

Between opportunities and threats – an analysis of Brazilian Landless Workers' movement experiences with new media technologies

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Abstract

Recent discussions and research about the uses of digital social media platforms by social movements and protest organizations have raised questions about threats and challenges represented by these technologies. There is also a debate on whether digital social media platforms can contribute to establish and strengthen long-standing oppositional groups and structural change. In this context, this article analyses how the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) experiences and views the use of digital social media platforms in its communicative processes. Based on interviews and observations, the article shows how MST militants present ambivalent views towards platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and towards the dynamics of digital communication. Conclusions point that the main concern is threat to the organic collective character of the movement posed by individualistic digital social media platforms. Different from contemporary protest organisations, MST sees a clear separation between the movement and its media. The goal is to appropriate of and control media technologies, which brings many difficulties when dealing with digital social media platforms.

Keywords: digital social media platforms, communicative processes, media practices, mobilisation, Brazil.

Introduction

The uses of digital media platforms and mobile devices for social mobilization by different groups are currently the focus of much research and discussions (Cottler and Lester, 2011; Curran, Fenton, and Freedman, 2013; Milan, 2013; and McChesney, 2013). While there is some consensus around the crucial role of these technologies as catalysers of direct action such as protests, demonstrations, and interventions (Banks, 2010; Tatarchevskiy, 2011; Tufeccki & Wilson 2012; Harlow, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012), the roles of these platforms in constructing longstanding social change and enabling the establishment and sustainability of oppositional groups is still debatable (Bennett, 2012). Few studies have looked into the experiences of established social movements who unite subaltern sectors of society. In this sense, this article makes a contribution by analysing the experiences of militants in one of the oldest and biggest social movements in

Latin America. The article opens up the discussion about how social movement militants weight up risks and opportunities brought by new media technologies.

The aim is to problematize and broaden two common views about the social movements relations to media technologies: 1) that thanks to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and to the internet in general social movements can participate in the public debate about issues that affect them, and 2) that media technologies play a structural role in mobilization processes. The discussion departs from the example of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento Sem-Terra*) and from the analysis of how an established social movement organisation that is formed by a vulnerable and exploited segment of society views and experiences the use of new media technologies. MST is the biggest social movement in Latin America, with around 1,5 million members spread around virtually the whole Brazilian territory. The organisation was founded in 1984 by a group of rural workers and has since then directed its actions towards agrarian reform and the defence of rural worker's rights in Brazil.

Since its formation, MST has had a strong focus on establishing and strengthening communication channels among militants and with society at large. Because it has always had a conflicting relation with established media outlets in Brazil and due to its endurance as an insurgent organization, MST is a unique case that can open up the scholarly discussion about the interplay between social movements and media. The experiences of MST militants add a different angle to the discussion, as the movement has been active for thirty years and has used an array of media technologies in its actions. Furthermore, experiences of others than educated middle-classes have been almost absent¹ from the discussion on the relation between media, social mobilization, and participation in the public debate.

The article is based on fieldwork and interviews with militants in the communication sector of the movement carried out between 2013 and 2014, described in the next section, which also gives an outline of communication processes and practices in the MST. The following two sections map out scholarly discussions and research about social movements and media and about the problems faced by social movements and other insurgent organisations when enacting and establishing communication processes. The next three sections before the final discussion analyse the case of MST from the perspective of the experiences and views of militants about media practices as a whole and new media technologies in particular.

Communication in the MST – empirical object, methodological approach, and material

The MST, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Terra* in Portuguese was officially founded in 1984, when rural workers' unions and organizations in the whole Brazil united under a single movement. Rural workers had been gathering and forming groups to work on their rights to land since the 1970s, but because of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil it was not possible for them to work as a movement in the open. The MST started then acting by occupying land that is not fulfilling its function according to Brazilian law and can therefore be expropriated. Usually, a group of families is formed to occupy and produce on the land and subsequently fight for expropriation in the courts, which grant the families the right to the land they have

¹ Communication and use of technologies among marginal groups in the global South are profusely discussed in the area of development communication. However, in such discussions the marginalized groups are often seen as the beneficiaries of projects and not as autonomous subjects.

occupied. The occupation becomes then an MST settlement. Throughout the 1990s the number of occupations increased and today there are around 350 thousand families (about 1,5 million individual) living in MST occupations and settlements.

Since its foundation the movement has prioritized communication and designated people or groups to be in charge of communicative processes. Communication is seen as a process of information and formation. It is closely connected to education in the sense that the media produced by the movement have an educative goal and in the sense that militants should be able to have a critical outlook to media messages. The movement produced its own media since the early years, it started with the newspaper *Jornal sem Terra*, which is still published, continued with the establishment of settlement radios, video-production, and more recently production for digital platforms, a website and social media profiles. To meet the demand for professional communicators, the movement organized secondary level courses and recently a degree in Journalism offered in partnership with a state university in Brazil. MST's communication sector consists of press-offices in São Paulo and Brasília staffed by professional journalists who work in tandem with communicators, radio presenters, video-producers, and other journalists at the local level. The communication sector is in charge of devising communication strategies, managing media relations, and producing content. One of the biggest challenges is to produce and circulate "counter-information", or to counter-balance mainstream media reporting.

