

Web Activism in São Paulo: New Political Practices

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In September 2011, Ocupa Sampa, a Brazilian activist movement started to occupy Sao Paulo's center, adopting the same strategy as 15M in Spain or Occupy Wall Street in New York. Analyzing the use of web activism in the organization of this movement, this essay focuses on the role of Ocupa Sampa as a possible precursor to the June Days, which started two years later.

In the last months of 2011, thousands of activists took to the streets in many parts of the world, occupying squares and other public spaces in political and cultural demonstrations that were original in many ways. In October the same year, Acampa Sampa was beginning in São Paulo, later to be called Ocupa Sampa, since it was not just a “camp”, but an “occupation” and a re-signification of the city. Young people responded to the 150 call, a global call to claim for real democracy: mobilizations were happening in many parts of Europe, the United States, the Arab countries and Latin America with the slogan: “We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers that do not represent us”.

A few days later, protesters were occupying the area of Vale do Anhangabaú, a degraded but traditional place for social and union movements located in the inhospitable city center, with a lot of movement during daytime but very little at night. The occupation was similar to the “*acampadas*” and “occupies” in the United States and Spain, gathering 250 tents and around 600 young people from mid-October to December, in an experience which was unique but of little impact on the life of the city during those weeks, passing almost unnoticed by the traditional media. However, Ocupa Sampa was an important milestone for the organization and mobilization of a basic juvenile public. The movement marked the beginning of new ways of action, of a new relationship with the city and a new sociability. The young protagonists of Ocupa Sampa also experienced the benefits of digital culture and online social networks for the movement's visibility.



Photo: Jennifer Glass

Other youth movements preceded and fed Ocupa Sampa: Movimento Passe Livre, Marcha da Maconha (Marijuana March) and Marcha das Vadias (SlutWalk). In May 2011, five months before Ocupa Sampa, the violent repression of the Marcha da Maconha (a strong movement for marijuana decriminalization, born in 2007) by the riot police of Policia Militar, brought five thousand people of all ages to the streets for the Marcha da Liberdade, under the manifest: “We are not virtual. We are REAL. A network made of flesh and bone people. Organized in a horizontal, autonomous and free form.”¹ June 2011 saw the first Marcha das Vadias, a loud juvenile feminist movement with international connections, arising from a case which took place at Toronto University (a police officer blamed the victims for a wave of rapes). Topless activists got the movement to the front page of Brazilian newspapers, claiming that “the choice to go topless is legitimated and supported because we believe that politics goes through the body and to use the body to protest is a way to do politics and strengthen the women rights movement, mostly for the right to the autonomy of the body.”²

But the core of Ocupa Sampa is Movimento Passe Livre (MPL)³, a national movement led in São Paulo by a group of college students living in the suburbs. To them, the struggle to re-appropriate urban spaces is linked with the public transportation issue that not only affects students and workers but also the whole city. Since 2003, MPL had been organizing many activities⁴ that gathered thousands of students in the streets of São Paulo, but without much visibility in this gigantic city.

In October 2011, young activists received a call through Facebook and Twitter for a global mobilization against the economic, political and social situation, in particular in Spain. They convened and camped at Vale do Anhangabaú, using social networks to mobilize hundreds of people. The use of digital and virtual devices contributed to boosting and decentering the

¹ Excerpt from the Marcha da Liberdade Manifest, shown in the book: “Movimentos em Marcha – Ativismo, Cultura e tecnologia”: <https://emmarcha.milharal.org/files/2013/05/MOVIMENTOS-EM-MARCHA-livro.pdf>.

² Marcha das Vadias: <https://marchadasvadiassp.milharal.org/apresentacao/>

³ Movimento Passe Livre de São Paulo website: <http://saopaulo.mpl.org.br/>

⁴ MPL activities in 2011: <http://saopaulo.mpl.org.br/historico/790-2/>

political debate, broadening the possibilities of collective action, incorporating new individuals and questioning the vertical structure of political parties.

Amongst the claims made by Ocupa Sampa the struggle for the transformation of democratic institutions links it to the European and American demonstrations: in Spain, 15M called for real democracy; in the United States, it was the end of corruption. In São Paulo, the discussion centered on the importance of direct, participative and true democracy, enabling citizens to have a voice to decide about the questions that affect them in their daily lives. A young person from the Communication Commission pointed out:

We wanted to unlink the quickest way possible from these international things, we were not a franchise. This, here, is not Spain, much less New York, this is Brazil. (Indignant 9)

Ocupa Sampa participants reported social inequality, homophobia, police brutality (especially towards Blacks and poor youth), violence against women, real estate speculation and the lack of houses for the poor. They positioned themselves against corruption and the penal system that criminalizes social movements and criticized family removals for the World Cup constructions. Already, they questioned public expenses intended for the sports mega-events and the social impacts at the stadiums construction areas, such as removing low-income population without the means to have a decent housing. Politicians were scathingly criticized for using power to their own benefit. In the same way as in Spain, the collectives criticized the growing distance between politicians and population claims, under the slogan: “they do not represent us”⁵

During the occupation, activists debated at the campsite, but also made intense use of social networks: mainly Facebook in which the collective had its own profile, but Twitter was also an essential tool to communicate information that had to be spread quickly. The campsite was an informational area on which discussions about political action on a global and local levels developed simultaneously, transforming the traditional roles of leadership. One of the outstanding issues of the movement was the emphasis on direct action: the movement valued the empowerment of individuals and of civil society in the political process. The use of digital media by these collectives had several advantages: it did not require great economic resources, it stimulated participation as well as the search for collaborative solutions to specific problems. The creation of collaborative platforms for various queries, online petitions, the profusion of blogs and profiles on social networks are examples of new communication tools introduced by technology, leading to changes in political participation.

