

ONLINE MEDIATED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION  
AMONG VENEZUELAN ABROAD

A study of Facebook usage during the Venezuelan presidential elections  
of October 2012

Lia Verónica Lezama Ruiz

University of Helsinki

Faculty of Social Science

Media and Global Communication

Master's Thesis

May, 2014



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta/Osasto Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Faculty of Social Sciences		Laitos/Institution – Department Department of communication	
Tekijä/Författare – Author Lia Verónica Lezama Ruiz			
Työn nimi / Arbetets titel – Title Online mediated political communication among Venezuelans Abroad			
Oppiaine /Läroämne – Subject Media and Global Communication			
Työn laji/Arbetets art – Level Master's thesis		Aika/Datum – Month and year May 2014	Sivumäärä/ Sidoantal – Number of pages 98p.
Tiivistelmä/Referat – Abstract			
<p>This research analyses how Venezuelans abroad engaged in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections of October 2012. This question is anchor in three different contexts: political and social polarization, increment of Venezuelan immigration and the use of new media as a field of interaction.</p> <p>The study first looks at the theoretical ground that provides a platform for the research, then explains the theoretical concept of public sphere, participation, community and social movements under the notion of the network society. Furthermore, some contextual background of Venezuela is presented in order to frame the origins of the political and social polarization in the country.</p> <p>This research combines quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to analyse textual and visual data generated during the Venezuelan presidential election in the Facebook group “Venezuelans abroad”. The large number of data collected offered a suitable material to outline topics of discussion, supporting material and sources of information through the quantitative approach. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach uses netnography design in order to make sense of the data collected in terms of political engagement. The study collected the data from a period of three days, consisting of the day before the presidential election, the day of election and the day after the election.</p> <p>The result of the analysis suggests that Venezuelans abroad used Facebook as a platform for campaigning the two main presidential candidates Hugo Chávez Frías and Henrique Capriles bypassing the rules of the electoral council. Due to the structural nature of communication in the new media, Venezuelans abroad could select their reliable sources of information and supporting material to generate their own content. Moreover, the close reading of the data suggests that Venezuelans abroad used Facebook to express their ideas, political interest and demands towards what they considered to be good or bad for the health of democracy, hence, Facebook represented the virtual space in which Venezuelans abroad reunited to produce their content, to debate, confront, affiliate and support other members of the group.</p>			
Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords Engagement, political communication, Facebook, online mediated communication, Venezuelan elections			

## **Acknowledgements**

I own my deepest gratitude first to God who made possible this journey and the achievements of a dream that started more than five years ago.

I cannot find words to express my gratitude to my family, to my parents Milena and Salvador who have supported me in every step of my life, holding my hands whenever I fell and encouraged me to take risks; and to my siblings Leonardo for being my example to follow, Laura for being the person with greatest advices and Luis Alejandro for his unconditional care and support.

I would like to specially thank Leopoldo for his love and patience, for being my shoulder to cry on in the moments of stress and worries, for being the person who has all confidence in me as a person and as a professional.

This work would not be possible without the guidance and patience of Mervi Pantti who continuously checked my work and supported me especially in the difficult moments of this journey. I will be always thankful for you.

Finally, I will be always indebted to my friends Ana, Jayson, Polina, Adela, Ile but especially to Tijana and Joonas with whom I worked long hours in Kaisa Library in different times of this journey and who corrected my work. You guys have been a great family in this part of the world.

Thank you, to all of you...

## Table of contents

1. Introduction of the research.....	6
2. Online mediated communication and engagement.....	11
2.1. Transition: from Public Sphere to Global Public Sphere.....	11
2.2. Dimensions of participation.....	14
2.2.1. Participation and the media.....	15
2.2.2. Participation and sharing values.....	16
2.2.3. Participation as civic practice.....	17
2.3 Virtual Communities.....	21
2.4 Internet as an opportunity for social movements.....	24
3. Contextual background: Venezuela.....	30
3.1 Portraying Venezuelan Political Context.....	30
3.2 Description of the candidates.....	34
4. Methodology.....	37
4.1 Research methods.....	37
4.2 Study Design.....	38
4.3 Data.....	40
4.3.1 Group of Study.....	41
4.3.2 Data Collection.....	43
4.4 Data Analysis Strategy.....	45
4.4.1 Quantitative Approach.....	45
4.4.2 Qualitative Approach.....	47
4.5 Ethical consideration and Validation.....	49
5. Online participation and political engagement in Facebook.....	51
5.1 Main features of the Facebook' messages.....	51
5.1.2 Online participation.....	52
5.1.3 Subject of discussion.....	54
5.1.4 Themes of discussion.....	55
5.1.5 Supporting material.....	60
5.1.6 Sources of information.....	61

5.2 Sense-making of Facebook post and comments.....	65
5.2.1 Polarised vision of Venezuela realm.....	66
5.2.2 Mobilising attention on voting: political engagement.....	73
5.2.3 Facebook as a virtual community.....	79
6. Conclusions.....	82
6.1 Facebook and many-to-many communication.....	82
6.2 Facebook and political engagement.....	84
6.3 Facebook and sense of togetherness.....	87
References.....	90

### **List of figures**

Figure 1: Themes of discussion. 6th October 2012.....	57
Figure 2: Themes of discussion. 7th October 2012.....	58
Figure 3: Themes of discussion. 8th October 2012.....	59
Figure 4: Supporting material by themes in percentages.....	61
Figure 5: Sources of information in percentages.....	62
Figure 6: Uses of sources by themes in percentages.....	64

### **List of tables**

Table 1: Online participation per day.....	53
Table 2: Online participation average.....	53
Table 3: Subject of discussion per day.....	55
Table 4: Supporting material by day.....	60

## 1. Introduction

History is not static, and sometimes it surprises us through an unexpected death or unforeseen change. During the development of this research thesis, President Hugo Chávez Frías died, Venezuelans went through another presidential election in 2013 (just six months after Chávez was re-elected) and currently the country is enduring probably the most critical crisis in the last 15 years. In the contemporary history of Venezuela no evidence of long term political protest is found, however, political protest is not a novelty in the country. The protests today in the streets of Venezuela represent a result of a political crisis rooted in Venezuelan society since perhaps 2002 and intensively increased since the death of Chávez, the 14-year president of Venezuela.

This study started from an interest in the uses of new media and their impacts on political organisations, interaction and participation. Examples such as the Arab Spring, the riots in London boroughs and cities in England in August 2011, the Wall Street protest in the United States against social and economic inequalities in 2011, as well as student protests in Chile in 2012, evidence the relation between the new media and participation. The new media includes platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs and, recently, they have become object of studies in different fields such as communications, social psychology, political studies, just to name a few. Considering the limitations of the internet in some countries, the events happening (in totalitarian countries in the Middle East) since 2011 raise the importance of analysing the dynamics of the societies where new media have been used for organisation and participation in political movements, also due to the restrictions of the traditional press. Castells (2004) previously considered the power of the media as a tool for escaping political controls, “the media have become more powerful than ever, technologically, financially, and politically. Their global reach and networking allow them to escape from strict political controls” (p. 396).

However, the new media itself represents more than a tool for totalitarian regimes, an opportunity itself for participation; the new social media have opened new spaces for social inclusion, group identity, pluralised participation and different forms of political conversation and engagement (Dahlgren, 2011). Based on the dynamics of the new

media and participation, this research proposes to study the online mediated communications of Venezuelans who live abroad.

This study is anchored in three different contexts: the polarised Venezuelan society, increasing Venezuelan emigration and the importance of social media as a field of participation and interaction. The political situation in Venezuela convulsed due to the social polarisation rooted in the “largest increases in inequality during the 1990s” (Naím, 2001, p. 31). Social friction became evident in the political arena during the presidential campaign of Chávez in 1998, in which it was perceived that underprivileged and marginalised sectors of society gave electoral triumph to Chávez. Since then, on the one hand the Venezuelan president appeared as the voice of the lower strata of the population and his “discourse and to a certain extent actions favoured the poor at the expense of privileged groups” (Ellner & Hellinger, 2004, p.21) and on the other hand a sector of the Venezuelan population did not feel represented by the political discourse of the president and not by the actions. His political actions were criticised due to the “militarisation of the government, the politicisation of the armed forces, the reliance on populism, and the ‘purging’ of all cultural institutions” (Ellner & Hellinger, 2003, p.22). One of the main opposition criticisms was related to the destruction of the democratic institutions and corruption in the “*Misiones*” (social welfare programs) that supposed to favour the unprivileged groups.

In addition, Chávez’s political discourse contributes to the exclusion and negation of the sector of society which is unhappy with his political management policies and presents political opponents as enemies of the nation (Aponte, 2012). The polarised political discourse during Chávez’s presidential terms, seems to be one of the reasons for Venezuelan youth to consider leaving their home country, states Esther Bermúdez in her interview (Gualdoni, 2007). Bermúdez who is the director of “mequieroir.com” (the website dedicated to helping young Venezuelan people who want to leave the country), claims that the number of subscriptions to the site increased exponentially when the former president took any repressive measures such as expropriation, control of foreign currency, approval of laws and reforms, just to name a few (Gualdoni, 2007). The most recent statistics published by World Bank Group (2011) indicated that 1.8% of the

Venezuelan population (equivalent to 521.500 people) have emigrated just in 2010. Thousands are leaving the country due to the political and economic instability (López, 2011). The main destinations of those who decided to leave are USA, Spain, Colombia, Australia and Portugal (World Bank Group, 2011).

Moreover, Venezuelans have faced a gradual erosion of the freedom of the press. The Law on Social Responsibility of Radio and Television, approved in 2004, provides the government with the authority to control radio and television content, while “broadcast media has declined in recent years, in part due to closures by regulators and other forms of official pressure, such as selective exchange-rate controls” (Freedom House, 2012). In addition, the media and media workers have faced “threats of arbitrary detention, charges, fines, and sentences, as well as license manipulation and other administrative harassment aimed at opposition media, primarily broadcast stations and daily newspapers” (Freedom House, 2011). As a consequence of control of traditional media, people have become more active in social media, because freedom of the online media is not as restricted as in the mainstream media. According to the Freedom on the Net (2011) report, “the country has emerged as a leader in the use of social media platforms [...] [N]ew media—especially blogs, the social-networking site Facebook, and the micro-blogging platform Twitter—have become important spaces for the diffusion of information and opinions on political and social topics”. In 2010 COMScore, Inc. (Reston, 2010) indicated that Venezuela was ranked third in world of countries showing a significant increase of Twitter users, after Indonesia and Brazil. These statistics are significant, considering that penetration of the internet in the country was 37% in that year (Conatel, 2011). A more recent statistic from Peer Reach, a social media analytics firm, indicates that Venezuela is the fourth country in the world with major percentages of Twitter users relative to its online population (Neal, 2013).

I personally presume that due to restrictions of freedom of the press, and social and political polarisation, Venezuelans have engaged in political conversation more than in any other time in the history of the country. The access to the new media has definitely modified the traditional paradigms of communications and, in this case, political communication. Based on this presumption, the main research question is how



Venezuelans abroad engage in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections of October 2012? Some sub questions were developed in order to approach to the main question a) what topics of discussion arose during the presidential elections?, b) what are the supporting materials Venezuelans abroad use for their online posts?, c) what sources of information were used to argument the Facebook posts?, d) how do Venezuelans abroad reflect Venezuela's polarisation in the Facebook group?, e) how do Venezuelans abroad encourage voting for an specific presidential candidate? and lastly f) how do Venezuelans abroad connect with each other in the Facebook group?

In order to answer these questions I will analyse the different posts and conversations produced in the Facebook group "Venezuelans abroad" during the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2012. This study will not specify the localisation of the Venezuelans abroad, since the Facebook group targets Venezuelans outside the country, which means anywhere else apart from the country of origin, however, there was not a technical tool to avoid Venezuelans inside the country join the group.

The data collected will be analysed through, firstly a quantitative approach which facilitates the description of the main features of the data; and secondly netnography will be utilised as the qualitative methods that facilitates the interpretation of the data collected.

There are already some studies conducted in Venezuela about social networks and politics on the net such as: Twitter and Venezuelan Elections 26S (Artigas, 2011) and An approach to the research about Venezuelan user's profile in Twitter during electoral processes (Montilla, 2011). In Venezuela, the main organisation researching participation, political communication, e- democracy and social network, is Venezuelan Researchers of Communication, which is an association of the communication research centres of six Universities of the country and, it has pointed out the relation between the social media and politics. However, the interaction between online media participation and Venezuelans living abroad is a topic that has not been examined yet. This study will thus become a contribution in the field of media and communication and more specifically in online mediated political participation and engagement.

The content of this research will be structured into five main chapters. The first chapter constitute an introduction to the research. In the second chapter I develop a theoretical framework in which key concepts and theories build the foundation for answering the research question. This chapter includes an overview on the public sphere, dimensions of participation, virtual communities and activism. The third chapter corresponds to the contextual background of Venezuela. This chapter portrays an overall view of the contemporary history of Venezuela, and highlights the relevant events to understand political polarisation and migrations movements in Venezuela. The fourth chapter presents the methodological choices, data collection and criteria for analysing the data collected during the Venezuelan presidential election in 2012. The fifth chapter aims to depict the results of a mixed methods data analysis, based on a descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis framed into the conceptual framework and theories from the theoretical chapter. Finally conclusions, considerations, inferences and deductions from the analysis of the results will be presented together with recommendations for further studies.

This research thesis has been influenced by my personal background and experience as a Venezuelan. I described four dimensions that influence the writing of this project: individual, national, journalist and research. The individual has to do with the personal emotions I have to deal during the process of writing that necessarily connect to the fear and worries for the future of my country. The journalist has to do with the personal experience of working in Venezuelan media and the concerns about the exercises of journalism. The research dimension refers to roles and interpretation of theories in order to disconnect the emotions and portray an objective point of view of the reality I decided to analyse. Beyond my personal belief and concerns as a Venezuelan, this research intends to approach a specific situation by using theories and concepts.

## **2. Online mediate communication and engagement**

This research is founded on four key concepts: the public sphere, participation, virtual communities and social movements. In addition, other terms, such as citizenship and democracy, are considered. In this section, I will present the different transformations that the main concepts of political communication have been going through in the “network society” (Castells, 2000). This chapter starts from the transition of the public sphere into a global public sphere. Then, three different dimensions of participation are framed into the digital age. Consequently, some basic approach to the sense of togetherness and community will offer a key to define the new forms of communication and interaction. Finally, social movements will be study in the online mediated society.

### **2.1. Transition: from Public Sphere to Global Public Sphere**

In this section, the concepts of citizenship, the public sphere, public screen and global public sphere will be presented. These concepts are linked together and cannot be separated from the notion of political communication and participation. The terms citizenship and public sphere become even more complex when the new technologies of communication and globalisation are considered, because national boundaries are getting more blurred and national identities are becoming transnational (Castells, 2004; Cottle, 2008).

People have needs to express and communicate their ideas, debate with others, contribute and participate in solving of common issues that could improve their way of living. Thomas Marshall developed one of the most influential studies about citizenship, *Citizenship and the Social Class*, in 1949, and defined citizenships in three dimensions: civil, political and social. His concept is underpinned in the social responsibilities the state has towards its citizens (Isin & Turner, 2002). Despite of the influential approach of citizenship by Marshall, ‘postmodernisation’ and ‘globalisation’ demands a reconfiguration of the term. The “rise of the network society” (Castells, 2000) and its influence in the social and political life urges a broader understanding of the definition of citizenship, especially after “the blurring of boundaries of the nation-state” (Castells, 2004, p.367).

Cammaerts and Van Audinhove (2005) introduce an overall view about citizenship in the transnational public sphere. They consider that the term citizenship evolved as a consequence of five different factors: 1. the crisis of formal representative democracy, 2. the change of the time-space dimension, 3. increasing migration and mobility, 4. political participation and, 5. the increase of social movement organisations. The authors explain that the ideas of citizenship cannot be understood anymore within the national boundaries. In addition, civil society questions the democratic legitimacy of other transnational actors such as international organisations (Cammaerts and Van Audinhove, 2005). The notion of transnational citizenships could be exemplified by the increasing interest of civil societies in global justice, inequalities of trade, war and peace, human rights, humanitarian catastrophes, as well as ecology and climate change (Cottle and Lester, 2011). National or transnational ideas, interests and demands of society create the “public space” for discussion, opinion and participation.

Historically, civil society, as part of the public sphere, “has produced the very ideas of citizenship as well as the groups and pressures” (Janoski, 1998, p. 17). Jurgen Habermas (1974) used the term ‘public sphere’ to explain political communication and portrayed public sphere as the place where community members could create their public opinion, in an environment different from government or economy. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) take this idea further and claim “the public sphere mediates between the civil society and the state, with the expression of public opinion working to both legitimise and check the power of the state” (p.128). Habermas distinguishes different levels of the public sphere: episodic publics found in taverns and in the streets, occasional publics like rock concerts or party assemblies, and “abstract public sphere” where isolated individuals are brought together through the mass media (Moe, 2010).

The notion of an “abstract public sphere” highlights the importance of the media in conceptualising public sphere. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) define that relation as “public screen”, they suggest that “new technologies introduce new forms of social organisation and new mode of perceptions” (p. 131). Indeed, the public sphere needs to be conceived in relation to the media and the implications of the mediation of public opinion through technology. Ideally, the media must enable information, ideas and

debates about current affairs in order to enhance opinion and participation (Dahlgren, 2000).

In addition, the public sphere in the societies of the twenty first century is being redefined, as a result of the new horizontal communication networks of the digital age. The idea of a “global” public sphere has been staged by Volkmer (2003), she considers the emergence of communication as a public sphere in today’s society, and explains that the new media infrastructure allows people to be eyewitness to events which are taking place in worldwide locations. As a consequence of this global process, citizens are becoming “increasingly autonomous from nation state contexts and are beginning to shape a politically relevant ‘global’ public sphere” (Volkmer, 2003, p. 1). In this context, the public sphere has become even more amorphous and difficult to explain in the online environment. Cottle and Lester (2011) explain that “national” public sphere has become highly-porous and fragmented because of the forces of global transformation, commercialisation and cultural diversity. In this respect, national public sphere is unsustainable in today’s digital age and public opinion formation can be explained in a “global” public sphere.

Castells (2000) frame digital age as “networks society” in which internet mediation is a social phenomenon. Hence, people with different social characteristics expanded their sociability beyond boundaries of self-recognition. As people are recognising themselves through the net, personal boundaries are becoming diffused, national boundaries are becoming blurred, and the global public sphere reinforces its position in the political communications flows. As a consequence, promoting the idea of public sphere in the network society becomes more complex and requires a broader view of the role of the media as a key element of democracy and power.

Other authors such as Peters (2004) have defined “global public sphere” as “transnational public sphere”. Peter describes three different ways in which the public sphere is becoming transnational in the media; first by the reporting of international events, second by the import and export of cultural products, and third by the transnational media such as BBC, Aljazeera, and CNN. This perspective seems to be more consumer-oriented and less developed than the idea of global public sphere

introduced by Volkmer (2003) and Castells (2000). However, re-defining public sphere as global or a transnational notion offers an integrated idea of the influence of globalisation in the political communications.

The network society, digital age or age of information is reshaping the relation between the power, the media, citizenship and democracy. The entire social structure is being reshaped. Then concepts of citizenships and public sphere became dynamic and transnational due to the structural nature of the online mediated communications.

## **2.2 Dimensions of participation**

In this section, the key point will be participation and online communities' framing in the new media landscape. Additionally, the terms engagement, political talks and political participation emerge in the discussion, as a result of the transformation in the digital age.

Knowing the relationship between citizenship and public sphere in the digital age, the question is how horizontal communication networks enhance participation and more specifically how the informational age contributes for political engagement.

