PART III

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Thirty years of Internet development. Lessons for Democracy: Internet as an opportunity for democratization of social life

Trzydzieści lat rozwoju Internetu. Lekcje dla demokracji: Internet jako szansa na demokratyzację życia społecznego

Abstract: This year marks thirty years since Tim Berners Lee launched the Internet as the public domain on August 6, 1991. This date is symbolic because the Internet was already operational for almost a year as an internal domain in the CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) near Geneva. Berners Lee wanted to standardize forms of electronic communication within the centre, and incidentally, opened at the same time, a new development in the history of social communication. The Internet over these 30 years has revolutionized social communication and all areas of human life. It has allowed people who previously could not speak to express their opinions, to actively influence discourse in the public sphere and even, in some cases, to reconfigure entire political systems in individual countries. In the following article I would like to look at how the information revolution has changed the forms of political communication and examine, to the extent that the synthetic formula of a scientific article allows it, whether the Internet has become a new opportunity for the democratisation of social life and to what extent this has happened.
Keywords: Internet development, public sphere, civil society, new forms of social communication, new social movements

Abstrakt: W tym roku mija trzydzieści lat od momentu, gdy 6 sierpnia 1991 roku Tim Berners Lee uruchomił Internet jako domenę publiczną. Data ta jest symboliczna, ponieważ Internet działał już od prawie roku jako domena wewnętrzna w CERN (Europejska Organizacja Badań Jądrowych) pod Genewą. Berners Lee chciał ustandaryzować formy komunikacji elektronicznej wewnątrz ośrodka, a przy okazji otworzył w tym samym czasie nowy etap w historii komunikacji społecznej. Internet w ciągu tych 30 lat zrewolucjonizował komunikację społeczną i wszystkie dziedziny ludzkiego życia. Pozwolił ludziom, którzy wcześniej nie mogli zabierać publicznie głosu, wyrażać swoje opinie, aktywnie wpływać na dyskurs w sferze publicznej, a nawet, w niektórych przypadkach, rekonfigurować całe systemy polityczne w poszczególnych krajach. W poniższym artykule chciałbym przyjrzeć się temu, w jaki sposób rewolucja informacyjna zmieniła formy komunikacji politycznej oraz zbadać, na ile pozwala na to syntetyczna formuła artykułu naukowego, czy Internet stał się nową szansą na demokratyzację życia społecznego i w jakim stopniu tak się stało.
Słowa kluczowe: rozwój Internetu, sfera publiczna, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, nowe formy komunikacji społecznej, nowe ruchy społeczne

The Internet has radically changed social communication, including political, because it has allowed people who were previously excluded from social discourse to have a voice. It created a platform through which they could join the previously strictly controlled communication process, and thus speak out much more effectively in the public forum regarding the issues of social life. Before the Internet, the production and distribution of information was handled by narrow media conglomerates, and the flow of information was tightly controlled, which in itself, as Habermas showed, had a primarily negative effect because the narrow interest groups behind the production and distribution of information had an almost exclusive influence on the shaping of social discourse. Ultimately, therefore, authentic public debate, which is a prerequisite for the existence of a civic public sphere, has been replaced by the self-presentation of privileged private interests which had dominated the commercialized discourse (Habermas, 2007, p. 357-358).

As Glasgow Media Group's research has shown, even serious and socially legitimate protests against Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal policies related to the social consequences of the restructuring of the mining industry could be portrayed as unjustified, for example by manipulating news coverage to portray the protesters' aggressiveness as the primary motivation for their action, diverting the attention of news audiences from the causes of the protests (Eldridge, 1995, p. 31-32). However, acts of violence as marginal in the scale of the protests became dominant in the consciousness of the viewers, and the re-editing of the research, attempting after years to see how the protests were socially remembered, showed that the message generated by the broadcasters became a generalized interpretation of the facts of the past, imposing at the same time certain interpretative frames defined by the intention of the broadcasters.

