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CASUAL POLITICS: FROM SLACKTIVISM TO EMERGENT MOVEMENTS AND PATTERN RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT: Politics have traditionally looked at the exercise of democracy with at least two implicit assumptions: (1) institutions are the normal channel of politics and (2) voting is the normal channel for politics to make decisions. Of course, reality is much more complex than that, but, on the one hand, all the extensions of that model beyond or around voting –issues related to access to public information, to deliberation and argumentation, to negotiation and opinion shaping, or related to accountability– are based on institutions as the core axis around which politics spin. On the other hand, the existence and analysis of extra-institutional political participation –awareness raising, lobbying, citizen movements, protests and demonstrations– have also most of the times been put in relationship with affecting the final outcomes of institutional participation and decision-making, especially in affecting voting.

Inspired in the concept of «feet voting» (developed by Tiebout, Friedman and others) in this paper we want to challenge this way of understanding politics as a proactive and conscious action, and propose instead a reactive and unconscious way of doing politics, based on small, casual contributions and its posterior analysis by means of big data, emergence analysis and pattern recognition.

In our theoretical approach –illustrated with real examples in and out of the field of politics– we will argue that social media practices like tweeting, liking and sharing on Facebook or Google+, blogging, commenting on social networking sites, tagging, hashtagging and geotagging are not what has been pejoratively labelled as «slacktivism» (a comfortable, low commitment and feel-good way of activism) but «casual politics», that is, the same kind of politics that happen informally in the offline world. The difference being that, for the first time, policy- and decision-makers can leverage and turn into real politics. If they are able to listen. If they are able to think about politics out of institutions and in real-time.

KEYWORDS: slacktivism, hacktivism, cyberactivism, emergence, e-democracy, e-participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1956, Charles M. Tiebout published *A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures* (Tiebout, 1956). In his work, the author theorized about a local government model to provide a series of public services to its citizens. Under certain conditions, these citizens would end up moving from one city to the next one so to adjust their preferences to the public policies being run in a specific municipality. Although the term does not appear in the original text, credit is given to Tiebout for the idea of «voting with one's feet» or

«foot voting» as a tacit and extra-representative way of doing politics by citizens – and, thus, a way of making decisions out of the institutionally designed channels for these purposes.

There are two conditions in Tibeout's model that make it difficult to translate from the theoretical to the real world: the fact that the citizen has it easy –both in terms of feasibility as in terms of cost– moving from one place to another, and perfect or complete information.

Half a year after that exposition, digitization of content and communications by means of Information and Communication Technologies make that these conditions –mobility, perfect information– if they are not real, they actually are much less of a barrier in comparison to Tiebout's times. Indeed, ICTs have removed at a stroke the scarcity of information and the transaction costs associated with its management. On the other hand, but still related to that, ICTs have almost made irrelevant the matter of mobility when it comes to being informed, debating, negotiating or, after all, expressing one's preferences.

In this sense, Benkler (2006) already stated that a new model of working or a new model of doing politics would rarely fit within the parameters of the traditional «hub and spoke» model of the industrial society. In that model, hubs concentrate communications and decision-making, while the rest of the nodes are fed by these centres in spike architecture, isolated from each other. To replace this industrial model, Benkler expects the building of a progressive networked public sphere, thus modifying the fundamental processes of social communication.

This change in the way of communicating and doing does not only happen at the individual level but –and above all– at the collective level (Noveck, 2005). That is, technology does not only empower the particular citizens, but it provides them with new tools after which or upon which they can build up new forms of collective action. Despite the fact that Benkler's approach is undoubtedly much broader and deeper, Noveck's is partly more ambitious: «we should explore ways to structure the law to defer political and legal decisionmaking downward to decentralized group-based decisionmaking».

Notwithstanding, the technical possibility of carrying out a specific change or movement –even if exploratory– should not be a sufficient condition (though probably yet necessary) for accomplishing it.

