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The Impacts of the Pandemic on Digital Activism

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Introduction[1]

At first, the COVID pandemic led to a sharp decrease in mobilizations and protests. Quite quickly, however, it became evident that a new cycle of collective action had begun, associated to the sanitary crisis (Abers & von Bülow 2020a, 2020b). In fact, the pandemic should be understood a *mobilizing event*, an open-ended crisis to which a wide array of civil society actors have responded by displaying a variety of online and offline repertoires of action. It is also an *unavoidable event*, in the sense that actors cannot ignore it, but must confront its wide reaching impacts. This is true regardless of the differences among types of organizations, social movement sectors, and ideological tendencies, although of course actors' strategies and responses to the pandemic vary considerably along these dimensions and through time. In this Report, I focus specifically on the impacts of the pandemic on digital activism.

The pace of the process of digitalization of life has accelerated during the pandemic. As physical distancing, work from home and on-and-off lockdown measures were put in place, people turned to their computers, phones and televisions for all kinds of daily activities, from work meetings to yoga lessons. While the pandemic has been an economic disaster for most sectors, for those related to the digital world it has been an opportunity to boost profits. Demand for tracking apps, telehealth services and meeting apps, to cite just a few sectors, have skyrocketed. Innovative health wearables are being designed in light of the pandemic, as in the case of one that triggers an alarm if the user touches his/her face[2]. At the same time, these innovations have raised key concerns around data privacy and security. Understanding the impacts of this new phase of the digitalization of life is an important challenge that will require a multidisciplinary and long-term effort[3]. As Vallee (2020) has put it, "keeping up with the seismic shift (created by the pandemic) is exhausting" (p.8).

This Report contributes to discussions about the process of digitalization of life during the pandemic by focusing on a specific topic: digital political activism. It argues that, as with digitalization in general, acceleration is also an important part of what is happening with digital activism. Change, however, is not limited to doing faster what was already being done in the past. In parallel with *acceleration*, there is a deeper process of *transformation*, shown in this Report through examples of digital *diversification, adaptation* and *bridging*. This transformation is incipient and highly uneven, but I

[1] I thank the members of the research group Resocie for their suggestions and critiques on an earlier version of this Report.

[2] See https://medical-technology.nridigital.com/medical_technology_oct20/wearable_tech_covid-19, last accessed November 14, 2020.

[3] Efforts are already underway. See, for example, the project about COVID-19 apps and data flows of the Center for Digital Integrity at the University of Warwick, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/cdi/research/hp-contents/covidapps.

advance the following general argument: civil society actors' perceptions of the possibilities of digital activism have changed in the context of the pandemic, especially in the cases of those actors that have had to face the constraints of digital exclusion and illiteracy[4].

Digital activism is defined as actions oriented towards advancing contentious causes, through digital resources and tools. This definition encompasses a broad repertoire, which ranges from what Marichal has called "micro-activism"[5] to more complex practices, such as participating in online hashtag campaigns, designing new apps oriented towards political change, or creating new online content. It also casts a wide net in terms of the types of actors involved, ranging from individuals that may or may not be involved in collective action, to social movement organizations. This Report prioritizes the analysis of the latter, rather than the former. Especially important, for the purposes of this Report, is the comparison among organizations that before the pandemic were situated in different phases of the digitalization process. While every actor has had to face the challenge of digitalization during the pandemic, they have done so from different starting positions and, through acceleration and transformation, they create different trajectories and produce a variety of outcomes.

The changes in digital activism are analyzed in this Report through a mapping of pandemic-related trends, defined as trends that have arisen during the pandemic or that the pandemic has contributed to further unravel. It is a preliminary analysis because things are changing rapidly in a context of high uncertainty, in which actors' interpretations about the characteristics of the crisis and how to respond to them are being disputed (Abers and von Bülow 2020b). Also important to note is that this analysis privileges the presentation of experiences of a set of civil society actors that are located in Brazil. Obviously, the impacts of the pandemic on activism are not the same for all actors all around the world, and it is impossible to generalize from the Brazilian experience. Notwithstanding that, the trends mapped can provide inspiration for analysis in other contexts as well.

This Report is part of a series of analysis that are based on data from the Repository of Civil Society Initiatives against the Pandemic, an online platform and resource hub created by the Research Group *Rethinking State-Social Relations*, at the University of Brasilia. It is also based on document analysis and on qualitative interviews with key civil society actors, undertaken between September and October of 2020.

[4] Digital literacy refers to the hability to use digital resources and tools.

