
SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNITY INCUBATOR

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DOI: 10.35782/JCPP.2019.4.01

Abstract: *The emergence of the Internet and, consequently, of social media brought into the area of human interaction a set of transformations with a historical dimension. In the last ten years, the information society has become an expanding reality. There are countless possibilities for communication and exchanges of ideas, including among scientists, such as: forums, blogs, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), text, audio and video conferencing applications (WhatsApp, Windows Live, Skype, etc.). The main objective of this study is to highlight, through the ethnographic method (observation and interviews), the study of the initiation and organization of virtual communities that manifest in the public space through protest movements. It aims also to point out the role that socialization platforms have in forming spontaneous solidarities and in shaping the civic engagement.*

Keywords: *social media, virtual communities, protest movements, Facebook, #REZIST*

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and, consequently, of social media brought into the area of human interaction a set of transformations with a *historical* dimension. This label, while it may seem exaggerated, is reinforced by the remark often encountered in different types of conversation, namely: *How did I manage to solve things before I had a smartphone or a tablet?* The Internet represents, in advanced societies, ubiquitous and all-knowing instrument, gradually appearing to become also all-mighty.

In the last ten years, the information society has become an expanding reality. There are countless possibilities for communication and exchanges of ideas, including among scientists, such as: forums, blogs, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), text, audio and video conferencing applications (WhatsApp, Windows Live, Skype, etc.). Today, virtual space is the one which seems to play an increasingly important role in responding to the need for territoriality. Having a website, blog or

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video channel (individually or hosted by YouTube, Vimeo, etc.) is now, in some cases, more important than owning a real estate, because this type of virtual territory can be much more lucrative rather than an agricultural land or a residential or hotel complex.

The use of the computer as the main means of communication has led to the growing within the virtual space of a “*public sphere*” - *a virtual or imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in an identifiable space.*” (J. Habermas, 1962). However, there are situations in which such “virtual communities” develop spontaneously - in response to an event of great interest, in most cases a catastrophe. This was the case of *Colectiv nightclub fire* in Bucharest which had a civic response on a Facebook platform called #*CoruptiaUcide*. *Virtual communities* is a term introduced by Howard Rheingold (1993, p.3) consisting of: “*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.*”

The urban environment represents, *par excellence*, the germinating space for the development of modern civilization. This is where the most intense and profitable economic relations are established, but also where the decisions and policies through which different institutions coordinate public life are made. Here, too, most conflicts arise spontaneously or organized by citizens, when their political, economic or social interests are harmed. In the national states - more centralized, inherently, than the federations - the capital cities represent the “privileged” stage of social movements, hosting genuine “territorial behavior” displays. In ethology, the term territorial refers to a sociographic space that an animal of one species dominates over other individuals of the same species and sometimes of different species. The behavior of conquering, marking/claiming and defending such a space was named by Peter H Klopfer (1969), territorial behavior. Edward T. Hall (1966) also used this concept of territory as opposed to personal space regarding areas of interaction with *the other*.

In the computer age, virtual space offers human individuals a new substrate to manifest their territorial behavior, but this time more strongly impregnated with the symbolic dimension, being closely linked to the ability of projecting a popular image, bringing with it notoriety and credibility. Clearly marked by territorial behaviors, the protest movements represent events that animated urban spaces, in the last seven decades, with the utmost intensity in times of peace. New information and communication technologies have also made their mark on these events and, in some cases, even they generated them. The most widespread form of E-democracy is the expression of opinions on online platforms.

2. Objectives and methods

The main objective of this study is to highlight, through the ethnographic method (observation and interviews), the study of the initiation and organization of virtual communities that manifest in public space through protest movements. It aims also to point out the role that socialization platforms have in forming spontaneous solidarities and in shaping the civic engagement. To better illustrate the different aspects of such a topic, a qualitative approach turns out to be the most suitable one. Participatory observation provides important data on public events in Bucharest since the first half of 2017.

