

## The birth of political cyber-activism

Published in: El País (22.06.2008)

There is a notable and lively digital presence in the preparations for the conferences that most of the Spanish political forces (the ERC, PP, PSOE, CDC, and other political parties) have held, are holding or plan to hold before the summer holidays. Official speakers have begun discussing various different amendments to Politics 2.0 online. In most cases, these amendments deal with the use of new technologies in political action. But some have gone beyond that and, trusting in the potential for change that new technologies imply, have proposed rethinking the way political parties are organised, their formulas for programmatic debate and their mechanisms for citizen relations.

There is a strong conviction that this opportunity will wait for no-one. The social and political difficulties that we must face, both locally and globally, demand that latent talent and creativity on the Web penetrate and revitalise the structures of democratic parties in order to bring their basic concept – public service – up to date. There is a hunger – and urgency – for new ideas to meet new challenges. And the Web thrives while party structures languish. There are those who have intuited it and others who do not want to see it even though they know it is there.

In this context, the echo of video-politics and digital activism in the campaign for the [general elections on 9<sup>th</sup> March](#) could not be clearer. For the first time in Spain, political parties strategically and efficiently used different initiatives on the Web on a mass scale to mobilize human resources (they discovered the power of cyber-volunteers), and implemented very effective viral communication actions. Furthermore, the media experimented with forms of citizen participation based in cyberspace. A digital debate was even attempted, without success, between the two main candidates for prime minister, Zapatero and Rajoy.

And added to this is the fact that the impassioned duel of the [American Democratic primaries](#) had a powerful impact on Spanish politics, which questioned the political-energetic and organisational capital that cyber-activists might represent and the possibility of enlisting them as cyber-affiliates (or *cibermilitantes* in Spanish). There is great consensus that a good part of [Barack Obama's](#) success lies in the intelligent use of the tools of Culture 2.0. Obama understood the political capacity of digital social networks, starting with their ability to mobilize supporters and raise funds. He sees new technologies not as just another form of media, but as the

---

organisational reflection of a new political culture. And that understanding is in large part responsible for the senator's connection with young people and more dynamic sectors of society, who feel that the candidate converses with them through their own media, using their own codes.

These are exciting times. It would be unforgivable not to take advantage of this new medium as a tool for renovating Spanish politics. This is a great opportunity for the parties to institute a profound change of style and organisational culture that would let them evolve towards more open, flexible and innovative structures just as so many companies, universities and other organisations have done within the framework of the information and communication society.

The ad, for example, for the [Plan de Modernización de las Agrupaciones \(Grouping Modernisation Plan\)](#) with which the PSOE is looking into reforming its internal organisation, has created a suitable framework in the socialist arena for the debate about the model of political affiliation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Casas del Pueblo* (local political party chapter houses) hold no attraction for many citizens today, not as a place for socialisation or dialogue or representation or as a place for political activism. They have been left practically abandoned and do not reflect the sociological and cultural plurality of their environments (especially in urban contexts). Meanwhile, the reasons for getting involved and the desire to do so continue to grow in our society.

Other parties, like the Catalan PSC and CDC, intensely experience the vitality of their voter base and find themselves in full pre-conference debate, asking themselves how to interpret the drive for change and how to incorporate it without disappointment. There is a demand for different – and new – politics. There is an urgent need for new organisations.

However, not everyone was taken with this cyber-enthusiasm at the [PSOE pre-conference debate](#). [Amendment 445](#) (driven by a group of Valencian socialists) and the so-called Facebook amendment (encouraged by many activists and welcomed by several federations) have received support, but also outright rejection. There is fear that the digital will overflow its rightful place and contaminate. Some leaders, including young leaders, believe that *iron bums and wooden arms* (an allusion to the organic control of assemblies with endless speeches and unanimous votes) are more democratic “because people are present and show their faces”. And there is a poorly disguised suspicion that this digital craze is just a passing trend, that it is empty of political content and the prisoner of a dogmatic new elite that will end up

---

widening the digital divide. But the risks, some of them very real, cannot and must not paralyze necessary and urgent change. Formal politics may arrive a day late and a penny short to what is on the horizon. It is no wonder, then, that politics comes in last place in terms of what people consider important.

In this crossfire, some leaders attempt only to channel the energy of digital activists in order to capitalise on their mobilizing capacity, but disregard their potential for prominence and leadership. They think of the digital domain as something to be colonised, without understanding that it is about influencing and being influenced. They try to convert the digital arena into a new dogmatic space or a recruitment centre, but this will only lead to networks empty of vitality. Others identify Politics 2.0 with ICT proposals or with expressing sympathy for defenders of free software. But they are both wrong (or they fall short) if they simplify or reduce the intensity of these political changes to the merely "technological".

[Digital culture is a wave of social regeneration](#) (and this is where its political power comes from) that, with very deep-seated movements in our society, connects: pleasure for shared knowledge and the creation of content; repugnance for ideological indoctrination; rejection of organisational verticality; more open and precise formulas for participation; new relational codes and codes for the socialization of interests; recognition of leadership that creates value; sensitivity towards more day-to-day, personal issues; global vision of the local reality; and permanent creativity as a driver of innovation. There is hope for new leadership. But on the Web only authority is recognised, not hierarchy. Better causes than dogmas.

So we are not talking simply about new political affiliates (cyber-affiliates, or *cibermilitantes* in Spanish) or of a new political battlefield (the Web). And it is not only about new tools (blogs, wiki, twitter, networks, video-politics, etc.) either. And neither is the issue resolved with the creation of a new "sector" (the knowledge and information society sector). No, we are not only talking about technology. We are talking about the politics of the future – of understanding it anew, of representing it in the *network society*.

We could start with the name of the thing. *Cibermilitantes*? Now that the conference-holding season is in full swing, making a small semantic alteration would be a huge contribution. Why not abandon the word "*militante*" and reclaim the term "member" or "activist"? Despite the emotional and political value that it had in the past, the word "*militante*" today has communicative echoes of strict,

---

exclusive and harsh discipline. And, it does not appear even once in the [Political Parties Act](#), which always uses the term "affiliates".

Now, while there is still time, please think about it. If you want cyber-politics, do not insist on calling activists "*cibermilitantes*". Begin with words. It is not a small change. And then move on to other changes. The time has come.

**Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubí**