Digital natives with a cause?
Certainly a cause to be suspicious…

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Book part:
Stru(gle)ctures of power: *The internet is an assemblage of human and non-human actors. These power structures of the internet often get hidden because we only concentrate on the interface and the consumption and forget to look at the larger technology complexities involved in its structure.*

Synopsis: *During the Latin American Camp for social activists in 2010, a group of participants connected imperialism, international donors, new technologies and facebook revolutions in a conspiracy theory that revealed a high sense of vulnerability in the face of globalization, and some of the power structures behind it.*

This essay uses the camp's episode to explore the relations of a group of young Latin American activists with the Internet ecosystem, its configuration of power, and how it impacts in their perception of some of the most important social phenomena taking place in the world today.

The JAS Facebook community, seen from above…

Introduction

This article was inspired by an experience I had with a community of 130 young social activists from more than 20 Latin American countries, at the *Latin American Camp for young social activists*, or JAS 10. The intensity and depth of this exchange experience produced important lessons for those of us who participated in its coordination, in terms of the political views and social ills that propel these young people's activism, and their complex relations with globalization in general. Here, I will focus on a particular aspect of these relations, illustrated by the conspiracy theory that a group of participants enounced during that camp. The degree of acceptance of this conspiracy, not only among the group of participants, but also within different social movements in the region revealed that internet and the ICTs' prominent roles as engines of globalization have a significant impact on the ways in which these activists relate with them.

It is a fact that Internet is quickly becoming a central environment in the daily lives and activities of increasing numbers of young Latin American men and women, whose learning, socializing and understanding of the world are molded by it directly or indirectly. However, the examples I use here show how Internet is in fact contributing to reinforce the continuity of ideologies, language and debates that long predated Latin American digital natives, but still resonate powerfully among these young people's thinking and activism. In order to understand this influence, we need to look at how socio-economic circumstances affect their participation in the digital ecosystem, particularly in terms of their access to it. This will also contribute to understand the origin of some of the concerns expressed around Internet's ability to affect social inclusion in Latin American countries with young democratic processes.

The importance that is attributed to Internet in molding political movements is affecting dramatically the way young people understand what's going on in the world. The current social movements in the Middle East present an extraordinary, real-time window to witness how young people everywhere are rethinking ideologies to re-position themselves in confusing, fast-changing geopolitics. In this sense, Latin American youth present a very particular mix between revolutionary legacies, anti-imperialism, and distrust towards ideas and technologies coming from the global north, summarized by many of them as *the struggle against the system*. I analyze here reactions of Latin American progressive media and blogs in the face of the episodes in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and their articulation with the vulnerability that many of the activists at the camp expressed regarding their place in the digital environment.

1. A conspiracy to steal the grassroots' social knowledge

The Latin American Camp for Young Social Activists was a week-long experience intended to promote a community of mutual support among social activists working on a variety of issues across the region. At the camp, about 150 social activists up to 30 years old, from more than 20 Latin American countries managed to organize agenda, activities and rules for sharing the space in a participatory way, even taking turns for over-all facilitation. After the camp, the community remained connected and gained in diversity, using mostly social media platforms, but also through smaller face-to-face encounters organized by its members.

The majority of participants had a photo or video camera, and made sure that almost every aspect of the camp was recorded. There was even a project created by 15 activists, who planned a series of theme-

based documentaries to promote the social work of participants, which still continues today, a year after the camp. But this omnipresence made an important part of the group increasingly uncomfortable, as activities progressed.

Even those who were taking pictures and videos for their own blogs and pages felt nervous about the possibility of all that material circulating online without their control. It was evident the high degree of peer trust among participants; the problem was with the institutions behind the camp, and particularly the donor: "*why are they paying for our expenses, and what do they really want from us?*" were some of the questions raised by them. Speculations about the funding organization behind the activity fueled concerns about the use of all that information for advancing political agendas of institutions they knew little about.

