

## The public's turn?

### Digital environment and mobilization in Latin America.

## A vez do público?

### Conjuntura digital e mobilizações na América Latina.

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#### Introduction

In the last quarter century, Latin America has been shaken by successive transitions in its democratic order. Reflecting what Fernando Mayorga (2016) defines as the "pendulum of Latin American politics," the late 1990s were marked by the predominance of governments that emphasized the role of the state and distributive policies. From the mid-2000s, a wave of liberal regimes, with a less interventionist character and guided by pro-market initiatives, occupied the political spectrum of the continent. Recently, the 2020s witnessed the emergence of new (and the return of old) political leaders with a more left-leaning orientation - cases in Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil.

The alternation between political cycles is perceived with relative naturalness by the field of Political Science studies. Norberto Bobbio is one of those who argue that for a democratic regime, being in transformation is its natural state: "democracy is dynamic, despotism is static and always the same as

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itself" (BOBBIO, 1997, p. 9). In the Latin American regional context, the phenomenon also occupies space in debates (O'DONNELL; SCHMITTER; WHITEHEAD, 1986; WEFFORT, 1989; PRZEWORSKI, 1994).

Among the analytical dimensions problematized by the authors, the emergence of the public as a relevant part of the ongoing transformations (HARDT; NEGRI, 2005; NORRIS, 2007; GILLION, 2013) has been gaining prominence. Particularly considering the association between digital contexts and mobilizations (CASTELS, 1999; 2017; LEVY, 2003; GERBAUDO, 2019), events involving the participation of Latin American societies in the region's political dynamics seem to offer a challenging horizon to traditions of study in various fields of knowledge. And this is no different in the field of political communication, in its efforts to understand the resulting informative logics.

Important contributions in this last research strand (SIEBERT; PETERSON; SCHRAMM, 1956; NIMMO; SANDERS, 1981; BLUMLER; GUREVITCH, 1995; KAID, 2004; ESSER; PFETSCH, 2004; HALLIN; MANCINI, 2004; 2011; 2016; CANEL; VOLTMER, 2014) consolidate a normative and functional view of the interactive process regarding the circulation of information between politicians, media, and the public (NORRIS, 2009). Generally, they prioritize the communication initiatives of "politicians" and "media" over the "public," regarding the set of messages that circulates within a political system (BOBBIO, 1998).

The result of these efforts is that the resulting approaches contrast with the growing space being occupied by "ordinary individuals" in public discussion arenas, amid the profound technological transformations that have marked the last few decades. However, some more recent theoretical frameworks have sought to broaden the epistemological diversity of the field, with a timely "rethinking" of political communication (NORRIS, 2000; BRANTS; VOLTMER, 2011; BARNHURST, 2011; NIELSEN, 2014; HENN; JANDURA; VOWE, 2015; BLUMLER; COLEMAN, 2017), particularly regarding the possibilities afforded by communicative participation of the public in democratic societies.

Citizens' initiatives in public discussion spaces have been gradually increasing in intensity and reach, powered by digital tools (MOSSBERGER; TOLBERT; MCNEAL, 2007; VACCARI; VALERIANI, 2018; RUESS et al, 2021). However, civic movements have not only been prominent in the context of "digital citizenship" and the "technological imperative." In Latin America, after decades of social upheaval that led to substantial political and economic reforms, a polyphony of voices resounds with enthusiasm and persistence, from digital screens to the streets, shaking and reshaping numerous local "public squares."

Activism in the region has been combined with multiple forms of mobilization that sometimes transcend the more traditional forms of civil society organization on the continent. Resulting from what Christof Mauersberger (2016) defines as the "struggle of civil society coalitions in Latin America" (MAUERSBERGER, 2016, p. 4), a rich mosaic of experiences and forms of political discussion has gained relevance since the end of the last century, in digital contexts that offer new angles of approach to the field of political communication, beyond its more classic terms.

Following this logic, the objective of this work is to highlight, in a comparative way, the technological variables surrounding the routines of citizens in Latin American countries, especially those that have recently experienced democratic transitions, from center or right to left-wing regimes. Focusing on Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, the most characteristic digital resources of each country are examined in a panoramic perspective, as well as some mobilizations that have gained prominence in their respective national realities, in the midst of discussions about politics in the digital environment.

