

REVOLUTION 2.0: PUTTING THE FEAR INTO AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES –

DIGITAL CULTURE AND POLITICAL
COMMUNICATION IN LATIN AMERICA



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In March 2008, Cuba was one of the last countries of the world to loosen its restrictions on the ownership and use of cell phones by private individuals. Previously, restrictions regarding computers and other electronic devices had been lifted already. The consequences are there for all to see. With this step, Cuba too finally moved into the digital age. What is of particular importance for the political opposition in this context is the impact in terms of publicity and visibility. According to the deputy editor in chief of the newspaper “Diario de Cuba” (www.ddcuba.com), Antonio José Ponte, the greatest change today consists of the fact “that the force propping up the Castro regime now has witnesses, that these witnesses are willing to speak out, and that more and more people around the world are willing to listen.”¹ Pablo Diaz from the same paper adds optimistically: “The revolution of the new technologies is heralding the end of the Cuban Revolution. The Internet helps to protect those living on the island and to sensitize those outside.” Jorge Ramos Ávalos brings it down to the simple motto: “More Internet, less dictatorship. The real revolution comes in the form of the cell phone.”² As long as fifteen years ago, Nicolas Negroponte accurately described the likelihood of governments being able to restrict the dissemination of news via the Internet in his classic work “Being Digital”: “The attempt to restrict the freedom of digital broadcasting will probably be as futile

- 1 | Antonio José Ponte, “Cuba: Fin de la violencia sin testigos,” *El País*, Mexico edition, March 31, 2010.
- 2 | Jorge Ramos Ávalos, “Más Internet, menos dictadura,” *Reforma*, México D.F., March 31, 2010.

as the endeavors of the Romans to hold up the expansion of Christianity.”³ Unfortunately, the danger that he also alluded to in his work, namely that “in the course of events unfolding, some of the early, brave data senders” might be eaten by the lions, can actually be observed in similar occurrences from the Ukraine all the way to Iran.

This new situation was demonstrated on the occasion of the death of Orlando Zapata Tamayo, who died after being on hunger strike for 85 days. That was how he had

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protested about the inhumane conditions of his incarceration. Pictures of the grieving friends and family went around the world by cell phone; his mother was able to make a direct statement in Yoani Sanchez’s blog *Generación Y*, an effective medium, which has since also been honored by an award from the *Deutsche Welle*, and which has 16,000 followers on twitter and 4,000 Facebook fans. People from the democratic opposition made arrangements – also by cell phone – to meet for demonstrations and for the funeral. One further new aspect was that the enforcers of the regime, who were brought in from other districts to cause disruption, could be more easily identified. Photos of these people passed on by cell phone facilitated identification.

Certainly, the suppression of information by the government appeared to be coming to an end – it was no longer possible to conceal events even in official media. This set a development in motion whose consequences cannot yet be fully appreciated. But what they showed to the human rights activists above all is that they were not alone. Accordingly, the aim now is to improve their access to modern technology and undermine restrictions by the Cuban government. These cover, for instance, the import of satellite phones, which allow people to bypass the island’s controlled service providers. However, sometimes even small devices such as a simple USB stick are of great help, for instance for passing on texts, presentations, suppressed literature, or photographic documents, as

3 | Nicolas Negooponte, *Total digital – die Welt zwischen 0 und 1 oder die Zukunft der Kommunikation* (München: Bertelsmann, 1995).

well as for the setting up of independent digital libraries. Contrary to their “material” predecessors, these are also far more difficult to confiscate and easier to reproduce.

It is clear already that these technologies will facilitate greater participation outside official channels and the emergence of a civil society on the island. Current studies – of which there are too few in Latin America, especially based on empirical data – hint at an interesting correlation. Carmen Beatriz Fernández stresses:

“Especially in the countries where the level of economic freedom is particularly low, the new technologies are used most frequently for *cyber activism*”⁴. In countries with a developed communication structure and a securely established freedom of press there seems to be less need. Added to this is the fact – not only for Latin America, but also for other developing continents – that the new technologies are of help to the population precisely in those areas where there is a lack of established terrestrial network infrastructure. Cell phones and computers make functions possible that were previously unfeasible, even extending to areas such as financial services.

