

Facebook for Protest?

The Value of Social Software for Political Activism in the Anti-FARC Rallies

Christina Neumayer & Celina Raffl
ICT&S Center, University of Salzburg, Austria

DigiActive Research Series, December 2008



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-Non-commercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>

Introduction

“No more! No more Kidnapping! No more Lies! No more Murder! No more FARC!” was the message that trespassed the national boundaries of Colombia and spread globally via the social networking website Facebook. The Facebook group “A Million Voices Against FARC” and the rallies that took place in 165 cities across the globe covered the Colombian news in January and February 2008. Several newspapers around the world announced that 500,000 to 2,000,000 people responded to the Facebook-group appeal on February 4, 2008 by attending rallies in different parts of the world (cp. Holguín 2008, online; Brodzinsky 2008, online).

Oscar Morales, a 33-year old Colombian engineer, and his friends initiated the anti-FARC-rallies by creating the Facebook-group “A Million Voices Against FARC”. 3,000 members subscribed within the first 24 hours. Morales was surprised by the massive outcome of the rallies: “We expected the idea to resound with a lot of people but not so much and not so quickly” (Rheingold 2008, online). Currently the group has more than 300,000 members.

The anti-FARC-rallies that were organised via Facebook and carried out in many cities all across the world serve as one example for global political activism. The protest underlines the theoretical concepts we state as characteristics of information and communication technologies in general and cyberprotest in particular: [1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital divide and social inequalities, [4] the influence of globalisation on local communities and their contribution to the global public sphere. Analysing these four concepts in relation to the anti-FARC-rallies allows the assessment of potentials as well as limits of networked political protest by using social software.

FARC, Colombia and Facebook

FARC¹, the “nation’s oldest and most powerful rebel group” (Rheingold 2008, online) was founded in 1960 as the military guerrilla part of the communist party. Currently it is the largest active insurgent group in Colombia; less known is the ELN². The original

¹ Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia

² Ejército de Liberación Nacional, National Liberation Army

orientation of FARC can be considered as politically relevant. In the meantime FARC, as well as its opponent, the paramilitaries, were transformed because of drug traffic and they are engaged in more violent methods such as kidnapping and murder (cp. Council of Foreign Relations 2008, online).

Raúl Reyes (2007, online), an important ideologist of the FARC, described the aims of the group by speaking of “a Colombia without social, economic or political inequalities; of a Colombia without corruption; with neither paramilitarism or state terrorism [...]” FARC is especially critical towards the neoliberal politics of president Álvaro Uribe Velez and the influence of the United States. They claim to represent the poor who are oppressed by wealthy classes.

Colombia is amongst the top ten countries regarding registered Facebook user accounts (cp. Facebook Statistics 2008, online). With 45 Million inhabitants Colombia is the second largest Spanish speaking country. Hence the upper class and upper middle class already represent a critical mass of Internet users in general. Although the perception of FARC is controversial there is a huge opposition against FARC observable nowadays that was reflected in the Facebook-group “A Million Voices Against FARC”. “Let’s commit ourselves to join a million voices in this group so we can make a difference, and let the entire world know [...] that FARC is a terrorist group” (online, 2008) was part of the message that spread globally via the digital social networking website.

Social Software for Protest

The Internet is revolutionising the way we live, how we interact and communicate with others. As Fuchs (2006, 293) argues the Internet is not only a big marketplace, it is also a space of political interaction. Blogs, wikis and social networking sites provide a technological basis for grassroots action to coordinate and for participants to communicate. Chat rooms, email and mobile gadgets enable ad-hoc activities to emerge. The Internet can support the organisation of topic-oriented pressure groups, protest organisations and ideological movements outside the mainstream since civil society has the opportunity to engage in political participation without the guidance of institutions or organisations. Fuchs (2006, 275) describes “cyberprotest as an emerging field of social movement research that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests, and online protest communication in society.”

