



STUDENT ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: Mobilization dynamics in the 2013 protests

Ativismo estudantil e redes sociais: Dinâmicas de mobilização nas Jornadas de 2013

Activismo estudiantil y redes sociales: Dinámicas de movilización en las Jornadas de 2013

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ABSTRACT:

This article reports the partial results of the research project “Educational Dimensions of the 2013 Protests in Brazil,” focusing on a literature review of the use of conventional and new information and communication technologies in this cycle of protests. It analyzes the role of digital social networks in the mobilizations, highlighting student activism and the reconfiguration of public space. Based on 28 academic publications between 2013 and 2022, it examines how these platforms articulated, expressed, and gave visibility to the 2013 Journeys. In the analytical-interpretative approach, we find four axes: media conflict, network mobilization, symbolic youth protagonism, and crises of representation. These axes explain the constitution of political subjects and the organization of protests. The articulation of these categories proposes an interpretative model that highlights contemporary youth culture, marked by digital mediations, symbolic disputes, and decentralized collective action.

Keywords: youth; social networks; student activism; Journeys of 2013 protests; political mobilization.

RESUMO

Este artigo comunica os resultados parciais da pesquisa “Dimensões educacionais das Jornadas de 2013 no Brasil”, com foco na revisão bibliográfica sobre o uso das tecnologias de informação e comunicação convencionais e novas nesse ciclo de protestos. Analisa-se a função das redes sociais digitais nas mobilizações, destacando o ativismo estudantil e a reconfiguração do espaço público. Com base em 28 produções acadêmicas publicadas entre 2013 e 2022, examina-se como essas plataformas articularam, expressaram e deram visibilidade às Jornadas de 2013. Na abordagem analítico-interpretativa, encontramos quatro eixos: conflito midiático, mobilização em rede, protagonismo simbólico, juvenil e crises da representação. Tais eixos explicam a constituição dos sujeitos políticos e a organização dos protestos. A articulação dessas categorias propõe um modelo interpretativo que evidencia a cultura juvenil contemporânea, marcada por mediações digitais, disputas simbólicas e ação coletiva descentralizada.

Palavras-chave: juventude, redes sociais, ativismo estudantil, Jornadas de 2013, mobilização política.

RESUMEN

Este artículo comunica los resultados parciales de la investigación «Dimensiones educativas de las Jornadas de 2013 en Brasil», centrada en la revisión bibliográfica sobre el uso de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación convencionales y nuevas en este ciclo de protestas. Se analiza la función de las redes sociales digitales en las movilizaciones, destacando el activismo estudiantil y la reconfiguración del espacio público. A partir de 28 producciones académicas publicadas entre 2013 y 2022, se examina cómo estas plataformas articularon, expresaron y dieron



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visibilidad a las Jornadas de 2013. En el enfoque analítico-interpretativo, encontramos cuatro ejes: conflicto mediático, movilización en red, protagonismo simbólico juvenil y crisis de representación. Estos ejes explican la constitución de los sujetos políticos y la organización de las protestas. La articulación de estas categorías propone un modelo interpretativo que pone de manifiesto la cultura juvenil contemporánea, marcada por las mediaciones digitales, las disputas simbólicas y la acción colectiva descentralizada.

Palabras clave: juventud, redes sociales, activismo estudiantil, Jornadas de 2013, movilización política.

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Introduction

This article, part of the project “Educational Dimensions of the June 2013 Protests in Brazil: Educational Agendas, School Experiences, and the Political Formation of Youth in Protest”, analyzes academic production on the June 2013 Protests, focusing on student activism and the mediation of social networks, particularly in the constitution of political subjects and symbolic disputes. We propose a critical analysis organized around four axes: media conflict, networked mobilization, symbolic and youth protagonism, and crisis of representation. These axes highlight the meanings attributed to youth and to the role of digital social networks in this context.

