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MODERN DIGITAL IMAGINARIES: FACEBOOK AS A SOURCE OF INDEPENDENT NARRATIVES IN COLOMBIA

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Introduction

As much as networked digital media has proven to be a powerful tool for coordinating and consolidating political action, the study of this issue in the context of Latin America requires an additional understanding of Latin American countries' political and economic landscapes.

In this paper, I analyze the activist group "Voces contra las FARC"'s use of Facebook during a period of acute political debate in comparison to that of the two local newspapers with the highest circulation rates, El Tiempo and El Espectador. This article expands the existing theories about the power of social media in countries with corrupted political sceneries and provides insights that could be used for comparative analysis between Latin American countries in hopes of characterizing the networked environment in the region.

Modern Social Imaginaries: A Latin American Overview

The question of what modern social imaginaries look like needs to be posed again from a new angle, since different cultures have modernized in their own ways and cannot be analyzed under one general theory¹. Nonetheless, from Castoriadis' suggestion that everything that is presented to us in the social world, starting with society itself, is inextricably tied to the symbolic², to Anderson's analysis of nations as imagined communities that only exist in the individuals' minds³, the humanities seem to agree on the fact that collective imaginaries are what enable the practice of society.

What happens when a new element penetrates the collective imaginary and changes the way in which people conceive their social existence? The sudden rise of technology

¹ Taylor, Charles (2002). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Public Culture 14 (1) 91:124

² Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society* MIT Press, 1987.

³ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, 2d ed. London:Verso,1991, 224 pp.

and social networking has undoubtedly influenced people's perceptions of their role in social, economic and political affairs. The case of Latin America is of special importance, since most Latin American countries still face challenges to democracy⁴ and social media is just starting to be seen as a tool to enhance civic participation where it has taken root and promote it where it does not exist yet.

With an Internet penetration of 54.3% and an estimated Facebook presence of 36,6%⁵, Colombia has the third highest Internet indicators in the region (preceded by Brazil and Argentina)⁶. Manifestations of civic engagement, such as the "One Million Voices Against Las FARC" march in 2008⁷, have already been coordinated through digital technologies, which proves that citizens have begun to discover that social media can be used to defy the balance of power between the state and the civil society⁸.

Kidnappings, Violence and Radical use of Social Media in Colombia

Kidnapping is an affliction that has haunted Colombian society for over forty years. In 2001, Colombia was named the kidnap capital of the world, and it was estimated that one kidnap occurred every three hours, resulting in over 3,500 reported cases. According to studies conducted by the National Center of Historic Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica), the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) were responsible for 43% of the abductions and the National Liberation Army (ELN) was accountable for 30%.⁹ In 2002, the number of kidnappings started to decrease, and in 2013 the Ministry of Defense reported a total of 299 cases¹⁰. This downfall is often associated with the government's ongoing peace negotiations with insurgent groups.

On November 17, 2014 General Rubén Darío Alzate Mora, commander of the Titan Joint Armed Force, was abducted by the 34th front of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). The kidnapping violated the agreement that had been reached between the guerilla and the Colombian government during the continuing peace dialogues, which were to be resumed in Cuba that following week¹¹. Furthermore, Alzate Mora was the highest ranked general in the in region, which made the act a matter of national security¹².

This situation raised questions that transcended the abduction itself. Not only was General Alzate Mora warned not to travel through the area where he was kidnapped

⁴ Ciria, Alberto. (1969) La comunicación política en América Latina: algunos de sus problemas. Estudios Internacionales 2, (8) 530: 542.

⁵ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/sa/co.htm>

⁶ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats15.htm>

⁷ Guerrero Bernal, Juan Carlos (2012) "One million voices against FARC":

Facebook as a vector establishing and mobilizing civil society against the Colombian guerrilla. Paper presented at the 53rd Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA)

⁸ Sharky, Clay (2011) The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change Foreign Affairs. 90, (1) 28-41

⁹ <http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/index.php/noticias/noticias-cmh/1530-las-cifras-del-secuestro>

¹⁰ <http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-del-dia/aumento-de-secuestro-expres-signo-de-la-evolucion-criminal-de-colombia>

¹¹ <http://dialogosdepaz.org/los-dialogos/>

¹² <http://www.elespectador.com/noticias/judicial/secuestro-del-general-alzate-el-hecho-tiene-tesis-el-p-articulo-528196>

due to its high rebel activity, but he also decided to do so dressed as a civilian. The reasons why he followed this course of action still remain unknown. President Juan Manuel Santos suspended the peace negotiations until the general was freed. However, local activist groups strongly critiqued the government's actions and the president's failure to demand the liberation of all those that remained abducted before resuming the negotiation process.

The question of whether or not the government could be held accountable for Alzate's presence in a high-risk zone remains unaddressed. Nevertheless, activists in Voces contra las FARC –a Colombian activist group that aims to shed light on the massacres, extortions, human rights violations and forced recruitment of minors for which the Revolutionary Armed Forces are responsible, immediately initiated discussions about the matter on social media, using Facebook as their primary outlet to provide their own answers to the questions that the government failed to take on. These included aspects of the kidnapping that were ignored or denied by mainstream media, starting with the fact that Alzate was wandering in a zone that is known to be “taken” by the armed forces, even after being strongly advised not to do so.

Radical media studies have previously explored the construction of radical news, and their opposition to mainstream media in aspects of construction, distribution and possibilities for discussion. Tony Bennet's hegemonic approach to this matter – according to which radical and mainstream media should not be seen as fields of symbolic production, but as inhabiting a shared field of relations¹³ was then adopted by Chris Atton in order to explore the radical media in the UK. In his work, Atton suggests that radical media seeks to transform the practice of journalism in hopes of giving a voice to the voiceless and inverting “the hierarchy of access” by providing safe spaces for both activists and ordinary people.¹⁴ In this sense, the case of Colombia is no different: Colombian mainstream media favors powerful groups and individuals, which intrinsically limits other audience's possibilities of entry into the news, while radical media allows “ordinary people” and radical groups to create news themselves and become protagonists of their stories.

A growing body of literature has characterized the relationship between radical social media and political activism as enabling in both directions¹⁵. The influence of Twitter in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt has come to prove that social media supports distributed conversation among participants and that journalism, in the era of social media, has become a conversation¹⁶. This implies that a new, virtual space has emerged for radical media as well as mainstream outlets, which poses an opportunity for social movements and organizations to reach their audiences.

¹³ Bennet, Tony (1986) *Popular Culture and the 'Turn to Gramsci'*. *Popular Culture and Social Relations*. London: Arnold pp. 348-53.

¹⁴ Atton, Chris. (2002) *News Cultures and New Social Movements: Radical Journalism and the Mainstream Media*. *Journalism Studies* Volume 3, 491-505.

¹⁵ Downing, John. (1984) *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*. Boston: South End Press.

¹⁶ Gillmor, D. (2004). *We the media*. Sebastapol, CA: O'Reilly Media.

Methodology

The main purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory analysis of Voces Contra Las FARC's use of Facebook during the period where General Alzate Mora was kidnapped. For this purpose, I collected data from the activist group Facebook page in addition to data from the Facebook pages belonging Colombia's two most influential newspapers, El Tiempo and El Espectador. Facebook was chosen as the social media site for this analysis due to the fact that it is the most popular social networking site in Colombia, with 24 million users according to MINTIC. This can be translated to a penetration of 90.8% of the country's Internet users.¹⁷

Data Collection Strategy

The social media analytics tool Quintly was used to gather historical data from the three official Facebook pages between the dates of November 16th 2014 and November 30th of 2014, when General Alzate was released. Considering that the two newspapers had published posts concerning all sorts of different topics, their two datasets were sampled and all messages that had no relation to the kidnapping were removed. Once the new dataset was established, message analysis was conducted.

Methodological Limitations

While my initial idea was to use an actor-coding scheme to identify information flows within the three organizations, Facebook's setup and privacy settings hinder the possibilities of conducting an effective coding process.

Findings

In contrast to its mainstream counterparts, which posted updates regarding General Alazate's case on their Facebook pages more than twice a day (an average of 6.28 Times in the case of El Tiempo and 4.85 times in the case of El Espectador), Voces contra las FARC published an average of 3.28 posts per day. This difference in quantity responds to the organizations' difference in size and capacity. While both El Tiempo and El Espectador have over one thousand employees including contributors to their virtual platforms, Voces is composed of less than fifty members, and job rotation is common. Table 1 reports the number of posts concerning the Alzate case per day between November 16 and 30, for Voces, El Tiempo and El Espectador.

¹⁷ <http://www.mintic.gov.co/portal/604/w3-article-2713.html>

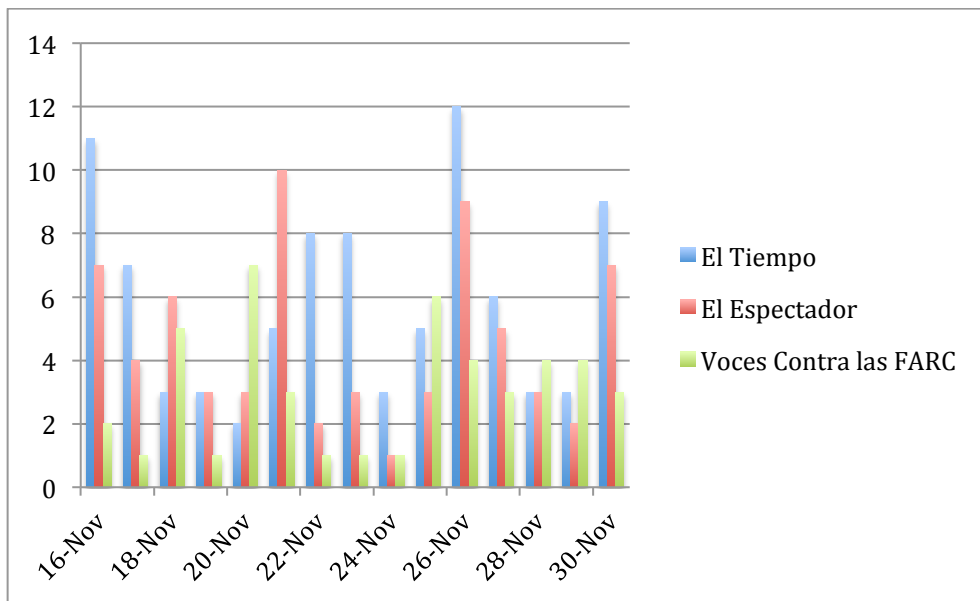


Table 1: Number of posts per day.

The peaks on November 16, 26 and 30 respond to the fact that those three days were the most crucial in relation to the Alzate case. The general was kidnapped on November 16, which immediately caught both the mainstream and the radical media's attention. Then, on November 26, the FARC announced the general's liberation, which happened on November 30.

Journalistic Techniques

Voces contra las FARC's aim of giving a voice to the voiceless is enhanced by the presentation of news *from the inside*, which superficially resembles the eyewitness reports in mainstream media, as it aims to present news in a way that communities will feel identified with.¹⁸ Along these lines, the activist group approached General Alzate Mora's abduction as part of a wider and more critical issue concerning every Colombian citizen, the issue of kidnapping and violence in Colombia:

"The interruption of the piece dialogues due to the kidnapping of General Ruben Dario Alzate Mora is not definitive but conditional. President Santos' arrogance prevents him from seeing that his alliance with criminals is a failure, and he will seek to resume it in spite of all the other Colombian citizens who have been kidnapped, mutilated, raped or killed." Voces contra las FARC. November 19, 2014.

Voces' stories are dominated by a narrative of violence, in which the reader is constantly reminded of the atrocious crimes for which the FARC are responsible in addition to the kidnapping of General Alzate. The technique of listing the guerilla's

¹⁸ Atton, Chris. (2002) News Cultures and New Social Movements: Radical Journalism and the Mainstream Media. Journalism Studies Volume 3, 491-505.

delinquencies, which often include blackmail, torture, rape, and murder, delivers a powerful message that cannot be reduced to a single incident, and is thus portrayed a series of events in which General Alzate's kidnapping serves as a mere case in point.

Furthermore, Voces' narrative is permeated by what could be defined as a "question-answer" dynamic that is not uncommon in radical media practices. While questioning the *status quo*, writers at Voces provide their own interpretations of the mysterious circumstances under which the kidnapping took place, most of which include denunciations of the government's corruption. These opinions, that distance themselves from the mainstream media as much as possible, also serve as invitations to dialogue, and group members often engage in debates and conversations via Facebook threads:

"Attorney Alejandro Ordóñez has been commissioned to investigate whether there are any irregularities in the series of Twitter messages in which former president Alvaro Uribe Vélez revealed that general Rubén Darío Alzate Mora had been kidnapped by the FARC last Sunday. This leads us to believe that if Uribe had not made this information public, it would have been kept from the Colombian people." Voces Contra las FARC, November 19, 2014.

To these accusations, some Facebook users respond:

"He [Former President Uribe] finds out about everything before we do. Way to be on top of the game and care for your country."

To create resistance, one should be informed of the counterpart's actions. There is nothing wrong with that. President Uribe did not lie at any time, he just made some information public. More so, any citizen is obliged to denounce crimes. This is just another tease to confuse people. Still, everything about this case remains a mystery, doesn't it?

In contrast, *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* refer to the Alzate case as an isolated incident, confirming the popular assertion that mainstream media produces an inflexible system within which the representation of unofficial voices is marginalized¹⁹

"President Juan Manuel Santos has announced the interruption of the cycle of peace dialogues with the FARC, which was to be continued in Cuba next Tuesday, due to the kidnapping of General Alzate (...). He stated that the FARC were entirely responsible for the General's abduction, and that conversations between the two parties would only be resumed after Alzate was returned his freedom." *El Espectador*, November 17 2014.

Two years after the National Government and the FARC had initiated a cycle of peace dialogues (...) they were interrupted this Sunday after the kidnapping of General Ruben Dario Alzate Mora. (...) The president accused FARC of committing an "unacceptable kidnapping". *El Tiempo*, November 17 2014.

¹⁹ Atton, Chris. (2002) News Cultures and New Social Movements: Radical Journalism and the Mainstream Media. *Journalism Studies* Volume 3, 491-505.

On the contrary, El Tiempo and El Espectador had a more reserved approach to the matter, favoring actual reporting of the facts over analysis.

However, even if both newspapers remained as neutral as possible in their reporting of General Alzate's kidnapping, there were too many unresolved questions surrounding the issue, which became worthy of coverage itself. On November 21, El Tiempo posted a link to an article titled "The Five Questions That General Alzate Needs to Answer", suggesting that the General would have to explain the following upon his return to freedom:

1. What was his objective in this expedition?
2. Why didn't he bring his bodyguards with him, if he was aware of the high guerilla presence in the zone?
3. Why was he dressed as a civilian instead of wearing his uniform?
4. Why was he traveling unarmed?
5. Are there any other explanations?