Inescapable, the so called 'new' media conveys the discussion of participation, media and politics.

Different angles of participation have been studied with the development of the internet and under the so called network society. Three different authors build up the concept of participation based on different perspectives. Nico Carpentier (2011) constructs the term participation into the media landscape and audience empowerment. Clay Shirky (2010) develops participation under the notion of sharing values and more specifically on the producers of the content. Finally, Peter Dahlgren (2011) frames participation into the political concepts and its relation with power. In this section the different approach will be presented and finally the main similarities will be extracted.

### 2.2.1 Participation and the media

Carpentier (2011, p. 111), highlights that the new media affected the discussion of participation and communication “[t]he development of the internet and especially the web [...] was to render most information available to all and create a whole new world of communication, the promise of a structural increase in the level of (media) participation, within its slipstream”.

The author develops four arguments in which its anchored participation; many-to-many communication, convergence of producers and receivers, convergence between “top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 254) and the differentiation between community and organisation.

The many-to-many communication refers to the structures of communication flows. The new media has offered a different structural nature of communication because the producers of content have multiplied due to the facility the web provides to do so, in other words, unlike the ‘old’ media, audience also produce content that can be reachable online by anyone. This current dynamic of the communication flow supports multidirectional forms of participation and heterogeneity of the communicational content and practices (Carpentier, 2011).

The second argument, the convergence of producers and receivers convey the reduction of the power position from the media organisation and the empowerment of the audience. Carpentier (2011) argument is based on the transformation of the user into ‘prod-user’. However, beyond the production and multidirectional participations, the convergence between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture brings some problematic blinds in the diversity of participation. The top-down corporates represent the media organisations based on “capitalist logics and not always in favour of the more maximalist approaches towards participation and democracy” (Carpentier, 2010, p. 53). The new media tends to detach from the capitalistic and consumerist dynamic, however it cannot be ignoring the combination of top-down business and bottom-up participatory cultures denominated by Jenkins (2008) as

“Convergence Culture”. Jenkins exemplifies the convergence culture with the Google acquisition of YouTube.

The conflation of community and organisation is the last argument Carpentier (2011) explains, “this conflation tends to lead to an underestimation of the importance of formal organisational structures in facilitating and protecting the more intense forms of participation” (p.113). For instance, the conflation between community and organisation can opaque the impact of participation especially if participation does not go beyond the online space and make pressure in the political arena. Hence, participation is just reduced to an individual activity without formal organisation to face abuses of power. For those reasons, Carpentier (2011) emphasises that old and new participatory practice cannot be detached from each other “mainstream media and (especially) alternative and community media have a long history of organising participatory processes at the level of content and management, and continue to play crucial roles” (p.113).

The angle of participation explained by Carpentier (2011) is framed mainly into the media landscape. The changes of participation in the context of the new media evidence some problematic arguments that could delegitimise participation, but at the same time could enhance a new version of participation. The main focus of the concept is based on access, interaction and audience power.

### **2.2.2 Participation and sharing values**

Shirky (2010) unlike Carpentier (2011) mainly concentrates on the producers of the content and developing of groups and communities. Shirky (2010) defines participation in terms of sharing values. The author states that due to the new media, new forms of sharing have been portrayed: individuals, communal, public and civic. Individual sharing refers to personal; this type of sharing might not have transcendental influence with those who has been shared, for example sharing a YouTube video of a Venezuelans abroad making typical Venezuelan ham bread. However, the video produced might be useful to one person in the future who would like to prepare the ham bread.



The communal value takes place inside group of collaborators and refers to values created as a consequence of people-interaction and collaboration with the sense of togetherness. Communal values consist of a group of people who talk and collaborate with each other to create perceptions of current affairs (Shirky, 2010).

Unlike communal values, public values are characterised by the sharing of group results, to the members of the public who are not participants. Public values are basically a community of developers or contributors who want to create a public resource available for all. Finally, civic sharing is directed to create civil values, “improving society is their explicit goal” (Shirky, 2010, p. 175).

Civic values could be compared with what Dahlgren (2011) denominates political discussion “political talk strives to find solutions to conflicts; it is purposive, goal-orientated” (p. 88). Moreover, the media could stimulate interaction that enhances civic talk and sharing values that aim societal benefits. Media platforms possibly encourage going from private sharing to civil sharing, this means that the dimensions of participation are not strictly defined or exclusive, and then the borders between dimensions of participation become very blurred.

The concept of participation developed by Shirky (2010) also focuses on the media platform and the production of the content. Carpentier (2011) and Shirky (2010) denote the importance of participation in civic life and the role of the media in it.

### **2.2.3 Participation as civic practice**

The classic definition of political participation focusses on, “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed and influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the action they take” (Verba and Nie, 1987, p. 46).

Basically, political participation refers to activities citizens could do in order to influence the election of the government, or change the action taken from the centres of power that could also involve environmental aims. Basically, political participation aspires to make changes, which at the grassroots are in the centre of power (political, economic and religious). As a consequence, the term participation is frequently

understood as an essential of democracy. In the contemporary era the new media brings the awareness of new forms of political participation, hence the concept of democracy, power and the media.

Dahlgren (2011) addressed two dimensions of participation in the new media landscape: social and political. Political participation enhances mobilisation and action taken, while social participation stays as online interaction and conversations in the new media platform, without enhancing offline activities. As a consequence, talks about politics might not end up regimes, unless they enhance action for changes. Nevertheless, political conversations enhance engagement and have a relevant meaning for the political life of democracy.

Very often, the concept of political engagement overlaps with political participation. Gozzi, M.; Grafman J.; Krueger F & Zamboni G. (2010) define ‘political engagement’ as ‘political interest’ and recognise the existence of a slight boundary between both terms, the author’s state “[A] person’s interest in politics contributes to the likelihood that he or she will be involved in the political process” (Gozzi et al, 2010, p.1763). In this sense, interest in politics does not necessary mean political participation, but those interested in the field are more likely to act. Dahlgren (2011) uses the term ‘political engagement’ and defines it as a “subjective states, that is, a mobilised, focussed attention on some object” (p.80), whilst political participation is more than simply a feeling of getting involved in some activities, it requires a sense of collectiveness and connection to other under the civic boundaries. Hence, political interest (Gozzi et al., 2010) or political engagement (Dahlgren, 2011) represent the first step for further political participation.

In spite of the meaning of political engagement in the life of democracy, it is very unlikely that just interests in the political arena cement the ideal of democracy “when most people talk about politics, they tend to do so with people they know and with whom they share basic political assumptions and values, with like-minded social contacts, which avoids conflict” (Dahlgren, 2011, 89), and the spirits of democracy lies on deliberation and consensus for the common good of society.

The notion of deliberative democracy takes place in situations where conflicts or differences exist and non-existent consensus seems to happen. Hence, deliberation based on the ability of discussion in which strong convictions could show a balance and compromise for the best of the parts involves. Moreover, Dahlgren (2011) states:

[d]emocracy emerges, at best, unevenly across the world, through political struggles; it rarely comes as a gift to the people from the powerful circles. In the effort to develop democracy, different societies have had different circumstances and histories, and even varying conceptions about its ideals.[...] Moreover, democracy is continually at risk from antidemocratic forces, some of which even use the processes of democracy itself to further their cause [...] The health of any particular democracy cannot be assumed simply because, for example, elections are being held (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 2).

Dahlgren's premise presupposes some alterations in the traditional concept of democracy. In the contemporary era, democracy itself faces some challenges based on the blurred notion of nation state. The new forms of communications brought new forms to defy the traditional state power, to legitimatise the traditional institutions. Consequently, democracy faces dramatic transformation in the network society (Castells, 2000).

The 'new' forms of defying traditional states' power encounter political participation in today's societies. Mouffle (1999) develops some conceptual grounds on the terms 'politics' and 'political' that edify the understanding of democracy dynamics. Politics embraces formal institutions such as the parliament and parties, it correspond to the institutionalised arena that pursues order and organisation in conflicted forms of interaction in society (Mouffle, 1999). The political refers to the different forms of human relations that can emerge in a society and basically implies "free-wheeling conversations" (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 100) "outside the traditional space of politics such as galleries, football stadiums and the like" (Akdogan, 2012, p. 23).

According to Mouffle (1999) the political is based on the conversation and conflicts that emerge in society that could enhance political talks. And the politics relates to the decision-making in the political institutions towards a matter that affects society. Basically, the definition of political could be understood as all that embrace the citizen

and public sphere, while politics refers to the nation idea and the influence political participation could do into the institutions to make changes that “favoured” civil society.

However, the ‘new social movements’ faced around the world blurred the notion of what is in the arena of institution and what is in the arena of the public sphere. Akdogan (2012) states

the new social movements blurring the public and the private sphere, the introduction of the individual in the political, the introduction of new levels (local/global) in the public sphere are causes and consequences of new kind of politics and new definitions of democracy. (p.23)

The notion of engagement, democracy, political and politics has been transformed “because of the convergent effects of the crisis of traditional political systems and the dramatically increased pervasiveness of the new media” (Castells, 2004, p. 370). The critical role of the diverse media transformed politics and democracy process, the links with ideologies and identities, and particularly the new media transformed the flows of communications. Regardless of the influence of the new media in today’s society, there is no intention of turning the discussion into a media-centric perspective.

Some similarities and differences in the three perspectives of participation could be highlighted. Dahlgren (2011), Shirky (2010) and Carpentier (2011) coincide that the new media established new forms of participation which empower people and enhance new forms of communications; this is not other than the horizontal flows of communication. However, Carpentier (2011) highlighted some problematic blind originated from the business character of the media structure and the warning on the reduction of participation to individual activity without structural organisation power that could enhance political, economic, environmental or social changes. The online participation Dahlgren (2011) described as social participation.

Moreover, Dahlgren’s idea of political talks or social participation accommodates with Shirky’s (2010) definition of communal participation. In addition, some structural characteristics of the new media platforms needs to be considered: 1. online groups are

not as free as we might think because conflicting talks might be avoided in order to stick with the values of the group, 2. moderators or administrators of the group or forums could inactivate the members and 3., the platform might also act against the group freedom by eliminating the group. In any case, online groups can always regroup.

Finally, there are two dimensions of participation clearly identified by Dahlgren (2011) and Shirky (2010), one of which is more passive and does not imply action, but possibly to encourage engagement, and the other of which represents actions and it is civic goal orientated. Both authors frame participation in the global public sphere or online mediated public sphere. Hence, new technology represents an intermediary key between the terms introduced in the section before, citizenship and global sphere, but also politics, engagement and participation. Overall, new media represents a key element in the social construction of meanings, politics, democracy and power.

### **2.3 Virtual Communities**

The term community in itself is already problematic, melancholic, romantic, bucolic, in simple words a “minefield” (Dahlgren, 2011: Miller, 2011). In this section, I intend to approach the sense of community envisaged in the new media landscape. During the 1990s the social meaning of computer-mediated communication intensified the debate in the arena of community (Castells, 2000) The debate on the virtual community originally divided in two perspectives: on the one hand, the new forms of communications underline the opportunity to create new forms of community in which people could debate political subjects; on the other, the invention of the virtual community enhances social isolation and augments the meaning of online mediated participation as an entity of social change. Moreover, virtual community works on a different plane of reality, as a consequence, online communities have led “to a re-evaluation of the way in which communities are formed and how they function” (Muller, 2011, p. 271).

One of the ground-breaking works on virtual community came from Rheingold (1993) who states “A virtual community [...] is generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organised around a shared interest or

purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself” (p. 386). Hence if communication turns out to be one of the main objectives of virtual communities, then we are talking about new forms of communication and moreover new forms of sociability.

However, Rheingold (1993) emphasises his interest in virtual communities as a potential tool for political influence. The author states that technology itself will not represent a political influence “people must learn about that leverage and learn to use it, while we still have the freedom to do so, if it is to live up to its potential” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 9). Rheingold’s definition of community embraces some potential form of organisation in the political arena. Nowadays, the discussion that surrounds virtual community lies in engagement, social movements, participation, civic practice and the discussion between the local and the global, the private and the public. Today’s discussion of community relates to the power of the communities for organisation and social change.

Inexorable, the new media facilitates not just new forms of sociability, but also an extraordinary level of online contact and engagement. Therefore, online communities enhance new forms of engagement, connections and interactions, but do not necessarily substitute offline interaction and connections.

For instance, Facebook was initially created to facilitate students in organising meetings, parties, lectures and also sharing their experiences. Basically, Facebook’s original idea was to organise offline activities (Miller, 2011). “Facebook was not designed as a political tool” (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.6) however, it enhances potential influence for political engagement, organisations and practice as it demonstrated the different forms of activism and social movements in the last couple of years. Facebook is just one example of the different new media forms.

Daniel Miller (2011) develops a definition of community, based on his anthropological research of the uses of Facebook in Trinidad. The author concludes that community appears in modern politics “as an unalloyed good which provides the individual with support, concern and physical help. It is viewed as a bulwark against loneliness and depression” (Miller, 2011, p.184), unlike the initial belief and concern of social

isolation as a result of online mediated communication (Castells, 2000). Moreover, “Facebook is hugely helpful in pushing us back to a more balanced and realistic understanding of the meaning and experience of close-knit community” (Miller, 2011, p.184).

Fundamentally, Facebook and the different forms of new media facilitate the encounters of people, who share common experiences, interests, problems or causes, on a small or large scale. Moreover, new media platform facilitates the viral disseminations of information, meaning that many people could access the same information almost simultaneously and the information could be also easily spread across the world. In fact, “on-line information access and computer-mediated communication facilitates the diffusion and retrieval of information and offers possibilities for interaction and debate in an autonomous, electronic forum, bypassing the control of the media” (Castells, 2004, p. 415). Hence, the horizontal modes of communication, the blurring of boundaries in terms of time and space enrich the notion of community in the modern societies. In a nutshell, the main characteristics of the virtual communities lies in, first, its capacities to transcend distance, associated with geographical locations. Second, its abilities to disseminate communication and information, and third, its opportunities to allow multiple membership to the different media platforms.

Another understanding of community is conceived by Wenger (1998) under the name of “community of practice”. His definition of community is base on the notion of the common practice that ties the members of the group together, a group that coheres through ‘mutual engagement’. Wenger’s definitions of community highlights the recognition of the community member’s not just through the other members of their community, but also through the differentiation with other communities, they do not belong to (Cox, 2005). The community concept developed by Wenger especially emphasises identities and the different levels of participation in a community, as well as the tensions with other communities. Moreover, “community of practice surely remains a useful ideal type of social relation” (Cox, 2005, p. 533).

The different perspective of communities presented until now depicted the influence of the community in the development of social connections, engagement and solidarity.

Conversely, Dahlgren (2011) offers an approach to the modern community based on “civic practice”. The author defines community in terms of “civic cultures”. Civic cultures refer to the different patterns of communication, practice and meaning that connect citizenships and through which they feel identity. Moreover, civic cultures represent the foundation for political participation or “civic agency”. Hence, the meaning of the online mediated communication falls on the ability to serve democratic participation, and the significance for democratic society. Dahlgren (2011) underscores that the “civic uses” of the internet remain modest in comparison to other form of engagement, and much internet use has to do with leisure and entertainment. In this sense, the significance of the new media to enhance more democratic society is under scrutiny. Community coexists under the notion of democracy.

The success of online communities as organisers and promoters of democracy will depend on the social, economic, cultural and political context of the country, or places, where the action would be organised. In this section, I present a different approach to the concept of community in which the online mediated communication was rooted, the use of the term is very diverse and a “minefield”, as Dahlgren defines. Moreover, I did not attempt to present one definition of community rather to offer a basic overview of different approach of the term.

#### **2.4 Internet as an opportunity for social movements**

The conceptual framework on the public sphere, the different dimensions of participation and virtual community offer necessary bases to introduce ‘new social movement’ in the network society. It is evident that the new media and particularly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs have played an important role in the ‘new social movements’ and transnational protests which have occurred since 2011. However, the history of the social movements influenced by the internet was outlined a few years ago, perhaps a reference point might be the so-called ‘Battle of Seattle’ 1999 in which nearly 50,000 people took the streets of Seattle to protests against globalisation at the World Trade Union meetings (Cottle & Lester, 2011).



Numerous studies about transnational protest and the internet can be found since the beginning of the 2000s. However, political participation in the global public sphere seems to be a relatively new topic of study. Perhaps, studying participation in an already defined “problematic public sphere” appears to be challenging. Among the studies consulted, the following approaches seem to be interesting in the relation between participation and online media: Cammaerts and Audenhove (2005), who studied online participation in three cases of transnational civil societies – LabourStart page, Indymedia, and ATTAC - Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009), who worked on the American uses of online discussion forums; Black (2009), studied the uses of online forum to discuss the World Trade Center site; Moe (2010) researched online participation in five Norwegian blogs; and finally Preece and Shneiderman (2008) recognised four types of participants in the online groups: the readers, contributors, collaborators and leaders.

Different studies about online participation, transnational protest and global activism always brings the question, what makes traditional media so different from online media to encourage participation? Bennett (2003) stated in a “stark” way that “the internet is just another communication media” (p.20). He explained that what made new media particular conducive to enhancing the power of this global activism moments, is closely related with the social, psychological political and media context. Even if this discussion seems trivial nowadays, the clue to understanding online participation has its origins in such a basic question.

Scott and Street (2001) point out four reasons why internet has become an opportunity for social movements. It allows:

1. Meso-mobilisation: coordination between movements networks across borders and without the need for a transcending hierarchical organisation form.
2. High impact without the need for major resources.
3. Organisation to retain editorial control over content and external communication.
4. Organisation to bypass state control and communicate in a secure environment.

The causes for the attractiveness of the internet developed by Scott and Street (2001) are highly significant nowadays as they help to understand why citizens found an opportunity to participate in new media, to generate a public opinion in the global public sphere. The Meso-mobilisation could be exemplified with the Arab Uprisings which happened in 2011, as in a sense “mass demonstrations remaining at the forefront of struggles for citizenship rights and democracy in non-democratic regimes around the world” (Cottle, 2008, p. 853). Thus, social movements such as the one which developed during the Arab Uprisings remain the transnational power of the information without following a hierarchical organisational form. Moreover, this cause is important when we evaluate the factors of the evolution of the concept of citizenship - mentioned in the section before - related to the crisis of formal democracy. Also, the demand for more a democratic system reinforces or evidences necessities of mobilisations that network can support without border restriction or state control of communication.

The second reason stated by Scott and Street (2001), “[h]igh impact without the need for major resources”, is also discussed by Bennett (2003), who claims that the architecture of the internet “enable people to organise politics in ways that overcomes limits of times, space, identity and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely [have] occurred by other means” (p.23). Moreover, social media also enables people to interact and participate in the time and the place they prefer. As a consequence, political participation seems to have less limitation in time and space if they compare with the traditional mainstream media. Evidently, some people would have higher interest or engagement to participate than others.

At the same time, new media leaves a gap for those who have never participated utterly in politics, but they would like to be part of a conversation (Mcclurg, 2003). This idea finds support in the third cause namely “the impact of the online media and the editorial control over the content” which outlines the structures or flows of communications. While, traditional media relies on the “few to many” flow of communication, the online media offer the option of “many-to-many” or what is equally known as vertical and horizontal communication (Carpentier, 2011). Moe (2010) assumes that the potential

contribution of the internet relies on the “many-to-many” mode of communication. He highlighted Splichal’s (2006) idea that coins “the internet brought about a new form of publicness – mediated and dialogical at the same time” (p.702). As a result “virtual communication anywhere is communication everywhere” (Trenz, 2009, p37). In the end what the expression “many-to-many” implies is that many people can participate as producers of the communication and the messages have wide opportunities to be shown in the global public sphere, and also can get the attention of mainstream media. This argument was previously considered by Carpentier (2011) and explained as one of those anchored in participation.

One of the characteristics of the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protest in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain depicted that mainstream media was and still been controlled not just by the repressive regime, but also by the lack of critical role of the mainstream media. Cottle (2011) claims repressive regimes in the Middle East used the national media to legitimise their power. Meanwhile, transnational media was characterised by its lack of critical role in the events and abuses of political dissidents, “western media’s conspicuous silence toward the everyday suppression of political dissidents” (Cottle, 2011, p. 650). In this context, online social movements play an important role spreading news around the world and clearly exemplifying the impact of the online media and how, by utilising digital technology, they could actually capture the attention of the mainstream media to distribute the information.

Other example are the protests which happened in Libya in 2011 and in Syria since 2011 which illustrate how, through YouTube and other social media, the world could access the information about the massacres in Tripoli and city of Homes. Meanwhile mainstream media could not cover the events due to the restrictions international journalists had in accessing information, the high risk of being killed, and due to the editorial control over the content.

Those examples give us a clue that political participation is changing because the internet (as one of the various means of communication that facilitates the organisation of civil society’s actors) has created new forms of civil engagements and extended the public sphere beyond the national boundaries (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005). In

the specific case of the new media, everyday conversations and conviviality help to incentivise moments of social connectedness and interactions in which identities and interests, rights and responsibility can become recognised and performed, and may even produce new patterns for the conduct of civil society beyond the virtual world (Cottle, 2011).

The riots which occurred in the United Kingdom (UK) from 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2011 illustrate how through new media people could go beyond the virtual world rather for criminal purposes or democratic intentions. According to Halliday (2011) “social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Blackberry and Messenger are thought to have played a role in organising riots across the UK”. The riots attracted the attention not just from the mainstream media, but also from the political actors. David Cameron, the UK’s prime minister blamed social media for being responsible for the riots: “everyone watching this horrific action will be struck by how they were organised via social media. Free flow of information can be used for good. But it can also be used for ill” (Halliday, 2011). Whether or not, in this particular case, social media was used for criminal activity is not the aim of this study, but it gives evidence that new media is also changing the relationship between society and political power.

However, the internet, from the participatory point of view, does not seem as a magical technological tool by which democracy will be saved, or as producing more or better participation, but rather as structure in the informal political process and social movement organisation (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005). McCaughey and Ayers (2003) and Russell (2005) also argue that internet should be seen as a medium that assists social change, rather than provokes it (Adi and Miah, 2011).

Finally, the last reason why the internet seems to be an opportunity for social movements is because it allows “organisation to bypass state control and communicate in secure environment” (Scott and Street, 2001). It is not a secret that in repressive states the media is controlled, censored and sometimes punished with shutting down, or huge fines, when they dissent the regime; and as I have mentioned above, the media is used by regimes to legitimise their own power. Repressive governments attempt to tighten their grip on the media and make efforts to censor, observe and target their

opponents (Cottle, 2011). However, “[t]he media have become more powerful than ever, technologically, financially, and politically. Their global reach and networking allow them to escape from strict political control” (Castells, 2004, p.396)

Right now Cuba, China, North Korea, Iran are probably the most clear examples of this, but there are many countries around the world in which repressive governments have intensified their effort to control the media (Freedom of the Press, 2011). It is even more striking to see that just

15 % of the global population—one in six people—live in countries where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures (Freedom of the Press, 2011).

As a result, 85% of the global population is under the domain of political, economic or legal repression. If regimes are targeting dissidents, online communication appears to be an option to express dissidents’ opinions, co-operate with those who share the same ideas and express their opinion in a more anonymous environment, where their actions cannot be easily targeted by the regime.

I have explained four reasons of the attractiveness of the internet among the organisation of social movements, but there is another side of the coin: the opportunity that internet offers for social movements does not necessarily imply direct participation of the citizens. The study of the online participation of transnational civil society groups (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005) highlighted that the interactivity and debate in the online groups was “weak”; additionally, it was shown that a very small amount of participants really discussed issues with each other. Earlier, Hill and Hughes (1998) claimed that the online public sphere tended to be dominated by those citizens who are already politically active outside the virtual word and also they might be functioning under the same ideological framework. It is possible to interpret Hill’s and Hughes’ ideas in the following way: those who are active online because they might be political leaders already, or they are participating with a special political interest.

### 3. Contextual background: Venezuela

Venezuela is mainly known for its oil natural resources and perhaps in the last decade for the confrontational discourse of the late president Hugo Chávez Frías against the United States. However, in order to understand the Venezuelan political dynamic some contextual background will be presented in this section. Some important events of the contemporary history of Venezuela explain the rise of the politics, social and economic transformation that Venezuela has been going through in the last fifty years. Some specific date will be spot in this contextual background: the 27<sup>th</sup> February 1989, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1992, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2002.

#### 3.1 Portraying Venezuelan Political Context

Venezuela gained its independence from Spain in 1812. However, it was in 1830 when the Republic of Venezuela was founded. Long periods of dictatorships and instability framed the history of the country until 1958. A democratic system was finally established with the approval of a democratic constitution in 1961. Until the 1980s Venezuela represented one of the best political and economic models in Latin America and an example to other Latin American countries. Economically, the profits coming from the oil companies allowed investment in infrastructure, natural resources and promising social programs (World Election. 2012). The oil industry was officially nationalised in 1976 and by the 1980s Petroleum of Venezuela (*Petróleos de Venezuela S.A*), the Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company, represents the third largest oil company in the world. Politically, Venezuela was characterised as being “a stable democratic systems with free elections and orderly transitions of power flourished” (World Election. 2012). Until 1993, the centre-left Democratic Action (AD) party and the Social Christian Party (COPEI) dominated politics.

In 1983 an economic crisis hit the country causing a devaluation of the national currency, increasing poverty conditions, inequalities and corruption. Therefore, the implement of neoliberal reforms and weak political strategies provoked major social unrest in 1989, a huge popular protest movement erupted in the capital (the *Caracazo*) followed by wide-scale looting. This situation ended up with a massacre in which “up to

3,000 may have died at the hands of the national guard” (World Election. 2012), those killings occurred mainly in the streets and the slums of Caracas.

In 1992, three years after the Caracazo and with the same president in power, Carlos Andrés Pérez, two unsuccessful coups d'état occurred against the government. One in February led by Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, after a day of combat Chávez and his military supporters surrendered. Consequently, he and his supporters were arrested and imprisoned but, “he gained national prominence and for many poorer Venezuelans, he became a hero for standing up to the discredited and corrupt (Pérez would be impeached in 1993 on corruption charges) regime” (World Elections, 2012). The second coup, also unsuccessful happened in November, when other military supporters commanded by another officer, Hernán Gruber Odreman, called for civil insurrection against the government.

In addition, to the political and social deterioration, in 1994 the country was affected by a bank crisis that impacted the economic wellbeing of the population. In order to gain popularity, the new president by that time, Rafael Caldera, released Chávez in 1994. While, Caldera was facing a major financial crisis, increasing of poverty and the decline of income per capita; Chávez, out of prison, used the popularity gained in 1992 to build the “Bolivarian movement” and finding support from the poorer and marginalised Venezuelans that were disillusioned with the current political style.

With strong support from the media, Chávez won the presidential election in 1998, promising the eradication of corruption and poverty. Chávez presented himself as the “messiah” invoking God and the Bible in his discourse; he used a popular speech to exalt the poor and marginalised, and used them as the victims of the forty years of bipartisan democracy, often the responsible for the economic and social problems of the country (Rivas, 2006). Chávez ideas seduced 56% of Venezuelan voters (Acosta, 2007). With the election of 1998 started a transition process that left behind the traditional political parties (AD and COPEI) and strengthened a new support around the figure of the new president and the people who participated in the fail coup in 1992 (Carrasquero, 2006).

During Chávez's first year in the power, a new constitution was proposed and approved by the electorate. The new constitution "strengthened the presidency and introduced a unicameral National Assembly" (Freedom House, 2012). Chávez started the social programs denominated "*Misiones*" aimed at decreasing poverty in the country, at the same time the government adopted a more confrontational rhetoric towards the United States.

Despite the populist appeal of Chávez, in the combined elections in December 2001 (Referendum on Chávez's labour reform and municipal elections) voting abstentionism reaches three quarter of the electorate. Moreover, the polls indicate a growing voting abstentionism amongst the poorest sections of the population (Hellinger, 2004).

In March 2002, a conflict between the government and Petroleum of Venezuela's (PDVSA) managements arose for the control over the oil policy. The conflict took place for six weeks. During that time the senior management team of the company decided to stop oil production as a protest. As a consequence, Chávez in a publicly-televised speech fired seven senior managers of the company (later, the number of redundancies increased to a total of 40,000 employees). Therefore, the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (*Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela*) and Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce (*Fedecámaras*) announced a national strike on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2002, in support of the senior managers' employees.

While opposition leaders called on marches and rallies in the eastern section of the capital city (characterised as a middleclass area), Chávez supporters organised demonstrations on the western part of the city (characterised as the area of the poor barrios). On the 11th of April, after massive demonstrations, the opposition leaders encourage protesters to go to the presidential palace and at the same time, while people were in the opposition protest, supporters of the government announced a demonstration in favour of the president at the presidential palace. Both demonstrations converged on the streets nearby Miraflores (the presidential palace). As a consequence, 19 people died while numbers of others were hurt (16 from the dissident protest and the other 3 were not identified as part of either protest). During the demonstrations and while people were murdered President Chávez made a national speech that by law had to be



transmitted by public and private channels. In an attempt of the private channel to report the gunfire exchanged between demonstrators, a split-screen was presented.

Immediately, President Chávez ordered the cancellation of the signal of the private channels. A couple of hours later after confusion and disinformation, the military high command announced that the president had resigned.

On the night of 12<sup>th</sup> of April from Miraflores, Pedro Carmona Estanga, former president of the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce and one of the important figures of the opposition, was proclaimed without elections as the new president of the country. Carmona announced a number of measures which included the dissolution of the National Assembly. During the 13<sup>th</sup> of April the tension in the streets of Caracas were visible, and rumours escalated as a result of a media blackout, looting on the streets of Caracas was reported through radio stations during that day and during the evening new rumours about the return of Chávez took place. Supporters of Chávez started to concentrate close to the presidential palace, in which the military commander Raul Isaías Baduel announced that Chávez was on the way back to Caracas. The official version of the April events was an attempted coup d'état against President Chávez. Anyhow, those events radicalised and polarised civil society and opened an opportunity for implementing more restrictions and centralisation of power.

Political polarisation increased, the government started to politicise all the powers in the country and implement measures to restrict the media, take control over PDVSA and threatened political dissidents. The opposition called for a referendum (figure embedded in the 1999 Constitution) in 2004, which Chávez won and increased his credibility. In 2005 opposition rejected to participate in the National Assembly election, arguing that the National Electoral Council allowed violations of ballot secrecy. This decision resulted that all 167 deputies were government supporters (Freedom House, 2012).

In 2006, Chávez won a third term with 61% of the vote. During this term of governance Chávez pressed forward radical institutional changes and proposed a group of amendments to the 1999 constitution, which included removing presidential term limits. These propositions were rejected by 51% of the Venezuelan population in December 2007, “the vote reflected robust opposition participation, public disappointment with

rising inflation and crime rates, and a degree of disaffection among current and former Chávez supporters” (Freedom House, 2012). That year the government decided to reject the concession to a 53-years-old private channel, Radio Caracas Television.

Nevertheless, in February 2009, the government introduced a referendum to abolish presidential term limits, and the proposal won with over 54% of voters supported. The third term of governance Chávez’s “stepped up his plan to reorganise local government institutions in the country through the creation of ‘socialist communes’, presenting them as a grassroots way of devolving more power to the people” (World Elections, 2012)

In 2011, Chávez was diagnosed with cancer. However, that was not a reason to refuse being a presidential candidate for the next election to be held initially in December 2012 and later changed to October 2012. Meanwhile, the opposition’s leaders began the primary campaign for the 2012 presidential contest. In February 2012, Henrique Capriles (Miranda state governor) won the primary elections and became the face of the opposition group denominated Unity Roundtable (MUD).

### **3.2 Description of the candidates**

The main candidates for the presidential Venezuelan elections were Hugo Chávez Frías and Henrique Capriles Radonski. Also, five independent candidates ran for president: Reina Sequera, Luis Reyes, María Bolívar, Orlando Chirinos and Yoel Acosta Chirinos. The independent candidates had very low popularity; indeed the results of the presidential election depicted that all the independent candidates together garnered 0.6% of the total amount of the electorate (CNE, 2012). For that reason in this part of the chapter I will just briefly describe the strongest candidates for the Venezuela presidential election 2012.

#### *Hugo Chávez Frías*

The constitutional amendments proposed by Chávez during his third period of governance suggested the intention of the president to be re-elected in the following election 2012, for the fourth time. However, unlike the past, Chávez faced blows to his popularity due to accusations of corruption and mismanagement, the rising public debt, corruption, clientelism, high rates of criminality, food shortages, housing policies, rising

inflation and destruction of the private sector (World Elections, 2012). In addition, Venezuela had been under the scrutiny of several different international NGO's and institutions for violations of "human rights, civil liberties, political freedoms and press freedom" (World Elections, 2012). Moreover, Chávez's administration had been criticised for his tendency to "discriminate on political grounds; erode judicial independence and undercut journalistic independence" (World Elections, 2012). However, Chávez continued to be a charismatic leader who connected with the marginalised people of the country. The social programmes have been cited by the official sector and supporters as the main achievements of his administration. Those programmes had been orientated for improvements in education, health and housing. Despite the criticism Chávez's administration, he still was an important leader, not just in Venezuela, also in Latin America.

*Henrique Capriles Radonski*

Since 2009, the opposition had unified under the name of Unity Roundtable (MUD). The MUD was a coalition between the centrist reformers, liberal right-wingers, former left Chávez allies and the old parties. The alliance called for a primary election on February, 2012 to nominate its presidential candidate.

Henrique Capriles Radonski, originally from the centre left party (*Un Nuevo Tiempo*, UNT) was nominated with 64% of voters approval. Capriles presented himself as a "modern" social democrat, young, energetic and showed to be a strong opposition candidate to face Hugo Chávez Frías.

Capriles comes from a middle-class family. He studied Law and specialised in economic and tax law. When he was 25 years old was elected as a deputy of the previous National Congress. Therefore, 1999 he was nominated as the youngest vice president of the National Congress and the president of the Chamber of Deputies. In 2000, he was elected a major of the municipality of Baruta in Caracas and re-elected in 2004. In 2008 he won the regional election as the major of the Miranda state, one of the main states of Venezuela.

However, Capriles was pointed out by the official party and Chávez's supporters as one of those responsible of the coup attempt on 2002. On the 12<sup>th</sup> April 2002, Capriles under his function as a major of the Baruta municipality was linked to the blockade of the Cuban Embassy and accused of violations of international principles. He remained in prison for four months and was then acquitted of the charges.

#### **4. Methodology**

In the previous chapter key concepts and theories were presented in order to frame the research question 'how Venezuelans abroad engage in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections of October 2012?' Some sub-questions will help to frame the main question a) what topics of discussion arose during the presidential elections?, b) what are the supporting materials Venezuelans abroad use for their online posts?, c) what sources of information were used to argument the Facebook posts?, d) how do Venezuelans abroad reflect Venezuela's polarisation in the Facebook group?, e) how do Venezuelans abroad encourage voting for an specific presidential candidate? and lastly f) how do Venezuelans abroad connect with each other in the Facebook group?

This chapter will describe step-by-step the methodological choices of the research. First, the research methods will present the uses of quantitative and qualitative approach in this study. Second, the research design will label netnography as the choice to approach to online mediated communication. Third, the data will define the group of study and data collected during the online observation. Finally, the data analysis strategic will describe step-by-step the procedure to follow in order to make clear the meaning of the data collected.

##### **4.1 Research methods: combination of quantitative and qualitative**

The decision between the qualitative and quantitative method appear to be a Solomonic choice when it comes to the research. Utilising one or another method is not a way of making the research more or less difficult, reliable or meaningful, but it is a manner of making the research accurate within the aim of the study. That idea finds support in Maxwell (2005) who claims that each method (quantitative and qualitative) "[has] their own strengths and logics, and are often best used to address different kind of questions and goals" (p.22). The methodological choices then, depend on the kind of information the researcher is trying to find out (Silverman, 2001).

The qualitative methods represent the main approach used for data collection and analysis of this study. However, the first part of the analysis constitutes a quantitative approach to the data. The large amount of data collected offered suitable material for counting; which outline topics of discussion, supporting material and sources of information.

The second part of the analysis constitutes a qualitative approach. There are two different reasons for choosing qualitative methods as the main research approach. First, in qualitative methods the emphasis is on understanding process, more than relationship between variables, and in this particular research the purpose is to understand how Venezuelans abroad engaged in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections. More than a relation of causality, this study looks to understand the process and relationships in a specific environment through a close reading and interpretation of the data. Second, the purpose of the study implicitly demands a reflexive process upon the different stages of data collection, data strategies and analysis which is perfectly adaptable in a qualitative design. According to Maxwell (2005), in qualitative research, the component of the design could be “reconsidered or modified during the study in response to new developments or to changes in some others components” (p. 2). The chosen methods shaped descriptions and interpretations of the data collected.

#### **4.2 Study Design: Netnography**

This research is grounded on internet studies and specifically, online mediated communications. Certain characteristics make the internet an unique medium of study, firstly, “the internet is not only a conduit that facilitates the swift and planet-wide flow of information, it comprises the cultural spaces in which meaningful human interactions occur” (Markham, 2004, p. 332). Secondly, the capacity and uses of internet communication are exclusive in configuration, and it has the power to shape user’s perceptions and interactions (Markham, 2005). For the aim of this study, the internet does not just play a role in the human interaction; it also represents the tool and place in which people with the same nationality, but in different locations, converge and engage.

This study use a Facebook group Venezuelans abroad as the virtual space where Venezuelans around the world joins. Miller (2011) in his anthropological study about the Trinidadian community portrays different dimensions of uses of Facebook that clearly justify the selection of this social networking service as a prolific field to gain knowledge about people and participation. First, it conveys different people around the globe and enriches the effect of their residence in different countries. In other words, it reduces the distance and space to connect with different Venezuelans abroad. Second, Facebook is an increasingly diverse social network in which people could be studied as part of wider set of relationship. It offers a public sphere for interaction between the members of the virtual community. Third, Facebook appear to be an ideal medium for certain kind of politics and activism enriched by the effective way of rapidly sharing and commenting information. Finally, Miller (2011) argues that Facebook could be seen as a source of news and information among their members and, more important as a tool to help people organising themselves and sharing their experiences.

Knowing the field and population of the study, the netnography offers a suitable research design for the aim of this study. It represents a potential way to examine in online mediated social relations, identities, practices, behaviours and sentiments (Skågeby, 2011; Kozinets, 2010). The research design does not totally diverge from the traditional ethnography. Basically, because the researcher needs to immerse themselves in the lives of individuals and from this living experience interpret meaning-making of the study findings (Markham, 2004). As a consequence, ethnographers, rather in the traditional way or the virtual field, study the meaning of “the behaviours, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 2006, p. 68-69). However, netnography is just one of various methods that could be used to approach to an online mediated communication.

Netnography is described under the name of online ethnographic. And it consists of different steps, typical to all qualitative research, “cultural entrance, collections and analysis of data, while also making sure that trustworthy interpretations are made, conducting ethically sound research and making sure that members of the study milieu can provide feedback to the research(er)” (Skågeby, 2011, p. 411).

The cultural entrance of the community will depend on the nature of the study and the intentions and publication of the results (Skågeby, 2011). For this particular study the researcher signed-up in the online group as one more member. Indeed, the researcher joined the group and engaged with it, without predispose any other member and avoid the risked to be blocked from members who did not trust the intention of the study. After defining the entrance in the group of study, data collections and data analysis strategy are the following steps.

### **4.3 Data**

The netnography design utilises document collection, online observation and online interviews as the most common methods for data collection (Skågeby, 2011). According to the object of study and purpose of this research, online observation was conducted to gather the data from the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group. Therefore, textual and visual material was collected from the online interaction and conversations in the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group.

The traditional netnography process implies observation and immersion of the researcher in the everyday life of people, and reflection on the different patterns of the culture group of study (Maxwell, 2005). In online research, ethnographers approach differently to its object of study depending on the feature of the media in which the group is immersed (García, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui, 2009) and the main reasons are:

First, since an ethnographer cannot directly observe the people she or he is studying, the nature of observation changes. Second, the ability to technologically record events, interactions and locations in online research settings changes the role of the field notes and how findings are reported. Third, the nature of online data (e.g. textual and visual material rather than people speaking and acting) requires a different set of skills for understanding and analysing it. Fourth, existing ethnographies of the internet/CMC [Computer Mediate Communications] tend to privilege text-based phenomena at the expenses of visual phenomena. (García et al, 2009, p. 57-58)



Markham (2004) sums up these differences in a very practical way “you may be sitting on your couch for much of the fieldwork, traveling to multiple cultural venues through your laptop” (p. 328). However, it is important to highlight that “virtual reality” is not disassociated of other aspects of human action and experience.

Netnography contributes to the studies of computer mediated communication because it offers a valuable interpretative insight of the data “by building, through careful focus and analysis, what is available publicly on the internet into a known and respected body of codified knowledge” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 113). That means that the human experience in online environment could be translated into valuable knowledge of the everyday life today and human relations.

The online observation implies two different kinds of techniques: passive and active participation. According to Kozinets (2010) participation in the online community should be active, meaning that, the researcher should not be invisible to the other members of the group. In addition, the researcher should not just communicate with members of a culture or group, but also to engage in the common activities, with the intention to understand how online communication works from the perspectives of the users. Nevertheless, Skågeby (2011) argues that participation could be hidden and explains the choice of how to conduct online observation depends on different factors: one of them concerns the type of communities and another is whether online participation is used as primary or supplementary method.

In this study the online observation consisted of an active participation, the selection of the data, data collection steps and time of collection will be described in the following section.

#### **4.3.1 Group of study**

A preliminary pilot study was conducted in order to select the group to study. Initially, dozens of Venezuelan online groups and communities were found in Facebook. Of those three online communities seemed to be the most popular and active among the others: Venezuelans exiles, Venezuelans around the world and Venezuelans abroad. Venezuelans exiles were set up as Facebook community, while the other two were set

up as Facebook groups. For Facebook groups it is necessary to request a friendship, while the community just requires a free subscription by “liking” the community. Then, the first step was to subscribe and request friendships.

The pilot study lasted from August 7, 2012 to September 15, 2012. During that period of observation, activities, discussion, interactions and tools were examined from the three different groups. This preliminary observation was done by passive online observation. I was looking for the most active group that could offer a significant amount of rich data that contained discussion and valuable information to answer the research question.

Finally, after the pilot study I decided to choose the Facebook group Venezuelans abroad ahead of the other two groups due to the level of activity, the diversity of subject matters, and the heterogeneity of the conversations that the selected group offered.

#### *Description of the Venezuelans abroad Facebook Group*

Venezuelans abroad Facebook group was selected to examine political engagement and participation. According to the information gained from Facebook Help Centre (2012), the social network divides three different kinds of public associations: community pages, official pages and groups. The first one is built around topics, causes or experiences. The second is described as pages maintained by authorised representatives and groups are defined as place that allows everyone to communicate directly with other people on Facebook about a specific subject.

The main features of a Facebook group are described by the privacy settings, audience and communication. The privacy settings for groups, allows keeping secret posts and information that would be available just for the members. In addition, the members could just be approved by the administrator of the group or other members. However, when a group reaches a certain size, a number higher than 5000 members, there is no possibility to add more members (nowadays each group could have more than 5000 members). Finally, the group’s members receive notifications by default when other participants make a post. Group members can participate in chats, upload photos to

shared albums, collaborate on group documents and invite members, who are friends, to group events (Facebook Help Centre, 2012).

Venezuelans abroad was created in 2011 by two Venezuelan friends who live outside the country and whose principal interest was to promote touristic aid to the members. The group conveys Venezuelans abroad in order to share general news, business, travel information, experiences and support each other. Hence, it could be said that Venezuelans abroad appears as a place where members are allowed to interact and discuss common issues of interest. It should be pointed out that the setting of the groups allows public view of posts, comments and audio-visual material. On the other hand just members are allowed to comment, post and upload material.

#### **4.3.2 Data collection**

Kozinets (2010) describes three different types of data that could be collected during the online participation. The first type of data corresponds to the archive or document collection. This data is usually made up of the textual material based on pre-existing computer mediated communications of the group's members (Kozinets, 2010; Skågeby, 2011). In this study, the documents collected correspond to textual, visual and audio-visual material from the Venezuelans abroad members group posted during a determinate period, from October 6 to October 8, 2012, those three days include the day before and after the presidential election in Venezuela, as well as the electoral day. The three days of data collection are justified on the basis and purpose of this study, in which engagement for political participation needed to be examined during the election time. At the moment of the data collection a total of 4218 members joined the group, however not all of them were actively posting or participating in the online posts.

It was expected that political communication rose during electoral periods. This idea took relevance during the pilot studies of the Facebook group. Indeed, previous events related to violence and the Venezuelan oil industry, generated talks and conversations in the Facebook group. That preordained a certain kind of involvement in the online group through acts of communication.

The second type of data is the elicited data. This corresponds to all posts, comments and material that the researcher employed to interact and communicate with the other members of the group (Kozinets, 2010). It was a total of eight posts written by the researcher during the data collection time, those posts were not structured or scheduled to gain a specific response from the group's other members.

The third types of data are field notes. This data regard to the observations the researcher made from the group, interactions, identity, self - presentation, meanings and perception of the world, and researcher participation and engagements to the group (Kozinets, 2010; Garcia et al, 2009). In the process of writing field notes some preliminary interpretation and analysis of the data could be extracted, as it is mentioned by Kozinets (2010) "data collection does not happen in isolation from data analysis" (p. 95). This stage of the data collection was done simultaneously with the collection of archival and elicited data.

Prior to the data collection period, it was necessary to figure out the tool to be used to archive the data. During the pilot study significant posts were documented on a word format document through the basic copy paste option. However, for the three days of data collection a particular format design was created to organise the data collected. In a word format document, three columns were drawn. In the first column on the left, the posts were codified into numbers. In the second column, all the textual data was organised and collected from the original group by copy-pasting website content. The third column or right one included all the photos, images, videos and links posted by the members of the group. The image below could illustrate how the textual and visual data were archived.

	<i>Textual Data</i>	<i>Visual Data</i>
3	 <p><b>Timeline Photos</b> Una vainita pues..... by [redacted]</p> <p>Like · Comment · Follow post · 5 October at 04:51</p> <p>[redacted] likes this.</p> <p>[redacted] Me gustaria ver el espacio cubierto por los buses , cubierto de votantes personas..los buses no votan las personas si ...eso es solo un showy ...como siempre ha side Chavez, Fidel, y el desaparecido Husein..solo un show 5 October at 05:12 · Like · #3 2</p> <p>[redacted] llenaron 7 cuadras 6 de autobuses y una con gente. 5 October at 05:24 · Like · #3 2</p> <p>[redacted] jajaja.. eso es asi!!! 6 October at 06:32 · Like</p> <p>[redacted] Este gasto se le anexa a la cuenta de todo el derroche de dineros del Estado para su beneficio y el de un partido politico. Pero la naturaleza se opuso...lastma que les llovio... :0) 6 October at 06:44 · Like · #3 1</p> <p>Write a comment...</p>	 <p><b>Timeline Photos</b></p>

After the data was recorded from the online observations, methods and techniques of analysis were set in order to codify and give meaning to the findings. In the following section the strategy chose for the data analysis procedure will be described.

#### 4.4 Data Analysis Strategy

This section presents an overall plan to analyse engagement in online political communication. The strategy to analysing the data combined a quantitative and qualitative approach as it was mentioned in the research design.

##### 4.4.1 Quantitative Approach

The document collection represented the main tool for the quantitative approach. This first part of the analysis requires breaking the text into manageable categories that subsequently are coded (Mathison, 2005). Hence, It was designed a matrix table that allowed the mapping of relevant information collected during the three days of data collection. The main categories included are: general information of the Facebook posts, topics of discussion, supporting material and sources of information.

*General Information* consists of drawing out posts collected, total of comments per post, total of “liking” and number of members participating in the talks. Basically, this part of the matrix implies counting the basic information elements per each post, the

image bellow illustrate an example of how this information is mapping in the matrix table.

General information			
Posts Number	Total Comments	Total likes	Total members participating
1	0	3	1
2	18	4	2
3	0	2	1
4	0	2	1
5	0	3	1

*Topics of discussion* extract the posts in which political conversations arose and those unrelated to political information, also include the theme of discussion. The image bellow illustrates this part of the matrix table.

Political Posts	Political Comments	Non Political Posts	Non Political Comments	Unavailable
Electoral Results	0	0	0	0
Voting from Abroad	18	0	0	0
Allegation of electoral Fraud	0	0	0	0
Electoral Results	0	0	0	0
Media	0	0	0	0

*Supporting material* contain information related to the photos, videos, website links and text used to post messages in the Facebook group's. In this section of the matrix the subcategories are mutually exclusive, meaning that each post was selected the main supporting material used in the message.

Supporting material			
Video	Photo	Text	Website Links
0	0	1	0
1	0	0	0
0	0	1	0
0	0	1	0
0	0	0	1

*Sources of information* consist of the different sources the members of the group used to portrait the information they wanted to share with others. The subcategories include mainstream media and new media.

Sources of information						
TV	Newspaper	Facebook	You Tube	Twitter	Blogs	Digital Media
0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	1	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	0	0	0	0	0

After the matrix is completed and codified each day, the information obtained was counting. The results will be expressed in percentages and graphs in order to make comparison and extract the main features of the Facebook posts: online participation in the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group, subject of discussion, themes of discussion, supporting material and sources of information.

#### 4.4.2 Qualitative Approach

The qualitative approach intends to analyse the meaning behind the online communication experience and through the three different types of data collected.

Kozinets (2010) offered a comprehensive framework to illustrate the overall methodological procedure to organise and extract the meanings from the data collected. Additionally, thematic analysis was used as part of the strategy during the selection and coding steps of the data.

Netnography offers an inductive approach to analyse qualitative data. This involves “detailed examination of a whole by breaking it into its constituent parts and comparing them in different ways” (Kozinets, 2010, p.118). This definition encompasses Creswell’s (2006) idea in which the author mentioned that analysis procedure involved “preparing and organising the data [...] for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables or discussion” (p.148). In simple words, data analysis involves the all

process of making meaning out of the data collected. Therefore, from the whole number of posts (528) collected during the three days, a close reading of the different posts and comments resulted in the selection of those posts that generate major number of comments (up to 10), this includes posts that originally include political subject, or not.

### *Techniques of Analysis*

The technique used to analyse the data is based on the combination of two different analytical processes, suggested by Kozinets (2010), analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation. According to the author the analytical coding process described by Miles and Huberman (1994) accommodates for the needs of netnographers. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe six different common steps in the analytical coding process: coding, noting, abstracting and comparing, checking and refinement, generalising and theorising. On the other hand, hermeneutic interpretation seeks out new dimensions and insights on the data through social and historical context (Kozinets, 2010). The combination of both techniques aims to provide a deep analysis and understanding of the findings.

### *Process of Analysis*

The analysis strategy suggested by Kozinets (2010) for this type of studies includes breaking down the text, categorising and labelling data, finding communalities, examining meanings, interpreting findings, and finally gathering the culture data represented. The data analysis strategy for this research is conducted in six steps:

1. Selecting posts and images: the data produces a considerable amount of posts that first were mapped into a matrix and then some of the posts were selected according to the criteria of the main objective of this research, meaning that “from the amorphous body of material, bits and pieces that satisfy the research curiosity, and help the purpose of the study” (Baptiste, 2001, p. 8) were taken as a data for the qualitative analysis.
2. Coding: this stage included reading the data, analytical coding in the entry, coding and assigning labels and writing notes. In the coding process the visual and audio-visual material were considered, under the premise that “visual or verbal [data], it



can be read and analysed as text, sometimes more literally than at other times” (Markham, 2009, p.149). Additionally, the process of coding was underpinned on the thematic analysis of the data. This means that after a careful reading of the data, recurrent themes were extracted and made it into categories to be studied (Markham, 2009; Skågeby, 2011).

3. **Abstracting and comparing:** this process implied identification of the similarities and differences in the phrases, comments and elements of the data. This process also reflected on the themes inducted in the previous step.
4. **Generalisations:** the main task was formulating general explanations that describe regularities and consistencies in the online posts.
5. **Hermeneutic interpretations:** this was a holistic procedure in which the researcher looking for meaning, intentions of the posts and historical context depicted in the posts.
6. **Confront generalisations with theory:** the final step was confronting generalisation and interpretation of meaning with the literature framework. This stage leads us to the discussion analysis section.

#### **4.5 Ethical considerations and validation**

The question on the ethics in internet research deals with the matter of what is public, and what is private. Already, the entry to the Facebook group analysed was framed into active participation, but without mentioning that an academic study was being conducted. Walther (as cited in Kozinets, p.142, 2002) state that “any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission and retrieval of comments”. In this study none of the persons posting and commenting in the Facebook group was identified. Moreover, each of the post was coding and referring to it under a code number, rather than the name of the participants.

Furthermore, in ethnographic studies validity deals first with the truthful matching of observations made and theoretical ideas extracted from the data, and second with the reliability of the findings in relation to generalisations for other similar social settings (Pollock, 2009). For the first validity problem, accuracy of the observations and

theoretical ideas can be confirmed by finding the online post in the Facebook group or in the data archives. The second issue of validity is more complex in the sense that there are many possible settings for the online research, however the systematic development of analysis strategy and theoretical support might help to maximise possible generalisations of the findings.

In terms of the emotions first it is necessary that the researcher will be aware of his or her own presumptions, and then I should be able to objectivise the relationship between the researcher and the object of study with the support of the theory selected for the study.

## **5. Online participation and political engagement in Facebook**

This chapter is focused on the data analysis of the Facebook messages Venezuelans abroad posted during the presidential elections in October, 2012. The analysis will be divided in two sections. Each section offers valuable information to answer the main research question how Venezuelans abroad engage in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections of October 2012?

I intent to approach to the main question by determine the potential contents, patterns or features through the following sub questions a) what topics of discussion arose during the presidential elections?, b) what are the supporting materials Venezuelans abroad use for their online posts?, c) what sources of information were used to argument the Facebook' posts?, d) how does Venezuelans abroad reflect Venezuela's polarisation in the Facebook group?, e) how do Venezuelans abroad encourage voting for an specific presidential candidate? and lastly f) how do Venezuelans abroad connect to each other in the Facebook group?

The first part of the data analysis chapter constitutes a quantitative approach to the data and provide a general picture of features and patterns of the Venezuelans abroad online participation. However, this study is not focused in the causal relation of variables. This research emphasised the analysis on the interpretation of the content by close reading and examination of the data collected. Hence, the interpretative analysis offers evidence of the subjacent meaning of the messages, member's interaction and political engagement during the presidential election.

### **5.1 Main features of the Facebook' messages**

The quantitative notion of the corpus material offers information related to online participation, topics of discussion, supporting materials (textual, visual and web links) and sources of information used by the members of the Venezuelans abroad group during the three days of data collection. This section presents a systematic procedure to analyse the main features and patterns of the messages posted in the Facebook group.

### 5.1.1 Online participation

Online participation has become a new phenomenon despite of the more than 15 years existence of the world wild web. Today, new opportunities to collaborate in the production of online content with ease, impact the traditional concept of participation. Through the internet, the top-down traditional relation between the mainstream media and people has changed into a many-to-many relationship in which different voices can be heard and global conversations are feasible (Moe, 2010). As a consequence, participation has become a more complex term to define, where many could produce content in a ubiquitous frame. In the internet context, Facebook became a space for sharing common experience, interests, problems and unexpectedly a political tool, due to its characteristic of putting people in touch with each other in a global sphere.

This study based on the engagement in political communication through online mediated communication; hence, participation needs to be addressed. Online participation is determined by the action of posting messages and commenting on them in Facebook. For this research, the “like” option of the media platform determines the presence of the member in the discussion, but not concrete online participation. However, the “like” option offers information about the nature of the connection, communication and interaction members are making during the presidential elections.

The boundaries of participation are not limited in time and space, which means that during the 24 hours of the day, the group members have the opportunity to post and comment in the virtual space. The nullification of distance and time represents one of the main characteristics of postmodern communications, the changes in the dimensions of time and space evidence the impact of online communication in the configuration of national physical limits.

The *Table* below offers information about online participation per day in the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group.

Table 1: *Online participation per day*

	Total Posts	Total Comments	Total likes	Total Participants in the Online Discussion
<b>6.10.2012</b>	161	256	334	280
<b>7.10.2012</b>	180	753	391	388
<b>8.10.2012</b>	187	391	401	326
<b>Total</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>1400</b>	<b>1126</b>	<b>994</b>

A total of 994 members participated in writing post and comments. Those members generate a total of 528 posts, 1400 comments and 1126 likes during the three days of data collection. *Table 1* depicts that greater numbers of members participated in the online discussion during the day of the presidential election. This means that discussion and debate was rather stronger on the 07<sup>th</sup> of October, in comparison with the other two days. However, the day after the elections the number of messages posted was slightly higher than previous days, but fewer comments on each post were registered, meaning weaker interactivity and conversation between the group members. Instead members inclined to like comments and posts, but they did not discuss the content.

The average of participation per post offered an overall view that highlights the weak participation in the online discussion. *Table 2* contains the results of a basic, average calculation obtained by dividing separately the total number of comments, likes and participants between the total numbers of posts.

Table 2: *Online participation average*

	Online participation average		
	Comments per posts	Likes per posts	Participation per posts
<b>6.10.2012</b>	1,59	2,07	1,74
<b>7.10.2012</b>	4,18	2,17	2,16
<b>8.10.2012</b>	2,09	2,14	1,74

The results illustrate that on average, during the day of the election each posts got approximately four comments, while the day before the election each post got almost

two comments, and the day after the election just about two comments per post. This first picture of participation denotes major intention of interaction and response towards the posts presented during the day of the election. However, the numbers of people participating in the conversations are not higher than two people per post (on average). This result evidences a weak inclination for discussion in the virtual space.

Regardless of the average, some posts registered in the data collection had more than 100 comments and more than 15 different people participating in the discussion; while others do not have any comment at all. Those posts and discussions will be study in depth in the second part of the data analysis.

The average of the online participation shows the type of relation members develop to communicate and connect with others through commenting or liking. This short-term research of the Venezuelans abroad indicates that for a group of 4218 members, the online participation and discussion appeal to be scarce or even rare.

### **5.1.2 Subject of discussion**

As it was mentioned in the contextual chapter of this research, the Venezuelan presidential elections occurred in a polarised political environment. Dalton (2008) claims “dissatisfaction might stimulate individuals to participate in order to readdress their grievances” (p.56); but at the same time, “dissatisfaction might lead to alienation and withdrawal from politics” (p.56). Dalton (2008) portrayed this idea under the notion of political participation in real-live, rather than in online mediated communication.

During the process of the election it was highly expected to find messages and comments relating to political subjects. *Table 3* depict the numbers of posts which identify with political subjects in the Venezuelans abroad group. In this research, political subject refers to any message or information that involve power relationships, actors, context and communication styles that encourages the interest in the electoral process, voting, campaign, national values and any topic related to democracy or the deterioration of it.

Table 3: *Subject of discussion per day*

	<b>Total of post with political subject</b>	<b>Total of post with other subject</b>	<b>Unavailable</b>
<b>6.10.2012</b>	139	18	4
<b>7.10.2012</b>	173	7	0
<b>8.10.2012</b>	176	7	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>

By conveying Dalton's (2008) initial idea and the amount of post political related during the period of data collection, it could be assumed that Venezuelans abroad open talks mainly about political issues, perhaps in order to express their dissatisfaction. The numbers of posts counted illustrate a large amount of messages closely related to political issues, rather than any other subjects. The themes of the political post and messages offers broader information about what specifically Venezuelans abroad are discussing during the elections.

### **5.1.3 Themes of discussion**

A set of themes could be schematised and conceptualised from the data. They are related with the events and information happening in Venezuela, as well as information emerging from overseas. Unlike the top-down form of communication, in the traditional media, in Facebook ordinary individuals are initiating the broadcast without any special or particular skills (Kirkpatrick, 2011), ordinary Venezuelan people broadcast different themes, select the supporting material and choose their sources of information.

The main themes presented during the presidential elections are:

*Allegation of electoral fraud:* this theme refers to a deliberate unfair practice applied to favour one or other candidate. This includes warning of possible irregularities with the electoral machine before the elections and during the elections process. The grievances are mostly associated with the malfunction of the electoral machinery, deprivation to vote due to the closing of frontiers and manipulation of the results to favour one candidate.

*Campaigning:* this theme includes any information that encourages or discourages voting for a specific candidate. Besides, comparisons between what candidates offer for the following years of government.

*Elections Process:* it refers to all the news related to the process of elections, such as preliminary considerations towards the elections, encouragement and instructions for voting, as well as information coming from the electoral authorities.

*Electoral Results:* consists of the different official and unofficial information of the electoral results; triumphalist sentiment before the official results announcements; thoughts and feelings of a pleasant nature or dissent after the announcement of the presidential election results.

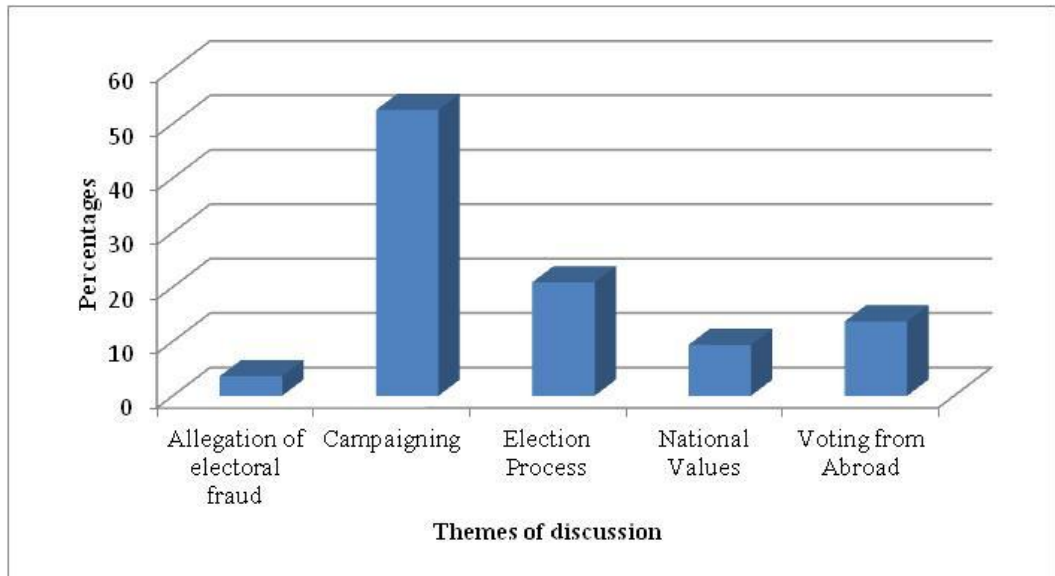
*Media:* refers to information coming from different national and international mainstream media and online news websites. This also includes complaints related to news published in the media and online problems to reach mainstream media.

*National Values:* denotes messages about ethical, moral, social, national and religious values.

*Voting from Abroad:* this theme corresponds to the activities Venezuelans abroad had during the electoral process, such as: invitations to vote in different countries, instructions and requests to vote abroad, personal experiences in the voting process in Venezuela and abroad.

The messages posted in the Venezuelans abroad group could be summarise in those themes. However, during the three days analysed, those topics interchanged according to the electoral process and events occurring in the country and overseas. The following charts present day by day the themes identified in the post.



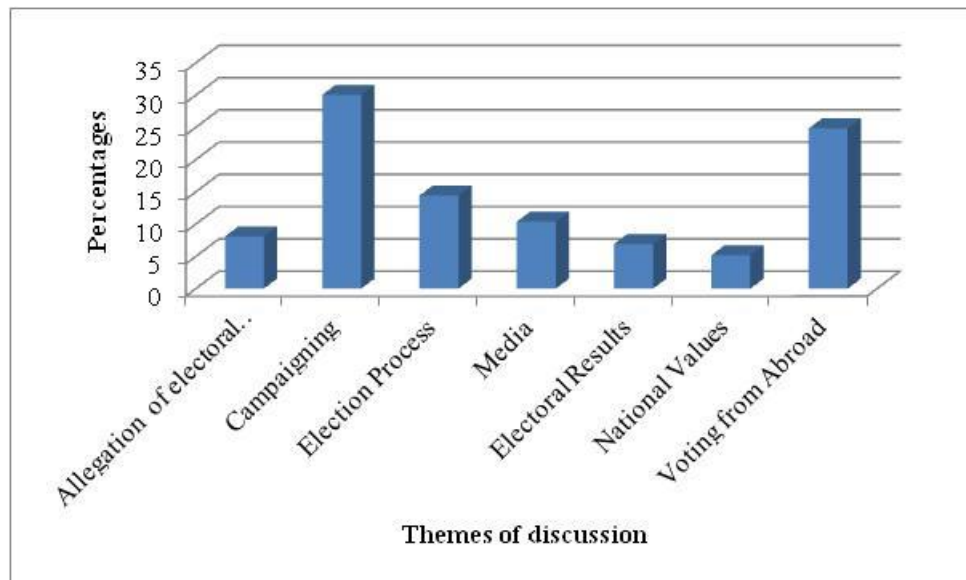
Figure 1: *Themes of discussion. 6th October 2012*

The day before the elections just over 50% of the messages posted relate to the theme campaigning. The enthusiasm towards the candidates also came with the encouragement to vote and the belief in the electoral system, despite the allegations of possible fraud. The second most posted theme corresponded to the Election Process, which includes the instruction to vote. The third most important topic Voting from Abroad was related to the different news coming from Venezuelans around the world, which also added enthusiasm toward the logistic of voting in the different centres overseas, as well as requirements, times and news coming from the different embassies and political representatives abroad.

Other topics are portrayed on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 2012, such as National Values and Allegations of Electoral Fraud. Those topics are mentioned in the messages, but with a minor regularity.

In the next two days, more themes are included in the political discussion, however, during the day of the election campaigning remain as the most common theme of discussion.

Figure 2: *Themes of discussion. 7th October 2012*



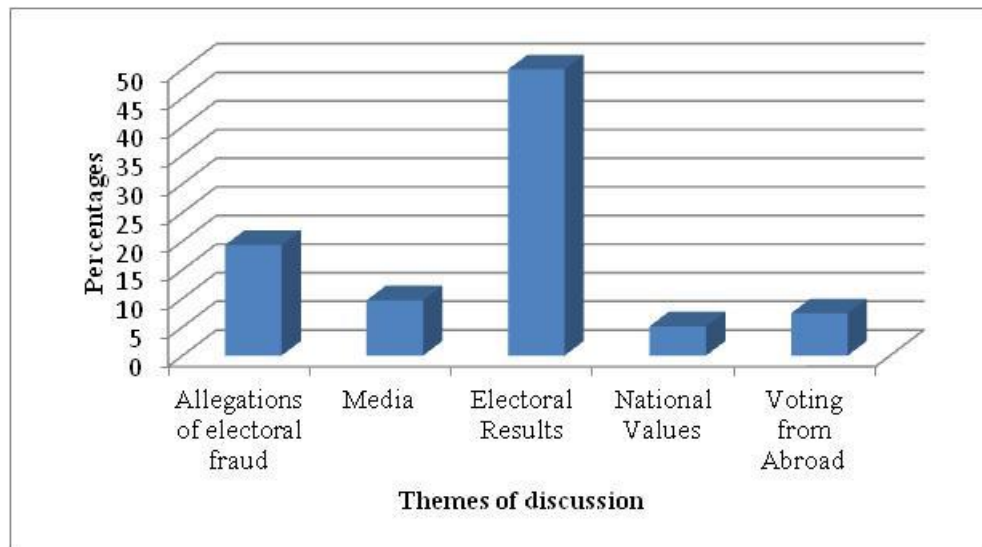
The day of the presidential elections, most of the members of the Facebook' group remained promoting voting for their favourite presidential candidate, as well as defending their reasons for their political thoughts. The theme Voting from Abroad became slightly more popular during this day and became the second most discussed themes among the other seven mentioned. During the first two days, the themes Campaigning, Voting from Abroad and Electoral Process remain as the most popular in the posts; meanwhile, Media and Electoral Results appear as new themes of discussion.

Moreover, Venezuelans abroad witnessed and reported their experience abroad and encouraged other Venezuelans abroad to participate in the elections. Equally relevant was the electoral process in the country, which together with the media offered an overview of the events happening in the country. Few irregularities in the electoral process were reported or exposed for the members of the group, even though it increased in comparison with the day before the elections. Finally, an excessive celebration of unofficial results was identified in a few messages, but still its represents the sixth most popular topic in the messages posted.

Campaigning represents the most posted theme before and during the election, as an offline activity "campaigning activities represent and extension of political participation beyond the act of voting" (Dalton, 2008). The large scale broadcast of the electronic

media facilitates new form of campaigning that could be uses by those who already works for a party or candidate. Basically, a variety of offline “political act” can be replicated in the virtual space, such as persuading others how to vote, political organisation or meetings and other forms of party activities during and between the elections (Dalton, 2008).

Figure 3: *Themes of discussion. 8th October 2012*



The messages posted the day after the elections are concentrated in five themes that according to the *Figure 3* could be clearly identified. Almost 50% of the messages are related to the Electoral Results obtained by the official and unofficial entities. The unofficial results of the election brought a new element to the discussion; triumphalism.

However, after the official announcement of the presidential results (which promulgate Hugo Chávez Frías as the winner for the next six-year presidential period), messages of allegations of electoral fraud arise in the online Facebook group. This theme was the second most popular in the post written after the elections. The most popular themes after the day of the election suggested an association between results and fraud in the online discussion raised among the Venezuelans abroad.

The day after the elections, the themes Voting from Abroad, Media and National Values also remained in the Facebook group posts.

The themes identified adjusted according to events happening in the country and abroad during the whole process of the election, starting from the enthusiasm of the campaign and voting, following by the experience and witnessing of the electoral process and terminating with the reflexion, pleasing and disagreement of the electoral results. Constant topics are repeated during the three days, between them: Allegation of Electoral Fraud, National Values and Voting from Abroad. Despite those three themes being not the most popular, they persisted in the discussion of the Facebook group.

#### 5.1.4 Supporting material

This section is devoted to examine the uses of supporting materials in the Facebook's posts, including photos, videos and website links that the Facebook user's utilised in their posts.

Table 4: *Supporting material by day*

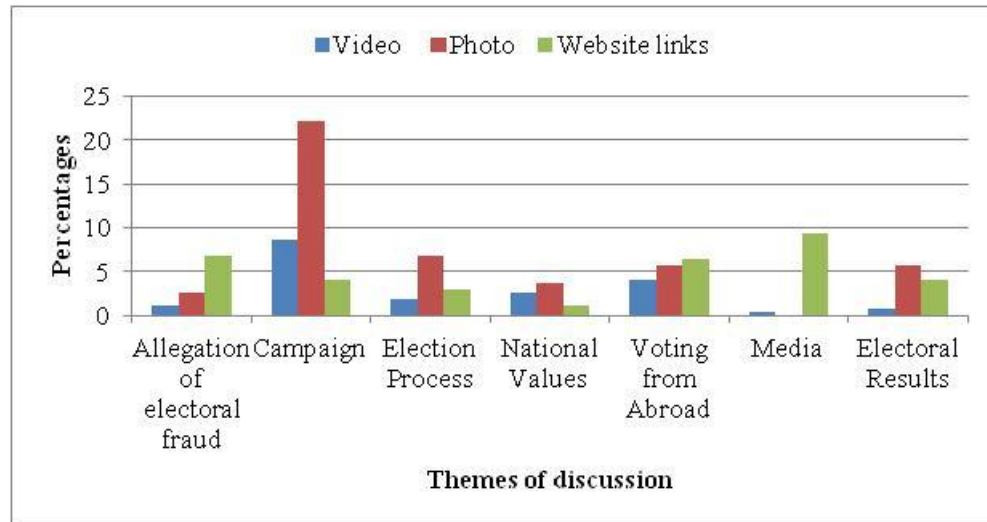
	Video	Photo	Text	Website links
<b>6.10.2012</b>	27	57	37	18
<b>%</b>	5,53	11,68	7,58	3,69
<b>7.10.2012</b>	21	42	80	30
<b>%</b>	4,30	8,61	16,39	6,15
<b>8.10.2012</b>	5	25	106	40
<b>%</b>	1,02	5,12	21,72	8,20
<b>Total %</b>	<b>10,86</b>	<b>25,41</b>	<b>45,70</b>	<b>18,03</b>

As the *Table* above depicted, the uses of videos and photos decline drastically over the three days. Meanwhile, the use of posts based on verbal expressions and website links multiplies. In the cases of the subcategory text increased three times from 37 the first day to 106 last day.

Looking individually at the subcategories, text represents the most common form of verbalising expressions. However, video, photo and website links together represent more than half percent of the total posts. As a consequence, in the construction of the messages those supporting material represent an important element of communication in the Venezuelans abroad group.

The *Figure 4* intends to identify the relation between the themes of discussion and the uses of video, photos and website links as supporting material.

Figure 4: *Supporting material by themes in percentages*



The *Figure* above evidences that most of the videos, photos and website links were utilised to portrayed the theme campaigning. This also explains the decline of those materials uses, over the three days, based on the fact that campaigning appeared during the day before the elections, in a minor quantity during the day of elections and logically disappears after the election, when the comments about the electoral results arise. Moreover, the increment in use of website links is mainly associated with the themes Media and Allegation of Political Fraud. Those themes became more popular during the last two days.

The uses of website links seems to be particularly relevant for the topic Media, this can perhaps be explained under the premise that members of the group posted links of Venezuelan online mainstream media websites and foreign media, which reported on the electoral process. Includibly, the results of the uses of supporting material bring to our attention the sources of information Venezuelans abroad utilised during the elections.

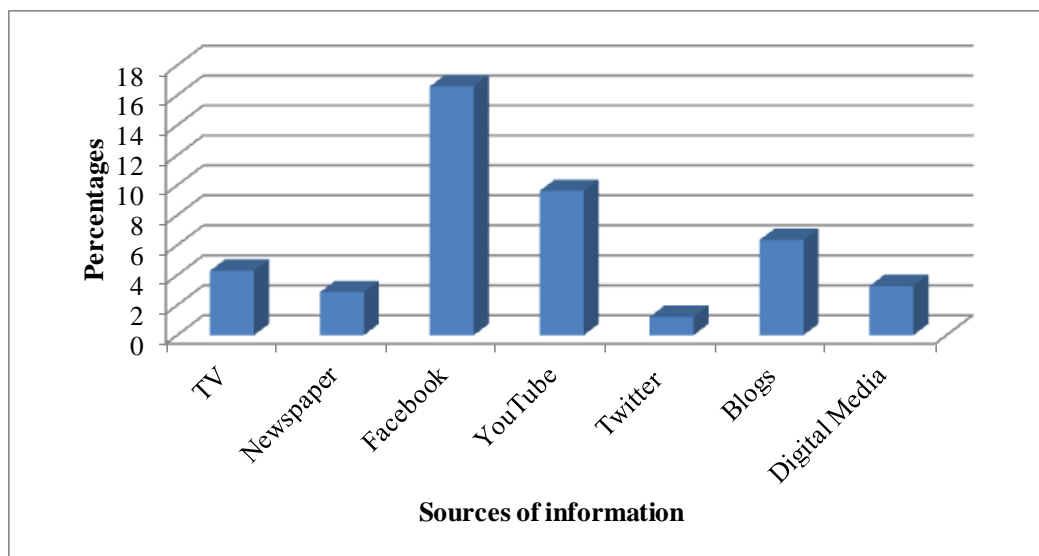
### 5.1.5 Sources of information

In the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group, official and unofficial online publications are used as sources of information. Miller (2011) already compares Facebook as a kind of magazine that use various online sources of information and also is “aggregated as a generic internet portal” (p. 119). This means that, at least in Miller (2011) study of Trinidadian community, people use Facebook as a direct source of information, especially those who are busy. If the news they found on Facebook is sufficiently interesting them, people checked in more formal media (Miller, 2011).

For this study, the sources remain important due to the unreliability of the official sources, especially for those identified as pro Capriles. The most reliable online sources identified were national (Venezuelan) and international TV and newspaper, Facebook, YouTube, blogs and Venezuelan news websites, but not necessarily in this order. On a minor scale, official institutional websites are used as trusted information.

The *Figure* bellow shows in percentages the different sources utilised by the Venezuelans abroad, during the three days selected.

Figure 5: *Sources of information in percentages*



From the total of messages posted, 15% used Facebook as the main source of information, representing the most reliable source among the others. Members of the group subscribe to other Facebook groups or communities that also discussed the

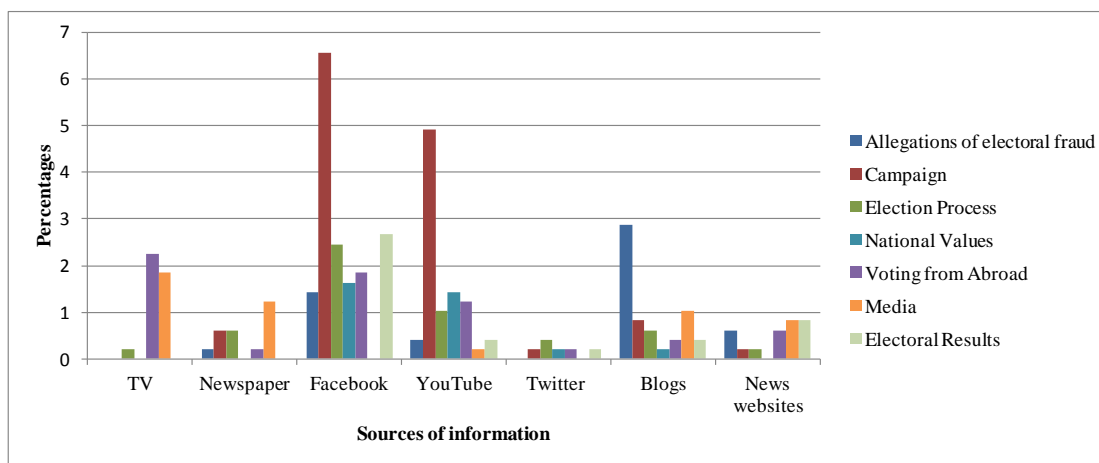
elections in Venezuela, such as “Indignation from Venezuela”, “There is a pathway”, “Capriles’ President”. The information posted in those groups mentioned became frequently post in the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group.

