Online and Mobilized Students: The Use of Facebook in the Chilean Student Protests

Estudiantes conectados y movilizados: El uso de Facebook en las protestas estudiantiles en Chile

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ABSTRACT

Considering the relationship between new social media and youth political actions, the purpose of this article is to describe the use of Facebook during the 2011 Chilean student movement, through a content and textual analysis of Facebook's page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH). In 2011, Chile experienced massive mobilizations for seven months. These were perhaps the most important social protests in Chile's recent history, where young people played a leading role in the discussion over education. During these events, Facebook was one of the digital social networks most widely used by the mobilized organizations. In FECH's case, it utilized Facebook mainly to call for protest actions, to highlight the achievements of the movement, and to indicate their opponents. However, most of the content published on this Facebook page was produced by traditional media, showing that conventional communication strategies of social movements are interrelated with new innovative practices. Therefore, this article rejects technological determinism, because it does not recognize the complex characteristics of student and youth movements.

RESUMEN

Considerando la relación entre los nuevos medios digitales y la acción política de los jóvenes, el objetivo de este artículo es describir el uso de Facebook durante el movimiento estudiantil chileno de 2011, a través de un análisis de contenido y textual de la página de Facebook de la Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH). En 2011, Chile experimentó una serie de movilizaciones, quizás las más importantes de su historia reciente, donde los jóvenes fueron los protagonistas de la discusión sobre la educación. Durante estas manifestaciones, Facebook fue una de las redes sociales en Internet más utilizadas por las organizaciones participantes. En el caso de la FECH, esta agrupación estudiantil usó Facebook principalmente para convocar a las acciones de protestas, para resaltar los logros del movimiento y para señalar quiénes eran sus adversarios. Sin embargo, la mayor parte del contenido publicado fue generado por los medios de comunicación tradicionales, demostrando que en el nivel comunicacional también se entrelazan las estrategias usuales de los movimientos sociales con las nuevas prácticas más innovadoras. Por lo tanto, se rechaza la visión del determinismo tecnológico, porque no da cuenta de los fenómenos complejos que caracterizan el desarrollo de los movimientos estudiantiles y juveniles.

PALABRAS CLAVE / KEYWORDS

Student movement, Facebook, social networks, Internet, protests, students, education.
Movimiento estudiantil, Facebook, redes sociales, Internet, protestas, estudiantes, educación.

1. Introduction

«With rain, with snow, the people still move», sang almost 100,000 students on August 18, 2011 in the streets of Santiago. That day, the temperature was 4 degrees below zero and snow fell on the capital of Chile (Cabalin, 2011). This event was called the «March of Umbrellas» because participants used them to protect themselves from the elements. This was just one of the multiple protests of the «Chilean Winter», as it became internationally known, in reference to the «Arab Spring» that year. Only a few hours after the march, the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) used Facebook to call for a new protest action, stating: «after the beautiful march today, cacerolazo[1] at 21:00!». This post received 443 «likes» and 31 people posted comments in support of the cause. This is an example of the combination of traditional and new resources that are currently used by social movements, where digital networks have played a key role in their communication strategies (Castells, 2012).

During 2011, various protest movements developed in different countries («Los Indignados» (The Indignants) in Spain and the «Arab Spring» in Tunisia and Egypt, among others). In fact, for some authors, this was a historic moment that should be remembered as the «year of revolutions» (Fuchs, 2012: 775). One of the characteristics of these citizen mobilizations was the intensive use of social networks. As such, different media began using expressions such as «Facebook or Twitter» revolutions to refer to these events, depending on the importance assigned to a specific social network. However, a number of academic papers on the subject, published in a special issue of the Journal of Communication, qualified this categorization as simplified and popular, demonstrating that the impact of online social networks is complex and contingent on the context where protests develop (Howard & Parks, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2012). This view allows for the problematization of the notion that contemporary social movements are a consequence of new media on the internet. This causal relationship is associated with technological determinism, which does not recognize the complexity of social movements and their political, social, cultural and economic components (Fuchs, 2012).

