

# Facebook for Global Protest: The Potential and Limits of Social Software for Grassroots Activism

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of Social Software for networked political protest. We demonstrate grassroots activism on a current example: the anti-FARC-rallies in Colombia (*A Million Voices against FARC*), which found its origin in the social networking site Facebook.

Our findings are based on four concepts that we state as characteristics of information and communication technologies in general, and of cyberactivism in particular: [1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital divide and social inequalities and [4] the influence of globalisation on local communities and their contribution to the global public sphere. In our paper we discuss prevailing theoretical approaches by explaining them on a current example to assess its potential political impact.

We argue that Social Software has the potential to foster grassroots activism, political inclusion and community building that decrease oppressive or elitist forms of political decision-making. At the same time an exclusive character of Social Software can be observed, especially (but not only) in developing countries where an enormous social gap is predominant. By analysing the role of Social Software for political protest we show new possibilities but also limits of this kind of grassroots activism.

**Keywords:** Communities, Cyberprotest, Cyberspace, Social Inequalities

## Introduction

*“No more! No more Kidnapping! No more Lies! No more Murder! No more FARC!”* was the message that spread globally via the social networking website Facebook. About 100.000 people around the globe were said to confirm their participation within the Facebook group, demonstrating their solidarity with the Colombian citizens. Several newspapers announced that 500.000 to 2.000.000 people responded to this appeal on February 4, 2008 by attending rallies that took place in 165 cities across the world.

The anti-FARC-rallies that were organised via Facebook and carried out in many cities around the globe serve as one example for global political activism. This protest is one out of many examples that underlines the theoretical concepts we state as characteristics of information and communication technologies in general and cyberprotest in particular: [1] the foundation for community building, [2] the interrelation of the real and the virtual space, [3] digital divide and social inequalities and [4] the influence of globalisation on local communities and their contribution to the global public sphere.

In our paper we provide some facts about Colombia, FARC, Facebook and Social Software. This information is necessary to understand the theoretical concepts and their correlation with the anti-FARC-rallies we explain later. In the following chapters we debate the theoretical concepts as stated above in more detail. Cyberspace is thereby defined according to its possibilities for enabling social movements (cp. Lévy 1997). The heterarchical, decentralised and likewise open architecture of the Internet provides the necessary precondition for virtual communities and hence for participation, new social movements and cyberprotest to emerge. The anti-FARC-rallies exemplify how a virtual community can use the specific architecture of the Internet to organise itself for political activism that is carried out in real space. Cyberspace is not a sphere of its own, distinct from *real* life, but an expression of societal structures that are to some extent transferred to the virtual space, and vice versa. The rallies all across the world are an outcome of a community built in virtual space, but were carried out in real space and gained attention across the globe. We argue that social patterns existing in real space have an impact on cyberspace

communities. The Facebook group *A Million Voices Against FARC* was not a representation of affected Colombian citizens. Those excluded from virtual space depend on real-space-elites. The Internet is designed by a global architecture that enables a local conflict to trespass national boundaries and to be carried out globally by new forms of (online) communities.

### **Colombia: Politics and Insurgent Groups in Brief**

Colombia is located in the northwest of South America and with more than 45 Million inhabitants the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world (cp. World Bank 2006). The literacy rate is very high, more than ninety per cent of the Colombian population aged 15 and over knows how to read and write. Despite the advance in education the gap between rich and poor people within the country is very high, as in many other South American countries.

About one fifth of the Colombian population regularly used the Internet in 2007, whereas in 2006 only about 15 per cent had access (cp. Internet World Stats 2007). The majority of Colombians is still excluded from cyberspace. Traditional media is dedicated to the upper class since they are the target group for advertisements in a privatised media landscape. Ownership of traditional media is concentrated in wealthy families and transnational media conglomerates, or within groups who are associated with one of the two main political parties. Although the government accepts freedom of press, eighty journalists were murdered because of their work within the last decade. Media uses self-censorship to avoid being harassed by corrupt officials, criminals or illegal armed forces (cp. Library of Congress 2007, 24 sq.).