I am writing about this to show some important qualitative change associated with the spread of the Internet as a communication tool. This is because the Internet has dramatically changed the models of communication between broadcasters and their audiences, allowing for greater objectivity in the presentation of facts and at least greater opportunities for the involvement of these audiences in various social initiatives. In other words, it allowed to bypass censorship or restrictions imposed by media broadcasters or various interest groups including the nation state in the process of creation and distribution of information. As a consequence of the above, it strengthened the transparency of transmitted information.

The Internet presents therefore, to some extent, a solution to the dilemma described by researchers from Glasgow, who in their time concluded, referring to the lack of objectivity of the content presented in the media, that it is impossible to objectively present information in a multilateral manner at a time when some who have an impact on production and distribution of this information are the ones who are not interested about this process

(Eldridge, 1995, p. 37-38). Ultimately, then, one can venture to conclude that the Internet has had a positive impact on democratizing the transmission and distribution of information.

The sum of praise for the Internet's impact on the functioning of modern societies must be balanced by the objective presentation of the negative social consequences of the development of this communication tool. The Internet is, to use a metaphor, a double-edged sword. On the one hand it allows to strengthen the communication potential and thus enables more effective development of the public sphere, but on the other hand it is only a tool that can be used by a number of social actors to achieve different, sometimes conflicting particular interests, also to conflict communities or even be a tool used for anti-democratic radicalization or spreading ideologies that contradict the generally accepted social order. The development of this medium has also benefited groups spreading radical ideologies such as right-wing extremists, Islamists and neo-Nazis, to name the most transparent examples. In addition, concerns about individual autonomy, the objectivity of transmitted knowledge or ultimately new techniques for the persuasive manipulation of needs and choices (Zuboff, 2019, p. 352) or even the planning of whole societies of behavioural social engineering (Ruciman, 2018, p. 8), all draw new maps of the risks associated with the development of the Internet.

However, I want to focus now primarily on the opportunities the Internet provides for pro-democracy initiatives that aim to positively influence the development of debate in the public sphere. It seems that such an important turning point, demonstrating the aggregating power of the Internet in social discontent, occurred when the United States and its allies organised mass protests against military intervention in Iraq.

On February 15, 2003, a broad coalition of anti-globalist organizations prearranged and carried out a series of anti-war protests in over 600 cities around the world. The organizational success was possible precisely due to the aggregating potential of new electronic means of communication, especially the Internet and the dynamically developing mobile digital telephony. While the official media lacked information about the protests in the making, a coalition of anti-war organizations made effective use of new forms of electronic communication. In many cases, the demonstrations gathered crowds of over a million protesters. The nation-state was unable to effectively minimize the flow of information because it did not have sufficient control over the means of electronic information distribution, which in turn was effectively used by the protesters.

Although the war began just over a month later, the moral backlash, on a scale never seen before, made it clear to those representing the nation-state as well as those representing civil society that the time for absolute control of information by agencies representing national, corporate, or more broadly the interests of influential media conglomerates in a form considered the seemingly unassailable standard has come to an end. It is worth adding that already several years before the described protest, and also later, a coalition of

movements contesting the globalization processes based on the neoliberal model of the world economy have been able to prepare and effectively organize a number of social protests, sometimes on a spectacular scale, such as the protests in Seatle in 1999, Prague in 2000, Genoa in 2001, or Gleneagles in 2005, to name just the more important ones due to their publicity. Activists of the Coalition of Movements for Alternative Globalization effectively protested against the negative consequences of globalization, creating huge spheres of exclusion, economic neoliberalism, as well as against elites, which they saw as lacking political legitimacy and anti-democratic in principle (Starr, 2005, p. 19-20). By organizing the protests they wanted to revitalize the public debate in the sense given to it much earlier by Habermas and expressed in the concept of the civic public sphere. In other words, they wanted to create conditions for initiating a new public debate on sustainable social development that would combine private interest with the public one. What is important in all this is that the Internet has served as a tool for effective communication, publicity and coordination of activities (More, 2005, p. 38-39).

