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Social Media and Virality in the
2014 Student Protests in Venezuela:
Rethinking Engagement and Dialogue in Times of Imitation

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This article examines the relationship between social media, political mobilization, and civic engagement in the context of the 2014 student protests in Venezuela. The study investigates whether these technologies were used by participants as a catalyst to trigger the protests and amplify them across the country or whether they were a galvanizing factor among more general conditions. The analysis uses cultural chaos and virality/contagion as theoretical approaches to discuss these events to provoke discussion about the relationship between protests and social media. However, far from a techno-deterministic assumption that sees social media as somehow having agency in itself, the authors highlight the role of social media as a platform for political engagement through imitation and emotions while rejecting false dichotomies of rationality/irrationality among the crowd.

Keywords: Venezuela, protests, guarimbas, social media, Internet, Chavismo, dialogue, virality, contagion, cultural chaos, democracy

Introduction

After the death of President Hugo Chávez in 2013, Nicolás Maduro was elected president of Venezuela by a slim majority in a contested election (Sagarzazu, 2014). Maduro inherited a fragile economy in which deteriorating public finances met with widespread shortages of basic goods, high inflation, general power cuts, and growing rates of violent crime (Kurmanaev & Russo, 2014; Pons, 2014).

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The situation came to a head in 2014, when students and other segments of society took to the streets to protest against the government (Chinea & Ore, 2014; Robertson, 2014)—a situation that government officials referred to as *guarimbas* (Vargas, 2015)—a slogan that is often used to refer to vandalism perpetrated by anarchist groups.

This article examines the relationship between social media, political mobilization, and civic engagement in the context of the 2014 student protests in Venezuela. The authors ask whether these technologies were used by leaders and participants as a catalyst to trigger the protests and amplify them across the country or whether they were a galvanizing factor among more general conditions. Following similar research that claims that viral media have played a key role in Spain's *indignados* movement (Postill, 2014), we use virality/contagion (Sampson, 2012) and cultural chaos (McNair, 2006) as theoretical approaches to analyze these events while examining their limitations and shortcomings in the context of the Venezuelan society.

We start by contesting techno-deterministic claims that see the use of these technologies as pivotal in instigating these protests. Alternatively, our findings suggest that if the technologies were used to coordinate protest efforts by some of the student leaders, their most important role was nevertheless to facilitate a mimetic effect among the many, or what is referred to in cultural studies as "contagion" (Sampson, 2012, p. 159) that took place in the context of a "cultural chaos" (McNair, 2006) fostered by a new "media ecology" (Strate, 2006). The concept of media/information ecologies has been used as a theoretical explanatory framework by some authors (Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2015; Rinke & Röder, 2011; Treré, 2012) to study protests and student movements and collectives. Emiliano Treré, for example, highlights the coevolutionary nature of these ecologies, in which actors learn and adapt as a group, and Michael Dahlberg-Grundberg on the Arab Spring underlines from his own data how some modern social movements and their technological keystones may work according to hybrid logics in the context of these ecologies.

Following these works, we also conceptualize the phenomenon of reproduction and rapid dissemination of the protests in Venezuela in terms of coevolution and hybridity. Our thesis is that this learning and adaptation happened in parallel to different logics. We think, however, that protesters' learning and adaptation occurred as a process of imitation. To investigate this thesis, we used a mixed-methods approach, which included triangulating semi-structured interviews and content analysis of the media. The findings suggest that social media did not trigger these events, although the data do underline that they were used to orchestrate protests and as channels of communication among protesters. The findings also indicate that social media was used as a collective non-geographical space for imitation.

This contagion effect, in our view, was very powerful in orchestrating mobilization as protesters came out not necessarily to engage with the political agenda of the leaders promoting the protests but to mimic the behavior of others. Protests in Venezuela are common—although usually not as widespread as they were in 2014—even among Hugo Chávez's supporters when he was still in power and the country's public finances were in better shape than they are nowadays. Therefore, these types of protests cannot be narrowly seen in binary terms of government versus opposition nor in terms of traditional political rationality but rather as a social practice linked to freedom of expression (Gargarella, 2008). Protests in

Venezuela traditionally have been used to highlight issues that liberal institutions have not addressed. The fact that people protest does not mean that they are not supportive of the government or that they have engaged somehow with the political agenda of the opposition (Cañizález, 2013a) but simply that they are trying to become visible to and connect with those in power.

The Protests and the Students

There is little that indicates the existence of a structured student movement capable of mobilizing large segments of the population in Venezuela. Moreover, some of these students' movements are appendixes of the political parties in opposition (Sosa, 2014). Indeed, most of the student protests came from both the national autonomous—not managed by the central government—and private universities, both with little *Chavista* support given the social background of students. The suggestion is that there is a class element in the interplay as the protests were led by middle- and upper-class individuals who have seen a deterioration in their life standards and traditional entitlements (VenEconomia, 2005) and who have been at the core of the opposition to the government (Ito Cerón, 2014).

However, we also question the government's conspiracy narrative that the protests were orchestrated efforts by the right to overthrow the government (TeleSUR tv, 2014), even though there is clear evidence of past involvement of the opposition to do that in 2002 (Hernández, 2004; Lugo & Romero, 2002–2003). However, there is no hard evidence that these protests were part of a wider plan against Nicolás Maduro; nor did the extent of these protests make it likely that they were somehow part of a coordinated effort funded by foreign powers (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2014b; Nikandrov, 2014), because it is unlikely that these forces had that capacity to mobilize people to such an extent.

On the contrary, participation in these protests was mostly spontaneous. As such, they became spaces in which discontent converged but in ways that not only reflected frustration toward the curtailing of middle-class liberal aspirations but expressed the type of struggles for social rights that had been seen in the past from workers unions. The students were able to galvanize the discontent regarding shortages of food in the supermarkets, limitations in housing provisions, crime, inflation, and job prospects while reflecting the anger against diminishing liberal entitlements among the middle class.

Protests have often been defined as "sites of contestations in which bodies, symbols, identities, practices and discourses are used to pursue or prevent changes in institutionalized power relations" (Taylor & van Dyke, 2004, p. 268). As such, they are spaces of temporary convergence of resistance, discontent, and overall power in which the individual becomes part of what historically has been called the "crowd" (Canetti, 1962; Le Bon, 1895/2003; Ortega y Gasset, 1930/1966). This crowd can exercise collectively power in ways in which the individual cannot.

We also identify with the concept of protests through John Dewey's (1927/2012) notion of "the public," which comes into existence by its association with a particular set of issues. Accordingly, protests happen as a consequence of inadequate institutional channels to either address the issue or hear the voices of discontent. The weaker the institutional channels are, the greater the likelihood of protests

taking place in a liberal democracy. Therefore, the lack of credibility and trust in liberal institutions is a powerful encouragement for protests to happen (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

In the case of Latin America some important studies have examined the protests (López Maya, 1999; Machado, Scartascini, & Tommasi, 2011; Yashar, 2005). Most of these works have focused on how protests have affected politics and how they link with transnational resistance movements against the power of the elites and the imposition of neoliberal policy. Other studies have looked at how these resistance movements articulated the power base for today's left-wing governments (Arditi, 2009). However, as Susan Eckstein (1989) has pointed out, "neither political science paradigms of regime types nor theories of social movement have been able to adequately explain why segments of the population at times go out and protest while others stay at home" (p. 1). It is a conundrum to which Antonio Gramsci (1950/1996) dedicated much work.

To problematize this issue further, student protests present a series of elements that are based on class assumptions. First, most students in higher education are of either the upper or middle classes (Leher, 2010). Despite this, most studies on student protests have highlighted the "vanguard" status that these movements enjoy within the public imaginary in terms of both resistance and contesting to power. The overall role of student protests have been studied in the past. From the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas (1968/1971) to Singer's (1970) examination of the French May of 1968 to more recent works on China (Calhoun, 1997). In all these studies, student protests have been presented as an element that challenges those in power.

