

Two countries fit within my heart: Transnational digital activism and political subjectivity in mexican migrants

*En mi corazón caben dos países:
Activismo digital transnacional y
subjectividad política en migrantes
mexicanos*

DORISMILDA FLORES-MÁRQUEZ²

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9659-6392>

This article explores the transnational digital activism practices in relation to political subjectivity among Mexican migrants in the United States. It is a political interrogation of a communication practice, approached ethnographically. The findings enable us to situate these practices in the tension between being far away and being close, and the transformations in the transnational public space.

KEY WORDS: Digital media, digital activism, public space, migration. Mexico, United States.

Este artículo explora las prácticas de activismo digital transnacional en relación con la subjectividad política, entre migrantes mexicanos en Estados Unidos. Se trata de una interrogación política de una práctica de comunicación, abordada etnográficamente. Los hallazgos permiten situar estas prácticas en la tensión entre estar lejos y estar cerca, lo que transforma el espacio público transnacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Medios digitales, activismo digital, espacio público, migración, México, Estados Unidos.

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² Universidad de La Salle Bajío, Mexico.

E-mail: dorixfm@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

A real time broadcasting of a demonstration carried out in any city in northern Mexico, news on violence against South population, a meme on the President, comments on the results of the most recent soccer game, are all coexisting elements in screens. Digital media play a fundamental role in the everyday life of millions of migrants around the world. Through digital media, they hold different practices, which evidence communicative transformations in the global age.

This article explores the transnational digital activism practices in relation to political subjectivity among Mexican migrants in the United States. The research questions politically the practices of these actors in and beyond digital media, to understand in a located way the reconfigurations of the public in the global age. Methodologically, it is an ethnographic work, which moves from the screens to the actors and their experiences. Methodologically, it is an ethnographic work, which moves from the screens to the actors and their experiences. The main findings lead to an understanding of transnational digital activism practices based on changes in political subjectivity. As a result of the migratory experience, the subjects have the opportunity to rethink their country of origin, their relationship with it and their political practices.

Digital media are a key element in these processes. They hold the tension between being far away and being close that, in many cases, derives in motivation for the positioning of migrants as activists.

THE STUDY OF TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL ACTIVISM

This research addresses the practices of transnational digital activism, as an element that materializes the link between public space and digital media and enables us to observe the transformations from this relationship. Activism is understood as the exercise of active citizenship, through organizations that are formed and work outside of formal political circles, in actions aimed at social change (Kaldor, 2003; Pleyers, 2018; Ramírez Sáiz, 2006). In this sense, activism is not limited to protest, it includes other types of transformative actions, carried out by different groups on a permanent basis and involving profound changes from the everyday life level (Pleyers, 2018).

Digital activism has been studied in recent years. Digital is much more than a technical issue. Digital media implies an expansion of communication possibilities, in terms of materialities, access, scope, visibility, interaction and interconnection (Jensen, 2010; Scolari, 2008; Thompson, 2011).

Materialities refer to the digital processing of the data, which enables its production and circulation in time and space (Jensen, 2010). This has implications in terms of access and scope. Access to information has expanded in recent decades. Although the problems of digital inequality persist, with digital media there is a shift in access to public expression. In traditional media, this access is usually reserved for political, economic and cultural elites, which results in a lack of coverage for civil society actors. In digital media, *technologized* subjects emerge and take position by themselves, based on the possibilities of access, the interest and the skills they have to communicate, which represents a break off with the logic of traditional media (Flores-Márquez, 2017). In other words, access is not enough, but it is a fundamental element when it is articulated with other factors such as the search for participation. In this way, digital media are not reduced to the condition of tools, but constitute spaces of struggle for meaning, in which we seek to access public expression and expand visibility (Cardon, 2011; Cardon & Granjon, 2010; Flores-Márquez, 2017; Milan, 2013). This leads to the emergence of new political actors (Castells, 2008, 2009; Martín-Barbero, 2008; Pleyers, 2018; Thompson, 2011).

The scope and visibility also expand in relation to the materialities of digital media. The subjects that access public expression in digital media have the potential to make their presence and ideas visible. It is important to emphasize the *potential* nature of this, while the scope and visibility that certain contents and/or groups reach depend on various factors, such as connections, interactions, algorithms, or the echo that something or someone can have in certain communities. Even with these caveats, the scope and visibility of digital media was not possible for many activist groups in the past.