Global access to information via the Internet is its main advantage. Turkle (1996) argues that virtual identities are rather anonymous. Age, class, race and gender might become obsolete, hence the Internet offers equal chances to participate online. Social software fosters a new way of virtual community building and enables interaction, communication, and cooperation. A new generation of skilled web users – with increasing computer competences that is subsumed under the term ‘producers’ is able to use social software for organising grassroots action. The “flat governance hierarchies and distributed power” (Rheingold 2002, 163) of the networks are essential for the political process since they make grassroots activities possible and emerge from civil society.

Community Building

Howard Rheingold (2008, online) immediately announced the anti-FARC-rallies on his website as “From Facebook to the streets of Colombia” and explained this incident as one example of so-called ‘SmartMobs’. This concept describes the combination of “different technological, economic, and social components” which result in an “infrastructure that makes certain kinds of human actions possible that were never possible before” (Rheingold 2002). The heterarchical, decentralised and likewise open architecture of the Internet provides the necessary precondition for virtual communities and hence for participation, new social movements and cyberprotest to emerge. The anti-FARC-rallies exemplify how a virtual community can use the specific architecture of the Internet to organise itself for political activism that is carried out in real space.

Shared symbols, identities or causes, and community building can be enhanced by using new technologies to interact, organize and participate in discussion. “Imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) share symbols, ideologies or interests, and are not restricted to a single nation anymore. In the same way as print-media help to distribute information amongst a more or less locally restricted community the Internet can have the same function on a global scale (cp. Holton 1998, 34). Social software has “real potential for enabling democratic forms of decision-making and beneficial instances of collective action“ (Rheingold 2002, 163), although social software can be used for different purposes as well, dependent on the targets and causes of a community. According to Fuchs (2008, 279) protestors on the Internet produce “shared meanings

that constitute collective identities and practices.” The opposition against FARC is the common ground on which the Facebook group for the anti-FARC-rallies was developed, although the people that joined the group come from completely different backgrounds and cultural contexts.

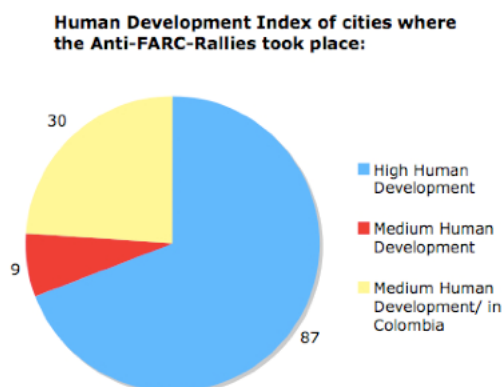
Real-Virtual - Dichotomy

The virtual creates spaces for identity construction and self-representation as well as for political action, where “citizens take their problems into their own hands” (Klar 1994, 169). But the virtual is not a sphere of its own distinct from real space. The real and the virtual are closely related to each other and cannot be separated when analysing online political protest. As Benkler (2006, 18) argues “[t]here is no guarantee that networked information technology will lead to the improvements in innovation, freedom, and justice that [...] are possible. That is a choice we face as a society”. Ideology, political orientation and causes depend on the actors who organize and support online protest. Political activism can be enhanced by the use of social software, but the outcome is dependent on its real physical actors. The enormous response to the anti-FARC-rallies was enhanced by the support of national opinion leaders such as president Uribe and the national mass media, especially the only national newspaper ‘El Tiempo’.

In ‘The Cyberculture Theorists’ David Bell (2007, 68) comments on Castell’s perception of the ‘Network Society’ as follows: “The elites of self-programmable labour live exclusive lifestyles while social exclusion and poverty escalate around them.” Societal structures are projected onto the virtual space. Economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) are important in terms of using, entering the virtual space and (inter)acting there. Those citizens who do not possess the necessary “capital” to enter the virtual space are excluded and have to rely on the guidance of the “real-space-elite”. As a Colombian blogger stated on the events one day after the rallies took place: “Facebook is the largest social network site in Colombia. But access to it is very limited. Yesterday it wasn’t only a global public outrage, because most of the people was supporting our president. I think there are important causes here in Colombia that cannot take place, because access to media is restricted.” (SmartMobs 2008, online) Social patterns, including social inequalities and imbalanced power relations existing in real space, have an impact on virtual communities and on the organisation and outcome of networked political protest.

