

# Being networks: the digital formism of net-activist movements

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## Abstract

For the last few years online social movements have spread through several latitudes creating important theoretical challenges for several areas of knowledge, concerning the nature of such actions, given the connective and technological quality of its acts as well as concerning the creation of a new kind of locality, simultaneously informative and material expression of an unprecedented dwelling condition that brings humans together, informative circuits and territorialities. Finally, the necessity that imposes rethinking the composition of human collectives beyond the perspective of modern sociology, since it presents itself as expression of a reticular interactive ecology that is no longer political, that is, anthropomorphic and ideologically oriented.

**Keywords:** Internet activism, digital communication, digital networks, social action, ecology

## I. Media and emancipation: digital protagonism and the industrial imaginary crisis in communication studies

The appearance of activism on digital networks, which has spread through the four corners of the world, dwelling<sup>2</sup> broadband, mobile communication and social networks, suggests the necessity of overcoming the sociological industrial and positivist imaginary, created by modernity to describe the social function of the media. For a long time, the media has served as a scapegoat, being thought responsible for the upkeep of exploration and cultural degradation:

True communication bears communion, a sharing of previous experiences. The

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of dwelling is preferred here instead of “use” because it expresses a bigger complexity in the relationship between humans and media, beyond an instrumental conception of communication technology. To know more about the concept of inhabiting in a communicational perspective, see *Paisagens pós-urbanas* by Massimo Di Felice (Annablume, 2009)

dehumanization of communication appears from its attachment of part of the media and modern culture – previously by part of the press and successively by radio and television (Lowental, 1967: 336).

The nefarious consequences of the diffusion of information, which has marked the appearance of mass society, as well as the social impact of media, have many times configured themselves as an obsession and an unstoppable threat: “the masses decided to advance to the first planes of social life, occupying places, using instruments and to enjoy the pleasures so far reserved to the few” (Ortega y Gasset, 2002: 11).

In the industrial era, with the advent of the steam machine, electricity and mass production, the analysis of the social function of the media was concentrated in the studies of the processes of dominant ideology distribution and reproduction and the capitalist means of production, subordinating the social function of communication to the productive logic. The theoretical analyses are not distanced, maybe only in some very rare exception, from the instrumental model that attributed to the media the simple role of channel or vehicle of information distribution, giving the whole communicative process the statute of architecture and vehicle of a new type of domination (Adorno, Horkheimer, Baudrillard etc.).

This way, it became improbable to think of the social function of the media in a perspective of development of emancipation and social transformation processes in a positive sense. Though it is possible to find several authors that highlight the fundamental role developed by the media, in order to change the perception and thus leading to important processes of social transformation<sup>3</sup>, there are few or almost any studies that attribute to the media an active role in the changes and forms of emancipation in society.

In a famous article from the 80s, philosopher Gianni Vattimo alerted us to the necessity of not limiting the analysis of media and its social functions to the schematic patterning of the mechanistic postulates that repeated the chorus: industrial production, mass culture, media, domination. Inserted in an industrial logic and the unidirectional geometrical shapes of the information flows of analog mass media, the social function

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<sup>3</sup> W. Benjamin, H. Innis, M. McLuhan, D. Harvey, J.D. Peters, J. Meyrowitz.

of media was limited to distributing and reproducing the logic of increment to consumption and the role of diffusion of values and lifestyles needed for the reproduction of capitalist society.

The media, communication, culture, social practices, art and everything that existed was thought of as mechanisms, the functional components of great clock of industrial capitalism. The systemic and positivist conception of such thought and the instrumental and functional reading of the social role of the media expressed by itself, in its own systemic and structural form, the sequential and logical conception that is natural to industrial production: each part was not explained by itself, but obeyed a logic and a higher intelligence in which was found its identity and specific function. This systemic, instrumental and mechanistic conception gave to the media the role of channel of exposure, brought fame to certain authors (Adorno, Ortega y Gasset, for example), and finding very few to question it within the studies of the social function of the media.

Vattimo's *The Transparent Society* (1989) was one of the few studies to go against that, for it was also different from the McLuhanian perspective and the Toronto School, more focused on the perceptive-historical impact of media, choosing to think of the mass media in its emancipating social function, attributing the same singular role of determining the crisis of colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the unitary conception of history.

The so-called “primitive” people, colonized by the Europeans in the name of the right of the “superior” and more evolved civilization, revolted and made the idea of unitary and centralized history problematic. The European ideal of humanity was revealed as an ideal among others, not necessarily worse, but that cannot, without violence, intend to have the value of true essence of man, of all men. The impossibility of thinking of history as an unitary course, an impossibility that, according to this thesis, gives place to the end of modernity, [which] appears not only in the crisis of European imperialism and colonialism; it is also, and maybe even more, the result of the appearance of mass communication media. These media – newspapers, radio, television, in general everything we now call telematics – were determinative to the process of dissolution of central viewpoints (Vattimo, 1989: 87).

This process of image multiplication created by the mass media is interpreted by Vattimo as a qualitative process capable of pluralizing not only aesthetics, News,

information, but, consequently, viewpoints and world views:

What happened in fact, despite all the efforts of monopolies and great capitalist hubs, was that radio, television and newspapers have become elements in an explosion and generalized multiplication of *Weltanschauungen*, world views. This vertiginous multiplication of communication, this capture of work by part of a growing number of subcultures, is the most evident effect of the mass media and is also a fact that – interconnected with the fall, or at least the radical transformation of European imperialism – determines the passage of our society into post-modernity (Vattimo, 1989: 87).

Vattimo’s original perspective attributes to the media an important social role of change, responsible for significant transformations.