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CHANGES TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

It is not only in authoritarian systems that the changes brought about by new media technologies and their application become apparent. When two students from the elite university *TEC* in Monterrey in Mexico recently got caught between the lines in a fire fight between police and drug gangsters and were killed, it was their fellow students posting on *twitter* who made sure that the events were conveyed authentically, putting the official statements into perspective. The Mexican new media expert Octavio Islas attributes the “symbolic capital” and the international support that has reached the famous *Subcomandante Marcos* and his Zapatista guerrillas in Chiapas in his country

4 | Carmen Beatriz Fernández, *Ciberpolítica – Como usamos las tecnologías digitales en la política latinoamericana?* (Buenos Aires: KAS-Programa Regional Medios de Comunicación y Democracia en Latinoamérica, 2008).

mainly to the supporter networks on the Internet.⁵ In Argentina, opponents and supporters of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner are fighting virtual online battles, prompting journalist Pedro Cifuentes to comment: "The unanimous public opinion is that these virtual platforms do not convince the undecided, but strengthen the opinions held by those involved. And they are, of course, also important for the coordination of meetings and demonstrations in the real world."⁶ Verbal excesses, encouraged by the anonymity on the Web, also raise doubt about the independence of the activists from certain political parties.

Mexican cyber activist Martha Zapata Galindo confirms that social movements make use of the alternative media: "Political and social movements use the Internet for organization, coordination, as well as cyber activism. It is interesting that use of the Internet for mobilization and for activism has been increasing steadily in the indigenous movements in particular."⁷ However, concrete

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events are also being organized offline, since access to the relevant technologies is still rather poor. But organizations like UNESCO are now providing support especially to indigenous communities for the utilization of

the virtual world – for instance in Peru. Various service providers in Latin America have facilitated these endeavors by waiving their fees. Zapata Galindo adds that it is possible, however, that the divide between those who have access to the new technologies due to knowledge and economic opportunities and the have-nots will grow wider at the same time.

Here and in other social networks too a countermovement has been emerging for some time now encompassing everything you won't find in the classic media – partly because those are subject to the self-censure that journalists exercise for various reasons. It also means,

5 | cf. Octavio Islas, Carlos Enrique López und Fernando Gutiérrez, "La propaganda por la Presidencia de la República en Internet," *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación*, Sept. Oct. 2000, 16 - 20.

6 | Pedro Cifuentes, "Kirchner sí, Kirchner no, 2.0," *El País*, Mexico edition, February 16, 2010.

7 | Martha Zapata Galindo, "Es gibt im Internet die Möglichkeit, alle Grenzen und Kontrollen zu überschreiten," interview with *Lateinamerika Nachrichten*, 372 (June 2005).

however, that the information is no longer passed through professional filters, which the user could generally rely on in the past when evaluating the truth of a piece of news. This has now at best been replaced by self-control and other users on the Web – similar to the Wikipedia method.

Governments all over Latin America have been attempting for years to encourage the use of computers and the Internet with various measures, from courses and training for all groups of the population to the provision of an appropriate public infrastructure. There are initiatives being conducted in many places, especially at communal level, to also use the Internet for forms of e-government and to increase the transparency of public administration in particular. In countries with endemic corruption, this is a particularly laudable endeavor. Mexico, for one, is trying to make public tenders accessible that way; Chile encourages tax payments via the Internet. In many instances, citizens are experiencing greater efficiency. At the same time, issues of data protection and cyber criminality are emerging, as everywhere in the world, which countries in Latin America are not well prepared for.

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NEWSPAPERS' FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

All this causes substantial changes for newspapers in particular, leading to a fight for survival; a particularly serious issue is the downturn in the volume of classic advertising, which is shifting to the Internet. These days, the number of Internet users clearly exceeds that of newspaper readers virtually everywhere, especially amongst the young. "Today," says Lydiette Carrión, "a journalist or author without an Internet presence simply no longer exists."⁸

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8 | Lydiette Carrión, "Periodismo en la blogósfera – la panacea?" *DFensor*, 2 (February 2010), Comisión de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal, 17 - 18.

a whole, the figure is around thirty percent. In Cuba it is as low as 12.7%. In Brazil, Internet users spend 6.18 hours online per day according to ComScore, in Mexico four hours. According to a study by McKinsey, the youth of today only spends half as much time watching television as their parents; but their Internet consumption exceeds that of the older generation by some 600 percent. As regards the ownership of cell phones, countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela have now statistically reached virtually total coverage.