[5] Marichal defined "microactivism" as "one–to–several forms of politically oriented communication that reflect micro–level *expressive political performances*. These performances are not necessarily geared towards mobilization like more traditional forms of digital activism but this does not invalidate their political purpose" (italics in the original) (2013: 2).

The Context Matters

To analyze changes brought about by the pandemic, it is important to put these changes in context. This Report argues that in the Global South the turn to digital activism is much more relevant – and challenging – than in the Global North, for two reasons. First, in less developed countries or regions, inequalities in digital access and digital skills make the process of appropriation of digital tools more difficult. Second, the impossibility of imposing strict quarantine and isolation policies (because of living conditions and because people have to keep working) means that the experience of the pandemic and of the measures against it are felt longer and harder, especially in the cases of poorest communities within the Global South. In these contexts, the pandemic is not only a crisis, but a catastrophe, defined as "situations when the organisations established to deal with emergencies and disasters, (for example, the fire, police, rescue and health services) are themselves overwhelmed or collapse" (Lavell et.al. 2020: 2).

The political context matters, too. In Brazil, the pandemic arrived in a preexisting context of political polarization, in which political authorities and civil society actors supported a denialist position. In such a context, digital activism has become much more important than it was before for a whole array of civil society actors that have had to face a double challenge: fill in the void left by the state – which is either unwilling or incapable of implementing public policies – and to mobilize against disinformation campaigns. Emerging scholarship has shown that, in fact, official denialism has an impact on how supporters perceive the risks associated to the pandemic (Calvo et. al. 2020) and, therefore, on how they respond to calls for physical distancing, the use of masks, or to donate money or food to the most vulnerable sectors of the population.

Arguably, the coupling of these characteristics of the economic and political context makes Brazil a unique case. This does not mean, however, that the findings and arguments presented below do not help us in understanding other cases. It is possible to compare the trends. For example, the issue of digital literacy and inclusion has risen as a key one across the Global South for social movements and other civil society actors whose constituencies have low educational levels. Other issues, however, such as how to cope with online misinformation campaigns, may bring the Brazilian case closer to the United States than to most other Latin American cases.

Trends in Digital Activism from Brazil

For this report, I will outline four interrelated trends related specifically to transformations in digital activism in the context of the pandemic: *appropriation, diversification, adaptation* and *integration.* Examples will show the rise of digital inclusion and digital literacy as key issues in actors' agendas, the adaptation of offline activities to online requirementes, the diversification of online repertoires of collective action, and the emergence of new bridges for better integrating online and offline activism.

Appropriation of Digital Tools

Access to the Internet has grown exponentially all over the world in the 2000s. Brazil is no exception. In spite of that, in 2019 still one in every four Brazilians did not have access to the Internet. Importantly, exclusion from the Internet is correlated with income, age, place of living (whether in rural or urban areas) and education. This is true not only in Brazil, but also in developed countries (such as the United States) Internet access varies according to these variables[6]. However, differences among social groups are much more consequential in a country with chronic inequality levels such as Brazil. Thus, while for the richest income group the Internet is ubiquitous (95%), only 57% of people in the two lowest income tiers have access to the Internet (CGI, 2019).

Relevant too are differences among those that do have Internet access, which also vary according to income, age, place of living and education. While 11% of the richest strata use mobile cell phones as their exclusive means of online access, this number rises to 85% for the two lowest income strata (idem). Again, the trend towards online access through smartphones is a global one (e.g. Taylor & Silver, 2019), but for poorer Brazilians it means having a very limited type of access, often dependent on the availability of free Wi-Fi services. Thus, it is not only a matter of who has access. It is also a question of the quality of the connection.

In March, when the first isolation measures were put in place in Brazil, the pandemic generated a rupture with face-to-face interactions that greatly and instantaneously restricted collective action. All of a sudden, there were no more weekly meetings, informal gatherings, assemblies or street protests. This presented a key challenge for civil society organizations, especially for those whose constituencies were digitally excluded. In spite of the increasingly widespread process of appropriation of digital tools

[6] For data on unequal Internet access in the United States, see, for example, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/ .

by civil society organizations, for many the digital arena remained a relatively uncharted territory[7].

In the context of lockdown policies, however, it became urgent to find ways to keep in touch with organizations' members and to find new ways to mobilize people. For many, especially those with preexisting conditions that made them more vulnerable to the virus, digital channels became the only way to continue some form of participation and of communication with others.

