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The Humanities in the Digital Era

From the digitalisation of culture to digital culture

Democracy, innovation and digital culture*

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Abstract

The impact of digitalisation and of the internet affects not only society and the economy. Politics, too, is beginning to be transformed. Alongside many other initiatives, the Brazilian Digital Culture Forum, held in Brazil in 2009, provides an example of how democracy can benefit from innovation. By means of a digital social network, the public continually interacts, proposing and reviewing public policies. This is not the only example: Brazil is experiencing a proliferation of the use of the net for social and cultural ends. The changes are profound, but the intellectual and macro-political worlds have not yet realised their potential.

Keywords

digital culture, democracy, politics, digitalisation

Democràcia, innovació i cultura digital

Resum

L'impacte de la digitalizació i d'internet no afecta només la societat i l'economia, sinó que la política comença a patir una transformació. Al costat de moltes altres iniciatives, el Fòrum de la Cultura Digital Brasilera, celebrat al Brasil durant l'any 2009, és un exemple de com la democràcia es pot beneficiar de la innovació. Per mitjà d'una xarxa social digital, els ciutadans interactuen contínuament proposant i fiscalitzant les polítiques públiques. I aquest no n'és l'únic exemple. Al Brasil proliferen les iniciatives d'ús de la xarxa per a finalitats socials i culturals. Els canvis són profunds, però la intel·lectualitat i la macropolítica encara no han percebut el potencial d'aquests canvis.

Paraules clau

cultura digital, democràcia, política, digitalització

I

It is a political truism that the first one hundred days of president are decisive. Over the course of this period, a leader marks out his or her positions and announces to society his or her priorities which, given the advanced and complex nature of contemporary democracy, are usually based on a manifesto presented during the preceding election campaign.

This was the case with Barack Obama. As a defender of the freedom of communication and distribution during the race that took him to the White House, one of his first measures was to redesign the President's web site, adopting Creative Commons

Licences for all the content produced for it. Creative Commons is a flexible form of copyright management developed by the University of Stanford that allows creators to define the use of their creations on the internet. Obama thus showed that he was an innovative President, backing open and transparent government, leaving behind the dark days of the George W. Bush administration

Nevertheless, innovation is everywhere in the world of horizontal networks. Someone who really created something interesting for the first one hundred days of the Obama administration was Jim Gilliam, multimedia activist and producer of Brave New Films "protest documentaries" such as *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, directed by Robert Greenwald. It occurred to Gilliam that the internet could be of help in identifying the main problems of the United States. Taking advantage of the opening proposed by Obama, he created the White House 2 web site.[1] In principle, the purpose of the site was that anyone in the United States could make a list of the country's issues and give their opinion on what its main priorities should be. Gilliam's aim was to constitute a form of e-governance to offer President Obama a valuable public consultation tool. The web site was launched but was not incorporated into the president's programme of communications strategies. The initiative continues today, providing a forum where some ten thousand US citizens discuss what the priorities of their current government should be.

I mention the example of White House 2 because it is an example of a form of politics driven by the internet. Two of its features make it especially representative of the current political context: 1) White House 2 is an individual, non-party-aligned project collectivised through online interaction and debate; 2) its primary goal is to create open, transparent information that contributes to public involvement without directly interacting with the power structures of conventional representative democracy.

II

Having reached this point, we should take a short break.

At the beginning of the 1990s, it was thought that the internet would surpass the current means of electronic mass communication, seen as inefficient in that they did not facilitate dialogue, and become the perfect environment for practising democracy. Authors of differing ideological hues covered the subject of digital democracy. It was a period of great theoretical output on the matter. It was believed, for example, that the public would be able to vote on any draft bill, thereby progressing beyond the modern representative model. Added to this initial excitement was the fact that political science was also paying more attention to deliberative democracy.

In his article "*Promessas e desafios da deliberação online: traçando o panorama de um debate*" ['The promises and challenges of online deliberation: sketching the outline of a debate'], Sivaldo Pereira states that, in addition to "temporal proximity, deliberative democracy and digital democracy also have some common underlying concerns that can be summed up in two wishes shared by both:

1) to reduce as far as possible the crisis of representation affecting the modern democratic system and
2) to use communication processes mediated to this end".

Until then, for the Left, issues such as social participation in the decision-making process and collaboration between different social players in drawing up public policy were not universally considered as positive. It is for this reason that understanding the importance of these two keys to the construction of democratic systems is a recent phenomenon and one that has become the subject of dispute between different schools of progressive thought, some of which are still stuck in a centralist planning model.

