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### **Abstract**

The re-democratization of Latin America’s social and political institutions since the 1990s has seen various changes affecting the whole continent following from the collapse of military dictatorships in the mid-80s., from the adoption of economic neoliberal reforms and demands for social and economic inclusion to calls for wider equality for less privileged groups and updated media reforms and regulation policies directed to the public interest. A key global geopolitical player in Latin America, Brazil has managed to reduce poverty levels and grow its middle class, but little has changed in the media sphere, which is still heavily skewed towards the market and highly concentrated.

The Internet nonetheless has slowly emerged as a powerful counter-public sphere that is invigorating debate, challenging the status quo and creating avenues for wider political pluralism. It is also beginning to provide a space for the articulation of new ideas, for the criticism of the media’s self-proclaimed objectivity during presidential elections and is opening up possibilities for more complex and less stereotypical representations of subordinated groups. It is also assisting civil society players and other citizens in political mobilizations and organizations of protests against the limits of the social and economic reforms carried out in the last decade by Brazilian centre-left to centre governments, as the June 2013 demonstrations showed.

Since the late 1990s, the World Wide Web has began to be actively used for political campaigning. It was used by female politicians like Dilma Rousseff and Marina da Silva during the 2010 presidential elections to advocate their causes and mobilize voters. Nonetheless, the lack of access of less privileged sectors of the Brazilian population to the Internet poses problems for its democratization and use for political mobilization, its capacity to offer challenging counter-discourses and criticism of politicians and policies as well as its general use for the public interest. In this paper I argue that despite problems of lack of access to the web in Brazil, the potential of

the Internet for democratization is strong and is already having a powerful role in not only political mobilization, but in contributing to challenge taken for granted discourses, boosting diversity and undermining the concentration of the market media.

## **Introduction**

Latin America is quickly becoming one of the world's fastest growing Internet markets, with access to computers rapidly expanding in countries like Brazil. The Internet and new communication technologies have been hailed by various scholars and cyber enthusiasts as key elements, which can bring development to countries of the South and contribute to the reduction of inequalities between nations (Cardoso, 2010; Silverstone, 2000). The 2005 *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilios* of the IBGE underscored the existence of 32.1 million Internet users in Brazil. This represents 21% of the population of 10 years of age and over. In the 2008 study, this number went up to 55.9 million, or 34.8% and is rapidly growing.

If there is one thing the Internet does offer is the possibility, or the hope, of a *more democratic and participatory society*. Arguably, the exclusion of citizens from the World Wide Web has economic, social and political implications, and poses serious implications on an individual's rights to participate in a democracy and to engage in political life. To be digitally excluded is not only a violation of citizens' information and communication rights, but it makes the emerging economies of Latin America and Brazil loose out in jobs and investments. In this chapter I argue how democratic politics in Brazil are facing a paradox: on one hand new technologies are opening up avenues for participatory democracy at all levels, from providing citizens with a growing platform for advocacy, political mobilization and organization, as was evident during the 2013 June mass protests held throughout the country, to the ability to scrutinise the activities of politicians and of Congress.

For a country that traditionally closes its elite activities to the rest of the population, the web is beginning to play an important role for the public sector in its relationship with citizens, making governmental actions more transparent and thus creating the means to undermine political corruption. The Internet is emerging strongly also as a tool for politicians to engage with citizens, promoting particular causes and working on issues usually marginalised from the mainstream media, like gender politics. The persistence of digital exclusion nonetheless poses serious limits to the capacity of the web to deepen democratic politics in Brazil. To start with, political mobilization, which takes place on the web is still largely restricted to politically aware and educated citizens as well as decision-making elites, although from the 2006 elections onwards the web has become increasingly popularised in the country.

This chapter explores key theories on the problems and impacts of the digital divide (i.e. Norris, 2001; Nederveen Pieterse's, 2010). The debates presented here are divided into four parts: the first investigates the benefits of networked politics and its limits; the second looks at the relationship between economic growth and the persistence of high numbers of digitally excluded in Brazil, as well as the government and civil society initiatives to tackle this, whilst the last part of the chapter provides a summary of the positive aspects of the uses of the web in Brazil for the public interest. It provides a brief discussion of the ways in which female politicians, such as Marina Silva of the Green Party and Dilma Rousseff from the Worker's Party (PT), used the Internet for political campaigning during the presidential elections of 2010. It also examines briefly the 2013 June protests and the ways in which various different sectors of Brazilian society used new technologies to either mobilize and organize the demonstrations or report on them live, denouncing police brutality.