In a broad sense, this analysis is also connected to other recent works by the author (LEO et al, 2020; LEO, 2021), which seek, to some extent: 1) to contribute to the epistemological debate in the field of political communication; 2) to give greater methodological emphasis to the perception of the "public" in political communication processes; and, finally, based on the previous efforts, 3) to broaden the range of regional political communication studies, through the identification and comparative systematization of political communication initiatives generated by Latin American civil society.

### **Democratic transitions and public participation in Latin America**

In a period of just under five years (2018-2022), the geopolitical changes in Latin America were emblematic. Since December 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been the president of the United Mexican States, elected for a six-year term by the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA). One year later, in December 2019, Alberto Ángel Fernández was chosen to lead the Argentine Nation, through the Justicialist Party. In 2021, it was Gabriel Boric's turn, a former student leader, to triumph in the Chilean elections, at 35 years old, elected by the Social Convergence party, as the youngest politician to occupy the country's highest office. In June 2022, Senator and former mayor of Bogotá, Gustavo Petro, in an unprecedented election, became the first leftist president in Colombia's history, representing the Human Colombia party. Finally, in the same year, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party was re-elected as

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President of Brazil for an unprecedented third term, in a tightly contested election decided in his favor by the smallest margin of votes since the redemocratization.

With the exception of Mexico and Argentina, where the elections were decided in the first round, the other elected candidates defeated representatives from the center or right in tight races, decided only in the second round. In some cases, such as Argentina and Brazil, the electoral triumph was over incumbents, with strong support from the public machinery. Additionally, in Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, extreme-right leaderships with significant popular support were defeated in deeply divided societies. In each of these national realities, public mobilizations around local political movements were significant, making protests one of the region's hallmarks (BORSANI, 2020).

In a broader perspective, only Uruguay, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Guatemala are currently led by right-wing representatives (or with a more conservative bias) in the regional context in question. The picture brings to mind the memories of the "pink wave" that hit the continent almost two decades ago, although now, with even more pronounced trends, given that the left is also present in the Dominican Republic, with Luis Abinader (2020), Bolivia, with Luis Arce (2020), and in Honduras, with Xiomara Castro (2021), among others (including Nicolás Maduro, in Venezuela, one of the longest-serving rulers in the region, in power since 2012). However, the circumstances that mark the historical periods in question are significantly different.

One of the peculiarities of the region's current political ecosystem (as in other locations around the planet) is a much more diverse, fragmented, and conflictive communication environment. Under such a context, politics has been tested in every way, in the midst of an atmosphere of uncertainty and rapidly changing societies, which gives political communication the aura of a "contemporary Babel" (BRANTS; VOLTMER, 2011, p. 1). As Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck (2014) argue, "the development of new communication technologies has made the concept of media more heterogeneous and blurred" (SHEHATA; STROMBACK, 2014, p. 95), favoring a greater mediatization of routines and, as a consequence, the decentralization of political communication practices.

Since the seminal discussion between Walter Lippmann ([1922]/1961) and John Dewey ([1927]/2012) in the 1930s about the importance of the public and its relationship with the media, reflections on citizens' participation in political discussions have been surrounded by controversies. The

difficulties in achieving consensus on the potential and threats arising from the complex associations between society, politics, and the media have grown. Analysts often vary from the most enthusiastic to the most skeptical about the possibilities of communication resources in the context of politics (BOHMAN 2004; CHADWICK, 2009) and, more specifically, about what they can represent in terms of public participation in democratic societies.

As a premise to such discussions, the debate in spaces of collective living is understood as essential for democracy (GUTMANN; THOMPSON, 2009). However, in practice, the interest of "ordinary" citizens in political matters can also translate - at least regarding communication dynamics oriented towards politics - into a fertile ground for conflicts, misunderstandings, and, in extreme cases, risks to democracy itself (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018; RUNCIMAN, 2018; MOUNK, 2019).