The analysis in this article is based on a corpus of 22 interviews with MST militants who are active in the movement within the area of communication in various forms (radio communicators, press-officers at national and regional levels and video-educators) and on observations of the activities at MST press-offices in São Paulo and Brasília, at a settlement radio in the state of São Paulo, one MST school in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, and during the MST's sixth national congress in Brasília. The fieldwork and interviews are part of a doctoral dissertation project that looked into MST's communicative processes. The interviews are from 36 to 120 minutes long and were carried out during two fieldtrips to Brazil in July-September 2013 and February-March 2014. I have met with informants at their workplaces and homes, and also at the congress venue during MST's national congress in Brasília.

All the interviews were transcribed and coded according to themes related to the dissertation's research questions. As the interviews were carried out in Portuguese, relevant parts have been translated to English in order to be used in articles, presentations and the final dissertation. Each one of the themes was then refined in order to find overarching patterns and rationales. The informants signed an agreement of informed consent that explained how the interviews would be used (in the doctoral dissertation and articles). The agreement also stated that I would not use real names if the informant wished so, all informants authorized the use of their names. They also had access to the interview transcripts for comments and corrections – only two informants responded to the emails correcting mostly factual data from the interviews.

Social movements and the struggle to communicate

Scholarly enquiry and research addressing the relationship between social movements and media is usually based on the premise that social movements (as well as other kinds of marginal and insurgent social

formations) occupy a fringe position in the public space. At this marginal position, social movements will have to deploy different strategies and varying amounts of effort in order to raise public awareness about their demands. In Euro-American research traditions, there is a tendency to utilise the idea of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1991) as a normative horizon towards which social movements' communication is directed.

Research that addresses social movements' efforts in order to engage in public discourse with other social actors and sectors usually places social movements in the categories of weak publics (Habermas, 1991; Fraser, 2007) or challengers (Wolfsfeld, 2004). This area of enquiry analyses social movements' ability to move beyond processes of identity construction and internal cohesion building - enabled in part by communicative processes - and engage in a dialogue with other sectors of society. In these terms, access to common arenas where social movements can communicate with other sectors of society is of crucial importance for the advancement of social projects and socio-political demands. Such arenas, where conflicting worldviews can be confronted, are becoming less prominent, however, as Gitlin noted in 2002, at the dawn of deregulation processes and the introduction of satellite and multichannel television. Since then, others have discussed this fragmentation (see, for example, Deane, 2005) and the possibilities and hindrances for the formation of new arenas. Deane (2005 and 2007) has warned about the fragmentation of the public sphere brought about by the multiplication of possibilities for producing and distributing content. He questions whether the circulation of information can be characterised as communication, a concern shared by Waisbord (2005, p. 88), who argues that:

it is dangerous to fall into a romantic position that sees grassroots media as the only spaces where citizens can voice opinions, get information, and redress social conditions, while ignoring the fact that large-scale media institutions are of tremendous importance in people's everyday lives.

Curran, Fenton, and Freedman (2012) question the idea of an inherent democratic ethos in online communication. They argue that power is 'the starting point for understanding all social change and political upheaval, even within social movements'. Power relations, according to the authors, are 'not only an argument for political economic interrogation' but also 'a plea for a consideration of the social dimensions of political life and citizenship - what brings people together and why they seek solidarity' (2012, pp. 156-7).

In Latin America, specifically in Brazil, the discontentment of certain groups with the character of the dominant media institutions, particularly with their failure in configuring the symbolic arena of a national public sphere, has led to sharp criticism from organised social movements. Since the 1980s, an empirical and theoretical body of work on communicative aspects of popular mobilisation has been formed in Latin America. Peruzzo (1982 and 2007), for example, has studied for many years the role of public relations in different social movements. The author uses the term 'popular public relations' to describe activities that have as aims 'awareness raising, mobilisation, organisation and cohesion in the internal level of social movements' (2007). She also recognises the importance of strengthening ties and gaining support from wider society and from the government through mass communication vehicles (newspapers and TV in this case). This is a view of communication within oppositional, insurgent, or subaltern social movements as a system of strategies and techniques that are employed in an organised process. As an example of this way of looking at popular communication, Henriques (2004, p. 12) observes that mobilisation is constituted by the strategic formulation of communication actions capable of sustaining both public legitimacy and the trust

that maintains cooperation. Further, the author stresses that the success of mobilising strategies relies on the capacity to continuously feed the public debate and strengthen the sense of belonging and identification among mobilised subjects.

In Brazil, as noted by Matos (2012, p. 105), there are segments of society that are excluded from the public debate that takes place in mainstream media. As a result of this structural exclusion, some trends can be observed in various sectors of Brazilian civil society. First, there is the spread of community media initiatives documented by Peruzzo (2007) and Henriques (2004), among others. Second, there is increasing pressure for investments in strengthening the incipient public service media (Matos, p. 2012). In sum, the debate on media and democracy in Brazil gravitates around the possibilities and challenges for the creation of a media landscape that can serve 'the multiple publics and their needs, political interests and diverse cultural identities' (Matos, 2012, p. 145).