Venezuela also has a history of student protests against power. This includes the 1928 student movement against the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (Arellano, 1988; de Sucre & Mendoza, 1967; Figueroa, 2008), the incorporation of students into the guerrilla warfare of the 1960s (Tarver, Angulo & Loaiza, 2004), and the student protests against the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s (Pérez-Liñán, 2008). Precisely because of the role of students against the dictatorship, the constitution of 1961 awarded most national universities autonomy from central government, which also prohibited police and military forces from entering their grounds (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2014a). Indeed, the history of students' protests in Venezuela has been mainly associated with and constrained within these university spaces.

This conceptualization of student protests as spatial realities—in which discontent is able to converge and express itself as radical contestation of power—is pivotal in understanding why and how social media has been incorporated into these protests. This notion suggests that the use of social media allowed the projection of influence and power beyond the physical boundaries of university autonomic spaces. It also indicates that it was technology that allowed these protests to spread across the country.

Contagion Effect

Although only 40% of the population in Venezuela has permanent access to the Internet (Tendencias Digitales, 2012), students were able to project their message of discontent widely because they had the resources and knowledge to access social media (Sádaba, Bringué, & Calderín, 2011) in a

scenario in which mobile devices had become the main communication platforms for access (Bonina & Illa, 2008) and despite traditional "mainstream news media being now overwhelmingly controlled by or extremely susceptible to government power" (Cañizález, 2014, p. 160). Students using social media acted as "opinion leaders" (Schramm, 1955), allowing different elements to converge and to produce unexpected outcomes; in other words, creating a media ecology that unleashed the destabilizing impact of digital communication technologies (McNair, 2006).

Paradoxically, it was under Hugo Chávez that Venezuela increased its access to the Internet and made the use of social media a priority (EFE, 2011; Martínez & Rico Díaz, 2104). Politically speaking, this was done to offer alternative spaces beyond the traditional mainstream media, which, at the time, was mostly controlled by the opposition and economic elites (Lugo & Romero, 2002–2003). The strategy was directed at increasing public presence of pro-government voices, social organizations, and citizens in the public sphere to counterbalance the then hegemony of the privately owned media. It was under Chávez that political struggles were taken to the virtual space, "especially after the coup in April 2002" (Lozada, 2004, p. 170), which highlighted how vulnerable the government was in relation to connecting and mobilizing with its supporters.

Due to these policies, the novelty of the technologies, and a marked increase in the average income of the population, Venezuela saw an exponential growth of almost 300% in the number of Internet users (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2014c). "One of the most avid groups in adopting these technologies were the nongovernmental organizations and other groups often associated with the so-called civil society" (Urribarrí, 2011, p. 48). Nevertheless, according Raisa Urribarrí (2011), a researcher in the area, there were already important indications of the intention of the government to control these spaces and other problems derived from the expansion of the user base:

> If between the years 2000 and 2011 the state in Venezuela developed a set of programs and public policies directed at increasing access to the Web—going from a penetration of 3.38% to 36.57%—it is also important to highlight that the government's own communication conglomerate, CANTV, literally monopolizes the Internet provision by controlling over 90% of the market with an average speed of less than a megabyte per second (1Mbps). The tragic paradox is that while the number of people connected grow, the quality of the Internet connection has deteriorated. All this while the government increases its grip of the net. (p. 50)

During this time, pro-government voices started to talk about the need for "a new media hegemony" (Cañizález, 2013b, p. 30) that could counterbalance what they saw as counterrevolutionary movements orchestrated by the right-wing sectors. These pro-government voices specifically refer to the articulation of a general communication strategy that would use social media to create alternative spaces of communication and propaganda (Venezolana de Televisión, 2013). By the time the protests broke out, the media ecology was dense with new voices and channels.