In the field of political communication studies, perceptions of the phenomenon reflect similar interpretive diversity. Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1995) point to a crisis of public communication, whose roots would result from an increase in media influence on the political environment, resulting in problematic consequences for citizenship. Contesting the "civic malaise" potentialized by the media and by electoral marketing strategies - which gained relevance in post-industrial societies -, Pippa Norris (2000) ponders the potential positive effects of continuous exposure to the media, with the thesis of the "virtuous circle," according to which better-informed citizens in democratic societies would be prone to greater involvement in political issues.

Empirically, there is no way to navigate the contemporary digital environment without encountering evidence of both things. Virtual demonstrations against and in favor of existing political systems have become a stage for heated disputes. Dissonant voices are mixed with sympathizers of all hues. If there is room for fanaticism, racism, and anger (KLEIN, 2017), there is also room for the valorization and rejuvenation of democratic citizenship (COLEMAN; BLUMLER, 2009). As highlighted by the recent qualitative survey conducted in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, coordinated by Esther Solano and Camila Braga (2022), the politicization of young people aged 16 to 24 is growing through unconventional digital channels, in their relationship with non-political personalities' profiles, such as gamers, lifestyle gurus, and tiktokers - and in direct interaction between their respective followers.

These data suggest a relative counterpoint to the trend perceived in broader surveys, such as the one conducted by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, regarding the decreasing satisfaction of young people with democracy - not only in absolute terms, but also in relation to older generations at comparable stages of life (FOA et al, 2020). Based on a vast global dataset on democratic legitimacy - gathering information from over 4.8 million respondents, 43 sources, and 160 countries between 1973 and 2020 - the research reveals how satisfaction with democracy has changed over time among four generations - millennials, Generation X, baby boomers, and the interwar generation - over the last quarter-century, in all major regions of the world.

In Latin America, in particular, skepticism, mixed with apathy - and, when not, cynicism (CAPPELLA; JAMIESON, 1997) - towards politics in general, and democracy in particular, has found resonance among populations. The latest reports from Latinobarómetro have been finding a decline in "support for democracy" year after year. In the most recent data, for 2020, the level of support for democracy remained below 50% of the continent's population - while 13% prefer authoritarianism and 27% are indifferent to the existing form of government (LATINOBARÓMETRO, 2020).

The evidence that Latin American citizens place little value on democracy is not recent. They are also included in the report "Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy," from the Statistical Compendium of the United Nations Development Programme - UNDP (2004). The perceptions derived from the research signal an unequivocal discredit in democracy in Latin America - whose causes are plural, but involve, among others: the election of charismatic leaders, successive re-elections of heads of the executive, institutional fragilities, economic discontent, feelings of exclusion, among other banners that are incongruent with modern democracy.

However, the possibilities offered by technological resources are leaving their marks on political debates through networks, consolidating an alternative space (and potentially more inclusive and diversified) for civil conversation (MARQUES, 2006). Despite the divergences among authors regarding the plausibility of a "virtual public sphere" - resizing the inaugural debate brought by Jürgen Habermas (2003) - the digital environment has empirically constituted itself as a broad forum for exchanges between citizens. In this sense, regardless of whether it is configured as the "decisive space par excellence," digital networks and other associated resources open the opportunity for "exposing opinions and forming conversational arenas" (MARQUES, 2006, p. 164 and 183).

Comparatively investigating informal political conversations through digital resources in seven Western democracies, Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani (2018) found that, in general, such practices contribute to greater extra-institutional political participation by citizens. However, the associations between political conversation and participation differ from reality to reality, depending on the technical resources at play. Thus, the relationship between conversation on social networks and participation is more intense in established democracies (Denmark, France, United Kingdom, and United States) than in "third wave" democracies (Greece, Poland, and Spain). On the other hand, they do not perceive greater differences in the relationship between conversations about politics carried out through mobile instant messaging platforms and participation when comparing newer democracies. For the authors, the results suggest that different institutional configurations, in combination with different technological affordances, help explain the patterns of relationships established between conversations and political participation.

With the caveat that we avoid here adhering to a deterministic rationality (based on causal relationships), which privileges the role of means and political agents as instances of power in dispute, this reflection aims to contribute to a more qualitative and interpretative approach (DENZIN; LINCOLN, 2018; SALGADO; STAYNER, 2019), understanding that technological factors combine with the circumstances of each political, social, economic, and cultural reality as constitutive parts of the dynamics of political communication in digital contexts, focusing on Latin America. Thus, we seek to go beyond the logic of communication effects (media effects) to prioritize understanding how the media (and, by extension, politics itself) potentially affect and are affected by public initiatives in their possibilities of using digital technological resources.

Therefore, this reading does not advance a critique of the dominant epistemology, but rather alternative possibilities of analysis that contribute to expanding the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological diversity of the field, given the complex interactions between political communication actors - in a present marked by the co-occurrence of significant long-term changes: from political culture to communications infrastructure, as highlighted by Lance Bennett and Barbara Pfetich (2018).

### **Latin America Digital: Technological Conjuncture and Social Mobilizations**

In a recent post on the blog maintained by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "Development Matters," executives from major multinational companies jointly

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authored an article highlighting the intense, rapid, and profound digital transformations that have occurred in Latin America in the wake of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 outbreak. They emphasize, in particular, the sudden increase in Internet traffic of over 40%, practically overnight, since March 2020. For the authors, "the robustness of the telecommunications infrastructure in the region - built over decades of investment - and the flexibility of many Latin American governments during the pandemic were some of the factors that facilitated this transition" (MELGUIZO; SALIDO; LEAMAN, 2022, p. 1).

From a similar technological perspective, the investment fund Atlantico published the "Latin America Digital Transformation Report 2022" in early September 2022, which emphasizes the digital boom unleashed by the pandemic. According to the authors, more than a circumstantial peak, the analyses point to the sustainability of the growth rates of digitization on the continent, while other more developed regions of the world have already returned to pre-pandemic projection lines. As a result, predictions for the future of the technology ecosystem in the region point to growth of the same magnitude as countries like India, China, and the United States, which began their technology investment journeys much earlier, enjoying significant strategic advantages as a result (ATLANTICO, 2022).

However, the digital conjuncture of Latin America can express ambivalences, depending on the analytical perspective adopted. Based on data collected by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on global communication and information technology (ICT) indicators, as of July 2022, Latin America has around 500 million of the approximately 5.3 billion people (or 66% of the world's total population) who currently use the internet. Proportionally, about 70% of the region's inhabitants had some type of access to the online environment, according to data from 2020. However, while in Haiti the proportion of digitally included individuals was 35%, in Chile it reached almost 90% of the population. Argentina with 85%, Brazil with 81%, Mexico with 72%, and Colombia with 69% complete the picture of significant rates of internet penetration in the routines of their societies (ITU, 2022).

When crossing data on digital inclusion with sociodemographic profiles of Latin American countries under analysis, more contrasts become evident. According to the reports from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the combined populations of Brazil (215 million), Mexico (132 million), Colombia (52 million), Argentina (46 million), and Chile (19 million) make up more than two-thirds of the continent's population. From an economic perspective, their Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) represent almost 80% of the region's total GDP - which is around USD 5 trillion - although Brazil (with USD

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1.6 billion) and Mexico (with USD 1.3 billion) account for more than double the other countries: Argentina (USD 500 million) and Chile and Colombia (USD 300 million each). In the reverse direction, poverty and inequality levels remain high, with 1% of Latin Americans holding 46% of the wealth - while poverty reaches approximately 20% of the population in Colombia, 10% in Mexico, 6% in Argentina, 5% in Brazil, and 1.5% in Chile (ECLAC, 2022).

Regarding education, although Latin American and Caribbean countries have recorded the highest increases in public spending on education globally between 2000 and 2018, investing around 5.7% of their GDPs, according to data from the "UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2020," the quality of education still accumulates problems. In the most recent "Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study 2019," organized by the Regional Bureau of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC) of UNESCO, which makes a comparative curriculum analysis of 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the results show that a large proportion of students in the region learn little in the early years of their educational trajectories. As an indication, learning in mathematics is a common challenge for all countries, with almost 50% of students placed in the lowest performance levels. In the case of science, approximately one in three students is at the lowest performance level (ERCE, 2019).

