

“#THISBILLISNOTMINE” online activism and engagement in digital social network sites

“#ESSACONTANÃOÉMINHA” ativismo online e engajamento nas redes sociais digitais

“#ESACUENTANOESMÍA” activismo online y participación en redes sociales digitales

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Abstract

This paper seeks to better understand the production of meanings in the context of online activism. Based on an interpretative and exploratory qualitative investigation approach, we seek to examine the path of the activist campaign “Cedae, this bill is not mine”, by the organization Meu Rio, in the context of the crisis of water supply to the metropolitan population of Rio de Janeiro, in early 2020. The study analyzes different strategies for mobilization and engagement in digital social networks and interprets the interpretation of people, from a web of interactions in search of meanings. The investigation takes place under the aegis of a larger interpretive category, sustainability, as the transformations that one wants to see in the world depend on actions that involve social mobilization for change. Activism thus reveals itself as an emerging and fundamental activity for the design and expansion of communication practices in sustainable development.

Key words: Online activism; Engagement; Mobilization; Digital social media sites; Sustainability.

Introduction

The current challenges of humanity - posed by environmental and social changes resulting from the way in which human beings have existed and developed on planet Earth - require increasingly robust, interdependent, and urgent intellectual and practical actions. The “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is an example of a recent global response to this scenario¹. In this context, many mobilization and engagement initiatives are underway and being planned to face global challenges, building and revealing a countless number of new agents of change, and, consequently, expanding and giving a new shape to activist actions around the world.

What, nowadays, encourages people to get themselves involved in causes, whether social, political, cultural or of other nature? And what is the role and relevance of new technologies in this process? How has activism been remodeling itself in contemporary times? In a scenario of frequent questions and changes, social movements have also been redefining their ways of organizing, acting, communicating and mobilizing in favor of the causes they defend. What has been perceived is an activism in continuous transformation, which accompanies a context of intricate socio-environmental challenges and a new system of society based on digital networks.

This article is a synthesis of the author’s master’s research, which seeks to investigate, based on the case study of a campaign by the Rio de Janeiro activist organization Meu Rio, how social movements, non-governmental organizations or action networks have been using new technologies and developing methods, strategies and narratives to mobilize and engage citizens through online activism. The objective is to better understand social engagement in the context of contemporary activism and investigate the field of meaning production, considering the interactions offered by contemporary communication and new technologies.

Under the umbrella of the larger “sustainability” category, the campaign chosen to “locate” the present discussion was “Cedae, this is not my bill”, which unfolded in the context of the water supply crisis for the metropolitan

¹ The 2030 Agenda is an action plan for people and the prosperity of the planet, created in 2015, with 193 Member States of the United Nations - UN as signatories. The plan indicates 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, and 169 targets, to eradicate poverty and promote a dignified life for all, within the limits of the planet.

population of Rio de Janeiro, at the beginning of 2020. It is, therefore, a cause which involves access to quality water for population and basic sanitation, themes that are so relevant to the global agenda of sustainable development and urbanity.

In globalized, multicultural and complex societies, transformations of all kinds have been increasingly rapid — and identities tend to be increasingly plural. At this juncture, activism often incorporates, as Scherer-Warren (2006) highlights, multiple dimensions of the *self*: gender, ethnic, class, regional, but, equally, dimensions of affinities or political options and values: for equality, for freedom, for peace, for the ecologically correct, for social and environmental sustainability, for respect for diversity and cultural differences, among others. In these same societies, the increasing incorporation of new information and communication technologies has led to the formation of new social movements and unusual configurations of activism, conceiving, according to Di Felice (2013, p. 49²), a new form of “locality”, “informative and material at the same time, an expression of an unprecedented housing condition that brings together humans, informational circuits and territorialities”.