We present results from the project’s literature review addressing conventional and new information and communication technologies during this protest cycle. Our premise is that Internet social networks acted not only as channels of communication but as actual spaces for symbolic construction, narrative dispute, and the emergence of new forms of political participation (SEABRA; GROPO; CASTILHO, 2023).

The review was conducted in 2022 via the SciELO portal, Capes Journals, Capes Dissertations and Theses, and Google Scholar. We used the descriptors “Jornadas de 2013” and “Junho de 2013,” selecting only articles, doctoral theses, master’s dissertations, books, and academic book chapters. We found 142 works in total and grouped them into five themes based on their relationship to educational dimensions: youth and education; activism and militancy; Internet media and social networks; broad relevant analyses; and others. This article examines the 28 works within the theme Internet media and social networks, as shown in Table 1, with emphasis on those addressing Internet social networks.

Table 1 - Products with the theme “Media and social networks” in the 2013 Journeys

Year	Authorships	n.
2013	MORAES <i>et al</i> (2013), SILVA (2013), MALINI (2013)	3
2014	ALZAMORA <i>et al</i> (2014), RECUERO <i>et al</i> (2014), MOURA (2014)	3
2015	BEÇAK <i>et al</i> (2015), FIDELIS (2015), FERREIRA (2015), JESUS (2015), BEZERRA (2015), ZAGO (2015), SANTOS (2015), SILVA (2015)	8
2016	FERREIRA (2016), ARAÚJO (2016), COSTA (2016), COSTA (2016), FONTANETTO <i>et al</i> (2016), PADOVANI (2016), LEMOS (2016)	7
2017	OLIVEIRA <i>et al</i> (2017), QUEIROZ (2017), GERBAUDO (2017)	3
2018	MELO <i>et al</i> (2018)	1
2019	MACHADO (2019), SUZINA (2019)	2
2022	FACIOLI <i>et al</i> (2022)	1
Total:		28

Source: “Educational Dimensions” Research.

In this article, we offer a critical and systematized reading of academic production on the June 2013 Protests, focusing on the relationship among youth, digital social networks, and student activism. From reviewing these 28 texts, we identify four recurring thematic axes—media conflict, networked mobilization, symbolic youth protagonism, and crisis of representation—that allow us to reinterpret the demonstrations as expressions of a new youth political culture.

The June 2013 Protests were a watershed in Brazil’s recent history, mobilizing millions across many cities and revealing new forms of political participation and collective engagement. Youth protagonism—especially that of students—stood out, closely linked to strategic use of digital social networks (SEABRA, 2017; SEABRA, 2016).

Youth, Activism, and Digital Networks: Disputes and Critical Contributions

The analysis mapped a set of recurring theoretical references that structure reflection on youth, political participation, mediatization, networked activism, and digital symbolic production (SEABRA; GROPO; CASTILHO, 2023). Table 2 lists the most-cited authors, indicating the main theoretical contributions used to interpret youth political practices in hybrid sociability environments.

Table 2 - Main theoretical sources in the works on “Media and Social Networks” in the June 2013 Protests.

Author	Main Book	Frequency
GOHN, Maria da Glória	<i>Youth and Political Participation</i>	6
BIMBER, Bruce	<i>Information and American Democracy</i>	2
CHAUI, Marilena	<i>Culture and Democracy: The Competent Discourse and Other Speeches</i>	2
EARL, Jennifer	<i>The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment Through an Online Network</i>	2
MARICATO, Ermínia	<i>The Impasse of Urban Policy in Brazil</i>	2
OLSON, Mancur	<i>The Logic of Collective Action</i>	2
SINGER, André	<i>The Meanings of Lulism</i>	2
SOUSA, Jessé	<i>The Brazilian Underclass</i>	2
TELLES, Vera da Silva	<i>Youth and School: Meanings and Searches</i>	2
TOURAIN, Alain	<i>What Is Democracy?</i>	2
DELEUZE, Gilles	<i>A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia</i>	2
CASTELLS, Manuel	<i>The Network Society</i>	2

Source: “Educational Dimensions” Research.