The reticular nature of the Internet facilitates interactions between subjects, based on the establishment of links (Scolari, 2008). These elements of interaction and interconnection also go beyond the

technical, since the connections that are technically supported, are socially established from affinities and/or common interests. In this way, networks are constituted as a “connective tissue” that facilitates the resonance between social movements (Khasnabish, 2007).

Digital activism requires the presence of certain media. Lievrouw (2011) defines the alternative/activist media as those that transform social devices, practices and agreements, to challenge the dominant ways of doing society, culture and politics. In other words, it involves the use of digital media to circulate critical views of the world. This option for the digital media in activism contemplates different degrees, from that which is developed exclusively online, to the majority in person but which uses digital media as tools (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

On the other hand, the transnational character refers to what goes beyond the borders. In our times, new forms of citizenship emerge, which have been conceptualized as transnational civil society, global civil society, global citizenship, global or supranational social movements and transnational activism (Bringel, 2017; Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Castells, 2008; Feixa, Pereira & Juris, 2009; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kaldor, 2003; Kymlicka, 2011; Martín-Cabello, 2017; Padilla & Ortiz Scaglione, 2014; Ramadan, 2013; Ramírez Sáiz, 2006; Susen, 2010). Specifically, the transnational character of digital activism is explained by two elements: the technological reach of digital media and the social and political scope of the issues that are dealt with. The latter is produced around concerns shared globally, or around local concerns that find an echo in wider contexts.

Transnational digital activism is understood within the framework of the transnational public space. Public space refers to the encounter and participation around public issues (Carré, 2015; Cassegård, 2014; Nash, 2014). For much of the twentieth century the notions of the public referred to national contexts, but from the second half of that century it became evident that public affairs were not limited to them, but transcended political borders and were placed as common concerns of different entities in international contexts. This is observed in different areas of social life. In political terms, the search of European countries to establish themselves as a community of nations after the Second World War took place around common concerns. Likewise, the student

movements of 1968 placed shared problems and were oriented towards social change. These dynamics were articulated some time later with the emergence of digital media, which facilitated the interconnection and dissemination of common issues.

We can see, then, a reconfiguration of the public in two basic ways: expansion and fragmentation. Expansion refers to changes in the scope of public affairs, which go beyond national borders, which gives rise to conceptualizations about the expanded public space, amplified public space, space/virtual public sphere or space/public transnational sphere (Cardon, 2011; Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Fraser, 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002; Reguillo, 2002; Ribeiro, 2002; Trejo Delarbre, 2009; Thompson, 2011; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Winocur, 2015; Zeifer, 2016). At the same time, there is a process of fragmentation when public affairs concentrate the interest of specific groups that, although they manage to build transnational links, represent important ruptures, as discussed in the conceptualizations about the oppositional public space, the subaltern public spheres, the counterpublics, or the spherules of the public (Fraser, 2007; Neumann & Sagraдини, 2009; Tufte, 2015).

The transnational public space refers to the social space that is constructed by the participation of actors of different types, around matters that go beyond national borders. The communicational dimension of the public space focuses on the debate or discussion of public affairs, the arenas of discussion and the taking of the public word as an act of symbolic character (Arsène, 2009; Badouard, Mabi & Monnoyer-Smith, 2016; Cárdenas Torres, 2012; Granjon, 2014; Motta, 2014; Schudson, 2012; Tarragoni, 2014). Digital media are especially relevant in these dynamics, because of the possibilities of interconnection, but also because they represent a break off in the logic of power, in such a way that they broaden the possibilities of visibility and thus contribute to the incorporation of new actors (Thompson, 2011). In this way, digital media by themselves do not produce participation, but provide spaces for those who have previously assumed themselves as political subjects to participate (Ward & De Vreese, 2011).

This work explores the actors and their practices, based on political subjectivity. This is understood as the ways in which subjects experience

politics in everyday life. This emphasis on the everyday allows us to identify the links between the micro and macro-social processes from the practices, which leads to understand political action as something that is not limited to rational logic, but incorporates the affective and the symbolic (Lechner, 1988). In this logic, the subject is the center of politics, while political space is constituted as a product of the actions of the subjects (Smith, 2017).

This focus on political subjectivity contemplates situated actors. For the present study, migrants represent a sector crossed by the dynamics of change in the global age, such as greater mobility, greater access to digital media, but also greater inequality. The above derive in changes in the ways of understanding and participating in the public (Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Huang, Lee & Hayes, 2012; Staeheli, Mitchell & Nagel, 2009).

Likewise, migrants experience tensions in terms of citizenship, since they inhabit a country in which they were not born, in different migratory conditions. Many of them maintain interest, links and participation in their country of origin (Le Bot, 2012; Melella, 2016; Pardo, 2008; Ramírez, 2016; Ramírez Sáiz, 2006). The foregoing evidences an expansion of the public that goes beyond national borders and forces us to rethink them.

The case of Mexican migrants is very relevant for several reasons. Worldwide, Mexico is the second country with the highest number of emigrants, about 13 million Mexicans live abroad. In addition, the most numerous migration from one country to another is precisely that which occurs from Mexico to the United States, so that 98% of Mexican emigrants are located in that country. In fact, the United States is the country with the largest number of immigrants, 49.8 million of its inhabitants come from other countries (United Nations, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The present work sought to recover the perspective of the actors, through an ethnographic study. It articulated the ethnography of the Internet and the ethnographies of participation, to know the trajectories, experiences and perspectives of the actors, as well as their communication practices

in digital media. The ethnography of the Internet allows us to understand the ways in which technology is used and the meanings it acquires for communities. Although it focuses on those practices that are carried out on the Internet, it is not limited to it, but it incorporates the contexts of production and use (Hine, 2015; Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis & Tacchi, 2016). The ethnographies of participation are essentially ethnographies of the political, focused on the participation of subjects in certain contexts (Cefaï, Carrel, Talpin, Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2012). In this way, the digital ethnography of participation articulates the two logics to explore the political practices that are produced through digital mediation.

Data were collected through digital ethnography, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. We reviewed publications of groups of Mexican migrants, on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It is important to note that only those publications of a public nature were taken, that is, they were published in pages and accounts of the groups, with an open visibility. Publications made in a personal capacity were not included in the digital profiles of the interviewees, even if they were accessed. Participant observation was also carried out in the activities of an organization of Mexican migrants, as well as observation in urban environments with a high concentration of Mexicans, in the cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco, California.

In addition, 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Mexican migrants living in the United States. We did not opt for a specific profile, but for diversity, in such a way that we contacted migrants who have stayed there for different periods (permanent migrants, temporary migrants), which correspond to different migratory conditions (with dual citizenship, with legal residence –work or student visa–, undocumented), age (youth, adults, seniors) and gender (women, men, LGBTTI). Three axes were approached with them: migration trajectories, social and political participation and belonging to organizations of different types, as well as communication practices in digital media. Most of the interviews were carried out through the Internet, some others were conducted in person in both Mexico and the United States.

The results presented in the following sections are based mainly on the analysis of the interviews. The analysis was based on two phases: in the first one, a qualitative content analysis was carried out (Schreier, 2014), to identify key elements in the data; these operated as input for the second phase, which consisted in the ethnographic analysis of the texts (Roulston, 2012). The emerging categories were contrasted with the preliminary analysis of the field notes and the publications in socio-digital networks, subject to deepening the analysis of these two elements.

ACTIVISM, MIGRATION AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

Three profiles of Mexican migrants were identified, based on their interest in the public affairs of this country, their participation in organizations and their digital communication practices. These are general profiles that allow us to understand the logic of migrants in specific contexts.

The first profile corresponds to Mexicans who participate in migrant organizations, or in activist groups, in order to intervene in their communities of origin and improve their quality of life. This block includes those who actively participate in migrant clubs, which are organized according to both places of origin and places of residence, for example, Zacatecan migrant clubs in California. In this logic, the transnational relationship is localized and connects concrete subjects and communities. Those included in activist groups of Mexicans outside of Mexico are also included in this category. Some of them are movement cells that emerged in Mexico and spread to other countries, such as the representations of # YoSoy132 and Ayotzinapa in different cities. Others are activist groups that express their solidarity with different movements and groups in Mexico, such as the Zapatistas, the self-defense groups, among others. In these groups, the transnational is seen in the expansion of concerns about specific issues in Mexico, towards the contexts in which they live. Some more are groups of Mexicans abroad, who do not explicitly assume themselves as activists, but who are integrated around the national identity and carry out activities together. However, they have collaborated with other groups in Mexico at specific times

—such as the earthquake of September 19, 2017— and every day they express themselves publicly about the situation in their country. In these ones the transnational appeal to identity, nationality and nostalgia for their country of origin.

The second profile corresponds to Mexicans who participate in community organizations and/or activist groups focused on the problems they have in the United States. They hold proudly the Mexican identity and their interest in this country, but they consider it more pertinent to intervene in the place where they have decided to settle. This block includes the groups of Mexicans who fight for their rights in the United States, mainly as a consequence of adverse migration policy, which attempts against the exercise of their rights or even their permanence. Those Mexicans who have joined community organizations to support vulnerable groups in different cities in the United States are included as well.

The third profile refers to Mexicans who do not participate in organizations, because they live very hectic dynamics, or because they do not find the need to do so. However, they show some interest in remaining informed about public events in their country of origin. In terms of interests and actions, there are important differences between those profiles; however, in terms of experiences, there are several elements of coincidence.

For Mexican migrants, the migratory experience has helped them to look at their country of origin in different way. They are proud of their nationality, since they attribute positive characteristics to Mexicanness, such as being happy, kind, supportive, hard-workers and resourceful, even in adverse environments. However, these positive assessments find a point of contradiction when referring to politicians, or citizens. Most of the migrants interviewed associate Mexican politicians —mainly those who hold public office— with corruption, impunity and ineptitude. In the same way, they are critical of citizens, whom they consider passive. Those who prefer the institutional way, point out that citizens should work in conjunction with the governments and not limit their participation to the electoral. Those who opt for the activist path, consider that Mexicans should be more critical and develop greater organizational capacities to intervene in social issues.

Distance has allowed migrants to compare, among other elements, their urban and/or rural environments, living conditions, opportunities and the modes of operation of governments and citizens. From an outside view, they perceive different dimensions of the problems, value other ways of exercising citizenship, to perceive them as more committed, critical and active.

There are citizen organizations that fight for the rights of people, who fight for the rights of workers, as doctors, all that. I love it, I love knowing that there are people who do not sit at home waiting for someone else to solve problems, but here there are those citizens' organizations. They are the ones who seek, who are the ones who, in the end, get those benefits for us. There are also organizations of Americans who fight for the rights of Mexicans, immigrants, Latin Americans, that is, other races (Mexican activist 1, California, June 2017).

These elements produce a very strong relationship with the country of residence. One of the interviewees expresses it saying "two countries fit within my heart". The country of origin carries serious social problems and, in a certain way, that made them leave, but it is the place they love despite everything. The country of residence represents freedom and opportunities for growth, even when the environment can be hostile.

The interest of migrants in their country is connected both with the idea of origin and with the links with family and friends remaining in Mexico. Around them they identify a series of problems that concern them. They distinguish between natural phenomena, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, which they recognize as inevitable. In front of them, they point out social problems, such as corruption, impunity, public insecurity, missing people, femicides, the presence of organized crime groups, among others, that are avoidable and should be taken care of properly. These problems annoy and hurt them, but are also some of the strongest reasons not to return to Mexico, even when they miss it so much.

Digital media are very relevant in the lives of migrants, from the private or semi-private interpersonal level –they maintain contact through WhatsApp, Messenger and Facebook– up to the level of public

expression, especially in the case of those who are part of activist groups. In that way, digital media represent the opportunity to *be close*, to keep the links with Mexico alive.

Those migrants who participate in migrant organizations and activist groups are aimed to intervene in the social reality of their communities of origin to improve their quality of life. They claim to have begun to participate in specific problems in Mexican localities that, they believe, have not been sufficiently and adequately addressed by the corresponding authorities. Besides the concern, the self-recognition of certain capacities is articulated, which can be the critical capacity, the capacity of organization and, even, the economic capacity. Migrants identify problems and/or specific needs, which are especially significant and, in addition, they feel motivated and able to intervene and to contribute.

Some consider that the institutional way is adequate, that their responsibility as a civil society and, specifically, as migrants, is to collaborate with governments in Mexico to improve the living conditions of their compatriots. For this they participate in programs such as the “3X1”, which integrates funds from migrant organizations and the three levels of government, to support infrastructure projects and social assistance, aimed at solving basic needs of the communities. In some cases, migrants act without the intermediation of the government, which puts them in a position of community leadership, despite the distance.

There are some nice testimonies of people who lived on the other side of the river, they did not have a bathroom, they were poor. We built a bathroom for them with water tank, shower, toilet, everything, so that they live with dignity ... And the lady says in her testimony that promises from the government, the church and deputies from any party still remained. We arrived without promises or other things ... This is the way we work (Mexican migrant, Utah, February 2018).

Other migrants consider that the best option to participate is the activism, which is their way of fighting against inequality. In some cases, the intervention is aimed at solving problems of migrants with

the Mexican government, such as procedures that allow them to exercise their rights of political participation from abroad.

