

Digital Media Practices and Social Movements. A Theoretical Framework from Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation in Latin America using digital media is the result of a long, continuous process of social appropriation of communication technologies from the culture of subordinated groups. One of the classic examples is the network of miners' radio stations in Bolivia since 1949, which represent one of the most outstanding examples of grassroots, participatory communication in the world (O'Connor 2004). However, this process of social appropriation of communication technologies has

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marked the difficult and contradictory fights for democracy in the region in light of the lack of visibility channels in an exclusive system that is at times virtually monopolised by the dominant mainstream media, both analogue and digital (Sierra 2006). Regarding digital media, the uprising of the indigenous communities in Chiapas in 1994 was one of the first times in the world that the internet was used as a means of protest, to support a social struggle, which was original in its rhetoric and global in its expression of opposition. The Zapatista uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) was a symbolic and media-focused breaking point in Mexico and Latin America. This was firstly because it coincided with the entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement and secondly because it gave the situation of the indigenous population visibility in the media, as it was a group that had historically been excluded from television (Sierra 1997, 1999). Later, the massive spread of low-cost technologies and the broad experience built up since the 1970s in the region in community-based, grassroots communication aided the empowerment processes of the new media and digital culture for protests and in all aspects of social life. This could be seen in student movements such as #YoSoy132 in Mexico and the “Penguins’ Revolution” in Chile, and the convergence between analogue and digital citizens’ media projects operating in contexts of armed conflict such as in Colombia (Rodríguez 2008, 2011).

Starting with the alternative digital media experiences that have taken place in the last two decades in Latin America, this chapter proposes a theoretical and methodological framework inspired by the critical tradition of participatory communication for social change as it developed in Latin America (McAnany and Atwood 1986; Beltrán 1974, 1993) and the contributions made by the scientific community of the so-called Latin American School of Communication—ELACOM¹—(Sierra 2010; León 2007, 2008, 2010). ELACOM, from the last decade to the present, is the work programme which best symbolises and represents the search for identity in Latin American thought on communication (Marques and Gobbi 2000, 2004; Fuentes 1999). We also propose an analysis focused on an approach from below that helps to better understand media practices (Couldry 2004, 2012; Cammaerts et al. 2013)

¹In Spanish *Escuela Latinoamericana de Comunicación*.

and the mediation process (Martin-Barbero 1993, 2006) in the Latin American region.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, we underline the latest framework of collective action that has characterised the new cycle of struggles in Latin America. Secondly, we outline our proposal, which will consider three pivotal aspects of the process of appropriating and using digital media. We will introduce the importance of the emotional dimension in the process of appropriation, and how the protagonists give digital media new meanings and uses, such as *Do It Together*, which are the result of the cultural hybridisation in Latin America. Afterwards, we explore how the bonds that are formed between the media and the protagonists reflect a “new” community of reference distinguished by horizontal processes. Finally, we analyse how the net activism practice leads the participating people to experience a process of empowerment. We explore the potential of our conceptual framework based on some concrete examples drawn from secondary and primary sources related to the Latin American struggles and movements that have been studied by the authors in the last two decades (Sierra 1997, 1999, 2006, 2010; Gravante 2016; Sierra and Gravante 2012, 2014, 2017). In the conclusion, we discuss how the language and narratives of Latin American grassroots communication establish, as a result, the relevance of proposing another “point of view” for communication studies in the Western world.

To summarise, our theoretical and methodological framework can serve as an analytical lens that helps us better understand the *performative function of media* (Rodríguez 2001, p. 82), that is, how people use digital media to re-create their identities, values, ways of life, cultural practices, and forms of interaction that have at have not been permeated by capitalist-driven logic. Examples of these actors include indigenous movements and urban grassroots movements, which together question theories on the use of collective action and social conflict from the point of view of the media and the representation of digital culture (Treré and Magallanes-Blanco 2015). The historical context experienced by Latin America will then be considered in order to rethink the concepts of the public sphere and media citizenship (Sierra and Gravante 2012). The geopolitical and social background justifies the need to consider conflicts and the role of communication in accordance with a new epistemic framework and new thought that establishes a non-colonial focus on the south (De Sousa Santos 2010a, b, 2014; Yehia 2007) and an approach from below with a view to breaking away from the binary,

techno-centred rationality of media activism as a simple process of appropriation, resistance and political opportunity (Treré and Barranquero 2013).