A recurrent discussion in the literature about communication among marginal groups in general and social movements in particular is the contention between these actors and other more established actors, such as political parties, the state and its organizations, and not least the media. There is somewhat of a consensus on the asymmetric way in which the power to communicate is distributed. This asymmetry can be of material resources and knowledge, but also symbolic, which happens when media is controlled by groups that are antagonists to social movements and difficult or control their access to media outlets.

Social movements and digital media

The interplay between activist practices and new technologies has been a constant object of study in recent years. Many attempts have been, and are still being, made to describe and discuss the ways in which media technologies modify or enable practices of activism (Wojcieszak and Smith (2014, Gustafsson 2012, Tatarchevskiy 2011, Banks 2010, Tufecki & Wilson 2012, and Harlow 2011). These studies highlight the ephemeral character of digitally enabled activism, in which mobilisation is effectively organised with the help of technology without questioning the sustainability of these formations. These types of social movements can also be connected to the character of contemporary mobilisation, which revolves around 'personal life-style values' (Bennet, 2012). While there have recently been much research about protest movements, longstanding social movements with clear visions for social change whose actions goes beyond episodic protest and demonstration are less prominent in research agendas.

Beyond the description and mapping out of media practices it is necessary to discuss the possibilities offered by the Internet for opposition groups. In this respect, Kahn & Kellner (2004, p. 93) conclude that:

online activist subcultures have materialized as a vital new space of politics and culture in which a wide diversity of individuals and groups have used emergent technologies in order to help to produce new social relations and forms of political possibility.

Bennett (2003) notes that the changes brought by digital communications to activism and protest go far beyond reducing the costs of communication or 'transcending geographical and temporal barriers'. What digital communications offer, he argues, is the possibility for the formation of networks that enable

permanent campaigning. This argument begs a analysis based on the daily experiences of militants that looks closely at does this *possibility* materialize in practices and processes, how *permanent campaigning* happens empirically, and lastly, whether there are any threats in using digital communications.

It has become common to associate protest, demonstration, and social mobilisation with new information and communication technologies. The amplifying and organising properties of today's media platforms have contributed to the widespread reach of localised insurgencies and protests in recent years. Consequently, the attention and importance attributed to these events by scholars have been, at times, overblown.

Social movements have been using different media to communicate for a long time, actively seeking ways to produce and distribute self-generated content as an alternative to official and hegemonic accounts of their activities. In consequence, new forms of production and distribution of content will reorganise both the way movement members and the mainstream media of the day relate to each other and the way movements as a social formation communicate with other spheres in society. In 1980, Todd Gitlin wrote that 'people *as producers of meaning* have no voice in what the media make of what they say or do or in the context within which the media frame their activity' [emphasis added]. He suggested that professionals within media institutions held the power to attribute meaning (or frame) social movements' activities and actions; they controlled the field of news production and dominated its habitus (news routines, values, and organisational culture). Activists then 'learn how to turn the tables by getting strategically arrested' (ibid., pp. 42-43). Christa Berger's (1996) analysis of the interplay between the MST and the regional newspaper *Zero Hora* resonates with Gitlin's assessment of the relationship between journalists and activists, as she concludes that both compete in the field of discourse, struggling to define words that carry with them symbolic or material capital. Both authors share the view that, conflicts and struggles aside, mainstream media, represented by the institutions they have studied, had the primacy in interpreting and framing the social movement.

The power imbalance between mainstream media and social movements is being revived in light of the development of new forms of media that could potentially redistribute interpreting and framing privileges and reorganise power relations. According to Atton (2002), community and alternative media emerge then as counter-forces to the hegemonic power of mainstream media. However, the extent to which such initiatives represent a significant platform for dialogue with other spheres in society and their capacity to subvert dominant communication flows is still contested.

New media and mobilization – questioning the technological-determinist argument

Recent studies on media and mobilization (Banks, 2010; Tatarchevskiy, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson 2012; Harlow, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012) argue that new technologies and platforms function as a catalyser for social mobilization and foster the formation of networks (Bennet 2012). In this section I engage with these arguments, discussing from MST militant's point of view what roles new media technologies and platforms can have for mobilization and formation of networks. I do this by discussing how MST militants see the relation between the use of different media and the formation and maintenance of a collective that is the social movement. Forming a collective of people with shared views and understandings about the problems

they face is a crucial condition for mobilization. Maintaining cohesion and a sense of community through time among the members of the collective is a challenge if a protest organization wants to endure and become an established social movement. The formation and maintenance of a collective are processes materialized through communication, so here the question to be explored is how new media technologies modify communication within the context of mobilization. Do they bring any new concerns? Do they pose any threats? Do they require adaptation? And finally, what new possibilities and benefits can they offer?