With the advent of the Internet, the geometries of the flows of information have acquired a qualitative alteration, adopting the form of ecosystemic informative architectures coproduced by its users, allowing thus for the diffusion and increment of studies regarding the socially emancipating role of media.

One of the main theories of networks to consider the relevant role of information technology for the social, political and economic change was presented by Manuel Castells in his text *The Information Age* (2002). In this extensive work divided in three volumes, Castells, adopting the social-technological viewpoint in his investigation, distinguishes five main attributes of *networked society*: information, production flexibility, reticular logic, diffusion and convergence of digital communication technology. In his conception of this new social architecture, information adopts the central role, and digital networks constitute the material basis of social transformation and of means of restructuring capitalist/state production as well as industrial development towards “informationalism” – in this “(...) the generation, processing and transmission of information become fundamental sources of productivity and power due to new technological conditions (...)”. (Castells, 2002: 65).

Thus, according to him, technological development promotes a higher accumulation of knowledge and information and a higher complexity of processing of this information, which in its turn leads to a greater development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), demanding the expansion and action of knowledge

over knowledge, in a constant virtuous cycle of generation and circulation of knowledge and symbols, of productivity and possible empowerment of societies and individuals.

Due to this, facing the development of new ICTs, according to the Spanish sociologist, we go from bureaucratic and verticalized means of production to a horizontal and reticular structure, typical of a new communicative and productive paradigm in which access to networks and the possibility of informative exchange are determining factors for inclusion in informational society.

So, according to Castells, the network logic thus defines the dominant social processes, giving shape to social structure, establishing the informational paradigm as rule of connection to networks of wealth, power and culture, highlighting the tendency toward asymmetry, regionalization, interdependency of systems and the growing diversification within each region.

So, according to the sociologist, the Internet that appeared from freedom of thought and innovation, associated to the context of college campuses of the 60 in the US<sup>4</sup>, and the creative capacity of its producers (Castells, 2003, p. 24) is a cultural creation, from which are distinguished producers/users (creation and configuration of the network) from consumer/users. To him, culture, source of meaning, is a collective construction that transcends individuals preferences and forms of behaviors and customs. This way, the Internet established a new pattern of communication and also a new culture, structured in four cultural layers that contribute for an ideology of liberty: techno-meritocratic culture (from producers/users), hacker culture, virtual communitarian culture, and entrepreneurial culture (Castells, 2003).

## **II. From alternative media to participative media: net-activism and the characteristics of actions on networks**

Contemporarily with the diffusion of studies that offered an innovative look

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<sup>4</sup> According to Manuel Castells (2001) the Internet had its origins on ARPANET (1969) – a network of computers created by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA, connected to the U.S. Department of Defense. In the context of the Cold War, the objective of ARPA was to stimulate research in interactive computing capable of decentralized and flexible communication in which information could move without centrality on a single point. The project was realized by researchers, mathematicians and programmers and had its first node installed at the University of California in 1969.

regarding the social function of media and with the expansion of the Internet there has been an emergence of several direct action movements, with specific social and communicative practices, giving birth to new forms of social conflict. In this context, we saw the rise of the word cyberactivism, that was coined in the US, as a modality of organization and direct political action [marked by the diffusion of information on the network with the intention of boycotting consumption of determined products, and also to enact occupation, demonstrations and protests connected to human, civil and environmental rights] (Di Corinto and Tozzi, 2002). It was premiered, thus, a new type of participation based on the construction of informative networks through the diffusion of information on the Web for the defense of natural and environmental resources, cultural diversity of native indigenous cultures, as well as the activism in territories and in the participation of world forums against neo-liberalism all the way to UN reform proposal.

New movements and new concepts appeared since then, self-styled *Internet Activism*, *Electronic Advocacy* or *Cyberactivism*.

As a matter of fact, the word cyberactivism has its origins in the 1990s, with the advent of digital technologies, and manifests itself through movement discourses. This type of media activism has found in new communication technology a valuable ally for the strengthening of organizations, both locally and globally, for the coordination of campaigns and protests, for the diffusion of information, complaints and petitions. In this first phase, in general, the concept of cyberactivism refers to how to use the Internet to give support to global movements and local causes, using informative network architecture to spread information, promote collective discussion of ideas and the proposals for acts, creating channels of participation (Lemos, 2003).

However, what constitutes the characteristics of cyberactivism, or online activism, is not limited to simple incorporation of the Internet to the communicative processes of activism, but includes the form that this communicative technology substantially transformed the activism itself and the concepts of participation, democratic space, collective identity and political strategy, entailing a significant change in the forms of social action by the cyberactivist movements (McCaughey &

Ayers, 2003).

Since the birth of cyberactivism, throughout the transformations of information and communication technologies, there was an abundance of actions that sought to reach the interaction with communicative formats that could better express their demands. Due to the transformation of the interactive capabilities of the network, of a Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, there was a reconfiguration of the meaning of cyberactivism that, in the last few years, outlines itself as an intensive form of networked interaction between individuals, territories and digital technologies, designative of the connectivity<sup>5</sup> that is characteristic of social action *in* and *through* networks.

In that sense, the reinterpretation of the term “net-activism”, which served as title for Ed Schwartz’s (1996) book and indicated a simplification of the expression Network Activism, is being used here without restricting its meaning to the scope of electronic democracy and of citizen networks of political participation, as referred to by Schwartz, or to the uses of the Internet proposed by cyberactivists. It is, therefore, being extended to analyze a new form of digital activism *in* network and *through* network that is articulated as maximization of possibilities of autonomy, of processes of sustainability and creativity in the scope of new-global movements. These are characterized not by the opposition to globalization, but by the advent of a global citizen identity, inhabitants of digital networks, which do not deny local diversity and whose agenda of claims and global action advance towards answering common necessities, such as democracy, equity, conscious consumption and sustainability.