The prominence of authors such as Gohn, Castells, Chauí, Deleuze, and Touraine converges with the theoretical basis mobilized to understand the 2013 protests, especially regarding mediatization, networked activism, and youth. Gohn (2005), for instance, dialogues directly with the youth-and-politics axis (DAYRELL, 2007), offering elements to interpret student action as the expression of new political subjects in hybrid participation spaces (SEABRA; GROPO, 2022) and the appropriation of networks and streets as arenas of symbolic dispute (SEABRA, 2024).

Castells (2013) relates collective action to digital communication. His notion of *mass self-communication* connects with studies on networked activism (RECUERO, 2014) and helps explain the decentralized, horizontal logic of the protests. This perspective—bridging New Social Movements theory and analyses of global protests in the 2010s (GROPO et al., 2022)—complements research on media activism (SANTOS, 2015; JESUS, 2015) and on the symbolic dimension of youth practices—posters, cartoons, and hashtags—directly associated with cultural critique and the plurality of voices present in streets and networks (COSTA, 2014; WERNECK, 2019; ZAGO et al., 2015).

Authors like Chauí (1981) and Deleuze & Guattari (1995) are also strategic for addressing critiques of traditional political representation and the emergence of fragmented, fluid political subjectivities. Their philosophical reflections resonate with online-mediated modes of subjectivation in which youth activism manifests through multiple agendas, provocative aesthetics, and rejection of centralized leadership. This plurality—often analyzed as a trait of the “crisis of representation”—is also examined within studies of the mediatization of politics (THOMPSON, 1995; FAUSTO NETO, 2010), where symbolic circulation and media performance become central.

The Italian sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo (2017) theorizes the role of social networks in 2010s protests, including June 2013 in Brazil. His thesis of *mass self-communication* was enthusiastically embraced by activists of the 1990s alter-globalization movement—“marked by a libertarian strategy of self-organization and direct action” (GERBAUDO, 2021, p. 70)—and helped ground the view of 2010s protests as “horizontal,” “leaderless,” and based on consensus and participation. Gerbaudo also revisits Hardt and Negri’s notion of the “swarm,” whereby social networks express the contemporary “multitude,” shaped by the transition from a material to an immaterial system, characterized by nomadism and deterritorialization (GERBAUDO, 2021, p. 76).

The movement’s “cyber-populism” pragmatically used corporate digital media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—even amid surveillance and censorship (GERBAUDO, 2017, p. 135). Unlike the alter-globalization movement, which used autonomous digital media, these networks were occupied with emotional texts and striking images, generating digital enthusiasm. Informal “soft leaderships,” such as São Paulo’s Free Fare Movement (MPL-SP), acted as digital vanguards—more as megaphones than as sources of rigid directives (GERBAUDO, 2017).

Gerbaudo underscores the intrinsic relationship between networks and streets in 2010s movements, including June 2013: networks acted as mobilization tools, often leveraging emotional appeal. He warns that “horizontalism” can conceal real leaderships and inhibit public debate about them. Thus, he criticizes certain spontaneous readings that treat movements as automatic effects of technology, disregarding how leaders used digital social networks to mobilize emotions and forge a sense of popular unity during street occupations.

Interpretive Mapping of Academic Production on the June 2013 Protests

Continuing the analysis of the 28 works on media and social networks in the protests, Chart 1 synthesizes the main analytical categories derived from them.

Chart 1 - Analytical Synthesis of works on “Media and Social Networks” in the June 2013 Protests.

