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DIGITAL DISRUPTION IN POPULAR MEDIA PRACTICES IN BRAZIL

EFECTOS DE LA RUPTURA DIGITAL EN PRÁCTICAS DE MEDIOS POPULARES EN BRASIL

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Abstract

This article discusses the digital disruption in popular media practices in Brazil. It is based on interviews conducted from 2014 to 2016 with 55 communicators attached to 20 social movements and community associations all over the country. The results show a prevalence of analogical media that coexist with different grades of appropriation of digital technologies. The lack of resources explains part of this coexistence, so socioeconomic conditions still represent a barrier for the development of popular media. But there are also practical and strategical reasons that justify these choices. Mainly, it is important to observe how digital disruption is a long standing process that transforms practices both in the level of technical options but also in the sense of developing media for social change.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los efectos de la ruptura digital en las prácticas de medios populares en Brasil. Se basa en entrevistas realizadas entre 2014 y 2016 con 55 comunicadores vinculados a 20 movimientos sociales y asociaciones comunitarias en todo el país. Los resultados muestran una prevalencia de medios analógicos que coexisten con diferentes grados de apropiación de tecnologías digitales. La falta de recursos explica parte de esta convivencia, ya que las condiciones socioeconómicas aún representan una barrera para el desarrollo de los medios populares. Pero también hay razones prácticas y estratégicas que justifican las elecciones. Principalmente, es importante observar cómo la disrupción digital es un proceso a largo plazo que transforma las prácticas tanto en el nivel de opciones técnicas como en el sentido de desarrollar medios para el cambio social.

Palabras clave

Popular media; Brazil; digital disruption; inequalities

Keywords

Medios populares; Brasil; ruptura digital; desigualdades

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1. Introducción

The cases analyzed in this article have three things in common (Table I). First, they are all connected to groups dealing with some kind of social struggle. It means that these media practices are included in larger strategies of social movements or organizations and associations searching for transformations in the conditions of life of a determined population. Second, they are all located in peripheral zones in Brazil. The concept of periphery, here, can refer to the localization in the space when the groups are located in geographical remote areas, but it can also be associated to socioeconomic conditions of marginalization, when referring to disadvantaged communities. Finally, they are all long standing initiatives, meaning that they are all media outlets established to last –in opposition to media strategies developed around a mobilization that end with it.

Table I – List of all cases observed, according to its institutional attachment and geographical situation

Organization and geographical situation	Media
1. Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST. National office in São Paulo Settlements and Campment in Laranjeiras do Sul, Paraná (South)	1. Jornal Sem Terra
	2. Brasil de Fato
	3. Terra Vermelha
	4. Rádio Comunitária
	5. Herdeiros da Terra
	6. Central de Mídias Populares
2. Associação de Moradores de Paraisópolis Paraisópolis, neighborhood in the center of São Paulo, capital (Southeast)	7. Rádio Nova Paraisópolis
	8. Jornal Espaço do Povo
3. Centro Sócio Pastoral Nossa Senhora da Conceição. Mãe Luiza, neighborhood in the center of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte (Northeast)	9. Fala, Mãe Luiza
4. Associação de Moradores de Chiador Chiador, Minas Gerais (Southeast)	10. Jornal de Chiador
5. Núcleo de Comunicação Comunitária São Miguel no Ar. São Miguel Paulista, neighborhood in the East of São Paulo, capital (Southeast)	17. A voz do Lapenna
	18. Mundo Jovem Comunica