 The conspiracy was summarized in an article distributed by an organization called ALAI, or *Latin American Information Agency*, through dozens of blogs and websites. Using a participant's testimony, the author denounced the camp as part of a global effort lead by the US government in cooperation with international donors to destabilize "anti-imperialistic democracies" using internet, social media and new technologies. Vagueness and disputable aspects aside, this conspiracy reflects a deep concern in the face of power structures behind internet that are little known: who's administering the information exchanged on Emails and social media platforms, and to what extent this data is available to companies and governments. This concern turned into a sense of high vulnerability, when combined with the little information available on the sources of the money behind this, and other social projects, and a perception that both--the sources of money and the power structures--were probably the same. This recipe for conspiracy explains the basic arguments in the article: international cooperation is often a disguise to appropriate social knowledge, and these institutions (cooperation agencies and international donors) are ultimately contributing to agendas that are different than those of the social movements they are supposedly helping. But the article also show important aspects of these young activists' perception of their place in the internet and regarding ICTs: no matter how skillful or familiar they become in their use, these tools ultimately belong to people, corporations and interests whom they cannot trust. And it is suspected that, when push comes to shove, the owners of the online world will side by "the empire":

> […]It isn't hard to trace the trajectories of these organizations. Following their links, he [the source] arrived to pages such as *Fundacion Nuevos Líderes*, *Jóvenes Empresarios* of Chile, *Union Mundial*, and *Tactical technology collective* among others. "All these organizations stand for things such strengthening democracies, fight against corruption and the defense of Human rights, but of course defending the freedom of capital." They have high level contacts in the UN, in the WEF of Davos, USAID and many others. "They promote initiatives in south East Asia, in Africa, and now they seem to be preparing their landing in Latin America."

> Tactical technology Collective deserves a mention apart. "This NGO, financed by Soros is dedicated to train social activists in the use of electronic tools. It provides manuals and guides to use tools such as online maps, graphics, audio, video, blogs, free telephony, information security, cell phones and much more. Their materials are excellent, and could be of great help for social activists lacking funding, censored, and with problems with the authorities."

> After reading and tracing all these organizations, many doubts arose, especially around the reasons for their recent interest in our continent. He suspects that their interest is in training people to de-stabilize

anti-imperialist democracies. In fact, questions are piling up: "does all this have anything to do with the latest moves of the US government to allow the export of internet services to promote the opening of regimes considered authoritarian and repressive?" we know that Facebook, twitter and other tools have been key in the recent rebellion in Iran, and that Hugo Chavez is denouncing similar moves in his country.

From Raul Zibechi's *"How the empire expropriates social knowledge"* (translation by Hernan Bonomo, from original in Spanish, available at: http://alainet.org/active/37263)

2. The conspiracy is global: Latin American activists decoding the Middle East.

The current process of dramatic reforms taking place in the Middle East is challenging world views and political thinking worldwide, and Latin Americans aren't exempted from that challenge. The article's suggestion of a close association between the expansion of social media and the expansion of global capitalism reveal important aspects of the confusion that popular revolts in the Middle East generated among Latin America's left[1]. Suspicions of the Empire's ever-present hand behind the revolts are being fueled by the prominent role that western media—especially from the US--attributed to digital activists and tools like Facebook or Tweeter in their making.

Many among the leftist, progressive Latin American media had problems from the beginning to read these movements outside cold war parameters. If the Egyptian revolution was welcomed—Mubarak was unquestionably an ally of the "west" after all—the reactions toward the Libyan uprising were in some remarkable cases, of outright support to the Khaddafy regime. One of the most influential news services in the region among activists from the left—the Venezuelan *Telesur*—showed their closeness to the Libyan regime by becoming the only foreign media with official permission to transmit from Tripoli, before the BBC was authorized. In an interview, Telesur's correspondent in Tripoli expressed that the international press, but especially Internet, are to be blamed for the attacks against Libya's people and government[2].

Latin American youth are not alone in their discomfort regarding this narrative of social media at the center of popular revolts. In fact, many social activists in the Middle East and across the globe remain skeptical—including, remarkably, bloggers and tech-activists. To understand their discomfort, one needs to look at the key elements of this narrative: a community of young, moderately-to-non-religious, very smart and tech-savvy men and women mobilize protests against an autocratic regime utilizing Facebook, a tool developed by a genial, middle-class, Jewish young man from the US—who happened to have studied at Harvard, one of the education flagships of liberal democracy.