The occupation of Vale do Anhangabaú was very striking for the activists we interviewed, especially because of the daily coexistence with homeless people, street children, local drug dealers and crack addicts. This scenario meant that many conflicts unrelated to the camp arose and had to be administered by the activists. The encampment thus became an experience of sociability animated by all its participants. In dialogue with the first occupants of Vale do Anhangabaú, the activists incorporated them to the movement as they integrated their demands in the Ocupa Sampa agenda. During those weeks Vale do Anhangabaú changed. Besides hundreds of tents, activists hung banners, posters, debated, welcomed homeless people and street children, received food and equipment donations, built an organic mini garden on the street island, worked with the garbage, separated and recycled it. They organized themselves in working commissions, initially creating the Communication Commission, responsible for spreading the movement through online social networks and for articulating Ocupa Sampa with

⁵ All flags can be founded in one of their manifestos: <https://ocupasampa.milharal.org/nosso-manifesto/>.

the global network movement. They also formed the Infrastructure Commission; the Cultural Activities and Workshops Commission; the Feeding Commission, the Organizing of Activities Agenda Commission; the Security Commission (protecting the occupation from neo-Nazi attacks); the Welcome Commission (in charge of presenting the movement to curious people and beginners) and the Direct Action Commission (which organized external actions).

If the activists occupied and faced the city, the emergence of Ocupa Sampa did not happen without the strong articulation of digital culture. To Castells (2013), social practices and network politics are increasingly combining themselves and manifesting in urban space, generating what the author calls autonomous spaces, fluxes spaces. To Castells digital culture enables the development of companionship and to Hardt and Negri, the communication fluxes favor the development of cooperative means of life, based on the development of dynamics centered on what they call the “common”, from which the various aspects of social life can be produced as a community to be shared communally.

Equipped with power generators, computers, 3G internet, cameras, microphones and megaphones the activists promoted in the occupied public space countless educational and festive events, open assemblies, art workshops and open lectures, most of them exhibited online and live. To Jesús Martín-Barbero (2004), the key is in the *social uses of communication technologies*. According to Castells (2013), the activists reposition and amplify the online communities’ characteristics that built the internet culture: the value of free and horizontal communication and “the autonomous formation of networks as an organization tool, collective action and meaning” (2003:32). They intensively used Facebook⁶, Youtube⁷, Twitter⁸ and the movement’s blog.⁹ There is a consensus between the interviewees on the fact that Facebook was fundamental to supply the occupation with all its needs; both the movement’s autonomy and its permanence on the square owe much to the solidarity network built through the publication of necessity lists on Facebook. Water, gas, food, 3G modems, ink, blankets and electric wires: in a space where money did not circulate, all requests through social networks were promptly attended. The online conferences with other occupation movements in Brazil and in the world, the live transmission of assemblies and public lectures produced “interactive convening mechanisms” (Moraes, 2007). Experiencing it for the first time, one of the interviewees commented on the importance of this experience:

Within a month of occupation we made our first video conference below Cha Viaduct, with 3G internet, and projected it so that everybody could see. It was beautiful! We contacted Tokyo, Taiwan and Madrid, all in English. The conference that impressed me the most was Taiwan, the guys are rough! [...] The conference days were very emotional. You can observe a movement, the same as yours, from the other side of the world, through the internet. The days of the conferences were very emotional, the strength of the movement was amazing, everybody was there for the same cause; it means a lot of energy.” (Indignant 1)

The Use of Digital Media in Contemporary Political Action

The incorporation of digital media in contemporary political practices transforms the arena of debate in magnifying the number of participants, first and foremost because of the

⁶ The main Facebook pages of the movement are: Ocupa Sampa (<https://www.facebook.com/ocupasp?fref=ts>) and Ocupa Acampa Sampa (<https://www.facebook.com/OcupaSampaAcampaSampa?fref=ts>)

⁷ Ocupa Sampa Youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/acampasampa>

⁸ Twitter: <https://twitter.com/OcupaSampa>

⁹ The movement’s original blog was substitute by another, in a different platform: <https://ocupasampa.milharal.org/>

easiness with which the information moves and acts on public opinion and also because of the possibility to pressure public managers. Nonetheless the network organization stimulates the movement of ideas between different political actors, enabling the development of creative actions, something necessary to political resistance as affirmed by Hardt and Negri (2005).

