Activism, citizen participation and communication strategies for the defence of public spaces: Analysis of three processes in Malaga

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Source of this image: https://pixabay.com/es/

Introduction

In recent decades, **"the emergence of the networked public sphere"** (Benkler, 2015) has resulted in a transformation of citizen practices of discussion, organization and action. The possibilities offered by internet-based social action enable individual and collective synergies **committed to demands of environmental and social justice.** In Spain, the example of the "*indignados*" **M15** movement has been profusely analysed and "the study of its gestation and explosion" (Toret, 2013) has provided abundant evidence to support the above mentioned possibilities.

In spite of the relevance of the virtual dimension, **the interweaving of media and territories** is key to understanding how technological platforms contribute to create *"a choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling"* (Gerbaudo, 2012). Along this line, Toret (2013) has defended the need to adopt **"a multilayer perspective"** allowing to take good notice of "the multilayer synchronization of the collective behaviour", not just online but also offline.

Objectives

*This research analyses **three participative processes started by citizens in Malaga between 2017 and 2019** with the purpose of defending public space, local environment and city welfare*

The **objectives** pursued are:

▪ Examine how citizens set up communication strategies to defend public spaces when they are prevented from participating in the debate about these issues.

▪ Evaluate the value given by citizens of their own participation when they are involved in communicative actions related to the public sphere.

Processes

The campaign for the continuation of the social centre ***La Casa Invisible*** (est. 2007) and the citizens' platforms ***Bosque Urbano Malaga*** and ***Defendamos Nuestro Horizonte***, both originated in 2016.
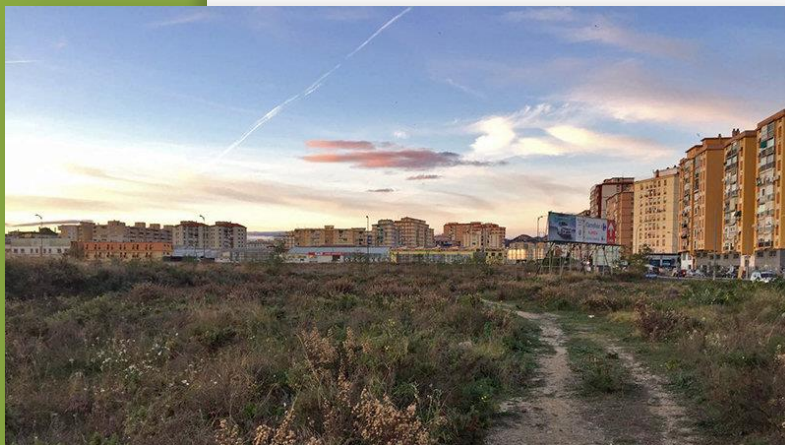
La Casa Invisible (2007)
The Invisible House

Source of these images: La Invisible https://lainvisible.net/

Bosque Urbano Malaga

(2016)
Urban Forest for Málaga

Defendamos Nuestro Horizonte (2016)
Defending our Horizon

Source of these images: Defendamos Nuestro Horizonte
https://www.facebook.com/defendamosnuestrohorizonte/

Method

*The methodology adopts a **mixed approach** that analyses the origins, purposes, strategies and ways of doing (approaches):*

- Interviews and focus groups (semi-structured).

- Analysis of its activity in the digital environment to understand their behaviour and relationship with the community.

- Documentary review of the news published in local media.

Results

Let's start with the first results!

Results

1. Origins and organisation

Bosque Urbano Málaga (BUM) – est. 2016
- Abandoned space 177.000 m2 (contaminated, used for petrol containers).
- 2 people initiative in an ordinary day walk (internet search about the space and petition on Change.org for an urban forest in that space).
- 1 month = 20.000 signs and 1st meeting with volunteers.
- Assembly format (university, cultural and neighbourhood associations) / Internal organisation: culture, action-communication and project commissions.
- They have been able to go through generations to endow the movement with marked local and intergenerational roots.

Defendamos Nuestro Horizonte (DNH) – est. 2016
- Colloquium about the project of 150mt tower in Malaga Port.
- +20 people from different backgrounds (activists, architecture and urban planning professionals, researchers and university professors, political and union leaders ...) with a common precedent, the movement Save the Port (from property speculation) in 2010.
- Similar organisation to BUM, they achieved a cessation of the urban plans from city council.
- Petition on Change.org.
- Famous people who support the initiative.

Results

1. Origins and organisation

La Casa Invisible (LCI) – est. 2007
-   LCI is a social centre established in an abandoned public building (XIX century), run by local residents from Malaga city centre.
-   After years of negotiations with City Council (Conservative Party - PP), the transition process began in 2015 (promised in 2011) following the official process.
-   While some controversial exhibitions took place in LCI (2017 and 2018), the Ciudadanos Party (ally of PP) started a campaign against the transition (they wanted/want to sell the building to private investors) using the exhibition topics and the excuse of the illegal and unsafe situation of the building to gain the support from the PP to start the eviction of LCI.
-   Citizens organised different demonstrations (2018) to show their support for the LCI and to petition for the transition. In August, 2018 the eviction process was stopped.