NEW MEDIA AND EMERGING SUBJECTIVITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

After the expansion of the transnational network of solidarity with the indigenous people in Chiapas in 1994 over the internet, the spread of the World Wide Web and increased access to and use of digital technology in the second half of the 1990s were celebrated by many activists and scholars around the world—particularly in the USA and Europe—as the advent of a “Renaissance 2.0”. According to techno-optimists, new information technologies would give rise to a new humanism that would lead to another possible (and utopian) world. In fact, the start of the new millennium brought with it a change in world geopolitics, and it was not caused by digital technologies. The violent repressions enacted by the police and paramilitary groups on common, ordinary people who had participated en masse in demonstrations against the meetings of large international economic institutions²; the systematic co-opting of the more active individuals in collectives and grassroots movements by protest professionals—the NGOs that composed the *Social Mundial Forum*, left-wing parties and unions³; finally, the new “national security” laws and priorities since the attacks on September 11, 2001 that would identify all activism as a terrorist threat led to (especially in Europe, Canada and the USA) the decline of movements against the neoliberal policies that had characterised the end of the 1990s. Meanwhile, in Latin America, besides the fall of the anti-globalisation movement, a new cycle of resistance was beginning, led by individuals and groups (peasants, indigenous communities, collectives of homeless people, the unemployed, *villeros*, *chavos banda*,

²A fundamental episode that marked the end of citizen participation was the repression at the G8 protests in Geneva in 2001, with the murder of a young activist, Carlo Giuliani, by Italian police.

³This co-option also involved a group of hackers who had helped create dozens of projects and virtual networks, which were then absorbed by defence and military intelligence departments through different companies for creating and managing espionage, surveillance, and remote arms control software.

students, *cartoneros*, housekeepers, etc.),⁴ which outgrew the classic studies of collective action and the traditional frameworks of politics and the social sphere (Zibechi 2007, 2010a, b, 2012, 2014; Regalado 2010, 2011; Regalado and Gravante 2016). These social subjects, based on the patchwork of everyday life (De Certeau 1984; De Certeau et al. 1980), in line with the Latin American tradition of popular and participatory communication, produced multiple links with digital and analogue media in their protests, such as the Argentina protest in 2001 with the alternative media *Red Eco Alternativo*, *Cono Sur*, *Indymedia*, *Red Acción* (Vinelli and Rodríguez Espéron 2008), and in the Oaxaca insurgency with the hybrid-digital radio station *Radio Escopeta* and *Radio Disturbio* (Gravante 2016). Furthermore, as Jeffrey Juris had stressed in his research about the emerging forms of tactical and alternative media associated with the global justice movement in Spain (2008), the social movement digital media experienced in Latin America share two important, interconnected dimensions with the so-called anti-globalisation movement: the media activist networks' structures have no centre, their organisations are structured using a horizontal networking logic (set of practices for political activities such as horizontal and anti-hierarchical organisation, consensus-based decision-making, direct action, self-organisation, self-managed and self-reliant projects, and so on); the alternative media are characterised by prefigurative politics, in other words, the media projects anticipate or enact an 'alternative world' in the present. For this reason, and following Barassi and Treré's analysis, it is possible to explore the relationship between digital media, media strategies and social movements' tactics by considering everyday media uses (2012).

So, the original experiences that emerged throughout the Latin American region revealed, within this new framework of action, that the

⁴ *Villeros* are people who live in suburbs of large Latin American cities like Buenos Aires or Santiago del Chile. These working-class barrios and neighborhoods are excluded from all sorts of facilities in terms of education, culture, health, etc. *Chavos banda* are very young people, generally from rural, poor villages, who live like beggars in urban areas such as Oaxaca, Mexico City, Guadalajara. *Cartoneros* are people who make their living collecting and selling salvaged materials to recycling plants. This movement began in Argentina in 2003 and has since spread to countries throughout Latin America. Most of these people live under the shadow of the informal economy; they do not exist for nor are they represented by the ruling class.

process of appropriating digital technology was not limited to knowing how to use a computer or connecting to the internet, nor was it a process that simply meant possessing digital technology. Instead, digital media were part of an integrated process of providing new codes and new meaning for the public and social spheres (Neuman 2008). In the same way, other scholars (Barassi and Treré 2012; Treré 2012; McCurdy 2011; Mattoni 2012; Juris 2008), in their research on digital media and social movements, stressed the need to rethink the relationship between media and culture and move beyond functionalist approaches in order to start to analyse media as practice, as Treré has pointed out: “[t]his means taking into account not only ‘what people do’ with the media, but also the sets of beliefs, ideologies, and understandings whereby practices are ordered” (2012, p. 2363).

