

# Battlefields, experiences, debates: Latin American struggles and digital media resistance

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## **Battlefields, Experiences, Debates: Latin American Struggles and Digital Media Resistance**

### *Introduction*

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The role of digital communication within contemporary struggles in Latin America has not received the consideration it deserves, especially internationally in English-language scholarship. The articles in this Special Section aim to fill this gap and provide key guidelines to navigate the multifaceted tapestry of digital media resistance in Latin America. We illustrate that in the Latin American scenario digital technologies have been appropriated in multiple, even contradictory, ways to fight against inequalities, challenge highly concentrated media ecologies, create counterhegemonic spaces, and build bridges among organizations. Moreover, we point out that in order to understand the communicative dynamics of contemporary Latin American struggles it is necessary to establish a dialogue between diverse traditions and conceptual frameworks. We conclude by summarizing the arguments and reviewing the significance of the contributions to this Special Section.

*Keywords: Latin America, Latin American struggles, social movements, digital media, resistance*

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*The Latin American cause is above all a social cause: the rebirth of Latin America must start with the overthrow of its masters, country by country. We are entering times of rebellion and change. There are those who believe that destiny rests on the knees of the gods; but the truth is that it confronts the conscience of man with a burning challenge.*

Eduardo Galeano, "Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent"

The last few years have witnessed a proliferation of social movements and insurrections throughout the world in diverse social, cultural, and political contexts. The Spanish *Indignados*; Occupy Wall Street in the United States; and the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries all point to new and powerful ways of protest and mobilization, in which digital media have played a major role. Although much academic attention has been paid to these movements, we believe that recent uprisings and social movements in Latin America, and the roles they have played in the global scenario in relation to the use of digital communication technologies, have not received similar consideration and scrutiny. First of all, the vast majority of the literature that has addressed these recent Latin American mobilizations is published in Spanish, mainly in journals and books that have a limited global reach and distribution. Second, the international academic literature in English that has tackled the role that digital media play within contemporary Latin American protest tends to be scattered and fragmented. The few contributions have considered disparate elements of the digital media environment, studied in countries that are quite different from each other: analyzing youth protest in Chile (Valenzuela et al., 2012); comparing online/offline activism in the United States and in Latin America (Harlow & Harp, 2012); examining new social movements and digital media in Guatemala (Harlow, 2012), Mexico (García & Treré, 2014), and Brazil (Bastos et al., 2014); and exploring online alternative media in El Salvador (Harlow, 2015). But, while special issues analyzing the Occupy movement or examining the media ecologies of the Arab Spring abound, it is hard to find a coherent set of articles that tackles the complexity in the use of digital media technologies within the Latin American context in just one aggregated space.

In order to fill these two gaps, our goals for this Special Section were threefold. Our first goal was to build an open, coherent space where various scholars discuss the uses and appropriations of digital media in specific contemporary Latin American struggles and movements. Such a space may make room to lay out similarities and differences between both cultural and political contexts and conceptual lenses used to make sense of the roles of communication technologies within protest and beyond. Second, we hope to contribute to the circulation and construction of knowledge and understanding of the interplay of digital media and social movements in the contemporary scene in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and El Salvador. The range of experiences of this Special Section cover almost the whole region, reflecting upon the conflicts, confrontations, and challenges faced in many Latin American nations. Third, we hope to stir an international debate about the richness and heterogeneity of relationships amongst social movements and digital media (with emphasis on social media) in Latin America, and about the nature of Latin American interconnections with the global uprisings in the Mediterranean region and the Global South.