From these multiple dimensions, individuals move through different “worlds” and they ally opportunely in time and space, both real and virtual, with increasingly less defined borders, connecting at nodal points that support a fluid, multiform and metamorphic network. Even though this dialogue and interaction are not free, on the one hand, from conflicts and power struggles, and, on the other, from possibilities of solidarity, reciprocity and sharing, the confrontation and meeting of demands and struggles relating to different aspects of citizenship have been allowing — and requiring — social movements to redesign themselves and move from defending a single identity subject to defending a plural subject (CHERER-WARREN, 2006).

Taking these considerations as the starting point, this article seeks to make contributions to the discussion and to the understanding of the production of meanings in contemporary activist practices.

Methodological course

As Becker (1977) recommends, I highlight that my research took place through the eyes of people who connected with each other and engaged in a campaign led by the progressive activist organization Meu Rio, on its digital social networks, for ten days, in the context of the water supply crisis in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, under the responsibility of the then public company Cedae, in the first months of 2020. It is important to highlight that, in my role as researcher, I did not interact with the campaign as a “participant”, neither online nor offline; I just got involved with the data afterwards. This is, therefore, a post-campaign analysis, based on data available on the digital social networks in which the campaign was built and published; The data is, therefore, public - allowing access by anyone, as long as they have access to digital platforms, based on a created profile (login and password).

Being of a qualitative and exploratory nature and having a hermeneutic-interpretive approach, the research has privileged the dimension of significance and seeks to understand the production of meaning, based on actors and their interactions with each other and with platforms and strategies based on digital networks, considering criteria that are important for these subjects. In this fashion, I analyze the social situation in question, construing the interpretation of subjects, based on a web of interactions, in search of meanings (here taking into account the stratified set of social meanings, by Geertz, 1978).

Meu Rio produces meanings, narratives and codes, inserted in a network of meaning, being able to transmit messages that people will “read” and “consume” in their own way, creating — or not — connections and patterns that make such narratives relevant and influential and generate engagement and developments. The semiotic concept of culture (Geertz, 1978) allows us to look at the meaning and interpretations that social actors give to what they produce and, in the same context, to think about conflict as an integral part of this same network of meanings, since the existence of divergent interpretations and struggles to establish meanings is part of the cultural construction³.

To analyze the network of meaning, I used the “*unidades mínimas ideológicas (UMI)*” (ideological minimum units), an anthropological method structured by Velho (1973), which made it possible to categorize speeches and

2 All references written originally in Portuguese have been freely translated.

3 The research also included a bibliographical deepening of concepts such as “culture”, “society”, “mediatization”, “activism” and “digital social network sites”, followed by an empirical stage, which consisted of an exploratory netnographic work on the case study. At this stage, I also incorporated conversations and information collected in an online interview with the organization studied, based on a semi-structured questionnaire.

analyze the production of meanings in the context of relationships posted on digital social networks of the campaign studied, in addition to cross-referencing the content found in this field and in the interview carried out with Meu Rio.

Internet, cyberactivism and new forms of social participation

From a new communicative and productive paradigm that marks the emergence of a network society, in Castells' terms (2003), transformations also arise in social actions: new ways of participating and organizing, new concepts, new forms of social conflicts start to take shape, mediated by technology resources.

The use of the internet and social network sites is a new element that marks the actions of social movements in contemporary times. Through "cyberactivism", activists are called on, demonstrations are publicized and what happens on the streets is monitored in real time, empowering groups and initiatives that demand collective rights.

Luvizotto (2016, p. 301) highlights that many actions of a political-social nature emerged and were strengthened and potentialized as the internet has supported them. For the author, information technologies have not only become instruments of fundamental importance for the organization and articulation of such social collectives, but they have also provided the formation of new social movements and new forms of activism.

The greater distance (in physical and commitment terms) and the easiness (with fewer resources, not just economic, but of all nature) have also favored new forms of social participation: the organization of social actors in communities and virtual social networks, according to Pereira (2011), has allowed political activism to be organized in a way that overcomes temporal, financial, spatial, ideological and identity constraints, contributing to the expansion of activities to levels rarely imagined before.