Through activism we have achieved rights, such as the voter's ID. However, we perceive the indifference of the government and its lack of interest that Mexicans obtain the voter's ID ... The government is the one that represents us the least, the Consulate here is not interested in giving adequate instructions so that people know ... For example, the elections ... The first to vote, I guess, were people from Zacatecas and after them people from Michoacán could vote for the State government. Nevertheless, there was no information ... The consul was not interested, actually he put obstacles to us, just because he assumed I was an activist (Mexican activist 2, California, June 2017).

In these initiatives, digital media are an important arena of communication, integration, organization and connection between actors located in two or more countries. Through them, they position certain topics that interest them, both to explicitly point out certain problems and to present their visions of the world. They also call for participation in activities and disseminate them once they were made. In particular, some activist groups focus their work on information. They believe that Mexicans should have access to information about their country and be more critical of the conditions of inequality and violence in which they live. Their commitment to information is translated into the review and dissemination of news about Mexico, from various sources, with the purpose of contributing to the formation of a more critical society. The publications are echoed mainly by the community of Mexicans abroad.

The participation of migrants from abroad produces a sense of being close. However, their main challenge is to recognize that, despite the cultural and emotional proximity, his daily life no longer occurs in Mexico. This may be very evident in the facts, but it is a complicated experience for them, since many have decided not to return to their country of origin, to make their life in a country that gives them the freedom and security they did not have before leaving. In this way, the political subjectivity of migrants has as a key element: the tension

between being far away and being close. This tension leads them to understand in a new way their position in the world, in the country they inhabit and in front of the country of origin. The political space in which they act expands and incorporates at least two countries, with all the territorial, legal, identity, affective, media, communicative implications. Of course, these processes are not identical in all migrants, but are particularized in terms of other factors, such as interests, support networks, migratory status, context, conjunctures, among others.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, transnational digital activism was approached, based on the experiences of Mexican migrants in the United States. Activism –which refers to the exercise of active citizenship outside of formal political circles– becomes more complex in terms of a series of elements, such as the expansion of the scale towards the transnational and the incorporation of digital media. In particular, the transnational activism of Mexican migrants reveals a series of concerns that lead them to organize and participate from a distance. These dynamics open questions about the notions of the public.

On the one hand, there is an expansion of the public, when Mexican public affairs take on relevance outside of Mexico, within communities of Mexicans and sometimes also of foreigners. Interest in such matters does not depend on nationality or physical presence in a particular territory, but on other factors, such as political subjectivity. In this case, migrants assume themselves as Mexicans and participate politically, economically and culturally, wherever they may be.

On the other hand, there are processes of fragmentation, while public affairs are not necessarily of general interest. Each group emphasizes some elements, according to their interests, experiences and expectations. Some, for example, are interested in solving basic needs in precarious communities, others prefer to focus their efforts on the struggle for political rights. While these migrant communities share experiences, this does not necessarily translate into sharing interests and intervention options. In this way, the discussion of public affairs

appears fragmented in different spaces and groups, which do not always dialogue with each other.

Public expression is understood as an act of symbolic character, carried out mainly in digital media. Among migrants, expressing themselves publicly on certain issues translates into a political action that configures them as *new political subjects*. As anticipated, digital media do not produce participation, but provide an arena to do so for those who are assumed as political subjects. The practices of public expression, an everyday action for them, acquire a transnational dimension in political, but also cultural and communicative terms.

Political subjectivity is built on the tension between being far away and being close to their country, their community and their loved ones. Being away enables to live other experiences, compare and rethink the country of origin. These comparisons comprise at least two levels: the country and citizenship. Regarding the country, most of the interviewed migrants perceive Mexico as a failed state compared to other countries that manage to function. Regarding citizenship, the encounter with political practices in another country leads to identifying passivity as a characteristic of citizens in Mexico. Digital media play a very important role in this tension between being far away and being close, while enabling interpersonal communication, information and public expression, based on the possibilities of scope, visibility, interaction and interconnection.

From this exploration, there are different veins in which it is worth deepening. In the first place, it is pertinent to analyze in more detail the digital public expression practices of each profile of migrants: those who participate in organizations and activist groups related to Mexico, those who do it in American groups, as well as those who do not participate in groups, but at the same time express themselves publicly about the situation in Mexico. A second vein to follow is spatiality, understood as an experience of space, which acquires different meanings in migration contexts. According to this study, spatiality is observed in the tension between being far and close, which is related to political subjectivity. Another vein to be addressed is visuality, in particular the visual representations of the Mexican, both in the digital publications and in the urban environments where Mexican migrants live.

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