As the classical media of social communication lost the exclusivity to create and distribute information, social actors who previously would not have had the chance to be heard had more opportunities to have their voices heard and their views socially publicized and popularized (More, 2005, p. 40). All this potential initially had mainly moral value. By stigmatizing irregularities and demanding change, social actors were able to impose certain forms of discourse in the public sphere that had not previously had a chance to exist. These activities, publicized and coordinated via the Internet, allowed information about particular activities or issues to reach the general public, and showed new horizons of communication opportunities opening up to web users (Dejneka, 2016, p. 403).

Two days after the demonstrations against the war in Iraq, Patrick Tyler's article *A New Power in the Streets* appeared in The New York Times (Tyler, 17 February 2003, p. *The New York Times*). Reflecting on the power of mobilizing world public opinion, Tyler pointed to the great importance of anti-war demonstrations in potentially delaying the preparation of military action by the U.S. government and its allies. He compares these to the great acts of social mobilization of the past, i.e. the Spring of Nations of 1848 and the bloodless revolution of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe. The conclusion, paradoxically contained in the form of the initial thesis of the article, states that we may be faced with two superpowers on the communication scene of modern times. One superpower is the United States, but the other is the world public opinion, which has a moderating influence on the actions of the former (Tyler, 17 February 2003: *The New York Times*).

The term "second superpower" was used in his analyses by James F. More a few weeks later when he published an online article entitled *The Second Superpower Rears in*

Beautiful Head[1]. The article serves as one of the first academic texts on the role of the Internet in the effective aggregation of social demands towards the state. The article was subsequently published in 2005 as a chapter in a creative commons online book titled *Exrtreme Democracy.* This second super power, as previously in Tyler's case, is the power of world public opinion, which, through new communication possibilities associated with the development of the Internet, becomes a real force controlling the conduct of nation-state power.

More showed the new potential of the Internet as an aggregator of public demands, which in his eyes became a "second superpower," separate from and sometimes opposed to the first power, that of the nation-state, in his article identified with the United States of America. The latter was to correct the anti-democratic inclinations of the former, and not subject to the simple control of the nation-state. As he points out:

There is an emerging second superpower, but it is not a nation. Instead, it is a new form of international player, constituted by the "will of the people" in a global social movement. The beautiful but deeply agitated face of this second superpower is the worldwide peace campaign, but the body of the movement is made up of millions of people concerned with a broad agenda that includes social development, environmentalism, health, and human rights (More, 2005, p. 37). It is especially the Internet communication technologies that were supposed to enable effective communication between citizens, who were the actors of this game, contesting the decisions of the state, as the author points out elsewhere and on a global scale (More, 2005, p. 38). In this context James F. More can also be considered an important initiator of the debate on the role of civil society in developing democratic consensus and the role of new forms of communication in this process, especially mobile telephony and the Internet. More believes that new technologies have given public opinion a global character, and by constituting it on a global scale we can observe the birth of an innovative form of democratic participation that changes the classical understanding of democracy and civic participation in community affairs, based on the concept of deliberative democracy (More, 2005, p. 39). According to the author, the Internet and other interactive media are progressively penetrating the global communication space by enabling the conditions for continuous interpersonal communication and dialogue on a global scale. The collective power of new forms of communication is thus an important new complement to traditional forms of participation (More, 2005, p. 38).

Referring his remarks to the United States (which, in my opinion, we can currently interpret as an explication of the contemporary democratic system), the author points to the fact that the world public opinion that is just forming reveals a new form of "emerging democracy" that differs from traditional forms of participatory democracy (More, 2005,

p. 38). While in the traditional sense participation in political processes is mainly practiced through electoral laws and voting procedure, in the new just emerging variant of the so-called "emerging democracy" participation in political processes is continuous and mediated by the possibilities created by new forms of communication. In the first model, deliberation involves a small group of elected or appointed representatives speaking and making decisions. In the second, it is a component of individual discernment and understanding of events undertaken by individual social actors on the basis of their understanding of events, communication with other actors, deciding when and on what terms to participate in certain events or processes concerning the community. Consequently, while in the first model participation in democratic processes seems remote or even unattainable for most citizens, in the "emerging democracy" participation is understand as a process of direct involvement of citizens in community life (More, 2005, p. 39). We could even say that its characteristic feature lays in direct participation in the consensus-building and decision-making process. In a sense, then, More's diagnosis postulates a certain pragmatic return to the concept of direct democracy. Here, the bottom-up pressure of social actors in the form of various kinds of initiatives can have a great influence on the final shape of the arrangements for community life. In this particular case, it happens through the aggregating potential of new forms of communication.