Colombia is a representative democratic republic, Alvaro Uribe Velez is president since August 2002. Apart from the official political parties there are two large insurgent groups active in Colombia, i.e. the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (cp. CIA 2007). Drug trade is an issue that is frequently discussed in relation to the government, industry, but also to paramilitary and guerrilla groups in Colombia.

FARC, the *“nation’s oldest and most powerful rebel group”* (SmartMobs 2008, online) was founded in 1960 as the military guerrilla part of the communist party. The original orientation of the group can be considered as politically relevant. After the annihilation of all members of Unión Patriótica – the political party of FARC founded in 1985 – FARC transformed due to drug traffic and engaged in more violent methods such as kidnapping and murder (cp. Council on Foreign Relations 2008). Raúl Reyes, an important ideologist of FARC, described the aims of FARC by speaking of *“a Colombia without social, economic or political inequalities; of a Colombia without corruption; with neither paramilitarism or state terrorism; of a Colombia with industrial development; of a worthy Colombia, independent and sovereign; a Colombia where resources are invested in scientific research and technological development; a Colombia where the environment is protected; [...] a Colombia that does not continue privatizing, that does not continue selling the businesses of the State but instead uses these businesses to benefit social programs”* (Reyes 2007, online). FARC is especially critical towards the politics of president Uribe and the neoliberal politics protected by the Colombian government as well as the United States. They claim to represent the poor who are oppressed by the wealthy classes and are against the influence of the USA.

In May 2008 Manuel Marulanda, the leader and founder of FARC, died of a heart attack. His death was reported in the worldwide media which believed at that time that FARC would release their hostages and that a more pragmatic leadership could be established (e.g. Times Online 2008; CNN 2008; BBC 2008).

### **Some Facts about Facebook and the Anti-FARC-Rallies**

Facebook, founded in 2004, rapidly grows and is today one of the largest social networking sites around the world. With about 70 million active users (cp. Facebook Factsheet 2008) Facebook is currently the 6th most-trafficked website in the world and the 2nd most-trafficked social media site. The privately owned company was founded by former Harvard Student Mark Zuckerberg. Anyone interested in networking and discovering people can join Facebook

to keep up with friends, interact with colleagues and meet people they might not know yet. The network aims at digitally mapping people's real-world social connections.

The three major Facebook country communities are the United States of America, United Kingdom and Canada. Apart from these states, Colombia is amongst the top ten remaining countries with regard to registered user accounts (cp. Facebook Statistics 2008). The reason therefore might be found in the large number of inhabitants. As the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world the upper and higher middle class already represent a critical mass on Internet users in general. A Spanish version was released in 2008 after the rallies took place. Hence we assume that only a minority of Colombians, that are able to speak English, joined the Facebook group against FARC.

The anti-FARC-rallies serve as one example of protest organised via Facebook<sup>1</sup>. The Facebook group *A Million Voices Against FARC* was initiated by the 33 years old engineer Oscar Morales who was surprised by the massive outcome of the rallies: "*We expected the idea to resound with a lot of people but not so much and not so quickly*" (SmartMobs 2008, online). Morales launched the Facebook group together with five friends. 3000 supporters joined the group within the first twenty-four hours of its existence. "*Let's commit ourselves to join a million voices in this group so we can make a difference, and let the entire world know [...] that FARC is a terrorist group led by murders and enemies of the Colombian and World's People*" (Facebook 2008, online). Today<sup>2</sup> the Facebook group against FARC has 230.000 members. The turnout of the global protests was enormous (cp. Holguín 2008, online).

### Social Software for Political Protest

The Internet is revolutionising the way we live, how we interact, and how we communicate with others. It also changes politics, not just from a governmental and parliamentary perspective but also on the individual level. The Internet is not only a big marketplace, it is also a space of political interaction (cp. Fuchs 2006, 293) and moreover a central resource of information. Blogs, wikis and social networking sites provide a technological basis for grassroots action to coordinate and for activists to communicate. Chat rooms, email and mobile gadgets enable ad-hoc activities to emerge. The Internet can support the organisation of topic-oriented pressure groups, protest organisations and ideological movements outside the mainstream. Fuchs (2006, 275) describes "*cyberprotest as an emerging field of social movement research that reflects the role of alternative online media, online protests, and online protest communication in society.*"

Global access to information via the Internet is its main advantage. Turkle (1996) for example argues that virtual identities are rather anonymous. Age, class, race and gender might become obsolete, hence the Internet offers equal chances to participate online. Some claim that political online interaction will become a new public sphere and that these virtual communities provide opportunities for participation and engagement (cp. Negroponte 1995, Rheingold 1993, Toffler/Toffler 1995). But there are certain disadvantages as well, that are inherent in the technology. Although the Internet can potentially connect people all over the world, limitation on Internet access, a lack in computer skills and literacy make the political forum which it offers less inclusive – not only, but especially in the developing world (cp. Buckler/Dolowitz 2005).

