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Digital Community Activism And Impact on Social Tagging Systems

I n recent decades, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made enormous advances, impacting the way individuals stay updated on what is going on in the world and share their ideas. In the second half of the 1990s, these ICTs fostered spaces for interaction and information that surpassed old geographical barriers or limitations in media access.

The web has played a momentous role in this process. At the time when the Internet was becoming massive, toward the late 1990s, Web 1.0 dominated, where only some governmental institutions, commercial sites, academic portals, and formal media could generate and share information in cyberspace. Then, Web 2.0, characterized as collaborative and social, launched in 2004, allowing private citizens to create content. Now, version 3.0, anchored in the precepts of the World Wide Web Consortium, is attempting to be more organized and semantic.[1]

Of the different web generations, Web 2.0 is particularly interesting because it ushered in a broad spectrum of social spaces for information and communication where people can share their ideas and generate social changes. Along these same lines, we can talk in terms of social activism as something that has transferred human expressions and demonstrations from the streets to the digital sphere. Considering this, this article will reflect on the importance of the social web and the function of social tagging in digital activism, as well as a brief review of some of the activism that has transcended its habitual space in order to achieve a specific end.

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Web 2.0 and Social Tagging

The social web was born in 2004, considering the precepts established by Tim O'Reilly in his manifesto *What Is Web 2.0?*[2] While this document offers a highly technological approach (mentioning information retrievers, programs, metadata, etc.), our proposal must underline two ideas: the decentralization of the web and the proposition that every client can be a server. Its basic argument is the collective construction of cyberspace: a digital environment where users can participate by adding content, organizing it, and disseminating it.

That is, O'Reilly proposed a web for all, based on two conditions: that it be a space for knowledge and also of collective participation. Regarding knowledge, he stated that the great generators of information (government bodies, universities, the media, commercial sites) must be on the web, but it is also important that individuals' and social groups' wisdom be present.

In terms of collective participation, Web 2.0 brought in the citizens of the world who wanted to share information and interact in society, and at the same time generated the means to do this such as blogs, wikis, and social networks.

According to Natalia Arroyo Vázquez, the philosophy of the social web is characterized by seven aspects that have a huge impact on information and communications: participation and collaboration by Internet users; expansion of communications channels; greater interaction among members of society; the possibilities for sharing resources and knowledge to benefit others; democracy, in the sense of greater citizens' participation in society's life; a more public character; and the opening and creation of collective work.[3]

In the first years of Web 2.0, blogs were very open spaces; later social networks appeared and have reached unprecedented levels. Their apparition and expansion represented a bastion of communication in global society and a change in the panorama of the media and communication. In the framework of the social web, networks have been the space in which people generate more information, and, compared to the media that preceded them, they have included personal, spontaneous interaction that has favored social relations in the twenty-first century.

Social networks have also transformed individuals' informational behavior. In a society in which protocol

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seems to be limiting and restrictive, they offer freedom of expression, interaction with more colloquial language, and the possibility to link up with people with whom users share ideas, goals, political positions, economic circumstances, etc. Just as traditional information and communication media (radio, television, the press) have had a huge impact on social and political life in the history of humanity, social networks are an instrument of power within the reach of a broad segment of the population. There, people create materials, distribute them, and determine their content through social tagging, a recent technique for the representation, identification, and recovery of information.

In the context of networks, social tagging (an activity) and social labels or tags (descriptors) allude to words or short phrases linked to information resources stored in cyberspace. Social tagging promotes participation in the digital space and facilitates inclusion in communication processes, while social tags increase the presence of subjects on social networks in such a way that they can be perceived by anyone and create communities of followers with common interests.

In the last decade, from the perspective of library and information science, social tagging has been considered a form of indexation in which the user, with his/her own words (free language), defines the thematic content (aboutness) of an informational resource with the aim of making it identifiable, shareable, visible, and retrievable. From a more communications-based point of view, social tagging is an activity in which the web user uses words to assign labels to his/her own informational resources or those previously stored on the Web.

Digital Activism and Social Tagging

Activism has traditionally been understood as the application of persuasive mechanisms in a localized way. This is the opposite of today's practice, which generates new

collective statements, experiments, or investigation. The aim is to erode good and common sense and cause structures to swing away from their sedimented identities.[4] As a practice, it has been present in different places and at different times, linked to technologies as a means of dissemination; thus, it is possible to speak of a social activism that has used printed media, telematics, etc., to communicate.

In our time, activism has been linked to digital society and it is common to speak of digital activism. The question then arises: What is it? Definitions abound; there are even people who say that it is a concept that is under construction, given its recent presence in technological communities. Despite this lack of precision, digital activism is rooted in networks and social tagging, as technological tools that favor opening up information and communications media. From its inception, social activism has been a citizens' practice of social commitment that consists of the participation of persons, groups, institutions, or associations on social media with the clear aim of informing, creating awareness, educating, or motivating to action, using the web.

Digital activism is based on technological tools and social intentions. Although sometimes people put a priority on activity as a process of technological communication, digital activism is not reduced to mere technological advances, but rather implies social, ideological, and behavioral aspects. A broad view of social activism includes both technology and the economic, social, and political context in which a protest or change arises. The technological infrastructure (networks, systems, apps, devices) are the starting point, while the intentions are the goal or final aim.

With the advent of the Internet and easy access to social media, social activism arrived to transform informational and communications behavior over the last two decades. According to the UNESCO's "Internet Universality Indicators,"[5] 5.28 billion people worldwide use it from some kind of mobile device, and 4.89 billion use social networks.