Starting from these media practice approaches based on Couldry’s theorisation (2004) and on Martín-Barbero’s pivotal work (1993), which urged for a shift away “from media to mediations”, we start our proposal by exploring everyday practices of (digital and analogue) media appropriation through which the protagonists play out resistance and resilience against the hegemonic system. In doing this, the fieldwork of our research experience has shown that an approach from below is needed in this cycle of struggles that began with the outbreak of protests in Argentina in 2001. It means, above all, placing the focus of the study on the individual and his/her subjectivity, without separating the person from the collective. In other words, we need to look at the *ordinary, working people*⁵ generally ignored by those in power and by scholars. In fact, this proposal is not based on the experiences of hacktivists or members of the organisations that participated in the protests, because of the understanding that fundamentally all social change is the result of transformation only visible in the everyday actions of millions of people (Holloway 2010). Therefore, taking an approach from below involves analysing digital media experiences that are performed by ordinary people in the cities or places where the fights are taking place and that involve self-managed media, i.e., they are not the result of any initiative or support from official organisations (parties, NGOs, unions, etc.).

⁵“We, the ordinary, working people” was and still is the way in which the people of the Water and Life Defence Coordination Group in Cochabamba, Bolivia, describe themselves.

Now that the new cycle of struggles that has characterised Latin America has been put into context, and what we understand to be the focus of analysis from below in our approach has been explained, the following section will break down the first aspect of our theoretical and methodological approach, focusing on tools to better understand why ordinary people decide to appropriate a form of digital media, and how that type of media is modified, adapted and given meaning.

APPROPRIATION PROCESSES AND CREATIVE RESILIENCE PRACTICES

Analysing net activism practices from below means moving away from a technology-focused perspective and concentrating on the processes that occur between the form of digital media and its users, always bearing in mind that the appropriation process is vitally linked to the social and cultural fabric in which the form of media is developed, in terms of the everyday culture and the life experience of the subjects. In other words, it is necessary to consider the appropriation and uses of technology as processes of sociocultural mediation that go beyond establishing the video technology (Orozco 1996, 2007) and the processes of sublimating and creating myths linked to the birth of each “new” technology (Trerè and Barranquero 2013).

Emotional Dimensions of the Appropriation Process

Over the last twenty years, studies of social movements and collective action have highlighted the role of emotion in studying protest. There are numerous scientific contributions which show that including the emotional dimensions as a variable in analysis helps to explain the origin, development and success or otherwise of a social movement (Jasper 1997; Polletta 2006; Flam 2000; Goodwin et al. 2001, 2004). Furthermore, it is hard to find activities and relationships that are more openly emotional than those linked to political protest and resistance (Goodwin et al. 2000). It is unsurprising, then, that in net activism there should also be a reconsideration of a series of emotional and cognitive processes that push common, ordinary people to appropriate digital technology (Poma and Gravante 2013). Other research projects in the communication field have shown that the rage and pain caused by repression, anger against the ruling class, and the feeling of injustice are created through processes like moral shock, the emergence of threats,

the identification of those responsible and the injustice frame, among others, which determine the mediation model in conflicts (Gravante 2016; Sierra et al. 2016).

Analysing these processes makes it possible to understand the first act of appropriation of digital media: why do ordinary people choose to approach something that they were not familiar with before and create a web portal, a blog, a radio station or streaming television? Furthermore, thanks to the emotions that accompany small victories, solidarity, social relationships, etc., it is possible to understand the learning process, how technical difficulties are overcome and the use that is made of digital media. Analysing the emotional dimensions of net activism practice in Latin American grassroots movements therefore shows how these actions emerge and develop, following a pattern of pain-rage-determination-rebellion-freedom. They progress according to the social rationale that has long been found in the discourse and practice of Zapatistas and indigenous communities, which undoubtedly reveals a feeling and imagination that are different from the results of the social analysis of the new cycle of protests in Latin America (Esteva 2014). From the 2001 protests in Argentina, the people's insurrection in Oaxaca in Mexico in 2006, and the defence of the Mapuche people's land in Chile to the latest protests in 2014 in Brazil, one of the elements that has decisively determined collective action is the feeling of rage towards the ruling class when people see that the reality conveyed by the mainstream media does not coincide with the reality that they experience in the streets. Unlike the protests against austerity that have taken place since 2010, especially in the USA and Europe, and the protests by organisations that compose the so-called Global Justice Movement (in which pain and rage were framed in a cost-benefit paradigm), grassroots protests carried out in Latin America by subaltern classes are defined by *righteous rage* (*digna rabia*), as it is called in Mexico: a feeling of indignation that emerges when people feel that their dignity has been defiled, causing them to break away from their condition as victims and shift towards another action.

