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#VIRTUAL DEMOCRACY

On April 24th, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in cooperation with Catholic University of Pernambuco (UNICAP) hosted the event "Democracia Virtual" in Recife, in order to discuss changes within the flow of information's which are linked to the internet and social networks. These are transforming many social dynamics within our globalized world, affecting the day-to-day life of individuals in almost every aspect, by raising political consciousness, which also enhances the political organization of societal groups against the governments. At the same time, governments and other political agents are also being influenced, changing the way they interact as well as their outcomes.

Parallel to this, an international conference in São Paulo, addressing the importance of internet, its governance as well as its future, was taking place. The speakers as well as the audience in Recife built parallels to this event, by reflecting on the implications of cyber governance on virtual democracy. This resulted into a vivid interaction between speakers and audience within a well attended conference room, demonstrating the increasing importance which this topic represents within different spheres. The event was attended by the academic as well as political spheres, including the presence of youth wings of political parties, such as the Democrats and Pirates. Both speakers and audience were able to interact with each other on a face-to-face basis, as well as virtually via Twitter, by using the hash tag #DemocraciaVirtual, the comments of which were presented on a screen within the conference room.

Virtual Democracy in the social networks

In the first panel, Gregory Ryan, project coordinator of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, held an introduction on the current placement of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., whose importance seems to be continuously growing. The undeniable impact of these places demands on both society as well as political institutions, requesting answers to the traditional top-bottom model and vice versa. This creates a demand to thoroughly analyze its uses and consequences, due to social networks being a tool which could help creating an exchange between citizens and its respective governments.

Ryan pointed out that it is past due to accompany and understand this specific evolution, which affects societies as whole but does not seem to follow a defined pattern. More over, the interactions between various social agents and governments, which take place in this new context, also need to be understood.

The first speaker, Vinicius Braz, founder and NetWeaver of the P2P Foundation Brazil Glocal Initiative, emphasized that the phenomenon of networks being composed by individuals, is no novelty. What makes the movement of today special is that due to

social networks, the flow of information has been enhanced and its access has been facilitated, enabling a wide interaction among individuals around the world.

He commented on the concept of glocalization, on the global citizen, embodying an evolution which enabled each individual to become more global and interconnected through networks, giving birth to liquid, direct and glocal democracies.

These new dynamics affected almost all imaginable areas of human conduct, leaving no doubt that social networks play an important role within the wave of protests and revolutions around the globe (from the Arabic spring, to the protests in Venezuela and the manifestations in Brazil, all promoting a horizontal interaction within social media). These are examples of how glocalization enables countries and societies to learn from each other.

This first presentation was highly interactive, motivating the participation of the audience and interactively using social media, concentrating on the movement of activists from the hacker scene, which among others, where participating on the parallel event in Sao Paulo, the NETMundial conferece. He considers this event to be central, due to the circumstance that depending on how the technical and governing standards for the internet, and, by extension, social networks are defined, the net community may evolve in one or another direction. This process, thus lamented Braz, is however dominated mainly by a few governments and enterprises; and although civil society was present through the so called multi stakeholder groups, Braz questioned whether they could legitimally speak for the public in general terms.

Understanding the internet as a new terrain without boarders, which can be used to promote the empowerment of individuals, constituted the core argument of Thales

Castro's presentation, Professor at the UNI-CAP and Damas Faculty as well as the consul general of Malta. Due to the internet being a occidental creation, he questioned the circumstance of divulging a rather western understanding of it throughout the world. Not all societies and countries can identify themselves with occidental values and hence have difficulties adopting concepts of democracy and human rights, which have a great western influence. Therefore it is important to understand the different values and understanding across cultures and societies of the world.

The European model is not necessarily compatible with the ideas of all countries and adopting the former is neither always necessary nor desirable to achieve accepted conditions by their societies. By stressing the differences between Islamic and occidental human rights, he comes to the conclusion that the use of the internet not necessarily has to fit into the Westphalian mold.

Building upon this argument, Elton Gomes, Professor of Damas Faculty and NEPI-UFPE, highlighted the rise of cyber activism during the past 20 years, which created a new environment to disseminate ideas through new methods of communication. He then linked the premise of this idea to the Brazilian manifestations of June 2013, which augmented the political consciousness of the general population. These protests enabled a huge territory to connect, thus magnifying the capacities of the state and politically organized citizens to be more responsive and effective (process enabled by economical stabilization, international inclusion, improvement of access to information and better education).