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In Mexico, the National Survey on Availability and Use of Information Technology in Homes (ENDUTIH) states that in 2022, 93.1 million people were Internet users, 78.6 percent of the population six years or older. It also states that the primary use of the Internet is for communication (93.8 percent); second, for access to social networks (90.6 percent); and third, for entertainment (89.6 percent).[6]

Given the extensive use of mobile devices and greater Internet coverage, the digital world has absorbed different facets of life. Just like libraries, entertainment, politics, or education exist on the web, protests and social movements have also entered it, securing the mobilization of thousands and millions of people in favor of or against specific causes.

What are the objectives of digital activism? How does it operate? And what is its impact in cyberspace?

Ami Divatia and Prachi Thaker have detected at least three objectives that favor citizens' participation in democratic and social life:

1. Short-term actions like strikes or protests associated with the demand for solutions to contemporary problems.
2. Actions that seek alternatives to a social phenomenon or the behavior of subjects or organizations.
3. Revolutionary actions that seek profound or fundamental changes in society or institutions.[7]

Suay Melisa Özkula mentions that digital activism recruits people, and its main objectives fall into five categories: political denunciations, defense, and comments; recruiting and creating movements and campaigns; organizing and coordinating actions; actions in a certain direction, hacking, and civil disobedience; and research and documentation.[8]

Clearly, the authors have very diverse proposals, but they do share some elements: grouping based on an ideology and pursuing an aim that attempts to change social reality in a given period.

Few studies have analyzed digital activism's mode of operation, much less do well-defined comparisons exist, especially regarding the success of some movements versus others that have not been successful. Until now, these authors have noted that social activism covers a series of elements: a social, economic, political, or entertainment reality or event; the position of an individual or group

about that; a tag that represents it; the dissemination of that tag; and an objective that the activism pursues.

On a global level, certain well-known cases have become social phenomena in terms of their wide dissemination and scope on the web. In 2017, the #MeToo tag denounced violence and sexual harassment against women in general, but particularly in the mecca of U.S. cinema. In only two days, Twitter logged more than half a million Tweets, while Facebook saw 4.7 billion shares using it in only twenty-four hours. As a result, it went viral, reproduced by actresses and women writers, politicians, economists, and citizens in their communications.

In addition to the high number of Tweets, the response included the creation of other more local tags that protested sexual harassment and aggression, among them, in Spanish, #YoTambién and, in French, #MoiAussi. The expression #NoAzafatasenelAutomovilismo (#NoGridGirlsinCarRacing) aimed at eliminating women as models at car races; and others even more regionally centered emerged like #EnaZeda, which raised the banner of the national Tunisian movement against sexual harassment.

While #MeToo has been an important process of digital activism in the last decade, worldwide, other movements have also achieved changes: #BlockNaredraModi sought tolerance and respect in journalism; #BlackLives Matter pointed to police violence against Afro-Americans; #BringBackOurGirls denounced the kidnapping of a group of women by a terrorist group in Nigeria; #IceBucket Challenge created awareness about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS); #OscarsSoWhite pointed to the lack of Black representation for the Academy of Cinematographic Arts and Sciences Awards (the Oscars); #NeverAgain underlined gun violence in schools; and #COVID19 kept the world informed about the health crisis humanity faced beginning in 2019.

Even though in many cases social activism has proven its ability to move people to action and transform society, it is common that it continues to be questioned. While an optimistic view is that digital activism has the strength to change social reality, pessimistic views consider that in most cases it is merely a technological manifestation that in the worst cases promotes chaos.

All this means that some digital activism transcends and spurs people to action, while other variants are consumed and die in the attempt. Among the successes, we can mention #NoAzafatasenelAutomovilismo, which man-

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aged to eliminate the presence of female models, or grid girls, at car races in many European Union countries, and #MeToo, with an unprecedented scope. However, the number of tags that have not had a big impact is greater. Therefore, deeper research is needed about the processes of dissemination and visualization of digital activism, as well as how it goes viral.

Given that, like in-person activism, digital activism can be successful or can disappear in the attempt, we can conclude that it must be seen as a form of participation citizens have within their reach, an act of freedom that can be exercised with the clear objective of promoting social improvement in a world that is becoming more digital every day. **VM**

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Notes

1 The semantic web is a broader version, with greater (semantic) meaning, in which any Internet user can find answers more quickly and simply, thanks to better defined information. It is based on comprehension of words instead of numbers and keywords. Thus, solutions to habitual problems can be obtained in a search thanks to a common infrastructure through which it is possible to share, process, and transfer information simply. For more information, see https://www.w3.org/2001/sw/wiki/Main_Page. [Editor's Note.]
2 Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," *Communications & Strategies*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 17-38.
3 Natalia Arroyo Vázquez, "¿Web 2.0? ¿web social? ¿qué es eso?" *Educación y Biblioteca*, no. 161, 2007, p. 71, https://gredos.usal.es/bitstream/handle/10366/119409/EB19_N161_P69-74.pdf?sequence=1.
4 Marcelo Svirsky, "Defining Activism," *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 4, 2010, p. 163.
5 UNESCO, "Internet Universality Indicators," 2005, https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-universality-indicators. [Editor's Note.]
6 INEGI, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnología de la Información en los Hogares" (ENDUTIH) 2022, https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/dutih/2022/. [Editor's Note.]
7 Ami Divatia and Prachi Thaker, "Socio-political Activism: Content Analysis of Selected Hash Tags," *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 189.
8 Suay Melisa Özkula, "What is Digital Activism Anyway? Social Constructions of the 'Digital' in Contemporary Activism," *Journal of Digital Social Research*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 68-69.