One crucial argument raised in this chapter is how the Internet has emerged, and in the June 2013 protests managed to consolidate itself, as an *alternative and political blogosphere* and a reaction to the partisanship and officialdom character of the mainstream media, with requests for

media democratization and further reforms. The Internet in Brazil is thus having a positive role in invigorating public debate, and is contributing to the undermining of media concentration, boosting political pluralism and stimulating political participation. This emerging vibrant, contradictory *blogosphere* is paving the way for the construction of diverse representations of disadvantaged groups. I begin this discussion by providing a short summary of the theoretical debate on the positive aspects of networked politics, as well as their limits, in the democratization process.

### **The benefits of networked politics: the limits and challenges to democratic politics**

How can we understand the relationship between the Internet and the public interest? It seems clear that the relationship between the Internet and democracy must be understood in relation to other social, economic and political factors. Various members of society on one hand use the web for the public interest through an individual engagement with politics as well as to scrutinise the activities of governments, whereas governments on the other hand, in their relations with citizens, make use of new technologies. Politicians for instance are finding in the web an avenue to advocate their party policies and mobilize citizens, whereas disadvantaged and marginalised political groups and social movements view it as an opportunity to work on misrepresentations and mainstream stereotypes or to organise protests to pressure governments to fulfill their promises.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that democratic politics play a minor role in *cyberspace* in comparison to commercial transactions. The Internet is heavily dominated by commercial corporations over independent individual blogs, NGOs and other party websites. Drawing from a wide range of political theories, Norris (2001, 107) asserts that the type of political organizations found online are closely linked to the process of democratization of a given country. This means

that there is a clear connection between income and economic power, new technologies and wider political participation.

Digital politics can be understood here in the broader sense, in other words, as the carrying out of political debate between voters, or as non-partisan discussions or forms of civic engagement by sectors of the community gathering online to deliberate on ways of improving their own lives. High expectations have been placed by cyber enthusiasts on the capacity of information and communication technologies of benefitting minor parties and other political voices marginalised from the mainstream, creating an alternative sphere of debate which can work to counter-weight dominant *status quo* discourses (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003), or offer more in depth discussions on governmental policies.

Debates concerning the rise of the Information Society nonetheless have been deeply contested, being usually cast in either an optimistic or a pessimistic light: the former group sees the web as having the potential of reducing traditional inequalities between developed and developing societies, whereas the latter believe that it is destined to reinforce current disparities. More utopian or highly optimistic theories on the Internet (Clark and Aufderheide, 2009) argue however how the web has profoundly shaped contemporary life, from the selling of books to the ways in which politics is being practiced worldwide.

In the summary of the report *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*, Clarke and Aufderheide<sup>1</sup> (2009) underlined how digital public media 2.0 will become more of a key component of democratic public life. They see this new media as being directed to the public and produced by it. This has been the case of the grassroots mobilization around the 2008 Obama electoral campaign, seen as proof of how the medium has opened up new avenues for civic engagement, and especially amongst the younger segments of the electorate. Such arguments seem to hit at the very core of the technological determinism theories, and the utopia surrounding the

supposedly 'magical' powers of the Internet and of social networking sites to change real life problems, such as reducing poverty and combating race and gender oppressions.

The fact of the matter is that the power structures of the old media, and their tendencies towards concentration, have not disappeared and have actually been reinforced in a context of increasing expansion of new technologies, mergers between companies and other inequalities produced by globalization. The Internet can be thus seen as being more a space to advertise products to consumers and trade than one which improves the democratic quality of public life (Margolis, Resnick and Levy, 2003, 65).

A comparison can be made between the expansion of digital democracy in Brazil in the 2010 elections with the uses of the web in the Obama 2008 presidential campaign. According to data gathered by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* survey, some 74% of Internet users, or 55% of the adult population, went online in 2008 to get news and information about the election. More than half of the population used the Internet to get involved in the political process. Two-thirds of voters between the ages of 18-24 engaged in political activity on these sites in 2008. Similarly to the actions of many Americans in 2008, but taking into consideration the lower levels of Internet use in Latin America, many Brazilians in 2010 went online to share their views on the dispute with other bloggers, as we shall see, with many politicians also attempting to copy the 2008 'Obama effect' by actively going on the Internet to attract voters.

It is thus more accurate to say that the web is emerging everywhere around the world, either in Egypt, Brazil or the UK, as a valid space for opposition groups, or parties who feel marginalised from the mainstream, from either the Conservative or Progressive side of the political spectrum. The Internet can have either negative or positive functions, such as reinforcing prejudices, in the same way as it can be empowering for many disadvantaged groups, neglected at the margins. We saw this happen in Brazil during the 2013 June protests, when different youth groups who do not usually receive space in the mainstream media voiced their demands through social media.