A network which focuses on the capacity to inform and summon enables the decentering of politics and, as a consequence, produces an impact and resizes the traditional political structures. In this sense, the possibility of widening the discussion represents one of the most significant aspects of politics in a network. As an example, Benkler (2006) highlights the importance of social practices that use digital tools to establish conversation, collaboration and sharing in the network, opening new ways of social production.

Despite the fact that activists recognize the importance of social media in the occupation process, there are also very contradictory impressions about the importance of online social networks. An acting participant in the occupation asserted: “I spent my entire trajectory in the Ocupa totally alienated from the internet movements” (Indignant 5). Most of the interviewees recognize the importance of Facebook and Twitter to the movement but they also point out their limits and recognize the conflict derived from there. One of the problems faced by Ocupa Sampa was the organization of the Communication Commission that, in the view of many interviewees, concentrated power: they had the biggest tent, it was very closed and involved few participants. Progressively, the enchantment and potency of social networks started to generate some conflicts, the most important was about the existence of passwords to the Youtube channel, the blog and the Facebook pages. There was therefore a tension and concrete difficulty to imprint a horizontal political practice, without hierarchy.

If in the beginning and during the occupation the use of digital tools excited the campers, little by little they became conscious of their limits. An active member of the Communication Commission mentioned his discomfort concerning the use of internet during the occupation. He already thought that the digital exclusion was (and still is) huge in Brazil and that the bet on online communication prevented the occupation from taking the whole city, from going beyond Vale do Anhangabaú to the suburbs, outside the protesters and sympathizers’ social circles:

We were very concerned with the internet publications, and we ended up losing political strength, because we focused too much on our social circles, on our equals in some way. This finally plastered us, because we did not get to the right people. There was no effort for a group of people to leave and go talk in the suburbs, even though what we talked about were problems that really afflicted much more those who lived in Paraisópolis¹⁰ than those who lived in Higienópolis¹¹.

As Martín-Barbero already stressed, we have been witnessing through these movements a re-territorialization process, a new appreciation of meetings in the urban space: “in large cities the use of electronic networks constructed groups, virtual at birth, just territorializándose, from connecting to the meeting, and the meeting for action” (Martín-Barbero, 2003: 379). However, this re-territorialization happens over a new basis, since it is about the collective construction and experimentation of a “new public space, network space, sited between the urban and digital spaces, it is a space of autonomous communications” (Castells 2013:16). Because of this, the perception of conflicts and powers in Ocupa Sampa related to the communication process of the

¹⁰ Paraisópolis is the second largest slum in São Paulo with around 100 thousands inhabitants.

¹¹ Higienópolis is a traditional and sophisticated residential neighborhood located in the center region of São Paulo.

movement. This new hybrid public space was being built through the encampment with the use of the networks.

The use of web activism in Ocupa Sampa reaffirms the intimate relation between online and offline life, between “real” and “virtual”. Online practices indeed accentuate offline practices, and there is no contradiction there. The importance of the digital technology appropriation aiming at contemporary political practices is mainly in their articulation with face meetings and the appropriation of urban spaces. There is a strong relation between the use of digital tools of communication and territorial local actions, between city and cyber city, between local and global in favor of young empowering and creation. In a connected and global society, web activism allows groups and social movements to cluster individuals with different goals and claims, to extrapolate digital social networks and to go to the streets. There are two moments, one is offline and the other is online. The online moment, where Ocupa Sampa began, articulated individuals and publicized the movement, the offline moment consists in occupation of streets and squares, face meetings, exchange, and collective advances. These are the moments when the movement reaches its goal.

From Occupy Sampa (2011) to the June Days (2013)

In June 2013, Movimento Passe Livre, an active participant in the two-month occupation of Ocupa Sampa, organized demonstrations that started the so-called *June Journeys*, a movement initiated in São Paulo against the rising price of public transport. Ocupa Sampa can thus be considered as a kind of laboratory of new social and political practices, since the intense use of digital media allowed the widening of participation and the inclusion of new subjects in the political debate.



Photo: Movimento Passe Livre, 02/06/13

At the center of the debate, the precarious conditions of life in São Paulo city articulated the claims of many collectives in the city: urban mobility is one of the main problems. Our data has shown that the demonstrations occurring in June 2013 were a result of a mobilization process developed during the previous years. In this sense, the “June Journeys” (*Jornadas de Junho*) of 2013 proved the intimate relation between online and offline life. Besides, we now know that the use of blogs and other social networks by activists are tools, rather than an end in itself, and that

online practices accentuate offline practices. We also verified that there is a strong relation between the use of digital tools of communication and local actions, between city and cybercity, between local and global in favor of an empowerment of political subjects that are transforming social practices. Therefore, we consider Ocupa Sampa as one of the first laboratories of these new political practices.

There are possible explanations for this phase of intense social movements, which should be considered as a transition from traditional practices to new political practices. This new activism arises from a combination of several things: the practices of political actors in traditional organizations, networks with decentralized and collective practices, and groups that still have a hierarchy in dynamic discussion and deliberação.

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