In addition to this configuration of structural factors in the region, the fact that a large part of the recent transformations in the Latin American political scene is occurring amid a historically concentrated media environment (BECERRA; MASTRINI, 2009) adds to the situation. Oligopolies of communication dominate this environment, with emphasis on the Globo group in Brazil and Clarín in Argentina, or "communicative duopolies," such as in Mexico, where the Televisa and Salinas groups, with their respective television networks (Televisa and Asteca), are not only hegemonic but also maintain traditional relationships of interest with particular political groups, in regimes of loyalty that are always changing (MÁRQUEZ-RAMÍREZ, 2014).

In support of this perception, the series of reports produced by the non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders, which analyzes the control regimes of media structures worldwide, including the countries in the region under analysis (with the exception of Chile), recurrently find that "the concentration of media ownership in just a few hands undermines the plurality of information. It violates the right of every citizen to form their opinions freely, considering different approaches and views of events of individual interest" (MOM-Mexico, 2018, n/p). Even in Colombia, which has a slightly less

concentrated media environment, "communication companies often have their interests intertwined with business and political empires" (MOM-Colombia, 2017, n/p).

Despite the more established media infrastructure in the traditional communication segments of the Latin American region (such as TV, radio, and print), some important variables can be observed in the digital environments of the respective countries discussed here, with the growth and diversification of online activities. In this direction, the DataReportal (2022) prepared by the consulting firms Kepios, Hootsuite, and We are Social signals a framework of massive and continuous digital activity by local populations. Especially in the realm of social media, the number of active users is progressive and comprehensive.

Brazil has the highest number of social media user profiles in the Latin American continent, with 171.5 million (equivalent to 79.9% of the population). Of these, 138 million have accounts on YouTube, followed by 119.5 million on Instagram and 116 million on Facebook, among the three platforms with the most users in the country. In Mexico, there are 102.5 million social media user profiles (equivalent to 78.3% of the total population), of which 89.7 million have accounts on Facebook, followed by 80.6 million on YouTube and 46 million on TikTok. In Colombia, there are 41.8 million social media users (equivalent to 81.3% of the total population), of which 35.1 million are on Facebook, followed by 30.4 million on YouTube and 18.3 million on Instagram. Finally, in Argentina, there are 39.5 million social media users (86.3% of the total population), with 31.7 million of them on YouTube, 28.4 million on Facebook, and 24.7 million on Instagram. In Chile, the country with the smallest population analyzed here, there are 17.8 million social media users, which correspond to 92.8% of the population, with 15.6 million users on YouTube, 12.5 million on Facebook, and 11.6 million on Instagram (DATAREPORTAL, 2022).

In addition, data on the region's telecommunications infrastructure point to a context of significant integration of networked activities, with over 450 million unique mobile phone subscribers, of which about 400 million are connected to the internet, according to GSMA Intelligence data (2021). In the global mobile connectivity ranking, which assesses the technical conditions of accessibility and usability of existing mobile telephony resources in each place on the planet, Latin American countries occupy intermediate positions, with Uruguay leading, followed by Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia. More specifically, mobile connection penetration per capita in each country is higher in Chile (141%), followed by

Argentina (128%), Colombia (127%), Brazil (106%), and Mexico (92%), according to the "Mobile Connectivity Index 2021" (GSMA, 2022).

Also, due to this context, the use of WhatsApp as an instant communication tool has intensified in the region. With the exception of Chile, whose data is not compiled, the percentage of internet users aged 16 to 64 who incorporate the application into their daily routines corresponds to 96.4% in Brazil, 95.2% in Argentina, 94.3% in Mexico, and 94% in Colombia, also being the favorite social media platform for about 1/3 of those who use the digital environment in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia. In addition, in Brazil and Argentina, internet users spend almost 30 hours per month connected to WhatsApp, while in Mexico, it is 20 hours (DATAREPORTAL, 2022).