The form of citizenship and activism that characterizes such movements is the result of one fruitful interaction between subjects, groups, entities with information technologies, access to databases, informative networks and the many interfaces employed. In this way, their objectives, their definitions, their disseminations and their implementations are not, in many cases, results of an unidirectional process, but constructed in network, in a collaborative manner. This specific dimension takes us to the necessity, within the analysis of net-activism, to deepen the meaning of social

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Through connectivity we understand the capacity and the levels of connection of a network. As for the definition of network, see Recuero (2009), Barabási (2003), Latour (1994, 2000).

action, seeking to understand and think of the quality of *networked action*, which is produced through the interactions between subjects, technologies and information.

Taking into consideration the deepening of this conceptual horizon, it is possible to historically distinguish three main stages of net-activism which are in the origin of the current forms of conflict.

The first stage, which we can consider an embryo stage, is connected to the advent of the Internet in its first form of computer network, which makes possible the exposure and sharing of texts and first actions with the global character between web surfers. The second stage, contrariwise, is marked by the experimentation of first forms of social conflict that are dislocate the social action by the Internet to a planetary-information spatiality. The third stage is characterized by the advent of web 2.0 and the social networks and express themselves not only through protest movements, several kinds of subversion, but through the constitution of efficient networks of activism and collaboration.

Starting from the viewpoint of communicative structure and from the several topologies of informative networks elaborated in constitutive stages of the networks of the Internet, culminating in the model created by P. Baran (1964), we can flank each historical stage to the image of a kind of network that visually narrates the structure and shape of its actions in each phase, as follows: the *centralized network*, *decentralized network* and *distributed network*.

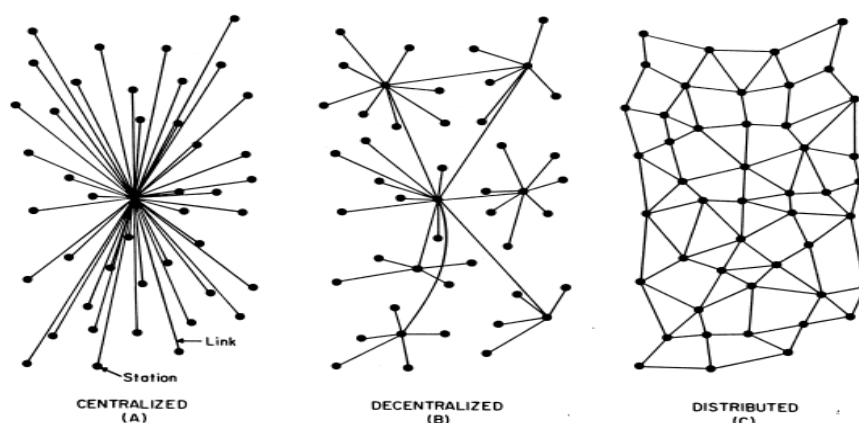


FIG. 1 – Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks

Network topology: centralized, decentralized and distributed

The latter, in Baran's perspective, is defined as a model in which information



navigates in a distributed, horizontal, dialogic and redundant manner, and in which each node has equal importance and interdependency. These three types of topology can metaphorically describe the three historical stages of net-activist actions.

In the first stage, we watch the diffusion of form of activism based in centralized networks that consist in the constitution of international themed movements that are disseminated throughout the world and that gain visibility and notoriety through digital informative circuits. One of the first examples of the advent of digital participation and net-activism is the *Association pour la communication progressiste* (APC) created in 1988 and collected since more than 6,000 members (Gardon & Granjon, 2010) of different organizations that are pacifist, ecology, human rights etc.

The APC presents itself as a network of telematic networks that collects international militant groups. It has as its objectives offering an informatics network interconnected on a global level that allows for the diffusion of militant information, the exchange of electronic messages and the organization of debate through forum, discussion and teleconference (Sreberny, 2005: 309).

At the same time we see the birth within the APC of the *Women's Networking Support Programme*: “Wednet (*Reseau femmes Environnement et developpment*), which wove connections between its stable bases in Canada, African movements and the *De mujer a mujer* group, a Mexican female association” (Sreberny, 2005: 317). It is born, therefore, a set of informative networks based, above all, in electronic bulletins such as *Women Envision d'Isis*, *Seawin*, *South East Asian Women's Information Projects* (Sreberny, 2005).

Still in the early 90s, we see developing in Australia and India a movement of aesthetic theorists and of communication media that sought to create strategies of action through interaction with digital means called tactical media. Its action gravitated around art, politics, communication, seeking innovative strategies of intervention. As outline by Dominique Cardon and Fabien Granjon in the book *Mediactivistes* (2010), the experience of tactical media will start to have quick international ramification, firstly in the United States, through *Critical Art Ensemble et Electronic Disturbance Theater*: developers of a conflict within bits and digital informative circuits. At this time we begin to see the first examples of mail bombing, virtual and digital protests, known as

cyberpunk<sup>6</sup>.

In a second stage, which we can describe through the second network topology, the decentralized one, we see the advent of original forms of conflict, while several networks are born and collected in actions and several forms of activism, several actors, group and movements from different countries. These share times and strategies of conscious net-activist action of a new type of conflict – distinct from the conflict of classes and logics of institutional political disputes of industrial society itself – whose objectives are not the conquest of power, nor the creation and dissemination of revolutionary processes. Examples of these new forms of conflict are the movements connected to the figure of Hakim Bey<sup>7</sup> and the practices of temporary liberation of areas (temporary autonomous zones) and forms of protest that use the figure of Luther Blisset<sup>8</sup>, who anticipates the criticism towards reproduced identity, in the last few years, by the Anonymous movements.

