THE VISIBILITY OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE INTERNET

Yanko Moyano Díaz

Universidad de Barcelona

ymoyano@gmail.com

Introduction

The visibility of political discourse on the Internet is a subject that is widely commented upon, given that the amount of information now in circulation has reached a volume that is becoming increasingly hard to encompass. In recent years, the speed at which this volume has grown has accelerated significantly (Hall, 2011), in a trend that is now beginning to generate concern. This growth is partly linked with the incorporation of technological innovations that have increased the mass media's capacity to produce and disseminate content. The same institutions that were already well positioned in the "information market" have managed to take advantage of the growth in Internet use, for instance, and have replicated or transferred their habitual contents into the virtual world. In other words, radio stations, television channels, magazines and newspapers have adapted to the technological innovations, and as a result they have extended their presence into new spaces in everyday life. Certain similar institutions (albeit with less capital) have also benefited from the extended use of the Net (I am referring to benefits such as the reduction in the price of publishing technologies and the simplification of dissemination operations over the WWW), though these benefits do not seem to have been sufficient to achieve a balance, as the proportion of attention they receive as compared to larger communication media has not altered significantly.

We can conclude that something very different has happened with the producers of the new type of information content. Much more important in socio-cultural terms is the explosion of content that has been put in circulation by those who, until very recently, were barely considered "users" or, to put it in another way, passive receivers of information (Beas, 2011). By this I am referring to all the content that has appeared in recent years in the form of blogs, forums, Tweets or comments on the social networks, as well as institutions that are fully established, but the functioning of which is completely subordinated to the new virtual dynamics, such as Wikipedia.

The optimists among us see this phenomenon as a change in the correlation of strengths, and claim that a new scenario is taking shape in which

individuals have increased their independence over the traditional mechanisms of information distribution (the mass media). From this, they infer that the foundations are being laid for a revitalisation of political activity, horizontally, on a global scale, as part of a trend that will only increase and which will, sooner or later, result in a new form of citizen activity that is more active and inclusive. At the opposite extreme, however, we should be asking how far we can really cope with the explosion of information that is taking place, and at what point the proliferation of content starts to become an obstacle that will hamper agreement between political subjects who, paradoxically, initially made contact with each other thanks to that very explosion (Mayos, 2011). While an increase in content volume democratises communication and makes an increase in political participation viable, information saturation could hinder understanding, hamper the emergence of new interpretations, and it could even impoverish the quality of contacts, to the point of quashing their real effectiveness.

Intuition

Let us put ourselves for a moment in the shoes of Irineo Funes, the "memorious", from the story by Jorge Luis Borges, who was able to perceive everything that existed around him, as well as to remember it all. Irineo's ability (which was also his handicap) enabled him to recall all the details of any day in his life, but if he did so it also took up an entire day. Borges says of Funes that "it was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term dog embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front)".

An infinite capacity for *perception*, for accumulation of experiences, involves an equally radical suppression of the cognitive tools of selection, whether they are rational or not. This is the function fulfilled by what Kant called the "synthesis of perception" and which, with different names and details, is still the nucleus for many of the controversies in philosophy. Independently of whether or not the capacity for storing experiences can be infinite, without a suitable synthesis, it is impossible to use all the information that has been recorded. In other words, synthesis of perception (or any of its later equivalents) is the basis for the entire framework of categories on which rational thought is founded.

This very framework can be extrapolated to a more general sphere. Until only a few years ago, certain institutions fulfilled a similar selective function, functioning as filters at a cultural level. They decided which information should not be considered important, according to an authority principle granted to them by tradition, accumulated prestige or, simply the pre-eminence conferred by the network of political-cultural institutions. But precisely because they simplified this selection, they also restricted the individual action of selecting information, and thus made it more difficult to disseminate original solutions and creative innovations. Customs, ideologies or simply all the suggestions by social actors of *greater weight* began to accumulate in these institutions, and through these they exerted an influence over people's everyday practices, such as what book to buy, what newspaper to read or what station or channel to tune in to.

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The critique of the discourse of modernity that began over two centuries ago has undermined the legitimacy of institutions such as science academies, renowned publishing companies and newspapers with the highest circulation, and has revealed the interests that are inevitably involved in any selection. At the same time, the importance of specific approaches has increased, and with it the interest in preserving spaces for individual and circumstantial decision. As a result, the real and everyday individual has to a great extent been liberated from the general criteria that predisposed his or her decision, but precisely because of this, s/he has been left a little more isolated.