The conformation of this scenario has been happening simultaneously with the emergence of widespread protests in the region - as well as around the world. In a special report from June 2022, The Economist highlights that Latin America is trapped between economic stagnation and furious street protests. Generalized social frustrations coincide with a marked deterioration of the political scene, fueled by a corrosive cacophony of social media (REID, 2022). Echoing these concerns, scholars interviewed by the *Jornal da USP* caution that the use of social media in popular mobilizations should be perceived with caution, considering that the technical instrumentalization of social routines does not always bring good results for democracy (DERVICHE, 2021).

However, as Bernardo Sorj (2015) points out, Latin America is navigating its "third wave" of consolidation of civil society in the continent, now constituted by mobilizations that find in cyberspace a central instrument of action. For the author, the combination of online and offline activities has the potential to lead to an effective transformation of local public spheres:

Recent experiences of street demonstrations in several countries indicate that when we analyze political communication, we should treat the online and offline world as interconnected subsystems. In the transition from one to the other, individuals and organizations reappear, with their differentials in terms of initiative, power, values, and interests that were present, although hidden, in the world of networks (SORJ, 2015, p. 14-15).

Pedro Fuentes (2022), in an article for *Revista Movimento*, analyzes the two great waves of mass revolt that swept Latin America in the early decades of the 21st century. The first, which began in the early 2000s, is more associated with the insurrections or rebellions that erupted in Ecuador, Argentina, and Bolivia, culminating in street conflicts against the military coup that overthrew Hugo Chaves in Venezuela,

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an episode that ultimately strengthened bolivarianism in the country - with decisive repercussions in the region. Almost two decades later, in 2018, a new wave of mobilizations reached Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. In the following years, 2019 and 2020, it spread to the Andean highlands of Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and then reached Colombia. In 2021, it flared up again in Ecuador and in 2022 it began to occupy the streets of Panama, where the local population protests against the high cost of living.

In Argentina, the tradition of popular mobilizations spans generations, with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo as a symbol of tenacity and resistance, with their public marches of outrage against the country's military governments, led by mothers and grandmothers of political disappearances since the 1970s. In the transition to democracy, the mobilization processes of organized civil society around different social movements became a constant and, in a way, consolidated independently of the country's digital transformations (PEREYRA, 2013). In the more recent post-pandemic period, the digital environment amplified criticisms of the deterioration of the internal economic situation, mobilizing different sectors of society in rallies and protests, often called for by social media, some of them invoking an "Argentinazo" - in reference to the December 2001 crisis, which led to a widespread popular revolt and the resignation of then-president Fernando de la Rúa. Under enormous pressure, the current government faces internal divisions among sectors of the governing coalition - while witnessing an increase in tensions in the media and on the streets, with the ramifications of Cristina Kirchner's corruption trial.

Chile and Colombia are among the states that experienced "estallidos sociales" (social explosions) between 2019 and 2021 as a result of longstanding dissatisfaction in the region, according to Murillo (2021). The consequences are being reflected in the current internal political situations of each country. In Chile, the protests began at the end of 2019, initially as a student movement, but throughout 2020, civil unrest grew uncontrollably, without specific leaders, leading to massive participation by Chilean society - from the lower social classes to segments of the middle and upper classes (Labarca et al, 2021). In Colombia, discontent grew in 2021, under the leadership of labor unions and workers' centers, but quickly spread to other sectors of society, with youth as one of its protagonists (García Acelas; Arias Perales, 2021). In both cases, citizens' digital initiatives occupied a space in the events, contributing to the dynamics of each place (Calderón et al, 2021). Through cell phones or social networks, the protests gained global prominence.

Mexico and Brazil are not exceptions to the rule. In the first case, López Obrador has maintained relative popular support since he was elected in 2018, helped by his direct communication with the public through social media, particularly with his daily morning briefings, known as "mañaneras," according to María Elena Gutiérrez-Rentería (2022) in the "Digital News Report 2022" by the Reuters Institute. However, in a country divided by resentment toward the political elite - which has been accentuated over the years due to increasing inequalities, growing crime, and a new perception of corruption in the country (Greene; Sánchez-Talanquer, 2018) - the atmosphere is tense. At the beginning of 2022, the call for a controversial referendum to revoke the presidential mandate, although unprecedented, recorded very low turnout rates, under strong opposition appeals for the population to boycott the consultation. According to his critics, the Mexican president has been exploiting social networks and social mobilizations as political instruments - and appealing to plebiscites when he cannot get support from Congress to approve reforms. In the most recent wave of protests that invaded the streets of the Mexican capital on Sunday, November 13, 2022, tens of thousands of people expressed their rejection of AMLO's intentions to reform the country's electoral system - which is constantly under suspicion by the mandate.