However, in this second stage, we find the net-activist zapatista experience (1994), which premiered an original form of glocal conflict that spread throughout the world a wave of post-ideological activism<sup>9</sup>, in a first moment gathered with the active support to zapatist struggles, but successively capable of reconstituting autonomously in several contexts and countries. Indigenous and cybernetic, the zapatist struggle will inspire all world forum and the conflict which would be expressed after it, as a practice of media protest and physical confrontation<sup>10</sup>, in meetings and reunions in the richest countries: Seattle (1999), Praga (2000) Davos (2001), Genova (2001) etc.

A new typology of conflict spread through several corners of the world and

<sup>6</sup> It is also at this time that, around the world, a diverse set of activities, publications, action and aesthetics known as cyberpunk are spread. The concept deals with thoughts and practices that oppose an antagonist culture and the critical and dialectical thoughts that are common to left-wing politics and are presented in the famous *Neuromancer*, by W. Gibson, in the *Cheap Truth* fanzine edited by B. Sterling, but also other authors such as R. Rucker, J. Shirley, M. Swanwick. In all of them, contemporary society is criticized through science fiction and the perception of a future in which the dimension of political action is associated to the interaction with technology.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding such conflicts, see *TAZ: Zona Autônoma Temporária, Anarquismo Ontológico e Terrorismo Poético* de Hakim Bey, published by Conrad.

<sup>8</sup> See: Blisset, Luther. *Guerrilha Psíquica*. São Paulo: Conrad Editora, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding zapatism, see: Di Felice, 1998 and 2001.

<sup>10</sup> It is in this context that we see the birth, within anarchic insurrectional groups, of the black bloc movement that develops urban guerrilla tactics and techniques.

started a new world phase for activism marked by its informative and digital matrix. All of these movements articulate themselves in networks and experimented an informatized conflict, without places, which became visible, becoming concrete in specific moments and places while, simultaneously, reproducing and articulating itself in the bits of the digital informative flows.

The third moment of net-activist conflict is diffused after the advent of broadband (web 2.0), of the social network and mobile computing (smartphones and WiFi) and will be marked by the passage from a form of conflict media-informative into autonomous and collaborative reticular forms of activism that, in many cases, are responsible for the implementation of radical transformation processes (as in the case of the Arab Spring that culminated in the fall of authoritarian regimes) or by the advent of new actors and ample movements that appeared against political parties and corruption, making the actions of governments more difficult and insecure in several countries as in the cases of *M-15* in Spain (2011), *Movimento 5 Estrelas* in Italy (2009), *Geração à Rasca* in Portugal (2011), the June Riots in Brazil (2013), *Yo soy 132* in Mexico (2012), *Occupy Wall Street* in the US (2011)).

The advent of Web 2.0 determines the passage of alternative media, that is, the forms of use and production of alternative content disseminated through several counter-cultural scopes, into participative media, that is, the digital social forms that articulate their architectures through dialogue and the sharing of content. This techno-informative alteration will be decisive in the development of actions and the characteristics of the movements in this period.

What makes this third stage of activism unique is not only its expansion to a global level and the inauguration of a new form of techno-social protagonism, in which the political-democratic dimension is dislocated from traditional spaces into digital interactive networks, but, above all, the consolidation of some expressive forms, which in the course of the last decade outlined such particular forms of action.

In a recent international study<sup>11</sup>, coordinated by the Atopos Research Center

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<sup>11</sup> With the support of the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), in the support modality for regular research, the international research titled “Net-ativismo: ações colaborativas e novas formas de participação em redes digitais” was developed from 2011 through 2013 and counted with the participation of coordinators from the research centers involved in the project: Prof. José

from the Escola de Comunicações e Artes at the Universidade de São Paulo, collected several important international research centers<sup>12</sup> identified some common characteristics that marked the quality of net-activist actions in these several countries<sup>13</sup>.

The first characteristic was identified in the particular ecology of such actions and its multiple localities. These have as origin the digital networks and continue on city streets, without giving up its informative-digital dimension, being filmed, transmitted, photographed, posted and commented online. They express, thus, the dimensions that aren't just local or urban, since the quality of these actions and its efficacy are the result of more so their atopic<sup>14</sup> connective capacities than their specific physical and geographic localities.

A locality, therefore, no longer expressed by the counterpoint of real/virtual, public/private, but connective, continuously redefined by the crossing of informative flows and their synchronic connections. The second characteristic identified from several net-activist movements is expressed in the singular non-linearity of their actions. This, in fact, presents itself as a set of actions not only human, that is, not only expressions of will of a subject-actor, of social movements or opinion, but the result of of the synergy of several actants<sup>15</sup> (informative circuits, devices, smartphones, digital cameras, recorders, social networks like Facebook, social movements, individuals etc.).

Summing up, the specificities of such actions that do not originate, therefore, only in the political sphere and that of complaints, was pointed in the complex and intermittent dimension of alteration of the dwelling condition itself, proposed by the

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<sup>13</sup> The final results of this international research will be presented in the I *Congresso Internacional de Net-ativismo – redes digitais e novas práticas de democracia* which will take place on November 6th, 7th and 8th, 2013, at the Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, and will count with Brazilian and foreign researchers that study the theme of activism in digital networks, in diverse áreas of social and communication sciences.

<sup>14</sup> We here reference the concept of atopia developed in the book “Paisagens pós-urbanas” by Massimo Di Felice (2009).