However, it is impossible to deny that the internet has provided effective and innovative tools that allow social movements to mobilize supporters and to counteract hegemonic media trends. In fact, one the leaders of the 2011 Chilean student movement, Giorgio Jackson, states that «new technologies served to put a limit to the mainstream media, to show that they no longer have a monopoly on the represented reality» (Jackson, 2013: 85). Considering this point, this article analyzes the Facebook page of FECH, the most influential federation of students in Chile, to describe how this organization used this digital social network during the student movement.

In order to do this, this paper first presents the relationship between the youth and the internet and then situates this discussion in the Chilean student movement to further describe the use of FECH's Facebook page. It concludes with final remarks.

2. Globally connected youth

The effects of the internet on social capital formation, political participation, cultural diversity and the identity construction of individuals, among other themes, have been studied since the '90s. Young people have received special attention in academic work around new technologies because of the close relationship between youth and the Internet (Tapscott, 2009).

Young people interact with digital social networks more than any other social group. This is a global phenomenon. For example, the youth in Asia share similar experiences via the internet with their peers in the United States or in other parts of the world (Farrer, 2007). However, it would be naive to think that young people are experiencing a full development due to new technologies. In fact, global inequalities are affecting many of them. Unemployment is highest amongst the young, they suffer from vulnerability and many are experiencing «waiting times», a term coined by Jeffrey (2010), which describes the situation of young people in developing countries that bet on education as an instrument of social mobility, but have instead seen those expectations crushed. Furthermore, the representation and social visibility of young people have been dominated by «moral panic» (Valdivia, 2010; Thompson, 1998). The youth are seen as the hope for the future, but at the same time they are the risk in the present (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005). Against this backdrop, new technologies have allowed them other avenues of expression and participation in society.

New information technologies not only have a high economic component, but also cultural and political ones (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Due to their interactive nature, social networking sites on the internet have been viewed as a collaborative space with immense consequences for the development of young people Some authors have spoken of this as a «historic moment» for youth (Tapscott, 2009), but others are more skeptical about the positive impact of these new technologies (Gladwell, 2010). In the case of the 2006

and 2011 student movements in Chile, social networks and new media played a key role in the development of the protests. During the «Penguin Revolution», the 2006 secondary school movement, the students used Fotologs, blogs and YouTube to communicate their demands (Condeza, 2009) and in 2011, mobilized students utilized Twitter, YouTube and Facebook as their communication strategies.

Herrera (2012) has characterized this close relationship between young people and digital social networks as the «wired generation». In the case of the Chilean student movement, we can assume that its protagonists are part of this new generation. Mobilized youths were able to use the internet as a space for the construction of meaning while on the movement. For Castells (2012: 5), this process of production of meanings and concepts is fundamental to the success of social movements, since power is exercised by «the construction of meaning in people's minds, through mechanisms of symbolic manipulation». Online social networks, as such, help to counteract hegemonic power relations. However, Buckingham and Rodriguez (2013) state that new information technologies are far from being an absolute free and democratic space, because traditional patterns of domination and control often play out on the internet.

At any rate, the internet does allow for the observation of the development of political participation by young people. In 2011, the mobilized Chilean students showed that their protest actions offline and online were complementary (Valenzuela, 2013), allowing them to overcome the division between «traditional» and «new» movements. In fact, they were able to incorporate both strategies, making them more diverse and difficult to define linearly. However, the «message» of social movements continues to be determined by how the movement operates, which is more important than which media platform was chosen to communicate the movement's operations (Castells, 2012).

3. The communication of the movement

The students were in the streets for 7 months and

received support from 80% of the public, according to various surveys. One of the elements that helped to explain this massive popular support was the ability of the students to frame their message of transformation and to control the media agenda during movement. Students were aware of the need to convert their political objectives into a massive message, as Jackson (2013: 63) points out: «Our initial language was not ideological; it was technical and pragmatic, in the sense that if we wanted to reach more people, we had to start by deleting certain words». The students conveyed a message that condensed the main problems of

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the Chilean education system: inequality, low quality, segregation, and indebtedness (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013).