Creative Use in Net Activism Practices

While analysing the emotional and cognitive processes that emerge from social protests allows us to understand the use of digital media, the next stage in comprehending the process of technological appropriation is studying how the protagonists use these media and what meaning they

give to them. The process of appropriation is not merely reproduction, doing a *CTRL + C* and *CTRL + V* of content, reading a manual or downloading a guide from the internet. On the contrary, appropriating a form of media represents—and makes possible—a minimum level of freedom, initiative and other ways of creating meaning. The practice of communication does not depend only on use but also, fundamentally, on social forms embedded in people's *habitus*. Therefore, the appropriation of digital media is not only the ability to do something collectively, but also the ability to redesign the tool and digital culture so that it fits the protagonists' diversified reality (Martín-Barbero 2002). As Orlikowski has pointed out, in his research about the relationship between everyday working life and technologies, appropriation and 'technology-in-practice' "include the meanings and attachments—emotional and intellectual—that users associate with particular technologies and their uses, shaped by their experiences with various technologies and their participation in a range of social and political communities" (2000, p. 410).

In order to explore how people critically negotiate with technological structures, it is interesting to see how the role of distinguished elites or creators at scientific centres is not unheard of in the Latin American media appropriation model but it is not hugely significant. It is a model of appropriation, or rather an action that involves adapting, transforming and actively receiving, based on a different code that belongs to the people and brings with it enjoyment as well as resistance. Some examples of struggles and resistance in defence of land and its natural resources by countryside communities and indigenous peoples have emerged as the response to extraction policies in Latin America, and are characterised by the creative use of new technologies. Experiences of the digital media used by the Mapuche indigenous peoples in Chile, the indigenous peoples of the Peruvian rainforest and the indigenous communities of the Chaco Boliviano, among others, show that the use of technology includes a process of adaptation, replacement and/or rejection; at the same time it forms hybrids of analogue and digital technologies, of existing rural, community-based practices and emerging urban practices, and of indigenous world views and the imaginations of a new generation of digital natives. Finally, the appropriation process goes beyond the limits of reproducibility and heteronomy, and is instead an act that breaks away from the dichotomy of original/imitation, where there is innovation of practices, meanings and sometimes tools.

Digital Media in Latin America: Do It Together!

The miscegenation (*mestizaje*) and cultural hybridisation of Latin America (García-Canclini 1995) is the result of flows in which indigenous people blend with the rural, the rural with the urban, the folkloric with popular culture and the popular with mass culture (Martín-Barbero 1993) and in this cultural front is where new identities are developed and come in conflict (González 2001). Latin American cultural hybridisation generates codes that are deeply desacralised, radically subversive and anti-hierarchical, permanently distant from the values and visions of dominant classes. The upshot of this is that to understand media practice and the use and meaning of digital media in Latin America, it is also important to consider digital media among the components of a community—organisation, rules and principles that relate to physical and material space, etc.—and the elements of communality—such as spiritual existence, ethical and ideological code, political, social, legal, cultural, ethical and civil conduct, etc. (Díaz Gómez 2004). These parts are mixed together and included in net activism in different ways, according to different experiences, collective and individual histories, but always permeated by the “Do It Yourself” culture. For example, the lack of technical resources in urban experiences in Argentina was overcome by using *trueque*,⁶ that is, by exchanging and installing parts from old computers to make “new” PCs. In the Oaxaca movement, in Chile, and in Brazil crowdfunding was also used. The lack of internet access for the indigenous Zapoteca communities in Mexico when defending their land was overcome thanks to the implementation of a wireless broadband internet network using a UHF TV channel. In other words, the difficulties encountered during the media experience were overcome largely thanks to solidarity bonds developed during the protest, and self-taught, informal practices. “Do It Yourself” does not include only the individual, but is instead a common practice that essentially consists of an education process experienced by all the protagonists. In these experiences, the “Yourself” in DIY becomes

⁶ *Trueque* is the exchange of material or immaterial goods or services for other goods or services, and it is different from normal sale/purchase because money is not involved in the transaction. It is a pre-Hispanic custom common in many Latin American indigenous communities, and is now widespread in urban areas too.