But this fundamental condition is provided by Inglehart (2008) when he speaks of the change in values among generations and, in general, compared with the years immediately after the revolution of May 1968 and the pacifist movements during the following decade. In his analysis, the author clearly identifies how the changes in values that were breaking in 1971 have consolidated even to the point of an ending to the intergenerational confrontation in matters of values. Indeed, values more identified with materialism –with survival– are already part of generations in their way towards di-

sappearance. On the contrary, post-materialist values centred in autonomy and self-expression become hegemonic, values that, not surprisingly, several authors have identified as resonating with the hippy philosophy of the decade of 1960 or the hacker philosophy bound to the development of the (Himanen, 2003; Lanier, 2010).

2. POLITICS AND/ON THE INTERNET

Thus, technological changes along with a change in values are a perfect ground for changes in behavior to take place and, above all, for changes of approach in everything that is related with collective or community matters. Several authors have, consequently, analyzed the potential of the Internet on economic development, civic engagement or citizen participation, following the idea that «the Internet may be a new stimulus for political knowledge, interest, and discussion» (Mossberger et al., 2008). But is that really so?

The first thing that scientific evidence tells is that on the Internet, and concerning its use in politics, the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor et al., 1970) is increasingly being confirmed by research. Thus, political participation is highly determined by educational level, employment situation and, in a lesser extent and with decreasing importance, by age. It does not happen this way, though, with socio economic status or class (Robles Morales et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding, it has been proved (Borge & Cardenal, 2012) that usage –or the experience in usage– of the Internet does have a direct effect on political participation, and that this effect is independent from political motivation. In other words, digital competence increases the probability that a person ends up participating in online politics, and this will happen independently of their initial political motivation. The explanation, among other reasons, would be that the abundance of political content on the Internet increases the probability that a given Internet user finds by chance and reads this political content, despite the fact that it was not within their original purposes. On the other hand, this probability is yet again increased by the intensive usage of search engines in quest for online information that broadband users usually perform. Last, because this information is gathered by non-traditional websites, that is, by websites that do not belong to political parties or organizations explicitly related with political activity (labour unions, lobbies, etc.), thus offering political information for the non-political information seeker (Horrigan, 2004).

Once information is found on the Internet –oftentimes unintentionally or by serendipity– it is also usual that users find open forums where to engage in a debate –or a discussion– about politics. These «'open source' spaces for dialog» (Kelly et al., 2005) enable all kind of encounters that do not necessarily are partisan or flocks of the same feather.

The final result of this political participation on the Internet can be summarized in three different ways. Firstly, things do not change at all or, in any case, what already was taking place in the offline world is reinforced by online practices. Indeed, and as we have already stated referring to the use of the Internet in relationship with the socio-demographic status, and referring too to the knowledge gap hypothesis, it has been evidenced that online activities do not substitute but reinforce political actions that the engaged citizen was already performing outside of the Net (Christensen, 2011). Secondly, greater exposition to political information on the Internet has been identified too with a higher level of criticism in one's own political positions that, often –though still in a reduced and minority context–, have ended up being transformed in an also critical vote, and thus favourable to minority political alternatives; alternatives that, if not opposed to one's initial ideas, certainly not mainstream and quite marginal within the hegemonic political system. Thirdly, the use of the Internet and accessing the information found in there have also been linked with going beyond critical voting, and with the increase in both the intensity and the amount of participation in extra-representative initiatives and political actions, that is, not marginal to the hegemonic political system, but completely outside of it (Cantijoch, 2009).

Notwithstanding, we believe that this approach –how does the Internet affect voting, how does the Internet affect motivation, how does the Internet affect participation in institutional politics or in extra-representative movements– still is too partial for the depth of the changes that we are witnessing in our streets.

Sádaba (2012) reminds us about the same issue with which we also began our reflection: the dire importance of the political and socioeconomic changes, associated with social movements, which can hardly stick to causal relationships related to technological changes or changes in communications. So, when doing the exercise of explaining the «virtualization of social movements» it does not seem sufficient with just superimposing a «digital layer» to what already exists, but it is very likely that a comprehensive rethinking of the whole model is much needed, including in this new model how political commitment, participation or activism work, so that we can understand the newly appearing trends.