As Machado (2007) points out, with the advent of the internet and web tools, information stops being concentrated in mass media and large media conglomerates and, instead, it offers the possibility of production, selection and interaction to its users, generating new content and sources of information. It is the "disintermediation" — as highlighted by Carolina Terra (2012) —, which happens when the power to communicate, both in the production of content and narratives and in dissemination, previously restricted to large media groups and corporate conglomerates, becomes also in the hands of the public.

Di Felice (2013) understands that, given the transformation of the network's interactive capacity, there was a reconfiguration of the meaning of cyberactivism: a concept that, for the author, increasingly refers to the intensive form of network interaction between individuals, territory and digital technologies, indicative of the typical connectivity of social action in and on networks. In this sense, Di Felice points out that it is extremely important to understand that the forms of citizenship and activism are the result of a fruitful interaction between the subjects themselves, and between them and the technologies undergoing rapid and agile transformation. And he states:

(...) the objectives, forms of organization, positioning, dissemination and engagement of these individuals are results and resulting not from a unidirectional or predictable process, but built as a network, in a collaborative, based on the synergy of several actants⁴ (information circuit, smart devices, smartphones, digital cameras, recorders, social networks, such as Facebook, social movements, individuals, etc.) (Di Felice, 2013, p. 55).

Pereira (2011) highlights that the use of the internet by social movements is an ongoing construction, which establishes a two-way relationship: in which one gives form and is also formed by the other.

Will the internet, then, be a new and innovative field for activism that already exists? Will it be a strengthener of existing networks, in which already constituted social movements begin to seek, above all, the convergence of communication (in the terms of Jenkins, 2008), access and efforts, reducing costs, expanding capillarity, building, in different scales, decentralized and deterritorialized emerging support and using new tools to communicate and mobilize for in-person action? In the near future, "fights" will only be able to take place in the virtual field or, for activism, it is indispensable that there are offline interactions, with online and in-person spaces being shared, self-reinforcing themselves?

⁴ Di Felice refers here to the concept expressed by Bruno Latour (2012) and the Actor-Network theory, a neutral way of referring to human and non-human actors — who contribute to the outcome of an action.

Communication for activism

Increasingly mediated by an environment with technological protagonism that is structured in a network, the forms of activism and social participation are constantly changing and are not uniform or simple to categorize. As a starting point, I turn to Sebastião and Elias (2012), for whom three types of participation profiles can be identified: “the activists”, with high online and offline involvement; “the contributors”, who provide support, usually financial and sporadically, and “the subscribers”, who are in the middle and whose participation, although active, is limited to the online environment, namely, they are *like activists*⁵, or practice “couch activism”, as the School of Activism⁶ (2013) calls it. Despite the difficulty in accurately classifying such profiles — including for the purposes of strategic engagement — what seems important to highlight is that it is difficult for a person to limit themselves to a single motive or reason that justifies the decision to get involved or engage in a cause. Possibly, there will be numerous reasons; perhaps, with some hierarchical logic. The School of Activism (2013) summarizes “these reasons” in three key factors that will influence people in terms of their interest levels and that, thus, will lead them to decision making: cultural relevance, value of the experience and cost of execution, which form the equation $Interest = Relevance + Value - Cost$ ⁷.

Therefore, decision-making is at the center of engagement⁸ and communication is *sine qua non* in this process. It is from this that people will decide whether or not to engage in the cause — and/or stay engaged in it. Engaging, in this context, involves the support of civil society to achieve victory in a cause, with the activist’s task being to offer elements and build possibilities that could help people make decisions. To this end, in the experience of the School of Activism (2013), communication needs to be a multidimensional action — and not unidirectional; more focused on people — and less on tools; one that activates personal values and builds dialogues, creating a convergence between the cause and the worldview and/or the needs of the target audience — so that these people can, in practice, make a decision.

In the field of activism, more than telling the story of the dispute that is being fought, it is necessary to fight for the story that is being told. (...) The main role of activist communication is the dispute for the narrative, for people’s imagination, and in this process, it is essential to structure your story from an engaging and challenging point of view for your audience (p. 21).