With the appearance of the internet, and thanks particularly to the possibilities for democratisation that it offers, the words *participation* and *collaboration* began to be included in the dominant vocabulary of social organisations and movements. Another word that has gained in power in this context is *transparency*. This is a concept based on the idea that every democratic system has the duty to supply the public with the greatest amount of information possible, so that they may make decisions. Without transparency, channels for participation and collaboration may be reduced to a mere artifice for neutralising disputes. However, over the last fifteen years, debate has focused more on theories and hopes than on practical action, with the exception of some pilot projects. However, everything points to this trend reversing and innovation beginning to gain ground.

Here, our short break has come to an end.

III

Understanding the digital democracy initiatives currently in progress is a good way of finding out what is at stake and how this changing environment takes shape.

Recently, Google Brazil, the Overmundo Institute and the Getúlio Vargas Foundation invited me to take part in a discussion on Digital Citizenship that gave rise to hitherto unseen understanding between activists in the field. We may not know where this confluence is taking us, but the dialogue has already been extremely enriching. The document produced by the Overmundo Institute and the Getúlio Vargas Foundation's Technology and Society Centre includes a very comprehensive guide to the most important initiatives underway in Brazil and the United States. By way of example, I will now mention

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1. See: <www.whitehouse2.org>.

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some of those that appear most interesting to me. I prefer to focus on Brazilian examples as a way of highlighting our inventiveness.

The *WikiCrimes* project[2] is a worldwide phenomenon. It is a mashup (web application hybrid) of data and maps, in this case of crimes, which is updated on a collaborative basis with contributions both from by the user public and from public databases. The information is shown on a map, so that visitors can see where there is a greater occurrence of a particular crime. It has many uses: from helping the police and authorities to recommending the avoidance of certain types of behaviour in recognised danger zones. The project is headed by Professor Vasco Furtado, coordinator of the Fortaleza Federal University's Knowledge Engineering group. The project is entirely run from the university by the research group's students. Under Furtado's supervision, some of them have recently created the company WikiMaps, whose goal is to offer this information integration platform to those interested in creating 'social maps'.

Another outstanding project, begun only recently, is *the Transparência HackDay* ['Transparency HackDay'], which consists of meetings involving public leaders, journalists and hackers (producers of developer information). Three such meetings have been held over the last three months, two in São Paulo and one in Brasilia. These exchanges of knowledge have given rise to debates, albeit ones with an eminently practical focus, whose goal is to improve democracy and public actions (be these reports of crimes, complaints or procedures). *Transparência HackDay* is organised by the company Esfera, one of the undertakings forming part of the Casa de la Cultura Digital grouping.[3]

Of the applications arising from this project, the most interesting and successful to date has been *SACSP*,[4] which adds a map providing information on the São Paulo Citizens' Advice Service. *SACSP* uses data from São Paulo City Council's official web site to produce instant analyses. Initially, its success was received negatively by the municipal data processing company. Later, however, the platform's developer attended a meeting with the company which resulted in it providing funding so that the service could continue to be offered. Amongst other advantages, the service allows people to see that they are not alone in reporting crimes.

IV

Here, we should take another break for a digression.

When people speak of digital democracy, they always give the example of Barack Obama. Has the current President of the United States really been an innovator? Yes he is, without doubt. In addition to the aforementioned improvements to the White House web site, he has launched two other important internet projects. One is Data.gov.[5] On this site, the US government publishes information in free formats that allows the public to cross data and produce new information of interest to them.

It seems strange that Brazil's intellectuals have not seen the leading role played by the country in the digital era or understood it. Foreigners have, however. Proof of this is to be found in Clay Shirky's recent interview with Alexandre Mathias of *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Shirky, author of *Here comes everybody*, is one of the US's most famous authors. In his conversation with Mathias, he highlights Brazil's key role in the incorporation of the emerging values of digital culture. Here, he is not speaking about technology, but rather politics:

> Brazil has been the first country to completely adopt a co-participation model as a tool for economic, cultural and social progress. This occurs at different levels, from the lowest –such as the *favela* funk culture, whose essence is based on co-participation– to the highest, such as the fact that President Lula says that he prefers open source solutions to the country's problems. Other countries are moving in the same direction, but none is as advanced as Brazil.

Today, Brazil has one of the world's most active and successful freeware communities. Since the very start of the Lula administration, this community has had a great influence on policy, consolidating hacker values in the heart of Brasilia.

The other side of the same coin is provided by Brazilian society. Figures show that Brazil is a pioneer in the adoption of online social networks such as Orkut, Facebook and Twitter, where the second-most used language is Portuguese. Digital culture is developing through these platforms, and this has led John Perry Barlow, one of the net's first freedom activists and cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, to say that Brazil is the "ideal networked society".