Social Software indicates a potential *social* change rather than a technological turn. Tim Berners-Lee argues that many of the technological concepts we now associate with that notion have existed since the early days of the Web (cp. Berners-Lee/Lanningham 2006). According to Boyd (2007, 17) Social Software "*is about a movement, not simply a category of technologies. It's about recognizing that the era of e-commerce centred business models is*

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<sup>1</sup> Very early Facebook was confronted with the massive power of organised protest. In April 2007 Facebook was used to organise demonstrations worldwide against the regime in Myanmar (former Burma). Approximately 300.000 subscribers formed the group *Support the Monks' Protest*. This Facebook group worked in conjunction with Amnesty International and The Burma Campaign UK. Mark Farmaner, director of the latter, points out that they were working very closely with Facebook because it was able to mobilise a large number of people (cp. Stirland 2007).

<sup>2</sup> That is by July 2008.

*over; we've moved on to web software that is all about letting people interact with people and data in a fluid way."*

The changes into a participatory and interactive space where grassroots activities can be enhanced and users become producers, designers and collaborative knowledge creators are still at their initial stage (cp. Buckler/Dolowitz 2005, 5). To assess the potential of Social Software for political protest we have to define the new qualities of the revolutionary changes of the Internet. There are many scientific and even more non-scientific explanations about Social Software. Participation and user activation are the most important features that differentiate Social Software from the traditional Internet. "Social software is a set of tools that enable group-forming networks to emerge quickly. It includes numerous media, utilities, and applications that empower individual efforts, link individuals together into larger aggregates, interconnect groups, provide metadata about network dynamics, flows, and traffic, allowing social networks to form, clump, become visible, and be measured, tracked, and interconnected" (Saveri, Rheingold and Vian 2005, 22).

Participation, discussion, the active role of the user as well as organisational and social benefits by using the global infrastructure for creating networks are important parts – if not the basis – of political participation and activism. Still political leaders, commercial global players and international institutions already have an enormous influence on the structure and design of the Internet.

The "*flat governance hierarchies and distributed power*" (Rheingold 2002, 163) of the networks are essential for political activism since they make grassroots activities possible and give civil society the opportunity to engage in political participation without the guidance of institutions or organisations. As Bradley (2006, 100) argues: "*Our citizen's role can be empowered with IT support in the home – there are opportunities to widen and strengthen democracy.*" The communities that emerge in cyberspace combined with the new architecture of Social Software can lead to enhancement in political activity. The potential for community building and political participation of citizens is there, but users and hosts of digital social networks and Social Software platforms decide about the substance, ideology, thematic relevance and form of activism and participation.

## **Protest Communities in Web 2.0**

Howard Rheingold, author of *The Virtual Communities* (1993) and *Smart Mobs* (2002), immediately reacted to the anti-FARC-rallies. "*From Facebook to the streets of Colombia*" was the title of his blog entry on February 4, 2008. Rheingold defines the movement as "*another example of how technology [...] can be used to rally large numbers of people to a cause*" (2008, online). Cyberspace can be understood as a technologically mediated space of cognition, communication, and cooperation (cp. Hofkirchner 2002). Accordingly, Fuchs (2006, 293) defines cyberprotest as "*a space of alternative online media that challenge the one-dimensional logic of the dominant mass media (cognition), [as] medium that co-ordinates the interactions of global social protests (communication), and [moreover, as] a production system that is used by protestors in order to co-operate in such ways that globally distributed forms of online protest emerge [...] spatio-temporally disembedded, and enable people to jointly protest although they have never met and don't know each other (co-operation).*"

Cyberspace can also be defined according to its possibilities for enabling social movements to emerge (cp. Lévy 1997). The heterarchical, decentralised and likewise open architecture of the Internet provides the necessary precondition for virtual communities and hence for participation, new social movements and cyberprotest to emerge. The anti-FARC-rallies exemplify how a virtual community can use the specific architecture of the Internet to organise itself for political activism that is carried out in real space.