Finally, the explosion of content I mentioned previously and the transformation of the general model of information dissemination have made the previous assessment criteria anachronistic. The tastes of the old information users (now the Internauts) have completely transformed and a new communication paradigm is beginning to grow. In this scenario, immediate contacts and person-to-person contact are receiving increasing attention, and this means that traditional institutions have been losing the little influence they had managed to hold on to. There is no doubt that as a result of this, information selection practices have been freed up and democratised, though also the solutions have been homogenised and the network of communication references made more complex.

In its current state, the Information Society is about to change (if it has not changed already) into a kind of Irineo Funes, filled with *memories* through which we travel at an amazing speed, and which we are not quite sure how to keep. Thanks to the development of technological tools we can, admittedly, *store* memories with amazing accuracy, but we only know how to do it like Funes did. At the moment we do not possess tools that can adapt to the new forms of communicative experience and, even though work is being done in this area, the contents still exceed our scientific abilities to describe them, hierarchise them and operate with them. Or rather, we accumulate the contents separated from a hierarchical categorisation system that enables us to operate efficiently with all *the dogs* in the world as the individual elements of one single concept, *dog*.

So, does this mean that we are no longer selecting information? Not at all. If that were true, we would also have to accept that all the content we have to cope with every day reaches us in a totally random manner. Obviously this is not true, and it is easy to demonstrate this in practice. Bearing in mind all of the above, however, what it does suggest is that selection is not carried out by using rational criteria. My hypothesis is that it is carried out intuitively.

In the absence of a new, legitimate and generalised tool for hierarchising content, we carry on *selecting* content because that is inevitable, and we do it *however we can*. That is, by applying (intuitively and without any critical mediation) some of the principles that were already in existence in the age of information written on paper. As a result, the selection criteria and the selections themselves are increasingly difficult to assess in terms of good or bad, true or false. Nor is it feasible to *predict* which content will be important and valuable in each case, beyond the elaboration of suppositions based on statistical analysis carried out *a posteriori*.

Nevertheless, what I do think would be useful is to describe general trends that characterise our modern-day way of thinking, and to track their presence in specific cases, in an attempt to verify their importance and to justify a less exact but more accurate idea of the mechanisms used for selecting political content on the Internet.

Visibility

Unquestionably, the need to maximise efficiency in the distribution of new content has become a priority topic. One very important factor in terms of the evaluation of every discourse that comes into circulation is the level of visibility it is able to reach and maintain. As has been said countless times, the most highly-valued resource nowadays is time, and that applies especially to Internet users. In the case of political action on the Internet, the need to capture users' attention becomes extremely pressing. Political practice in the virtual space, just like any other dimension of web-surfing, represents a constant, hurried exercise in content selection. Internauts successively discriminate what they believe does not deserve attention, and they keep just a few of the contents, which are the ones that really have a bearing on the formation of political representations. At a very elementary level, the Net could be filled with political initiatives with the best of intentions, but only a few ever truly enter the consciousness of society.

In a situation of intuitive, acritical information selection, as I have described above, some contents separate themselves from the rest and achieve a higher profile. The general condition that brings about this separation is what we call the "visibility" of content. As one can imagine, if we attempt to emphasise contents –to make them visible–, they tend to adapt to the conditions that facilitate their reception and provoke their redistribution (Aced, 2009). This especially includes political contents. Anyone wanting to understand the conditions for this selection should not restrict themselves to studying the effects of technological innovations and their impact on the transformation of the communication model; instead, they should try to understand better the general framework that determines the existing communication model, or rather, the general suppositions of intuitive selection which are, when all is said and done, the ones that favour certain choices over others.

This is precisely what we aim to do in this article. We will describe some of the conditions for the intuitive choice of content, or what could be called the conditions for "visibility" on the Internet**.** These conditions are: novelty, publicity and social prestige, all of which were originally described in the general context of the contemporary everyday experience. I will attempt, furthermore, to show how they are integrated into a general dynamic of reproduction of political experience on the Internet. To that end, we will be looking at two political phenomena that are very closely linked with the global communication model: the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the Cuban bloggers movement.

We will not attempt to demonstrate that these conditions for visibility must be considered to be the *causes* of the degree of attention and dissemination achieved by both proposals. What we are interested in is verifying that these conditions are included in the discursive corpus of

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two political phenomena and that, in turn, they have been considered as being among the foundations of modern-day everyday experience. The question to be answered is the following: if, as we have already stated, we start from the hypothesis that a direct link exists between intuition and visibility, what conditioning factors of contemporary experience are implicit in the two political proposals to which we refer?