The narrative implies a dormant Egyptian society, whose strength and potential for change are suddenly awakened by the commitment and courage of some among her youth, combined with the ingenuity and talent of their American counterparts. So what ignites the revolution is a cosmopolitan effort across presumed cultural and even religious divides, that ends up fueling massive popular revolts across the Arab world. The

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[1]   On the political aspects of this confusion, see Atilio Boron's article "No abandonar a los pueblos arabes" (Don't abandon the Arab Peoples) in *Pagina12* http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elmundo/4-163612-2011-03-07.html

[2]   http://www.telesurtv.net/secciones/noticias/91195-NN/jordan-rodriguez--medios-son-los-responsables-de-la-situacion-en-libia/#%C2%A0

enthusiasm among western liberal media was such that many ventured to call them *Facebook revolutions* at their early stages.

It isn't coincidence that mainstream media in the US were immediately attracted to these aspects of the story, which reinforce the argument of global capitalism as a democratizing and modernizing force. As told, this is an extraordinary example of how free-market entrepreneurship and globalization can mobilize social power in a positive direction; in this case, by toppling Mubarak, the most powerful autocrat in the Arab world.

But this narrative was received with skepticism by much of the mainstream progressive media in Latin America, and outright contempt by the more militant left. This isn't surprising either, given the history between Latin American social movements and US regional policies. In general, progressive media in the region were quick to respond to this narrative generated in media outlets in the US, saying that this same global capitalism praised as motorizing the revolutions is actually the reason why these regimes survived for so long. Furthermore, the assumption of spontaneity of these revolutions, which attribute a central role to young digital activists and social media in their making, was challenged by many among the same youth supposedly at its center. While Latin American mainstream media highlighted the hypocrisy of western democracies that maintained these autocracies in place, some bloggers in the region quickly picked up another narrative[3] coming from their counterparts in the middle east, which pointed to the long campaign of workers unions' strikes as the key reasons to look at to understand the collapse of these regimes. [4]

The positioning of an important part of young social activists in Latin America in the face of these competing narratives shows a cautious attitude towards the role of internet in their social struggles, and to a certain extent, resentment towards what they see as an attempt of western media to "capture" revolutions that belong to local social movements. If the JAS camp's documenting incident revealed their vulnerability in the digital environment, their doubts regarding internet as the revolution maker question its importance in social change. It is worth to highlight the different roles attributed to digital activism in the cases of Egypt and Libya. In the first case, the revolution is seen as a legitimate popular process, in which digital activism has a relatively marginal place. On the other hand, the role of internet in the case of Libya is portrayed as much more important, but the popular origins of this process are put into question. These differences seem to say that, for many of them, revolution doesn't come online, but reactionary movements sometimes do.

Finally, when they choose to see the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia as the culmination of a process of social struggle instead of a spontaneous outburst, these social activists also make an important statement about the relative importance of the digital revolution in their own realities: being digital natives is a circumstance that doesn't alter much of the nature of the social challenges they face. Instead, it does change some of the environments where their struggles take place, and the means by which they need to be addressed.

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3   See *Hossam el-Hamalawy, periodista y bloguero egipcio: "Las revoluciones no surgen de la nada",* in Cubadebate: http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2011/01/29/hossam-el-hamalawy-periodista-y-bloguero-egipcio/

4   Some examples of this narrative in Latin American blogs: http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/egipto-activismo-obrero-fue-origen-revuelta; *Egipto: Los trabajadores y la revolución*: http://laclase.info/internacionales/egipto-los-trabajadores-y-la-revolucion-0; *Perspectivas del proceso revolucionario en Egipto:* http://www.pts.org.ar/spip.php?article17082; *Egipto: La revuelta de la población trabajadora ignorada por los medios de comunicación occidentales:* http://lapupilainsomne.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/egipto-la-revuelta-de-la-poblacion-trabajadora-ignorada-por-los-medios-de-comunicacion-occidentales/