For a start it is necessary to make visible a separation between communication and media, which is very visible in MSTs communicative processes. Communication is seen as a social process and as a performance, it permeates all sorts of interactions, from workshops and meetings to making a radio program. Media are entities external to the movement, tools, artefacts, and institutions with which MST interacts as a collective subject. In the interviews with MST militants, communication is often seen as being above media. It is communication, as a dialogic and participatory process, and not the use of media that needs to be encouraged among militants to the extent that communication will always happen regardless of what media are available, as Rita, a militant since the 1980s, explains:

We maintain our principles to the extent that we strengthen our collective instances, if you weaken the collective spaces, the direction instances, the debate collectives, [then individualism] is strengthened. But our movement is very radical with this issue. So the principle of collective direction is applied to the extent that you create the collective spaces for decision making, for construction of political guidelines, and maintaining these dynamics in our movement - of meetings, national meetings, collective meetings, formative processes. We never neglect this in our movement, because it would be much cheaper and easier, considering our dimensions, to do everything online.

Rita's statement reveals her view that communication strengthens collectiveness in the movement – collective direction can only be achieved through communicative processes and practices such as meetings and discussions. Furthermore, well-functioning communicative processes are both the desired result of the collective direction and a crucial element of its practice. In the last sentence, we find out that she does not think that new media strengthen or facilitate this collective process, even if it could be easier to use digital media as the main means of communication in an organisation the size of the MST. It also illustrates the view of communication and media as separate elements - communication as a process and media as tools. Even if they are related because communication (also) happens through media like radio, newspaper, telephones, computers, they are not to be confused. As her argument goes, the use of media does not grant the desired dialogic communication process, it can even prevent it from happening.

Eliane, who is younger and started as a militant in the MST more than 10 years after Rita, shares the same view on digital media and collectiveness:

[...] our organisation is run through other elements, the meeting, which is a more local space, than through the Internet. The Internet helps but it is not the main instrument for mobilisation in our movement. It helps, it contributes, including the emails, our organisation through emails has increased a lot; however, when we need to decide an action, a national activity, we always need a collective space, a meeting, the physical presence. The physical space is very important for us

because we are a movement that needs to have local materiality.

Collectiveness is thus something that is connected to communication and, according to these informants, not necessarily facilitated by media. They all seem to be aware that the speed and practicality allowed by the Internet, emails, and digital social networks can be harmful for the movement's collective organisation and decision-making processes. The benefits and advantages that many scholars have ascribed to digital media, notably fostering continuing mobilization, are not taken at face value within the MST, as Eliane puts it:

Another very important thing that we have been discussing in relation to social networks is that for us they have to be part of a project, a project of change, there is no point in only using them. There is no point in communicating in social networks and not communicating in practice.

Once again, "communicating in social networks" is not equalled to "communicating in practice" which reinforces the view that there is desired communication process, which happens when all have the possibility to participate and when there is a dialogue as opposed to transmission of information. In order to organize as a collective, MST needs more than "posting on Facebook", the movement personified in its leaders and communication sector needs to create the conditions for discussions that include militants. This can of course be achieved with the *help* of media, but requires the collective efforts of militants.

One aspect of the MST's media practices that became salient was the preoccupation with the conflict between the individualistic ethos of digital media – particularly social networks – and the collective identity of the movement. The informants who were strategically involved in planning and operationalizing communication and media strategies were concerned about this conflict. Because of their responsibilities and experience, these informants were able to assess and relate the needs and objectives of the movement and the affordances of the media. In their views, the ability to produce and circulate their own messages and interact with others allowed by digital social networks is overshadowed by their tendency to become channels for individual expression, as Rita tells that they need to be careful when using social media because they are not a gathering of individual persons but "a social organization with an organic structure" and collective principles. She admits later that the technologies facilitate organizational processes but at the same time they 'challenge us to not individualize and not lose the collective structure of the organization'. This is a tension that is less present (or has not been properly observed) in studies that look into the relation between media and social mobilization among educated middle-classes in the Global North. One possible reason is that so-called "identity politics" is usually performed individually. Even on subjects from groups based on identity there is no collective subject in the same way as MST militants see the movement.

These views challenge widely accepted understandings that digital media facilitate connective action (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012), assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012), and the formation of networks and communities (Castells, 2001 and 2009). In line with Bakardjieva's (2005 and 2009) argument that digital media might offer a forum to express and exercise citizenship, but that doing so occurs in an individual fashion, around perceived common issues, MST's relation with media clearly show that we should be more careful in establishing a causal relation between the use of digital media and the formation of collectives. In this sense, MST militants contend that collectiveness is a property that they have constructed and not something that can be achieved through the use of media. Even though production and circulation of media can be enacted

with a view to strengthening the collective, they are seen as instruments. So much so that militants working with communication believe that only certain media, used in certain ways, can strengthen the movement's collectiveness.

What the informants generally meant when they argued that social networks were essentially individual media channels was that content was usually produced by an individual and shared without any discussion within the group. The speed at which content is circulated does not allow collective construction, evaluation, editing, and subsequent publishing. Even when different organisations have an institutional profile on social networks, they cannot escape the risk of *faux pas* by individuals who might hastily post something harmful for the organisation as a whole. Within the MST, as communication and media are subject to constant planning and discussion, the fear is exactly that the constant pressure to communicate exerted by new media will risk the consistency of the movement's image and threaten its organic processes. This thought is apparent in Eliane's explanation of how the movement has been trying to use social networks:

We discussed for a while, internally, what we would do with Facebook, because we had this preoccupation that Facebook is a very individualistic media and we, in our movement, we fight individualism, so we try to think [about] things together, collectively, think [about] the process together, because any individual action [...] can delegitimise our organic character.