Throughout an engagement campaign, the level of interest of the people involved may vary, with the potential to be transformed based on the communication strategies used by activists, leading these people’s interest to a higher level of engagement. This “status” can be expressed by an “engagement funnel” (Escola de Ativismo, 2013, p. 15), in which the closer to the bottom of the funnel the higher the level of engagement (starting with attention, navigating through interest, involvement, action, and ending with advocacy). The path to engagement does not necessarily go through all stages of the funnel, however, analyzing people’s position in the engagement flow and the evolution of engagement itself is relevant to the development of more effective action strategies.

In this context, I highlight one of the strategies and tools that has been very used by online activism and campaigns, in general, that use digital marketing, which is the “call to action” (CTA) strategy, which serves to encourage interaction, introduce the next step in your communication. If monitored, it works as an important indicator of campaign engagement.

5 This is the so-called *slacktivism* or *like activism*, a pejorative English-speaking term that refers to a form of social participation that is characterized as lazy, as it is just a click away, but which causes individuals to feel a sense of social participation and an important positive impact on society. society (Sebastião; Elias, 2012).

6 in: “<https://escoladeativismo.org.br/escola/>.” Accessed on 13 apr. 2021.

7 “Relevance”, according to the School of Activism (2013), is a cultural factor of the person or social group, difficult to be modified. Examples of applicability are vaccination and traffic safety campaigns. “Value” refers to the value of the experience; a factor that occurs exactly at the moment we are executing the action and can be perceived by the sensation of the moment, which can provoke, for example, humor, adrenaline, belonging, solidarity, legacy, among others. Communication plays a fundamental role in transmuting the focus of the action from simply transmitting the message to building an experience. Finally, the “Execution Cost” of an activity is not always monetary and can be understood as a sum of all the variables that make it difficult or prevent this action from being carried out. Possible costs include time, transportation, physical, social, intellect, use of a platform, among others.

8 Based on a quick search for the etymological origin of engagement, I was introduced to the French term *engager*, meaning: to provide commitment, guarantee. Engagement as commitment would come from the Latin *compromittere*, which means guaranteeing, swearing, making a promise. Another use derives etymologically from the Latin word *involvere*, in the sense of surrounding, surrounding, participating, relating. It is a term that, in some sources, also endorses its origins in military use. Currently, it has been widely used by digital marketing, people management, and, also, mainly by activism.

Therefore, another fundamental action arises in the execution of the campaign, which is to evaluate the repercussions, that is, to continuously measure and monitor the process and results — a task made much easier with the current resources offered by information technology. The monitoring, however, as highlighted by the School of Activism (2013), must go beyond traditional quantitative data, building qualitative indicators, considering offline and online interactions (in this case, taking advantage of analytics⁹), as highlighted:

Monitoring that can really generate important insights and conclusions to enhance actions must go beyond shallow quantitative data. This data can help with perspective, but insights into your network are contained in qualitative analyses, which seek to understand how people are engaging and relating it to their communication channels and their cause (p. 29).

Universe, narratives and meaning production

Based on the comments present in the publications (posts) of the campaign studied in the digital social networks, I used the method of ideological minimum units (in Velho's terms, 1973) to investigate the most frequently used categories, how they are related and hierarchized and the principles and criteria that govern this organization. Such categories, therefore, are extracted from the discourses, based on the recurrence in which they appear and become the starting point of the analysis. "These ideological minimum units do not have a meaning in themselves, but only as they are opposed to other categories can we locate them. (...) the principle of opposition is what matters" (Velho, 1973, p. 67) — even if it is implicitly presented. Categories are collectively constructed (and not the work of isolated individuals). Thus, they structure the production of meaning and constitute a map of a group's thinking, forming a network, a web of meanings (Geertz, 1978). They are a type of coordinates that, when mapped, provide keys to the action of that particular group.