YouTube also represented an important online source of information. The videos posted showed affiliation to one or other presidential candidate, experience of voting abroad, traditional and national music, complaints about the electoral system, just to name a few. Finally, blogs appears to be the third most used source of information, the most popular being “Chávez die now”.

The online access to mainstream media, such as newspaper or TV, appeared to be less popular as a source. The results evidence, that Venezuelans abroad use new media as the main source of information about the Venezuelan elections.

Despite of the uses of different media sources, more than 50% of the total messages posted during the presidential election avoided the use of Facebook, YouTube, blogs or other type of source; meaning that members produced their own content or copied content from others without any referencing or evidence of the source used. The self-content include all posts that circulate chain messages, jokes, adages or any text, videos and images taking for any unidentified source. These results show the increasing empowerment of the audience in the production of contents and the reductions of the power position of media organisations (Carpentier, 2011), perhaps, due to the political polarisation and state control of the media, they do not represent a trustful source of information.

Particularly interesting is the uses of sources of information by theme, in the following *Figure* could be visualise in percentages.

Figure 6: *Uses of sources by themes in percentages*

Facebook represents the most consistent source in comparison with the others and it is also used in six of the seven themes identified in the posts. YouTube and blogs remain less popular than Facebook despite of being YouTube and blogs the only new media used in all the themes generate during the presidential elections of October 2012. Twitter, news websites and others are the least common sources used to provide information about Venezuelan elections. National and international TV represent the most limited source, despite its importance in the theme Voting from Abroad, and Media.

The theme Campaigning holds higher percentages of uses of sources, as the figure depicts Facebook and YouTube are primarily used to report information about Campaigning. However, Election Process and Voting from Abroad are reported by using all the different sources identified over the three days. Allegation of Electoral Fraud uses blogs as the main source, this theme basically developed outside the mainstream media.

This first part of the data analysis evaluates and seeks numerical evidence in the corpus material that could provide information about online participation, subjects and themes of discussion, resources and sources of information used by the Venezuelans abroad during the Venezuelan presidential elections, and the previous and following days.

The basic numerical approach to online participation in the Venezuelan Facebook group indicate that members of the group participate by writing posts and comments, also



likes clicking could be considered as a form of communication without representing discussion or changing of ideas in itself. The evidence suggests that during the day of elections Venezuelans abroad were willing to talk about political matters and grievances.

Nevertheless, overall the members of the group preferred to post messages, rather than discuss it. Despite a weak inclination for debate, approximately seven posts were written per hour and 28 of them encouraged replies and debate. Moreover, from the total of posts published during the elections 93 % of them involve political subjects and include different themes that varied over the days. The most popular themes portrayed contain information related to Campaigning, Electoral Results, Voting from Abroad and Election Process. Likewise those themes are portrayed under the uses of visual, audiovisual and online material taken from others online media sources of information, mainly new media.

## **5.2 Sense-making of Facebook posts and comments**

This part of the analysis is focused on the close reading of the online archives collected and the interpretation of meanings behind the discussions between the Venezuelans abroad. A total of 28 Facebook's post and 994 comments were utilised for the interpretative analysis. Each of the 28 posts gathered more that 10 replies or comments and one of the post selected unrelated to political talks, however the replies transform the conversation into political discussion. The numbers of Chávez followers talking in the 28 posts, reduces to three people, in contrast to the number of Capriles followers which are more than 10 different people. However, those posts which gathered the most comments corresponded to those posted by Chávez followers.

Considering that language encompasses the history and context of the people who talk (Edley: 2001), the use of lexicons or repertoire by Venezuelans abroad represents an important influence in the interpretation of political discussion. However, this part of the analysis is not focused on how the message is said, for this reason the techniques selected for the analysis does not include discourse and linguistic analysis. I am looking

to understand how Venezuelans abroad engaged in political communication through Facebook.

In addition, since this research is based on the uses of Facebook, it is important to count that the ambiguity of the medium might bring different interpretations and meaning of the people experiences, culture, language and interactions. According to Markham (2004) “[internet] sustains itself through its ambiguity; suffers, netizens, consumers, and researchers can and do interpret it freely, deriving and applying meaning of the concepts in countless ways” (p. 330). Thus, I assumed that more than one interpretation could be given to the material collected.

The discussion in this part of the analysis is centred on defining Venezuelans’ current situation, political engagement and Venezuelans abroad as virtual communities through the online mediated communication and during the presidential elections.

### **5.2.1 Polarised vision of Venezuelan realm**

The social and political polarisation of Venezuela has led to a dual vision of the country reality invigorated by the political discourse and the media. The radicalisation of political positions has encouraged ignorance towards others who share a different political position (Cañizales, 2004). Different studies (Cañizales, 2004; Tablante, 2008) depicted that polarisation has been related to the media representations which also have been taking positions toward the political environment. Under this frame, each political sector believes they hold the truth, and reject the presence of a different idea than the one they have. Hence, the constructions and meaning of the experiences Venezuelans have towards their country will depend on the political side they affiliate with. In this part of the analysis I will explain the different perspectives that Venezuelans abroad have towards the country, towards those who share the same political ideas and towards those who have different political ideas.

*The country we have in the present versus the country we will have in the future*

The members of the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group that oppose the management of the country under Chávez’s presidency built a discourse of the country they will have in the future, which is described as a land of development, progress and opportunities.

Meanwhile, the country they have in the present is described without dignity, corrupt and unequal. The present is defined as a result of the government policies, while the future is defined as the solution for the country under Capriles.

The current situation in the country is criticised for the deterioration of education and the health system, the loss of values and the economic dependency of the population as a results of government benefits. Besides, Venezuelans abroad criticise the international politics which benefits economically other countries, while in Venezuela poverty is on the rise. The government is associated with crimes such as drug trafficking, and also condemned as a repressive and tyrannical regime. The deterioration of the health system of the country was portrayed by the distrust President Chávez had towards the system to treat his own cancer sickness. According to the members of the group “Chávez does not trust in Venezuelan doctors... I don’t understand why he is running to other countries when he said that they were preparing good doctors in the country...this is indignant” (p. 2, 6 Oct). Other member of the group commented about the bad quality of the health system taking her own experience as an example “one of my daughters is not anymore in this world because of the bad quality of attention and preventions with the vaccination (...) she got thrombocytopenia and the medicine to save her life never arrived to the clinic” (p.8, 6 Oct).

The members of the group also discussed the poverty in the country, based on the deprivation of people basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, electricity and water. Moreover, the political talks emphasise the need to encourage the values of working and studying as crucial for personal growth, rather than make people dependant on the benefits the government offers. Members of the group used their own experiences to portray how with hard work they could become successful “I have succeed in life due to my own efforts and values, rather than wait for scholarships or gifts from any government” (p.8, 6 Oct), “I worked during the day and studied at night to get my own company without depending of anyone” (p.10, 6 Oct)

Chávez government is also portrayed as corrupt and criminal. Venezuelans abroad argue that the so calls “*Misiones*” (social welfare programs) were used for corruption “the coordinators of the missions are just filling their own pockets” (p.4, 6 Oct) and for

keeping Chávez followers submissive “they [Chávez followers] are getting use to wait for the government to give something, regardless the humiliation that implies” (p.6, 6 Oct), “this government has made modest people, miserable. Just for a piece of bread his followers go to any Chávez meeting. This nefarious person [Chávez] transformed a country with a brilliant future into a country of miserable people” (p.6, 6 Oct). Equally, the government is criticised for the violence, which is considered one reason to vote for the other candidate “your vote is for the youth that cannot go to school because the thieves mug them in the public transport, imagine we would like to jog in the evening, we shouldn’t...” (p.9, 6 Oct).

Another criticism of the government is the use of Venezuelan resources to please other countries and help to finance the Syrian war “nefarious is financing the Syrian war by providing diesel to the tyrant who is killing his own people” (p.5, 6 Oct), “This thief [Chávez] and scoundrel [...] gave millions of dollars to Honduras and donated a huge amount of money to Brazil for using in the Carnival festivities preparation” (p.5, 6 Oct),

The current situation of the country is associated directly as a result of the government and more specifically Chávez’s responsibility. When the members of the group define the different problems they considered are affecting the country, instantly, they encourage others to vote for Capriles as a solution. Hence, the country they want is associated to the changing of government. However, there is not a clear definition of the country they perceive in the future, but they pin their hopes on the promises of Capriles’ presidential campaign. The opposition leader campaign use terms as future, progress and dignifying, and the main slogan is there is a pathway “we never lost the hope! There is a pathway!” ( p.15, 6 Oct). However, the perception of the Venezuelan current situation has another side portrayed by pro governmental followers.

*The country we had in the past versus the country we have in the present*

Chávez’s followers omitted the dialectic of the apresent country and the future country. Instead they focus on the comparison of the past government and current government. The current government is recognised for the social programs’ efforts and the inclusion of poor people in the political agenda, while the past government is described as exclusive and corrupt.

“The country we had in the past” was described as a place where the poorest people were excluded and where inequalities reigned “we got tired of forty years of exclusion of the poorest people” (p.22, 7 Oct). Poverty is included in the political and media discourse since the “Caracazo” in 1989 (Tablante, 2008), this was a huge popular protest movement erupted in the capital, as a result of economic measures imposed by the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez and the high government corruption. However, the political discourse previous to Chávez was incapable of persuading the masses discontent with the levels of unemployment, corruption, inequality, inflation and distrust to democratic system. Since 1998 and perhaps since his participation in the 1992 coup, the style of Chávez’s rhetoric seduced the masses discontent with the past of the country, his discourse focusses on the marginalised and underprivileged sector of the Venezuelan population and envisioned a new society structure in the Constitution of 1999. During the last 16 years, poverty has been use as pivotal of social and political polarisation in Venezuela (Ellener & Hellinger, 2004).

The main achievement of Chávez, during his years in office has been associated with the social programs named “*Misiones*”. Because of this, Chávez’s followers have described “the country they have in the present” as a place where now poorest sectors are included in the political policies and those sectors have benefitted from the social programs “the president has helped many poor people in this country, giving them the opportunity to participate in the missions[...]”(p.22, 7 Oct), “our president is a humanist, and gave dignify to the poorest and modest people... inclusion is his [“*Misiones*”], his rights to the education, health, social security, among others” (p.23, 7 Oct). “Never before in the history of the country, a huge percentage of GDP has been used for social inversion” (p.26, 7 Oct).

Venezuelans abroad portrayed two different visions of the country giving evidence of the polarisation in which the political discourse is submerged in the online environment. The understanding of Venezuelans problems and political discourse depends on their political position, and that position determines the interpretation of reality. As a consequence, the possibilities of finding agreements between those who think differently are scarce in the online political discussion between Chávez and Capriles followers because each subgroup has ideas which they maintain as the truth, ideas also

reinforced by the political and media discourse. The necessity to separate their ideas also influenced the creation of identities and definitions of the self and the adversary.

*Defining Capriles' supporters versus defining Chávez supporters*

On the one hand, Capriles' followers define themselves as people from the lower class who achieved success thanks to hard work, effort and values. "I have education and also values [...] I learnt to work in order to get what I need [...]" (p.8, 6 Oct). "[M]y grandmother did not have education, but she worked hard for her family [...] those were the real mothers who did not beg for anything" (p.8, 6 Oct). "They are people with the same needs that any other Venezuelan from the lower class [...] I don't think they [referring to his family members] wouldn't say how bad is the situation there [Venezuela] if they would be happy with the Revolution" (p.23, 7 Oct). Capriles' followers avoid using the word poor to define themselves or their family, instead they use terms as lower class or people without education who worked hard.

Moreover, Capriles' followers associated the benefits from the government materialising from the social programs, as an "indecent" way to succeed and progress, they emphasise that their own success was not due to government help "We've been taught to raise our family with values and lot of respect without any help from the government, we needed to work decently" (p.9, 6 Oct). Despite of social programs being recognised as a success of Chávez governance, the opposition leaders claimed that they are corrupt and clientelistic. Besides, some critics assumed that "*Misiones*" are not sustainable in the long term due to the rapidly increment of the country public debts from "26% of the GDP in 2008 to over 50% in 2012" (World Elections, 2012).

On the other hand, the pro Chávez members of the Venezuelans abroad group define, in third person, the people that support the president as those who are poor and marginalised by the upper class "those people, who you despise and you also look down, are the majority [...]" (p.36, 7 Oct), "what they [the media] do is annoy the humble people of Venezuela" (p.22, 7 Oct), "[...] those [referring to the members of the group] who denigrate their country and their people just for being poor or for the colour of their skin" (p.38, 7 Oct). The different members of the group who identified as Chávez followers separate from the idea of presenting themselves as "poor or

marginalised” regardless of their general definition of Chávez followers as the poorest sector of society. Moreover, in terms of the discourse Chávez’s supporters position themselves as people with valid arguments who defend what they call Social Revolution, “I can imagine how annoyed you could be with my comments because they are the harsh reality” (p.14, 6 Oct).

According to the Gini index, poverty sharply declined in Venezuela from 59% in 1999 to 28% in 2008 and extreme poverty declined from 22% to 10% the same years (World Election, 2012). Those data strengthens the arguments of Chávez followers toward the decreasing of inequalities through the social programs, during Chávez’s period in power. However, the sustainability of the “*Misiones*”, the growth of the public debt and the economic dependency on oil have been factors of concern about the maintenance of the social programs in the long-term.

#### *Defining the adversary*

Equally important to the definition of the self, it is the definition of the adversary and how members of the group portrayed those who think differently.

Capriles’ followers define Chávez followers as dependant people, who do not want to work, as those who have enriched themselves through corruption, and with lacking in work ethic “they prefer to beg, they got used to being maintained by the government [...] How much costs the conscience of a Venezuelan? What happened to the dignity of Venezuelans? [...] they denigrate themselves just to get what they need and because they do not want to work” (p.4, 6 Oct), “go and work instead of waiting for the benefits of the State” (p.83, 8 Oct), “more disgusting is to sell the future of your country and the freedom” (p.36, 7 Oct). The discussion reveals the loss of values, proudness and dignity of Chávez followers to find a job, to work for their goods rather than wait for the government to give it for free. Part of the Venezuelans abroad members also criticise the attitude of Chávez followers considering them as “ignorant” “opportunist” and “uneducated people”. Moreover, Chávez’ sympathisers are described as antinationalistic people, also their nationality was questioned and they have been criticised for their inability to judge the problems of the country “He is a traitor to the motherland and agent of Cuban G-2” (p.31, 7 Oct), “he might be from Colombia” (p.20, 7 Oct) “what a

horrible way to express, she doesn't seem to be Venezuelan" (p.5, 6 Oct), "there are each time less people without brain as you who are waiting for benefits - wear glasses and see the reality of the country" (p.4, 6 Oct). Capriles' followers repeatedly use the term and images of "seal" ("foca") when one of the members posted or defended the "Revolution". The term seal is used to disqualify the adversary, and describes them as people unable to think, dull and dependant of their owner, who satisfy their basic needs in exchange of maintaining him in the power "he might be one of Chávez's seals" (p.6, 6 Oct)

Meanwhile, Chávez' followers define Capriles' followers as racist towards indigenous people or black people from the country, as promoting anti-nationalism, and as the sector of the population who discriminate and criminalise underprivileged people due to their own economic wealth, "racist rats who repulse your own country and your people, only because they are poor or because their colour of skin" (p.38, 7 Oct). Moreover, Capriles' sympathisers are described as resentful people, as a consequence of, media coverage "what is happening is the media has made your brain useless" (p.24, 7 Oct), "whatever is on the TV is the virtual world you believe in" (p.27, 7 Oct). Particularly interesting is the use of the term "majunche" to refer to Capriles followers "majunche you have to be" (p.3, 6 Oct). The term "majunche" came into the political discourse of Venezuelans after the president Chávez named the opposition leader with that term. During the presidential elections campaign 2012, Chávez used that term in order to avoid named Henrique Capriles by his name. According to the Royal Spanish Academic dictionary "majunche" means someone inferior, dull and mediocre, this is a Spanish term just used in Venezuela and became popular during the electoral campaign in 2012.

Certainly, the debate's discourse moved from values on one side and to discrimination on the other, hence Chávez's followers were portrayed as people without values, while Capriles' followers were portrayed as a racist and discriminatory group.

The uses of stereotypes and offensives language intend to disqualify the opponent in the political conversation. The online mediated political communication between Venezuelans abroad expressed a form of involvement in the political realm of the country, however, the profound polarisation of the different sectors of Venezuelan



society was evidence of the incapacity to find consensus and compromise for the best of all. Moreover, the denial of the adversary and the annihilation of the opposition's speech removed the possibility of "the consent of the people" as a base of political order and legitimation (Held as cited in Dahlgren 2011, p. 14). The definition of the self and the adversary depict that "the consensus of the people" cannot be possible with the opponent because the opponent does not share the same identity, hence one or the other have to disappear.

### **5.2.2 Mobilising attention on voting: political engagement**

The political polarisation among the Venezuelans abroad brings to attention the level of involvement in political talks, involvement implies engagement, and some kind of passion "[p]assion is not blind; it involves a vision of the good, [...] and often also involves some notion as to how to achieve this good" (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 84). In the case of the Venezuelans abroad and due to the electoral circumstances, the good is directly related to the voting for one or other of the presidential candidates, but how the Facebook group members encourage engagement to vote for a specific presidential candidate? This question will be answered through the definition of the presidential candidates, the definition of the electoral process, and through the signs of deliberation and confrontation between the members of the Facebook group.

#### *Chávez versus Capriles*

Campaigning for one or other candidate generated major controversy and number of comments when the Facebook' post involve any image, link or text that gratified Chávez as the most suitable candidate for the presidential elections or when including content that criticised the social programmes. Hence, the post that brought major attention focused discussion and confrontations on the figure of Chávez, the pros and cons of voting for him; instead to portray the qualities and differences of one and other candidate. However, some phrases and slogan from Capriles' campaign was repeatedly used by his followers.

Chávez was portrayed in two different ways, depending on the political views of the members of the group. From one part of the group, Chávez is portrayed as the defender

of the poor people in Venezuela with expression such as “vote for President Chávez, the president of the poorest people” (p.3, 6 Oct), “only with your help [Chávez], we could help poor people” (p.20, 7 Oct). The arguments utilised to justify, how the late president helped the deprived sector in the population, is based on the establishment of social programmes “vote for missions, love mission, mothers mission, mission inside slum” (p.3, 6 Oct), those “*Misiones*” are described as a social welfare programmes established during the government of Chávez. Likewise, the conversations related to campaigning, also describe the candidate as the one who loves the motherland “those who love the motherland, come with me” (p.18, 7 Oct), this brings to attention the call of nationalism as an instrument for the presidential campaign. Finally, the political figure of Chávez is compared with Jesus Christ and by using passage from the Bible with attached the political figure as the saviour of the poor. To sum up, the campaign highlighted Hugo Chávez as the president who, through social programmes, has helped the most deprived sector of the population and he was exalted together with the figure of Jesus Christ, as the saviour of the poor people in Venezuela. For these reasons, it is attached to the president the love of motherland.

However, other members of the group describe the late president in opposite terms. Chávez was portrayed as responsible for depriving people to satisfy their basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, electricity and water, “[...] [with Chávez] you will be without shoes, without electricity, without work, without food, without medication [...]” (p.3, 6 Oct) Equally, the political candidate is described as the president who encourages corruption through the “*Misiones*” and drug trafficking, “President of new rich and drug dealers” (p.3, 6 Oct), as well as reproving inequalities in the revolutionary process “what a joke, of course this is an equalitarian revolution” (p.3, 6 Oct).