### **The Multifaceted Tapestry of Digital Media Appropriations Within Contemporary Latin American Struggles**

Addressing the relation between digital communication and movements in a continent whose richness and heterogeneity of experiences, histories, and cultures constitute one of its main characteristics represents an ambitious and challenging task. We think that a good start lies in avoiding the determinism and the optimism of current research on digital activism and social change (Waisbord, 2015), and consider technology not as a revolutionary solution to social and political crises in Latin America, but as a controversial issue embedded into complex social, cultural, and political processes that have, for decades, shaped the relationships between protest movements and communication. The importance of analyzing the social and political context is always key in media-centered analyses, but it acquires a special importance in Latin America, where several parallel battles are being fought through digital and social media (as well as on the streets) in defense of basic human rights and the construction of a way of life different from the Westernized capitalist, *extractivist*, and neoliberal model. Despite being a region that “has the fastest growing internet population in the world” (Tufts, 2015), that represents 10% of the worldwide users of the Internet, and whose residents average 10 hours a month of using social media (Lazalde, 2015), in recent years, the gap between those who have (capital, resources, power) and those who have not in Latin America has been widening (El Mundo, 2011; ONU-Habitat, 2012). There is a growing number of citizens engaging in social mobilizations to express their discontent and reclaim their rights to land, education, healthcare, democratic media, justice, and peace (for an extensive discussion on the several battlefields of contemporary Latin American struggles, see the conversation between Treré & Pleyers in this section). Many of the contributions of this Special Section illuminate the ways in which contemporary Latin American social movements respond to increasing inequalities and injustices by incorporating digital media into their everyday tactics and strategies. However, there is no intention to idealize digital media or the role of digital activism; on the contrary, the threads interwoven throughout this Special Section reveal a dynamic process and a complex tapestry of multiple understandings, appropriations, and relations with technology.

In order to comprehend the need for digital social media as tools to challenge the system and create counterhegemonic spaces, we believe it is also essential to understand the role of mainstream media and their relations with politics in Latin America. Mainstream media are part of the dominant political and economic system in most Latin American nations. Media corporations not only dominate the media scene and the content of messages in print and electronic media; they also have enormous political, economic, and symbolic power, and they are allied with governments in maintaining the *status quo* (García, 2013). This has generated the so-called “captured liberal model” (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014), a highly concentrated media system characterized by lack of regulation enforcement, pragmatic exercise of power, and strong alliances between media barons and political elites. Moreover, in different Latin American countries, independent media professionals and watchdog journalists live under constant threats and fear of being killed (Waisbord, 2000). Even in progressive countries with left-wing governments, such as Ecuador, media (in this case, public media) have been widely used by power elites to shape the discourse and public opinion, and to minimize (if not openly attack) detractors, protestors, and diverse manifestations of opposition (see Coryat in this section). In this particular scenario, digital media have been strategic for the dissemination of messages, for the provision of information otherwise

not available, for the protection of activists, and to convene people. Recent Latin American movements have also directly confronted the power of media apparatuses to influence public opinion, sway elections, and manipulate democratic processes (see Bacallao-Pino, Parra, and Treré & Pleyers, all in this section; see also García & Treré, 2014). Digital media have thus acted as spaces of counterhegemonic communication (Downing, 2002), challenging mainstream media and enabling collective action via the massive appropriation of social media by citizens and activists.

It has been 20 years since the uprising of the Zapatistas began in Chiapas, Mexico, and it is possible to argue that, throughout, their strategic use of media (print, electronic, and digital; Cleaver, 2000; Magallanes-Blanco, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Russell, 2001) has been a major contribution to the development of a locally organized rebellion into a worldwide movement (Bob, 2001; De Angelis, 2000; Khan & Kellner, 2004; Routledge, 2002). The Zapatistas proved that online environments have become strategically important for movements, collectives, and individuals gaining visibility and strength both online and offline. The role of digital media in current mobilizations is relevant, as it allows individuals to use it as a forum to express and channel different forms of participation (Valderrama, 2013), as well as to create and distribute messages that confront mainstream media. Digital media appropriations in social mobilizations and struggles are shaping a reconfigured network system (Bacallao-Pino, in this section) and changing the dynamics of social movements, opening new possibilities for organization, access, production and distribution of knowledge, and monitoring, and also widening the scope of the struggles (León, Burch, & Tamayo, 2005). As Gutiérrez states in this special section, contemporary Latin American social movements and their uses of digital media are revealing the importance of analyzing not only the ideologies and the demands of these movements, but also the organizational forms, the (infra)structures, and the everyday practices of emergent collectives and networks.