An interesting approach about the limitations of seeing the upcoming political transformation enabled by the Internet as a mere virtualization of existing practices and actors comes from Martínez Roldán (2011) and his revisit of lefebvrian theory (Lefebvre, 1991). In his work, we can read the new movements as redesigns of the *Spaces of Representation* coming to «displace the hegemonic *Representations of Space* established by the dynamics of the capital». As a result, a hybridization of the urban space and the cyberspace takes place, affecting, in return, the spaces of representation and, above all, the representations of space and the institutions that inhabit and shape them.

The idea of these new spaces as something more than mere virtual carbon copies of the reality has already been explored by Castells (2012) in his spaces of autonomy, or

by Echeverría (1999) in his idea of the third environment. Both approaches can also be understood as interesting complements to Marc Augé's non-spaces (2000): the citizenry reinventing spatiality and, by doing it, reinventing the institutions of our society that now have to yield to the new leisure and consumption habits, but also to political activism. Of course, the re-location of the political action has to necessarily go hand-in-hand with a «process of formation and exercise of power relationships in the new organizational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks» (Castells, 2009).

We believe there is enough evidence to state that politics with and on the Internet runs on two different levels: firstly, an evolutionary one, where old practices and actors are replacing procedures and tools from the past by new digital protocols and tools; secondly, a transformative and disruptive one, where old spaces and power relations are being altered in their essence with new practices, actors and scenarios that escape traditional characterization schemes.

3. ONLINE PARTICIPATION AND EXTRA-REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION: FROM EMPOWERMENT TO PARA-INSTITUTIONS

We have already seen how the Internet makes it more likely being informed about politics, or having a higher degree of engagement and participation. But it is also true that this impact does not only happen at the quantitative level, but also the quality of such engagement and participation is affected. Colombo et al. (2012) clearly show how, in addition to greater interest, the Internet makes that internal political efficacy –the degree with which people consider themselves more or less competent in politics– is also positively affected. In other words, greater interest and higher internal efficacy levels can be seen as good proxies for the level of empowerment of the citizen considered as a political actor. This empowerment –understood as the freedom to act within the system– is notwithstanding not matched by higher levels of governance –understood as the freedom to act upon the system–: that is, internal efficacy is not matched by more external efficacy –the idea that the citizen has on the disposition and capability of their leaders and institutions to provide answers to the demands of the population– and often turns into disaffection with the actual democratic system.

At this point, a relevant question is worth being put: whether this disaffection will join the ranks of abstention, or whether this disaffection will be transformed into extra-representative political action.

What so far has been found is that further empowerment of the citizens has resulted in a new elite, a *leetocracy* (Breindl & Gustafsson, 2011) of *goverati* (Peña-López, 2011) that defines a hard core of activists coalescing temporarily to run campaigns or to include a specific issue in the public agenda, thus becoming a sort of new mediators

between public decision-makers and the citizens. This «small group of highly specialised movement entrepreneurs» (Breindl, 2012) defines new hierarchies whose evolution begins in the constitution of the core of the movement, its enlargement and further participation of other agents of the public sphere –this time coming from the lines of the traditional activists–, and the conversion of the movement into new para-institutions that look much like the traditional pattern on their outside, but that are radically different, network-like, in their inside (Peña-López et al., 2013).

These networks and sub-networks, linked to each other, live together in «strong symbiosis between [the] established commercial players of the mainstream media» (Kelly, 2008), sometimes threatening their mere existence, some other times collaborating with them, though now creating new forms of relationship and partnership between the actors of the political scene. But it is not only about changes: the actors themselves that participate in these networks are transformed too, as are their respective roles, among them mass media and the tasks that these used to carry on.

New forms of being informed and new forms of informing. Nevertheless, we have already seen how its impact is usually centred in extra-representative participation and only marginally in abstention or vote to minority alternatives. So far, we could understand that the whole change of paradigm towards which we seem to be heading is but limited to some procedures and communities acting in the margin of huge majorities. On the contrary, if there is something at the core that has been extremely altered that is debate. Anduiza et al. (2012) state that the impact of the exposition to online political information is certainly determined by social extraction. These determinants, indeed, affect –and again following the knowledge gap hypothesis– affect all areas related to political information and the motivation to vote, either online or by other traditional channels. However, while the impact on motivation or on activism of online political information is small compared to other socioeconomic factors, it is not so with political debate: the existence of information on the Net sparks the debate and does have a major impact in the involvement of citizens in political discussions.