Moreover, the members of the group expressed their dissatisfaction towards the foreign affairs and uses of national resources to favour others countries such as Cuba, China, Russia, Iran, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Belarus, and blamed the former president as a false prophet of Jesus Christ by using phrases from the Bible “... and will come false prophets who will use my name (Jesus Christ) to fool masses...” (p.21, 7 Oct). As a result, the political description of the presidential candidate Chávez was associated with two different views, on one side the president is exalted for his work with the deprived

sector of the population, and on the other side members of the group deny the arguments by associating Chávez's governmental management with corruptions, inequality and allies with controversial countries - in terms of freedom and equality.

Conversely, the group opposed to Chávez's re-election define Capriles as the candidate for the "progress and future" which is the main slogan of his campaign. Political talks related to Capriles' campaign encompass conversations about restoring the values of Venezuelans by voting for the presidential candidate. He is presented as change, the novelty, the new face in the political landscape, the solution for the different problems, and the new liberator of the country "I'm convinced that we need to change the government in order to finish this nightmare" (p.38, 7 Oct). "Capriles is the liberator who will fight for our democracy [...] everyone vote for Capriles" (p.41, 7 Oct). Likewise, the opposition leader is considered as the person who would be able to unify and reconcile the country, and recognise all society as Venezuelan (not as Chavistas and anti-Chavistas) "he wants reconciliation of Venezuelans, all together" (p.37, 7 Oct), "the president don't decide who are Venezuelans, the Venezuelans decide who is the president' Henrique Capriles Radonski" (p.39, 7 Oct). On the other hand, Chávez followers criticised Capriles mainly because he represent the past in which the poorest sectors were neglected and oppressed "Capriles represents the past, he does not offer anything new, his government program is unclear, just more promises" (p.22, 7 Oct).

#### *Venezuelan presidential election*

The Venezuelan presidential elections in 2012 reached more than 80% political participation (CNE, 2012). During the Election Day, Venezuelans abroad focused on discussion about political participation of Venezuelan citizens, the legitimacy of democracy and speculation on the results.

Capriles' followers considered the higher political participations as an expression of demanding political and social changes, seeking new faces in the political sphere "Venezuela wants young and new faces" (p.59, 7 Oct) and calling for the peace of the country. On the other hand, Chávez followers considered political participation as an expression of legitimating the revolution and the political process going on since 1999, "this time, the long queues in the electoral centres are Chávez's responsibility" (p.57, 7

Oct). The connection between participation and communication seems to be an important component where “participants enter into personal relationships by taking positions on mutual speech-act offers and assuming illocutionary obligations” (Habermas cited in Carpentier, 2010, p.80), such as the act of voting.

Presumptions of the electoral results, that favoured Capriles against Chávez (reinforced by international media), created a matrix of opinion in which Chávez’s supporters warned that previous triumphalism would open speculations of fraud after the publication of results. Consequently, Capriles’ supporters moved the discussion towards possibilities of fraud in the electoral process due to the corruption, and the use of the resources of the country “it is not a secret that in Venezuela you can do whatever you want if you have money and this guy [Chávez] has the money of the country, the guns of the country, and all of that in the wrong hands... most probably the electoral machines are also dashed” (p.59, 7 Oct).

After the Electoral Council announced the official results, in which Hugo Chávez Frías was re-elected with 55% support from the electoral population, Venezuelans abroad open the discussion around the continuation of the political system, which on one hand represented the continuation of socialism, revolution and democracy; and on the other hand represented the continuation of totalitarianism and tyranny. If Dahlgren (2011) definition of democracy is taken as a reference “Democracy emerges, at best, unevenly across the world, through political struggles; it rarely comes as a gift to the people from the powerful circles” (p. 2), it could be interpreted that the two different visions of the Venezuelan system encompass the same idea of democracy, but view the “powerful circles” as being in different areas. Hence, for one part of the Venezuelans abroad, the powerful circle is represented by the economic power and capitalism, portrayed as the responsible for poverty and inequalities. Meanwhile, for the other part of the group the powerful circle is represented by the political power, portrayed as the antidemocratic forces that use the process of democracy itself to further their totalitarian causes. Indeed, that appears to be the reason why the allegations of fraud emerged as another theme of discussion during the elections process, and with more frequency after the election results.

In the discussion of the political system, Chávez's followers depicted that construction of socialism and revolution will continue with the re-election of Chávez. The Venezuelan political model was compared with Sweden, Cuba, Norway and Switzerland in order to counteract accusations of communist implementation in the country. Paradoxically, these group member claimed that revolution will be forever and the revolution is directly linked with the statement of maintaining Chávez in power indefinitely. Although, Capriles' followers associated Venezuelan political system with communism and totalitarianism "when you live in a democracy everything is possible ... but not in a dictatorship that control everything" (p.78, 8 Oct); "there is a misunderstanding between democracy and communism, I see my country destroyed and that is not democracy nor by chance" (p.72, 8 Oct). This part of the Venezuelans abroad group highlights that dictatorship uses democratic resources to legitimate themselves in the power "[...] it is already visible that with votes we could not finished with the dictatorship, in Venezuela we do not have democracy and the elections have been used for the 'Chavismo' as a tool to legitimise an antidemocratic president" (p.77, 8 Oct). To sum up, Chávez followers described the Venezuelan political system as the establishment of socialism through Chávez's revolution, which they expect to be indefinite. In contrast, Capriles' followers portrayed the system as totalitarian and antidemocratic, together with distrust of the results and allegations of fraud.

Moreover, Venezuelans abroad, who disagree with the re-election of Chávez, attempted to understand and justify the electoral results under the idea of ignorance of some of the voters. Thus, the result is portrayed as a consequence of ignorance and ignorant people. In the political conversation the term ignorance is not clearly defined, just used as an expression "The Venezuela of ignorance won today" (p.72, 8 Oct); "Venezuela lost today, ignorant people" (p.76, 8 Oct). However, when the term is used to refer to a specific person, rather member of the group or any other person, then the use of the expression "ignorant people" seems to disqualifying the argument of the thoughts that person defended "[...] you are a piece of ignorant" (p.72, 8 Oct), "I do not considered myself a wise man, but my work certified that I am not an ignorant person" (p.73, 8 Oct). Moreover, Capriles' followers associated the ignorance with the deterioration of the educational system in Venezuela during Chávez's presidential period "this is the

Venezuela that graduates professionals without knowledge [...], thanks to the actual ‘democracy’ ” (p.72, 8 Oct). Then, the electoral results comments and talks utilised the term “ignorance” and “ignorant people” to justify the reasons of the re-election of the president.

*Deliberation versus confrontation*

Facebook has been used by Venezuelans abroad as “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas cited in Carpentier, 2010) in the context of the presidential elections. Political discussion arose sharing three main features. First, the opposition members of the group were most likely to discuss the posts and comments Chávez’s followers presented. Hence, posts that favour the presidential candidate Chávez concentrate the major number of political conversations and talks, while the messages that supported Capriles are mainly ignored in terms discussions. In addition, the members of the group use the words “debate” and “refute” to depict that somehow they perceived the discussion as a deliberation, and Facebook as a place to refute ideas they disagreed with. Likewise, the capacity of rational deliberation is attached to the feelings of people and in this particular case to the mourning, after the electoral results.

Second, Venezuelans abroad construct their arguments under the notion of what they considered correct or true. Hence, over the political discussion a dual relationship between the good and bad, values and anti-values, Capriles and Chávez, was developed for the members of the group.

Finally, political discussion arose as a motif to confront Chávez’s followers and their political inclinations; hence, participants were unlikely to maintain dispassionate and impartial “people engaged in political conflict are not always so prone to behave in a neutral, truth-seeking, dispassionate, or altruistic manner” (Dahlgren, 2011, p. 92). As a result, political talks became uncomfortable between those Venezuelans who thought differently and the space of discussion turned into a place for reinforcement of their political ideas, or a place to confront the opponent. There was no place for consensus or intention to persuade others to change their political views, indeed “[w]hen most people talk about politics, they tend to do so with people they know and with whom they share

basic political assumptions and values, that is, with like-minded” (Dahlgren, 2011, p.89). Then, when opposite ideas converged the discussion was confrontational, instead of seeking common solutions or agreements. There is a recurrence of disqualification of the opponent arguments by using harsh language and expression, which additionally brought new topics of discussion such as: racism or lacking of values, as well as requests for tolerance and respect. In the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group space, the solutions to the conflicts that affected the country were directly linked to the presidential candidate. As a result, there were two views on how to solve the conflicts, on one side voting from Capriles or on the other side voting for Chávez.

### **5.2.3 Facebook as a virtual community**

The Venezuelans abroad Facebook group counted very few members that identified as Chávez followers; paradoxically, those members’ comments and posts generate major online participation in the political discussion and encouraged the sense of togetherness. Therefore, Venezuelans abroad found the Facebook group as a place of encountering others for affiliation, support and sharing emotions during the presidential election.

As a place for affiliation, the Facebook group enabled Venezuelans to transcend the geographical distance, time differences, create identities and facilitates the dissemination of communication and information. Venezuelans around the world found an online space to interact and communicate the current affairs influenced by their political inclinations. In addition, the sense of togetherness and alliance sometimes moved from the political conversation into an everyday conversation and turn into a social experience: “good morning my friends [...], I’m going to sleep now [...]” (p.48, 7 Oct); “where are you my compatriot... in Spain? (p.48, 7 Oct); “I’m in Switzerland and tomorrow many of us going to Bern [referring to the city they need to go to vote]” (p.48, 7 Oct). In some cases, it was also sought to go beyond the online space “we need to organise a meeting... do something together [...] any suggestion?” (p.62, 7 Oct); “I’m at your complete disposal in Massachusetts” (p.62, 7 Oct); “I’m at your complete disposal in Montreal” (p.62, 7 Oct).

Furthermore, Venezuelans abroad appropriated national values (patriotic symbols and Simón Bolívar thinking) and religious values (devotions and religious metaphors) to

create identities. However, the main tie that connects them was their political inclination, translated into the candidate they will vote for. Then identification towards one or other option was revealed in the members post, comments, profile pictures and alliance to defend against the “adversary” “we need to be together against the enemy...whenever one of those dullards comes here, we need to be unified, then they won’t have more choice rather than leave” (p.50, 7 Oct)

The online space not just facilitates communication and interaction, also the dissemination of it. This took particular relevance the day of the election and until the presidential results were officially published. The Facebook group was also use as a place to seek support and solidarity “I would like to send you a hug to all of you, I don’t know what I would have been done without our discussions this last days, I’m feeling that I know you and I will miss you all” (p.68, 8 Oct). After the results of election Capriles’ followers encourage others to not feel down and continue fighting “[we] lost a battle, painfully, but not the war” (p.76, 8 Oct); “this [result] will make us stronger after we overcome the anger, we cannot surrender” (p.78, 8 Oct). Somehow members managed to transmit hopes and enthusiasm, even though they did not get the electoral results they expected “Venezuela has more future than past and we are here to give everything for the Venezuela we want” (p.79, 8 Oct).

Finally, the online space was use by Capriles’ followers to pose sentiments and disagreement towards the electoral results. The main feelings expressed were sadness, anger, disappointment and pain “[I feel] disappointment, sadness, helplessness, a mixture of feelings [...] anger, anger, that is what I feel [...] at the same time sadness for my country and my family that live there” (p.76, 8 Oct). There also depicted feelings of frustration or release for not being living in the country “I am in a very comfortable situation here [in Florida, US], this makes me feel somehow guilty” (p.76, 8 Oct); “Chávez’s victory does not affected me, I am not living in Venezuela, my family is not in Venezuela, I am not dependant of Venezuelan government, but still I feel anger” (p.77, 8 Oct). Besides, Venezuelans abroad express their regrets for the decisions taken in the past and sympathies for those who live in the country “[...] we are paying dearly for our decisions in the past [...] the hardest situation is for those who did not vote for him [Chávez] and still have to equally suffer his government” (p.76, 8 Oct). In the



recognition and expression of their feeling, Capriles' followers also accepted their incapability of a rational discussion and incapacity for debate due to mourning after the announcement of electoral results "[...] this is not the moment to refute anything, we are sad and we will answer anything, then we will start other cycle of 6 years of division. [...] we are not in the moment to debate [...]" (p.74, 8 Oct). Moreover, Capriles' followers requested respect to those who felt hopeless towards the Venezuelan situation and encourage the other part of the group to celebrate with their counterpart instead to write in the Facebook group to mock the mourning of others Venezuelans abroad.

Venezuelans abroad Facebook group embrace Rheingold's (1993) idea of virtual community in which interactive communication is connected in order to share the same purpose or interest. However, the political talks between Venezuelans abroad seem to be initially a spontaneous encounter in the virtual space, rather than organised. Anyhow, the interest or purpose that moved people to participate in the online talks presupposes some engagement or involvement from the members of the Venezuelans abroad group and particularly in this case, political engagement (Dahlgren, 2011).

The polarised context and the carrying out of presidential elections encouraged online mediated discussions that, according to the data collected, were kept in the virtual space. Some attempts of live organisation arose in the discussion that suggested social life meetings. In terms of mobilisation and action, Venezuelans abroad had rarely any type of discussion related to these practices. Hence, talks about politics did not necessarily enhance activism or mobilisation, particularly after the official presidential results were announced and regardless of the different complaints of fraud.

According to the results of this analysis, it cannot be said that the act of voting as a "civic practice" was enhanced by the online mediated communication just because Venezuelans abroad invited people to vote or expressed their desire vote. It could be argued that people intended to vote even before joining the Facebook group. However, Venezuelans abroad Facebook group shares patterns of communication and meaning that connected the members of the group and creates a place for sharing emotions, seeking for support and building affiliations.

## **6. Conclusions**

Unquestionably, the internet has transformed the information and communication flow of everyday life. This research focuses on engagement in online mediated communications, more specifically on Facebook. The theoretical framework addresses key concepts to understand the changes in the configuration of the global sphere, participation, community and social movements in the network society and moreover, provides a platform to analyse how Venezuelans abroad engaged in political communication through Facebook during the presidential elections on October 2012.

The prolific amount of data required an analysis based on quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach allowed mapping of relevant information related to online participation, topics of discussion, supporting material and sources of information. Additionally, the qualitative approach, based on netnography design methods, facilitated the sense-making of interaction and communication between Venezuelans abroad who participated in the Facebook group. The combination of these methods enabled a holistic analysis of the data collected. For instance, posting, commenting and liking represented a form of online participation, and the close reading of those posts and comments offered information related to debate, confrontation or deliberation in the online mediated communication. As a result, this study approached how the message was said (topics, sources of information and supporting material) and what were the subjacent meaning of the messages and their implications in political engagement.

### **6.1 Producing content in the online communication**

In the case of the Venezuelans abroad, Facebook offered a space to invigorate political communication during the presidential election. The Venezuelans abroad Facebook group was composed of two subgroups: Chávez' sympathizers and Henrique Capriles' sympathizers. However, the majority of the members participating in the posting and commenting identified as Capriles' followers. Chávez and Capriles represented the strongest presidential candidates for the Venezuelan elections in 2012. Moreover, the figures of the two candidates reflected the polarisation in which Venezuelan society is embedded. On the one side the strong leadership of Chávez remained as a powerful

phenomenon, especially after twelve years in power and under the shadow of cancer. On the other side was the nascent leadership of Capriles which was the result of the coalition of very heterogenous politicians and parties that oppose Chávez, from centrist reformers to former leftist allies of Chávez.

Certainly, the electoral event brought into discussion political topics related to the themes of campaigning, electoral process, voting from abroad, electoral results, allegation of electoral fraud, media and national values. Those themes represent 93 percent of the posts written in the Venezuelans Abroad Facebook group. The basic numerical approach to online participation indicates that members of the group participated by writing posts and comments, also 'likes' could be considered as a form of communication without including discussion or changing of ideas themselves. This finding demonstrates that Venezuelans abroad connected to political communications during the presidential election, specifically through the new media, Facebook. This raises the question of how the message was presented in online media. The main features of the messages written in the virtual space indicate that different resources of information and online media sources were used to portray political inclinations of the Venezuelans abroad, congregated in the Facebook group.

More than half of the political posts made use of visual, audiovisual and online material in order to communicate ideas, information and opinions. The usage of those supporting materials varied over the days, the employment of photos and videos in the posts declined, whereas the use of website links increased during the period of study. By correlating the themes and supporting material, it seemed that videos and photos were mainly used in the posts related to campaigning; this could also be explained by the fact that campaigning represented the primary theme used in the posts written by the Venezuelan's abroad. The use of supporting material brings to attention which online media sources were utilised during the Venezuelan presidential election.

The sources of information employed in the posts by the Venezuelans abroad, include not just the online versions of mainstream media, but also new media. The corpus material showed that political communication emanated from members of the group preferred to utilise new media such as Facebook, YouTube, blogs and in minor scale

Twitter, rather than information coming from online editions of mainstream media. Facebook and YouTube represented the most used online sources to depict information related to campaigning. Conversely, mainstream media does not represent a relevant source of information in the Venezuelans abroad conversations.

In addition, the political themes discussed suggested that the day before the election and the day of the election the campaigning theme represented the most popular among the Facebook posts, while allegations of fraud and electoral results remained as the most popular themes after the elections. Overall, the members of the group preferred to post messages with different political themes, rather than discuss the content of it. Only five percent of the total political posts recorded discussion and interaction among the members of the group, the replies to the posts accumulated more than 900 comments in total. Thus, despite of the lower amount of posts that generated discussion, those posts which enhanced interaction between the members of the group generated replies significant in terms of content and quantity. The evidence suggested that Venezuelan's abroad were willing to discuss the content of the posts especially when: it was in favour of the re-election of Chávez, and illustrated information of the electoral results or claimed fraud in the electoral process.

## **6.2 Facebook and political engagement**

The close reading of the posts and replies serve to analyse the different meanings behind the messages and what were the implications of those messages in terms of polarisation, political engagement, and interactive. Venezuelans abroad used the Facebook group to express their ideas, political interests and demands towards what they consider to be good or bad for the health of democracy, hence Facebook represented the virtual space in which Venezuelans abroad reunited to produce their content, to debate, confront, affiliate and support other members of the group. However, in the virtual space the absence of deliberations and the absence of the relation to civic society and state, differ from the classic idea of public sphere conceived by Habermas (1974). Nevertheless, Facebook facilitated the connection between unknown people who: 1. shared the same nationality, 2. localised in different spaced and time zones, 3. engaged in political talks and 4. were involved in a democratic practice: voting.

The new media offered an opportunity to enhance horizontal political conversations among Venezuelans abroad. Online information access and computers mediated communications, facilitated campaigning and sharing the electoral experience as well as interactions and debates in an electronic forum, evading formal media control (Castells, 2004). Thus, Facebook presented a different structural nature of communications that bypassed space and time limitations, as well as traditional media control. Unlike the traditional media characterized for its “bottom- up participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 254), the structural nature of this new media, enabled many-to-many communication in which Venezuelans abroad produced their own content, selected their reliable sources of information and supported the messages with links, visual and audiovisual material. This dynamic of communication through Facebook enhanced multidirectional forms of participation and heterogeneity of the communicational content and practices (Carpentier, 2011.)

Through the electronic communication Venezuelans abroad formed their own “political and ideological constellations” (Castells, 2004, p. 415) rooted in polarised Venezuelan society and “circumventing established political structures” (Castells, 2004, p. 415) that for example, banned campaigning for any of the presidential candidates during the elections and the day before them. Venezuelans abroad functioned as a group of people that interacted and collaborated to create a perception of their home country through the discussion of the Venezuelan realm, the election process and the results of it. This dynamic of the group is embedded into the communal values explained by Shirky (2012) but Venezuelans interactions depicted in the political talks indicates that the group also shared civic values that aimed to benefit the country through voting for one or the other candidate.