The "organic character" (*organicidade*) of the movement is frequently mentioned in interviews and highly regarded by the militants. To say that MST has an organic character means that even though the movement has a clear structure – with local, regional, and national leaderships and specific sectors with clear tasks – the decision making process is collective and should ideally be bottom-up, with a strong participation from militants in the settlements and camp-sites.

Nevertheless, there are, within the movement, concrete initiatives and discussions about how the potential of social networks can be used to their benefit. During the National Congress, the Brazilian media collective *Mídia Ninja*, which became known nationally during the demonstrations of June 2013 for their live and unedited broadcasting of different events, produced independent coverage of the congress. *Mídia Ninja* also helped the communication task force in devising social media strategies during the congress.

The interviews and observations have shown that the media practices within the MST have the purpose of strengthening the collective ethos of the movement, or, in the words of its members, the internal 'organicity'. For this to be achieved, it is necessary that the MST as an organisation be able to exercise a certain level of control over the media and over the processes that guide the practices related to these media. It is also necessary that the collective processes of debate, discussion, and reflection that permeate the movement be reproduced in and through media practices. Such control can only be achieved through the deliberate separation of communication and media. By claiming ownership of communicative processes and creating their own arenas of communication that have become established through time, MST militants are able to choose not to use digital social networks as organisational tools. The changes that individualistic and network-like media technologies impose on MST's communicative processes are starting to be felt and addressed by the movement. It is noticeable, however, that many of those in charge of leading the construction of communication processes are aware of the structural conflicts between digital social networks and MST's communicative ethos.

Media practices within MST – appropriation and control

The term 'new media' refers to Internet-based media platforms and, in the particular case of the MST, to its website and digital social media platforms. Different from so-called old media, which are now organically integrated into the movement, new media – digital social platforms and mobile devices in particular – have been subject to plenty of internal discussion. Some informants have stated that the movement is undergoing a process of appropriation of social networks so that they can be utilised for the benefit of the movement as a collective. Digital social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube seem to be considered more problematic than a website, possibly because a website allows its creators to exercise greater power over the content and interactions with it. Unlike digital social networks, publication on a website allows a collective process of production in which information is sent from settlements and campsites or regional press offices to the national press office in São Paulo. Writing and publishing on a website also complies with more traditional rules of journalistic coverage – interviews and data collection, fact checking, and writing of a final text.

The interviews point to two different dispositions regarding the use of new media by the MST as a collective: ambivalence and disagreement. The press officers, who have a broader knowledge of communication in the movement and who work with different aspects of communication on a daily basis, are ambivalent about the potential of digital communication in general and social media platforms in particular. At first, they display a certain scepticism towards the a priori democratic potential of the Internet. They do not believe that, through their activity on social media or the website, the movement will be able to achieve any sort of political representation. Such mistrust is revealed when an informant tells me that 'the movement's time is not Facebook time', meaning that the logic of constant and rapid flow that characterises the platform does not synchronise well with the logic of the MST in which decisions are reached through a deliberation process that includes collective discussion. Alberto, a regional leader in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, explains that the 'political time of an organisation' is not compatible with Facebook time:

[...] at this moment [when we are stressing the] importance of the settlements for the political struggle [...] it is an idea that has been discussed over the last two years [...] but it is now that the leadership, the militants, people in the basis are assimilating it. [This process] has a time, which is the time of a political organisation, it is not Facebook time. [...] of course sometimes you have to use these tools as an important element, as a means of spreading information. But it is the time of a social organisation, a political organisation [...] [social networks, the Internet] cannot be used in this way. Of course, they have an important animation role, but from the organisational point of view of constructing consolidated processes, it is not via the Internet, it is not via telephone, it is sitting around a table, discussing, talking, and deciding.

The organisation of a settlement and articulation of political guidelines, as Alberto explains, are organic processes and, as such, are not something that can be done virtually. In his view, the movement does not have anything to gain from speeding up this process by using digital social networks. Of course, they are not averse to using the Internet to facilitate communication, as Rita argues:

All that [Internet, email, digital social networks] is very important, it has facilitated communication, given us more agility. Now, what is the preoccupation and the challenge? We are in a period in which everything happens at the speed of light, the speed of communication, and a social movement does not have the speed of a click, of pressing enter on a keyboard.

I interviewed Rita during MST's National Congress in Brasília, and she recognised the important role played by technologies – operated by the 'numerous and well-organised communication task forces', she added – for the socialisation of discussions and experiences among those who were not present at the congress. Real-time updates to the website and the possibility to keep those who were not able to travel to the congress updated were, in Rita's view, some of the main advantages of technologies. Nevertheless, what technologies offer is a potential that can only be fully realised through the efforts and work of the communication sector, as many informants stressed in their interviews.