Category	Description
Investigated territories	Predominance of studies in Brazilian state capitals, especially São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, and Porto Alegre. Some texts address the phenomenon nationwide; others have a local focus.
Research subjects	Mostly youth and students (secondary and university). Also present are activist collectives, alternative media (e.g., Mídia Ninja), social-network users, journalists, and politicians.
Main analytical categories	Digital social networks; networked activism; youth; mediatization; political subjectivation; discourse and symbolic circulation; hashtags; posters; participation; crisis of representation; public space.
Main conclusions	The protests express a reconfiguration of collective action, marked by youth protagonism and intensive use of networks as spaces of articulation. There is consensus on agenda fluidity, the absence of traditional leadership, and the strength of cultural symbols.

Source: “Educational Dimensions” Project.

Regarding research subjects, the texts predominantly highlight student youth (secondary and university) as protagonists, alongside activist collectives like Mídia Ninja, social-network users, journalists, and political representatives. This diversity of subjects allows reflection on the multiplicity of voices and experiences that characterized the protests.

In terms of categories, recurring concepts include: digital social networks, networked activism, youth, mediatization, political subjectivation, symbolic circulation, posters, hashtags, participation, crisis of representation, public space, and new forms of collective action. These categories frame the protests not only as political events but also as communicational and cultural phenomena, re-signifying the integration of Brazil's new youth.

The main conclusions drawn from the 28 works point to a reconfiguration of collective action forms, marked by youth protagonism and the strategic use of digital social networks as spaces of articulation, mobilization, and political expression (SEABRA, 2019).

Our analysis shows that social networks played a central role in June 2013, functioning as channels of communication and as spaces for symbolic construction, affective articulation, and the emergence of new political subjects. Drawing on theories of networked activism (CASTELLS, 2013; RECUERO, 2014) and the mediatization of politics (THOMPSON, 1995; FAUSTO NETO, 2010), platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube operated as parallel public arenas to traditional media, fostering horizontal and decentralized engagement. Hashtags like #ogigantecordordou and #vemprarua consolidated as devices for mobilization and meaning-making (RECUERO, 2014; ZAGO et al., 2015).

The notion of parallel public arenas refers to the emergence of alternative spaces of visibility and public debate created by digital social networks, especially during events like June 2013 in Brazil. Across the 28 texts, this concept recurs, revealing a structural shift in how political subjects—especially youth—inform themselves, organize, and express themselves publicly.

Traditionally, the public sphere was mediated by institutions—press, parties, unions—that filtered legitimate discourse (THOMPSON, 1995). With the popularization of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, individuals gained autonomous tools for content production and dissemination that could compete with hegemonic media. This resulted in what Castells (2013) calls mass self-communication, wherein users produce, distribute, and consume decentralized information.

By enabling direct expression—opinions, images, videos, live streams—these platforms operate as parallel arenas in which discourses marginalized by traditional media find space and circulation. Rather than relying on intermediaries, protesters—especially students—formulated agendas, framed narratives, and contested meanings directly against conventional media (RECUERO, 2014; JESUS, 2015; SUZINA, 2015). Engagement becomes more horizontal, reducing the gap between speakers and audiences, and more decentralized, as it does not depend on a unifying center but on multiple networked nodes (ZAGO et al., 2015).

This condition enabled the rise of digital sub-public spheres where youth collectives, alternative media, and ordinary individuals redefined political agendas and performed new forms of citizenship. The impact is twofold: the range of voices in the public sphere widened, and conflicts between narratives intensified—especially between



emerging discourses and traditional media framings, as shown in studies of clashes between social-media content and journalistic coverage (ALZAMORA, 2014; MELO, 2015; FONTANETTO, 2015).

Countering views that deny leadership and idealize horizontalism in the June 2013 Protests, Gerbaudo (2017; 2022) argues that social networks were used by “soft leaders” to promote a “choreography of assembly.” This strategy connected networks and streets in Brazil and other 2010s protests, articulating movements through communications between leaders and crowds, the construction of a sense of popular unity, and the mobilization of collective emotions.