<sup>15</sup> We refer here to the concept expressed by Bruno Latour and the Actor-Network theory through which we can define as actor any member, human or not, that contributes to the outcome of an action.

connective to territorial informative circuits. An ulterior aspect identified by research finds in the recursion of its actions that seem to have as main objectives, alongside public and external complaints, the conscious expression of internal complaints that are expressed in the radical demand for transparency, real democracy and collective decision-making in the scope of their own movements, moving in this way, in an elliptical manner, the action itself and the direction of its own impact.

Finally, beyond the quality of actions, the ecology of the habitational condition and the recursion, the research pointed out two other characteristics. The first was the appreciation of anonymity and a refusal of a political, ideological or synthesized identity in charismatic figures or leaders; the second is the refusal of institutionalization, expressed in the common aversion to political parties of any tendency, in the also generalized refusal of becoming an institutional political force.

<b>Characteristics of modern social movements</b>	<b>Characteristics of networked social movements</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collective political identity</li> <li>2. Ideological discourse</li> <li>3. Defined political objectives</li> <li>4. Struggle for power</li> <li>5. Defined hierarchy and leaders</li> <li>6. Submission of means towards ends</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anonymity and absence of collective political identity</li> <li>2. Discourse without ideology</li> <li>3. Multiple cosmopolitical objectives</li> <li>4. Strange action towards the struggle for power</li> <li>5. Networked non-hierarchic organizational format</li> </ol>

In this sense, the distinctions of the networked social movements in relation to modern social political movements seem evident.

### III. Of the reticular forms of net-activist movements

In its work *Speaking Into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters distinguishes two main types of communication that present two diverse communicative conceptions: the dissemination and dialogue forms. The first expresses the forms of exposure of information of an emitter that seeks to spread its

content for those who might be interested; the second, contrariwise, expresses a kind of tight ties and produces a particular type of interaction in which the participants do not possess control over the content being created, but construct it in a relational way. In Peters' description, the first form is exemplified by the communication preferred by Christ, while the second is found in the dialogues and dialogical interactions established by Socrates.

Both delivered teachings regarding love and the spreading of seeds, but seeking distinct effects. (...) These two conceptions of communication – a dialog strictly connective and spreading with weak connection (or weak ties) – continue to this day. (...) My objective is to counterpoint two *Grundbegriffe*, in the theory of communication, dialog and spread as they formed effectively and historically in European thought (Peters, 1999: 45)

We can use Peters' double conception regarding spread and dialog to interpret the analyses and the studies that appeared in the last few years due to a diffusion of digital social networks. We will limit our reflection to the social-communicative scope<sup>16</sup>, signing towards only some of the most known authors that address the argument dedicating pages to the subject. We will present, therefore, in the limitations of this space, two diverse conceptions of digital social networks, one which expresses its main characteristics in its expansive structure and its power of spreading, and the other that puts more emphasis in the elements of dynamic interaction and dialogue. The assumption of one perspective or the other will influence, as we'll see, in a diverse manner the analysis of meanings attributed to the importance of digital networks within net-activist movements, determining, also, two diverse interpretations of the social and communicative meaning of its actions.

In the scope of the studies of digital networks there is a wide agreement in qualifying their power of spread, content, information, idea and opinion as the main function of digital social networks. From this consensus, a good part of the studies of the theme developed as its objective the analyses of such processes of spreading,

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<sup>16</sup> See: DI FELICE, Massimo; TORRES, Juliana; YANAZE, Leandro. Redes digitais e sustentabilidade - as interações com o meio ambiente na era da informação. São Paulo: Annablume, 2012.  
DI FELICE, Massimo. Redes digitais, epistemologias reticulares e a crise do antropomorfismo social. In: Revista USP, São Paulo, n. 92, p.9-19, December/February 2011-2012.

noticing impacts, cartographing relations and identifying types of ties<sup>17</sup>. In this perspective, digital information architectures are perceived and studied in its social functions. Obviously, according to the ones who defend these ideas, networks and digital media allow for a new kind of informative interaction, qualitatively distinct in relation to analog media, allowing all actors in a technologically symmetrical fashion the faculty of construction and diffusion of content. Likewise, a good part of these studies continues to subscribe to the informative activities realized by networks within a larger sphere, constituted by the social system itself. The interaction networks, in this way, stay within the social spheres, and thus considered as instruments of aggregation, diffusion and even practices of innovative actions, collaborating, therefore, with the advent of a new type of social, but that in no case questions the concept of interaction itself and even that of society. Also going in this direction are the generous contributions of Manuel Castells, undoubtedly one of the most important and attentive researchers of the social impact of digital social networks. One of the examples of this is the approach the Spanish sociologist reserves to the question in its most important works. In the prologue of *Network Society* (1999), overcoming the question of technologic determinism and highlighting the complementarity of the social character of technology and the technological dimensions of the social, the author highlights the permanence in network society of centrality of identity and the role of social actor:

The new information technologies are integrating the world in global networks of instrumentality. The communication mediated by computers generates a wide array of virtual communities. (...) The first historical steps of information societies seemed to characterize them by the preeminence of identity as its organizational principle. By identity, I understand as the process through which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs meanings, mainly based in a certain cultural attribute or set of attributes (Castells, 2002: 38).

Going deeper in his analysis, in the same text, Castells highlights the opposite distinction between *network* and *being*, globalization and identity, identifying such opposition as one of the main characteristics of our contemporaneity. By limiting the ontological analysis of the Being to its private dimension and identity of the subject, the

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<sup>17</sup> See: Recuero (2009), Barabási (2003), Latour (1994, 2000), Venturini (2009), Severo (2010).