However, the space created through Facebook does not represent mediation between the civic society and the state, not even a place to legitimate and check the power of the state (DeLuca and Peebles, 2002) during the Venezuelan presidential election in October 2012. Indeed, the dimensions of participation depicted on Facebook could be described as social participation (Dahlgren, 2011), meaning that Venezuelans abroad talked about political topics but not necessarily to enhance offline mobilization and

actions taken such as voting or protesting regardless the allegation of fraud of the electoral results. Despite of voting being the most visible citizen action shared in the Facebook group, previous involvement in the online campaigning suggested that Venezuelans abroad were already motivated to vote. Hence, talking about political concerns, not necessarily to motivate others to vote for one or other candidate, instead presented voting as a social event that needs to be portrayed in the new media in order to find affiliation, support or confrontation.

No evidence to prove that Venezuelans abroad voted as a result of political talks was found in the messages analysed. Perhaps, further studies of the target group could raise more evidence in this respect. Nonetheless, the potential of Facebook as a tool cannot be depreciated especially when the polarisation of the country already envisaged a political crisis

[v]oting is the most visible and widespread form of citizen action, but it is not the only means of citizen input. The public's participation in politics is not limited to elections, nor is voting the most effective means of influencing the political process (Dalton, 2008, p. 40,)

Inexorable, the 'new media' facilitates not just new forms of sociability but also an extraordinary level of online contact and engagement. Usually, the concept of political engagement overlaps with political participation. In any case, those engaged in politics are more likely to act. Hence, political conversations enhance engagement and have a relevant meaning for the political life of democracy (Dahlgren, 2011).

The political talks among the Venezuelans revealed a polarised discourse that envisioned two different realities of the problems and solutions, of the centre of powers and democracy itself. In this context, the conflicts and differences circumvented any possibility for consensus. Moreover, even more problematic was the disregard of the others who thought differently. In Facebook simply blocking the "adversary" represented a solution to avoid the conflict. Thus, opportunities for deliberation based on the ability of discussion in which strong convictions could go into a balance and compromise for the best of the parts involved (Dahlgren, 2011), remained scarce in the

online mediated communication between the Venezuelans abroad, during the presidential elections in 2012.

Moreover, discussion about political systems and democracy in the online mediated communication do not necessary mean that political engagement was a result of the new media (in this case Facebook) but certainly could be a result of the engagement in a particular event or political circumstance in itself, for example presidential elections. However, when people become politically active “they must have some visions of how thing ought to be done, and they must have hope that at least some progress can be made towards realising this vision” (Hall, 2005, p.215). The electoral results showed that for one part of Venezuelan abroad their vision and hopes of progress were frustrated.

### **6.3 Facebook and sense of togetherness**

Political engagement enhanced revision on the connection established between the members of the Venezuelans abroad Facebook group. Facebook represented a platform where Venezuelans discussed and engaged in political talks but also, a place where they created affiliations that promoted homogeneity, identities and engagement. In addition, Facebook served as a place to seek for support and solidarity in the virtual setting.

Venezuelans abroad enhanced political conversations that create homogeneity between those who share the same political inclinations. Hence, they shaped interaction, behaviours and relations based on the sharing of the experience and more particularly based on political inclinations. Particularly remarkable is that despite of the minority having shared a political inclination to oppose the political ideas of the majority, the minority was not removed from the online Facebook group. In addition, the small number of members that participated and presented themselves as sympathisers of Chávez did not self-censor and did not even try to make themselves anonymous in front of the other members. There was no fear of isolation from the minority group, they consolidated and united as a small group versus vast majority. However, some comments between the majority urged others members to block those members who represented the minority.

The Venezuelans presidential elections served as an opportunity to promote national, religious and ethical values embedded in the Venezuelan society. For instance, the association between the figure of Jesus Christ or praying chains exposed an appropriation of values into the political campaign for the presidential candidates. Equally, members of the group associated national values with their candidates and rejected the adversary as anti nationalistic or ignorant towards Venezuelan culture and traditions. This rhetoric showed that each subgroup used different values in order to encourage pleasantness towards their favourite presidential candidate.

Moreover, the interaction between the members seemed natural in the virtual space despite of the different places Venezuelans resided abroad. They could exchange information and debate but also created connections that went beyond the political discussion and generated social connections, example of that was the multiple invitations members of the group received to visit each other. Moreover, the results of the elections enhanced solidarity and sharing of feelings between those members who felt defeated with the re-election of Chávez.

Despite of the allegations of fraud and disagreement towards confirmation of the results of the elections, no intention of mobilisation and formal organisation for offline activities or transnational protests arose. There is a question to be raised whether posting and becoming a member in a new media platform could enhance the idea of community translated into civil society engaged with activities and organization. Moreover, could the interaction in Facebook help individuals to shape their identities, to foster values and learn to deal with conflict in productive way (Dahlgren, 2011). Perhaps, formal organization for offline participation in Facebook is associated with political discourse of the leaders. Further studies could analyse the relationship between the political discourse of the opposition's leaders in Venezuela and the organisation of national and transnational protest through new media.

Overall, the present research shows that Venezuelans abroad engaged into political conversation and interaction in order to 1. compensate the anxiety and in some cases lack of information; 2. campaign the electoral candidates; 3. communicate the different electoral news coming from the country and abroad; 4. invite people to vote; 5.



complain about the elections process, 6. disseminate rumours of the elections results and, 7. seek for support and solidarity. Moreover, connection between the members of the group replicated the social and political polarisation that is embedded in the Venezuelan society today.

## References

- Acosta, Y. (2007). La protesta política en Venezuela (2001-2007). *Revista Artículos* (Vol: XXVI), 74-98 Retrieved May 20, 2013 from <http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/pdf/repsi/v26n2/v26n2a05.pdf>
- Adi, I. & Miah, A. (2011). Opn Source Protest: Human Rights, Online Activism and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In Cottle, S. and Lester, L. (Eds.), *Transnational Protest and the Media* (pp. 213-224). New York: Peter Lang.
- Akdogan, I. (2012). Digital – political fantasies in Istanbul: an analysis of the perceived role of ICT in changing local institutional politics, activism and identity. Communication Research Centre. Finland: University of Helsinki.
- Aponte, C. (2012). La situación social de Venezuela: Balance y Desafíos . *Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales*, pp.1-20. Retrieved March 22, 2014 from <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/caracas/09463.pdf>
- Artigas (2011). Los intentos para conocer las nuevas audiencias. Twitter y las elecciones venezolanas del 26S. *Universidad del Zulia: III Congreso InveCom 2011*. Retrieved November 20, 2011 from [www.congresoivecom.org/index.php/.../231](http://www.congresoivecom.org/index.php/.../231)
- Baptiste, I. (2001). Qualitative data analysis: Common phases, strategic differences. *Forum: Qualitative social research*, 2(3). Retrieved March 04, 2013 from <http://www.utoronto.ca/~kmacd/IDSC10/Readings/Data%20analysis/QDA.pdf>
- Bennet (2003). New Media Power: The Internet and Activism. In Couldry, N. & Curran, J. (Eds.) *Contesting Media Power* (pp 17-38). Oxford: Rowman and Littlefiel.
- Black, L. (2009). Listening to the City: difference, identity, and storytelling in Online deliberative groups. *Journal of public deliberation* (Volume 5), 1-35.
- Cañizález, A. (2004). Apuntes sobre medios y periodistas en una sociedad polarizada. *Comunicación: Estudios venezolanos de comunicación*, 127, 14-19
- Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and Participation: A site of ideological-democratic*

*struggle*. United Kingdom: intellectual Bristol.

Carpentier, N. (2010). "Producers" on Participatory Websites. Ordinary Young People and the Politics of Banality. In Dahlgren P. and Olsson T. (Eds.), *Young Citizens, ICT's and Democracy* (pp 51-68). Stolkhom: Nordicom.

Carrasquero, J. (2006). Democracia participativa y exclusion en Venezuela. In Lalander, R. (Eds.), *Venezuelan Politics and Society in Times of Chavismo* (pp. 45-51). Stockholm: Review of Latin America Studies.

Castells, M (2000). *The Rise of the Network Society: Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (V. 1). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Castells, M.(2004).*The Power of Identity : The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. (V. 2). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Cammaerts, Bart and Van Audenhove, Leo (2005) *Online political debate, unbounded citizenship, and the problematic nature of a transnational public sphere [electronic version]*. *Political Communication*, 22 (2). pp. 147-162.

CNE. Consejo Nacional Electoral: Divulgacion Presidential 2012, resultados electorales. Retrieved April 16, 2014 from [http://www.cne.gob.ve/resultado\\_presidencial\\_2012/r/1/reg\\_000000.html](http://www.cne.gob.ve/resultado_presidencial_2012/r/1/reg_000000.html)

Conatel. Servicio de internet indicadores de los años 1998 – 2011. Retrieved November 20, 2011 from <http://www.conatel.gob.ve/#http://www.conatel.gob.ve/index.php/principal/indicadorestrimestrales>

Cottle, S. (2011). Media and the Arab Uprisings 2011. *Sage Publications, Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 12(5), pp. 647-659. Retrieved April 16, 2012 from <http://jou.sagepub.com/content/12/5/647.refs.html>

Cottle,S (2008). Reporting Demonstrations: the chaging media of dissent in Media, Culture and Society (Vol 30). *Sage Publications*, pp. 853-872

Cottle, S and Lester, L (2011). *Transnational Protests and the Media*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Cox, A. (2005). What are communities of practice? A comparative review of four seminal works in *Journal of information Science*. *Sage Publication*, pp. 527-540.

Creswell, J. (2006) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. London: Sage.

Dahlgren, P (2000). The internet and the democratization of civil culture. *Political communication*, 17, 335-340

Dahlgren, P. (2011). *Media and political engagement: citizens, communication, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalton, R. (2008). *Citizen politics: public opinion and political parties in advanced industrial democracies*. Washington DC: CQ press.

DeLuca K and Peeples J (2002). From the Public Sphere to the Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the Violence of Seattle. *Critical Studies in media communication*, 19 (2), 125-151.

Edley, N. (2001). Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor & S. J. Yates (Eds.), *Discourse as data: A guide for analysis* (pp. 189-228). London: Sage.

Ellner, S. & Hellinger D. (2004). *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez era: Class, Polarization & Conflict*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Facebook. Venezuelans Abroad. Retrieved August 16, 2012  
<https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/Venezolanizimos/>

Facebook Help Centre. Community Pages. Retrieved April 16, 2013 from  
<http://www.facebook.com/help/168393039888715/>

Freedom House 2012. Freedom of the Press Report 2011. Retrieved March 22, 2014

from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/venezuela#.U0ArEle0vDA>

Freedom House 2013. Freedom of the Press Report 2012. Retrieved March 22, 2014 from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/venezuela#.U0Aqyle0vDA>

Freedom of the Net Report 2011. Freedom House 2011. Retrieved February 11, 2011 from [http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/Venezuela\\_FOTN2011.pdf](http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Venezuela_FOTN2011.pdf)

García, A., Standlee, A., Bechkoff, J., Cui J. (2009). Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer - Mediated Communication [Electronic version]. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38 (1), pp. 52-84

Gualdoni, F. (2007). Los balseros del aire: Miles de venezolanos huyen del país ante la inseguridad y la incertidumbre política. *El País*, España. Retrieved November 19, 2011 from [http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/balseros/aire/elpepuint/20070724elpepiint\\_4/Tes](http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/balseros/aire/elpepuint/20070724elpepiint_4/Tes)

Gozzi, M.; Grafman J.; Krueger F & Zamboni G. (2010). Interest in politics modulates neutral activity in the amygdale and ventral striatum. *Human Brain Mapping*, 31 (11). pp. 1763-71. Retrieved March 04, 2014 from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/doi/10.1002/hbm.20976/pdf>.

Habermas, J (1974). On Social Identity [Electronic version]. *Telos Spring: a quarterly journal of radical thought*, 19, pp. 91-103.

Habermas, J (1996). *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: MITPress.

Hall, C. (2005). *The trouble with passion: political theory beyond the reign of reason*. New York: Routledge

Halliday, J. (2011, August 11). David Cameron considers banning suspected rioters from social media. *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 22, 2012 from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/aug/11/david-cameron-rioters-social-media>

Held, D. (2006). *Models of Democracy*. Cambridge: polity press

Hellinger, D. (2004). Political Overview: The Breakdown of Puntofijismo and the Rise of Chavismo. In Ellener, S. and Hellinger, D. (Eds.), *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization & Conflict* (pp. 27-55). London: Lynne Rienner Publishers

Hill, K. and Hughes (1998) *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Inis E. & Turner, B. (2002). *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*. London: Sage Publication

Janoski, T (1998). *Citizenship and civil society: a framework of rights and obligations in liberal, traditional and social democracy regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence Culture where old and new media collide*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Kirkpatrick, D (2010). *The Facebook effect*. UK: Virgin Books.

Kozinets, R. (2010). *Netnography: Doing Ethnography Research Online*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Lopez Ballesteros, Frank (2011, August 15). Más de 500.000 personas emigraron de Venezuela en 2010. *El Universal*. Retrieved November 19, 2011 from <http://www.eluniversal.com/2011/08/15/mas-de-500000-personas-emigraron-de-venezuela-en-2010.shtml>

- Markham, A. (2004). The internet as Research Context. In C. Seal, G. Gobo, J. Gubrin and D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice* (pp. 358-374). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Markham, A. (2005). The politics, ethics, and methods of representation in online ethnography. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 793-820). London: Sage Thousand Oaks CA.
- Markham, A. (2009). How can qualitative researchers produce work that is meaningful across time, space, and culture? In A. Markham & N. Baym (Eds.). *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method* (pp. 131-155). London: Sage Thousand Oaks, CA
- Mathison (2005). Content Analysis. *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Retrieved April 22, 2014 from <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.helsinki.fi/10.4135/9781412950558.n107>
- Maxwell, J. (2005) A model for qualitative research design. In J. Maxwell (Eds.), *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (pp 214-253). London: SAGE Publications.
- McCaughey, M. and Ayers, M. (2003). *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. Bristol: Taylor & Francis.
- Mcclurg (2003) Social Networks and Political Participation: The Role of Social Interaction in Explaining Political Participation. *Political research quarterly*, 2003 (56), 449-464. Retrieved February 11, 2011 from <http://prq.sagepub.com/content/56/4/449.short>
- Miller, D (2011). *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Montilla, A (2011). An approach to the research about Venezuelan user's profile in Twitter during electoral processes. *III InveCom Congress 2011*. Retrieved April 20, 2011 from [www.congresoinvecom.org/index.php/.../235](http://www.congresoinvecom.org/index.php/.../235)

- Moe, H (2010) *Online Media Participation and the structure of public sphere*. Unpublished paper for the conference Democracy as Idea and Practice, 14-15 January 2010. Norway: University of Bergen.
- Mouffle, C. (1999). Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? in Social Research [Electronic version]. *Prospects for democracy*, 66 (3), 745-758.
- Muller, A (2011). Virtual communities and translation into physical reality in the 'It Gets Better' project. *Journal of Media Practice*, 112 (3), pp. 269-277.
- Naím, M. (2001). High anxiety in the Andes: The Real Story Behind Venezuela's Woes. *Journal of Democracy*, 12 (2), 17-31.
- Neal, R (2013, November 18). Twitter Usage Statistics: Which Country Has The Most Active Twitter Population? *International Business Times*, Retrieved March 24, 2014 from <http://www.ibtimes.com/twitter-usage-statistics-which-country-has-most-active-twitter-population-1474852>
- Peters, B. (2004) *Views of the public Sphere*. Unpublish manuscript.
- Preece, J. and Shneiderman, B. (2008). The Reader-to-Leader Framework: Motivating Technology-Mediated Social Participation. *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction* (1) 1, 13-32.
- Pollock, E. (2009) Researching white supremacist Online: Methodological concerns of researching hate 'speech'. *Internet journal criminology*. Retrieved October 05, 2012 from [http://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/Pollock\\_Researching\\_White\\_Supremacists\\_Online.pdf](http://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/Pollock_Researching_White_Supremacists_Online.pdf)
- Real Academia Española. Retrieved March 05, 2014 from <http://lema.rae.es/drae/srv/search?key=majunche>
- Reston, VA (2010, August 11). Indonesia, Brasil y Venezuela lidera aumento global del uso de Twitter. *ComScore Press*. Retrieved November 19, 2011 from



[http://www.comscore.com/esl/Press\\_Events/Press\\_Releases/2010/8/Indonesia\\_Brazil\\_and\\_Venezuela\\_Lead\\_Global\\_Surge\\_in\\_Twitter\\_Usage](http://www.comscore.com/esl/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/8/Indonesia_Brazil_and_Venezuela_Lead_Global_Surge_in_Twitter_Usage)

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community: homesteading on the electronic frontier*. US: Harper Collins. Retrieved March 05, 2014 from <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/>

Rivas, J. (2006). Crisis y desinstitucionalización de los partidos políticos en Venezuela. In Venezuelan Politics and Society in Times of Chavismo. In Lalander, R. (Eds.), Venezuelan Politics and Society in Times of Chavismo (pp. 51-61). Stockholm: Review of Latin America Studies.

Russel, A. (2005). Myth and the Zapatista movement: exploring a network identity. *New Media and Society*, 7, pp. 559-577. Retrieved April 19, 2012 from <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/7/4/55>

Skågeby, J. (2011) Online ethnographic methods: towards a qualitative understanding of virtual community practices. In D. Ben Kei (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Methods and Techniques for Studying Virtual Communities: Paradigms and Phenomena*. Sweden: Linköping University.

Scott, A. and Street J. (2001). From media politics to E protest? The uses of popular culture and new medias in parties and social movements. In Webster, F. (Eds.), *Culture and politics in the information age: a new politics* (pp. 32-51). London: Routledge.

Shirky, C (2010). *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*. London: Penguin Books.

Silverman, D. (2001) *Interpreting Qualitative Data. Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction (2nd edition)*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Splichal, S. (2006). In Search Of A Strong European Public Sphere: Some Critical Observations Of Conceptualizations Of Publicness And The (European Publich Sphere). *Media Culture and Society* , 28 (2006), pp. 695-714.

Tablante, L. (2008). La pobreza como tema político y mediático en Venezuela. *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, (53), 117-146.

Trenz, H. (2009). Uniting and dividing. The European Public Sphere as an Unfinished Project. In Salovaara-Morning, I. (Eds.) *Manufacturing Europe. Spaces of Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (pp. 35-53). Göteborg: Nordicom,.

Verba, S. and Nie, N. (1987). *Participation and political equality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press

Volkmer, I (2003). The Global Network Society and the Global Public Sphere. *Society for International Development*, 46 (1), pp. 9-16. Retrieved April 04, 2012 from <http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.helsinki.fi/ehost/detail?sid=4317795b-df9e-4a07-9a1b-6177346ccfe2%40sessionmgr114&vid=6&hid=126>

Walther, J. (2002). Research ethics in internet-enabled Research: Human subject issues and methodological myopia. *Ethics an Information technology*, 4 (3), pp. 205-216. Retrieved April 07, 2014 from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023%2FA%3A1021368426115>

Wenger, E. (1998). *Community of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

World Bank Group (2011). Datos sobre migracion y remesas 2011(2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Retrieved April 22, 2012 from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/Factbook2011Spanish.pdf>

Wojcieszak, M. and Mutz, D. (2009). Online Groups and Political Discourse: Do online discussion space facilitate exposure to political disagreement? *Journal of Communication* (59), pp. 40-56.

World Elections. Retrieved December 16, 2012 from <http://welections.wordpress.com/2012/10/10/venezuela-2012/#comments>