The Internet can thus provide room for opposition groups to attack each other, or to strive to debate particular socio-economic and political issues that can have an impact on policy decisions. From whatever perspective we take, it seems to be the case that these ‘multiple discourses’ which are being articulated on the web can assist in the creation of a more *vibrant* public sphere of debate in the *Habermasian* sense, and this is especially important for transitional or emerging democracies like Brazil.

In Brazil as is the case of more advanced democracies, the mainstream media have embraced new technologies, with a growing convergence between media platforms occurring since the 1990s. The majority of blogs accessed on the Internet are those of journalists from the mainstream newspapers, such as Ricardo Noblat’s blog from *O Globo*. Nonetheless, the web in Brazil is also offering many spaces for new websites and other civic organisations to make use of it to propagate their political causes, from the emergence in the decade of the 1990s of media websites like *Observatorio da Imprensa* ([www.observatoriodaimpresa.com.br](http://www.observatoriodaimpresa.com.br)) and *Comunique-se* ([portal.comunique-se.com.br](http://portal.comunique-se.com.br)), to alternative media sites like *Midia Ninja*, which gained notoriety with the live reporting of the police repressions against demonstrators in Rio and Sao Paulo in the June 2013 protests.

The Internet is thus offering more opportunities for citizens to access details on party policies and the biography of politicians, contributing to scrutinise the activities of Congress and providing more transparency in party-funding, radio and TV concessions and approval of laws. The democratic capacity of the Internet includes not only its interactive potential, as well as its ability to stimulate more engagement, but also its role in invigorating the public sphere, helping to unite civil society in various debates, including wider investments in public services and education, as the protests in Brazil made clear. Thus for emerging and new democracies like Brazil, the Internet can have a very positive role, one which is closely tied with the advancement of democratization.

The limits to *cyberdemocracy* are nonetheless persistent, and the efforts to tackle the digital divide

need to be expanded if there is a genuine aim of granting communication and information rights to less privileged groups in the country.

### **The Internet for the public interest and the digital divide in Brazil**

Various theorists have explored the numerous benefits to democracy of the web, ranging from its capacity to increase interconnectedness between countries, peoples and communities to permitting the rapid transmission of global events, assisting in the creation of global citizens and the formation of global civil society united in favour of particular political causes (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003; Norris, 2001; Nederveen Pieterse, 2010; Cardoso, 2010). Some of the key concerns raised in the digital divide controversy between information-rich and poor countries have mainly consisted in how to include larger sectors of the world population in the knowledge economy, providing the means for further democratization of access and connectivity to all citizens in developing and advanced democracies alike.

Scholarship worldwide has shown that the hype with new technologies has not resulted in a diminishing of economic and social inequalities between and within countries. However, it can contribute to democratization and political engagement, and most importantly, it can strengthen the voice of the developing world. The digital divide literature is vast and cannot be fully covered here. My main purpose in this chapter is to highlight some of the core dilemmas concerning the digital divide debate by looking at the work of key authors (Norris, 2001; Castells, 2010; Nederveen Pieterse, 2010; Thussu, 2006) who have articulated a relationship between digital inclusion, education and economic development.

Norris (2001, 103) is sceptical about the role of the Internet in strengthening democracy. In her book (2001, 37) on understanding the digital divide debate, she makes use of a sophisticated framework, which combines both institutional as well as individual data. She underlines three levels of analysis, which are: a) the *macro-level technological environment*, which determines the

distribution of Internet access within each country; b) *the meso-level context of political institutions*, including parties and government departments, and c) *the micro-level individual resources*, which affects patterns of online engagement. Norris's key findings suggest that *economic development* is an important avenue for understanding Internet connectivity and consumption. In this chapter I precisely equate the lack of digital inclusion of certain sectors of the population, a factor that both has an impact on further economic development as well as emerging as a barrier for wider political participation, with the ways in which the web nevertheless is contributing to form a vibrant and influential counter-public sphere in Brazil.

A pattern that emerges here is one in which most rich nations that already have many radios and television stations are the ones with more access to networked computers. As Norris (2001) states, *Unesco's* emphasis is that most of the world's population lack basic access to a telephone, let alone a computer, resulting in societies that are marginalised at the periphery of communications. Nederveen Pieterse (2010) and Norris (2001, 59) thus envision the digital divide debate as being less about providing more computers in schools and libraries in developing countries, and more about creating the means for wider education in IT skills and literacy levels. Education is thus seen as a significant force in social development, capable of assisting in the creation of the skills that will facilitate a wider use of computers in these societies.