Rheingold coined the term SmartMobs, a concept that describes a group of people who cooperate with each other by using information and communication technologies to organise activism. SmartMobs include "*[p]eer-to-peer collectives, pervasive computing, social networks, and mobile communications*" (Rheingold 2002, 66), the effects of their interrelationship are multiplied. In *Technologies of Cooperation* a few years later Saveri,

Rheingold and Vian (2005) define Social Software as a combination of tools that makes the quick emergence of group-forming networks possible.

The anti-FARC-rallies can be considered as one example of SmartMobs: SmartMobs are formed by people “*who are able to act in concert even if they don’t know each other*” (Rheingold 2002, xii). Concepts such as the crowd, the masses, and the mob are designated to plural collectives. In this respect the *Multitude* (Hardt/Negri 2004) is an important concept which has to be seen in contrast to crowds, masses and the mob. The Multitude is composed of a set of *singularities*, a “*social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. [...] The plural singularities of the Multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of people*” (Hardt/Negri 2004, 99). Although the Multitude remains multiple it is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent. For community building in cyberspace we can assume that people from completely different cultural backgrounds form communities or groups of action due to a similar ideology, political belief or common interests. According to Fuchs (2008, 279) protestors on the Internet produce “*shared meanings that constitute collective identities and practices.*” The opposition against FARC is the common ground on which the Facebook group on the anti-FARC-rallies was developed, although the people come from completely different backgrounds and cultural contexts.

According to Bradley (2006, 164sq.) we can define a community as a group with common bases; purpose in terms of a shared meaning or a specific intention of the members; culture as a “*collective identity that includes values beliefs, attitudes, behavioural norms, and accumulated experiences*”; the same location in a physical or virtual space; participation is voluntary as well as “*multiple, shifting and overlapping memberships and participation.*” Common history, knowledge or practices can enhance the strength of a community, although the web is able to connect people from different background, histories and experiences in order to share interests and aspirations (cp. Bradley 2006, 165). As Wellman (2001) argues we find community in networks, not groups since a community does not only share a common interest, but is based on interaction, communication, discussion and relationships that networks can provide.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), which show the common ground through shared ideology or interests can be related to cyberspace-communities as well. Imagined Communities describe nations that consist of a community that is socially constructed. In the same way as print-media helped to distribute information for an Imagined Community the Internet can have the same functionality on a global scale (cp. Holton 1998, 34). In Anderson’s terms we can talk about an Imagined Community that shares a common ideology or idea, although the members do not know each other in person. Sharing common values and symbols make actors cooperating and acting together in virtual space as well as in real life. This becomes evident when discussing the example of the anti-FARC-rallies that where organised online, in the virtual sphere of Facebook, but supported by traditional media, politicians and activists in real life. Cooperative social contracts build the Internet’s basic architecture. “*The Internet is both the result of and the enabling infrastructure for new ways of organizing collective action via communication technology*” (Rheingold 2002, 47).

Although Social Software provides the potential for political action commercial structures are inherent in most websites and create hierarchies favourable to some participants and detrimental to others. As Graham (2000, 132) suggests the so-called information revolution is carried out by “*literate and language related*” societies and is therefore a product of an elitist part of the world’s population that does not include financially and educationally backward groups. Users, as well as Social Software itself, define the ideological colouring of the global outcome. The disadvantage of social protest via Internet is that “*[e]very new form of communication both heighten ties between those who already know one another, and raises the walls of exclusion for those lacking access to the new medium of communication*” (Della Porta/Tarrow 2005, 4). Information about protest can be distributed much faster than fifty years ago, but the Internet creates the risk of ambiguity since everybody can function as an initiator of social movements. Cyberspace communities can emerge through Social Software

and its new qualities, although the real space with its social structures, problems, ideologies, persons, cultural contexts, hierarchies and ideologies is transferred into the virtual.