6. Comunidade Sabará. Sabará, neighborhood in the north of Curitiba, Paraná (South)	19. Folha do Sabará
7. Fundação Casa Grande Nova Olinda, Ceará (Northeast)	22. Rádio FM Casa Grande
8. Associação de Moradores de Florânia Florânia, Rio Grande do Norte (Northeast)	23. Rádio Ibiapina
9. Casa do Bem. Mãe Luiza, neighborhood in the center of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte (Northeast)	24. TV do Bem
10. Rede de Notícias da Amazônia Regional office in Santarém, Pará (North)	11. network of 15 local radio stations
11. Projeto Saúde e Alegria Regional office in Santarém, Pará (North)	12. Rede Mocoronga
12. Associação de Moradores de São Pedro Community in the margins of the river Arapiuns, attached to the municipality of Santarém, Pará (North)	13. Rádio Floresta
	14. Blog de São Pedro
13. Associação de Moradores de Maripá Community in the margins of the river Tapajós, attached to the municipality of Santarém, Pará (North)	15. Rádio Bem-te-vi
14. Comunidade do Lago Grande do Curuai Community in the margins of the river Amazonas, attached to the municipality of Santarém, Pará (North)	16. Rádio Curuai
15. Fora do Eixo National office: São Paulo, capital (Southeast)	20. Mídia Ninja
16. Nigéria Filmes. Fortaleza, Ceará (Northeast)	21. Coletivo Nigéria
17. Mural. Several communities in the peripheral zone of the city of São Paulo (Southeast)	25. Agência de Notícias das Periferias
18. Énois. São Paulo, capital (Southeast)	26. Énois
19. Escola de Notícias. Campo Limpo, neighborhood in the South of the city of São Paulo, capital (Southeast)	27. Escola de Notícias
20. Cefuria. Curitiba, Paraná (South)	28. Escola de Comunicação Popular

Many scholars in the world are making efforts to better understand the new trends of information and communication technologies, mainly those related to digital culture, and their application within social change processes. As Thomas Tufte indicated (2013), it may be the big challenge for the field currently. This research could have followed the path of observing the dynamics related to new applications, predominantly based on the use of virtual platforms. It did not. Digital is everywhere between the sample, but the focus is mainly traditional long standing popular media: newspapers, radio stations and TV or video producers, and how they are coping with the digital disruption. There are many reasons for that. This article focuses in the one that is related to the development of the concept of popular media. If the digital culture comes with the utopian promise of participation, diversity and changing power relations (Cardon, 2010; Castells, 2013), so did popular media in Latin America.

> According to Fernando Reyes Matta (apud Festa, 1995, pp. 311-32), what was sought with studies on popular and alternative communication was to understand this new phenomenon in the lives of Latin Americans and to walk together in the common search for libertarian utopias. Essentially, this communication from the social searched to change the unjust, to change the oppressor, to change the historical inertia that imposed suffocating dimensions, through a liberating vocation that was nourished by a multiplicity of communicative experiences. (Peruzzo, 2008)

Therefore, to better understand the evolution of this long tradition of popular media appropriation within social change processes, it is interesting searching to identify how it fits, and if it is transformed or even replaced by more recent practices. This reflection requires an observation of digital disruption as a phenomenon already in place but also as a horizon of transformations still to come.

2. The digital disruption in popular media practices

I define digital disruption as an ongoing process straightly connected to "fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics" that characterizes contemporary times (Appadurai, 1990). For Arjun Appadurai, the social relations in this complex context cannot be objectively given but depend on historical, linguistic and political situations experienced by the actors (idem). So it does any digital appropriation, strongly pushed by fast developments in technology but still adapted and converted according to socioeconomic and political contexts and cultural traditions. The term *digital disruption* suggests a process that changes the practices in a long standing way, both by concrete transformations in the availability of resources and by modifications in the sense of developing media.

This debate fits properly within the conceptual framework of mediatization, defined as a metaprocess that is "important for people, their actions and their sense-making processes at micro level; for the activities of institutions and organizations on the meso level; and for the nature of culture and society at a macro level" (Krotz, 2007: 257). Another important aspect of this approach is that it highlights the importance of determining the role of technology as one part of media. For Krotz and Hepp, technological and social processes must be interwoven (Krotz, 2007: 143). This is particularly important while discussing the digital disruption in popular media practices. The mediatization in popular media practices helps to better understand how communication becomes even more fluid along strategies of social change, trespassing the time and space limits of campaigns to take part of an ongoing process of dialogue and transformation.

3. Methodology

The study is based on field observations and interviews with 55 communicators from 20 different social groups acting in six regions from North to South in Brazil, from 2013 to 2016 (see the complete list in Annex 1). All the cases are attached to a social struggle, are situated in a peripheral zone and work with long standing strategies. While preserving these features, the selection of cases was although based on a Maximum Variation Sampling (Patton, 1990), gathering experiences in urban and rural areas, applying a large variety of technological platforms (printed, audiovisual and digital), and with varied ranges of audience (from community to national scope). The sample searched for heterogeneity in order to observe shared patterns across the cases.