It is worth mentioning that the discussions that took place at that time, showed the Internet primarily as a tool that can contest the established forms of politics and builds forms alternative to those proposed at the national state level. Undoubtedly, the so-called new social movements of the first decade of the 21st century used innovative communication tools quite effectively in their attempts to create alternative political proposals to those offered by the nation-state. This is because the spread of the Internet has created opportunities to involve ordinary citizens in a common debate on particular issues considered to be socially important. With new publicity opportunities, the public could be mobilized in a short period of time to act on particular challenges faced by their communities. It also meant that more people interested in a given issue could work together on new solutions. This, in turn, meant that a consensus could be reached that included a larger number of proposals, and thus better represents the general interest. In this sense, the Internet has become a tool that has helped to revitalize the public sphere and the social participation of the individual in community affairs.

Manuel Castells argues that the new forms of political activism associated with the development of network social movements build a new kind of participation in collective life through the possibility of creating what he calls "spheres of autonomy," in which dissatisfaction is transformed through collective attempts to exert pressure on the social system in order to modify it (Castells, 2015, p. 250). In these spheres, dissatisfaction is transformed into collective attempts to exert pressure on the social system from below in

order to modify it. The author describes this as a certain new pattern of social interaction, which in its essence has a hybrid character. As he writes:

The use of Internet and mobile communication networks is essential, but the networking form is multimodal. It includes social networks online and ofline, as well as pre-existing social networks, and networks formed during the actions of the movement. These networks not only function within the movement, they connect participants to other movements around the world, to the online blogosphere, to the media, and to society at large. Networking technologies are meaningful because they provide the platform for this continuing, expansive networking practice that evolves with the changing shape of the movement. Although movements are usually rooted in urban space through occupations and street demonstrations, their ongoing existence takes place in the free space of the Internet (Castells, 2015, p. 249).

The author focuses primarily on the relationship between the technologies that are creating new forms of communication allowing for the revival of deliberative discourse procedures and the actual spaces that are either occupied or are sites of concentration for disgruntled participants in networked protests, which he calls 'networks of outrage and hope' in the title of his book. This outrage can be understood as a collaborative effort of participation effectively transformed into a pragmatic tool for change. This is due to their ability to offer alternative forms of deliberative discourse. As these movements are inherently networked they can afford to lack an identifiable centre, while providing coordination and communication functions through multi-level interaction (Castells, 2015: 249). As a consequence of this new communication order, these movements do not need an official centre of leadership, command and control or a vertical organization to disseminate information or instructions (Castells, 2015, p. 249).

The success of the new forms of political engagement described by Castells has been possible due to the effective use of the possibility of aggregating resentment from the existing situation as a result of using new communication technologies. The author describes many examples of the effective use of the aggregative potential of new media applied in order to maximise opportunities for movement participation, including the possibility of creating movements that can reach the entire population through the opportunities offered by these open communication networks, which have no defined boundaries and whose essence is to reconfigure according to the level of engagement. (Castells, 2015, p. 249). Thus, this involvement can be local, but it can also take the form of a spontaneous movement involving the entire population.

In his studies he focuses on descriptions of particular movements and their social impact, assuming that the value of these movements lays in correcting the mainstream discourse conducted in the public sphere and disseminated by traditional media and traditional forms of politics. The 'spheres of autonomy' he describes allow for independent

creation and expression of views also through direct actions, for example through the occupation of certain specific (urban) spaces that become their emblems.

His descriptions are very valuable, as they show new forms of politics in a world where trust in validity of traditionally understood politics, representation and the very concept of representative democracy are in retreat (Castells, 2015, p. XI), primarily as a consequence of the electorate losing trust in its representatives in the traditionally understood model of representativeness (Castells, 2015, p. 252). By assumption, the role of these movements is to rebuild that trust through new forms of engagement built from the bottom up (Castells, 2015, p. 251-252).