Younger militants, however, are more positive towards the potential of the Internet and digital social networks for the MST's communicative processes even if they are used for communicating within the movement. They are more likely to use their personal profiles to post calls for events and pictures of certain activities. Still, these are activities to which the general public is invited such as seminars, open lectures, markets where the MST's produce is sold, and other events organised by the movement and open to the community. Protests, demonstrations, and occupations, in turn, are only publicised as they happen or after they have already started. As Rodrigo, a youth leader, reasons, there is a fine balance between sharing and sharing too much:

[...] it is possible to make an evaluation that we are more flexible in [our] communication than before. I have Facebook, I have Twitter, I talk about the activities that are happening [...] of course I do it with caution, but I post pictures of the activities as they happen, me personally, because this helps to advertise, it is a two-way street [...]. I think we need to be careful, however, at this moment we don't have an in-depth evaluation about these surveillance services.

Digital social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and, more recently, Instagram have significantly facilitated the act of sharing information. Moreover, they are free to use for personal users and easy to operate. The development of mobile phones into a multiplatform, multitasking device also simplifies the act of sharing content. In a critique of the sharing and content-creating logic of social networks, Dean (2009) coined the term communicative capitalism, arguing that what she calls contributions (information and content shared by individuals and organisations) has a bulk value for the companies that provide the platforms for sharing. Sharing is therefore encouraged and made easier. It therefore takes a certain level of self-awareness and self-censorship – as acknowledged by Rodrigo – to constantly avoid oversharing. As sharing and being present online becomes the norm, avoiding sharing demands self-control on the part of the individual and the socialisation of accepted rules and behaviours within the organisation. The normalisation of sharing as a form of sociability has consequences for individuals. They then need to adapt and constantly negotiate their relationship with the normal and socially accepted form of acting that is sharing content.

Informants also pointed out the need to educate the movement's social basis about the potential and dangers of using social networks. This would be a way to socialise the militancy into the accepted – because

they are safe – ways of using digital social networks, as Fernanda, a press officer in Brasília, argues:

[...] we need guidelines [...] security guidelines and such because whether you want to or not you expose militants and many of them are persecuted in a way or another where they live, because of the daily struggle for land, so security procedures are necessary.

Adriano, a militant video producer, echoes this view, emphasising the disruptive nature of direct action, which is at risk when information about planned activities is leaked prior to their actual performance:

[...] of course there is this generational shock in the sense that there is a generation who grew up with more access [to Internet] and usually comes from urban areas. [They] post everything on Facebook and this may cause problems in the future [...] we'll come to know this later, today we don't have this knowledge [of] possible criminalisation that may occur, for example, by identifying who took part in the actions and later these people are penalised. We do not have any response to this yet but I wouldn't be surprised if there is already an investigation.

Following this attitude of cautious curiosity, the movement started using digital social networks mainly as channels to expand their audiences. Twitter started to be used as a way to broaden the reach of the website by linking to articles originally published on the website, immediately reaching important audiences such as journalists, other social organisations, and intellectuals. In this way, the platform offered some sort of narrowcasting, as the MST could follow journalists, politicians, and other relevant people and organisations. Even journalists from outlets that the movement would not communicate with directly could use information from digital social networks in their reports.

Since media are not considered part of the movement but instruments and tools to be used, it is understandable that the inception of a new technology or instrument will be a motive for suspicion and reorganisation of social processes. Ambivalent opinions regarding digital social media networks, particularly Facebook were fairly common in the interviews conducted. They were commonly expressed in connection with the newness of social networks and with the uncertainty about how they can be used in a way that is beneficial to the movement.

Digital social networks are seen more positively at the individual level or even as an alternative to landline telephones when these are not available in rural areas. Facebook is also used to search for content and news to be broadcast during radio programmes. At one of the radio stations visited during fieldwork, the closest telephone was located in a different building, about 50 metres away, and the mobile phone signal was not reliable, which made Facebook the only way for the radio presenter to communicate with the audience during a broadcast. In sum, as Gustavo, communication coordinator in the state of São Paulo, explains, the Internet and digital social networks are instruments that can change or facilitate communication:

Facebook [...] has this role now of [enabling] this faster communication. We tried for a while with MSN, but MSN never [...] it is not a social network, [it] did not catch up like Facebook, with this boom of Facebook, this explosion of the social network, everyone has it now [...]. Everyone has Facebook,

so this way of dialogue is very fast and easy. Everyone has a simple mobile so it becomes easier. Then the Internet for us is starting to become a kind of instrument. Because in the past we only used the Internet to look for news, to carry out studies, look for information on different topics, get deeper knowledge about certain themes, but now the Internet gives us this as well. With technological development we cannot keep ourselves to the archaic, we need to keep up with evolution and use technology as a tool to help us, and the Internet contributes to that today, for us here, it's quite positive.

The existence of a conflict between the collective ethos of a mass social movement and the individualistic character of a digital social media network is also evident here. However, militants outside the press office do not find it so problematic. They do not use digital networks as a substitute for other organisational practices such as meetings, collective discussions, and deliberation. For them as individuals, Facebook, which is the platform they named most often, is a 'local' medium, serving to connect them with the local community of friends and establish a local audience.