The Spark

The first protests took place in the cities of Mérida and San Cristóbal in the southwest of Venezuela (López Maya, 2014). After the assassination of student Bassil Alejandro Da Costa on February 12, 2014, the protests spread to other cities. Da Costa's death was recorded and uploaded to YouTube (Ramírez, 2014), becoming a viral phenomenon. Seeing this cold-blooded killing in an environment in which people identified with the students led to mass protests. What followed, in our view, reflects the phenomenon of "contagion by empathy" (Sampson, 2012, p. 155), in which there was not only empathy toward Da Costa and his family but deep resentment against the government. Regarding this view, journalist and blogger Luis Carlos Díaz, commented:

> There was an emotional break between the government and large segments of the younger population who say on You Tube how presumably members of the secret service, Sebin, shot in cold blood that students. It was an emotional moment that I would personally best describe as the moment that young people in Venezuela, particularly in certain segments, loss their innocence. It was then and there that they realize that traditional channels would not work for them and that they were indeed facing a different type of regime. (personal communication, November 11, 2014)

According to some estimates, "over 800,000 people went to the streets" (Uzcategui, 2014, p. 153). This became one of the largest student mobilizations in Venezuela's recent history, and, according to most polls at the time, it had wide support from the general public, who saw the protests as legitimate (Instituto Venezolano de Análisis de Datos, 2014). In the face of this public support, the government found it impossible to downplay the protests. Instead, the government opted to disfranchise those participating in the protests by criminalizing the students and presenting the protests in the official narratives as *guarimbas* (Venezolana de Televisión, 2014). According to Amnesty International (2014), dozens of students were incarcerated and hundreds were injured in the crackdown that followed.

The government has repeatedly claimed that the student protests were orchestrated by the opposition with the support of the United States to overthrow Maduro (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2014b), and certainly there is evidence that some of the leaders of these protests were heavily involved with the party politics of the opposition (Konducta, 2014). Nevertheless, the size of these events leaves no doubt that more complex factors were at play. Similar protests in the past were confined to the autonomic areas of the universities or their adjacencies, but this was the first time that this type of protest spread so widely among so many different segments of society. It is this multiplying effect that calls for further analysis. Why were so many people drawn into these protests? Why were these protests able to transcend the small geographical autonomic areas of the universities for the first time? Moreover, given the limitations regarding participants' backgrounds and the nature of their overall political discourse, how were they able to reach out to so many people simultaneously?

Research has pointed to austerity programs, decreasing living standards, and police brutality as having a pivotal role in triggering these types of events (Newburn, 2011). For example, the United Kingdom saw similar protests in Bristol in 1980 and in Brixton (London) and Toxteth (Liverpool) in 1981.

All cases involved decreasing living standards, racial discrimination, and police brutality. However, none of these events transcended relatively small geographical areas in the United Kingdom. The difference between these previous events and the 2011 London riots—which spread simultaneously across many cities in the United Kingdom—was, according to some authors, the new media ecology. This allowed for protesters to connect with occurring events and with one another across the country while bringing into play simultaneously a series of elements and events, "collective intelligence" (Lévy & Bonomo, 1999), and shared political imaginaries. This research has recognized the role that social media played in amplifying these types of events (Dant & Richards, 2011). Accordingly, the new media ecology became a medium in which various elements galvanized to foster the imitating of political actions in terms of contagion/virality.

Scholars such as Henry Jenkins have nevertheless criticized the metaphor of virality, suggesting to use instead the term *spreadability* because it recognizes human agency (Usher, 2010). Nonetheless, we continue to adopt the term *virality* in our own work, because for us agency does not necessarily translate to control—not even to individual control. Contrary to Jenkins, we see virality as an argumentative metaphor, which implies human agency/intervention, although not necessarily the ability to control or set direction to protests as social practice. The use of the term *virality* as an argumentative provocation implies that the messages can take on a life of their own with the sole purpose of surviving and thriving in the new media ecology—something that does not preclude human agency.