The 3 initiatives are integrated into the transversal platform*, Málaga No Se Vende* (Málaga is not for sale, 2018) for the defense of the city and its belonging to citizens and not to politicians, big companies or elites.

Results

2. Strategy

Given that situation of urban impositions of the political-technical-media system, **DNH** adopts a **non-media strategy**. They accept (local) media is not an alternative to communicate their platform/claims and adopt a **reactive strategy focused on social media** (following Castells' theories of "la sociedad red").

BUM adopts a very **positive and proactive tone**, avoiding confrontation with the municipal authorities and focusing on spreading (media and social media) the benefits of the urban forest.

The conflict addressed by **DNH** has **an emergency component** because the skyscraper project has shorter deadlines and therefore involves more immediate threats than those affecting the **BUM**, where the City Council maintains urban plans that **do not currently have short-term performance.**

Results

2. Strategy

LCI follows an **intermediate strategy**. It is not the same to be the object of media attention due to the organisation of a feminist café (cultural activity) than by a threat of eviction and closure (participatory and more demanding sphere); likewise, the LCI strategy is more sustainable over time (it was established in 2007) and therefore, it is adapted. Currently, **the relationship with the media is somewhat ambiguous and depends on each editorial line**.

Regarding the relationship with the political parties**, they focus all their efforts on Francisco de la Torre (PP),** for being the main interlocutor as mayor of the city and responsible for the transition. They avoid the others parties.

With citizenship, the strategy is **to mobilize their community** (public sphere) so that the risk of eviction is perceived by society and the importance of **showing the strength of the project** to the authorities**: its supporters** (philosophers, academics, artists, politicians, society…).

Results

3. Communication department and actions

DNH **has had difficulties to create a communications commission to spread its messages to the public.** The work is carried out by 1-2 people who prepare the material to convey their message to all citizens of Malaga: press releases, news, technical and political allegations, geographical and legal reports ...

For this, they use Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, which are complemented by a Telegram channel exclusively dedicated to sending information. Also, they launched a request in Change.org and different concentrations during the key moments (legal and technical) of the urban process.

They use the WhatsApp groups for **the internal coordination** of the volunteers (100 people), although it is necessary to insist that the most intense and daily involvement is assumed by few people, that includes **the two in charge of communication**.

There are **no communication professionals** among the DNH volunteers.

Results

3. Communication department and actions

BUM, does not have a great communication team but among them, the promoters have a university degree and communication experience. BUM has a **very recognizable communicative style and tone**, and an elaborate aesthetic quality in its productions.

This has been seasoned with **astute strategic planning of their actions and speeches,** for which they have used both the Change.org platform and Facebook and Twitter for external communication. Internal coordination relies the classic mailing lists, complemented by WhatsApp groups and video calls.

The communication commission of the BUM has established clear lines of **work to keep the press informed of its main calls**: notes and press releases, press conferences and events.

Results

3. Communication department and actions

LCI has the **most extensive and experienced communication team**, which includes professionals, students or teachers in the field of communication **since its start in 2007.**

They have a long career of more than a decade managing statements, press releases, interviews and press conferences with traditional media; in addition, for external communication they maintain quite active profiles on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and a Telegram broadcast channel as the one mentioned for DNH.

Internal coordination is very active through Telegram groups and a general mailing list.

They have experienced the **generational renewal of the communication commission**, especially with women, from both the feminist collectives and others such as pensioners.

Conclusions

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*These movements have showed how **the frames can be challenged,** change the established and create an alternative discourse, created in community and without many resources.*

The collective will has paralysed urban projects *for the common good and the well-being of citizens.*

Conclusions

- **Originality in all proposals** (the BUM against the urban speculation, is a real alternative and not just saying no), both in the **organisation** of the collective and in the transmission of their **messages and claims**.

- Each way to manage relations with the media is result of the **"citizens' creativity"** to overcome difficulties (media coverage, correct transmission of the messages, representation,…) and to achieve the objective **to achieve societal awareness** to assert their positions before the relevant authorities.

- **Main difficulties:** the lack of funding (much sharper for BUM and DNH) and resources to keep the battle going (technical and legal) at the same level as the authorities involved.

- **Challenges:** to maintain citizen support (involvement of the neighbourhood) and get more people involved in the three initiatives, both for internal work and to support the different activities they organise.

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*The main conclusion is that **the fight for the defence of public space continues** (in all three cases).*

*In all cases, the local government's **desire for privatization has been contained and stopped**, while the platforms continue in their efforts to return to the citizenship the spaces that belong to them.*

Further reading

In this book we present the latest advances made in strategic and organizational communication. Beyond traditional approaches, we propose new ways of doing and understanding communication in today's society.

Communication takes on an activist role to create a society that is fairer and more committed to citizens.

Labcom.IFP (2019).

Source: http://www.labcom-ifp.ubi.pt/book/328

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Málaga is not for sale!

Source of this image: Diario Sur https://www.diariosur.es/malaga-capital/personas-marchan-centro-20180513003841-ntvo.html

Any questions?

Thank you very much for your attention!

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