In Chile, the neoliberal model in education was imposed in the '80s during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, implementing the privatization of the educational system, increasing competition, the pauperization of teaching jobs, the weakening of public education, among other specific aspects of the neoliberalization of education on a global scale (McCarthy, 2011). Thus, in 2011, the supposed neoliberal progress faced a critical review by the majority of the population for the first time in 30 years, surprising the administrators of the economic and political systems. As noted by one of the 2011 student leaders, Francisco Figueroa: «few imagined that the model's own children, the youth allegedly lulled by individualism, would rebel against the current state of affairs» (Figueroa, 2013: 72). The

student revolts showed precisely how the passivity that the youth were charged with reduced their political participation to only the classical dimension that was established by the routines of the political system. However, young people do participate through other methods.

The 2011 student demonstrations, marches, strikes and takeovers of educational establishments were accompanied by flashmobs, kiss-a-thons, viral campaigns, and other artistic activities, where students used both the physical and digital public space actively. It was a mixture of «Facebook and street», to paraphrase the book Tweets and the Streets: Social Media

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and Contemporary Activism (Gerbaudo, 2012), which questions the overemphasis on digital social networks as catalysts for protest actions. The students displayed their demands through a combination of both strategies, demonstrating that «even a new medium, as powerful and participatory as the internet's social networks, is not the message. The message constructs the medium» (Castells, 2012: 122). This means that for a social movement to be successful it requires, among other things, the construction of a persuasive message (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 1994), which connects with the experiences of people. Digital social networks allow for that message to go viral, thus leading to mass impact, especially among the youth sectors. This was understood by the Student Federation of the University of Chile through the use of its Facebook page as the means to distribute their message.

4. Methods and material

86% of young Chileans have a Facebook account and 52% of those young people connect to Facebook every day (Scherman, Arriagada & Valenzuela, 2013). Facebook was the digital social network most used by

the students during the 2011 movement. In fact, 68% of those who mobilized used the internet as an information platform to find out about the movement (Arriagada & al., 2011). Consequently, it is important to analyze how this generation of students displayed their actions through online social networks during the student movement. With this objective in mind and without generalizing the results to all mobilized organizations, the Facebook page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile was utilized as a reference, as it represents one of the most influential institutions in the educational debate in Chile and its president in 2011, Camila Vallejo, was one of the leaders with greatest public visibility in the media. This Facebook page had more than 62,000 «friends» during the movement, surpassing the number of students at the university itself, which shows the extent of its influence beyond the University of Chile.

The new information technologies involve diverse epistemological and methodological approaches. Social networks can be useful for studying social interactions, relationships of belonging, identity formation and types of discussion, among other themes (Murthy, 2008). According to Coleman (2010: 488), there are at least three categories to study digital media: a) «the cultural politics of media; b) the vernacular cultures of digital media; and c) the prosaics of digital media». The first relates to the interest in the study of the circulation and construction of cultural identities, representations, meanings and collective commitments in digital media. The second approach deals with the analysis of different groups or social phenomena in digital media (for example, blogs, hackers, and memes). Finally, the third approach focuses on the social practices that occur in digital media, which involve economic, financial, cultural or religious aspects. This study uses the first approach.

As the student movement lasted seven months, this sample is restricted to only one month, considering two milestones: a political one (the first change of the Education Minister during the movement) and the other, a symbolic one (the «March of Umbrellas»). These two events represent in some ways, what the student movement meant in the recent history of Chile. On the one hand, the political system was over-

come by the force of the mobilized students who questioned the legitimacy of the means of political representation in the country; on the other hand, the persistence of the protests and their size transformed the movement into an expression of the collective commitment of students beyond the particular circumstances of each individual student.