By critiquing “digital spontaneism,” Gerbaudo contends that 2010s protests—including June 2013—were not truly leaderless. He identifies decentralized, low-visibility yet essential leaderships mediating collective emotions, calling rallies, and sustaining discursive cohesion. These leaderships operate through a networked “choreography of assembly” on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—performing unity and engagement.

Applied to June 2013, the concept of soft leadership helps reinterpret the role of collectives like MPL-SP and Mídia Ninja, not merely as vehicles of spontaneous mobilization but as strategic actors in the symbolic conduct of the protests. By challenging overly enthusiastic readings of networked activism, we propose a critical approach that recognizes both the powers and limits of digital social networks as arenas of political dispute. This aligns with our broader aim: to move beyond dichotomies (networks vs. streets; spontaneity vs. organization) and understand protests as hybrid, performative phenomena traversed by multiple forms of leadership and mediation.

Networked Youth and Symbolic Disputes in Contemporary Political Culture

The 28 works show that social networks not only facilitated communication among protesters but reconfigured the public space, creating plural forms of engagement and a media ecosystem in which youth assume discursive and symbolic protagonism. This parallel arena confronts and pressures traditional media, broadening public expression in the 21st century.

Student protagonism stood out both on the streets and online, with students convening protests, producing symbolic content, and criticizing political institutions through posters, memes, parodies, and performances (WERNECK, 2019; FACIOLI, 2018). Together with alternative media such as Mídia Ninja, they narrated and reinterpreted events in real time (JESUS, 2015; SUZINA, 2015). Many rejected party flags and conventional forms of representation (MACHADO, 2014; FIDELIS, 2015), seeking more horizontal, collaborative political practices (SOARES, 2019; PADOVANI, 2015) in a process of youth politicization in hybrid spaces (DAYRELL, 2007; GOHN, 2005).

Gerbaudo (2017; 2022) highlights soft leaderships active in autonomist collectives or socialist youth, shaping agendas, calls to action, and emotional mobilization—even when aiming to “lose control” after the initial spark. Aesthetics and performance marked the protests (COSTA, 2014; WERNECK, 2019), composing an “aesthetics of indignation” based on cultural signs, humor, and symbolic circulation (FACIOLI, 2018; COSTA & MOURA, 2015), wherein emotional engagement often outweighed traditional ideologies (MELO, 2015; JESUS, 2015).

Student activism in 2013 influenced youth political culture, paving the way for feminist, antiracist, environmental, and educational mobilizations (BEÇAK, 2014; LEMOS, 2014), redefining youth’s role in digital and public spaces. The analysis revealed four recurring axes—media conflict, networked mobilization, symbolic youth protagonism, and crisis of representation—summarized in Chart 2.

Chart 2 - Comparative overview of main thematic axes in works on “Media and Social Networks” in the June 2013 Protests.

Thematic Axis	Description	Exemplary Texts
Conflict between traditional media and alternative media	Analysis of narrative disputes between mainstream press and alternative media such as Mídia Ninja.	ALZAMORA (2014), JESUS (2015), SUZINA (2015), FONTANETTO (2015)
Social networks as spaces for mobilization	Studies highlighting the role of digital platforms in convening, articulating, and disseminating demonstrations.	RECUERO (2014), ZAGO <i>et al.</i> (2015), CASTELLS (2013)
Youth protagonism and symbolic production	Research focusing on the creative actions of students and young people on networks, through memes, posters, and videos.	WERNECK (2019), FACIOLI (2018), FIDELIS (2015), SANTOS (2015)
Crisis of representation and digital/online deliberation	Works discussing the rejection of formal institutions and the use of networks as arenas for horizontal political deliberation.	MACHADO (2014), SOARES (2019), PADOVANI (2015), NUNES (2014), LEMOS (2014)

Source: Authors (2025).