It is interesting to note that although the Zapatistas and the bloggers are symbolic groups that are virtually divergent, politically and culturally speaking, they both end up fulfilling the same general conditions for visibility we have mentioned. Thanks to this, they capture the attention of Internauts from very distant spheres, geographically and culturally, and involve them to such a point that it is they who, in the end, guarantee the survival of the content producers. It is said that in the harshest years of South America's military dictatorships, when the police came to take them away, people would try to yell out their names, as loud as they could. They did so in the hope that others might hear them, and thereby reduce, even slightly, the regime's impunity and perhaps prevent it from making them disappear. What with tweets, e-mails, forums, blogs and websites, if they manage to make themselves visible, there is no doubt that today's virtual yells are much more likely to be heard, and by more than just a few neighbours in the same street.

Zapatistas and bloggers

My decision to include these two experiences in one single article will probably be disconcerting to some. I am well aware that they have been used repeatedly, each on their own particular side, by agents of political rhetoric that are almost always opposed. In the case of the Zapatistas, their emergence onto the political stage in the 1990s inaugurated a trend towards a new style of *leftism* that has gradually created its own discourse. In spite of its newness, in this, just as in any other emerging political imaginary, recent symbols are mixed with other, older ones, such as the Cuban revolution. The most widespread representations are constructed through simple oppositions; thus, in the same way that terms such as the United States, neoliberalism and the World Bank are all situated on one side, on the other, terms such as Zapatismo, Fidel and revolutionary are unthinkingly overlapped. This also means that the authors of the Cuban blogs, all of whom are discontented with the island's political system, are all *imagined* to be in opposition to Subcomandante Marcos, regardless of any details that might suggest other, more reasoned analyses.

This is not the right place to give close examination to the way these connections are produced, or to discuss their consequences. Without trying to determine the veracity and scope of this framework, I simply consider it to be *valid*. On this basis, I am interested in showing that beyond their differences (in this case produced by the common political representations of *left* and *right*), both share very similar visibility conditions.

We would also like to highlight another difference that makes the common features we will be describing even more striking: the two cases spring from very different moments of the development of the Internet.

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The Zapatista phenomenon appeared in its early stages: the movement was *discovering* the Internet's potentials while the Net was growing. In January 1994, the time when the Zapatista movement burst on to the Mexican political scene, virtually none of the features of Net surfing we are now familiar with existed. Remember that it was not until 1998 that the Internet really began to take off in terms of its widespread use; it then achieved 200 million users by the year 2000, 1,000 million by 2006 and 1,800 million today. Meanwhile, the type of message sent followed traditional models. Regarding the general format of the messages (letters, communications, narrations), no major innovation took place in relation to other practices that were by now common. The Internet became an important tool for another reason – because of the immediacy it offered, the ease to produce its own information and the capacity to evade information walls and spread its content throughout the world.

The group known as the Cuban bloggers have a completely different dynamic. The best-known of these blogs, "Generación Y", began in April 2007. The very blog support is linked with the ease with which, nowadays, we can create our own spaces for distributing content. Even in the Cuban context, where major restrictions exist on Internet access and the connection speeds rarely exceed 56 Kbps, the blog support enables them to maintain a platform that is functional enough to maintain the attention of the most technologically *advanced* Internauts. Some years ago, the impossibility of carrying out monetary transactions from Cuba and the precariousness of the Internet connections would have seriously hampered the emergence of a web space such as the ones that have appeared in recent years. Subsequently, other tools have become important, which are also linked with this second phase of the Internet. Twitter use has become widespread, and this has provided a dose of immediacy that has allowed users to contain major reprisals by the Cuban government.

Novelty, publicity and social prestige

The first of the visibility conditions we mentioned concerns the increased attention received by the contents that break with the continuity of the generalised model for the representation of reality. These contents could be described as possessing an informational *novelty* and producing an impact that forces us to reorganise our way of thinking. They produce a surprise that makes the *usual* interpretation impossible. This impact derives from the difficulty in connecting the new content with the other informational landmarks that surround it and, in order to understand it, the links between the different types of information that previously existed must be reviewed and reshaped. The mechanism of the effect is similar to what Paul Ricoeur (1980, 2003) described in the metaphor. Based on the interpretative innovation that is enforced by metaphor (understood as a tension between contradictory meanings), the accounts *create* an interpretative range that stimulates a hermeneutic process which, in turn, leads to a reconsideration of the connections between the reader and the world. In our case, the tension is produced by the incompatibility between what one expects to have happened (as the first meaning), and the difficulty of the new data that provide the *new* information. This also leads to a reshaping of the meanings and political representations derived from them.