Prospects regarding the Internet's capacity of contributing to the development of poorer countries and reducing economic inequalities nonetheless seem grim. The report of the *Global Economic Prospects and Developing Countries 2001*, published in December 2001 by the World Bank, predicted that the distance between the rich and poor countries in terms of Internet access would continue into the next (current) decade. As Norris (2001, 5) notes, the OECD has underlined how the benefits of the Internet have not yet trickled down to Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, not to mention the poorest areas in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. The developed world has nearly 50 telephone lines for each group of 100 people, while in the

countries of low income this proportion is of 1.4 telephones for each group of 100. Also 90% of the users reside in the industrialised countries, with nearly 60% of the users concentrated in North America (Canada and America (in Norris, 2001).

The fact that the development of software technology is still heavily concentrated in the US attests to what Nederveen Pieterse (2010) sees as a tendency of ICT4D (information and communication technologies-for-development) to reaffirm the dependency of developing societies on these same technologies. The situation of dependency has not changed much. In the end of 2012, France and Brazil negotiated a deal for the production of supercomputers in the country, a technology transference project, aimed to contributing to areas of geo-military advancement and oil production, creating a technological centre in Brazil. Problems of infra-structure, funding and centralization of projects, however, are some of the challenges that Brazil faces, impeding it to advance its digital inclusion programmes. This is a common problem faced by other countries of the South, as scholars (i.e. Thussu, 2006, 238-240) have underlined.

According to the statistics provided by the International Telecommunications Union (ITC), the number of Internet hosts in Latin America grew at a rate of 136%, ahead of North America (74) and Europe (30). The numbers vary according to the source, methodology and the quantity of participants. According to a more recent research conducted by *ComScore* (May 2010), the number of Internet users in Brazil increased to 73 million users, including children from the age of

6. The numbers continue to grow: statistic provided by the institute of research *Ibope Nielsen Online* stressed that in the second semester of 2012, there were 83.4 million users.<sup>ii</sup> One of the reasons for the increase was the increase of income of people who, from 2007, had their first contact with a computer through the *lan houses*<sup>iii</sup> and afterwards bought their own. The numbers are not that far apart from the 35.5% who use the Internet in Chile, although it is much lower than China (49.2%), according to the *2006 World Internet Project* (in Cardoso, 2010).

The reduction of the divide between the digitally included and excluded carries important political, social and economic dimensions. It has the potential to boost prospects for economic development and literacy, serving as a tool for the expansion of educational levels and IT skills. In Brazil there are approximately 17 million literally illiterate people and another 30 million called functional illiterates. A computer has little capacity to serve as an engine of economic growth and educational inclusion of the person using it if there is no proper electricity, or the person does not know how to use the technology properly.

Governmental efforts to increase Internet connectivity have become more pronounced in the region in the last years. The first mandate of Lula (2002-2006) included wider digital inclusion and access to new technologies as a national public policy capable of guaranteeing citizenship rights. It launched ambitious programmes such as the project Citizen Connected – *Computador para Todos*, part of the “Programa Brasileiro de Inclusão Digital” (*Brazilian Programme of Digital Inclusion*)<sup>iv</sup>, equating the use of technology with local development and the deepening of democracy.

At a moment when Brazil’s economy is pointed out as being the sixth largest one in the world, the government of Dilma Rousseff is facing the difficult challenge of boosting digital inclusion, having promised to take broadband Internet access to 75% of the country until 2014 through the programme initiated during Lula’s administration, the “Plano Nacional de Banda Larga” (*National Broadband Plan*). Other non-governmental experiences of digital inclusion conducted by NGOs include the work carried out by *Viva Rio*, an organization that is being responsible for implementing spaces of access to the web in shanty-towns and poorer neighbourhoods throughout the state of Rio, as well as offering IT training.

There are sharp regional inequalities in access, with the cost of broadband being very high. Institutional problems include the lack of proper infrastructure throughout the country, making it difficult to install a wider structure of broadband access. Governmental actions on digital inclusion include the participation of the Ministry of Education, through the Secretary of Distant Learning,

the ministries of Communications and Science and Technology. The GESAC project (*Governo Eletronico Servico de Atendimento ao Cidadao*) is a key example of a programme that aims to include citizens from remote Brazilian areas, serving more than 10.000 localities. All areas are attended with a connection kit, which permits access to the Internet of high speed through satellite. The participants include schools and *tele-centres*, such as the famous *lan houses*, part of the governmental digital inclusion programme, *Computador para Todos* (Computers for All), and which created credit lines for low income families to purchase computers.