All public posts on FECH's Facebook page that were made over these 33 days were intentionally selected, beginning on July 18th -when the president, Sebastián Piñera, made a change in the cabinet, which included the departure of then Education Minister, Joaquín Lavín, and the appointment of his replacement, Felipe Bulnes- and ending on August 19th, one day after the «March of the Umbrellas». This last event was included to observe how the students addressed the success of the march the day after it occurred. These entries were analyzed into a content analysis matrix (Krippendorff, 2013), deductively constructed from previous literature on social movements and new communication (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 1994; Benford & Snow, 2000; Castells, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013). This methodological design relates to the research question: What were the uses of FECH's Facebook page in terms of content during one of the seven months of student mobilization?

To answer this question and describe the uses of Facebook, eight general categories were used. The first two categories recognized the architecture of the analyzed medium, which regulates and limits its use (Lafi Youmans & York, 2012). These basic categories are:

1) Likes: The number of «likes» on each post was quantified to account for the popularity or acceptance of each entry.

2) Comments: The number of comments for each entry was considered to observe the interaction generated from the initial entry.

The following three categories attempted to describe the communication strategy used by the Student Federation of the University of Chile. In order to do this, the presence (1) or the absence (0) of these functions were considered.

3) Own posts: The posts made by FECH were used to quantify whether FECH generated some kind of commentary on their page as a way to frame the content posted.

4) Photos and videos: The presence of images was measured with the understanding that their addition can make an entry more powerful.

5) Organization's Leadership: Considering that their president was Camila Vallejo, a figure widely

known by the public, the use or lack of Camila Vallejo's name was also measured in FECH's posts.

The remaining two general categories attempt to describe content characteristics present in each of the analyzed entries. These categories were:

6) Source of content: It is important to note where the content originated. Therefore, I measured if the content was generated from FECH's own website, if it was content from the University of Chile, if it was from another organization related to the movement or if it was content from the government. Also, I quantified if the content posted was produced by an organization not associated with the movement or by a traditional medium.

7) Media quote: To measure the interaction with other communication platforms, I quantified if the content posted was referring to a form of national, international, student or other digital social media (for example, YouTube) communication.

The final category attempted to describe the purpose of the entry, since the objectives of social movements are also associated with different communication strategies (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 1994). Thus, this category corresponds to:

8) Purpose of Entry: I measured whether the content published summoned participation in protest actions (marches, strikes, etc.) or movement activities (lectures, conferences, etc.). Also, I measured if the entry highlighted achievements or support of the movement (balance of participation, emblematic backups, etc.). Finally, other objectives that could reaffirm the definition of movement (mobilization reasons) or replies to or mentioning opponents (government, police, etc.) were also measured.

This descriptive content analysis was complemented with textual analysis of the posts made by FECH to describe and understand how public content on their Facebook page was framed. The textual analysis followed the approach proposed by Norman Fairclough (2003), who understands discourses as a facet of social life in interaction with other social dimensions. Discourse is, ultimately, a social practice (Fairclough, 2003). This textual analysis was done to account for the broader use of Facebook, considering the importance of generating messages and meanings in the development of social movements (Castells, 2012).

5. Results

Considering the eight general categories mentioned, 552 posts were identified during the month of analysis (an average of 16.7 posts per day), which

shows the intensive use of this digital platform by FECH. There were 47,314 approvals (likes) on the content posted and 8,686 comments. In other words, each post generated on average 15.7 reactions from fans of the page.

5.1. Content

The analysis shows that FECH used its Facebook page primarily as a source of information for the student movement. The vast majority of posts were accompanied by a comment made by FECH itself, which tried to explain, elaborate on or summarize the content posted. In 85.7% of the 552 posts, FECH made its own introduction to frame the discussion. However, the presence of visual «hooks» (photos or videos) was lower than expected, considering how frequently the use of Facebook is associated with the publication of images. Only 58.5% of the posts analyzed used photos or videos. References to the leadership of the organization had even lower numbers. Camila Vallejo was practically never mentioned in the entries. Just 43 of the 552 posts included some mention of the president of FECH. This result is striking because of the high public visibility of the leader, but it could be explained by the very nature of FECH, whose leadership is made up of a list of representatives who are voted in each year. Thus, the organization is not serving a particular leader, but rather all student groups that make up its board.