“Together”, that is, the appropriation practice involves collective abilities and DIY becomes Do It Together. In DIT, the roles and responsibilities of the sender and receivers are blurred, and it is difficult to find the line between those who make the media, those who are protesting and those who sympathise with the struggles and receive the media. Do It Together encourages the receivers to join the practice of self-publication (from comments, discussion forums and blogs to open publishing of content, videos, etc.). In other words, it directly involves the audience in the production and distribution of its own messages using transgressive practices such as irony, humour, culture jamming, provocation, etc., in which the action is related to reflection, which can lead to a change in people’s everyday lives (Freire 1970, 1976). Thanks to DIT, it is the individuals who establish the interpretative framework on creative action and power because they are not merely consumers/producers of considerations belonging to others. Instead, they create their own reflections with the aim of changing the ways of building their own lives. An example of this is the recent construction of the Cuban blogosphere, which is attempting to use the digital network to reproduce and build new processes of autonomy based on the values of the 1959 Revolution.

In short, the process of appropriating digital media that takes place during a protest is the result of a range of cultural and social mediations. Therefore, any study of net activism cannot be limited to simply analysing the structural elements; instead, it should focus on what Raymond Williams called “the structure of feeling” (Williams 1973). The following paragraph will discuss the elements that are believed to define the relationship between people and the digital environment.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES

The approach from below has led us to consider the appropriation of technology as a social activity bound to the experiences of the protest’s protagonists. Shifting away from techno-centric aspects makes it possible to consider how the appropriation of digital media is the social construction of a public media space in which people create meanings and identify with them. The bonds that are formed between the media and the protagonists reflect a “new” community of reference distinguished by horizontal communication between sender and receiver.

Digital Media as a Meaningful Space

Observing the physical places where the different digital media experiences in Latin America took place (social centres, public computer centres, private homes, community centres, etc.) has revealed the popular culture in the social setting (Martín Barbero 1993). In other words, the space surrounding the digital media undergoes a process of identification by the users: from stickers proclaiming free software in Zapotec language to photos of Che Guevara and Maradona, photos of children, girlfriends, those killed by the police, even a magnet of Richard Stallman with his GNU. This identification process is also reflected in the virtual binary code too: logos on the websites, jingles that open radio and TV streaming programmes, personalised avatars in forums, etc. In the case of the Mapuche people fighting for their land, for example, symbolism is built and ranges from text and flags to images of religious power (*Machi*) and political power (the *lonco*) (Godoy 2003). In all these experiences, symbols serve as signs of appropriation, since this is how a space is delimited and defined, and at the same time they indicate the personality of the people and groups that create the digital media.

When we move into a new house, a process of appropriating the space begins, i.e., there is a period in which we adapt and we wait for things find *their* place. It is the same when people appropriate a form of digital media: the first step is “building confidence” with the new tool, acting on the medium, mastering it and transforming it, creating the logo, choosing the graphics and the domain name, with the aim of making the media space “our own”. Creating these digital “geographies” also involves forming a feeling of belonging related to building a community and its collective imagination (Escobar 2008, 2010). Creating new public media spaces involves producing cybercultures that create resistance and transformation or introduce alternatives to dominant culture and politics, whether virtual or real (Escobar 1999).

Digital Media as Temporary Autonomous Communities

In the appropriation model defined here, certain relationships and bonds are developed between the media and its users, which include identification, interaction, projection, personalisation, territoriality and privacy aspects. When people appropriate a form of digital media they do not merely develop a utilitarian relationship with it in order to, for example,