According to an online survey of 1,760 civil society organizations held in the last week of May, 55% mentioned the difficulty in keeping in contact with their constituencies as the second most important negative impact of the pandemic (behind only the dwindling of financial resources) (Mobiliza Consultoria & Reos Partners, 2020). At the same time, 44% declared that they had adapted their actions to be able to get in touch with their constituencies remotely (idem). Other data sources confirm the relevance of this issue. In an online debate, a member of an organization that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities estimated that about 20% of the families they worked with did not have Internet access[8]. The issue also became more relevant - and urgent - because individuals entitled to receive a monthly emergency payment approved by the National Congress (informal workers and those earning very low wages) had to download a banking cellphone app to register and follow-up on the payments[9].

In this context, part of the advocacy mobilization of NGOs and social movements zoomed in on the issue of digital exclusion. The Coalizão Direitos na Rede (Rights in Network Coalition), for instance, proposed to use public funds to subsidize connectivity costs and hardware acquisition for low-income students[10]. Another NGO, Intervozes, requested that phone companies did not interrupt connectivity services because of lack of payment during the pandemic. In other cases, civil society organizations distributed cell phone chips and installed Wi-Fi points in places with poor connection[11].

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[7] For a discussion about the heterogeneity of ways in which social movement organizations appropriate or not digital tools and engage in digital activist practices, see von Bülow, Vilaça and Abelin 2019.
[8] See the "live" discussion organized by the Federation of APAES in Sao Paulo, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3KCy96vTFg, July 29, 2020.
[9] See the instructions for access to payments here: https://www.caixa.gov.br/auxilio/Paginas/default2.aspx.
[10] See https://direitosnarede.org.br/2020/05/20/fust-deve-subsidiar-acesso-a-internet-durante-pandemia-especialmente-os-estudantes/
[11] For instance, in September the NGO Central Única das Favelas (Central Union of the Slums) began to distribute thousands of chips as part of their "Slum Mothers ON" project, and installed wi-fi spots in Brazilian slums (with funding from private donors and the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO). See https://www.vozdascomunidades.com.br/destaques/cufa-distribui-chips-de-celular-na-rocinha/ and https://www.instagram.com/p/CGkcr_LJtk-/. Other types of actors, such as Universities, also launched digital inclusiveness programs that included the donation of hardware and of connection chips.

As argued above, however, access is only part of the discussion about digital inclusion. For people in the urban peripheries and for those living in more isolated rural areas, the connection costs and the speed and reliability of internet access are key issues as well[12]. As part of civil society efforts to deal with these challenges, in October a new Internet provider was launched by the NGO Central Única das Favelas and several of its partners. Self-described as a "social provider", it aims at offering cheap and reliable Internet service in Brazilian slums, and promises not to cut off access when data plans have been used up (but only to slow down the connection speed)[13].

Digital inclusion is also about digital literacy, a key obstacle for organizations working with poor and older people with low educational levels, and with people with disabilities. One activist, who leads an organization that works with poor people all over the country and has very little online presence, described his preoccupation and then his surprise with the results of their efforts at digital inclusion in the context of the pandemic:

> *"The first two weeks were of a state of total distress (...) We did not know what to do. Because, where do we act? In the streets. (...) Then: nobody can leave their homes. What do we do now?"*
>
> And, as they adapted:
>
> *"What I found out was amazing. We talked so much to them about the relevance of meeting, that men and women who can barely write their own names, today they can use an app such as the one we are using right now (Zoom) and they are able to participate in meetings. There are difficulties, but they can express themselves, they can tell us what is happening. We had never imagined that this could happen. (...) We were mistaken. We have done meetings with 30, 40 people, with the most humble grassroots people. It was very surprising" (Interview 7, October 2, 2020).*

For these activists, digitalization meant not only learning to do things in a new way, but also changing the way in which they evaluated digital possibilities. What seemed impossible - to meet online with people who can barely write their own names - became possible in a very short period of time. The trend towards the appropriation of digital tools overlaps with two additional trends: towards the diversification and the adaptation of collective action repertoires.

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[12] As explained in the first episode of the podcast "Lugar de Quarentena", a podcast about the pandemic experiences of people living in slums: https://anchor.fm/arqueperifa/episodes/1---Coletivos-Culturais-da-Quebrada-ed76kt

[13] See https://alosocialcelular.com.br/

Diversification and Adaptation of Collective Action Repertoires

A second observable trend is related to the changes in the ways in which actors use digital tools for collective action, or their digital collective action repertoires. Actors that already had a digital presence have diversified and adapted the use of digital tools. This has entailed a process of organizational adaptation as well. Organizations have redirected resources, from offline to online activities, and have invested in better infrastructure and on security services.