To arrive at this system, I worked with representations of the researched universe, which is made up of people from the urban environment, in a complex society, in Velho's terms (1994), having a series of heterogeneous characteristics, but presenting certain experiences in common. I am privileging the fact that: they use the internet and have accounts/profiles on digital social networks; there is a predominance of individuals who live in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro and, consequently, have been affected by the problem of supplying water treated by the public company Cedae, in Rio de Janeiro, in January 2020; in addition to having connected with the Meu Rio organization's campaign, "Cedae, this bill is not mine" — and with each other, through said campaign. In this context, we cannot attest to the social class of these individuals based on the available information. Therefore, there is no way to assert a certain homogeneity (or leveling) of social strata. In fact, what we can increasingly observe is that virtual environments are connected in a *continuum* with offline spaces — and vice versa. People move between one and the other, naturally, constituting, in the terms of Sodr  (2002), "another existential sphere", the "*media bios*". The analyzed context also takes us to the field of possibilities, in the terms of Velho (1994), in which the individual is exposed to multiple experiences, apparently contradictory and eventually fragmenting.

In this fashion, it is important to emphasize that, at no time, am I suggesting that these people think or act as a constituted and frequent group, but actually, that they connect in their representations specifically in that space (virtual)-time-purpose (motivation). Thus, I infer that what may be in common between them is highly linked to sharing and experiencing a similar problem or to the fact that they sympathize with the problem at hand: access to treated water suitable for human consumption in Rio de Janeiro, in January 2020, and associated issues that emerge, such as the payment of the supply bill and the management of the public mixed-economy company itself. At the same time, engaging in this campaign equalizes all the people involved and, also, separates them from others. It equalizes insofar as they are connected by the same cause, the same claim, the same problem. On the other hand, it differentiates them because they assume their identity and have autonomy in the construction of their discourses and forms of participation, even within a specific context — and they do so by supporting or antagonizing the campaign itself or each other, through their comments and interactions.

Locating the researched universe more appropriately, I am specifically referring to individuals and their virtual manifestations, in reactions to posts motivated by the "Cedae, this bill is not mine" campaign, in the context

⁹ Analytical intelligence is a comprehensive and multidimensional field that uses mathematical, statistical, predictive modeling and machine learning techniques to find meaningful patterns and knowledge in data. Usually, these are services offered by the digital platforms themselves in support of evaluation of the use of the resources they offer.

of three distinct digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) of the social organization Meu Rio, in the period from February 5th to 20th, 2020, as detailed in Table 1¹⁰.

The analytical synthesis of the most recurrent categories present in the speeches shows that, in addition to public health, issues linked to rights and “public matters” in urbanity are at stake. The ideological aspect is also present and, inevitably, highlights the political content of the issue. It also reveals — albeit in an indirect and general way — the path taken by the campaign: begins with the initial problematization, with in-depth issues of a political-ideological nature, involves public figures, triggers public acts, motivates engagement and leads to an outcome through non-payment of the bill.

Table 1. Ideological Minimum Units of the campaign on digital social networks

Ideological Minimum Unit	Feature	Typical phrase
Privatization [of Cedae]/ Not privatization [of Cedae] ¹¹	Privatization is a neoliberal policy, intensified in Brazil from the decade of 1990, with a view to selling companies or public institutions to the private sector, which begin to manage them and profit. It is an issue brought up as a backdrop to the aforementioned water supply crisis in Rio de Janeiro.	“The solution beyond privatization and opening the market (...)” “Everything that the privatization project wants is to have the population against the company”
Not paying the bill/ Normalizing the supply (...) unite/without union	Such “bill” is from the month of January 2020 from a relevant part of the population of Rio de Janeiro, who, during the period, was receiving piped water, with an inappropriate odor and appearance, supplied by Cedae. In addition to the alleged health consequences, there was a rush by people from Rio de Janeiro to consume bottled mineral water, increasing expenditure on the natural resource. Unite to avoid paying the bill and have mobilization strength... because if you don’t unite, there is no victory.	“The people have to unite and not pay the bill of CEDAE for this month and for the following months if things continue”.
Practically unsolvable problem/basic sanitation policies	It has to do with the lack of treatment of sewage, with insufficient basic sanitation in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro [polluting rivers and seas and, consequently, compromising the quality of water supply and population health].	“I believe it is a practically unsolvable problem : population increasing and impoverishing, lack of basic sanitation (...)”
Incompetence of the governor’s management / political will and honesty	It refers to the mismanagement of the recently impeached governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel.	“But the problem is not being against Cedae, but against the incompetence of the governor’s management(...)”
public act/online act public act/inaction	Protest, demonstration by the population, in the streets, in defense of the supply of quality water in Rio de Janeiro and putting pressure on the public agents responsible for this	“Meu Rio, we need to hold a public act in front of the W’s [Witzel, the governor] Palace, with hundreds of empty water bottles. I and many others want this action against this absurdity that we are experiencing and we still have no solution.”
Sanitation is necessary/ threat to public health	According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the main objective of basic sanitation is to promote human health, as many diseases can proliferate due to the absence of this service.	“The surrounding municipalities cannot bear the burden. SANITATION IS NEEDED.”