## The Real-Virtual Dichotomy

Social Software and its potential impact on communication and networking has already changed the way we perceive, design, and (re-)use information and communication technologies. But the virtual space is not a sphere of its own. It is to some extent a social representation of the real world, as argued above. Currently many efforts are undertaken in terms of (global) cooperation, both in the virtual, as well as the real world. The virtual creates spaces for identity construction and self-representation as well as for political action where “*citizens take their problems into their own hands, defining and designing their needs, products and lifeforms for themselves*” (Klar 1994, 169).

Castells (e.g. 1996) emphasises on the changing perception of spatial and temporal distances due to information and communication technologies, which changes *spaces of places* to *spaces of flow*. These *spaces of flow* consist of several spheres. The technological level refers to the infrastructure of networks, the geographical level to the topology of spaces, and the social sphere refers to spatial organisations that are using the networks. Castells concept of *timeless time* furthermore refers to the changing perception of time, where information is speeding up and data collection increases.

Societies and individuals in real space are closely connected to cyberspace, although individuals create new forms of identities and self-representation in the virtual world. “*Community research in a broad sense comes to the fore, with respect to both physical and virtual communities. Analysis and design of ICT and societal systems both at local level and globally become important*” (Bradley 2006, 56). According to Castells the suspension of spatial and temporal distances is the dominant social logic of the *Network Society* (1996). Since humans are living in real physical space – the *space of places* – this process brings along a loss of the self of individuals. These are according to Castells *the* characteristics of the information age. The transformation of space and time has an enormous impact on identity formation, especially the possibilities of self-representation in cyberspace through Social Software.

In The Cyberculture Theorists David Bell (2007, 68) summarises Castells approach as follows: “*The elites of self-programmable labour live exclusive lifestyles while social exclusion and poverty escalate around them.*” Societal structures are projected onto the virtual space. This can also be interpreted in terms of Bourdieu’s concepts of capital (e.g. 1997). Economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital, such as education, are important for entering the virtual space and (inter)acting there. Power relations are transferred as inequalities into the virtual space: “*In that regard, the designs that dominate early in the growth of a technology can have disproportionate power over the way the technology will affect power structures and social lives*” (Rheingold 2002, 96). There are two extreme perspectives in terms of power relations. One suggests that information and communication technologies and their developments will help to increase control of the user and privacy will be diminished. On the other side Social Software is associated with more powerful users and an enforcement of a collaborative democratic potential as well as social influence on design. The technological infrastructure given at the moment both enables and constrains cooperation. It deserves a change in the real-world society to make best use of networking, interacting and collaborating on the web. Such a movement towards increased cooperation requires public awareness and the support of empowered people.

The global character of virtual spaces cannot exist independently from real world’s societal structures. A new lifestyle has to be created that goes beyond geographical boundaries and the relevance of real places can diminish due to the possibilities of cyberspace as a transnational global sphere. These innovations can have a positive as well as a negative impact. “*There is no guarantee that networked information technology will lead to the improvements in innovation, freedom, and justice that [...] are possible. That is a choice we face as a society*” (Benkler 2006, 18). Governments, companies, politicians, and the public administration often conspire

against a fair and inclusive society to emerge. Society in general has the responsibility to enhance a more democratic and human centred use of technologies that can lead to increased participation.

## Social Inequalities Online

Social patterns existing in real space, including social inequalities, have an impact on cyberspace communities. The Facebook group *A Million Voices Against FARC* was not a representation of affected Colombian citizens. Although Facebook is the largest social network site in Colombia, it is still dominated by a US-American community. Only about a fifth of the whole Colombian population has regular access to the Internet. We assume that the rallies organised via this specific networking website were announced by an elite, representing their interests, and not necessarily those of the Colombian citizens. Those excluded from the virtual space thus are dependent on the real-space-elite.

Information is considered as the most important commodity in the information age and transforms cultural, social and economic values (cp. Bell 1973, Castells 1998). But the enthusiastic assumption that the Internet would lead to more profit in societal, economical and political terms seemed to be endangered after the burst of the dot.com bubble at the turn of the millennium. As Lessig (2007) argues the Internet was created as a global space, controlled and regulated under the influence of commerce. The Internet itself is neither regulated nor controllable, but a combination of hardware, software, and code, and hence can either enhance freedom or be an instrument of control.