THE PARTIES ARE UPGRADING

While Internet communication seems to have had hardly any effect during elections in 2000, we are now looking at a totally different picture. It is, for instance, possible to demonstrate that the Internet was being used intensively during presidential election campaigns in Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico und Columbia as far back as 2006, while there was not much evidence of this happening in Bolivia, Chile and Costa Rica as yet. And that was the case although authors such as Michael Cornfield had already confirmed the significant influence that digital communication had on the election result in the USA back in 2004: "Did internet use make a difference in the 2004 presidential race? Yes. The most successful campaigns relied on it to gain advantages over their competitors. The numbers of adult Americans who relied on the internet to learn about the campaigns, to help make up their minds, to help others make up theirs, and to register and vote is simply too large relative to the final margin to think otherwise."⁹

It was the experience of Barack Obama in the US confrontation in 2008 at the latest that brought the breakthrough, even though conditions in the north of the continent still differ greatly from those in the south: in many aspects of election campaign communication the USA are the great international exception rather than an international model. The imitators are active in Latin America as well, with a greater or lesser degree of success. This was particularly apparent just a few months ago in the Chilean presidential election campaign, where the successful candidate

9 | Michael Cornfield, "The Internet and Campaign 2004 : A look back at the campaigners," on Pew Center Web site, <http://www.pewinternet.org> (accessed April 20, 2010).

Sebastian Piñera developed his website successfully into a virtual communication center, focusing on providing prospective supporters with options to participate. 39,000 users followed his daily campaign activities on *twitter* alone – he proudly declared himself the most successful *twitter*o of the country on Facebook. The candidate also kept his followers up-to-date on their *BlackBerrys* – for instance with anecdotes on the occasion of his visit to Europe where he met Presidents Sarkozy and Zapatero.

Rafael Rubio Nuñez draws the following conclusion: "The socio-political situation and the new tools are forcing the parties to open up to people through channels that permit direct contact with society and that allow them

to convey their own message directly without intermediaries."¹⁰ Of course this presupposes that there is a credible message, because in the end the Internet is just a tool that cannot replace values, content, and strategy. Upgrading their technical tools alone will not be sufficient to counter the loss of credibility

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that parties and politics are suffering from. According to the Argentinean marketing expert Carlos Fara, "the public is starting to see through the methods of political marketing, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to appear credible and authentic. Once you have seen through the magician's tricks, they lose their effect."¹¹

NOT FOR CONTROL FREAKS

According to Carmen Beatriz Fernández, however, Latin-American candidates often don't actual use these technical possibilities to their full potential on their websites. "They simply serve as notice boards for information and offer the user little opportunity for interaction," says the Venezuelan expert. But there must be a desire for interaction in the first place. Internet campaigns in the US such as that fought by Barack Obama or previously also by Howard Dean – who acted as a pioneer in this area in collaboration with his campaign manager Joe Trippi – were only as

10 | Rafael Rubio Nuñez, "La nueva comunicación política – lenguaje, blogs, videoblogs y comunidades sociales," *Bien Común* / FRPH (México: D.F., October 2007), 38 - 48.

11 | Carlos Fara, "Locos por el marketing," *Imagen* 58/2002 (Buenos Aires), 23 - 25.

successful as they were because campaign management did not constantly intervene to try and control and regulate matters.¹²

You need to make a choice. If you want to utilize the creativity of the Internet community for your own candidates and your own message – always assuming your appeal

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to this target group is assured – this will only work if you allow it appropriate freedoms.

For many Latin-American parties, which tend to be organized along strictly hierarchical and authoritarian-patriarchal lines, this is particularly problematic. Furthermore, people who become involved also want to have some influence – and whether this is always desirable to the political leadership is no doubt questionable. Anyway, experience shows that the Internet now also makes an effective platform available to parties and candidates who cannot afford a costly media presence – especially if they rely on Internet-savvy target groups and their multiplier function. In general, however, it cannot be demonstrated that election campaigns have really become less costly thanks to these new possibilities. One particularly drastic example is the party system in Mexico that enjoys extravagant state funding.

POLITICIANS ON ALL CHANNELS

For many politicians in Latin America too it has become the done thing to have a presence in virtual social communities, such as *Flickr*, *YouTube* or *Facebook* and supply their followers with their SMS messages. Young members of parliament and the youth organizations of the parties tend to take the lead in this. To present yourself as particularly human, close to the people and approachable can, however, also result in unwanted humor, especially if action and image don't quite match. But it was no different in the television era.