Gilles Lipovetsky (2002) refers to this influence of novelty as a general condition for post-modernity. While many authors have described the connection that exists between the capitalist form of production and the need for a permanently renewed consumer supply, this does not fully explain the importance that novelty has acquired with respect to demand. Lipovetsky himself reminds us that Baudrillard and Bourdieu attempt to explain this link by incorporating an analysis of the phenomena of the symbolic distinction of class identities. However, in *El Imperio de lo efímero* [The Empire of the Ephemeral] he adds an extra level. Lipovetsky champions the profound nature of the phenomenon of fashion and explains the relationship that exists between the almost obsessive drive towards the new and the processes of the development of modern subjectivity and of the personality in general. Ultimately, it is a subject that carries the idea of freedom to its ultimate consequences, based on a permanent recomposing of the images of itself that it chooses to project on a daily basis.

In the context of Cuba –where the state exerts significant control over the media– the emergence of a *different* source of informational content, as if self-made, represents in itself a novelty that distorts the representations of the socialist political model. It is surprising simply because of the fact that it exists. It arouses curiosity and provokes debate, prior to any analysis of the specific content of its proposals. This leads to a reconsideration of the value that has traditionally been given to the audience in absolute terms. Clearly, the dissemination of content achievable by blogs, analysed from a purely quantitative point of view, cannot compare with what the official media can achieve. The blogs' capacity to gain a *numerous* audience is fairly small, especially if we bear in mind the fact that, in a society such as Cuba's, the state restricts Internet access and controls *all* the content of *all* TV channels, radio stations and publications. Even if we accept the Cuban government's accusation that the bloggers receive support from the United States, in the most extreme case this would involve sums totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars, a risible amount in comparison with the resources that any state has available, no matter how ruinous its situation. It is clear, therefore, that the definition of "impact" must be reformulated, and should make way for an evaluation that considers the increased repercussions that are produced by exceptional instances, differences, newnesses.

In this respect, moreover, we can clearly see how interest in novelty progresses in tandem with the reaffirmation of individual freedom. Choosing what is different asserts the independent stance of every one of the people involved in broadcasting new content and new interpretations of the sociopolitical environment. On the opposite side, there are those who continue to be *shackled* to the past, or rather, who reproduce the messages issued by the official information media. While they continue to reproduce the conventional discourses –bound to their categories and, above all, bound to the prevailing model of broadcasting– those who stand up for their independence *liberate* themselves by affirming their difference, their individuality, to the extent that they make use of the expressive opportunities they find in using new technologies.

The Zapatista guerrilla also surprised the world. Their emergence at a time that was so close to the collapse of Soviet socialism posed a puzzle in itself. How should we identify them? Narcoguerrilla? Old-fashioned

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communism? Post-modern guerrilla? They created doubts because, first and foremost, they represented a new reference point which contrasted with the announcement of the end of global confrontation, of the great stories of modernity, and of the ideologisation of everyday experience. In this new proposal, furthermore, the classic *personalities* of liberation reinvented themselves. New details appeared in their *uniforms*, which broke with the monotony of military discipline and highlighted an abundance of technological *artefacts*, signs of being rooted in a different age. Finally, in their writings, while they showed clear affinities with classic South American authors such as M. Benedetti and E. Galeano, the transferral of this style into the field of realpolitik and its self-assurance in terms of combining registers represented a clear break with the Marxist-Leninist manuals, and even with Fidel Castro's conversational, direct style – which was also self-assured, but much less symbolic and fun.

A second element that also invigorates the visibility condition is one that could be associated with *the seduction of publicity*. John B. Thompson describes this process very well in two of his pieces (Thompson, 1998 and 2002). In his view, the long process of the development of modernity is (without contradicting other, more traditional analyses) a long process of publicly exposing the old sphere of private life, of publicising personal life. In the new contemporary public space, elements that were not previously of interest are now connected, and end up influencing the decisions of citizens. One paradigmatic example is the Clinton-Lewinsky case, which had an unforeseeable impact in the United States. The most fleeting comparison between the debates that took place as a result of this case and, for example, those that resulted from the Bush administration's *mistakes* just a few years later, indicates a major change in the nature of political scandal, and reveals which content has the greatest influence in forming public opinion. This is the change Thompson refers to, the seduction it produces throughout society and the transformation of the political discourse it stimulates.