Spreading the Word

We find the logics of virality useful, particularly in relation to the formation of the crowd and in the context of contagion, because:

> The chaotic rhythm of contagious encounter is indeed easy to observe but not so easy to control. Certainly, unlike the assumed substance of the memetic unit, the incorporeal material of affective contagion has a distinct ungraspability. (Sampson, 2012, p. 95)

Sampson and other scholars (Borch, 2006; Nye, 1973) have been clear in their own work about the tendency of early authors such as Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), and José Ortega y Gasset, (1883–1955) to psychologize participative social movements. They also remind us of Tarde's and Le Bon's disdain toward the crowds; they saw them as the "masses" of lower-class urban dwellers with little rationality and acting on primal instincts. Moreover, generations of social movement scholars have produced a comprehensive critique against both Tarde and Le Bon and have written extensively about alternative explanations.

Nevertheless, we believe that the exponential growth of the student protests in Venezuela can be examined using the laws of repetition and adaptation. We also think Le Bon's mental unity principal is still valid as a tool for scrutinizing how the crowd "absorbs the individuals into the suggestibility of the many" (Sampson, 2012, p. 169). According to Le Bon's (1895/2003) mental unity of the crowds' principle—or meme:

Under certain given circumstances, and only under those circumstances, an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed, doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics. The gathering has thus become what, in the absence of a better expression, I will call an organized crowd, or, if the term is considered preferable, a psychological crowd. It forms a single being and is subject to the law of the mental unity of crowds. (p. 46)

For Le Bon, who had witnessed the Paris Commune, the rise of Georges Ernest Boulanger, and the Dreyfus Affair, some events were able to galvanize a multiplicity of elements and ultimately lead to the mobilization of large segments of the population. In such cases, he suggested, people behave differently as individuals than when they are in a group.

Sampson (2012) points out that in an age of interactivity, this "meme" effect transcends the physical boundaries and can spread more widely and faster. Therefore, given the right conditions, a protest can become an epidemic in a matter of hours, taking on a life of its own. This does not, however, preclude agency from the different participants. On the contrary, the virality metaphor suggests that the protests acquire their own agenda and dynamics through imitation among individuals, which would explain why the protests in Venezuela grew so quickly despite the leaders of the opposition lacking the political appeal to mobilize the protests. (When the leaders of the opposition, Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado, initially called for people to protest in the streets, few heeded their call.)

Sampson argues that, in certain cases, empathy becomes a means of contagion, which indicates that emotionality can play a key role in protests.[1] Far from an indictment of lack of consciousness among students and members of the public when joining these protests, the metaphor of virality/contagion reminds us of the false dichotomy between rationality/irrationality and rationality/emotionality in relation to human political behavior. In this context, the students were seen as legitimate protesters and as acceptable role models (drawing parallels with British youngsters joining ISIS nowadays). The fact that their words and actions spread through Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube only added to that legitimacy of participating in these protests, because there was no apparent mediation between them and the general public who could listen and see them directly.

Sampson (2012) also suggests that the process of contagion is temporary and that it declines and dies, just as a virus does. This temporality means that the contagion effect subsides over a relatively short period of time—which would explain why the student protests decelerated their spread after some weeks and then declined until stalling. However, this is not an entirely satisfactory explanation; heavy-handed police and military intervention to crack down on the protesters, the imprisonment of key

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[1] It is important to clarify that by using the notion of contagion, Sampson is not passing judgment, despite the usual negative connotations of the word. Rather, he is using the word *contagion* it to metaphorically describe certain patterns of behavior.

opposition leaders, and a sustained media campaign to criminalize and delegitimize the students had perhaps a more crucial part in the waning of the protests.

