Review of the Book: "Tweets and the Streets" by Paolo Gerbaudo

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GERBAUDO, Paolo (2012). Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism. Pluto Press. London.

In "Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism" (GERBAUDO, 2012), the sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo (Lecturer in Digital Culture and Society, Department of Media, Culture and Creative Industries, King's College London) addresses the question of how communication for digital media intersects with the public rallies that were held in public spaces during the mass protests of 2011 — in Cairo, Madrid and New York.

The author draws on the concept of "popular" as employed by Ernesto Laclau in "On populist reason" (LACLAU, 2013) to define these protests as popular in so far as they are applied to the people and made up of the inhabitants of the localities where the protests occurred.

In the three public spaces that are the focal point of the study, Gerbaudo argues that the use of digital media by political activists as a tool for organizing and mobilizing a popular uprising for direct political action in the streets, follows a functional specialization. In this division of the functions of the corporate digital networks, Facebook took on the role of forming groups, establishing flexible, intersubjective alliances and arranging for content, cognitive symbols and guidelines for mass demonstrations. As well as this, its role included stirring up popular crowds and enabling them to form a sense of identity even as a crowd.

With regard to Twitter, it had the logistical function of operating protests in real time which involved scheduling the timetable, venues, dates and other details for organizing political action in public spaces, which had already been planned in advance by Facebook. Finally, You Tube and the photographic sites linked to Twitter (Yfrog, Flickr e Twitpic) were assigned the task of detecting and disseminating any sign of political activity and the events surrounding the activities at the same time as they took place.

However, the author seeks to understand the social significance of the social media, as well as their technical and operational importance in forming groups and organizing political activities. With this aim in mind, he seeks to analyze this phenomenon by comparing its historical and contextual configurations.

Thus the use of digital media by contemporary activists is akin to Lenin's classical analysis of a party political newspaper as a "collective agitator, propagandist and organizer" (LENIN, 1902, 1969). Like the old pamplets of the workers' movement, the corporate digital networks not only convey abstract opinions but give shape to the way the political players think and act in concert by choreographing collective action.

On the basis of this analogy, Gerbaudo sets out to explore questions such as: 1) What constitutive principles of digital networks such as flexibility, multiplicity and the formation of strategic alliances can provide testimony about the popular movements of 2011?; and 2) How can communicative practices made possible by digital media reflect the different ways the contemporary movements are organized?

In the light of this aim, a quantitative analysis is conducted of the active use of digital social media in the popular movements of 2011 that focuses on the role these media play in mobilizing collective action. The book begins with an investigation of the "Arab Spring" and the use of digital social media by activists in the Egyptian uprising. Following this, there is a discussion about how the organizing model and political action in Tahrir Square was adapted and changed in the context of the "indignados" [outraged] in Spain. Finally, the discussion concludes with an examination of the use of social media in the "Occupy Movement", in the United States, and the difficulties experienced in interacting between the on-line communication and the base station — a conflict which characterized the emergence of this movement.

In empirical and methodological terms, these different social movements involve a diachronic analysis which takes account of the different stages of progress of each one. In particular, it notes the range of meaning and modes of appropriation of digital social media in the social, historical and cultural contexts that apply to each of these popular movements.

At the same time, a methodological decision has been made in this analysis to establish an ethnographic research framework which includes 80 interviews with activists who have become reconciled to the idea of systematic observations of popular demonstrations in public spaces and mainly those held in Egypt, Spain and the United States. However, this quantitative analysis sets out from the standpoint of the activists themselves.

With regard to the question of theoretical choices, the lines of interpretation pursued in the research converge in a perspective that is opposed to the essentialist views of the digital social media. These handle them in an abstract manner without taking account of their ability to intervene in specific geographical places of action, as well as failing to note how these media are rooted in the culture of the social movements that adopt them.

The author takes an opposite view and suggests that the key factor in understanding the role of the social media in contemporary social movements is their capacity to mediate and interact with the emerging forms of aggregated public data. The argument of Gerbaudo is that social media have been largely responsible for choreographing popular mobilization as a symbolic, cognitive and discursive creation of public space which fosters a wide extension and individualization of the electoral constituency.

However, this introduction of social media into the popular movements has not resulted in a situation of absolute spontaneity or unrestricted democratic participation. On the contrary, the activists who were responsible for coordinating the movements in Facebook, and the other corporate social networks have become moderate leaders or choreographers who are now defining the creation of an emotional space within which political action can unfold.

Bibliographical References   708

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