The abundance of personal details that appear in the communications of Subcomandante Marcos fosters the creation of an attractive intimacy between the reader and the broadcaster of the political proposals. The same applies with Yoani Sánchez, the best-known of the group of Cuban bloggers. She writes her political critiques in the form of chronicles that reproduce the intimacy of her personal experience of Cuba. In each case, the personal representations quickly become a shared representation of the social reality. The identification between the public and private experience ends up being so *natural*, that it turns out to be counter-productive to attempt to describe the correspondence between a representation of them and a general representation, as there is no epistemological condition involved that claims to constitute itself as a guarantor of the veracity of the discourse.

This occurs because intimate discourse, as a public fact, does not respond to the dichotomy of true-false. It only needs to be accepted as close, possible, credible. And it achieves this when it produces a sensation of affinity between the perception of the reader's private life and what s/he expects the other perceptions and other private lives in his/her environment to be like; in other words, when the reader justifies a general conception of the public space that is solely based on a general projection of one's own, personal perception.

However, not all of the power of the Internet's contents is derived from the autonomous capacity for social legitimacy being achieved by the world of new technologies. The interest aroused by phenomena related to political cyber-activism should not lead us to forget the strengths and prestige that traditional institutions involved in the dissemination of information still have. We should remember, for example, that the first contact between Zapatismo and the world took place via traditional channels, thanks to the coverage the movement was given by renowned information media, including the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*. Gradually, Zapatismo established a direct platform for communication over the Internet, but by that time the interest had already been consolidated.

Something very similar took place in the case of the Cuban bloggers. Despite the fact that their starting point was the World Wide Web, the group gained strength and capacity for dissemination through the support they received in the form of international awards and thanks to periodic references to them by the more established media organs. The strategy that the Cuban government has used to try to cancel out the activists' influence is highly significant (albeit lacking in newness). Instead of directly attacking the content of the blogs, the government concentrates on delegitimizing the awards they receive, revealing allegedly antipatriotic sources of funding and publicising their links with those political institutions that are easiest to stereotype, in ideological terms. Though well-known, this strategy fails to highlight the relationship that still exists between activism 2.0 and the traditional institutions, on which a sizeable dose of their legitimacy still depends.

By way of conclusion

Up to now, we have described two phenomena in the dissemination of political contents over the Internet, starting from the supposition that a direct link exists between the *intuition* and *selection* of information. We have attempted to show that at least three of the conditions that favour selection have been previously postulated to explain more general mechanisms, linked with the contemporary experience as a whole. After highlighting their presence in the two cases described, we conclude that an analysis of the new scenario of an information society cannot be limited to the study of the effects of technological innovations; it also requires a study of the general assumptions of the experience, or what we could also call the composition of a model of contemporary subjectivity. In this respect, we should examine the link between the determining factors of visibility described and what we could call the "non-conscious structure of political understanding".

In one of the most contemporary models of political communication, George Lakoff examines the state of US political debate based on the evidence that there are mental processes that precede rational thought and predefine many of our everyday decisions (Lakoff, 2008). In his model, a central role is given to non-conscious cognitive mechanisms that are culturally deeply-rooted (frameworks, conceptual metaphors and prototypes) from which he postulates an interesting link between emerging rhetorical experiences (such as the ones covered in this article) and the political interpretations that are most widespread throughout the population.

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Now that we have completed the initial examination stage, this analysis will only be complete if we also explore the function of tradition in the selection and interpretation of content. For instance, subjects that we have not yet touched on, such as the comparison between Subcomandante Marcos and Che Guevara, or the symbolic role of Don Durito (the character from Zapatista stories), which corresponds to Don Quixote in the political discourse of the South American left, and which can only be dealt with on this non-rational level. The same applies with the blog "Generación Y" and the rupture it has caused in the traditional duality of revolutionary vs. counterrevolutionary, a view that is fundamental to an understanding of Cuban political dynamics over the past 60 years.

If we apply Lakoff's proposal to the aforementioned two cases, the analysis carried out here leads to a more complex level, where we not only have to examine visibility conditions, but also the link between these and the cognitive cultural model that it is supposed to have. In fact, in an even more ambitious phase, we would have to try and understand the relations that are established between the different symbolic scenarios that *collide* on the Internet (bearing in mind the cultural diversity of the individuals that surf it), and raise the possibility that a model of exclusive political understanding is being created in the virtual political community.

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