Castells (1998, 73) defines social exclusion as *“the process by which certain individuals and groups are systematically barred from access to positions that would enable them to an autonomous livelihood within the social standards framed by institutions and values in a given context.”* The potential of access to the Internet and the fear of exclusion were subsumed under the term digital divide focusing on the gap between haves and have-nots. Authors such as Aichholzer (2002), Couldry (2007), or van Dijk (2005) point out that simply providing access will not lead to global activism, participation or social equality. *“[N]ew orientation could be characterized as the shift from building infrastructure to creating identities. In other words: from bridging the digital divide to closing the knowledge gap”* (Maier-Rabler 2002, 15). Nevertheless access is a necessary precondition to take benefit from the positive potentials of the Internet and related technologies.

Even though about a fifth of the whole Colombian population has regular access to the Internet (cp. Internet World Stats) the majority does not have the possibility to be integrated in the virtual space. The Facebook-group *A Million Voices Against FARC* consists of a small part of the Colombian population and a large number of people from abroad who are in the same elitist position. Those excluded from the virtual space thus depend on the real-space-elite and traditional mass media.

Due to processes of commercialisation of many parts of the Internet the initial hopes of creating a free cyberspace away from traditional, real-world hierarchies and inequalities were replaced by profit-oriented realism. Cyberspace emerged as a global, transnational sphere, but many people around the globe are still excluded, because of lacking infrastructures, skills and competences. Corporate interests made it controllable by an elite, which is able to restrict or enhance political protest and networks of critical voices across the world.

A common ground in defining the development of a country is the *Human Development Index* of the United Nations. In the following diagram we correlate the distribution of the cities where the anti-FARC-rallies took place (cp. El Tiempo 2008) to their *Human Development Index*. The uneven distribution of participating cities in the anti-FARC-rallies can be observed as follows:

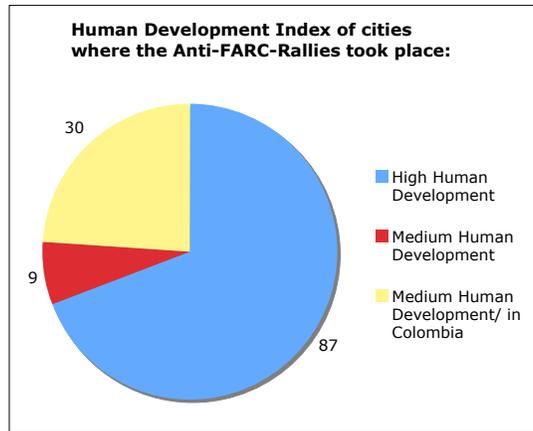


Figure 1: *Human Development Index* of cities where the Anti-FARC-Rallies took place

87 of the cities where anti-FARC-protests took place are located in countries with a *High Human Development Index*, 36 of them in North America. 39 cities have a *Medium Human Development Index* and 30 of them are located in Colombia. Outside of Colombia only nine other cities with a *Medium Human Development Index* participated. Cities in countries with a *Low Human Development Index* did not participate at all.

The distribution of cities shows that the protest was not global in terms of including all parts of the world. Only those countries where access to the Internet and use of social networking technologies is already common participated in the rallies. The correlation of the *Human Development Index* and those cities where the rallies against FARC took place suggests that even in geographical terms the protest was formed by a global elite. Taking this into account we can assume that the inherent social structures are reflected in cyberspace and a huge part of society is still excluded.

Absolute inequality in general is defined by the daily income from relative inequality that includes the distribution of income or life chances (cp. Held/McGrew 2007, 119). If we include distribution of life chances we have to turn away from a techno-centrist perspective where given infrastructure and access to technologies are seen as determining social progress, inclusion and welfare.

Designing and structuring technologies is a social act and technicians can be understood in their social role as experts, hackers, laymen, and common users that adapt to their technical needs. Technology is created and designed by society. Hence people have the ability to shape technologies (cp. MacKenzie/Wajcman 2003). At the same time technologies influence society and are both, enabling and constraining. This becomes especially evident in terms of Social Software which is claimed to activate traditionally rather passive users (“*readers only*”) to empowered “*producers*” (Bruns 2008). But such an understanding immediately raises the question, who is able to design, structure and change technologies at all. These are certainly not those people with lack in education and income. This means for example in terms of information and communication technologies that society on the one hand may benefit from, e.g. the empowerment of citizens, democratisation and participation. On the other hand these technologies have the power to exclude a large number of people in accessing information.