Spanish sociologist opts to focus his attention in the study of social transformations, thought of as if hit by the passage of a *new historical transformation*, characterized by the reorganization of society in network formats, expression of a profound and qualitative process of mutation. Despite recognizing the non-instrumental character of information technology and defending that those are not “simply tools to be employed, but processes to be developed” (Castells, 2002: 43), M. Castells’ concept of network is evidently an expression of a concept of social anthropomorphic “amplifier and extension of mind and human capabilities” (Ibid.), which expresses a merely social conception of communication processes and digital networks. The interpretation that emphasizes social characteristics and, therefore, disseminative, of digital networks, is even more explicit in his work *Communication and Power* (2008), in which he explains the perspective of study of society constructed around networks, capable of disseminating its functions and forms, modifying, but without altering the sociological structural statute:

The analysis presented in this book refers to a specific social structure: the network society. The social structure that characterizes society of the first 21<sup>st</sup> century, a social structure constructed around (but not determined by) digital communication networks (Castells, 2008: 21).

The concept of communication that feeds Castells’ theories is restricted to its social function, bringing closer his analysis regarding interactions between digital networks and social movements to the perspective designed by J. D. Peters as *disseminative*:

The construction of networks is operated by the act of communication. Communication is the process of sharing meanings by the exchange of information. To society at large, the main source of social meaning production is the process of socialized communication (Castells, 2013: 11).

Such an interpretation gets in the way and limits the analysis of the Spanish sociologist, who sums the complexity of the relation of social movements with digital networks and with the connection devices, through the viewpoint of a logic of individual and collective dissemination, simultaneously named as *mass self-*



*communication* by him. In the same manner, the analysis of action, as explained in his most recent work, *Networks of Indignation and Hope* (2013), ends up being completely limited in an exclusively anthropomorphic scope that oscillates between the emotional aspects and the social, political and economic contradictions:

As a matter of fact, social change involves an individual and/or collective action that is, in its essence, emotionally motivated (...). When it unleashes the process of communicative action that induces action and collective change, the most powerful positive emotion prevails: enthusiasm (Castells, 2013: 158).

The result of the sum of individual action and collective action points to the inevitable return of centrality of the political dimension over other aspects:

Summing up, in order for networks of countervail to prevail over networks of power built in the organization of society, they have to reprogram political organization, economy, culture or any dimension that intends to change” (Castells, 2013: 21).

The networks thought of by Manuel Castells are, therefore, expressions of a new expanded social, in which information is spread by social actors in conflict among themselves and whose action finds its diffusion in the same communicative structure. In its vision, network society is characterized as a global society in which actors, its actions, power and institutions meet in networks their spread and social redefinition. In other words, network society is a social system that has actors, institutions that communicate among themselves spreading functions, desires, hopes and objectives that are exclusively human.

The second communicative conception offered by Peters refers to the communication as dialogue, understanding with it the specificity of an informative architecture that, instead of spreading itself, changes itself as it communicates. This other perspective invites us to think of digital networks not from their social function and its power of transformation, but as a creator form. Overcoming the limit of Socratic conception proposed by the American researcher, we can think about dialogue not as a set of free trade and dialectics of opinions and viewpoints, professed by citizens, but as a particular ecologic act that establishes relations and connect, in dialog, entities of

several natures, in a network of forming relations. More than thinking of networks as an integral and active part of architecture of a new kind of social structure, in this perspective it is the same social concept and the thought developed about this by sociology itself that are questioned.

The form of a reticular non-systemic dynamism, neither socially structure is presented by the actor-network theory, suggested by Michel Callon (1986) and Bruno Latour and proposed the passage of sociology into science of *associations*, that is for the science that studies the emerging formation of networks, cartographing the actors and interactions at the moment in which they start developing themselves through their interactions:

When sociologists of social pronounce the words society, power, structure and context, they generally jump ahead to connect a vast set of life and history (...) but it's about time to look more carefully at the type of aggregated things that are so far collected and the ways in which they connect to each other (Latour, 2012: 43).

Inspired in the micro-sociology of Gabriel Tarde, Bruno Latour, in his proposal of network studies, does not seek to ordenate the actions and actors from consolidated concepts, but tries to reconstruct after the fact the ties, relations and its qualities. The starting point of the Actor-Network is the non-existence of social and society before the fact, and the resulting need to thinking of both as temporary and intermittent realities that need to be, growingly, retraced “by means of subtle changes in the connection of non-social resources” (Latour, 2012: 61). Alongside this reticular communicative and constituent element, the proximity of this network conception with the conception of the dialog of communication form proposed by Peters, finds itself in a more explicit way in the reticular and decentralized meaning attributed to action, which imposes the necessity of rethinking the very concept of actor.

Actor is that which makes many others act. The actor, in the hyphenated expressions “actor-network”, is not the source of an act but the moving target of a wide set of identities that swarm in its direction (...). By definition the action is displaced (...) If it is said that an actor is an actor-network, it is, firstly, to make it clear that it

represents the main source of uncertainty as to the origin of the action. (Latour, 2012: 22).

In this perspective, the action in reticular contexts is the result of dialog between several *actants*, both human and non-human, which compose unstructured collectives. The dimension of dialog acquires the fundamental dimension of *forming* form, that is, the constituting dynamics of collectives and the networks themselves.

These two conceptions of networks that we express herein in a summed up way and in relation with the conception of communication-spreading and communication-dialog, reveal to us two different social and communicative meanings whose application in several net-activist movements generates distinct interpretations.

The idea of *spreading network*, which considers networks as part of a bigger social structure, intends to explain the social network movements, its organization and its actions as social practices, avoiding to question authorship of the action, therefore, who acts are the actors and its socials, limiting, consequently, to the analysis of net-activism to the political and dialectic dimensions of conflicts between state and networks of movements. The idea of *network of dialogue*, contrariwise, emphasizes the necessity of thinking about the quality of the social developed by net-activist movements that construct their actions through a complex ecology that collects and aggregates humans, informative circuits, interfaces, connection devices, databases, social network, press, media etc.