Obama came to power 2008, but by 2005 the Brazilian Ministry of Culture's web site was already adopting Creative Commons licences for its content, and in 2006 all the content produced by Radiobrás, Brazil's public broadcaster, started to be distributed under this licence.

In the book *CulturaDigital.BR*, which I wrote together with Sérgio Cohn, we analysed this pioneering facet of Brazil with thinkers drawn from different ideological backgrounds and areas of expertise. Amongst them was sociologist Laymert Garcia dos Santos, author of *Politizar as Novas Tecnologias* ['Politicizing the new technologies'], who said:

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2. See: <http://wikicrimes.org>
3. See: <www.casadaculturadigital.com.br>.
4. See: <http://sacsp.mamulti.com>.
5. See: <http://www.data.gov>.

The greatest problem I have with Brazil is that there is great wealth and, at the same time, a lack of thinking on the potential of this culture in the reality people are living and, above all, in the new role the country is assuming in the geopolitical redistribution that is taking place after the weakening of the markets. The so-called Brazilian intelligentsia has not yet, with precious few exceptions, become aware of the clear change that is taking place, nor of the opportunities that are opening up. I believe that this is really serious from a political point of view. The difference with respect to the First World will be the possibility of winning hearts and minds with our culture, using this technology to create something different from that which the centre –i.e. the Euro-US world– has done.

Although Brazil's intelligentsia has not seen the changes, its ruling class appears to be beginning to make progress, albeit slowly. There are currently three processes underway that will determine our future:

1) the public policy of providing universal broadband access which President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has promised will be government's final measure;
2) changes to intellectual property legislation to incorporate the rights of users, which are today the main source of conflict between the culture emerging from the internet and the old intermediary industries of the 20th century;
3) the building of a civil framework, one of a rights, of internet users, proposed by the Ministry of Justice.

The combination of these three elements gives rise to a set of circumstances that could allow Brazil to respond to the social changes occurring the world over immeasurably faster than other countries.

With this, our second break has drawn to a close.

V

Many digital democracy projects, including those mentioned above, are based on still-primitive levels of interaction, using simple deliberation mechanisms where members of the public can choose between options. In other words, vote. This is the case of the digital public budget of Belo Horizonte (Minas Gerais). A pioneering imitative, this allowed the citizens of the mining capital to choose a works project to be carried out by the city council and was the first virtual plebiscite of its type in the world.

The Brazilian Digital Culture Forum's proposal, begun in June 2009 and still under development, is of another kind. Its aim is to create a deeper interactive experience and create a collaborative tool for the drawing up of public policies.

The Brazilian state, redemocratised, has made use of a range of mechanisms to ensure that the voice of society is directly heard in the process of drawing up policies to transform the country. These mechanisms include the National Conferences, carried out in line with the Federal Pact (with municipal, state and federal stages) and serving as a structuring element for sector-wide policies. The majority of these conferences are supervised by a council responsible for ensure the implementation of the guidelines defined by society and of the reviews of proposed and developed policies.

In addition to these conferences, other participation mechanisms include public referenda (both attendance-based and virtual) public enquiries, seminars and forums.

The forums are places for collective debate, coordination, collaboration and planning, generally used for consultative purposes by the authorities, whose mission it is to bring together different players from one or more sectors of society, and can be permanent or temporary.

The Brazilian Digital Culture Forum is another social participation initiative, but one that stands out from all the rest due to its radical use of the internet as part of its methodology. In fact, this forum is completely structured around the CulturaDigital.BR platform,[6] a social networking site that by 2009 already boasted more than 3200 users, 160 discussion groups and around 300 active blogs. In this forum, members of the public debate the issues of the digital era, openly amongst each other.

In November, during the Forum's international seminar, which made attendance-based encounters that had already been taking place virtually, documents with guidelines for the definition of digital culture policies were drawn up and handed over to the Brazilian Minister for Culture, Juca Ferreira. These documents were subsequently returned to the forum and continue to be the subject of debate.

This year, a raft of new initiatives are being drawn up, including the proposal to create a collaborative form of e-governance for digital culture by founding a council based on the CulturaDigital.BR social network, which would also be represented on the National Council for Cultural Policies.

In light of the experience of the first few months, it can be said that the main characteristic of the Brazilian Digital Culture Forum is that it is a place for expansion and not for synthesis, something that was already contemplated from its beginnings.

The repercussions of digital technology are enormous and little understood. There is thus a need to find the right interlocutors who are prepared to design policies for this time of transition, in the knowledge that they will not form part of a movement with a beginning, middle or end.

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6. See: <www.culturadigital.br>.

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