The very notion of autonomy presented by Castells has a broader cultural dimension. For, according to the author, this concept refers not only and not so much to the existential autonomy of the subject (negative freedom), but rather, in line with the concept of Isaiah Berlin, to the concept of positive freedom (Berlin, 1969). According to this thinking, the concept of autonomy can refer to a social subject's ability to become a subject by defining its social actions around a project built independently of society's institutions, according to the values and interests of the social subject (Castells, 2015, p. 259). Importantly, autonomy understood in this way is made possible by the mediating nature of the Web, which allows individual actors to build their autonomy zones with like-minded people. The Internet thus provides an organizational communication platform for translating the culture of freedom into the practice of autonomy (Castells, 2015, p. 259), which the author understands in terms of Berlin's positive freedom.

This thinking coincides with the concept of the ideal type of effective communication process in the public sphere, in which the media is supposed to objectify information. Although not without reservations. It should be noted that Habermas himself is rather sceptical about the possibility of the Internet's significant impact on discourse in the public sphere, or to put it another way: he believes that "the use of the Internet has led to the expansion and fragmentation of communication networks (Habermas, 2009, p. 53). Thus, the importance of opinion formers so important to traditional mass media has declined. On the one hand, the Internet has caused an increase in communicative egalitarianism, but on the other hand it has enabled the public to have wide access to information that is not subject to preliminary editing (Habermas, 2009, p. 53). In turn, this has a very significant impact on changing the traditional communication model.

In the traditional model of civic public sphere, the dispersed and anonymous public of the political community had access to standardized information available to everyone. Despite the dangers laying behind this form of information creation and distribution, such distribution (standardized messages) resulted in the standardization of communication networks and thus in the transfer of previously standardized information to critical audiences. Thus, they were able to refer critically to the same sources of information. In the

model characterized by the communication of new media, due to the wide access of the audience to all kinds of information, the importance of opinion forming centers is minimized, including the role of intellectuals, who in the traditional model played a very important role of moderators of discourse (Habermas, 2009, p. 53). Thus, the process of information flow fragmentation may adversely affect the objectivity of messages. Habermas was concerned about the downgrading of news coverage in fragmented information networks. However, he did not pay due attention to the fact that in an era of communication dominated by electronic exchange, information can be distributed effectively bypassing the media conglomerates that shape its final forms, which has an enormous impact on the new understanding of politics and communication and creates new forms of social mobilization. Therefore, he did not foresee how effective the new communication networks could be in the process of deliberation and the formation of opinions regarding the issues of community life.

Returning now to the theme of the development of new forms of communication, it should be noted that a further revolution in this area occurred at about the same time that More proposes his concept of an "emerging democracy" based on new forms of popular participation made possible by the rapid development of information technologies and their mass dissemination. It is a consequence of the emergence and spread of social networks. In 2004 Facebook was created, in 2005 YouTube, in 2006 Twitter, to name the most significant ones. These fundamentally changed social communication. With the new communication tools, it was possible not only to send information in text form via mobile phone, but also to transmit communications from people directly involved in various events (including social protests), bypassing the mainstream news channels and their information-selection constraints. It is widely believed that the use of Facebook by Barack Obama in his first presidential campaign in 2007/2008 helped him engage many young Americans who had lost confidence in the procedures of representative democracy in the electoral process (Jackson, K.M, Dorton, H., Heindl B, *The Journal of American Culture*, 33 (1) March 2010,).The nearly three million friends on Facebook as well as the effective use of YouTube and Twitter platforms by campaign staff and young Internet users contributed significantly to Obama's ultimate electoral success (Harfoursh, 2009). Twitter and YouTube, for example, were effectively used by Iranians dissatisfied with the outcome of the June 2009 elections, who used these tools to organize anti-government social protests. A YouTube video showing the death of a young woman, Nada Soltan, who was fatally shot during anti-government protests and whose last moments of life were watched by millions of people on the Internet, further radicalized the attitudes of those protesting the election result and became an iconographic symbol of those protests, at the same time showing the moral bankruptcy of the regime *(Neda: An Iranian Martyr,* BBC Documentary). In 2011, the world could observe a series of revolts against authoritarian power in the Middle East called the *Jasmine Revolution*. These protests, which were only partially successful and liberalized the policies of