In Brazil, the most recent fundamental milestone in the phenomenon of mobilizations was the June 2013 protests, initially motivated by dissatisfaction with the increase in transportation fares (PEREZ, 2021). However, the movement quickly grew and incorporated diffuse issues and different sectors of society, shaking the Brazilian political establishment, in an unprecedented symbiosis between networks and streets in the country's history. The transformations resulting from this period led not only to the removal of an elected president but also to deep social divisions that, since then, have insidiously and daily reverberated in networks and streets, endangering the nation's democratic stability. In 2022, in the most intense presidential race in recent times, the digital environment was filled with disputes of narratives loaded with violence, untruths, and mutual resentments. Citizens mobilized on social media but also occupied the streets - with an "almost religious" fervor. The final result did not calm the spirits, much less empty public spaces. More than divided, the country emerged from its last elections with a noisy portion of society in a state of "permanent" mobilization, on roads and streets, in public offices and at the doors of barracks, under sun and rain and, among posts and live streams, willing to go to extremes.

## Final Considerations

The work has highlighted some of the most characteristic digital resources of the Latin American reality, albeit in a panoramic way, with references to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. In parallel, recent mobilizations that gained prominence in the same national realities were also pointed out, amid discussions on politics in the digital environment of the region.

Data extracted from different organizations (OECD, ITU, ATLANTICO, Kepios, Hootsuite, and We are Social) reveal that Latin America is in a position of relative global prominence regarding its digital context. Such analyses point to "intense, rapid, and profound digital transformations," as well as the sustainability of digitization growth rates on the continent, where around 70% of the region's inhabitants had some type of access to the online environment in data from 2020. In support of the optimism expressed by the preceding institutions, DATAREPORTAL for 2022 indicates an average progression towards 75% of the Americas' population with digital access, highlighting the massive amount of social media users, especially in Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico – considered only the countries analyzed here.

Although this picture contrasts with chronic problems in the region, such as high levels of poverty and social inequality, low-quality education, and historic media concentration, there are concrete advances in terms of telecommunications infrastructure on the continent, with projections for significantly greater integration of networked activities. WhatsApp use, in particular, has intensified as an instant communication tool, reaching percentages higher than 90% of users in the countries examined here. Moreover, faced with the constant penetration of integrated digital tools in networks, a potential range of new developments in social routines opens up.

In the political realm, technological transformations add to the emergency of widespread protests in Latin America – making protests one of the region's hallmarks. In the midst of economic stagnation and corrosive cacophony on social media, Latin American streets (and spirits) have been becoming increasingly inflamed. After two large waves of mass revolt in the early decades of the 21st century, beginning in the 2000s with uprisings in Ecuador, Argentina, and Bolivia, to the mobilizations that regained strength from 2018 in Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and then in the Andean highlands of Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and even reaching Colombia – Latin America seems to be sailing towards its "third wave" of civil society consolidation on the continent, with cyberspace as a central instrument of action.

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However, as evident as the presence of digital resources in people's daily lives may be, as well as their potential for political initiatives by ordinary citizens, it is not the purpose of this reading to suggest a direct and necessary causality relationship between technological contexts and social mobilizations occurring in Latin America, from communication initiatives undertaken by the public through the use of digital technological tools.

After all, it is necessary to recognize that the dynamics of political communication are more complex, and the roles played by other agents in the process of emanation of messages that circulate within a political system – that is, politicians and media operators – are equally important. Nonetheless, in light of the theoretical considerations highlighted throughout the text, we also seek to advance towards the set of debates and reexaminations of the epistemic, conceptual, and methodological assumptions that today run through the field of political communication (BANHUST, 2011). This is, therefore, the meaning of the emphasis given here to the dimension of the public, as a relevant part of the set of informative exchanges that occur in the contexts of political communication in general - and in Latin America in particular.