Through semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews I managed to gather a number of relevant opinions regarding the impact of “new technologies” on social engagement and also to obtain important recollections on the events of the University Square 1990 (on this topic I interviewed some of the participants at those events - now also in Victoriei Square). The group interviews have the advantage of a strong engagement in the discussions but at the same time they are harder to moderate. Individual interviews helped to deepen issues and motivate opinions. I also used photo-video techniques that enriched the information of this research. Visual ethnography has the advantage of inducing a state of empathy between the viewer and the author. Field research that involves participating in protest movements involves certain risks and difficulties that may impede, hinder or contaminate data collection. The psychology of crowds is inherently affected by a state of suspicion towards possible “infiltrators”. And if they also have photo-video equipment (as is the case in visual anthropology) the “civilian” agent label is applied almost automatically. This can also pose a potential threat to personal physical integrity or equipment. The same risks can occur in case of a bust. On the other hand, the sympathy for the supported cause can affect the attitude of maintaining objectivity and axiological neutrality. *In situ* research implies a significant risk of informational intoxication; however, the online environment also presents such a phenomenon and is called “trolling”.

3. Field research of the protest movement #REZIST

3.1. A short history of #REZIST movement

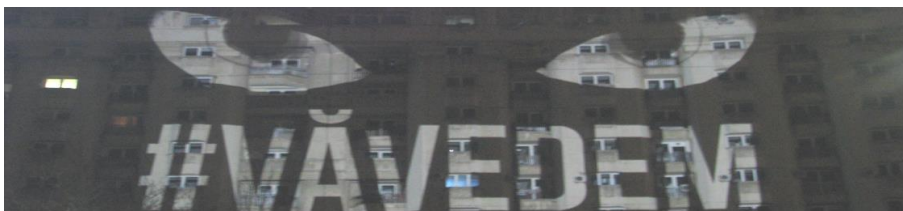
- October, 30th2015 – a violent fire burns down 'Colectiv' nightclub during a metal-core concert, killing 64 people (26 on site, 38 in hospitals) and injuring 147. The investigation’s conclusions point to criminal negligence and corruption deeds in local and central administration;
- Popular reaction against Government incompetence and corruption is ignited – a Facebook initiative “#CorupțiaUcide” (Corruption Kills) and several protests are organized from 1st to 3rdof November 2015.
- Government formed after 2016 elections - intention to modify the penal legislation on corruption - which would free from indictment some of the political leaders;
- “#CorupțiaUcide” initiative evolves (identical followers) in several FB initiatives: “#REZIST” and “Geeks for democracy” and a first protest against Government is organized on January, 18th, 2017 in Bucharest;
- January 31st, 2017, at 23.00, the Government issues the infamous Ordinance 13 dis-incriminating some corruption deeds. A spontaneous reaction brings about 15.000 people in Victoria Square;
- A large protest (~300. 000) took place next day (February 1st) in Bucharest (~150.000) and other major cities in Romania. An order for the police to clear Victoria Square was issued and enforced. Next morning, an ongoing protest is initiated with few thousands permanently occupying Victoria Square in Bucharest and several hundred in other squares in major cities of Romania;
- February 4th - Children's protest;

- On February 5th a record number of 600.000 people participated in protests. Government withdrew the Ordinance 13 without really abandoning this project;
- February 12th a huge flag of Romania is formed by the protesters using mobile phone lanterns and colored paper;
- February 27th an EU flag is formed in the same manner;
- by the end of spring the number of protesters permanently occupying Victoria Square decreased to less than 100, slightly increasing only through a Facebook mobilization for a few weekends;
- the Autumn saw a resuscitation of protests as the Government submitted to Parliament the former Ordinance 13 as legislative project;
- January 20th, 2018 – one-year anniversary meeting of #REZIST movement titled as „All roads lead to Bucharest. The revolution of our generation”-reuniting in Victoria Square people coming from all over the country.
- August 10th,2018 – 100.000 people consisting of Romanians coming from all over Europe, USA, Canada and Israel, alongside indigenous, protested in Bucharest against corruption of central administration and asked for Government resignation and snap elections. Among protesters, several “diversionist individuals” provoked the police agents throwing urine and feces bags and by pushing the separation fences. Police responded with tear gas. An order to evacuate the square was issued and police charged using batons, water-cannons and tear-gas;
- August 11th and 12th several thousand people occupied for several hours Victoria Square – no violent act was committed.

