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Comparing media activism in Spain, Germany and Japan: global problems and local solutions

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Introduction:

This is an ongoing project of comparing media activism in different parts of the world.

A common trait in discourses about media activism around the planet is the international dimension of the fight for the right to communication. A turn towards profit-oriented commercialized media products can be seen as a trend around the world and media activists display a great deal of solidarity and recognition they face a common struggle. This work departs from the premise that these groups form a transnational community with similarly minded representations of what is their ideal format and practices of media, although this imagined community has persistent local differences that will be the main object of analysis.

The aim of this project is to compare media activism in Spain, Japan and Germany in terms of their internal differences and articulation, mapping the movement from within and then comparing the results.

1. The nature of comparative studies and the problem of modernity as a project

It is first necessary to reflect upon the epistemological possibility of this kind of comparison leading to consistent knowledge. Existing literature on comparative media system studies has described Spain as a somewhat incomplete modern democracy when compared to Northern European welfare states (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Japan is another country usually

pictured as a latecomer to modernity, frequently turned into the exotic in a orientalist way. In this study we attempt to distance ourselves from these normative approaches and look not at the whole of the society or the media system rather than the community of Media Social Movement (MSM).

There is still in this project, to a degree, a reliance on the somewhat discredited cornerstone of the modernity project. But not as an ideal to be achieve by nation-states rather than as a representation by a specific community that negotiates its own ideals of democracy, or alternate modernity in the indigenous category. These shared projects are an intrinsic part of globalization and transnational networks of advocacy and political struggle are increasingly influential (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Media activists in different locations share an ideal of democracy that constitutes the epistemological corner stone that makes comparison possible.

2.Object of research and working definition of Media Social Movement (MSM)

We follow Carroll and Hackett (2005) in their definition of democratic media activism as a politically defined subcategory within the efforts of civil society to reform media. As in their own work, we focus on groups with progressive actions, oriented towards increasing the number of voices and opinions on the media sphere and not seeking profit. Such groups operate in all layers of the process of encoding/decoding, and can be classified according to their repertoire of action, that is, the actions they perform oriented to a specific agent in order to achieve a certain goal. By applying this logic, coming from the works of Charles Tilly among others, they organize the field in four categories:

1- Collectives with the goal of influencing content and practices of mainstream media.

2- Collectives advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media.

3- Collectives dedicated to building independent, democratic and participatory media.

4- Collectives aimed at empowering and educating the audience.

These four categories are then grouped as those that aim their actions to

the government and media corporation (1 and 2) and those who address civil society (3 and 4). The difference, according to their reading of Habermas through Cohen and Arato (1992), is that while the former are offensively trying to alter the logic of the bureaucratic system, the latter are defending and expanding practices of the life-world.

These objectives could also be related to two strains of thought among the numerous ideologies that form the field of progressive, left oriented politics. On the one hand, those whose goal is to influence the government and companies can be related to strains of radical democratic thought associated to agonistic models. On the other hand, those whose actions are aimed at civil society can be associated to autonomist and anarchist practices.

The fact that different political projects and strategies can be found within the democratic media activism field is a reminder that what can be mistaken for a sociological unit of analysis is in fact a mixture of different ideologies and practices, constituting processes of creation of identity and subjectification, as has been theorized by New Social Movements scholars such as Mellucci (1996). The capacity of these actors to work together and collaborate towards creating alternatives and gaining political relevance is a crucial question that has been posed in the discussion of the contemporary production of political subjectivity, such as the creation of the multitude that Hardt and Negri (2004) propose.

This means that only a macro level analysis of the movement as a whole cannot tell us much about how the actors operate and create common strategies, that is, how cohesive the movement is. The same limitation is present in micro analysis that focuses on specific practices of collectives. Unless in terms of specific rifts and fights between different groups, it cannot assess the collaborative dynamic of the movement as a whole.

3. Methodology

Following this definition, we mapped and organized the field of media social movement in Japan, Spain and Germany according to the four categories of Carroll and Hackett (This process is ongoing).

The methodology of analysis of the data applies a meso level approach to look at the relations between the collectives that are identified in different categories of repertoire. Seeing how much they communicate and exchange with other categories gives us insight into their articulation and capacity to create links whereas realities of little exchange among actors points to lowered levels of social capital and less vitality.

Communication between the different collectives is measured by the circulation of information among them. Among media producing collectives, we will look at linkages and reproductions of content by other media collectives. Among the other collectives, we will look at each collective's Twitter accounts and website to see how much they circulate news produced by alternative media versus mainstream media (This methodology is still ongoing design)

By applying this method in three different countries, we are aiming at finding a way to measure the strength of the social movements field in each location

Another goal of this methodology is to opens possibilities to look at historical events in each country to see if there are links between these and the dynamics of media social movements. A deep sense of crisis surged in Japan and Spain since 2011, related to natural, man-made and economic disaster. Many scholars have argued that media social movement in these countries have since gained importance and been instrumental in making possible the kind of public actions that happened (Liscutin, 2011; Fuster Morell, 2012).

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