10 Na pesquisa que dá origem ao presente artigo, os quadros UMI são segmentados, analisados e detalhados acompanhando os *posts* cronológicos da campanha, juntamente com análise das estratégias de comunicação para o ativismo.

11 Neste caso, são as duas categorias que aparecem, igualmente, isto é, a categoria e sua oposição — e vice-versa.

Drink the water, Hélio/ Not even he drinks this water	Phrase attributed to the former president of Cedae, considering the activists' public act of offering him dirty water, served in a glass, as he hurriedly left Alerj	Drink the water, Hélio #bebeaguaheio (In english: #drinkthewaterhelio)
Shameless/ decency, decorum	It refers to the qualification of the attitude of the former president of Cedae, who left the Alerj plenary without providing clarifications, although he was at that hearing for that purpose.	"(...) Don't be shy, SHAMELESS, RUNAWAY. HOW EMBARRASSING".
Congratulations action /inaction shame	Congratulating the attitude, the act carried out by Meu Rio activists, in Alerj	"Congratulations for acting, Meu Rio!
This bill is not mine/ the bill belongs to Cedae	Motto of the campaign (whose use, specifically, denotes adherence to the campaign), referring to the water bill of residents of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, in January 2020, served by Cedae, during the supply crisis generated by the poor quality of water supplied.	"This bill is not mine"
Let's fight for our rights let's not let it go /if we don't unite nothing will change	It refers to the understanding that people from Rio have the right to be reimbursed, as they paid for water supplied outside of quality standards. But to guarantee the right it is necessary to unite	"Let's fight for our rights, no more being deceived, we pay an absurd water bill, in the last month they supplied us with rotten water, we are not going to let it go".

Source: Research data, 2020

Among the most significant categories or social representations, I highlight:

- "privatization" and "non-privatization" of Cedae¹² involve themselves, the opposition, highlighting both defense and criticism of the company, its management and its value as public heritage;
- "Uniting" and "not paying the bill" appear as associated categories, whose opposition, "disunity" would make it difficult to obtain the desired results. What I can infer is a connection between these and the previous categories, in the sense of non-privatization, suggesting the following seam: privatization implies the opening of the market, but if people do not unite against privatization, the service will not improve; one solution is, therefore, to not pay the bill;
- "lack of basic sanitation", whose opposition is sewage treatment — one of Cedae's main functions —, appears at the heart of the "practically unsolvable problem". This problem requires "political will and honesty", a category that is not revealed, if not as an opposition to the "incompetence of the governor's management", which is the next highlighted category;
- [the desire for] the "public act", of taking to the streets, in my reading, highlights, however, two oppositions, based on the group's production of meanings: (i) in relation to the online act, that is, for an activism beyond digital networks - since the post that references it calls for the signing of an online petition; (ii) and given the need to exert more objective pressure in the face of inaction from both public agents and the population, as a provocation "to the people" (a category also used by users) to mobilize for their rights, in this case, for public health (which has to do with the other category that showed frequency - albeit lower - among users);
- "Drink the water, Hélio" appeared as a kind of meme¹³, to such an extent that, in some comments, it even took on the format of a hashtag.¹⁴ However, Hélio doesn't drink the water. Called to provide clarification

