on the way it is used.

Would the outreach of internet-based social movements be the same, if they had emerged before the Facebook algorithm changes in 2012? Would they have reached fewer people and, as a consequence, bore a lower capacity to aggregate people and drive them to the streets? It is hard to decide. We can only say that the outbreak of internet-based social movements made people, companies and governments more aware of the potential of the internet and, more specifically, of social networks to provoke social mobilization and commotion. Maybe this has forever changed the way social networks are used and perceived.

And so, we moved very quickly from the techno-enthusiasm to the techno-pessimism, from utopia to dystopia, from the ideal of modern western democracies to post-democracies or whatever comes after the democracies we know. There is no technological "and they lived happily ever after", as once assumed, but rather new struggles.

It is not intended to define here what the next steps of the internet-based social movements should be. This is something that can only be defined by the movements themselves. Maybe the characterization that we have made is a starting point towards understanding their frailties. We also hope to contribute by showing that the commercial social networks now have limitations of outreach that can be problematic to these movements, now and in the future.

Lastly, it is important to notice that the increase of control over internet-based social movements is a potential threat. For now, they must concentrate on how to deal with the different actants around them, the networks, the governments and, of course, their nemeses, antagonistic forces that have learned with them how to make good use of the internet to spread ideas and call for action.

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