Another result highlighted is the use of content produced by some type of traditional media. The majority of posts incorporated content generated by an organization not related to FECH. In fact, 40% of the posts corresponded to traditional media content and only 22.6 % is content generated by FECH itself. This illustrates that the Facebook page was mostly used to respond to the content published on other media platforms. References to content generated by the University of Chile (4), by another organization of the movement (7), by the government (3), or by an organization not directly linked to the movement (10) were scarce.

In summary, the major source of content for FECH's Facebook page was traditional media (radio, print and online newspapers, television). Specifically, national media are the main sources of content (37% of the 552 posts). International media only appear 14 times, despite the wide coverage of the movement in various countries. In addition, consistent with the low number of images in the analyzed posts, there were only 28 occasions when YouTube was referenced.

With regard to the purposes of each post, the use of Facebook by FECH responded to the usual characteristics of the communication strategies of social movements. Its main uses are: to mobilize supporters through the call for protest actions or movement activities (29.2%), to highlight achievements, outstanding support and mass demonstrations of the movement (27.5%) and to remind readers who were the opponents of movement (24.3%). The remaining 47 posts were intended to explain the main reasons for the student conflict. Through these communication uses, FECH contributed to the construction of interpretive frameworks for collective action, defined as «action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization» (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). The constant references to the popularity of the protests and the support that the students gained showed the «success» of the movement and the need to keep going, without forgetting who the opponents were. This was the framework for action that was communicated via FECH's Facebook.

5.2. Textual analysis

For textual analysis, 473 posts were examined, which included a header generated by FECH. The vast majority of these texts were direct references to content posted, in an attempt to introduce and contextualize the information. Also, in these posts, additional data were added to those mentioned in the posted content or information spread by traditional media was rejected. Some examples are: «Meet the new Minister of Education. Complete information on Felipe Bulnes» (19-07-2011), «Dear all, at this time have a double eye [be careful] when reading certain media» (19-07-2011), «They have invented many things to discredit us, pay attention to the info [sic] circulating» (19-08-2011). These types of messages were accompanied by explanatory notes. Through these means, the information available to participants of the movement spread and a counter-framing of news events published by traditional media (Squires, 2011) was realized.

The vast majority of FECH's own comments are short, accurate and informative texts. This can be explained because the Facebook page was administered by the young professionals of the organization, who have knowledge about communication. For example, commenting on the change of minister by President Piñera, FECH wrote: «A change in Minister is not enough, we demand a change in state policies!» (19-07-2011). Or to call a protest activity during the Chilean winter: «The rain isn't going to stop us either!» (28-07-2011). As expected, all references to the

movement's actions were positive and the references to the adversaries were negative, confirming the polarization communication strategy employed by social movements (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 1994).

The positive approach of the texts intended to show the support and achievements of the movement, counteracting the official conservative voices criticizing students (Cabalin, 2014). This discursive strategy was also intended to motivate and add supporters to the demonstrations organized. Thus, when there was an unauthorized march, which was violently repressed by the police on August 4, 2011, FECH posted on its Facebook: «The March Continues!! No repressive media that the government unleashes will achieve [or] undermine the strength of our movement. We respond with more unity and more fight!». During that day, there was a greater degree of violence against the student movement and Facebook was used as a platform to denounce such actions: «Throughout Chile We Are Being Repressed»; «What has happened in our country today Cannot Go Unpunished!». Messages written in capitalized words by the administrators of the Facebook page show that the emphasis of the students' complaints was affirmed by the leaders of the movement in its subsequent statements to traditional media.