Governments have not been capable of providing access to *all* citizens to Internet access. Businesses have had to play a role here as well. Data provided by the consultancy firm *McKinsey and Company* has underlined that an increase in 10% in broadband connections can lead to a growth of 0.1% to 1.4% in the GDP of the country. The same study argues that if the access to the web in Latin America reached the same level of Europe, 1.7 million jobs could be created in the region.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, Lugo-Ocando (2008, 5) argues that there is not enough evidence to suggest that the massive investment in information and communication technology and telecommunications during the past 10 years throughout the continent has made much difference to the lives of millions of Latin Americans in terms of narrowing the social and economic gap between the rich and poor on the continent.

In terms of the uses made by the public sector and government of new technologies to communicate better with citizens and stimulate their participation (i.e. *E-government*), responding to civil society's demands to wider transparency in the administration of public funds, it seems evident that the Internet is having a role in the undermining of political corruption throughout the public sector as well as having a positive impact in making the activities of the Ministry of Communications regarding radio and TV concessions more transparent and democratic.

Castells (2003, 128, quoted in Gomes de Pinho, 2008) affirms how research has underlined that the democratic potential and possibilities of the Internet have remained unfulfilled throughout

the world, with the exception of the Scandinavian democracies. That said, Castells (2003, 276, quoted in Gomes de Pinho, 2008) also affirms that most of the social and political movements in the world, of all political leanings, use the web as a tool for action and organization. Considering Brazil's still authoritarian and hierarchical nature, with a highly concentrated mainstream media that remains partisan and struggles with professionalism, it seems evident that the Internet is emerging as a powerful political and informational tool, occupying an important role in political mobilization and organization and assisting in the creation of a more democratic, but at the moment (counter) public sphere, raising issues to be examined next.

### **From political campaigning, gender politics to citizen's protests: the uses of the web for the public interest**

Writing about the potential of *cyber-democracy*, Levy (in Moraes, 2003, 367) has underlined how social media and virtual communities open up a new public sphere where liberty of expression flourishes. The Internet has managed to open up a communication space that is "inclusive, transparent and universal", and which is different from the "modern" public sphere space associated with newspapers and the traditional media, culminating in an expansion of the mediated public sphere where communication takes place from everyone to all. Arguably, the power of the Brazilian blogosphere as a counter-public sphere and as a vehicle that is contributing to boost media pluralism, political diversity whilst also undermining the concentration of the media and its position as the ultimate definer of the public agenda, has grown considerably in the last years in the country, as we shall see.

Brazil's political arena still provides room for the articulation of conflict and for the competition of ideas, for the battle for the agenda of public opinion, the predominance of a particular form of thinking over a topic in opposition to another and for the use of media actors to

endorse particular political views. If the key themes of the 2006 elections were political corruption and the reduction of inequality, the 2010 presidential Brazilian race was marked by the shadow of the legacy of the two Lula government's (2002-2006; 2006-2010) and by the entry in the dispute of two strong women candidates, Marina Silva and Dilma Rouseff.

Research demonstrates that party websites do not make much difference in terms of changing voting patterns. Focus group studies in the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands have revealed mixed reactions (Nixon and Johansson, 1999a and Crabtree, 2001 in Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003, 25). Many surveys also indicate a reluctance of parties to engage in open dialogue with voters. As Gibson and Ward (1999: 364) correctly point out, '...providing online channels for participation...is not the same as empowering members'. The authors do recognise that the Internet can make more of an impact in emerging democracies, including destabilising one party regimes and serving as a counter-weight to one-sided media discourses. I believe this is primarily the role that the web is having in Brazil as well as throughout Latin America, and as evident in a variety of ways during the 2010 presidential elections and the 2013 June protests.

Although the Internet has been featuring in the everyday life of middle class sectors of Brazilian society and in much of Latin America since mainly the mid-1990s onwards, its adoption by politicians is a much more recent task. According to Jose Calazans, analyst of the research institute of the Ibope Nielsen Online, the Internet in Brazil is in its third phase of evolution. The first phase, from 2000 to 2003, has been characterised by a restricted access by people of high income; in the second phase, from 2004 to 2006, there was a growth in access but restricted to the A and B classes and the third phase, from 2007 to 2012, there was a growth also of social networking and websites largely due to the improvement in the economic situation of Brazil. This helps explain why since the 2006 presidential elections the Internet has began to occupy centre stage in political campaigning, as well as in the life of politics in the country.