It is also possible, according to some journalists covering the events, that the prolonged perception of anarchy and disorder was in itself a driving force for the protesters losing legitimacy in the public eye and was a motive for many to withdraw from the protests. Rogelio Suárez, journalist and news editor of the Radio Fe y Alegría broadcast network in the west of Venezuela, points out:

> There was a sense after a while that it was too much, that the protests were going nowhere. That the *guarimbas* were only making things worse. After a while, the protests themselves became, in the eyes of many people, the problem. (personal communication, November 10, 2014)

Here the metaphor of virus is also useful, because collective perceptions can also halt imitation once they reach a saturation level in which the host body is killed. The analogy here is clear: The host body in this case is a public sphere that experiences information overload, leading to disengagement of individuals.

Despite theoretical limitations, Sampson's approach can help us better understand why the protests spread so fast and to so many places simultaneously. Meanwhile, McNair's assumption that in the age of cultural chaos the new media ecology can enhance distribution of content by bringing complexity into the equation also help us understand why this contagion became possible in the first place in a country where mainstream media spaces as institutional channels to express discontent were becoming increasingly curtailed by political polarization and government censorship.

Blackout and Beyond

By 2014, the Venezuelan government exercised control over most of the mainstream media, and it had a firm grip particularly on the broadcasting sector (Bisbal, 2011; Cañizález, 2010; "El Gobierno de Hugo Chávez," 2010). It did so mostly by reformulating the legal framework that regulated media ownership and broadcast licenses (Ramírez Alvarado, 2007), "allocating almost discretionally government advertising" (Cañizález, 2010, p. 63) and access to hard currency to buy paper, equipment, and spare parts (EFE, 2014). Where media control was not possible, the government used the judicial system to prosecute media owners and journalists (La Federación Internacional de Periodistas, 2009) while supporting and encouraging the buyout of oppositional media outlets by groups and individuals with close links to the government ("Silvia Alegrett," 2014).

Our data suggest that the mainstream media effectively tried to minimize the student protests, as is standard practice in most societies. A sample of stories published in the newspapers *El Nacional*, *Últimas Noticias*, and el *Correo del Orinoco* during the months of the protests (February to April) reveals that the protests did not receive as much coverage as one might expect. Even in *El Nacional*, the only one of the three newspapers that identifies itself openly with the opposition, just 46% of the stories about the

protests had a picture, and only 36% made it to the front page. More importantly, all three newspapers articulated their stories using politicians and government officials as main sources instead of the students.

The broadcast media also downplayed the protests. Examining audiovisual archives from two key television channels, Venevisión and Televen, during March 2014, it is possible to see that coverage of the protests was limited to the news segments and to brief sections of these. Although there are interviews with leaders of the opposition and human rights activists, students are all but absent in these reports. Both Venevisión and Televen claim to be the independent channels and portray their reporting as unbiased. Nevertheless, our sample of their coverage of these events suggests that the use of official sources and the invisibilization of the actual protests were characteristics of the news coverage in those days.

In terms of audience reach, the overall news media landscape failed to connect with the type of decentralized politics that are popular among younger people. Therefore, it is not surprising that both the students and important segments of the public relied more on social media to learn what was really happening. Research carried out just after these events indicates that the use of social media provisions such as Twitter "increased significantly during the days of the protests" (Arenas & Delgado, 2014, p. 70). This body of research suggests that the increased use of Twitter and Facebook also saw a politicization in the nature of the messages being exchanged. Not only were people using more social media; they were using it to discuss and exchange political messages.

There is, in addition, evidence that social media was used to create a space of protection against police brutality in a manner similar to events in the past when the universities' autonomic spaces offered refuge for protesters. For Melanio Escobar—a Twitter user who became prominent during the student protests as he gathered and published the names, pictures, and locations of people being detained by the police, the national guard, and the intelligence services—the question was simple:

> I felt that unless we gathered and published the names of those being detained, something could happen to them. In South America we have a long tradition of disappearances, people who are arrested and then vanish forever. (personal communication, November 21, 2014)

Escobar explains also that the use of Twitter and Facebook grew in part because it also became a system of self-defense:

> Those of us who were taking part in the protests noticed from the start that it was in those marches and situations in which there were no journalists present in which most of the deaths in the hands of the police occurred. These deaths happened during protests in which there was no one reporting in social media. In fact, there is no trace of Daniel Tinoco's [a 24-year-old student at the University of Táchira] assassination nor of Robert Redman [a 31-year-old recently graduated pilot]. There is no evidence or public register of the deaths of Génesis [a 23-year-old model and student at University of Carabobo] or Adriana Urquiola [a 28-year-old sign language interpreter for a local

television network]. We also notice that when people were filming or taking pictures, the police and the armed forces seemed to behave in a more constrained manner regarding the use of force. It then became obvious that we had to gather and disseminate this information. That meant asking people in the marches to take pictures and record footage with their mobile devices and then upload them to the Internet using social media. Once that was there, we all started to tweet so people could become aware of what was happening. (personal communication, November 21, 2014)

According to Escobar, the use of social media was not only a matter of dissemination; it responded to the need to reduce uncertainty and anxiety among the families of the students who had been arrested or injured,

I personally visited Fuerte Tiuna[2] and other places. I managed to compile the names of nearly 3,000 people who had been detained. I published their names—and in many cases, their pictures, thanks to amateur photographers in the place. Thanks to that, families, relatives, and friends of those under arrest were able to know where their loved ones were being held. I also know that other Twitter users did similar things from the hospitals and even from the morgues. The whole point was to reduce uncertainty and anxiety among the public. Let's remember that there was literally a blackout of the mainstream media, and social media was the only channel we had to communicate these things. (personal communication, November 21, 2014)

People also used social media "to set the record straight." José Leonardo León Avendaño—a broadcast journalist who is managing news director of the radio network Circuito Radial de la Universidad de los Andes and a part-time stringer for Thomson Reuters in the city of Mérida, where some of the biggest and more intense protests took place—explains what he saw those days:

People were using Twitter to disseminate the pictures of who were causing the vandalism and the destruction of property. It was not the students, but the pro-government groups called *colectivos*. These quasi-paramilitary groups, heavily armed and protected by the police itself, patrolled the city searching for protesters while vandalizing houses, buildings, and offices. People wanted to show what was really happening because this was not being reported by the mainstream media. They felt perhaps that at least in that way they were showing the impunity with which these people were acting. (personal communication, November 21, 2014)

The universities as institutions played a role in disseminating the messages about the protests, although indirectly. As Rogelio Suárez, a radio journalist based in Maracaibo points out:

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[2] Fuerte Tiuna is the main headquarters for the armed forces, and it became a massive detention center during the student protests.

It was curious to notice, for example, that the three main universities in the state of Zulia—URBE, LUZ, and UNICA—were constantly updating information to their students and staff members using their official Twitter accounts. In these updates they informed people when they were open, when they were closed—one could assume because of protests—or in which of their campuses there were particular problems. In so doing, they were practically mapping the geography of the protests, so if someone wanted to go, they knew exactly where to go. There is no doubt in my mind that the use of the institutional social media accounts by these universities gave indirectly information about the protests. There were also unofficial accounts of groups or individuals closely linked to these universities who not only provided similar information but went beyond to give far more details. (personal communication, November 10, 2014)

These descriptions of the increase in the use of the social media at the time do not explain why the contagion effect happened so quickly. Why did it translate into political action among so many in such a short period of time? Iria Puyosa (2014) offers a possible interpretation for this: "The propagation of political ideas happens only when a critical mass of nods gets connected" (p. 42). In other words, the digital platforms provided an opportunity for the protesters to reach that critical mass, after which the protests became viral. Puyosa argues that, thanks to the connections among the critical mass, political ideas can bypass the barriers created by polarization, which, until then, had prevented each side from reaching the other's constituencies.