Font et al. (2012), and after the work by Hibbing & Theiss-Morse (2002), provide some insights that can complete some of the ideas presented here. There is an apparent paradox that citizens seem to demand higher levels of involvement in politics while the data show a decline in party membership, unions and NGOs. But the paradox is cleared when we ascertain that participation is actually increasing in alternative ways such as non-formal or extra-representative political participation. The citizenry that demands greater involvement also has a certain bias (left-winged, urban) that matches the profile of the average Internet user. Furthermore, while this citizenry is suspicious and critical towards professional politicians and elected officials, it seems to rely more on their peers, in the same way that social networking platforms are reflecting the dynamics of this collective behaviour.

It is also worth noting that extra-representative participation is activated by extremes cases: extreme cases such as those seen during the Arab Spring in 2011, or in

Spain in March 2004 and in May 2011, the latter already out of the local sphere and embedded in an international financial crisis. Thus, and after the debate is sparked partly thanks to ICTs, these extreme cases would be the ones that enable the forging and setting of extra-representative participation that, at its own turn, finds in ICTs a perfect tool for its organization and coordinated action. And the circle closes.

4. ONLINE PARTICIPATION, CYBERACTIVISM AND SLACKTIVISM

Almost a decade has passed since the bloom of the so-called Web 2.0 and soon a second decade will have passed since the Internet was made available to the general public. Along the years, evidence (Smith, 2013) has refuted some myths while it has reinforced some of the ideas we have been presenting in the last paragraphs. That is, the constantly –and in recent years rapidly– growing political activity on social networking sites has not implied the decoupling of the «virtual world» with the «face-to-face world» or «real world», but the opposite: there is a total consensus about social networking sites being yet another part of any political activity.

However, while not detached from what happens offline, the patterns of online behavior begin to have clear differentiating features from traditional politics (Rainie et al., 2011; Obar, 2012): communication becomes more frequent and intense; it is believed that the digital medium favors the achievement of fixed goals; there is greater participation accompanied by greater engagement and greater satisfaction with the obtained results. Fernández-Prados (2012) even opposes Activism 1.0 with Activism 2.0, the second one much more oriented to debate and action, much more horizontal in form and more aimed at social transformation in its core. The author also contrasts the concept of e-participation and other procedures closer to conventional or representative participation, against e-protest as identified with new forms of political action such as cyberactivism, digital activism, or hacktivism, definitely far from the institutions and forming new channels of extra-representative democracy.

Drawing a parallel with the virtual communities dedicated to content creation, Fuster & Subirats (2012) define new communities of political action where participation is highly open, both in terms of «membership» –if this word is of any relevance in this context– as in terms of different profiles, forms and levels of commitment. This participation is also a highly decentralized and asynchronous one, with no dependencies of space –association venue, party headquarters– or time –scheduled meetings or assemblies. It is a participation that is also open in the sense of public participation, widely reported by the networks, and autonomous, where the individual is ultimately responsible for their commitment as well as the tasks they undertake. Finally, it is a form of participation also open in the way action happens and is implemented, initiated by individual initiative and fostered by individual endorsement. It is politics and it is democracy grounded in doing things and making things happen: a do-ocracy.

These new political communities, open, «forming around interested and knowledgeable discussants» (Kelly, 2008), are already replacing the existing hierarchies and substructures.

Far, then, from the «daily me» (Negroponte, 1995) or from the «echo chambers» (Sunstein, 2001), what emerges is a brand new political participation that hardly fits neither in the theories of mobilization nor in the theories of reinforcement (Norris, 2001), but seems instead to emerge as a new para-institutional way (Peña-López et al., 2013), halfway between mobilization and the new political forms and the reinforcement of the existing traditional institutions.

A new political mobilization that also has a fundamental feature that distinguishes it from other previous forms of involvement, both in its forma and in its scope: the constant logging and reporting of each and every activity and piece of participation, the traceability of all tasks and actions, the comprehensive and detailed documentation of the processes, the opening/openness of these processes and, finally, the publication and making available to the public the entire data sets, protocols, tools and results used in and resulting from political action.

It is in this context, and closely related with the high granularity accepted in the commitment and level of participation in these new communities of political activism, that the figure of slacktivism appears and progressively gains momentum. We want to here present two approaches to this concept. The first one, denounced and reviled by Morozov (2011), is the one generally used in the media and the literature and approaches slacktivism from the micro level and the side of the sender or the slacktivist. In this first meaning, the citizen satisfies their need to engage politically by getting involved in almost pointless and isolated actions, either by signing an online petition, either by forwarding a message or re-tweeting a tweet, either by «liking» or just commenting a piece of content shared on a social networking site, a blog or a mass media website. There is no doubt that, from this point of view, seen as a strictly politically unbound activity, slacktivism ranks last in the ladder of commitment, responsibility and effort of political activity.

There is, however, yet another approach, which can be made at the macro and the collective/aggregate level, and emphasizing on the side of the receiver, the one whom the *whole set* of clicks/RT/I-like casted by the whole set of *all* citizens is addressed to.

First, and as shown by Nonneke & Preece (2003), the lurker—the passive user of Internet forums—is a role more than necessary for the good government and health of an online community. Beyond passivity, it is the lurker—and in our case, the slacktivist—who maintains the cohesion of the community, spreads its content by means of their minimal effort actions, acts at critical times and, above all, provides value to the community itself by filtering and critically reading the contents shared or generated in it. But, besides these issues, it is worth being noted that lurking or slacktivism are often, and as mentioned above, activities inherent to the new political activism and their different levels of engagement and participation. Different levels of engagement and participation

that change over time and people and according to their interests and needs, and letting people go through different stages of participation (Peña-López et al., 2013) thanks to the granular nature of the political actions and tasks at reach.

Moreover, and at the collective level, these slacktivists are the same ones that get involved in political actions outside of social networking sites (Ogilvy et al., 2011), providing cohesion to the group and a sense of collective identity. Indeed, theirs are specific actions that come to complement, not replace, other actions of political participation. More importantly, the *passive* visibility of these actions –as they appear in the activists' profiles on social networking sites– ends up providing these actions with a life on their own, making involvement in civic causes be spread and resulting in behavioral changes both at the individual level as in the social circle next to the citizen.

5. CASUAL POLITICS

But, as we have already stated, beyond the individual or collective points of view we believe that it is worth considering the slacktivism not from the point of view of the «couch activist», but from the point of view of the decision maker.

There is an affectionate tradition during election seasons where candidates pay a visit to city markets and civic center cafes to chat with the «common people», to get their pulse, to listen to their demands and needs. Once the election season is over, these hearings usually occur in reverse, namely, with strikes and street demonstrations. To the extent that markets and civic centre bars succeed in repeating the same longings and complaints, or to the extent that strikes and streets are filled up with citizens eager to be heard, issues end up entering the political and/or the public agenda, depending on whether the first step is performed by parties or by mass media.

We can approach slacktivism from its collective aspect and as a small part of a greater whole: as the peripheral portion of the political participation that happens simultaneously offline in the streets and online on social networking sites, highly involved and engaged, carefully documented and disseminated on the Net, totally extra-representative and decentralized, but with outward forms that emulate institutions. In this sense, slacktivism is not as important in relationship to the issuer –the one that just makes a click– but in relationship to the receiver, i.e. the institution that feels questioned or challenged by literally millions of micro-actions that are also, in essence, the echo of a compacted movement. A movement that, as it is not institutionalized, does not fall within our usual parameters to measure the impact of political participation: working hours «lost» by a strike, how many protesters in the street or the number of votes that changed sides in the following election.

We are warned by De Marco & Robles Morales (2012) of the «influence of institutional participation and the new forms of participation [and] that these tools can

facilitate the dissemination of political practices that in the ‘real world’ usually have less political relevance». Thus, tools that were not originally designed for political purposes manage their way in approaching the citizen to participate in politics, by chance, by accident, serendipitously.