The distribution of power is a significant element of class production and reproduction of unequal educational chances. But education is the precondition for using Internet technologies such as Social Software. As Robins and Webster argue: “*the ‘Communication Revolution’ [...] is better understood as a matter of differential (and unequal) access to, and control over, information resources*” (Robins/Webster 1999, 63). The “*colonization of the public sphere by market forces*” (Garnham 2000, 41) can be observed by the increasing commercialisation of the Internet in general and social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube or

Flickr in particular. Smythe (1977) described power relations in a society with the example of television by production, quality, allocation and the role of financial capital, the organisation and the power of the media- and communication industry. He focused on the production and sale of “*audiences for purposes of the system*” (Smythe 1977, 285) in favour of the media companies. The commercialisation of the web and the burst of the dot.com bubble show a similar direction for information and communication technologies, especially Social Software or social networking sites.

Global activism via digital social networks is initiated by an elite who is able to organise activism, discussions and participation via Social Software. Within this process there are three obvious divides observable: First, the *global divide* which describes the divide between nations, especially between the western industrialised and developing countries. Second, the *social divide*, which can be observed within one nation (cp. Norris 2002, 273). As a third dimension we add the divide within a world society. People all across the globe are excluded from possibilities offered by the Internet and related technologies because of imbalanced power relations, lack of purchasing power and hence exclusion from the process of shaping technologies or commodities, lack of relevance for the market, access, skill or capabilities.

## Globalisation

The example of the anti-FARC-rallies demonstrates that the virtual sphere is not restricted to local, e.g. geographical constraints. The Internet is designed by a global architecture that enables a local conflict to trespass national boundaries and to be carried out globally by new forms of (online) communities. Social Software is also about glocalization, as Boyd (2005, online) argues: “[I]t is about making global information available to local social contexts and giving people the flexibility to find, organize, share and create information in a locally meaningful fashion that is globally accessible. [...] It is about new network structures that emerge out of global and local structures.” The network character of Social Software transforms the local conflict in Colombia into a global issue by gaining attention from people all over the (western) world, and hence has the potential to reshape local conflicts and to extend them to the global arena.

The global turnout of the protest by use of social networks was enormous, but national media played an important role as well. Additionally the support of president Uribe who is generally outspoken against FARC had a major impact. As Rantanen (2005, 95) suggests “*different media are open to globalization in different ways. While old media (such as newspapers or radio) are often more national in their orientation, new media such as video or the Internet are much more global.*” For the global outcome of the anti-FARC movement it was necessary not only to use social networking sites such as Facebook, but traditional media to achieve public support by Colombian citizens who are excluded from new media.

The changes in infrastructures of communication are one of the deep drivers of globalisation. At the same time the logic of capitalism and development of global market goods and services, worldwide distribution of information, new global division of labour driven by multinational corporations, the growth of migration and the movement of people foster global interconnectedness (cp. Held/McGrew 2007, 9f). According to Giddens (1990) local action becomes action from a distance with impacts across the national boundaries on a global scale. Globalisation is characterised by an intensification of international social relationships. The network structure is specified according to interdependencies and interactions with people who are absent through space and time. The process of extension across the globe by networking is significant for modernity (cp. Lamla 2003, 105). New possibilities of networking by new technologies and especially Social Software reduce financial costs for participating in international networks to bring a local protest on a global scale (cp. Della Porta/Tarrow 2005, 12).

The call for the anti-FARC-rallies spread around the globe via the digital social network Facebook. For a global outcome the message had to exclude local contexts, values, symbols and historical knowledge. “*No more! No more Kidnapping! No more Lies! No more Murder! No more FARC!*” is too catchy, oversimplified, and strongly abstracted to really understand

the role of FARC in Colombia, although it is ideal to be globally accepted and to catch the sentiments of the Colombian diaspora and people abroad. As Poster (2006, 12) argues: “*Global communication, one might say, signifies transcultural confusion. At the same time the network creates conditions of intercultural exchange that render [...] any culture which cannot decode the message of others, which insists that only its transmissions have meaning or are significant.*” The global diaspora and the “*political narratives that govern communication between elites and following different parts of the world*” (Appadurai 1990, 300) would need a careful translation from one context to another.