These new movements were able to address the inefficiency of the public machinery as well as of the societal behavior, a phenomenon resulting from the immense dissatisfactions regarding international sport-

ing events in Brazil. These protests, which did not have a clear objective and focus and were significantly influenced by anonymous leaders, ended up counteracting the initial mobilization.

Despite the lack of legitimacy of politicians, Gomes reinforced that cyber activists and opponents of the system still seem to be dependent on political parties, due to the fact that these interconnected opponents were still not able to create a movement which would have the power to replace the current flawed system.

This year is marked by the Brazilian elections as well as the world cup, offering individuals new possibilities to articulate their political demands, promote civic culture as well as political and civic education.

Virtual Democracy and political institutions

The subsequent panel concentrated on a top-bottom view regarding social media, highlighting the influence and the efforts of political institutions, as well as their difficulties to adapt effectively to the new demands within the sphere of social media. Gustavo Diniz, research fellow of the Igarapé Institute, started the discussion by displaying the challenges and possibilities of social media. Concentrating on the former, he stated that it is perceivable that criminal organisations are able to effectively exploit social media for the means of boosting their success and recruiting new members. Due to the fact that access to the internet has been facilitated even in the most remote areas, organized criminal groups as Mara Salvatrucha from Honduras and Knights Templar Cartel from Mexico, but also smaller sized groups within Brazilian favelas were, and partially still are, able to expand their networks using social media. In this regards, methods of combining non-technological or low-tech with high tech

venues, has proven to be effective. Examples include pigeons transporting smart phones into jails as well as home-made explosives pilot-controlled by high tech devises.

At the same time, Diniz stresses the capabilities of social media triggering (however not producing) massive protests, as seen in Brazil in June and August of 2013. While these manifestations were mainly peaceful, a militant and anarchist group rose, which was welcomed by some and rejected by others. In regards to the former opponents, government security and police assumed an increasingly repressive and aggressive approach to reestablish security, which at the same time lead to a devaluation of freedom and hence to the support of the counter weight which anarchist groups represented. On the account of the latter, the violence and related constrains on both sides was dismissed completely, questioning the legitimacy of such groups.

Diniz comes to the conclusion that social media bears possibilities and risks for our societies, to which governments are responding with various digital measures. These include interaction within social networks as well as digital and technological surveillance, leading to the well known question of balance between liberty and security. While currently no solution is at hands, more incentives should be dedicated to finding a way to guarantee a more just and open on- and offline world, based on the norms of cooperation and trust.

Subsequently, Mauricio Wanderly, Professor for International Relations of the Catholic University of Pernambuco first stressed the importance of the value of horizontality which the internet is known for. The same horizontality which displaced the center of debates into social media networks enabled and motivated more people than ever to participate in open debates. But at the same

time Wanderly required every one to question what and who is behind the growth of this activism, implying that potentially individuals are playing the same role as in their offline society.

Wanderly considered the possibility of a Leviathan (in reference to social contract theory), which penetrates the core of our societies and hence also reveals itself within the virtual sphere. Governments are constructed upon an off- and online network as well, however this network does not enable an horizontal dialogue, in neither sphere. Hence, the praise of the open, free and horizontal World Wide Web and the condemnation of governments infiltrating this liberty, leads him to the thought of rethinking the governments role as a whole. According to him, we do not only need a more dynamic and flexible space within the internet, but also in the offline world. The life of individuals is dynamic and changes constantly, making equally dynamic and flexible governments desirable. In order to reach this, a constructive dialogue is necessary to promote coexistence

The last speaker, Hugo Suppo, Professor of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, started his speech highlighting that social media in the end is just that: a medium to express ourselves. Moreover it's a medium which isn't being used in the same manner by the government as it is by the society. This leads to many social movements which are addressed at governments via social media, but at the same time the addressee might be blindfolded in this regard. This however does not mean that governments are completely blindfolded in regards to the use of social media as a whole, since states for example are effectively using the latter to promote their national interests within the international arena. This demonstrates that traditional public diplomacy can very well be transferred and transformed to meat similar objectives through new venues.

In order to construct the democracy that we are longing for, Suppo states that we need to make use of the potentials of public democracy within relevant spheres. Whether social media is one of these adequate spheres as well as an appropriate medium to promote and discuss these topics has yet to be shown. He stresses that for now, virtual democracy is merely a trend, which has to prove that it can also make use of public diplomacy to promote its interests. Until then, Suppo urges to be patient and to wait before investing more political, social and economical resources into a medium, which still has to prove its efficiency and efficacy.