A social movement that is bigger than its social media channels

Up until the advent of digital social networks, digital communication was used by MST as a way to facilitate communication. Through email, for instance, the movement was able to strengthen extraterritorial networks with other social movements and supporters around the world. The website was first to mark the movement's digital territory, to state its presence online and publicise basic information. Through social and technological change, digital social networks and social media themselves became structures that were potentially capable of enabling the debate and discussion processes that were previously unmediated (in the sense that they occurred through face-to-face communication). Moreover, digital social networks enable individual and immediate publishing of content *without* any discussion, debate, or editing. Together with surveillance concerns, the fact that content that refers to the collective can be published individually is one of the main reasons for discomfort and mistrust on social media networks. At the same time, informants were positive concerning the propaganda potential of these networks when used in a collective capacity. Another facet of the MST's media practices that emerged from the interviews is the scepticism about the organisational potential of digital social networks as substitutes or complements to existing organisational processes. Recent research and commentary have underscored the network properties of digital communications (see, for instance, Castells 2001, 2009 and 2013; Constanza-Chook 2006). These authors ascribe digital networks a nearly neutral status, which would allow them to function in a centre-less and non-authoritarian fashion, with rapid communication between different nodes in the network. However, as Gitlin (2012, p. 218) argues, '[t]he sluggishness of the past is an illusion'. In the case of the MST, the movement was able to construct an organic network of communication (with a number of hubs but no clear centre) without the help of digital social networks. At the same time, contrary to contemporary protest movements that emerged in recent years, the MST has a history of persecution, which justifies its reluctance in organising actions via these platforms.

The observations and discussions of media practices among MST militants reveal that, although the digital and non-digital networks are related and sometimes work in tandem, those in such networks do not see them as a unity. There was a tendency among the informants to see the movement itself as a network in which those inside hold relative control and are able to start chains of action and reaction. The fact that the informants are less confident about the networking potential of social media can be linked to the acknowledgement that they do not exercise the same power in the virtual world. This kind of concern is illustrated by the preoccupation, voiced by two informants, that using social networks in inappropriate ways can be harmful to the organic character of the movement. It has become clear that there is a will to transfer the collective organisational characteristics of the movement to its media production processes, which, in the view of the informants, can be achieved through radio, print media, and audiovisual production. Even though digital social networks are treated with suspicion and used with caution – to a great extent due to the fact that they are new – the website is seen as a platform to publicise the MST's actions and ideas, as press officer Marcelo explains:

On our website, we try to follow a guideline that is a reference for discussion of the agrarian question in Brazil, all topics related to the agrarian question. The audience is [made up of] our militants and supporters, researchers and people like you who want to study the MST and the agrarian question and have the website as reference. But also society as a whole, supporters and people who want to know the MST better and find information about the movement.

In the opinion of the press officers interviewed, the advantages and benefits offered by the website are greater than those offered by other non-digital media such as radio and printed press when it comes to reaching audiences outside the movement. Fernanda, a press officer from Brasília, does not see the website as a solution for every problem, as she recognises that large corporations still dominate accesses but also acknowledges the important role of the website coupled with social networks. Her reflections illustrate the view that media in general, and digital media in particular, are seen as discursive spaces, not as tools for organisation. As discursive spaces, their advantage compared to older media is their potential for spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This is a relational advantage in comparison to other media, but it does not diminish the need for concrete social mobilisation and political action. This view is clearly rooted in the character and history of the MST as a movement with a concrete and ideologically based platform of change whose demands took shape before media practices started to be performed.

Also related to the nature of the MST as a 'pre-media' organisation are the kinds of practices associated with emergent digital media. As opposed to contemporary protest and recent 'square movements', which use digital social networks as tools to organise street demonstrations and protests, the MST uses digital social networks to broadcast content. It is against this background that the possibilities and potential for a more plural and diverse public debate should be analysed.

While recent analyses of the relationship between media and social change have focused on how technologies foster new ways of organising and voicing demands (Gerbaudo, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), an alternative approach to analyse this relationship might be needed in order to account for the different ways in which this relationship takes shape. When analysing the MST's participation in the public debate in Brazil, a strong focus on social networks as tools for mobilisation and

performance of connective action (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) will not lead the analysis much further ahead.

Internet – a space to be conquered

As the interviews point out, for the movement as a collective, the Internet is considered a space to be conquered. This is the main difference from mass media that were previously used by the movement: they were not connected to a symbolic space in the same way that digital media are. When the press officers say that the movement's website should be a reference for the agrarian question in Brazil, or when a group in charge of revamping the website wants it to be a news reference for the working class in Brazil, they are trying to build and conquer a symbolic space. In this sense, the process of appropriation of digital media is different from that of analogue media, because it also entails the appropriation of virtual space. It is still a subtle difference and something that those in charge of communication and media strategies, such as the press officers, are starting to realise. Such a process of appropriation is a statement against technological determinist views, pointing instead to the idea that media have affordances. For the MST, these non-determinist affordances mean that they see digital media as a possibility to occupy a new space with a higher potential reach and the opportunity to broadcast unfiltered content. Because they have developed mechanisms and routines for organisation and mobilisation, they do not need to use digital social networks for such purposes.