Furthermore, the experiences and reflections gathered in this Special Section reveal that there are multiple, complementary, and even contradictory uses of digital social media in Latin American social struggles. For instance, digital platforms are used for political engagement through imitation and emotions, for protection against police brutality, and to reduce uncertainty and anxiety (Venezuela). Then, they are also used for the dissemination of ideas, events, pleas, and statements, and for convening, mobilizing, and coordinating street dynamics (Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador). Digital communication technologies are appropriated for challenging mainstream media (Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, El Salvador), and then deployed in the construction of communication bridges amongst organizations, individuals, collectives, and territories to gain both visibility and support (Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, El Salvador). From the evaluation of this multifaceted tapestry of uses, we can appreciate that the daily, useful, and effective uses of social networks (Avendaño & Egaña, 2014) connect with leisure, emotional spaces, and imitation as a process of learning and adaptation (Lugo-Ocando, Hernández & Marchesi in this section), all while being traversed by issues of (distributed) leadership (Nunes, this section) related to complex media ecologies (Treré, 2012) and networks in dialogue (Gutiérrez, this Special Section).

Finally, the contributions to this Special Section clearly show that, in order to understand the social processes and the communicative dynamics of contemporary Latin American struggles, it is necessary to establish a dialogue between diverse traditions and conceptual frameworks. For instance, in

her article, Harlow establishes a fruitful conversation between Martín-Barbero's concept of "mestizaje" and various recent Western approaches to alternative media and digital technologies. Similarly, Gutiérrez blends technopolitical understandings that have emerged in Spain with a grounded analysis of Latin American traditions and local cultures. This demonstrates that many of the contributions of the alternative media/citizens' media literature, the social movements scholarship, and the digital politics corpus can converge to reinforce each other in the challenging task of making sense of recent uprisings (Gutiérrez, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2014). Hence, approaches that analyze Latin American resistance "from below" (Poma & Gravante, 2015) and advocate at building a plural knowledge regarding communication "from the South" (Sierra Caballero, 2013) can engage in a fruitful dialogue with both technopolitical frameworks (Toret et al., 2015) and conceptual lenses based on mediation, media practices, and mediatization (Mattoni & Treré, 2014).

### **Outline and Significance of the Contributions of this Special Section**

The first contribution of this Special Section is more conceptual, while the second one has a broad focus, centering on a plethora of diverse Latin American experiences. Together, these two contributions set the tone for the specific analyses that follow.

In his contribution, Rodrigo Nunes presents a theoretical debate about how to conceive and discuss leadership in contemporary networked movements. The author discusses both online and offline interactions and stresses that these movements, so often described as leaderless, do in fact display different kinds of leadership. The polycentric nature of the network allows for a kind of fragile, distributed leadership which fluctuates with the movement and its needs, actors, and events. Nunes highlights the pragmatic value of distributed leadership, as it allows for power to circulate freely, activating less active or less organized nodes and inhabiting a space that he describes as "between Clastres and Machiavelli." Nunes' conceptualization strongly informs the reflections by Gutiérrez in one of the concluding conversations of this Special Section.

In her article, Daniela Parra looks at the relation between alternative media and grassroots Latin American integration. The author acknowledges that regional integration can take place through media conglomerates and industries, public communication initiatives, and alternative media, and focuses on the challenges that alternative media from different Latin American countries have to face to achieve Latin American integration. Amongst her findings, Parra recognizes that, because of the hardships in terms of finance, organization, and resources, many alternative media fail to consider Latin American integration as an objective and a product of their everyday work. Nonetheless, she highlights that alternative media use their narratives to find common ground to unite grassroots sectors throughout the region, and she stresses the networking activities of these media to create content, replicate struggles, gain support, and break mainstream media siege.

After the first two articles, the authors of this Special Section focus on specific experiences, both from several Latin American movements and from alternative media. In his article, Lázaro Bacallao-Pino compares the appropriations of social media by the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico and the student movement in Chile, relying on the combination of a quantitative analysis of their Facebook profiles with a

critical discourse analysis of social media content, as well as on interviews with participants. The author argues that these social movements used Facebook as a tool to challenge mainstream media through their demands, goals, online and offline mobilizations, and organizational characteristics. His findings demonstrate that, although both groups viewed mainstream media as sharing similar characteristics, the particularities of each movement mediated the movement's general appropriation of social media.

