

Chapter 19

Anything New Under the Sun?

Social Movements and Virtual Social Networks in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The most recent technologies of production, transmission, and access to information have made it possible, under appropriate conditions, to change the visibility of national and international concerns, as well as the protest movements many helped stimulate. Different countries have been faced with a multiplicity of movements articulated online that surpass virtual world barriers and (re) assume presence on the streets. In this chapter, drawing from several examples with different claim bases, authors discuss virtual social networks' role in political participation. However, as it happens in so many initiatives in this field, this is not affirmed from an underestimation of the role of Traditional Means of Communication or that of the trenches in the access and use of digital means.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic regimes are going through a particular period of time, characterized by signs of a deep crisis of participation in its more traditional sense, either in an incremental abstention in electoral acts or in a no less significant reduction in membership rates partisan and union organization. Among the most frequently cited reasons for this context are an increasing distrust of holders of political representation positions, a lack of equal access to political decision-makers, along with a media under-representation of opinions considered to be a minority, in favor of the promotion of reductive, simplifying or spectacular visions of political reality.

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Given this scenario, several voices have pointed to the possibility of a regeneration of the civic and participative fabric practicable through the New Media, including a greater plurality of themes and agents, a renewal and diversification of sources, and a broader concertation of interests around forms of political intervention and social reform (Pizzorno, 1998: 31).

However, contrary to what sometimes seems to result from the predominant technological gnosis based on the exaltation (and the exercises it allows) of a nihilified subject, such endeavor does not ignore the framed consideration of the individual, that is, from the particular appreciation of its context, its profile, and its intentionality. It requires, therefore, not a nihilified subject but a *homo ampliatur* socio-historically framed in its Inglehartian era of representative democratic dissatisfaction.

This same initiative is not new in itself and has already been the subject of scientific work on particular aspects of the framework advocated above - for example, the work developed by Memmi (1985). In the latter, the intensity of civic participation would depend mainly on the social, economic and cultural contexts of the participants, resulting in a stratification that contributes to the vertical construction of participation. In this sense, too, the work of Verba and Nie had already pointed out decades before, recognizing an overrepresentation of certain parts of the population traditionally favored - white men with higher literacy and high socioeconomic status - whose political influence was a reflection of their social and economic conditions (1972: 37).

These studies, therefore, demonstrated that the possession of certain material and symbolic resources enabled a more active political participation, namely as an exercise in democratic representation: with greater availability of material wealth, formation and literacies, for example, not only an individual you will have time for causes/initiatives of your interest and for promotion of other applications, but also a social status and a symbolic/credible capital or enough competence/aptitude to boost her/his own candidacy.

However, the possession of goods and competences does not imply similar aims, for which are much more decisive the values and the course of each individual, but also the national (and even international) political-economic context, variables on the basis of use of material resources (Dahl, 1961). In this sense, since citizens are using ICT, their social representations will be referential (Milbrath, 1965).

As such, even if one recognizes a correspondence between citizens' capacity to understand politics and their respective capacities for influence (Kaase and Barnes, 1979), technical literacy (equipment, infrastructures) or communication is not sufficiently explanatory (selection of media content): in reality, knowledge and understanding of the political system, its weaknesses, and added value, is essential for active political participation, even when practiced through ICT.

Other dimensions of context are equally significant for political participation: any financial means or literacies available to the individual do not imply it when in the absence of freedom of expression or other individual freedoms, an environment in which individual conduct may be resigned instead of mobilized or challenging. In addition, other freedoms and rights, such as that of association, voting, access to public office, or access to alternative sources of information are necessary conditions for a Democracy that does, in fact, intend to maintain itself, one in which citizenship feels legitimated to be involved without being reduced to a passive condition of 'spectator' (Della Porta, 2002).

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