If we recover Hibbing & Theiss-Morse’s thesis, we can see that they draw an ideal «democratic arrangement in which decisions are made by neutral decision makers who do not require sustained input from the people in order to function» (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). In this arrangement, citizens would have a preference for «stealth» processes that did not require much debate and even less controversy, delegating their responsibility in so-called «technocrats». The authors warn us, however, that the apparent lack of interest is not so. On the one hand because rather than a lack of interest in the *political space*, what we usually find is distrust or loss of hope. On the other hand, because there is palpable interest in the *political process*, in how decisions are made –regardless, again, of the will to engage in participation in the political space. This distinction between the political space –which raises distrust– and the political process –which raises genuine interest– is crucial.

Although we have already seen (Font et al., 2012) that these hypotheses have many edges, this preference for a stealth democracy would totally be in line with a casual way of doing politics, (1) totally informal and (2) based on constant microvotes (slacktivism) (3) around major topics (4) covered in large agorae (5) non-related to formal institutions and the different dynamics of representative politics.

Contradicting Hirschman (1970), we could say that in this choice for the extra-representative way and, especially, for its informal side, the notion of *exit* would not be so, but an *exit* towards *voice*. That is, the choice for extra-representative political participation would not be an exit from the democratic system, but a conscious choice to unleash one’s voice as another kind of engagement. And this would be particularly relevant or consistent in an environment where loyalty would be greatly devalued by the rampant political disaffection that plagues many modern democracies.

In this train of thought, the arguments that Hirschman (1991) himself collected as used to counter major political changes –the perversity thesis, the futility thesis and the jeopardy thesis– serve to explain the opposition to slacktivism, especially if consideration as futile.

Notwithstanding, as we will try to point out below, this approach still is the one of an evolution of the political arena, and not the one that is witnessing a deep transformation of the system. On the other hand, it is the approach from the standpoint of view of someone who makes a redemptive click, and not from the standpoint of view of someone who should monitor, organize and infer from millions of data that are produced by all computer activity in real time, i.e. *Big Data*.

6. EMERGENT SYSTEMS AND PATTERN RECOGNITION

We can give yet another twist to the question of slacktivism from the point of view of the decision-maker and his vision of what is collective, aggregate. The huge amount of data that can now be handled now; the limited –or very limited– potential as a political action of one single click, which we can even take as an almost uninformed action that ignores most of its context; and the casual encounters and random coincidences between campaigns and collective promoters are but three of the assumptions or pre-conditions that Johnson (2001) handles when he speaks about ideal environments for emergent behaviors to take place. Emergent behaviors are understood as collective behaviors whose design was not embedded in the different actions taken at the individual level. They can also be understood as complex collective behaviors that take place by aggregating a good amount of simple individual behaviors. Before emergent systems, Johnson suggests using pattern recognition as a very powerful tool.

Although decisions based on data are not –or should not be– something new, it is undeniable that Information and Communication Technologies and, in particular, the phenomenon of big data, offer new opportunities of magnitudes previously unseen (Esty & Rushing, 2007). It is true that this approach has well-founded criticism due to the coldness of data, the deficiencies when capturing contexts, the over-simplification of reality and the definition itself of the problems we aim at addressing. Added to that, there are also some doubts about relevant aspects such as privacy or security (Morozov, 2013). However, we believe that between the end representing traditional institutionalized representative politics and the end of automated decision making by the data, there is ample leeway for institutional innovation and, especially, hybridization procedures. And there is, above all, a real possibility of taking actions (and data) from slacktivism as living indicators –in every possible meaning– and as citizens who are «voting with their feet» every day, unconsciously and even passively, and with the absence of bias that conscious or proactive action could imply (we are talking here about huge amounts of data difficult to tamper with).

Among the many existing cases that we can use to suggest an approach to slacktivism as big data for decision-making, we can highlight the recognition of patterns of behavior in mobility from the geolocation of mobile terminals (Frias-Martinez et al., 2010; Frias-Martinez & Virseda, 2013) or the use of Twitter to trace the evolution of infectious diseases and as activity levels associated with its spread (Signorini et al., 2011), an exercise that can get translated into very interesting projects like the Health Map¹.

In an area closer to the politics, seemingly trivial experiments like the one by the FloatingSheep collective and their geolocation of racist tweets in response to the re-

1 <http://healthmap.org/en/>

election of President Obama in the U.S.² may be evolved into the mapping of all types of hate speech³, a most valuable resource with direct impact on awareness raising and policy-making in the field of human rights and risk of social exclusion.