The sample selecting process as well as the development of analytical categories was guided by an exploratory research, developed in November 2013. This work consisted of an analysis of 37 out of 113 contributions presented by popular communicators during the 8th Mutirão Brasileiro de Comunicação that took place in Natal (RN) in the end of October 2013. The event is a biennial national congress organized by the Catholic Church in Brazil, which gathers communicators from all over the country, mostly related to grassroots catholic initiatives in the field of communication, but also other community and popular experiences.

The analysis of reports –abstracts of 2-4 pages written by the communicators– was carried out with the support of NVivo software - version 10. Among the main results of this exercise were:

1. The higher frequency of presence of digital technologies in the practices in comparison with the original hypothesis, that considered that structural and economic barriers would limit the access and the use of such resources.

2. The sample suggested a larger presence of digital technologies, but also evidenced changes in the approach to media, such as an interest to audiences out of the close community directly attached to each medium, which can be associated to an identified search for an increasing visibility within the whole society.

The approach to the cases was organized in three field trips, the first in November-December 2013, the second in April-May 2014, and the third in October-December 2015. Some last interviews with actors already approached were conducted via Internet still in 2016 to double check information and to verify changes in the practices that were considered relevant to the analysis. In all the cases, the social actors were approached with "comprehensive interview", which underlined the importance of establishing a constructive dialogue with those that Jean-Claude Kaufmann calls as "informants" (Kaufmann, 1996: 16). In the present research, the informants were 55 communicators leading the media observed. Some of the communicators were interviewed more than once, including personal and virtual dialogues.

The field visits counted on two to five days in the place where media practices usually take place. There was no intention of following whole processes of media production. The visits had the objective of (1) being with the interlocutor on his/her place and having the opportunity to observe elements that he/she mentioned during the dialogue; (2) having the experience of the place, considering that the diversity of contexts was a relevant analytical feature; and (3) observing the concrete conditions of the group for developing media. The analysis of data was guided by the identification of shared patterns among the media practices observed.

4. Results

One of the original hypothesis of this research considered that professionalization and digitalization would be affecting popular media practices, mainly easing the access to contents and increasing the potential of reaching audiences. It was almost a marginal hypothesis, considering that I also assumed that structural inequalities would strongly limit the access of marginalized groups to digital technologies themselves. This limitation would concretely challenge the understanding of digitalization and of media as transforming powers (Castells, 2013) in the current society. Since the exploratory study, however, this hypothesis has proven a lot stronger than initially foreseen, both in the sense of confirming media as a power as well as in the one regarding the deep asymmetries involved in this process.

4.1. The prevalence of analogical practices

The general framework suggests that the digital culture is transforming popular media practices all over Brazil, even in regions where the Internet connection –and sometimes electricity– is low or absent. The first feature observed is the high frequency of presence of digital resources. Only one out of the 20 cases was not using any virtual platform during the period of the research, which was the community radio station Lago FM, situated in Lago Grande de Curuai, in the border of the Amazon River. The director of the radio station, Everaldo Souza, described the lack of Internet connection and mobile communication as one of the reasons why traditional radio keeps its place as a main source of information for the people in the region (Souza, 2015).

In this sense, it is important to highlight that analogical media was also highly frequent in the sample, including newspapers, whose longevity is commonly threatened by the advance of technologies. Nine newspapers and nine traditional radio stations were observed in the sample. Printed newspapers, for instance, keep the relevance because of practical and strategic reasons. They circulate within local territories as a document, where people can check the agenda, get to know local services and how to use them, discover profiles of neighbors or acquaintances. They are available and checked in meeting points such as health and education units, restaurants, churches and the commerce; they enter the homes and are read bit by bit during the month by the whole family (Fuser, 2013; Marinho, 2013, 2015; Ramalho, 2014; Santos, 2014).