Warm bodies in the cyberspace

In the JAS 10 camp evaluation, activists promoting the use of technology for social change noted the lack of interest that the majority of participants expressed in online security sessions, or for the matter, in most *how-to* workshop offered. A first thought was that online tools for advocacy, learning or exchange in general were still not that ubiquitous or popular among the majority of the group. But that's deceiving. For most of the 130 participants, digital tools are high among the main resources for learning, participating in the production of information and knowledge, and to some extent, for socializing. They show a familiarity similar to that of young people from true digital nations, despite their more limited access to connection. So other reasons that can be considered are the context of relatively high levels of freedom of expression in Latin American countries, and the social segmentation taking place in the digital environment. They can be summarized as follows:

> 1) **Environmental safety:** there is a context of respect of basic freedom of expression in Latin America in general, that make special precautions in terms of privacy and management of information exchanges non-essential, contrary to what occur in other regions of the world. The goal of social advocates in these countries isn't much to overcome state's security apparatuses to get information out for international awareness, but rather internal advocacy aimed at authorities, which relies less in the use of internet. There is a lack of incentives for development of sophisticated applications or platforms, or for the matter, for caring much beyond the use of basic, mainstream tools available.

> 2) **Social segmentation in the digital ecosystem:** Socially, Internet is regarded as a strong tool for communication and cooperation globally. Its potential to facilitate access to information and exchange makes it play a substantial part in projects promoting education and development in general. As such, it is permeated by similar ideas of global north as producer and enabler, and the global south as beneficiary and user that characterize most traditional principles of international cooperation.

> On the other hand—the economic hand--internet is a key instrument to expand commerce globally. And that is perhaps an important reason why youth in economically developed countries, whether they have the technical skills to "program" or do stuff, feel encouraged to see internet as something they contribute to create and shape, through their power as consumers.

> There is undoubtedly an ever growing agreement of the benefits entailed in the new digital forms of exchange, communications and production of knowledge. Attributing Internet a very positive value is almost common sense. However, most Latin American youth, without the technical skills, or economic power as significant consumers, perceive themselves as bottom-end users in a world where everything they see and their rules were created by others somewhere else. Only very limited groups and individuals with technical understanding--like the JAS 10 participants mentioned above—see themselves as part of a community with the ability to transform the digital ecosystem substantially. This position of disadvantage, combined with an access that is much more limited than in wealthier countries, certainly difficult a more proactive participation of young Latin Americans in shaping internet's environment.

Conclusion: Participation at a crossroads

Looking at the relations between the development of internet and the expansion of global capitalism, we can argue that the extent of participation of any given group in one is closely connected with its role in the other. If Latin American youth lack in general a sense of ownership over Internet, this has a correlation with how vulnerable many of them feel in the face of globalization, especially among the poorer ones, and the political left. And this vulnerability impacts directly in their perception of the role they can play in the development of the digital ecosystem.

Latin America has a long history of local and international conspiracies that disrupted popular movements and governments. The cold war offers plenty of examples of US interventions in her countries, often subtle, but at times grotesque. It has also provided much of political language and categories still resonating strongly among the new generations of young leaders. It's not hard to see how the combination of vulnerability in the digital environment with political views marked by the historically imperial role of the US in the region creates a fertile environment for a new generation of conspiracy theories, like the one generated within the JAS community.

Finally, if historical social inequalities determine similar inequalities in the digital ecosystem, there's an evident risk of internet deepening already acute socio-economic gaps even further. This is the reason why the few digital activists in JAS were so concerned and despaired about the little interest among the larger group of participants on critical issues such as open source software and free connectivity.

For them, the growth of the digital environment's influence in people's lives is redefining the meaning of activism and citizenship. If we are all becoming to some extent residents of this universal digital ecosystem, whether the takeover by forces of global capitalism claimed by conspiracy theorists is inevitable depends on how active its citizens are to prevent it. Promoting active digital citizenship is therefore crucial in what's becoming a continuation of the long, historical debate around global capitalism, democracy and social rights, but by language, platforms and means relevant to those born in the digital era.

About the author: Hernan Bonomo is an Argentinean graphic designer and sociologist. He works for an international foundation, coordinating youth activities in Latin America. He co-authored the book *Critical Tolerance and active citizenship: a practical introduction to educational debate* (Idebate Press, 2010), and writes on regional issues affecting youth and their participation in society.