individual countries, were organized and coordinated through the effective use of new electronic communication. In the autumn of 2012, the effective use of social networking sites by Internet activists in Poland and Germany made it possible to block ACTA legislation introducing broader control of the Internet (*Thousands march in Poland over Acta internet treat,* 26 January 2012: *BBC*). In the winter of 2013-2014, through direct reports from online activists and live online broadcasts from Kiev's *Maidan* by many activists using new media, it was possible to massify the protests and also to document the tragic course of events that took place there. In particular, the senseless deaths of defenseless young people, deliberately murdered by masked snipers transmitted live online, moved the world public opinion and largely determined the downfall of the regime of Viktor Yanukovych. Without the possibilities created by the Internet, the protest would probably have been suppressed, relations from *Maidan* would have been cut short and the tragic reports would have been censored. Largely due to new communication abilities enabling greater transparency of information flow, the protesters managed to publicize the protest, engage hundreds of thousands of people in the area of Kiev's *Maidan*, motivate them to defend the fledgling civil society, and ultimately succeed. In all the cases cited above as exemplary illustrations of the growth of social relevance and effectiveness as measured by the achieved success of the planned strategy of action and expressed by a number of actors within the framework of the so-called civil disobedience movements, we observed the range of civic protests having been organised in order to rebuild or, as it happened, for example, in Ukraine, build a civil society from scratch.

A good example of the process of the rise of new forms of political activism in the Internet age is presented by the Spanish civic movement *Podemos*, speaking out against the financial austerity imposed on Spain by the European Union in order to minimize its budget deficit and against the widespread corruption and nepotism of political life in Spain. *Podemos*, whose name means movement for participatory democracy, was founded on January 16, 2014 by social activists who want to restore the principle of citizen participation in the social life of the state. The driving force here was also the desire to build an electoral committee before the European Parliament elections in May 2014. By using Facebook to recruit members of the social movement, it was possible to gain 50,000 members in the first day[2] and 100,000 in the first twenty days of activity[3]. *Podemos* eventually formed an electoral committee and won 12% of the vote in the European Parliament elections, becoming the fourth political force to represent Spain in the European Parliament, just four months after its creation. After Spain's general elections in December 2015, it was the third political force in

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[2] Pablo, I. (2014). *Consigue en un día los 50.000 apoyos que pedía para seguir adelante con Podemos,* 19 January 2014: *El Periódico*).

[3] *Podemos ya es la tercera fuerza en afiliados con 100.000 registrados*, 17 August 2014: *Público.*

the country with almost 21% of the seats, shattering the division of parliamentary power that had been in place for decades between the left and the right[4]. Moreover, with about 400000 members, it became *Podemos* the second largest political party in Spain. The party, which did not exist two years before, became almost overnight one of the most significant political forces in the life of the country. A party that had not existed two years earlier became almost overnight one of the most significant political forces in the life of this country. It seems that the phenomenal rise of this movement lies in the democratic potential of the Internet base communication. By making effective use of the possibilities of the new electronic media and the procedures of direct democracy, including in particular the development of consensus on community issues during regularly organized meetings in local communities, the movement has managed to gain the public trust of voters disaffected with traditional forms of politics[5]. In the case of *Podemos*, a very important strategy proved to be precisely these meetings, where each of the attendees could speak, or suggest topics to be discussed in the forum. The feeling of security and the creation of a sense of autonomy for the assembled, as described by Castells, was as important in this case as the use of new forms of communication with the electorate to sustain interest in the movement and public involvement in its activities. Described earlier, the method of hybridizing communication techniques has become a very effective for building alternative forms of politics. What is extremely important, however, is the smooth transition from communication and building movement structures at the local level, with their own, to use Castells' vocabulary, "zones of autonomy," to effective action at the level of society as a whole. It should be noted, however, that *Podemos* probably would not have been founded without the previous experience of building spheres of autonomy by the social movement *Indignadas*, which, starting from 2011, both locally, regionally and at the level of the nation state, has been involved in attempts to develop alternative forms of representative democracy in Spain. Without this initiative, which has developed tools of hybrid electronic and direct communication, occupation of public spaces, and an elaborate theoretical discourse on the need to reform the system of representative democracy, the success of *Podemos* would probably have been less certain or even impossible.