According to the latter interpretation, the net-activist movements are bearers of a new type of aggregation that is expressed through a new ecology.

#### **IV. The connective act: cosmopolitics and the strange place of net-activist action**

The study of quality of net-activist action and its complex ubiquity gets us to think about the concept of network as assumption of an epistemology that overcomes the concepts of social and society, as elaborated by Western culture that have limited it to the scope of polis, that is, the anthropomorphic space of city, a place restricted to the contest and the conflicts of ideas.

In the limits of frontiers established by the model that circumscribes politics in

the ideas and in the human scope, it is not possible to narrate the reticular ecology that shapes the net-activist action, nor to understand the particularities of its extended interactions in a connective plurality of ambiences.

The contemporary ecological cultures, sustainability practices, digital activism movements that mark the Arab Spring and the continuing protests in all latitudes, through the forms of conflict realized by way of interactions with social networks, are the expressions of a new type of action that is no longer directed outwardly, nor only result of practices caused by informative or technical conditioning. What characterizes these actions is its atypical specificity, determined by continuous interactions of exchanges of informational flow among individuals, devices of connections, databases, informative circuits and territorialities. As mentioned in other contexts, the demonstrators that participated in protests, in several latitudes and contexts in the last few years, inhabit extended spaces reached through the power of connection of its mobile devices.

Not only the movements and actions have, in almost the totality of the cases, origins in networks, Facebook groups or digital social networks, but, by going to streets, they stay inevitably connected, and start to decide on their strategies and their movements in protests through continuous interaction with informative networks and through instantaneous exchange of information. Everything is filmed, recorded, photographed and immediately put on the network for the world. Only do they move while connected, but the protest happens only if it is recorded, photographed and posted on the net, becoming digital once more, that is, shared and distributed information.

From that viewpoint, it is not adequate to think in the distinction between physical and informative spaces. The quality of connected action digitizes the streets and its cities to gain an undefinable place and reproducing itself below the urban and political spaces. The conflicts are informative, the protests are nowadays interactive games that promote interaction between information, urban spaces and actions, games of exchange between bodies and informative circuits. Expressions of the appearance of a new type of computerized flesh, which experiences its multiple dimension, the informative digital and the bloody material, wounded and hurt. Both are real and none is

separated from the other, but each gain its truthfulness in its agency in computerized dialog with the other. The blood of wounded protestors not only falls to the ground and asphalt of the streets, but it spills on informative spacialities. The police and repressive apparatuses, in this context, become media, accomplices of an informative act, through which each of the protestors experience the painful pleasure of becoming bodies-information, through which the protestors experience the painful pleasure of becoming their bodies-information, elevating the conflict to the bits of informative circuits.

How to describe the communicative reticular ecology of this action and, above all, what kind of dialog and communication it expresses?

Soren Kierkegaard offers us an interesting clue to think about communication from an ecological and complex perspective:

Each time that one talks about medium or communication, it would be necessary to distance as much as possible from the opinion of fashionable journalists or intellectuals. One must, contrariwise, to recognize that, when one mentions the word communication, it is not merely a reference to information and to the message, but it defines the way in which a time or a certain society relates itself with the dead, the living and nature (Kierkegaard, 1979-82: 75).

Another relative meaning to the study of ecologic character and the relational dimensions can be found in the perspective offered by German philosopher Martin Heidegger regarding the particular concept of ontology. As it is known, a good part of the trajectory of its thought was taken by the search for an idea of ontology that isn't metaphysical that would indicate the temporal condition of it, refusing its abstract and conceptual dimension that is common to Western philosophy. Consequently to such purpose, Heidegger develops the concept of *Geviert* (quartered) in which the Being is described from its dwelling condition and of its relations with heaven, earth, mortals and the divine:

The fundamental trace of dwelling is this care (Schonen). It permeates the habitation in each aspect. The dwelling appears in all of its amplitude when we think that it resides in the being of man, understood as the permanence of mortals on earth. But on the earth it already means under heaven. Both mean staying before the divine and imply a belonging to the community of

men. There is an origination unity within which the four: earth and heaven, divine and mortal are one and the same (...). This simplicity we call Geviert, quartered (Heidegger, 2006: 56).

In Heidegger's perspective, the Being is unique as plural, while it develops and exists as it dwells, that is, as it performs the quartering (*geviert*), developing thus its condition not from a supposed metaphysical essence, but from its performance as project and as possibility.

In the perspective of the German philosopher, thus, the forming characteristic of dwelling is not found in a residence, in a being, but in its quality of relating and of communicating. This relational and communicative ontology is expressed also through the concept of *Dasein*, *Being there*<sup>18</sup> which expresses this dynamic and historical element and, therefore, not conceptual or metaphysical, of Being, expressing in its dimension of possibility and continuous overtaking. The perspective of relational ontology and of *Dasein* brings us to a refusal of any kind of definitive and conceptual essence and that opens us to a relational and ecologic perspective – constituted of a particular kind of ontology that is – only in that it relates and transforms itself.

*Dasein* (...) expresses well the fact that existence is not defined as overtaking, which transcends the given reality in direction to possibility, but that this overtaking is always overtaking of something, it is always concretely situated, that is, it is there. Therefore, existence, being there, being in the world, are synonyms. All three concepts in fact say that man is situated in a dynamic manner, which is in the world of could being, or yet (...) in the form of project (Vattimo, 1971: 22).