Other common uses of the messages were to broadcast the activities of the movement, to gather information for the development of demonstrations across the country or to reaffirm the protest actions. For example: «Let everyone in the world know that today in Chile we could not protest and congregate publically» (04-08-2011); «How is the cacerolazo going at home?» (09-08-2011); «Yesterday we were 100,000 in the rain in Santiago, peacefully beautiful. This Sunday everyone is invited to Family Sunday for Education, with everyone for everyone» (19-08-2011). These types of messages explicitly called for the interaction with fans of the page, asking on the one hand for «help» in denouncing unjust acts and, on the other hand, seeking feedback on the protest actions. It was

also a way to promote participation and turn readers into activists in these actions.

In short, the messages published by FECH demonstrated that the following communication functions were used on Facebook: disseminating and framing information, responding to opponents and traditional media, counteracting official information, calling for public demonstrations and events, highlighting the positive results of the protest actions and support obtained, calling for adhesion, and finally, acknowledging and identifying the main detractors of the movement.

> Obviously, new information technologies are fundamental to the development of the current youth movements, but cannot be considered exclusively as the factors that enable the success and scope of these movements. In the case of the Chilean student movement, its prolonged development is explained by structural reasons associated with the reproduction of inequalities in the educational system and the political and cultural reconfigurations of the country. Nonetheless, Facebook and other digital platforms were key to the success of the mobilizations, facilitating the transformation of many of the bystanders into activists of the movement.

6. Conclusion

As noted, one of the most important organizations of the 2011 Chilean student movement used Facebook intensively, but this use replied to classic schemes of social movements. This indicates that current protest actions synthesize traditional actions in new innovative ways, which dismisses any hint of technological determinism in the analysis of protest actions of these movements. According to Valenzuela (2013), in the case of young Chileans, the use of social media networks to express opinions and join social causes, predicts a higher probability of young people participating in public demonstrations, but cannot be considered a trigger for political actions. Social movements use digital social networks as a tool in a wide variety of

actions, ranging from street marches to viral internet campaigns, as a case study of the 15M movement in Spain illustrated (Hernández-Merayo, Robles-Vilchez & Martínez- Rodríguez, 2013).

In the case of FECH, the increased use that this organization gave to its Facebook page was made on the basis of specific mobilization strategies, such as the call for marches, debates and conferences, in addition to permanently highlighting its opponents as responsible the conflict. Aware of the importance of communication for the success of the movement, the students also resorted to traditional media, whose reports were the main content on FECH's Facebook page. This content, which often criticized the students, was recontextualized in the analyzed posts through explicit comments or direct calls to not believe the information published by traditional media sources. Along this line, the wisdom of one of the student leaders frames this idea saying: «We were on the radio, television news, and in the morning newspaper. This happened despite the lines of editors and the interests of some media sources, which responded against our rebellious and transgressive message, focusing its efforts in distorting our opinions and focused on showing the movement with a violent and uncompromising character, almost criminal character» (Jackson, 2013: 21-22).

Social networking sites were not used only for this counter-framing, but also for communicating the message of the mobilized students. Social movements see communication as «the lifeblood» (Stewart, Smith & Denton, 1994: 159) and Chilean students understood this well.

Obviously, new information technologies are fundamental to the development of the current youth movements, but cannot be considered exclusively as the factors that enable the success and scope of these movements. In the case of the Chilean student movement, its prolonged development is explained by structural reasons associated with the reproduction of inequalities in the educational system and the political and cultural reconfigurations of the country. Nonetheless, Facebook and other digital platforms were key to the success of the mobilizations, facilitating the transformation of many of the bystanders into activists of the movement.

Considering the above, it would be interesting to investigate other aspects of the relationship between new digital media and the actions of protesting youths. For example, the processes of appropriation of these new technologies by young people and their impact on citizen mobilizations or generational identity could be examined. This approach was beyond the scope and objective of this article, but in the same way, the study presented allowed for the analysis of the uses of Facebook communication developed by an influential organization in the 2011 Chilean student movement.

Notes

[1] A special type of protest where pots, pans and other kitchen utensils are banged together noisily to call attention to a specific cause.

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