In her contribution, Summer Harlow analyzes whether and how the Salvadorian nonprofit organization *Política Stereo* promotes citizen debate, participation, and action through the use of social media. The author investigates citizen participation, both *in* technology and *through* technology. Based on interviews, participant observation, and content analysis, Harlow conceives *Política Stereo* as a digital counter public sphere, a place to "hear the other side," and a platform that fosters online and offline participation and action. In her conclusions, she points out the emergence of a Salvadorian Twitterati and a social media divide that has serious implications for activism in digitally divided countries.

In her article, Diana Coryat brings together social movement scholarship and media studies by analyzing the limitations to media power brought about by mediated cultural politics, exploring the case of the confrontation between the Ecuadorean government (relying on public media) and the *Yasunidos* movement (appropriating social media platforms for resistance and confrontation). Coryat concludes that social movements enacting mediated cultural politics represent a counterhegemonic pole to the media power exercised by governments, corporations, and elites.

In their article, Patricia Peña, Raúl Rodríguez, and Chiara Sáez focus on the role of video activism in the 2011 Chilean student movement by looking at *TV para Chile* (an online television channel) and the videos produced by the *Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios* (ACES, Coordinating Assembly of High School Students). Based on interviews with key informants and content analysis of the audiovisual production of these organizations, the article concludes that video activism takes on different forms in the two cases examined: more structured and reliant on elements from mainstream TV in the case of *TV para Chile*, and more unstructured with formats that emphasize the role of witnessing and documentation in the ACES experience. The authors also bring attention to the lack of critical thought about the use of commercial digital social networks to broadcast counter-hegemonic discourses using video.

Jairo Lugo-Ocando, Alexander Hernández, and Monica Marchesi contribute to this Special Section by looking at the relation between protest and social media from the point of view of cultural chaos and virality/contagion, in order to examine if digital technologies were used to catalyze protest, or if they only represented a galvanizing factor amongst others, all in the context of the 2014 student mobilizations in Venezuela. For the three scholars, students in Venezuela acted as online opinion leaders, thus becoming nodes that altered the media ecology and fostered a mimetic effect in a context of cultural chaos. The authors conclude by underlining the role of social media as platforms for political engagement through imitation and emotions, while also rejecting false dichotomies of rationality/irrationality among the crowd.

The final two contributions are conversations held by Emiliano Treré with two experts in the field of digital media and social movements in Latin America. The aim of these two conversations is to close

this Special Section by providing broader reflections on both the contributions and challenges of digital media, and the battlefields of resistance in contemporary Latin America. The first conversation, with Bernardo Gutiérrez, centers on the exploration of technopolitics in the Latin American context. Gutiérrez discusses the multifaceted roles played by digital media technologies in the processes of resistance and emancipation of several Latin American countries, with particular attention paid to Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia. He argues that digital technologies have had a key role in transforming Latin American societies, and that similarities among these new mobilizations ought to be looked for in their technopolitical architecture and the forms of organization-action they assume, rather than in their demands, shared ideologies, and grievances.

In the second conversation, Geoffrey Pleyers discusses "The Battlefields of Latin American Struggles and the Challenges of the Internet for Social Change." First, Pleyers examines four types of movements that are significant in the region: indigenous and peasant movements, movements for democratization (of institutions, governments, and media), student movements, and movements for peace with justice and against violence and impunity. Then, he recognizes that social, political, and cultural changes in Latin America have to be inserted in a complex scenario where mainstream media and political elites are colluding; where independent journalists struggle to get their voices heard; and where governments have immense resources, both to spy on and control citizens, and to influence public opinion. Gutiérrez's analysis of the contributions of technopolitics, together with Pleyers' thoughts on the battlefields of information in Latin America, provides readers with a crucial set of resources to navigate the Latin American resistance scenario.

We hope that the experiences, debates, and reflections gathered in this Special Section can represent an open, coherent, and productive space, one from which an international debate on the role of digital communication technologies and online alternative media in contemporary Latin American struggles can emerge and thrive.

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