This ecologic dimensions that expresses a Being that is only while Being there (*Dasein*), that is, in relation to heaven and earth, divine and mortals, and that it is only being, that is, as possibility and overtaking, it helps to think of net-activist action and a *digital dasein*, expression of an ecology that collects, in a similar way to quartering, individual, devices of connectivity, informative circuits and territorialities. A dwelling

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<sup>18</sup> The translation of the concept of *Dasein* is indeed controversial. Herein we refer to the translation proposed by Gianni Vattimo that, by expressing a dynamic dimension, non-essentialist of being is its specific historicity, is added to the verb being the adverb of locality, *Being there*.

condition that, as I had the opportunity of tackling (Di Felice, 2009), we can define as atypical<sup>19</sup>.

In the atopy, the specificity of action and locality is the result of the undergoing of interactions and, as Heideggerian ontology, a relational process. The characterizing dimension in net-activist action, therefore, is no longer its structure, be it organizational or political-ideological or its strategic finality and its objectives, to become the consequence of its form.

The idea of form finds several possibilities of explanation and several options of approach<sup>20</sup>. In the sociological scope we owe the discovery of logic of form and its *forming power* to Georg Simmel. By describing the beauty and its characteristics, the German sociologist highlights how this is “always constituted by sets of elements that, while such, are strangers to their own beauty” (Simmel, 1998: 89). In its conception, therefore, as in the case of colors in a picture or the set of notes and pauses that compose a melody, beauty will be the result of a set of aggregation that form instills. It is, thus, for Simmel, the form to reveal the diverse elements that compose it. In an analogous conception, Michel Maffesoli highlights the power of form in overcoming opposition, dialectic itself, between particular and total:

Thus, by reducing it to the unit, which is common of rationalism, form favors uniqueness, maintains cohesion between the most diverse elements. In other words, in a world made of contrasts, it allows one to conceive of an idea of a set: that organic trait that aggregates, following several paths, all fragments of the heterogeneity. Dialectics had the ambition, pretension, of overcoming the contradictory and favoring, in this way, meaning to the world, orient it, attributing to it a finality. The formism, on the other hand, aggregates all the contradictory and favors a sense that extinguishes in the same act, that it doesn't project itself, that lives in the game of appearances, in the flowering of images, the appreciation of bodies (Maffesoli, 2000: 125-126).

Relating the importance of form with the analysis of action of net-activists, we can recognize the distance of these last few abovementioned with the sociological

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek word expresses the junction of the alpha prefix “private” with the word topos (place) that an attentive translation does not point to a place, but a strange location, a location beyond the local, an unmentionable locality.

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein in philosophy, Paul Valery and Gustav Flaubert in literature, Cezanne in painting.

interpretations regarding social action. In net-activist actions, indeed, to fulfill the actions is no longer the Weberian theological individual nor the rational subject of Habermasian communicative action, but an actor-network, connected and part of a reticular ecology that articulates itself in a succession of action, through the exchange of connective acts. The difference of the action of subject, the connective act expresses the impermanent and creating dimension, dear to Greek playwrights, of a creating happening. In place of action of human subjects and actors, the act is made through the fertile connectivity of several actants and interactors, human or not.

From such perspective, one can better comprehend the non-exclusively political dimension of net-activist actions that, in all contexts, avoided the assumption of a political identity, refusing any kind of flag and ideological formulas.

All of this allows us to distinguish from from formula. The formula offers its solutions, giving us certainties, based on coded thoughts, it has above all and everyone, pre-coded answers. Unlike form and formism (...) it limits them to propose interrogations and offer conditions of possibility (...). In antithesis to purely conceptual thought that believes it can circumscribe to the existence in its totality, formism lets space and potentiality that could and could not materialize (Maffesoli, 2000: 87).

It results equally clearer the strange relation to power of such movements that, by acting in an connective ecological dimension, leave spectacle society and its symbolic representations to start inhabiting a reticular and creative dimension. “In such perspective, the use of form indicates a presence of a living sociality that isn’t neither in favor nor against the power, but that could, at best, ignore, and at worst, dismiss” (Maffesoli, 2000: 155).

The forming form of networks of interaction that collect actants of several natures in ecological connections expresses a dimension that is constitutes as a conceptual challenge as a conceptual challenge for communicative theory, social sciences and philosophy. Inspired in the chemical idea of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that expressed a conception that opposed the mechanical model as much as the theoretical model and that opted to study chemical bodies, deducting their manner of changing by relating to each other, Isabelle Stengers proposed the conception of an interaction in which the



actions cannot be attributed to one single acting actor, but conceived as result of the interactions of a set of elements. The *cosmopolitical* idea proposed by the Belgian philosopher is not presented like the proposal of a politicization of the cosmos, according to a Kantian perspective that would divine the existence of a *common good world*, but, contrariwise, as the expression of cosmic complexity:

The cosmos must be distinguished of any other cosmos or particular world, as a particular tradition could conceive of it (...). In the word cosmopolitical, the cosmos refers to the uncertainty constituted by these multiple worlds and divergent, and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable (Stengers, 2007: 45).

The passage of the political sphere into the sphere that covers a cosmic dimension is, in the case of net-activist movements, not the result of an ideological option or the ascension of a common and political thought, but the consequence of a dwelling condition that expresses a particular kind of act (*αἰὼν*), that is characterized as an unrepeatable event, a kind of immediacy without past or future. Such a reticular connective act, more than a state, could be thought of as a condition. The Latin etymology of the term *condition* harkens to two meanings. The first refers to the feminine substantive *condictio-onis*, which could be translated as the term condition, situation, pact. The second relates to the term *conditio*, that besides the meaning of condition can assume the meaning of creation and foundation. The first points to a meaning of imposition and limitation. The second makes one think of a fertile and creating opening.

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