

CHANGE BEGINS ON THE WEB

The protests of June 2013 in Brazil

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Originally published at [2013 CT HOUSEHOLDS AND ENTERPRISES SURVEY](#), Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br). Sao Paulo: CGI, 2014, pp. 303-307.

Citation:

Machado, Jorge. **Change Begins on the Web**. *Survey on the use of Information and Communication Technologies in Brazil - ICT Households and Enterprises 2013*. Sao Paulo: Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br). pp. 303-307.

Online: http://www.cetic.br/media/docs/publicacoes/2/TIC_DOM_EMP_2013_livro_eletronico.pdf

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Southern suburbs of São Paulo city, Monday, June 3. Another gray autumn morning. In a protest against fare hikes and the poor conditions of the region's transport network, students block the M'Boi Mirim highway. It was the seed of what would be the biggest wave of protests in the history of Brazil. The event, which was organized via the Internet and publicized in the Free Fare Movement (MPL) Facebook page, occurred with virtually no press coverage. However, the next demonstration took place downtown São Paulo city and the outrage over transport quality, added to police violence, would ignite the social networks.

The month of June 2013 will never be forgotten. Millions of people took to the streets across Brazil in protest. It was not just against transport but also against corruption and overspending on the World Cup, as well as in favor of better public services and various other causes. The wave of protests that swept the country took politicians and the press by surprise. According to the National Confederation of Municipalities, on June 20, at the height of the wave of demonstrations, approximately two million people took to the streets in 438 municipalities (EBC, 2013).



The striking feature of these protests is that they were spontaneously organized through social networks. Although the MPL gave the cue, the protests spread throughout the country, involving other groups and causes unconnected with the MPL. The impressive ability to mobilize citizens and social groups through the Internet came as a surprise even to the most enthusiastic cyberactivists.

A few years ago I wrote an article entitled “Network activism and identity connections: new perspectives for social movements,” which lists the emerging characteristics of mobilizations via ICTs (MACHADO, 2007). I summarize them below

1. Proliferation and branching out of social collectives. The scope and dynamism of new. ICTs facilitate the proliferation of social groups, as well as the efficient and strategic integration of the various stakeholders that are branching out throughout society. New alliances and synergies arise, based on idealism and voluntarism, which enhance mobilization, participation, interaction, access to information and provision of resources.
2. Horizontal and flexible networks. Organizations tend to be increasingly horizontal, less hierarchical and more flexible, with multiple nodes, connected to numerous micro-networks or cells that can be quickly activated.
3. Trend toward coalitions. Networked coalitions of social groups around common interests, based on the communication infrastructure provided by the Internet are on

the increase.

4. Dynamic or goal-/event-driven existence. Mobilizations may develop, achieve certain goals, impact, create repercussions and expand because of a political event and, similarly, rapidly disappear when the event ends or the goal is achieved.

5. Organizational-material minimalism. Physical structure is of secondary importance. The possibility of operating at a very low cost encourages participation. The most important thing is the ability to mobilize.

6. Universalism and specificity of causes. Although it may seem contradictory, ideals can be either universalistic or particularistic. They may serve one or a small set of objectives for small and specific social groups (and even be geographically determined). However, even when linked to a specific cause or issue, demands are increasingly guided by a broader framework of rights concerning universally accepted principles such as sustainable development, human rights, people's right to self-determination, combating racism and discrimination, democracy, freedom of expression etc.

7. Great power of articulation and efficiency. ICT enables the organization of simultaneous protests in different cities, as well as the articulation of dispersed groups of protesters. Their geometry can be variable, concentrating and activating demonstrations according to various action strategies.

8. Delocalized strategies of shared ideologies. Action strategies in the virtual world aim to connect shared identities, goals, ideologies and world visions. Identity and solidarity begin to play a fundamental role in building networks.

9. Multiplicity of identities / circulation of militants. ICT enable the "circulation" of militants across networks. A single activist may be involved with more than one cause and multiple collective stakeholders. The same individual may militate in various movements and even broadcast his or her claims through the different networks in which he or she participates (through identity connections). As the bond that unites the members of a movement may only be specific and momentary, it is not uncommon for a single individual to participate in various social movements and protests, sharing an interest with people who, in other dimensions of social life, have hopes, values and beliefs that are considerably different from his or her own.



10. Diffuse identity of social subjects. Anonymity and the multiplicity of identities promote activism in various forms. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to deal with identity issues in social movements. The interests of the individuals connected by a network are increasingly at cross-purposes, varied and even tenuous. People support different cultural codes, values and interests. The struggle is increasingly less about individuals and more about building social subjects.