Since the 1990s, various websites have begun to proliferate in the Brazilian Internet space, from specialised media channels like *Observatorio da Imprensa* to other political websites, with government administrations and politicians also creating their own websites to provide information to citizens or to engage them. Certain Brazilian civic websites, like *TVoto*; *Repolitica*; *Eleitor 2010*, *Transparencia Brasil* and *Vote na Web*, have begun to occupy a niche and prominent space in the Brazilian political blogosphere, contributing to stimulate public debate and civic engagement and to assist citizens with knowledge of the political process. The aim of the website *Vote na Web* ([www.votenaweb.com.br](http://www.votenaweb.com.br)) for instance is for citizens to closely follow the work of Brazilian MPs, including checking the proposals that are sent to Congress and monitoring how many voted on particular issues.

A major component of the 2010 presidential elections in Brazil was the massive presence of the Internet in political campaigning as a means of promoting candidates and providing varied information about their political personas to voters. Prior to the start of the 2010 elections, there was a lot of debate on the nature of the impact of new technologies on the outcome of the race, with scholars like Lima (2007) defining the web's role in political campaigning in Brazil as having contributed to promote active niche circles of debate. In the 2006 race, the female candidate of the then far left party, (Socialist and Liberty Party) Heloisa Helena, emerged as a leading frontrunner in the race that culminated in Lula's re-election.

Since the impeachment of former president Fernando Collor in 1989 and the publication by the press of corruption practices by members of the Lula government in 2005, there has been a rise in political cynicism and growth in corruption scandals in Brazil. Such a volatile political environment has created a fertile ground for the emergence of strong women leaders, many of which are perceived by the public as more trustworthy, with both the 2006 and 2010 presidential elections marked by the presence of strong women leaders, from Heloisa Helena, to Marina Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

The fact of the matter is that many Brazilian women are still seen by conservative Brazilian elites - as well as by traditional Western standards, patronised as “Third World women”, mixing a toxic combination of racism, sexism and classism - as a unified group of young, attractive and “intellectually inferior” creatures who deserve to be exploited for capitalism’s profit. Similarly to the current obstacles discussed above concerning the problems of expanding digital inclusion, the persistent of gender and race inequality in Brazil also pose a serious impediment for further advancement of political democratization.

However, there have also been in this realm important conquests in the last decade. Women in Latin America currently govern over 40% of the population: Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Cristina Kirchner in Argentina and Laura Chincilla in Costa Rica. In the last 10 years, women have conquered important levels of political participation and rights throughout the continent. Countries like Brazil have seen a rise of participation of women in the workforce, with more women occupying senior positions in businesses and government, and including in the newsroom. As Buvinic and Roza (2004, 1) pointed out, Panama elected a woman president in 2003, Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), and soon afterwards Chile and Argentina followed by electing the former president Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) and Cristina Kirchner (2007), wife of the previous president Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007), respectively.

A 2000 Gallup poll conducted for the Inter-American Development Bank with a random sample of 2.022 voters in six major Latin American cities (Bogota, Colombia; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mexico City; Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil and San Salvador) revealed that the average voter had positive opinions concerning women’s place in politics (in Buvinic and Roza, 2004, 8). The authors (2004, 12) added that in a 2001 poll conducted in Brazil, the majority surveyed believed that women in senior positions were more honest than men. Nonetheless, despite the presence of high profile female candidates in the 2010 elections, according to the

Supreme Electoral Court of Justice (TSE), a total of 79% of men (15.780) ran for various political positions (governor, Senator and MP) against only 20% of women candidates, or 4.058.<sup>vi</sup>

According to the 2012 ranking of the World Economic Forum (WEF), Brazil has gone up in 20 positions regarding gender equality, falling from the 82<sup>nd</sup> position to the 62 on a list of 135 countries. The four criteria included economic participation and opportunity, access to education, health and survival and political participation, all issues widely explored during the 2013 June protests in Brazil, which were seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with the limits of the modernization reforms carried out by the Fernando Henrique Cardoso', Lula and Dilma's governments. Brazil received most of its points in the areas of education and health, but scored badly in economic participation (73<sup>rd</sup> position between the countries) and political participation (72<sup>nd</sup>). The study states that the advancement is largely due to improvements in primary education and in the percentage of women in ministerial roles, which have gone from 7% to 27%.<sup>vii</sup>

Political participation nonetheless is on the rise throughout the continent. Statistics from the World Bank revealed that in 2010, the percentage of women with political responsibilities in Latin America was of 24%, the highest percentage in the world, bigger than in Europe, where it was of 15%. Latin American women also occupy only 33% of the best paid professions, with discrimination in the marketplace persisting.<sup>viii</sup> Thus despite such advancements throughout Latin America, most still face economic hardship, social, cultural and political barriers to not only full political participation, but equality in mainstream society.

