Chapter 7
Social Networks on the Internet:
Twitter Coverage of the Exile of the Peruvian Indigenous Leader Alberto Pizango to Nicaragua

Débora de Carvalho Pereira
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Social Network Analysis – SNA is a hybrid research method used here to systematize a network of relationships around the collective transnational flux of information via the micro-blog service Twitter. The case studied is the exile of Peruvian indigenous leader Alberto Pizango to Nicaragua, and the conflicts between Indians and the military in May and June 2009 in Bagua, in the Amazon. To historically and politically contextualize the object of this case study in the so-called "Network society", concepts about globalization, ubiquity, and spatial and informational connectivity are employed. The method of Social Network Analysis is described in detail, with attention to the possibilities of visualization and of patterns of connections and identification of ideological values of actors in the network.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents, using the method of Social Network Analysis - SNA, a case study on collective media coverage, via the micro-blog server Twitter,[1] of the exile of Indian leader Alberto Pizango, after the massacre of Indians of the Peruvian Amazon in June 2009. It is possible to identify a network of social relations through comments posted about the subject. For a conceptual understanding of the issue, reflections are made about the shape of the emerging socio-technical culture, something called by many authors the Network Society. (Castells, 2002, 2003; Santos, 2002A and 2002B; Bauman, 1999, 2005). Thus it can be seen how informational flows engender cultural changes in society.

To understand these flows, two aspects of networks are examined: they are considered as social (symbolic, economic, political) networks, and as a socio-technical networks (because they are organized on the Internet). This leads to the following questions: (a) Does the field of Information Science note the importance of networks of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-051-8.ch007

informational practices? (b) Is it attentive to new forms of social interaction employed by companies and entities, and to the institutional, cultural and ideological[2] identities present in these networks? In a time when everyone wants to be 'seen to be something' in the virtual world, it seems that the issue of legitimacy of information issue is somewhat shaky. In this context, on one hand, elements such as 'community', 'identity', 'personality', and 'sociability' are discussed, while on the other hand, questions of 'authority', 'dispersed participation', 'control', and 'collaboration' are raised.

Information systems in geographically dispersed networks are discussed throughout this work as differential factors potentiating the practices, flow, and movement of information. Semantic Web tools (Berners-Lee et al 2001) offer mechanisms to search for specific terms, and to monitor the degree of interest arising in them on the network. They are available on the front page of Twitter, which made it possible to locate the term 'Pizango' in posts, and from this a social network around the Indian leader's name.

Web Semantics structure data to allow those searching to identify content pertinent to their subjects (Breitam, 2005; Pickler, 2007; Feitosa, 2006; Mika, 2006). In this way, this quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from a case study demonstrates the links between communicators and diverse social actors, which make a flow of information through the network possible.

To understand a society full of technical and social webs, it is necessary to bring together knowledge in the form suggested by the Social Network Analysis method. From the perspective of the SNA, research is a transdisciplinary proposition that converges upon the goals of the field of Information Science, allowing the researcher access to different disciplinary matrices.

Social networks are not new objects of study; what is novel is how technologies of information and communication can potentiate its flows. This phenomenon promotes an exchange of knowledge concerning global problems left unsolved by postmodern Enlightenment perspectives. Pollution, global warming, environmental destruction, uncontrolled urbanization, human rights issues and the massacre of indigenous populations are complex and radical issues that reach society in various guises. However, they are usually simplified, with each researcher, in the context of his/her disciplinary beliefs, viewing the subject through his/her own particular lens. Against this process of fragmentation of the truth into traditional scientific fields, the interdisciplinary methodology observed in the practice of Information Science requires the hybridization of different viewpoints to understand the phenomena of information mediated by computer use, through the prism of complexity (Morin, 2002).

When bringing together several fields of knowledge, "sailing is necessary, but you need to know where you are going "[3], to produce insightful science in a critical spirit, or inquiry that goes beyond the market logic of permanent urgency, producing scientific programs devoid of profound concepts.

In the spirit of transdisciplinary research, this chapter tackles the spatiotemporal and cultural paradoxes of network society (1). The SNA method is described in detail (2), and applied to a case study (3). Note that the network is initially defined not with reference to the actors but to the keyword 'Pizango'. That, by itself, indicates local social capital, but it is also implemented as a global cause for human rights and the management of the Amazon. The conclusions also present opportunities for further analysis (4).

SOCIAL NETWORKING TECHNOLOGY: CULTURAL PARADOXES IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Nowadays, technical innovations lead us to believe in the functionality of "all-in networking". This metaphor is indeed appropriate, emphasizing con-