Printed newspapers cope with limits of literacy in the countryside, as they can be read in family or close related groups (Santos, 2013; Lenon, 2015). But they are also used to reach massive audiences, as the renewed editorial project of the newspaper Brasil de Fato proposes. This newspaper was recognized by dense articles that were more frequently consumed by left wing intellectuals and militants. Since 2013, the group of social movements behind the initiative changed its format and editorial line to speak to ordinary people through a tabloid distributed free of charge in several capitals of the country (Santos, 2013; Rocha, 2015). Joana Tavares is the editor of Brasil de Fato in Minas Gerais. She explains that the printed newspaper is still the best access to the workers and has the advantage of coming along with other actions developed by social organizations in the grassroots: "it is alive" (Tavares, 2015). For her, it is important to take critically the promise of democratization coming with the digital, as "the Internet does not get to everybody yet and, most important, it is still the hegemonic content that is most accessed there" (Tavares, 2015).

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4.2. Different grades of appropriation

Although virtual platforms were found in most of the cases, the level of digital disruption varies a lot among the cases observed. On the one hand, most of the initiatives use digital resources to improve the production of contents. They use search motors to get access to music and information that they apply in the composition of programs (Diniz & Marope, 2013; Tercio & Junior, 2013). The access to smartphones and other mobile devices and software allows collecting and transmitting information from distant places or making live transmissions (Rosembach & Zottis, 2013; Rodrigues Barbosa, 2015). They also engage in collective productions, sharing contents among media partners (Pereira Rodrigues, 2013; Viana, 2015).

On the other hand, the use of virtual platforms to diffuse information is an ongoing process. The most used platforms are Facebook (18), blogs (8), websites (8) and YouTube (4). The updating frequency makes a difference between those using websites and blogs and those working on social networks. For instance, the sample counts on blogs and websites that have less than 10 updates during a whole year, some pass more than one year without posting a new publication, some disappeared during the time of this research.

The variety of appropriation must be analyzed through also a variety of perspectives. Víctor Manuel Marí Sáez recovers the concept of "informational capital, designed by Cees Hamelink to highlight that "[t]he center of communicative processes does not lie in technological instruments, but in the social processes through which people relate to NICTs" (Marí Sáez, 2006: 1012). For him,

> a criterion to discern and assess the suitability of one or another technology, and ways of incorporating it, is to look at the social processes in which a social organization is embedded, and analyze the communicative ways through which the people this organization caters to understand the world, communicate and express themselves. (Marí Sáez, 2006: 1012)

The cases observed confirm the importance of this approach. First, it is important to understand how digital platforms are apprehended. Some groups started using digital platforms as another passive channel of distribution for institutional information or for their analogical media. They saw them as part of the evolution of massive media, as some analysts also did at certain point (Cardon, 2010: 8). It means, for instance, uploading the PDF of a newspaper on a website and getting more audience. Yet, groups such as the MST, constantly repressed by the State and mainstream media, saw a risk on the diffusion of institutional information that could be used against the movement itself (Santos, 2013; Lenon, 2015).

In most of the cases, there is an ongoing migration to social networking sites. Some keep the same pattern there, posting information in an almost static way –they look like small articles, but still get comments, likes and shares. Some use them to provide follow up on content diffused in analogical media and motivate participation, as it is the case in most of media focusing on local communities. In one case, the Rede Mocoronga, the emergence of Facebook pages replaced the blogs and even the community newspapers that circulated from one place to another (Rodrigues Barbosa, 2015).

The second aspect to consider is the socioeconomic condition. The communicators agree in comments such as the lower cost of producing media on digital platforms, but there is still a cost that many groups are not able to face. In the Amazon region, energy supply and telecommunications structures are fragile or inexistent (Rodrigues Barbosa, 2015; Souza, 2015). In urban centers, there were plenty of resources, but they are expensive (Ramalho, 2014). Finally, the presence and the interactions on social networks require available and trained people, which is an already scarce resource in most of the cases.

5. Digital culture as a major reference

Considering the coexistence of analogical and digital practices, it is important to make an analytical distinction. In the 1990s, Cicilia Peruzzo presented a large study about communication in social movements in Brazil. At that moment, she talked about a situation where the practices were mostly based on the cheapest and most rudimentary technologies, even though there were some experiences better structured, such as community radio and television stations legally implemented (Peruzzo, 1998: 148-149). Facing the current high and fast technological development in the field of information and communication, it would be easy to evaluate that the use of analogical resources correspond to a continuation of rudimentary conditions. However, if the sample confirms the scarcity of popular media practices, for their lack of resources, it also points out to the choice of analogical platforms as associated to practical and strategic reasons. As highlighted by Marí Sáez, the "informational capital" relates do technical and instrumental conditions, but it is more interesting to observe how information technologies are appropriated in the process of producing knowledge to change realities (Marí Sáez, 2006).