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of El Tiempo with the date 'Jueves 30 de julio de 2015' and a search bar. The main navigation menu includes categories like 'OPINIÓN', 'COLOMBIA', 'BOGOTÁ', 'MUNDO', 'POLÍTICA', 'ECONOMÍA', 'DEPORTES', 'ENTRETENIMIENTO', 'TECNÓSFERA', 'VIDA', and 'CLASIFICADOS'. The 'POLÍTICA' section is expanded, showing sub-categories like 'JUSTICIA', 'PROCESO DE PAZ', 'GOBIERNO', 'CONGRESO', 'PARTIDOS POLÍTICOS', and 'ELECCIONES'. Below the navigation, there are 'TEMAS DEL DÍA' (Farc, Elecciones 2015, Juan Carlos Pinzón, Corte Constitucional) and 'ÚLTIMAS NOTICIAS'. The main article title is 'Las cinco preguntas que el general Alzate debe responder' with a sub-headline 'Aún no se conoce por qué el alto oficial, secuestrado por Farc, violó los protocolos de seguridad.' The author is 'Por: ELTIEMPO.COM |' and the date is '© 12:04 p.m. | 21 de noviembre de 2014'. The article text begins with 'En medio del anuncio de la liberación del general Rubén Darío Alzate, plagiado por la guerrilla de las Farc el pasado domingo en el corregimiento Las Mercedes, a 30 minutos de Quibdó, las dudas que rodean su traslado a esa zona siguen en pie.' and continues with 'El ministro de Defensa, Juan Carlos Pinzón, manifestó en días pasados desconocer las razones personales o de inteligencia por las cuales no se siguieron los protocolos de seguridad típicos de un desplazamiento de un general a una zona con fuerte presencia guerrillera como esa, por lo cual el país se realiza principalmente cuatro cuestionamientos frente al caso:'. To the right of the text are social media sharing icons for Facebook (16), Twitter (5), Google+, and Email. A 'PUBLICIDAD' section is visible on the right side of the page.

Screenshot: The Five Questions That General Alzate Needs To Answer.

While the article itself doesn't provide any preliminary hypotheses that could explain these issues, it represents an intersection between mainstream and radical media approaches to the Alzate case. The journalistic practice of asking open questions foments individual analysis, a strategy that is more likely to appear in radical media as a way of promoting the inclusion of different viewpoints in a possible debate.

El Espectador showed a similar inflection point in its otherwise distant approach to the kidnapping on the same date, November 21, when it published a link to a note affirming that General Alzate would have to thoroughly explain himself to the Congress and to the Colombian people. This note was much briefer than El Tiempo's piece, but it also

alluded to the questions that the mainstream media had chosen to ignore since the abduction took place.

POLÍTICA 21 NOV 2014 - 6:32 AM

Secuestro del general Alzate

General Alzate tendrá que dar explicaciones en el Congreso

El Senado tiene contemplado llamarlo a control político para que informe por qué estaba en una 'zona roja' sin los esquemas de seguridad.

Por: Redacción Política



Paralelo al avance de la liberación del **general del Ejército, Rubén Darío Alzate**, y otros cuatro secuestrados, en la comisión segunda del Senado avanza una citación al Congreso para que explique las circunstancias en las que se llevó a cabo su secuestro.

Screenshot: General Alzate Will Have To Explain Himself To The Congress

Comments to both El Tiempo and El Espectador's posts exceeded those gathered by Voces contra las FARC's, which is expected given the pages' difference in number of followers, higher for the newspapers than the activist group. (El Tiempo has 2.1 million followers, El Espectador has 1,6 million and Voces has 12,260). It is worth noting that this disproportion responds to radical media's expected *modus operandi*, which is strongly based on non-commercial premises as opposed to mainstream media's profit-centered, hierarchical organization.

Conclusions

While this case study answers a few questions about the newly established relationship between radical media and social networks in Latin America, which is still very immature in comparison to more developed countries, it leads to bigger questions about the use of social media by social movements in the region. Furthermore, it is worth noting that

this paper is merely a part of an ongoing research project, in which I plan to establish comparisons between media approaches to political issues in Colombia.

From the side of these organizations, my research raises questions about possible ways in which social media could be used to enhance civic action in Colombia, or at least to open new communications channels that allow individuals with diverse viewpoints to engage in political debates. It is also an invitation for them to perform user research, given the fact that, even though their activity rates (lower than those of mainstream media) can be explained by their very nature, they also imply a certain lack of interest in their social media followers. In order to fully apprehend the potential of social media networks and use them as platforms to foment dialogue organizations need to show deeper commitment to their followers.

It is worth noting that, even though some elements of the current studies about civic engagement and social media in politically repressed countries (mostly Middle Eastern) can be extrapolated to the Latin American scenario, studies that take into account the distinctive characteristics of the region are much needed. A characterization of such sort would help Latin American publics understand the crucial role of social media in the civic sphere and incite them to encourage participation in dialogues that take place in digital platforms.

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