12 The Rio de Janeiro State Water and Sewage Company, a state-owned mixed economy company, with the government of the state of Rio de Janeiro, as the main shareholder, was founded in 1975 with the aim of providing sanitation services in the state of Rio de Janeiro. In April 2021, it went to auction with the water and sewage services granted to the private sector for 35 years. Cedae will continue to exist, through the collection and sale of water to concessionaires.

13 A meme can be an idea, sound, icon, value, or anything else that can be grasped and transmitted easily. A redefined concept of its origin, coined in the studies of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in his famous book *The Selfish Gene*, from 1976. For Dawkins, memes are essential units of information. The internet was one of the variables that contributed most to the popularization of the use of the word meme.

14 Hashtag is a term associated with topics that can be searched on social networks by inserting the symbol [#] before the word, phrase or expression. The hashtag allows all publications on social networks that use the same hashtag to be more easily found.

on the supply crisis in Rio de Janeiro, he refuses to answer the deputies' questions, gets up and leaves. In the same context and associated with this first category, another frequent one appears: “shameless”, which becomes part of the same ordered group of meaning production, qualifying the conduct of the “villain”;

- “Congratulations for acting” is another category that appeared frequently and concerns congratulations and thanks from users for the attitude of the activists who were at the public event. Some comments are very specific, indicating that users felt represented. A feeling that I dare say is in opposition to the feeling of “shame” produced by Hélio Cabral’s behavior (previous category). Perhaps, a kind of “moral compensation”, which acts directly on the activation of values — an important ingredient for engagement;
- “This bill is not mine” opposes the responsibility not assumed by Cedae for the inadequacy of service provision in January 2020. In general, users reject the quality of the water supplied during the period, as well as the need to pay the bill, expressing themselves in favor of the campaign and reproducing its motto in their comments or recording positions that lead to the same production of senses, recurring, towards non-payment of the bill and, consequently, in the greater engagement with the campaign;
- “fight for rights”, “demand for rights”, “enforce our rights”, “conquer the right that is guaranteed to us” were categories that called for collective action, with verbs in the imperative, mainly “let’s go...” and “we have to...” or slogans, indicating a clear objective of making a statement, demanding some change and/or inciting the group’s spirits. Therefore, this category opposes collective inaction, non-mobilization, that is, if people do not unite, “nothing will change”.

The campaign came to an end, giving space to other agendas of Rio’s urbanity and the social organization Meu Rio leaves its “followers” “to the luck” of the reimbursement developments, the discussion of which was advancing in the relations between Cedae, the Public Ministry and the Public Defender’s Office. In March 2020, the Rio de Janeiro Court decided on compensation to the consumer, passed on in the form of a discount on Cedae’s billing account, for the supply of water with alterations in color, taste and odor.

Provisional considerations

In this exploratory path — theoretical and empirical — I was able to notice how the multiple dimensions of the self, this identity and hybrid plurality is a mark of the “new times”, of a society anchored in information, in exuberant technology, in living conditions without specific contours; finally, the “*media bios*”, in the terms of Sodré (2002). Individuals move through different worlds and territorialities (especially of meanings) giving meaning to existence through a combination of human + technological and informational prostheses. Although individualism gains more and more relevance in complex societies - almost as a chronic and essential antagonism - individuals also constitute a network, in a collaborative, conflicting and fragmenting way (therefore, apparently contradictory), constituting new and broader flows of sociability, providing a field of possibilities (in Velho’s terms, 1994) from the webs of meanings they weave.

I also highlight the importance of technological mediation, technomediations or mediatization, in the production of meanings, in a contemporary context that no longer distinguishes between “real” and “virtual”, or online and offline environments. They are not separate planes, they are contexts that interpenetrate and influence each other. They are separated much more for analysis purposes than for the production of meanings and the construction of meanings in sociability relationships.