Despite the massive public support for the *Indignadas*, manifested for example by the widespread participation of Spaniards in protests against corruption and the oligarchization of power (Castells, 2015, p. 117-118), the movement has failed to have a significant corrective effect on the policies of the Spanish government. It was not until the creation of *Podemos* as a political force that the status quo significantly changed. The formalization of social demands through the creation of a mainstream political force drawing on the *Indignadas'*

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[4] *P. Iglesias (2015). How the leader of the leftist Podemos party upset Spain's elites to reach the brink of power,* 25 December 2015: *The Independent.*

[5] *Spain rally: Podemos holds Madrid mass 'March for Change'* , 31 January 2015, *BBC.*

social discontent capital, using the communication techniques already developed, allowed a new political force to emerge in the public space. For all its social capital, however, the *Indignadas* have never been a formalized social movement with an explicit political program (Castells, 2015, p. 125). Its actions and speeches were motivated by a sense of profound social injustice, and its spontaneous participation in protests against the government, a kind of largely powerless protest by a discredited majority. Castells, who studied the phenomenon of the *Indignadas* wrote:

There was a general opinion in the movement that politicians lived in their own, closed, privileged world, indifferent to people's needs, manipulating the elections and the electoral law to perpetuate their power as a political class. 'They do not represent us' is probably the most popular and certainly the most fundamental slogan from the movement. Because if there is no real representation, there is no democracy, and the institutions have to be reconstructed from the bottom up[…]' (Castells, 2015, p. 127).

The basic intention of the movement was to transform an ineffective system into a functioning system of authentic representative democracy,[6] but it was only through the formalization of political action that *Podemos* was able to effectively emerge as an influential social movement implementing the demands of the *Indignadas*.

The basis of *Podemos'* success has been the skilful use of electronic communication tools to establish the movement and amplify its political message in a situation of decreasing trust in politicians representing major political parties and decreasing confidence in the effectiveness of traditional forms of politics associated with representative democracy, which according to the protesters no longer fulfils its functions(Castells, 2015, p. 263). However, it was not so much a question of an absolute contestation of the concept of representative democracy as of restoring a certain balance between the concept of representativeness and the praxis of social life(Castells, 2015, p. 263).

Another example that illustrates the pro-social capital of the Internet is the way it helped amplify and publicize the proto-protests of black Americans against racial violence in the early 2020s in the United States. At the time, there were a number of what could be called spectacular, though the word is probably not the most accurate, racially motivated murders.

The most notorious were the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery Tony McDade and Breonna Taylor. In two cases, these murders were recorded by bystanders and reported through social media (George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery).

Just as in the case of the murder of Nada Soltan in Iran in 2009, the sight of these murders has moved public opinion in the United States and has contributed to public statements against institutional racism and all forms of discrimination against minorities. Georg Floyd became the symbol of these protests. Arrested by police officers for allegedly

possessing counterfeit money, which he had used a short time earlier during a shopping spree, he was overpowered, knocked to the ground and then forcibly held in that position. The situation lasted over eight minutes. During this time Floyd asked, many of times the officer holding him to relieve the pressure on his neck, as he could not breathe. The policeman repeatedly ignored the incapacitated man's pleas. As a result of being forcibly restrained by the police officer, Floyd died, as consequence of suffocation. Footage showing the last minutes of the black man's life, repeatedly trying to say he could not breathe, sparked first national then also international protests. Floyd's last words " I CAN'T BREATHE" became a catchphrase commonly used during the demonstrations.