Poster (in Moraes, 2003, 330) has argued that the web promotes and reinforces already existing political formations, with the *Zapatistas* from Mexico for instance expanding their political ambitions through the web. One defining feature of the 2010 presidential campaign that saw Dilma Rousseff win in the second round with 55.7 million of votes (56.05), against 43.7 million given to her rival, Jose Serra of the PSDB (43.95%), was the revival of the clashes between sectors of the mainstream media with Dilma's candidature on the Internet.<sup>ix</sup> The web here was

widely used by political parties for attack campaigning and the exchange of accusations between the two main rivals of the dispute, the PT (Worker's Party) with Dilma and Jose Serra's PSDB (Social-Democratic Party).

One month before the 2010 October elections, Marina Silva ([www.minhamarina.org.br](http://www.minhamarina.org.br)) was pointed out as being the most popular candidate on social network sites due to her influence on the youth vote, according to experts. She held the biggest number of participants in her online profiles in social network sites such as *Orkut* (46.584) and *Facebook* (41.977), whilst Serra dominated in *Twitter*, with 455.186 followers, appearing ahead of Marina (244.057), Dilma (235.519) and Plinio Sampaio of the PSOL (41.064).<sup>x</sup> Dilma widely explored the women's vote during her campaign, with her website ([www.dilma13.com.br](http://www.dilma13.com.br)) containing links to various other women's blogs, including *Hip Hop Mulher*, *Galera da Dilma*, *PCdoB Mulheres* and *Viva Mulher*.

One of the most talked about events of the presidential campaign was the ironic and humorous reaction of *bloggers* towards the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo*. Bloggers ironically criticised what they thought was a biased campaign coverage that attempted to assign blame to Dilma to errors committed by particular individuals or ministers of the former Lula government. In response to a story published by *Folha*, on how light consumers paid R\$ 1 billion *reais* for an error committed by Dilma,<sup>xi</sup> a group of agitated bloggers created a popular tag on *Twitter* called *DilmaFactsbyFolha*. The *bloggers* went on the web to question the objectivity and partiality of the newspaper by coming up with fictional headlines that attempted to emphasise the partisanship character of the accusations, and by attributing random blame to the candidate for various disconnected and irrational facts, producing fictional headlines with ironic sentences like: "*Folha* has proof that Dilma was responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire".

Part of the same youth generation in Brazil in cities like Rio, who massively supported Dilma's election in 2010, made use of new technologies and of social media websites like *Twitter* and *Facebook* to organise protests against the government and other Brazilian authorities during

the 2013 June demonstrations, which were held throughout the country. Substituting the old “face to face” assemblies associated with traditional forms of mobilization and party organizations, different sectors of Brazilian society disillusioned with the government’s promises for wider social reform and economic growth, from anarchists groups like the *Black Blocs*, accused of acts of vandalism during the demonstrations, to leftist, conservative and other youth movements, took to the streets in the main capitals of the country, from Rio to Sao Paulo, in what was perceived as a burst of outrage against political corruption and public spending on stadiums for the 2014 World Cup, whilst public transport, health and education continue to be underfunded. Social media was widely used beforehand also for the organization of the March Against Corruption protests of 2011 and 2012, in the aftermath of the 2005 *mensalao* corruption scandals that saw senior Lula advisors in a tight spot.

Social media and the Internet emerged during these protests as vehicles of *grassroots mobilization* and of *digital citizenship*, having helped to assist disperse groups of people from different social backgrounds and economic income to unite via *Facebook*, *Twitter* and other websites around common causes of frustration with the pace of change in the country. These groups urged a deepening of the social reforms being carried out by the Dilma government, expressing disillusionment also with the corruption practices of local administrations and with the limits of the democratization project of the last centre to centre left wing governments in the country, from Cardoso to Dilma.

Moreover, the partisan character of the mainstream media and the notion that organizations like *TV Globo* have had a role in maintaining the *status quo*, impeding further democratization of the country’s political and social institutions, were criticised during the 2013 June protests. These were translated in the attacks of many demonstrators against the vehicles of these media companies. Pressured by civil society players, mainstream newspapers like *Folha de Sao Paulo* and *Estado* and *TV Globo* changed their editorial line from attacking the protesters to supporting

the demonstrations. The alternative media website, *Midia Ninja*, emerged as a key vehicle of the counter-public sphere during the most tense moments of the June protests, acting on the scene and amongst the demonstrations, covering the protests live and denouncing police repression and brutality.