In many cases, the analogical technology is still the most accessible to reach communities. Loudspeakers, for instance, are better solutions in a community where there is no electricity and where the inhabitants are scattered in large territories, like it is the case in the Amazon Region or the countryside. Additionally, the evolution of the Internet connections is very dependent on private corporations, which makes improvements more likely to follow the potential of markets than aspects such as social inclusion (UNESCO, 2014). According to a large study ran by the Communication Office of the Presidency, in 2014, the use of the Internet is higher among the youngest, the more educated, the richest and those living in urban centers (Brasil, Presidência da República - Secretaria de Comunicação

Social, 2014: 48). The dynamics in the sector follow the pattern of the competitive model already established in the radio and TV broadcasting system, which was early conceded to the private sector and based in urban centers (Mastrini & Becerra, 2011). It suggests that, in a context of social and political asymmetries, it is highly relevant to consider the strategic coexistence of online and offline resources. Following an international trend,

> [t]oday it is in the joint and cross-fertilization between everyday life and politics, between the internet world and the public squares, between social networks and militant spaces, that claims are expressed and mobilizations and social movements emerge to affirm citizenship and build public space. (Suzina & Pleyers, 2016: 6)

In all cases, the digital disruption must be seen as a long standing process that is transforming and will continue to transform popular media practices. Most of those who could be classified as soft users hope to increase it. Hard users, such as Mídia Ninja, were mentioned as a model to follow by some of communicators. The awareness of the power of media produces this desire, but also the conscience of media inequalities as another important root for social injustice in mediatized societies.

Taking the concept of mediatization, it is important to analyze the practices beyond the choice of technological platforms. As the sample reveals, Brazil is far away from a situation of universal digitalization, and it may never arrive there as developing media in the context of social change process is rather a question of transforming lives than of managing media outlets. As defined by the editor of Brasil de Fato in Minas Gerais, "the media project just makes sense in the context of social movements" (Tavares, 2015). Said that, the sample also shows that, even if digitalization has limits, it affects the way other communication practices are developed.

Communicators in very local level talked about international audiences coming from their presence on the Internet. Together with reactions from regular audiences, likes and shares become a measurement of the quality of productions (Suzina, 2015). But several actors trust on this visibility to engage people far from their communities in the support of local struggles (Diniz & Marope, 2013; Silva, 2015; Lenon, 2015). The relevant shift is that these communicators are talking at the same time to very territorialized audiences as well as to the anonymous mass of potential Internet users. Telling their stories to "the other" became as strategic to some of them as using media to organize the community.

This shift represents two main challenges for communication for social change. Inside the groups, it includes the risk of individualization that comes with the digital. As mentioned, a whole project of community newspapers was replaced by personal pages on Facebook within the Rede Mocoronga, in the Amazon region. If it answers needs of fast communication in a remote zone of the country, it is also relevant to consider what the impact on collective processes is. Considering a face of interrelation, the potential of enlarged visibility associates transformations in community to changes in the way the whole society deals with a certain issue.

6. Conclusions

Dominique Cardon affirms that, in an evolution series, digital media should be considered a part from analogical media as they were conceived to enable dialogue between interlocutors and not as a mass distribution mean of communication (Cardon, 2010). What the cases observed suggest is that media are what people do with them. Particularly, in a context of asymmetries, such as the one described in this study, digital disruption in popular media practices can actually enable dialogue but they mainly function as a powerful tool for breaking the monopolies of word control.

Therefore, I argue that the transformations in popular media practices caused by the digital disruption represent equally changes in the media sphere as a whole. They impose the construction of a "new" information ecology, where power asymmetries are directly confronted. In Brazil, the appropriation of digital resources in popular media practices has changed modes of production and enlarged the capacity of reaching attention. Although bringing new challenges for the field, they configure an important device in the fight against asymmetries.

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Annex I

Interviews

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Biography

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