The problem of race relations in the United States once again surfaced on the public agenda and became one of the most important social discourses of 2020, in the United States. Black citizens, according to statistics, are twice as likely to be killed by a police officer when unarmed than their white co-citizens (Belko, Washington Post: May 29). A 2015 study, for example, found that African-Americans statistically die at the hands of police at a rate of 7.2 per million when whites at a rate of 2.9 per million. (Bui, Coates, Matthay: 2018) It is not only about statistics, which speak for themselves, but also about the fact that once again, due to the pro-social use of the Internet, the problem was widely publicised. The organisation itself, which should rather be defined as a decentralised social movement, was founded in 2013 by black women activists after the murder investigation of Trayvon Martin, a black man murdered by a white supremacist on his way home from a nearby supermarket, was dropped. The court's verdict in the face of clear evidence of a crime committed by a white man sparked a wave of protest. It was then that the BLM movement was born. Initially, the slogan Black Life Matter was used as a hashtag to organise nationwide protests via social media. However, it soon became synonymous with the movement for social justice and equal treatment before the law for all US citizens. Since then, the movement has organised national pickets and protests to fight racism, especially institutional racism. The protests have attracted a lot of public attention, particularly in tragic moments when, again and again, cases of murders of defenceless black people by both ordinary white people and police forces were revealed.

The year 2020 was special because in two cases of so-called unlawful killing, ordinary citizens were able to witness the last moments of the lives of senselessly murdered African-Americans Floyd, and Arbery. The latter's misfortune was that he decided to practice running in a white neighbourhood, where he was subsequently shot dead by white supremacists following him in a car. All of this was captured by the camera of a car that was following the whites at the time, and after the shocking footage was released, it further helped to amplify the debate in the public sphere and the series of institutional actions taken by the new White House administration. As with the death of Nada Soltan in Iran , the public reaction to the similarly senselessly aborted existences of Floyd and Arbery was

almost immediate. However, while in Iran, due to the authoritarian system and the state's control over the majority of citizens' activities undertaken in the social space, ultimately the impact of these lost lives on the functioning of the state was small. In the case of a democratic society, however, there was widespread social mobilisation, which revealed the scale of racism in US and mobilised both citizens and, as a consequence of their pressure, the state to act. The systemic reforms of police forces, especially their training, the use of certain techniques and practices typical of the process of apprehending suspects, have been updated. Also importantly, the trials in both cases were widely covered by the traditional media of social communication, especially the press and TV networks, which in itself contributed to a general national debate on social cohesion, or rather its poor condition. In a sense, therefore, the digital activities triggered a nationwide social mobilization and the discourse was picked up and amplified by the commercial media, and, most importantly, the necessary reforms were undertaken.

…

In the examples above, the collective power of new media on both a local and supra-local scale proved to be an essential element of the strategy that led to the eventual partial or total success of the activities undertaken. Particularly important in this respect seems to be the use of electronic communication as a tools for the constitution of social movements and the amplification of their political message, which has a significant impact on the discourse taking place in the public sphere. Thus, in the activities of the new movements of social discontent, can we discern attempts (sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful) at revitalising the discourse of the public sphere? Can new forms of political activism that use hybrid forms of communication to publicize irregularities and commit actions to level them, be considered as a exemplification of the success of democratic potential of the Internet?

According to Castells, the new social movements of the Internet age are primarily concerned with restoring the bearing and authenticity of the procedures that allow democracy per se to function effectively. Thus, as the author states:

'Movements do not object to the principle of representative democracy, but denounce the practice of such democracy as it is today, and do not recognize its legitimacy'(Castell, 2015, p. 263).

Therefore, if this diagnosis is correct, and it seems to be the case, and if the essence of democracy lies in the transparent proceeding of matters concerning the community in its public life, then the importance of this type of movements undoubtedly points to a new dimension of the presentation of social discontent in the public space and of the effectiveness of the proceeding of a certain concept of political activism which aims to restore the authentic value of the concept of representative democracy. Contemporary movements of discontent, contesting the status quo, usually exhaust their potential after the achievement of their goals or when certain forms of ritualized practices lose their carrying capacity. What

seems important, however, is that they are an expression of a certain need to correct the discourse conducted in the public sphere and concerning the essence of the prevailing social order and a voice calling for a certain correction of the political course. Importantly, this is increasingly effective.

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