Puyosa, nonetheless, also warns that it was not possible to identify a core leadership in the protests. Between February and April 2014, as she points out, "when people took to the streets, the politicians and student leaders tried in vain to interpret the actions in a coherent manner" (p. 45). Indeed, the movement failed to create or even to set the basis for a more collective identity that could respond to the discontent that led to the protests in the first place. Because of the lack of cohesion—or centrality—the temporality of the movement was sealed. According to Luis Carlos Díaz:

The use of social media during the student protests amplified the scandal and stirred the anger and frustration against the government. But at the end it failed to articulate a civil agenda that somehow was able to synthesize people's aspirations and demands. (personal communication, November 11, 2014)

Does this mean that without political rationality—following emotional contagion/virality—it is not possible to achieve a more permanent change or long-standing agenda? No, because participation by means of emotional imitation can also lead to rational innovation in politics. For Sampson (2012), who is coming from a cultural studies perspective, it is precisely imitation that allows society to create new things. By this he means that once contagion occurs and is replicated among many, there will be variance, and it is from this variance that we can expect change and innovation.

This variance, in the case of Venezuela, can mean new forms of doing politics and engaging with the public. Student participation, at least partially, did occur by imitation, and it meant that thousands became politicized in ways in which they were not previously. People are starting to discover new ways of

political engagement. The question, however, is: What type of engagement are they learning under these circumstances? For Jesús Urbina—journalist, blogger, and a professor of media studies at the Universidad del Zulia:

> What the use of Twitter and Facebook showed during the protests is that their use reflected in many ways some of the worst aspects of our own political culture. If you think about it, they were not used to articulate spaces for democratic dialogue and cohabitation. Instead, they were used to design bubbles of contestation, making it even more difficult to speak to each other, which is what democratic society ought to be doing—at least in those areas in which dialogue could bring some sort of shared view of the future. Instead, social media was used in the same manner we tend to use television, newspapers, and the rest of the traditional media: to further delimit our own spaces. (personal communication, November 10, 2014)

Indeed, if social media has brought innovation in terms of political engagement, the key problem remains: the absence of spaces for dialogue in which people can exchange ideas, views, and shared interests.

Conclusion

At no point has been our intention to suggest that the student protests in Venezuela can be solely explained by psychology or techno-deterministic perspectives, which remain the key characteristics of virality and cultural chaos as theoretical approaches. On the contrary, we have tried to highlight their profound limitations as explanatory frameworks. However, we did find the virality and cultural chaos approaches useful as instruments of argumentative provocation, which, as Niklas Luhmann (1995) noted, can be crucial to opening new understandings. Neither are we saying that these technologies either hinder dialogue or foster a more inclusive public sphere per se. It has been, instead, users' practices and political culture, characterized by extreme polarization and violence, which have stopped political dialogue from happening among the different actors.

Our argument has been carried out to explore the power of those using these technologies for fostering emotional links among participants and for participation and civic engagement in ways that Venezuela had not seen for years. This is a process that Jeffrey S. Juris (2012) has called the "emerging logic of aggregation" (p. 259), which is able to assemble masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces. We have suggested that this logic of aggregation can happen also in metageographical terms. In light of this, we call for future research to explore how to make social media a space in which we all learn and innovate through the imitation of dialogue rather than an extended trench for propaganda and polarization.

At this point, is worth revisiting the history of the first democratic spaces for dialogue that were created in Latin America. "When universities were awarded autonomy, free from central government intervention, this was done to give them the freedom to debate ideas" (Cordero, 1959, p. 8). Indeed, since the university reform in Cordoba (Argentina) of 1918, this autonomy was understood not only as

geographical spaces protected from central power intervention but as a metageographically encounter for dialogue, knowledge, and political participation among individuals. In these spaces, academics were given autonomy to teach and research, and students were encouraged to imitate that same contestation to power and advance democratic citizenship. It is perhaps time, then, that we learn from these lessons and use social media to develop spaces for autonomic dialogue in which people and governments can engage with ideas and views without feeling excluded or threatened and in which imitation truly translates into democratic innovation.

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