The simplest and perhaps most visible adaptation was the transformation of offline meetings in online meetings. For the first time in decades of history of celebrations of Labor Day, the first of May was organized online, through six hours of streaming that brought together labor leaders, celebrities, musicians, and politicians. According to an interviewee from the Brazilian Association of NGOs, in the pandemic context they realized that online meetings were feasible, and, of course, much cheaper, because they did not have to fly people in from all over the country[14]. In fact, online activities became so common and acceptable that activists became exhausted, as one stated (ironically, while using Zoom to give an interview):

> *"We went from euphoria to exhaustion. (...) Is it valid (to meet online)? Yes. Then let's start doing it! Then it was funny because we began to schedule meetings for everything. Because, the costs that impacted those meetings, that was not an issue. (But) having to pay attention to a screen is tiresome, it exhausts people."15*

As Geert Lovink has argued in his article on "Zoom fatigue", "Zoom (or Teams or Jitsi or any other video conference app) has become another room in the house" (p. 3), and "Much like the Covid crisis itself, we are being asked to endure never-ending sessions on Zoom" (p. 5).

Exhaustion generated by the overtaxing of our brains in long videoconferencing hours is, as Lovink explains, a phenomenon that affects a wide range of people. For activists, who are the focus of this Report, this exhaustion resulted not only from the transition from offline to (an even greater number of) online meetings, but also from the boom in the organization of "lives", "webinars", podcasts, and the streaming of offline activities such as the distribution of donations.

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[14] Interview 5, October 1, 2020.

[15] Leonardo Pinho, of the Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários (UNISOL). Video Travessia - Episode 4, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0J9Ex_8xqk .

"Lives" were not a significant part of the digital repertoire of civil society organizations before the pandemic. In the context of social distancing, they quickly became a regular activity for many, organized through platforms such as Zoom and publicized through Facebook pages and YouTube channels. "Lives" have become fora for debating the meanings and impacts of the pandemic, for exchanging ideas with other activists and with scholars or politicians, and have become a stage from which to launch campaigns or denounce human rights violations. Part of this flurry of online activity has been directed at launching communication campaigns that aim at raising awareness about the virus and fighting disinformation and misinformation. A good example is of the Human Rights Center Gaspar Garcia, an organization located in Sao Paulo. Between May 17 and October 2, it organized thirty lives with a group of civil society organizations and individuals involved in the defense of human rights of people living in the streets[16]. Before the pandemic, the Center's Facebook page only featured three videos. These lives represent, thus, a new type of activity in the Center's digital repertoire. They had different aims. Some were organized to launch the Campaign "Despejo Zero" (Zero Evictions Campaign), which brought together a coalition of civil society actors to demand that during the pandemic people did not get evicted from their houses due to inability to pay the rent, and that homeless people living in occupations did not get evacuated by the police. Others discussed the need for transforming unoccupied hotel rooms in hotels into temporary shelters for homeless people. Still others were used to denounce police brutality against informal workers.

A challenging example of adaptation in the transition from offline to online comes from care, self-care and therapeutic initiatives. For instance, since 2015 the Feminist Center for Studies and Advisory Services (Cfêmea), one of the most important Brazilian feminist NGOs, launched a program on self-care and care among activists, as a new political strategy aiming at protecting and strengthening women activists[17]. In those cases, one of our interviewees argued, the difficulty comes from adapting the methodology, thought initially to be only offline, to the virtual stage[18].

Bridging Online/Offline Activism

The trends discussed above could lead us to conclude that the boundaries between online and offline activism have disappeared. This is not what is being argued in this Report. Separation between online and offline arenas keep existing, and that - considering the discussion about Zoom exhaustion above - is actually a good thing. However, the boundaries between these arenas are constantly shifting and, in the context of the pandemic, there are more efforts at better integrating them.

[16] See https://www.facebook.com/centrogaspargarcia/videos/?ref=page_internal .
[17] See the description of this initiative in https://www.cfemea.org.br/images/stories/publicacoes/folder_cuidado_entre_ativistas_english.pdf.
[18] Interview 6, October 2, 2020.