If the case of mobility through call data/detail records (CDR), health-related tweets or hate speech give us a powerful tool for refining public policies –mobility, health or human rights, respectively– the move towards political preferences detection takes us out the scope of the Administration or the Government and squarely in the field of Democracy and Governance. And let us insist on this point: «The value does not lie in each individual fragment of news and information, but rather in the mental portrait created by a number of messages over a period of time» (Rieder, 2012).

Put in another way: the new extra-representative digital participation can be understood both as a movement –with particular and well-defined actions– and as a culture – with its ideology and its overlying political program. It is this ideology, shared values and implicit political program which can now be made explicit through the handling of huge amounts of data, pattern recognition and inference of emergent behaviors

And slacktivism –or the slacktivist– is but a tiny but also precious piece of this puzzle. Because it is to the extent that a critical mass is reached of minimal and volatile actions, or of easily influenced individuals, that it is indeed possible to roll the snowball of viral participation (Watts & Dodds, 2007). If, after that, we can add the possibility of characterizing large aggregates of individuals according to their online behavior (Kosinski et al., 2013), we can not only infer emerging political trends through the identification of patterns of behavior, but we can also approximate their representation in the total population. And this is a crucial leap forward in comparison with usual aggregation of preferences emerging from political surveys or even polls.

Slacktivism lies in between two new ways of understanding collective action and decision-making. On the one hand, new forms of extra-representative participation initiated by highly cohesive cores of activists (Peña-López et al., 2013) or social hackers (Ruiz de Querol & Kappler, 2013). On the other hand, politics far away from the traditional leadership from modern democracies and more focused on capacity building and fostering emancipatory values, encouraging the shift from objective choice to subjective choice, and from subjective choice towards effective choice (Welzel et al., 2003).

2 <http://www.floatingsheep.org/2012/11/mapping-racist-tweets-in-response-to.html>

3 <http://www.floatingsheep.org/2013/05/hatemap.html>

7. VINDICATING SLACKTIVISM

In our exposition we have tried to present slacktivism under the topic of the iceberg. While the floating part is what is visible to the eyes, this is but a small part that can make us lose the overall perspective, minimizing its importance, and leading us to wreck.

Our claim of slacktivism is not made from the individual's point of view: as we have already acknowledged, slacktivism is in truth often made of actions just barely committed in themselves and even –and most times– a mere sequence of data generated automatically and passively. In this sense, and from the point of view of activism, we do not only understand but do share the ill reputation of slacktivism as the most evil brother of political engagement.

But most of the foundations of slacktivism are under the surface. Beneath the surface of institutions and formal political participation underlie new political practices not only extra-representative, but as new as invisible to the radar of modern democracy shaped around the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution. These new forms of doing or taking part in politics, in decentralized but cohesive way, individually-led but institutionalized on its outer face, must necessarily enter into the equations of institutional politics, and slacktivism is one of its most powerful variables.

The vindication of slacktivism has to be done, thus, from institutional politics, bringing up the value of casual or informal politics that occur in the periphery of the new social movements, in frivolous but significant friction with traditional practices – and, as we have seen often complementing each other rather than in opposition. Strictly speaking, and this is a major point, we believe that slacktivism does not actually take place in the periphery of new social movements in the sense of something marginal, but in the sense of something that is actually part of the whole, as smoke is part of the fire. In this sense, slacktivism is not weak engagement, but just a part of the new digital toolbox of political participation, which sometimes is more committed and sometimes is not, but it does not define the activist because, as evidence shows, we are facing a new kind of activism which is multimedia, crossmedia and transmedia. That is, slacktivism does not define the activist, but, in general, the activist individually uses slacktivism as yet another tool to reinforce a much more comprehensive and collective strategy of political engagement.

Before this landscape, we consider that monitoring, political pattern recognition, inference of tacit ideologies and proposals, or real-time politics are –or should be– new approaches to political action that are now not only possible but desirable. Setting aside this new toolbox, so much needed for understanding the new digital citizenship, is a sign of political stagnation as slacktivism is a sign that something is moving in society.

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