

Chapter 7

Networks for Cyberactivism and Their Implications for Policymaking in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Networks for cyberactivism have been developed in Brazil since the end of the 20th century. This chapter presents results of a three-year research about networks for digital political participation developed by civil society. The research analyzed 41 networks according to specific analytical categories to deepen the understanding about their potential to foster citizens' engagement in political initiatives and strengthen democracy. Several mechanisms that considerably stimulate a culture of political participation were clearly observed. Possibilities for political acting through those networks tend to narrow the gap between citizens' claims and government actions but that is not always the case. There is a lack of synergy between citizens' demands and strategic planning of public policies and other political outcomes. Some hypotheses are discussed to understand this context and reflect on the trends and challenges to digital democracy in the twenty-first century.

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INTRODUCTION

Brazil has experienced three decades of uninterrupted democracy. That context fostered the birth of specific political conceptions and practices. The notorious crisis of representativeness in the country also contributed to the emergence of specific and alternative ways of political activism using information and communication technologies as powerful allies to generate more outreach and penetrability of the organized actions. Non-government citizen networks, mainly from civil society, mobilize internet resources to achieve political goals. Those resources enable projects and practices that tend to offer more possibilities for citizens to engage in political mobilization, potentially contributing to strengthen and deepen participatory democratic practices (Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai, 2015).

In the mentioned historical period government strategies were adopted to stimulate citizens' participation in political processes through cyberspace (Freitas, 2016). Such strategies were adopted in digital governance practices implemented with the goal of deepening the relationship between public administration representatives and citizens by improving political mechanisms for participation. However, research results have shown that government initiatives tend to have a limited range fostering effective citizens' participation through cyber interactive channels of communication. The initiatives tend to guarantee institutional stability to the organizations rather than effectively promote citizens' engagement and legitimize democratic processes (Freitas, Fiuza & Queiroz, 2015).

Civil society also plays a strategic role in that political scenario. This chapter will present the results of a research that aimed at investigating the conditions created by non-government actors to legitimize participatory democratic practices through different strategies in cyberspace. The research mapped and analyzed non-government networks that developed digital platforms alongside other initiatives to stimulate political activism and cyberactivism.

Digital democratic initiatives are usually implemented by non-government and in some cases non-institutional actors organized in social movements and political actions. They reveal a political environment in which strategies to improve digital participatory democracy play a fundamental role. Digital democracy, in this sense, can be defined as

the process of using devices, apps, digital communication artifacts and technologies in general to supplement, reinforce or improve aspects of social and political practices – coming from the State or the citizens – in the benefit of the democratic substance of political communities. (Gomes, 2011, p. 27).

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