According to Appadurai (1990) we can assume that mass media and the Internet create a new kind of nationalism that is not restricted to national boundaries anymore. The Facebook-group *A Million Voices Against FARC* shares 360.749 members, 50.533 wall posts, 3.184 discussion topics, 3.065 photos and 82 videos, but the members do not know each other, similarly as in the concept of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* mentioned in the previous chapter. Some argue that the term “*netizen*” (cp. Hauben/Hauben 1997) can be used contrary to the citizen who is bounded to a certain nation. Poster denies the existence of the “*netizen*” since nobody lives inclusively in the net, but “*the netizen might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Net and to planetary political spaces it inaugurates*” (Poster 2006, 78).

Although the Internet shows a globally networked space, the ubiquity of Western cultural goods, the history of cultural imperialism and colonialism and the centrality of capitalism as an economic system introduced by the West present dominant forces in cultural globalisation (cp. Tomlinson 1997, 175). The domination of Social Software and social networking sites that are created within a Western context are one issue that lead to a discourse on the “*relationship between public sphere, on the one hand, and capitalism and the (global media), on the other*”, which is central in “*debates about politics of globalization*” (Schirato/Webb 2003, 161). Civil rights and political freedom cannot be guaranteed by a capitalist system that makes social actions possible only if they are adjusted to their ideologies. Global debates or global activism organised in cyberspace lead us to a notion of freedom, although many people or even geographical regions are disadvantaged and only a few individuals, nations or institutions are extremely privileged.

Political actions or decision-making processes on a local scale, or in particular parts of the world, can trespass national boundaries and rapidly acquire worldwide recognition or foster activism. Places of political action and decision-making are linked by “*rapid communications into complex networks of political interaction*” (Held/McGrew 2007, 20). Although the actors are localised and not necessarily mobile, transboundary political practice is possible not only influenced by institutional global spaces, but by powerful imaginaries that are inspiring for global action. Hence globality is a new resource for users who mix technical properties with local practices. The outcome of these technical properties depends on the users and their perception of a particular political problem, worldview or ideology, and the way they are able to use the technologies (cp. Sassen 2007, 349 sq.).

## Conclusion

Social Software has the potential to enhance political activism from a local to a worldwide scale as exemplified in the anti-FARC-rallies, although the usage of Social Software in general, not only for activism, still has to be considered as a privilege. Taking the enormous part of the population into account that is still excluded from the Internet and moreover Social Software, we argue, that the Internet in general, if not supported by traditional media or opinion leaders, cannot be the adequate tool for political protest in countries with enormous social inequalities. Since a huge part of the world’s population is excluded from cyberspace we assume that within a developing country Social Software is only used and formed by an elite, additionally created within and emerged from a Western US-American context and its inherent cultural, social, economic and political structures.

Although it is in principle possible to use Social Software for global political activism the equal distribution of access, additional skills, power and influence in the designing process

across the globe is a necessary precondition. Global resistance and grassroots activities have to emerge from a collective. Social Software has the potential to be used for collective knowledge processes or as in the anti-FARC-rallies for global political activism. This leads us to the assumption that transboundary political activism or participation by Social Software is possible, although not necessarily positive. “*Whether information emancipates rather than controls citizens depends upon the extent to which there is scope to challenge, argument, or reject the authority of officially given knowledge*” (Coleman 2007, 367).

Social Software opens up new possibilities. Globalisation, global networks and communities can create space for political participation. The majority is still excluded from cyberspace and hence depends on a real-world elite. We consider Social Software and its potentials as an enhancement possibility for civil society, but as still restricted to Western countries and elites around the globe. The use of Social Software for political protest or participation is dependent on the ideologies, cultural and political contexts of its users and developers. The users and producers of Web 2.0 can either enhance competition, communication or collaboration in cyberspace. Hence technology’s potential for political activism can be used in different ways and the future direction it takes is dependent on its actors.

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