In recent campaigns, the Internet has proved to be a particularly fruitful arena for all sorts of negative campaigning, since it is usually easy to veil the source of messages quite effectively. Octavio Islas speaks of genuine

12 | cf. Joe Trippi, *The Revolution will not be televised – Democracy, the Internet and the overthrow of everything* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

ciberguerrilleros in this context. Many an item that originates in an anonymous message on the Internet quickly finds its way into the established communication channels and the classic mass media. Hacker attacks on opposition websites have also become part of the weapons used in the confrontation. As early as 1997 Esther Dyson stated: "The Internet is a superb medium for conspiracies, the television on the other hand for propaganda."¹³

The Internet also allows rules prescribed by national election laws to be evaded, such as the time restrictions for the publication of polls in the days immediately prior to an election. In Mexico, the national election institute IFE is currently conducting such a fight against windmills. Negative campaigning has been explicitly prohibited there since an election law reform in 2007, and now it is up to the supervisory body to monitor matters and enforce the rules. During the midterm elections in 2009, there was a flood of complaints about things happening in the virtual sphere that made the authorities look helpless and that started up a debate about the need to regulate the Internet more strictly, as was to be expected. However, these ideas have not come to anything as yet. Their practicability was always in question anyway, and placing a little more trust in the mature citizens and their judgment might not be a bad thing in the digital age either.

In spite of all the advances in the area of the Internet, the traditional media of radio and television still seem to have a much greater impact in Latin America. Many Latin-American presidents – a prime example being Venezuela's Hugo Chávez with his endless *Aló Presidente* broadcasts – are seeking direct contact with their citizens through the television channels. Efforts to obstruct or even totally suppress undesirable stations underline the value ascribed to the impact potential of the "classic media". This does not, however, stop them also wanting to restrain the Internet: "The Internet cannot be free for everybody to do and say whatever they want," Chávez stated at a meeting of his United Socialist Party in the middle of March. Websites that "poison the mind of many people" especially were anathema to him. And the judicial system of his

13 | Esther Dyson, Release 2.0: *Die Internet-Gesellschaft – Spielregeln für unsere digitale Zukunft* (München: Droemer Knaur, 1997).

country has responded to relevant “hints” from politics in the past, for instance by an attempt to call the popular website *NoticieroDigital.com* to account for “anonymous defamation”. According to Peter-Alberto Behrens, the state now has direct control over 731 communication channels.¹⁴

Other governments are making great efforts to push their messages into the editorial content of various media. This is thought to project greater credibility than the use of advertising. For economic reasons, many media are playing along with such obfuscation. Apart from the question of illegality, the professional ethics of the journalists is at stake here in many cases. This and strict professionalism are still the most important competitive advantages in the fight for the attention of users, listeners, viewers and readers. Based on figures from Latin America covering the period from 1995 to 2005, Peter-Alberto Behrens has shown that there has been an clear loss of credibility already.¹⁵

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At the same time, the classic media companies are trying to secure and expand their share of the digital cake by combining their offerings in the areas of television, cable, fixed landline and cell phone services, referred to as the prospective business of *cuádruple play* in Latin America. The telephone companies for their part are trying to gain a foothold in the market of program content. There is a great need for appropriate legal regulation covering the media.

With all these analyses, one needs to consider the far-reaching implications that the advances made by new technologies and the changes occurring in the media landscape will have on social cohesion and the life of the individual – beyond the immediate political consequences. In this respect, the prognoses by scientific observers of the democratically governed countries of Latin America in particular do not differ from those in other parts of the world. They fear that the shift of the political discussion into the digital sphere will bring about a loss of quality in public discourse – with consequences for general social cohesion – as well as wholesale control, overstimulation,

14 | Peter Alberto Behrens, “Aló Presidente – Presse und Politik in Lateinamerika,” *KAS-Auslandsinformationen* 2/2010, 97 - 112.

15 | Ibid.

feelings of powerlessness, and a virtual "enslavement" of people by the permanent onslaught from cyberspace.

However, similar opinions were put forward when television with its myriad talk shows clearly and permanently failed to meet the quality of debate offered by the features in serious newspapers and magazines. Of course quality standards are debatable, but you can hardly deny the increase in the opportunities of obtaining information and participating afforded to wide swathes of the population by the current expansion of the media offering.