break away from the media siege of the mainstream media; they also establish a relationship with the place where the communication takes on meaning, and attempt to leave their own experiences, their own imprint, behind (Pol Urrútia 1996, 2002). People project their personality—or create another—through the media practice and interact with each other and with others. Through these interaction processes, people give the media space an individual meaning. When implementing digital media, one of the first elements of the dialectic process which helps the people and the media bond is choosing a name, i.e., the domain for the web pages, blogs, etc. The choice of name reflects the desires and motivations that led these people to become involved in the fight. This is the case, for example, of the *Revolucionemos Oaxaca* (Let's Revolutionise Oaxaca) web portal of the 2006 protests, the *Kimche Mapu* (Wise People) radio station or the *Ñuke Mapu* (Mother Earth) website of the fights of the Mapuche people, the streaming TV station *Rompeviento* (Windbreaker), and the *Tarifa Zero* (Zero Fare) website of the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement) in Brazil, etc. It can also be seen in the use of hashtags⁷: #NãoVaiTerCopa, #YoSoy132, #BRevolução, #comunidad-mapuche, #VemPraRua, etc. The result of the relationship established with the form of digital media lets the protagonists redesign the reality in which they live and reinvent a relatively autonomous media area (Bey 1985) organised using its horizontal and anti-authoritarian practices that temporarily elude hegemonic structures of organisation and/or social control. Therefore, as previously stated, the different aspects of our approach are bound together. The relationship that is found within a new community is bound to affective, cognitive and interactive processes, and through these processes people give the space a meaning, assigning the characteristics of their new community identity to the media. Moreover, this new community “may also apply to more stable issue advocacy networks that engage people in everyday life practices supporting causes outside of protest events such as campaigns” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). An example of this can be seen in the Mexican movement #YoSoy132 (Treré 2013; Gómez and Treré 2014), which valued the features of a new subjectivity, a new citizenship open to dialogue

⁷Significant data in Latin America on the use of the Twitter and Facebook social networks can be found only for the period after the Spanish language versions were launched: 2008 for Facebook and 2009 for Twitter.

and debate, collective deliberation and decision-making, with greater capacity for autonomy and empowerment.

Finally, with the act of identifying and building this new, autonomous media area, we find, among other things, processes for re-creating and redefining values, beliefs and identities that lead the participating people to become aware of aspects of reality that until that moment they had not considered—or to change their perception of reality and act accordingly. In summary, the people involved experience a process of empowerment. In the following paragraph, this last aspect of our approach is analysed, i.e., how the media experience influences processes of empowerment and social change.

ACQUIRING POWER

Empowerment is a process that fully emerges in the acts of identifying with a form of digital media and re-creating values mentioned earlier. This concept involves the individual and collective process of acquiring power, not as “power over somebody” but rather the “power to”, as potential (Dallago 2006). Naturally, when we enter a situation of social conflict, the empowerment process covers aspects other than communication. In other words, both the experience of digital media and the experience in the protest develop processes that go beyond reflections on digital technology and citizen communication, etc.

The Development of “Another” Communication

From 1994 to today, the galaxy of digital media experiences in Latin America has been responsible, among other things, for strengthened forms of community integration and mobilisation in the subcontinent. As the forms and level of citizen participation among the population have expanded, digital experiences and interactive networks have helped to radically transform forms of sociability and have, at the same time, gradually eroded the institutional bases of the centralising, hierarchical model of mediating social representations used by companies like Televisa (Mexico) and Globo (Brazil), which are archetypical models of the hierarchical system of controlling images and public discourse in the region (Bolaño et al. 2012; Martínez and Sierra 2012). Thanks to the broad experience gained since the 1970s in participatory communication and local development (McAnany and Atwood 1986; Beltrán 1993), the

empowerment processes of digital media have led the protagonists not only to think about the importance of having an autonomous form of media for communication but also to reflect on how “another” type of communication should be. This communication emerges from the needs of citizenship, as claimed by indigenous movements.

Analysing the practices and experiences of the *Penguins* student protests in Chile and #YoSoy132 in Mexico has proven how citizen media, more than simply a channel for protesting, should be able to create positive proposals about the opportunities that can be found within a society, whenever these proposals come from the people and not from dominant groups. The citizen media formed in the warring lands of Belén de los Andaquíes in Colombia (Rodríguez 2008) illustrate how participatory communication develops with a break away from dominant narratives and views, which are replaced by images that symbolise people’s everyday practices from a repressed world that needs to make itself known. Other experiences like the insurgence media of Oaxaca indicate communication as a commons, which belongs to the entire collective and, for that reason, it is not subject to limitations on use or access (Gravante 2016). In summary, “another communication” is not focused on individual behaviour, but rather on the social, political and cultural contexts of the groups themselves; it is communication that is developed through community participation and shifts the issue of power and decision-making into citizenship. In the Latin American experiences, it appears that the battle about code and communication is a true political battleground; as regards the practice of net activism, citizenship projects its social imagination, producing a space for it to re-create the concept of political practice.