Social Inequalities and Digital Divides

The *Facebook* group “A Million Voices Against FARC” was not a representation of affected Colombian citizens. Only about a fifth of the whole Colombian population has access to the Internet (cp. Internet World Stats 2008, online). Castells (1998, 73) defines social exclusion as “the process by which certain individuals and groups are systematically barred from access to positions that would enable them to an autonomous livelihood within the social standards framed by institutions and values in a given context.”



By correlating the cities where the anti-FARC-rallies took place³ with the “Human Development Index” of the United Nations we found out that out of 136 cities that took part in the rallies 87 cities are located in countries with a high “Human Development Level”-Index, 36 of them are located in North America. 39 cities have a “Medium Human Development”-Index and 30 of them are located in Colombia. Outside of Colombia only 10 cities with a “Medium Human Development”-Index attended the rallies. No country with a “Low Human Development Index” participated

The digital divide (cp. van Dijk 2005, Couldry 2007, Norris 2002), knowledge gaps (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1970), social inequalities and hierarchies (Castells 1998), access and control over information resources (Robins/Webster 1999) or one-sided information flow (cp. Herman/McChesney 1997) are reflected in political protest and lead to the exclusion of people from online political activism. The disadvantage of social protest via Internet is that “[e]very new form of communication both heighten ties between those who already know one another, and raises the walls of exclusion for those lacking access to the new medium of communication” (Della Porta/Tarrow 2005, 4).

³ The cities participating in the rallies were drawn from the newspaper El Tiempo.

These inequalities can be observed on a national scale as well. The anti-FARC-rallies were not a representation of Colombian citizens. Those excluded from the virtual space thus have to depend on national opinion leaders and the mass media.

Globalisation

The example of the anti-FARC-rallies indicates that the virtual sphere is not restricted to local, e.g. geographical, constraints. The Internet is designed by a global architecture that enables a local conflict to trespass national boundaries and to be carried out globally by new forms of (online) communities. The network character of social software transformed the national conflict in Colombia into a global issue by gaining attention from people all over the world, and hence has the potential to reshape local conflicts and to extend them to the global arena.

The global turnout of the protest by the use of social networks was enormous. “[D]ifferent media are open to globalization in different ways. While old media (such as newspapers or radio) are often more national in their orientation, new media such as video or the Internet are much more global” (Rantanen 2005, 95). Government and national media are still very powerful especially in countries where the gap between rich and poor people leads to exclusion of a certain part of society from new media. Although Facebook provided the infrastructure to bring the rallies on a global scale the support of the Colombian government and the use of traditional ways of online communication were key aspects, e.g. the Colombian government used E-mail to inform the Colombian embassies abroad and to convince them to take part in the rallies.

The complex political situation in the country was not reflected in the Facebook-group “A million Voices Against FARC” (cp. Holguín 2008, online). As bloggers commented “The problem in Colombia is not just FARC! It should not be no more FARC! It should be no more war!” (Current.com 2008, online) The message that spread around the globe via the digital social network Facebook had to exclude local context, values, symbols and historical knowledge. “No more! No more Kidnapping! No more Lies! No more Murder! No more FARC!” is oversimplified, and strongly abstracted, but catches the sentiments of the Colombian diaspora and people abroad (cp. Holguín 2008, online).

As Poster (2006, 12) argues: “Global communication, one might say, signifies transcultural confusion. [...] [A]ny culture which cannot decode the message of others, which insists that only its transmissions have meaning or are significant.” The global diaspora and the “political narratives that govern communication between elites and following different parts of the world” (Appadurai 1990, 300) would need a careful translation from one cultural context to another to really understand the national context. Hence globality is a new resource for users who mix technical properties with local practices. The outcome of these technical properties depends on the user and his perception of a particular political problem, world view or ideology, and the way he or she is able to use the technologies (cp. Sassen 2007, 349 sq.).