3.2. Deeds of group awareness

Besides the social and political agenda, the civic engagement manifested also as community spirit through several deeds of group awareness (photo credit of the author):

- intense communication among followers, initiatives for different activities, photo uploads, banner ideas, various announcements, etc.;
- non-violence and cleaning the waste after each event;
- tea preparation and distribution, banner creation, video-mapping (photos by author);



#We are watching you!



Resist!

3.3. Main findings after on-line and in situ research

After a year and a half (January 2017 - August 2018) of constant participatory observation of the online and *in situ* activity of the Facebook platforms entitled #CorupțiaUcide, #REZIST, and #GeeksforDemocracy and short semi-structured interviews with the participants in the protests in Victoriei Square, it is important to highlight the following aspects:

- intense communication takes place between the followers, initiatives for different activities, uploads of photos and clips, banner ideas, various announcements, etc.;
- there is a high civic commitment: concern to maintain cleanliness in the public space, the preparation and distribution of hot tea (temperature in the evenings of January 2017 dropping to -15C), civic education (February 4th “Children's protest”);
- the involvement of a grand-dramatic aspect of the protests (the flag of Romania and the EU and light carpets formed with mobile phones);
- there is a constant concern for the external image: the creation of banners in English and the transmission of messages addressed to the EU institutions and foreign embassies through the platforms #CorupțiaUcide, #REZIST or #GeeksForDemocracy;
- a mixture of ideas and political values between the participants: from libertarianism to communism (a more heterogeneous group than the one from the University Square '90)
- not a common voice, not a single-oriented crowd, but a multi-polar one (shown even by people disposition in small crowds / circles rather than a “classic” compact mass);
- political agenda without leaders – nobody should be a speaker for the crowd;
- it is not a movement against the establishment - support for the rule of law and fundamental institutions.

3.4. Discussion

A movement can quickly build up within an interactive group when people begin to see a problem that comes not from flawed individuals, but from flawed public policies. Micro-mobilization contexts act as a launching pad for social movements. Three resources influence the creation of a movement: members, leaders and an existing communication network. New members often appear through informal interaction channels, through existing personal connections, and the more a person is integrated into an activist community, the more willing he / she will be to participate in protest

activities. The model, speed and extent of a movement depend on the communication networks available. In general, the greater the number and diversity of people participating in a network, the greater the willing to make an effort to mobilize. Activists can even use viral marketing techniques.

As social movements can spread like other innovations, the embracing of ideas and behaviors by members follows the mechanism of cultural diffusion. Social platforms have created the possibility to easily join initiative groups, but also to instantly express positive or negative feelings about various topics, ideas or opinions advanced by the members of a group. Having a strong social impact, the topics and events discussed within the groups #CorupțiaUcide, #REZIST and #GeeksForDemocracy have rapidly generated an increase in the number of members, outlining some means of collective action.

The extension of the framework takes place when the organization of a social movement seeks to encompass interests and points of view that are very important for potential adherents. In fact, the movement is trying to expand its membership base by designing its goals and activities as being congruent with the values and interests of potential members. In 1990, the disclosure of photo and video images of the violent repressions on the young people on the streets in downtown Bucharest prompted the coagulation of a large number of politically unregulated persons on behalf of the citizens' rights, culminating with the creation of the Alianța Civică. In 2015, images from the scene of the tragedy at 'Colectiv' club generated a solidarity in revolt that far exceeded the number of people who had a direct or indirect connection with the victims and allowed the construction of the #CorupțiaUcide platform.

Micro-mobilization stimulates collective action, but groups of friends, or even larger associations of activists are not enough to develop or maintain a movement. This requires organization, and people in charge. Usually these command posts of the movements have an office, volunteers and a board of directors. Even a spontaneous uprising such as that of May 1990 brought some leaders forward and found resources to promote themselves: there were groups producing banners, others procuring/composing poems and mobilizing songs, others composing press releases, etc. Ongoing rallies of the present have less spontaneity, but they can benefit from a much better organization: an increase in creativity in the forms of protest and an impressive dominance of the audio-visual and online media. However, as with other recent social movements abroad generated by the online environment (Occupy, Indignados, etc.), the lack of leaders is the fundamental feature that differentiates #REZIST from the University Square '90.