The Emergence of a New Political Subject

One of the most important results seen in the analysis of net activism is the transformation in awareness and conduct experienced by the protagonists and the transformation of people as social subjects. This process gives rise to, mostly, a re-creation of political practice. In our approach, we turn to the contribution made by Piven and Cloward (1977), which is the most exhaustive and relevant to the object of study and context discussed here. Piven and Cloward (1977) identify three aspects in the process of transforming awareness and conduct, which are also found in these Latin American experiences.

One of the first changes is a total lack of confidence in institutions, the state and the entire political class, as well as the economic powers that gravitate towards them. The consequence of this negative perception of official politics is the construction of an identity of opposition between citizenship and institutional politics, members of which are responsible for disregarding society's demands. From the outbreak of protests in Argentina in 2001 to the 2014 protests in Brazil during the FIFA World Cup, one (communication) practice carried out by protesters was underlining the division of the world into "us" and "them". In other words, they showed the existence of two opposing identities, "us" (the people, the movement, etc.) versus "them" (politicians, bankers, businesspeople, etc.). In this transformation process, people who before accepted the status quo or who thought it would be very difficult to change the social situation begin to actively demand change. Finally, we find the level of effectiveness, i.e., the moment when citizenship that ordinarily was considered politically powerless begins to believe in its ability to change things. The divide between "us" and "them" definitively deconstructs the institutional spaces imposed by political power, making new spaces emerge (which can include media spaces) which are characterised by everyday actions, alliances with other experiences or social groups, etc. These are the new spaces where subordinated groups develop another way of doing politics, managing public matters and establishing their own legitimacy, which is radically different from the legality and legitimacy of hegemonic power (Thompson 1975). To conclude, the process of appropriating digital technology and the development and use of digital media in mobilisation and collective action processes involve, along with the protest experience, what Piven and Cloward (1977) call a new feeling of efficacy in people, which is embodied in the emergence of a political subject that questions the representation codes of the dominant system.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Latin America is, as we know, an area and geopolitical context born of a culture of symbiosis and colonisation, migration and different cultural miscegenation that has produced multiple mediations and creative hybrids, which are necessary to understanding the relationship between collective action and digital technology that characterises the social conflicts of the new millennium.

Certainly, the focus on different ways of seeing the world, interpreting it and interacting within it have been an epistemic tradition in Latin American thought since its origins. It has built new bases and styles of discovering and representing the universe focused on community-based forms inspired by the philosophy of liberation and the culture of resistance that today should also be enriched by the recent emergence of indigenous movements in a new rationale of intellectual engagement. By acknowledging otherness and difference, Martín Barbero gives shape to the idea of modernity in Latin America: a modernity that is unfinished, in the eyes of the mainstream, and different or novel, in the eyes of the alternative. From understanding identities and their struggles against the flows of modernity to understanding receivers' uses of the popular, of alliances, appropriations and forms of resistance, there is an underlying theory in the Latin American School of Communication (ELACOM) that envisages a Latin American society based on the difference and diversity of the media-connected social world rather than on debt or a lack of progress in modernity. And today studies about the decolonisation of knowledge and power provide updates and transcend by providing new conundrums and/or questions.

This chapter's starting point was media practices (Couldry 2004, 2012) and the mediation process (Martin-Barbero 1993, 2006) in Latin America performed by the "non-citizens", i.e., the "de-citizenised" people who are losing their place in neoliberal society and have opened their own spaces for communication and representation using a process of struggles in which they establish themselves as political subjects. This focus, which we have defined as an approach from below, has allowed us to design a theoretical and methodological scheme for studying the practice of net activism, i.e., the process of appropriating and using digital media in a social conflict situation, which, by transcending the technocentric dimension, focuses the analysis on people and real subjects.

The model of appropriating digital media that has emerged in Latin America demonstrates the central nature of the experience of the people, the community that is built around the media. Above all, it reflects the importance of the meaning that they give their ways of acting and knowing. This means that in Latin America the process of appropriating digital technology is, first and foremost, an act of strength that takes place in an asymmetric system of distributing economic and cultural currents. Digital media practices or so-called net activism are used by