These characteristics are based on a historical analysis of the performance exhibited by organizations that have distinguished themselves by strategically using the World Wide Web in their actions – such as Third World Network, Oxfam International, No Border, Palestinian NGO Network, Global Trade Watch, Indymedia, Nod50 and the zapatista Movement. They have not only proven to be valid in recent years but also tend to be more widespread among the younger population, which has more access to the Internet and benefits from the expansion and growing dynamism of social networks. The forerunners are organizations that gained vast experience working on the Internet when it still had few users. What is also noteworthy is that in recent years, in addition to established organizations, individuals have taken a leading role on the Internet. Suffice it to say, for instance, that 1.3 billion people have personal web pages on Facebook where they can “see and be seen”. In this setting, social proximity, reputation and strategic use of information play fundamental roles.

Ultimately, it is people who give meaning to things and are able to – at various levels and to different degrees – transform or define the political, economic and social institutions to which they belong. The potential for change lies in the ability to mobilize millions of consciences through these networks. The relationships, affections, feelings, concerns and dreams of millions of people run through those networks.

Even in the weakly politicized “rolezinhos”¹ organized via Facebook certain codes, values, interests and identities that circulate on the Internet are at stake. These processes are becoming increasingly autonomous and less controllable – albeit heavily influenced by a consumer society that knowingly generates needs and desires that are not fully attainable. Today, there is undoubtedly a fierce “cognitive” dispute in the virtual environment. Businesses, governments, political parties, religious groups, activists and the mainstream media are trying to occupy and dominate this environment in order to win over people’s minds.

The keywords of the moment could be “autonomy” and “consciousness”. Although most people adopt a more passive and somewhat conformist stance, the power to decide, reflect, engage in discussions, debate and disagree in a public environment with few mediations, such as the Internet, inevitably empowers people. The expansion of the Internet is gradually fostering a public environment that did not previously exist – one that coexists alongside the political sphere and traditional media, which, in turn, are subject to increasing questioning. As a result, and in order to placate social change, ICT channels for social participation in public sector issues are growing. There are more mechanisms to ensure transparency, better means to promote public discussions and new platforms for political collaboration (such as e-democracy and [participa.br](#)). The increased use of ICT – particularly via mobile devices –, the implementation of public and open databases, the possibility of reusing information and collaborating through networks point toward the intensification of this process. Different information media and forms of expression abound, as does the possibility of people’s attributing new meanings to reality.

1 Organized through facebook, “rolezinhos” are meetings bringing together hundreds or thousands of young people from poor neighborhoods in malls frequented by middle and upper class. Shopkeepers and clients reacted with fear in the face of a multitude of brown and black youth. Police began investigating the organizers and monitor social networks. The rolezinhos were banned by court order and police officers were on duty in the shopping mall doors to try to prevent the entry of people “suspected”. This has led to a wide debate on racism, social inequality and police oppression of the poor.



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When a young person from an underprivileged community connects to the Internet and participates in social and intellectual relationships, a vast horizon of possibilities begins to open. Obviously, this is an asymmetric process in which cultural and socioeconomic aspects play a major role. And despite the Internet's potential for emancipation, the flipside of this growing global connectivity is the possibility of broader social control and monitoring, as never before seen in human history.

The current scenario presents quite a few challenges. The revelation of a mass surveillance scheme by the National Security Agency (NSA) led to an overall more critical stance regarding the large companies that provide the communication infrastructure for the Internet, reinforcing the need for more autonomous and decentralized media. The concentrating effect of these networks into a few proprietary platforms is worrying, as a corporation's commitment to its shareholders is presumably greater than to abstract human rights. Additionally, the pressure from governments to access the private and personal lives of its citizens can be efficiently used in this context. Opposing this trend is a set of technologies and services involving encryption and anonymous browsing, but whose understanding is still out of reach for most people.

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Notably, most far-reaching actions on the Internet are guided by universal values and are based on demanding compliance with the guarantees enshrined in the laws of the modern democratic state. It is on these terms that the underprivileged have waged their struggle for human rights, democracy and social rights. Such values, which are increasingly “more universal” and associated with significant political events, are more easily deployable, as they establish strong identifications that facilitate the integration of individuals and organizations in symbolic terms. ICTs – particularly the media with mass communication potential – undoubtedly play an important role providing the infrastructure that supports a broad process of social transformation.

I began this article by mentioning the protests of June last year – which continued into 2014, up until the eve of the World Cup. I spoke about a mobilization process that began on the Internet and took to the streets. And the tension it generated, in one way or another, resulted in gradual political and institutional changes – such as those announced by President Rousseff during the June 2013 protests. This trend sets in as more people connect to the Internet and master new skills and tools in this environment. In this sense, much is yet to come, since a large part of the population is not yet digitally included. The ICT Households 2013 shows that only 49% of households have a computer, and only 43% have Internet access. Another important fact is that 75% of individuals in class DE have never used the Internet. We still lack a broadband that provides extensive coverage and a high quality connection at an affordable price. It stands to reason that broader digital inclusion will result in citizens who are informed, critical and better able to fight for their rights and make decisions concerning their own lives (CGI.br, 2014).

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