From the analysis I carried out of the speeches and narratives, I highlight some categories. The first of them involves the privatization of Cedae and reveals, through the production of meanings, the political-ideological bias of the campaign. “Public act” is another category that I point out as representative of the web of meanings (Geertz, 1978) of the studied context. Featured in users’ comments, the category both foreshadows and emerges as a consequence of the “public act” itself. It could be considered that it was the climax of the campaign, when there was the greatest number of interactions in the virtual environment and spillover of the campaign into other spheres of visibility, such as reporting in wide-reaching media outlets. This fact leads me to reinforce my assumption that online and offline tactics are combined resources for and in contemporary activism. Additionally, this category and its variants caught my attention on how “professional” activists represent users/followers, and, consequently, the role of activism stands out beyond a purpose, but also as a profession, in contemporary times.

Finally, regarding the categories of thought, I also want to highlight “This bill is not mine” (and associated

categories, such as “not paying the bill” and “coming together to not pay the bill”). This category is the very motto of the campaign and, at the end of the journey, I can see how it reverberated and integrated the production of meaning of the group studied, who ended up choosing it, given its semiological properties, as one of the main references to represent it – including reproducing it as a hashtag.

The case study analysis also showed me how “decision making” is in the center of engagement. Therefore, it is the activist’s task to offer elements and build possibilities that help people make decisions. I was able to observe how Meu Rio, at all times, in each publication of the online campaign, exercises the “call to action”, leading its audience, continuously, to decision-making and experience; this way, strategically, the engagement funnel works.

“Cedae, this bill is not mine” highlighted how much the composition of online with offline activism is relevant — at least for the target audience studied and in the context of urbanity, of social participation in the city. And, despite the intense use of online multichannel resources and integration of digital social networking tools, I was also able to observe traditional characteristics of social movements, such as deep-rooted ideological discourse, defined political objectives and a well-defined symbolic space for action.

As for people’s affective issues as determinant for individuals’ engagement, I believe that “the ideological field”, in this case, is the most appropriate term to describe the level of engagement. Regarding communication strategies, I underline a fertile field to explore. Storytelling, the call to action, unpredictability, inclusive language, cross marketing, accountability, multilingual discourse/communication formats, the tools and social media used and the achievement of actions make clear both the relevance of campaign planning and the use of metrics to monitor the initiative’s curves and indicators. It seems to me to be a successful campaign, both due to its quantitative indicators and due to the alignment and contextualization of users’ meaning production with the key messages of publications on digital social networks.

The internet and digital social networks have been rapidly changing the way subjects and social groups express their political and social demands. “Action networks” and activism groups, such as Meu Rio, which use digital networks as a structuring resource for their work, are examples of this. Moreover, online interaction and disintermediation become facilitators for political participation in globalized urbanity — where, for example, radicalism and solidarity coexist, both using the same networks and strategies. In this context, activism seems to me, by nature, to be an edge activity — in the sense of dynamism, permissiveness, diversity and conflicts that an edge environment can provide — with varied possibilities for experimentation and with great adherence to this situation. New technologies have not only become instruments of fundamental importance for social movements and activist organizations, but they have provided — and are providing — new ways of acting, defending causes, mobilizing, engaging, talking and positioning themselves in flows of sociability.

I conclude by highlighting that a cause that involves clean water and basic sanitation, rights and urbanity demonstrated to me, in the case study investigated, that it has the strength to unite, connect, engage and mobilize diverse people, who, to some extent, remained connected because they created identification, above all, with the cause - even if there were distinct political-ideological positions -, demonstrating that they coexist in multiple realities, transported without predictability in time and space by individuals who connect and disconnect vertiginously while constructing meanings.

In globalized, multicultural and complex societies, where there is convergence of profuse crises, I understand that inspiring narratives and communication and interaction strategies have a relevant role for activism, for engaging people to be participants and co-authors of the transformations they wish to see in the world.

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