Conclusion

Social software has the potential to enhance political activism from a local to a worldwide scale as exemplified in the anti-FARC-rallies, although the usage of social software applications still has to be considered as a privilege. In countries with huge social inequalities social software is still used and formed by an elite, additionally created within and emerged from a Western US-American context and its inherent cultural, social, economic and political structures.

Global resistance and grassroots activities have to emerge from a collective. Social software has the potential to be used for collective knowledge processes or as in the anti-FARC-rallies for global political activism. This leads us to the assumption that trans-boundary political activism or participation by social software is possible, although not necessarily positive. The use of social software for political protest or participation is dependent on the ideologies and the cultural and political contexts of its users and developers. Users and producers can either enhance competition, communication or collaboration in cyberspace. Hence technology’s potential can be used in different ways and the future direction it takes is dependent on its actors.

References

- Anderson, Benedict* (1983). *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, New York: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun* (1990). Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. In: *Featherstone, Mike* (Ed.). *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity*. London: Sage, 295-310.
- Bell, David* (2007). *Cyberculture Theorists. Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway*. New York: Routledge.
- Benkler, Yochai* (2006). *The Wealth of Networks. How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre* (1997). The Forms of Capital. In: *Halsey, A. H./Lauder, Hugh/Brown Philip/Stuart Wells, Amy* [Eds.] *Education: Culture, Economy and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brodzinsky, Sibylla* (2008). Facebook used to target Colombia's FARC with global rally. In: *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 4. In: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0204/p04s02-woam.html> (22.11.2008).
- Castells, Manuel* (1998). *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Couldry, Nick* (2007). Communicative Entitlements and Democracy. The Future of the Digital Divide. In: *Mansell, Robin/Aygeron, Chisanthi/Quah, Danny/Silverstone, Roger* (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 383-403.
- Council of Foreign Relations* (2008). FARC, ELN: Colombia's Left-Wing Guerrillas. In: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9272/> (23.05.2008).
- Current.com* (2008). Facebook users spawn grassroots protest of Colombia's FARC. In: http://current.com/items/88832752/facebook_users_spawn_grassroots_protest_of_colombia_s_farc.htm (23.11.2008)
- Dijk, Jan van* (2005). *The Deepening Divide. Inequality in the Information Society*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage.
- El Tiempo* (2008). Listado de ciudades y lugares de concentración en que se realizará la marcha en contra de las farc. In: <http://www.eltiempo.com/politica/2008-01-23/ARTICULO> (05.03.2008).

- Facebook Group* (2008). 'One Million Voices Against FARC' (English Version). In:
<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=21343878704> (23.05.2008).
- Facebook Statistics* (2008). In:
<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>(23.05.2008).
- Fuchs, Christian* (2006). The Self-Organization of Cyberprotest. In: *Morgan, K./Brebbia, C./ Carlos, A./Spector, J. M.* (Eds.). *The Internet Society II: Advances in Education, Commerce & Governance*. Southampton, Boston: WIT Press: 275-295.
- Fuchs, Christian* (2008). *Internet and Society. Social Theory in the Information Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Herman, Edward S./McChesney, Robert W.* (1997). *The Global Media. The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*. London, Washington: Cassell.
- Holguín, Catalina* (2008). Colombia: networks of dissent and power. In: OpenDemocracy. Free thinking for the world, Feb. 4. In:
http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/politics_protest/facebook_farc (22.11.2008).
- Holton, Robert J.* (1998). *Globalization and the Nation-State*. London: McMillan Press.
- Internet World Stats* (2007). In: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/sa/co.htm>
 (22.05.2008).
- Porta, Donatella Della/Tarrow, Sidney* (2005). Transnational Process and Social Activism: An Introduction. In: *Porta, Donatella Della/Tarrow, Sidney* (Eds.). *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1-19.
- Poster, Mark* (2006). *Information Please. Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Klar, Michael* (1994). Globale Information – ein Projekt. Global Information – a Project. In: *Meurer, Bernd* (Ed.). *Die Zukunft des Raums. The Future of Space*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 165-172.
- Norris, Pippa* (2004). The Digital Divide. The Information Society Reader. In: *Webster, Frank* (Ed.). New York: Routledge, 273-286.
- Rantanen, Terhi* (2005). *The Media and Globalization*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.
- Reyes, Raúl* (2007). Interview by Garry Leech. In: *Colombia Journal*, July 12. In:

<http://www.colombiajournal.org/colombia259.htm> (25.05.2008).

Rheingold, Howard (2002). *Smart Mobs. The next Social Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group.

Rheingold, Howard (2008). From Facebook to the streets of Colombia. In: *SmartMobs. The next social revolution. Mobile communication, pervasive computing, wireless networks, collective action*. In: <http://www.smartmobs.com/2008/02/04/fromfacebook-to-the-streets-of-colombia/> (22.05.2008).

Robins, Kevin/*Webster*, Frank (1999). *The Long History of the Information Revolution*. In: *Webster*, Frank/*Robins*, Kevin (Eds.) (2004). London: Routledge, 62-80.

Sassen, Saskia (2007). Electronic Networks, Power, and Democracy. In: *Mansell*, Robin/*Avgerou*, Chrisanthi/*Quah*, Danny/*Silverstone*, Roger (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of New Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 339-361.

SmartMobs. The next social revolution. Mobile communication, pervasive computing, wireless networks, collective action. In: <http://www.smartmobs.com/2008/02/04/fromfacebook-to-the-streets-of-colombia/> (22.11.2008).

Tichenor, Phillip/*Donohue*, George/*Olien*, Clarice (1970). Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34, 159-170.

Turkle, Sherry (1996). *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

About Christina Neumayer

Christina Neumayer (Christina.Neumayer2@sbg.ac.at) is a Ph.D. student and research assistant at the ICT&S Center (Advanced Studies and Research in Information and Communication Technologies & Society) at the University of Salzburg, Austria. She graduated in 2006 from the Department of Communication Science with focus on economy of the media and media globalization. Her research foci are eParticipation, ICTs for sustainable development, media globalization (especially Indian media) and Social Software for political activism. Prior to being a research assistant at the ICT&S Center she worked as a journalist for two years. <http://www.icts.uni-salzburg.at/neumayer>

About Celina Raffl

Celina Raffl (Celina.Raffl@sbg.ac.at) is a Ph.D. student and research assistant at the ICT&S Center (Advanced Studies and Research in Information and Communication Technologies & Society) at the University of Salzburg, Austria. She graduated in 2006 from the Department of Communication Science with a major in ICT&S. Her research foci are Information and Communication Technologies & Cooperation in Research and Development, Open Innovation, Social Software and Communities, and Information and Communication Technology Assessment (ICTA) & Design. Since 2007 she is teaching at the Department of Communication Science, University of Salzburg. <http://www.icts.uni-salzburg.at/raffl> and <http://celina11i.blogspot.com/>

About Research@DigiActive (R@D)

Research@DigiActive (R@D) is a project of DigiActive, an organization that encourages technology use by grassroots political activists around the world. The purpose of R@D is to produce applied, thought-provoking, actionable research at the cutting edge of Digital Activism. It seeks to highlight and disseminate qualitative and quantitative studies in the by publishing short papers by promising scholars. To submit a paper or get more information, please contact our Director of Applied Research, [Patrick Meier](#) by email at Patrick [at] DigiActive.org

About DigiActive

DigiActive is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use the Internet and mobile phones to increase their impact. Its goal is a world of activists made more powerful and more effective through the use of digital technology. DigiActive pursues this goal through several spheres of action, including a blog of digital activism best practices, an interactive map which serves as a visual database of digital activism, the research program R@D, and digital activism trainings. Learn more and get involved at www.DigiActive.org.