Our analysis reinforces the centrality of social networks in constituting new repertoires of collective action. More than technical means, platforms are symbolic arenas in dispute where narratives are produced, affects circulate, and mobilizations are articulated (SEABRA, 2024). Youth protagonism stood out for the use of irony, visual creativity, and alternative media to occupy streets and digital flows, challenging both the hegemony of traditional media and classic forms of political engagement.

The axes “crisis of representation & online deliberation” and “conflict between traditional and alternative media” articulate with frameworks on politics (THOMPSON, 1995; FAUSTO NETO, 2010), networked activism (CASTELLS, 2013; RECUERO, 2014), and youth in action (GOHN, 2005; DAYRELL, 2007). The refusal of traditional institutions—performed in the streets and enacted online—confirms June 2013 as a landmark in the political culture of connected youth.

Final Considerations

The June 2013 Protests mark a turning point in Brazil’s recent political participation, revealing not only dissatisfaction with traditional institutions but also the emergence of a new protest aesthetics propelled by digital social networks.

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (the main social networks at the time) functioned as parallel public arenas, offering students a way to communicate that was then perceived as horizontal, decentralized, and autonomous. This configuration challenged mainstream media’s monopoly and enabled the circulation of divergent narratives, which often found space only in alternative media or on protesters’ personal profiles. According to authors like Castells (2013) and Recuero (2014), mass online self-communication allowed previously silenced voices to set the public agenda.

A recurring feature was the prevalence of symbolic and performative practices—memes, creative posters, ironic slogans. Students often used humor to call out contradictions in the political system and limits of institutional representation. As Werneck (2019) and Facioli (2018) point out, the aesthetic dimension was not mere ornament but a constitutive element of a new youth political language.

The analyses also indicate a deep discomfort among youth with traditional modes of political organization. The refusal of parties, unions, and even classic student entities reflects a search for more horizontal, temporary, affect-driven forms of collective action. This desire for autonomy—with a rhizomatic, fragmentary character—finds theoretical grounding in Deleuze and Guattari (1995) and is widely discussed in studies on the crisis of representation (MACHADO, 2014; SOARES, 2019).

The construction of digital collectives, activist fanpages, and alternative media such as Mídia Ninja was another crucial development. These channels provided discursive production spaces outside major media companies’ editorial filters and amplified the power of networks as spaces of political action. The critique of traditional press—visible on protest signs and in the literature (ALZAMORA, 2014; JESUS, 2015; SUZINA, 2015)—reinforces the struggle for narrative control and legitimacy of public speech.

The legacy of June 2013 extends beyond its explosive moment to subsequent youth-led mobilizations. Feminist, antiracist, environmental, public-education, and peripheral movements appropriated the protests’ network logic and language to amplify their causes. The visual, symbolic, and communicational repertoires mobilized in 2013 remain alive and shape the political behavior of a generation raised amid online connectivity.

Understanding the centrality of youth and social networks in the June 2013 Protests therefore means recognizing the emergence of a new political narrative mode in contemporary Brazil—one of images, hashtags, affects, and subjectivities that challenge classic modes of doing politics. By articulating institutional critique, aesthetic engagement, and decentralized collective action, students in 2013 did more than lead a moment of crisis; they signaled possible paths for democratic reinvention in times of hyperconnectivity.

However, the same Internet social networks—portrayed in the corpus analyzed here as instruments of horizontality, autonomy, and progressive youth mobilization—would later be seen as tools manipulated by visible and hidden powers, including far-right organizations (in collusion or not with earlier actors). From the utopia to the dystopia of networks.

By gathering, systematizing, and critically categorizing academic production on June 2013, this article contributes an original perspective on youth, social networks, and political mobilization in contemporary Brazil. The four thematic axes identified—media conflict, networked mobilization, symbolic youth protagonism, and crisis of representation—compose an interpretive model for understanding the emergence of new forms of collective action and political engagement. This proposal not only organizes the field but also challenges overly descriptive or spontaneous readings by acknowledging the complex dynamics between networks and streets, affects and strategies, aesthetics and politics.



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