people to claim a need, such as a lack of visibility channels, or to demand something that was their own, such as the right to participate in decision-making processes. The model of technological appropriation that has appeared in Latin America involves, therefore, the notion of domination and being dominated, hegemony and counter-hegemony. The innovation in the use of digital technology cannot be explained without understanding the lack of resources, the needs and the social demands that motivate and feed the innovation, creativity and appropriation by the dominated (Sierra 1997; Sierra and Gravante 2012). It is a practice that is deeply embedded in people's everyday lives, in their histories and ways of viewing and understanding the world. Appropriation of digital communication media is the result of affective, cognitive and interactive processes, more than simply a matter of resources, functionality or interfaces. The bonds that are created between the form of media and the protagonists go beyond the utilitarian, and instead create a relationship in which people give the digital media a meaning and characteristics of their own identity at individual and group level. These relationships reject a vertical structure: in fact they are developed from horizontal solidarity networks, and the power of knowledge (or the domination that is suggested in the absence of knowledge) is replaced by a common pooling of the ecology of knowledge. Net activism involves a process of empowerment and a new feeling of effectiveness among people, not only in their perception of communication but also in the re-creation of political practice. In this way, the digital media are transformed into social spaces for a dissident culture and become a necessary laboratory for social change. With this approach we aimed to demonstrate the construction of consideration based on praxis as a chance to reflect and develop a theory that, according to Ramiro Beltrán, starts with practice/action. We also intended to develop a qualitative methodology that recognises the ability for action, reflection and the production of knowledge by the subjects involved in struggles, resistance and media. In the context of communication, therefore, scientific knowledge is apprehended by the emergence of other knowledge of grassroots cultures and of Afro-Latin American and indigenous people in accordance with the socio-analytical construction of collective knowledge as a rationale for appropriating common local knowledge. Finally, the digital media experiences in Latin America are characterised by ancestral and opposing forms of the commons and worldviews rendered invisible by Cartesian rationality and the colonial condition historically present in Latin America

(Zibechi 2007, 2010a, b, 2012, 2014; Regalado 2010, 2011; Neuman 2008; Regalado 2010; Sierra 2010).

The rediscovery of their own features as empowerment for thought and the Latin American context is reflected in Latin American critical studies on communication as an affirmation of difference. But it is also reflected as a questioning and antagonism of the norm and mainstream thought of Western modernisation and the hegemonic positivist social science in the North. Latin American critical studies on communication demonstrate, for example, with their emergence and critical deconstructive power, that “thought about borders, margins (which is where the language of power can be seen most easily) has been in the streets, squares, people, marches with the population and also in the forums, summits, discussion days, constituent assemblies over all these dizzying years” (De Sousa Santos 2010a, p. 5), questioning Anglo-American hegemony. With the New World Information and Communication Order movement (NWICO or NWIO), for example, and later the defence of the McBride Report, Latin America led a debate about access to information and the democratisation of communication as a fundamental component of human rights that marked a turning point in research agendas. Consequently, and as an outcome of the debate led by prominent thinkers and activists like Luis Ramiro Beltrán, the region saw the emergence (in the context of dependency theory) of public policies in countries like Mexico for access to media by indigenous communities, thereby legitimating expertise that, as Luis Ramiro Beltrán has noted, form a distinguishing, original feature of Latin American communicology: a praxeological dimension.

In our understanding, theories on culture and communication in Latin America relating to miscegenation and hybridisation are able to help us understand the complex relationship between digital media and collective action. These theories make it possible to understand the syncretism, assignment of new meaning, reconfiguration and deconstruction in folk, cultured, popular and mass culture, which characterise all social and media appropriation, using new epistemic bases that redefine the immanent issues of the body, emotions and insurgent practices as problematising points that determine net activism practices. Recognising the central nature of these aspects, along with other rationales that constitute the carnivalised language and narratives of Latin American grassroots communication establishes, as a result, the relevance of proposing another “point of view” for communication studies in the Western world.

Furthermore, in the last decades, Latin American social movements' digital media has shown how people have fundamentally changed access to and distribution of knowledge, which, as González claims (1999), was usually confined to vertical networks, such as universities, institutions and media mainstream, and characterised by hierarchical relations.

This “new research paradigm that theorises media as practice, rather than as text or production process” (Couldry 2004, p. 129) is able to explain the emerging alternative media model in contentious politics—which Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call the logic of connective action—such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street or the *15M* movement (and beyond). Moreover, this focus on media practice and the mediation process might sustain another perspective on the mediations of new intelligent, networked groups, as Mattoni & Trerè proposed in their latest conceptual framework focused on media practices, mediation, and mediatisation in social movements (2014). Finally, we believe that this Latin American framework has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between (digital) media practice and collective action, as happened decades ago with the reception of soap opera studies, the then-new thesis on mediation processes for understanding melodrama and *telenovelas* (González 2010), and the digital space of the *cultura latina* (Del Valle et al. 2010).

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