

Legitimation by Digital Discourses: The Case of the Indigenous Protest in Ecuador, October 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2019, a wave of protests took place in Ecuador. During this crisis, the governmental Twitter accounts played a fundamental role in broadcasting rival narratives. The objective of this research is to analyze and contextualize the communication strategies that were spread during the protests to answer the question: How was legitimation built/destroyed by governmental Twitter accounts? To accomplish this objective, multimodality ruled the investigation as it allows understanding how text, video, and image interact. Protest events analysis (PEA) theory was used. Additionally, critical discourse analysis was developed with four main categories of study: (1) redistribution vs. recognition, (2) unified political discourses, (3) legitimation vs. non-legitimation, and (4) tone of the speech. The authors conclude that authority can use storytelling to determine which processes can be catalogued as legitimate.

INTRODUCTION

The “Latin American spring”—an equivalent concept for the revolution in the Arab world between 2010 and 2012—took place at the end of 2019. The citizens of eight countries (Venezuela, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Perú, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia) participated in massive protests. Even though the trigger for each country was not the same, the economic discontent and the fury over political roguery were the main reasons. Ecuador was one of the first countries to demonstrate. The socio-political crisis

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in this country started in October 2019 as a claim for negotiation —when President Lenín Moreno announced the withdrawal of gasoline subsidies as part of the measures accepted to receive a credit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—. As the decision was announced, the carrier guild began to protest by closing streets and stopping the public service.

After three days, indigenous groups from the Andean region arrived in the capital city, Quito, to claim for the abolition of the withdrawal. Then, the protests developed into an expression for recognition. On the one hand, this generates the dichotomy redistribution vs. recognition. According to (Fraser, 2000), the claim for recognition is not simply equivalent to an undervaluation of the other, but to “not seeing their own status as a full interlocutor recognized in social interaction and being prevented from participating on equal terms in social life” (p. 124). Fraser places the debate in “post-socialist” societies. This society description fits the Ecuadorian context. On the other hand, the management of the situation allows us to understand the dynamics of the Mythopoesis. That is, “legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions” (Van Leeuwen, 2007: 92).

For ten days, the country experienced an escalation of violence and repression: while citizens were called to respect a curfew and the city was militarized, violence-oriented participants burned the Contraloría General del Estado, and acts of vandalism were registered. In the end, protests represented eight deaths, 1 340 injured and 1 192 detained people. According to (Ives, B., & Lewis, 2020), a protest is more likely to escalate to violence “a) the more recently it has faced state repression and b) when it is spontaneous rather than well-organized.” In the meantime, the government decided to move its headquarters from Quito to Guayaquil and install a message of non-legitimate actions. E.g., hashtags such as #ThisIsNotAProtest appeared in the governmental social networks; the name of Rafael Correa, ex-President of Ecuador, also emerged when he was accused of organizing the riots.

In this context, social media was used by the government, protesters, and professional media. In fact, “crisis can evoke incomprehension, indignation or fear” (Page, Freberg, & Saling, 2013). That is why “government agencies and emergency responders can assist in developing public perception by providing simple, direct, and timely information. Not doing so can lead to public perception that they are not concerned” (Page et al., 2013). Then, it is common for the government to develop and communicational strategy among allies.

In this sphere, misinformation and rumors proliferated. (Caplow, 1947) theorized that rumors emerge and propagate in the absence of official information. Besides, they undermined legitimate opposition (Tambini, 2017) and destabilized the government. That is why one of the main concerns of official, governmental social media was related to #StopFakeNews.

Finally, the indigenous leaders and government agreed to negotiate under the slogan #PeaceRecovers. The dialogue was broadcasted live, and Decree 883 was repealed.

This study pretends to explore the use of Twitter as a tool for telling stories and building senses around a specific event. This research aims to analyze and contextualize the communication strategies that were outspread during the protests to answer: how was legitimation built/destroyed by governmental Twitter accounts? This study belongs to techno-politics —the intersection between technology and politics—that has become a significant subject referred to communication studies: Communication, together with policies and politics, is the base of every government and democracy. Then, as politics develop in the social media sphere, it is fundamental to study the communicational strategies that the governments mature during a crisis. Besides, the present research is related to crisis communication. Its study seeks to foster crisis communication strategies. Communication is fundamental to understanding image and reputational assets and maintaining and developing healthy stakeholder relationships. This

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