Such bridges across online and offline arenas are most visible in the new collective action campaigns that have been launched by civil society actors in the context of the pandemic. For instance, the emergency mutual aid actions that were the priority for many social movement organizations working with poor communities of the slums in the months of March and April in Brazil (Abers & von Bülow 2020a) were organized both online and offline. Volunteers were recruited through Facebook, coordinated actions through WhatsApp groups, met in soccer fields (where they could gather while adhering to social distancing regulations), and delivered donations personally, in house visits or in distribution centers, often with online streaming.

The same bridging of online/offline tactics is characteristic of more confrontationist forms of action, such as the national strike called for by food delivery app workers, on July 25[19]. It was called on and offline. On the day of the strike, moto boys used WhatsApp groups to coordinate the closing of streets and other forms of protest, and keep each other informed. Throughout the same day, they called for a vomiting emoji flooding ("vomitaço") of delivery apps' social media pages[20].

A third example comes from the launching of communication campaigns during the pandemic. Especially interesting has been the work of media activists, who have created new cell phone apps[21] and have better integrated the traditional radio programs with online streaming in YouTube, Facebook, and as podcasts. These actors have also adapted their online communication strategies, to include two goals related to the pandemic: the "translation" of the complicated scientific language in which the pandemic is often discussed, and the fight against misinformation. At the same time, community organizations keep using the tools from the past: hanging banners across the street to ask people to stay at home, and parading the streets in a car with a megaphone.

[19] Other countries also saw similar mobilizations. The main demands are better delivery rates, safer working conditions and the supply of essential protective equipment by food delivery corporations.
[20] See the 25 July posts published in the movement's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/tretanotrampo.
[21] See, for example, the case of the Voz das Comunidades, a community journal in the Complexo do Alemão (one of the largest Latin American slum complexes), which launched a new cell phone app. See https://www.vozdascomunidades.com.br/ .

Final Comments

Civil society organizations that arrived late to the world of digital activism were badly positioned to respond to the pandemic, especially during the early period of restrictions on public gathering and adherence to social distancing measures. The interviews and documents analyzed in this Report provide examples of the difficulties faced by these types of actors in the first weeks of March of 2020. On the other hand, those that had incorporated digital skills and that had a social media presence were better positioned to quickly launch campaigns. They were also better positioned to protect their constituencies, by finding online ways of interaction and protest that minimized risks of contagion, and by being more efficient at getting help quickly to those who needed it the most.

This Report has shown that even those civil society organizations with little digital presence became aware of the need and urgency of the turn to the digital in the context of the pandemic. Not only are they using more digital tools, but they are also launching digital inclusion and digital literacy initiatives. Many are also making an effort at better integrating online and offline strategies.

Thus, how actors perceive the meaning and significance of digital activism for collective action is changing, and their digital practices are changing as well. Some of these changes are not easily quantifiable. They cannot be measured only in terms of the number of tweets sent, nor the number of followers in a social media platform. Transformation becomes evident, however, when activists talk about the relevance of digital inclusion and literacy, when they talk about the uses of new technological resources, and when they integrate digital practices with off-line actions.

The digital turn is not the panacea, however. Civil society organizations are discussing the psychological challenges involved in excessive screen time, and are aware of the fact that digital protest does not substitute street protest. This is why this Report has emphasized the briding of online/offline arenas, not the blurring of its boundaries.

Furthermore, the process of appropriation of digital tools is neither linear nor homogeneous. As before the pandemic, it remains a highly heterogeneous and unequal process, given the differences in resources and political power among actors. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether all the trends mapped will be sustainable in a post pandemic future. While the push for accessibility is likely to remain a relevant part of actors' agendas, without the health risk of the virus civil society organizations will move back to doing more face-to-face meetings and activities - though not as many as before.

This Report showed trends and opened several venues for future research. In particular, more research is needed on the different digitalization trajectories of civil society organizations, and how these are related to various perceptions of the potentialities (and limitations) of digital activism. We also need more data on what kinds of digital tools actors are prioritizing, and whether there are debates about the need to go beyond proprietary platforms. With a few exceptions, most of the examples included in this Report show a tendency for activists to use a limited set of platforms - namely Facebook, WhatsApp, and Zoom.

Finally, this Report is biased towards the study of civil society organizations. A thorough analysis of digital activism during the pandemic should include other forms of individual activism, such as the activism displayed by individuals that are not members of organizations, or that are acting in an autonomous fashion with regard to their organizational affiliations.

From a theoretical perspective, we need to discuss changes in the definition of concepts of activism and collective action, in light of the digital turn we are witnessing during the pandemic. We also need a better understanding of the meaning of the pandemic itself for civil society, as an exogenous shock, a crisis, an opportunity, a threat, or all of the above.

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