As social movements can spread on the model of promoting innovations, the embracing of ideas and behaviors by members follows the mechanism of cultural diffusion. If in 1990 access to high-impact media (the audiovisual ones exclusively subordinated to the state) was quite limited to independent newspapers and radio stations, in 2017 the Internet and private radio and TV stations allowed a broader reflection of the actions of protest and thus the popular reaction grew steadily over time.

The inherent appearance of spontaneous or opportunist extremist groups often contributes to the maintenance of social movements. This fact, by contrast effect, leads to greater support for the moderate groups. To reinforce their message, moderates must delineate the slogans and actions of the extremists. In 1990, in the University Square but also in 2017 in the Victoriei Square, individuals evoking the memory and the “heroic” facts of Vlad Țepeș and Zelea-Codreanu appeared. Without resorting to violence, most of the protesters have taken care of these tendencies even now. On the other hand, as Dykstra & Rivera (2016, p.66) pointed out: *“collaborating within cyber communities [...] while shunning outsiders and internal resistance can hinder collective abilities to actualize organizational goal, creating isolated ‘cyberbalkans’ that do not interact effectively with other social movements and political actors.”*

Often, protest movements which go beyond the specific and assumed actions of some unions have their origins in the university environment, which serve as incubators for progressive and even revolutionary mobilizations. Unfortunately, these are often abandoned by students who have graduated and who no longer identify themselves in the causes of the initiatives of their younger colleagues or who begin to face the pressures generated by entering the professional environment. In addition to these individual pressures, there are some collectives generated by the state. The authorities seek to restore peace in the social milieu either through intimidation measures or through "incentives" addressed to the group or to the more active individuals. In the short term, a systematic, sustained use of moderate force can be effective. But if it lasts too long or becomes extreme, the use of force can generate a reaction against the authorities and sympathy from the media and the general public for the social movement. Unfortunately, in Romania, the authorities did not know how to handle the protests of 1990 and those of 2017, resorting to actions of repression with a force disproportionate to the resistance and the means of manifestation of the protesters. This attitude resulted in an immediate effect of victimizing the protesters and engagement of a large number of “indifferent citizens”. An essential contribution to this, of course, was the media. What the public often assumes as their own opinions for or against a social movement is actually built news. This was ignored to some extent in 1990 by the movement's leaders (with initially mixed image consequences - protesters accused by the official press of being “drugged” or “paid”). However, the phenomenon was well understood by the participants in the protests of 2017, seeking to be as present on audio-visual or online information channels as possible, generating positive news of the type of national flag or of the European Union.

The diversity of messages and ways of expression in public demonstrations (allegorical chars, street dramatization, video-mapping) - a product of lucid creativity and not an impulsive act of rebellion - nevertheless, confirms the working hypothesis.

4. Conclusions

Protest movements have a key place in social sciences research. Protests in post-democracy (Occupy, Indignados, Arab Spring, #REZIST, Gilets Jaunes) are fundamentally different from the classical ones through several features:

- disregard of the political class in general;
- no movement leaders or spokespersons;
- crowds are not topographically unidirectional (oriented towards a platform or scene) but multipolar (network) - a gathering of circles;
- participants employ more creative forms of expression;
- protests are ongoing for extended periods;
- participants can have different interests and values, even opposite.

The groups that are currently manifesting themselves in the civic area through various initiatives have been called by Rheingold (2002, p.8) ‘smart mobs’ namely “a recent offshoot of interaction online, are planned events created by those *who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other* by using networked devices such as cell phones, PDAs and laptops and Internet.” An increased activity on social media such as Facebook and Twitter helped the initiation and further organization of the protests, though it failed to promote an authentic leader. Protesters generally support the rule of law while demanding reforms of the fundamental institutions. There is no political orientation or platform. As Loader & Mercea (2011, p.21) pointed out: “*Early conception of digital democracy as a virtual public sphere or civic commons have been replaced by a new technological optimism for democratic renewal based upon and collaborative networking characteristics of social media.*”

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