The idea that digital media connected to the Internet are a space to be explored emerges gradually in interviews and through the observation of meetings. During the evaluation meeting on the last day of the National Congress, the communication task force evaluated the use of social networks positively, highlighting the 'massification' of social networks. This understanding is particularly interesting because it invites us to see the interplay between social movements and media as a relational process. Since the MST cannot resort to traditional mass media to broadcast their views, they see digital social networks as mass media. Another clue that digital media are seen as spaces of communication is the discussion at the evaluation meeting about the participation of militants on Facebook. This was the first time when a less-cautious position was expressed - a participant at the meeting suggested that the use of Facebook could be amplified by militants, particularly by engaging young people who normally 'do not share MST news'.

Of course, there are shortcomings in this position, not least the well-documented arguments that digital media replicate the structures of older media (see, for instance, Hindman, 2010). Yet, this shortcoming is acknowledged by the MST, as shown in the interviews. Therefore, in order to understand the potential of digital media as a space for the promotion of ideas, it is necessary to put it in the perspective of: a) the MST's view of communicative processes as deeply rooted in their particular struggle; and b) the current media landscape in Brazil, with emergent new actors and the loss of the credibility of traditional institutions. In this context, digital media alone cannot promote diversity and plurality, but their affordances allow groups such as the MST – with a well-organised grass-roots base and a specific set of demands – to occupy the space that is available online. But it is important to note that this can only be achieved if there is already a well-established system of content production in place. The fact that the media landscape in Brazil is currently very dynamic should also be added to the equation.

Final considerations

In this article I have presented and analysed the ambivalent views on new media, particularly digital social media networks of a subaltern social media acting outside urban centres. The main goal was to explore what opportunities and threats militants see in the use of new media technologies against the socio-political background in which MST acts, which is characterised by power asymmetry between social movements like MST and elite social actors such as politicians, state institutions, the corporate sector, and the media. In this scenario, MST has little power to control what is said about them in the media and limited resources to produce and circulate their own content. In order to circumvent this power asymmetry, they have, since the foundation of the movement, attempted to construct a potential counter-hegemonic media alternative using the media that are at their disposal at a given time. In this context, contrary to widely accepted views of digital media and networks as an easy and cheap way for marginal groups to break through the filters of mainstream media, MST militants use media production as an alternative to the current situation but do not see it as a long-term transformative solution.

Interviews with militants revealed that political action in their view is something performed materially through practices such as meetings, interventions, and demonstrations, and symbolically through the construction of an alternative society that is ideologically grounded. In this sense media technologies are never starting points or catalysers of political action, but channels and tools to be used for mobilisation. Media are seen as entities outside the movement. Even when they might be considered a patrimony of the MST, as is the *Jornal Sem-Terra* newspaper, they are reluctant to admit that they 'live in the media' or are dominated by media. This posture challenges the idea of the network as an organic extension of social relations defended by Castells (2012). Of course MST's actions in platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are related to what they do outside online environments but, as the interviews demonstrate, they are definitely not the same thing. There is here a clear separation between communication as a process and media as the material channels that enable this process. This indicates that there is a difference in the levels of control over media – or agency – exerted by collectives and that exerted by individuals.

As interviews demonstrate, beyond maintaining control over media, militants want to analyse, understand, and reflect upon how media may benefit or harm communication in the movement as a collective subject. Compared to contemporary protest organisations that are quick to adopt new technologies to serve their own needs and facilitate mobilisation, the appropriation process within the MST is significantly slower. This can be explained by the fact that, even though there is a hierarchy in the movement with a national leadership, regional committees, and settlement leaders, there is a culture of democratic and collective decision-making. This is expressed in two of the movement principles: 'collective direction' and 'contact with the base'. The collective decision-making process shows again the importance attributed to communicative processes.

The view of the movement by its militants as a collective subject will reflect on their understanding of media as collective or individual media. Collective media are those that can be constructed collectively and in which the collective input is seen in practice. This view explains the ambivalence and cautiousness with media that stimulate individual engagement and production such as digital social networks and personal devices. The gradual and slow adoption of practices related to digital social networks such as Twitter and Facebook shows

that these are not seen as organic collective media. The practices are still very centralised – as opposed to other media – with some of the press officers controlling and filtering the profiles on these networks. Considering that the MST, being a collective subject, values collectiveness and organically run processes, their understanding of digital social networks as individualistic and even as a threat to the collective ethos of the movement challenges well-established arguments maintaining that digital social networks create collaborative collectives. This does not mean that we need to completely abandon the idea of the network as a model for connection and action but that we must accept the material, place-based, and politically situated aspects that also play a role in social mobilisation. Furthermore, this distinction between individual and collective media has not had much scholarly attention and deserves to be more closely explored. It does offer an analytical point of entry to investigate how digital media platforms modify communication within social movements and protest organisations.

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