Theories on the potential of the web for *cyberdemocracy* claim, as we have seen, that the web has limits regarding its capacity to reduce offline inequalities, but that it can act as a persuasive tool for political campaigning, contributing to lay the seeds for the articulation of counter-discourses about particular disadvantaged groups that in the short, especially in the mid and long run, can assist in the *empowerment* and in the changing of attitudes towards these same groups. Arguably, we know that the Internet can offer opportunities for smaller parties and candidates to get to know voters better, providing ordinary citizens with a voice and a chance to criticize political and media institutions, as evident during the 2010 elections. It can also be perceived as being an extra tool in mobilization and in the empowerment of voiceless citizens from diverse political ideologies, including apolitical and *de-politicised* groups, as the 2013 June protests revealed. It remains to be further researched how the Internet can function as more of a vehicle for wider participatory democracy in Brazil, and one which is truly committed to the public good.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly any discussion regarding the strengthening of the web as a public sphere of debate in Brazil, as a vehicle for the public interest and a tool in wider democratization, cannot be separated from other social and economic reforms and from the level of political maturity of the country. In spite of the limits of access and connectivity, the Internet during the 2010 elections functioned as an important tool to counter-weight the discourses articulated by the mainstream press, and this was evident again during the June protests in Brazil. *Bloggng*, the creation of websites by various

groups of Brazilian society, and the articulation of debates on social media sites like *Twitter* and *Facebook*, with the latter being seen by many as a new online political arena, have contradictorily emerged as a significant force that can contribute to the undermining of media concentration, boosting political pluralism and providing diverse representations of stigmatised and subordinated groups who have little space in the mainstream media.

As I have sought to underline in this chapter, the various uses of the web in Brazil attest to how it is emerging as an alternative space to play out politics away from both the mainstream media and Congress, assisting in the scrutiny of politician's activities and pressuring in favour of the approval of particular welfare reforms. At its best, the Internet can provide an avenue to fortify media pluralism and undermine media concentration; it can help disseminate a host of political ideas and articulate discourses that are rarely seen in the mainstream media; it can be used as a tool for wider civic engagement and political mobilization during election campaigns; it can serve as a vehicle to scrutinise governmental power, making administrations more accountable and transparent, as well as assisting in the support of certain causes, including the undermining of authoritarianism and political corruption.

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<sup>i</sup> Conducted for the Centre for Social Media of the School of Communication of the American University (February, 2009), and part of the Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation.

<sup>ii</sup> See 'Internet no Brasil chega a cerca de 71 milhoes de pessoas', (*Internet in Brazil reaches 71 million people*, Portal Vermelho/UOL, 02/10/2012).

<sup>iii</sup> Lan houses are areas of local network access, of computers displayed together, and which have become very popular in Asia and are now proliferating in poor communities throughout the country. There are approximately 130 lan-houses in Rocinha, a large shanty-town in Rio and one of the biggest in Latin America. Research published by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br) underlined that 48.08% of the people from the classes D and E have accessed the Internet from commercial places like *lan-houses*. ("Lan houses: a new wave of digital inclusion in Brazil," by Ronald Lemos and Paula Martini, September 2009, Publius Project).

<sup>iv</sup> See document 'Acoes governamentais em inclusao digital – analise de utilizacao do FUST' (*Governmental actions in digital inclusion – analysis of use of the FUST*, report of the Ministry of Communications, 2005). <http://portal2.tcu.gov.br/portal/pls/portal/docs/2055288.PDF>.

<sup>v</sup> See 'Exclusao digital pode prejudicar economia brasileira, dizem especialistas' ('Digital exclusion can damage Brazilian economy, say experts', *BBC Brasil*, 16/03/2010).

<sup>vi</sup> 'Eleicoes 2010 - As outras candidatas' (*The other candidates*, Ligia Martins da Almeida in *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 21/09/2010).

<sup>vii</sup> See 'Brasil sobe 20 posicoes em ranking de igualdade do genero' (Brazil goes up 20 positions in the ranking of gender equality), *Portal Brasil* (24/10/2012).

<sup>viii</sup> "Mulher latino-americana: muito por fazer, muito por ganhar" (*Latin American women: a lot to do, a lot to gain*, Revista Dialogos do Sul, 08/03/2013).

<sup>ix</sup> Brazil gave women the right to vote in 1934, although most of Central and South America, as Desposato and Norrander (2005, 7) assert, gave women suffrage laws only after the Second World War.

<sup>x</sup> 'E se a eleicao fosse nas redes sociais?' (*And what if the elections were on the social networks?*, *Comunique-se*, 29/09/2010).

<sup>xi</sup> 'Consumidor de luz pagou R\$ 1 bi por falha de Dilma' (*Light consumer paid R\$ 1 bi for Dilma's error*, *FSP*, 05/09/2010).