Taking as an example the "estallidos sociales" that crossed a significant part of the Andean America between 2019 and 2021, it would be difficult to imagine the same intensity, speed, and reach of the initiatives led by student movements, unions, and workers' centers - which quickly spread to other sectors of society - without the presence of digital tools employed in the Chilean and Colombian protests. And even in countries with a strong tradition of media concentration, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, the clashes fought by the public in digital environments constitute an additional (and relevant) factor in the configuration of their respective political realities.

Following this understanding, it seems reasonable to argue that the associations between the digital environment and popular mobilizations must be perceived in a dialogical sense. It is thus considered that their articulations do not necessarily occur in a linear and deterministic way, but in multiple ways, they can be combined, leading to the possibility of reciprocally and mutually affecting each other. Therefore, ultimately, as they interpenetrate, they tend to modify and be modified by other dimensions more directly involved in political communication practices - in this case, media and politics.

In empirical terms, there is certainly a need to advance methodological propositions that allow for a more accurate examination of political communication practices per se undertaken by the public - something that, however, would not be compatible with the extent of this article. In any case, dealing with the amplitude and scale of interactions in digital environments is an inevitable challenge in future developments.

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### **Abstract**

Based on a review of the epistemological contributions of the field of political communication and proposing a methodological emphasis on the perception of the “public” in political communication initiatives, this work highlights, in a comparative way, technological variables that surround the routines of citizens in Latin American countries. Especially, those who have experienced recent transitions from democratic, center or right-wing to left-wing regimes. Focusing on Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Brazil, it examines, in a comprehensive perspective, the most characteristic digital resources of each country, as well as some of the mobilizations that gained prominence in those respective national realities, in the midst of discussions about politics in the environment digital. In this way, it associates with efforts to expand the range of regional political communication studies, through the identification and systematization, of a comparative nature, of political communication initiatives managed by Latin American civil society.

**Keywords:** Digital media. Mobilizations. Latin America.

### **Resumo**

A partir de uma revisão das contribuições epistemológicas do campo da comunicação política e propondo uma maior ênfase metodológica à percepção do “público” nas iniciativas de comunicação política, este trabalho destaca, de forma comparada, variáveis tecnológicas que cercam as rotinas de cidadãos em países latino-americanos, sobretudo aqueles que experimentaram recentes

transições democráticas, de centro ou direita para regimes de esquerda. Com foco no México, Argentina, Chile, Colômbia e Brasil, são examinados, em perspectiva panorâmica, os recursos digitais mais característicos de cada país, bem como algumas das mobilizações que ganharam relevo naquelas respectivas realidades nacionais, em meio as discussões sobre política no ambiente digital. Desta forma, associa-se aos esforços de ampliação do leque dos estudos de comunicação política regionais, através da identificação e de uma sistematização, de caráter comparado, de iniciativas de comunicação política gestadas pela sociedade civil latino-americana.

**Palavras-chave:** Mídias digitais. Mobilizações. América Latina.

## Resumen

A partir de una revisión de los aportes epistemológicos del campo de la comunicación política y proponiendo un mayor énfasis metodológico en la percepción del “público” en las iniciativas de comunicación política, este trabajo destaca, de manera comparativa, variables tecnológicas que rodean las rutinas de los ciudadanos. en los países latinoamericanos - Los estadounidenses, especialmente aquellos que han experimentado transiciones recientes de regímenes democráticos, de centro o de derecha, a regímenes de izquierda. Centrándose en México, Argentina, Chile, Colombia y Brasil, examina, en perspectiva panorámica, los recursos digitales más característicos de cada país, así como algunas de las movilizaciones que cobraron protagonismo en esas respectivas realidades nacionales, en medio de discusiones sobre la política en el entorno digital. De esta forma, se suma a los esfuerzos por ampliar la gama de estudios de comunicación política regional, a través de la identificación y sistematización, de carácter comparativo, de iniciativas de comunicación política gestionadas por la sociedad civil latinoamericana.

**Palabras clave:** Medios digitales. Movilizaciones. America Latina.

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