

## Imaging Dissent, or Online Mexican Activism on the Global Stage

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In the two videos below, produced by the promoters of a campaign called [#ContraelSilencioMx](#) and distributed through social media, a young woman explains the opposition to Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's proposed Ley de Telecomunicaciones (Telecommunications Bill). Initially proposed as a measure to destabilize the nation's television duopoly, the bill proved less than a minor nuisance to the Televisa media empire. Although the long-standing media giant would get two more competitors in the broadcast arena, its control over the pay-TV market—increasingly its most profitable venture—remained unchallenged.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the more pressing concern with the Telecommunications Bill became the new government rights it ushered, chief among which was allowing government officials both to access citizens' private online data without a court order and to block all communication signals in areas they deemed "a threat to national security" for an unspecified period of time.<sup>2</sup> Human rights and Internet freedom advocates flagged these censorship measures and launched campaigns against them.



Video 1 <http://youtu.be/F6RARclnDM>



Video 2 <http://youtu.be/8El2QlwbMZM>

Both of these videos are similar except that the one on the left is in Spanish and the one on the right is in English.<sup>3</sup> The fact that this group decided to create an English-language version of their campaign illustrates the maxim that, nowadays, activists committed to even the most local of issues must increasingly articulate these issues for a global audience.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the woman positions the actions in Mexico as the start for a global movement against Internet censorship, promoting an alliance across nations on the basis of this universal ideal of a free Internet. Yet, while the Spanish version aims both to criticize the proposed bill and to incite action against it, the English version targets an audience that will probably not be able to engage in the latter. Still, the wider, English-speaking audience's awareness of the issues provides a potentially powerful indictment of the Mexican government. The second video, then, intends to effect a different kind of change; namely, it seeks to transform the global audience's perception of Mexico.

I open with these two videos in order to argue for the relevance and increasing importance of a particular form of social media activism, what I call imaging dissent. Imaging dissent refers to social media activism whose effect, whether intended or not, is visualizing a counteracting image of the world. This form of online activism creates a distinct, contesting worldview that runs counter to the perceived norm, or the accepted image of something. Here "image" stands for not (only) a semiotic value apprehended visibly but rather, in a "broader, more figurative" sense, as "an epistemic process of cognitive understanding and conceptualization."<sup>5</sup> In this case, social media activism results in an imaging process that provides a new conceptualization of the world it aspires to represent. By visualizing its alternative, imaging dissent stands as a powerful technique in protesting the status quo.

If this sounds like an argument that has been made before, that is because it has—but only up to a point. In the wake of movements such as the Arab

Spring and Occupy Wall Street, scholars and cultural critics continuously debate the role of social media for contemporary activist campaigns. While some remain skeptical about the value of social media for activist purposes<sup>6</sup> many have shown how it plays an integral, increasingly indispensable role in all sorts of mobilizations.<sup>7</sup> I agree with Jeffrey Juris when he suggests that by now it is clear both that digital media influence activist movements and that “the messiness of offline politics” continues to matter, so the question is not *if* but *how* digital media matter in contemporary movements.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the outpour of scholarship on the effects of social media activism, a recurring problem in these studies is that, in order to evaluate the effects of this activism, scholars often look solely at its offline reverberations. Even arguments that celebrate the affordances of digital media for activist purposes limit their focus to activities such as intergroup communication and organization of demonstrations.<sup>9</sup> In short, online activities are merely brought into the fold of the offline ones. By asking whether online activism yields offline results, not only does the offline sphere acquire primacy, but also the relationship between both is cemented as unidirectional. How the effectiveness of social media activism is gauged, then, becomes limited to aspects such as government indictments or policy changes. To be sure, these effects matter, but I contend that the exclusive focus on them precludes the inclusion of other types of tactics such as imaging dissent, which, in some cases, may procure more lasting, even if less pointed, consequences.

Because of its focus on the imaging properties of activism, imaging dissent accounts for the online and offline spheres differently from previous evaluations of social media activism, arguing that the online and offline effects can be considered separate albeit not exclusionary. Instead, akin to a systems theory logic, the online and offline spheres may be posited as distinct yet interrelated, wherein the actions in one may have resonances in the other, and vice versa. The offline and online spheres mutually constitute the plane on which social media activism operates.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the effects brought about by a distinct imaging of the world can be evidenced in both spheres, yet the scale and reach of these effects may significantly diverge. For instance, during the attacks on Gaza by the Israeli Defense Force during the summer of 2014, the social media outpour of support for Palestinians led many commentators to suggest that Israel was “losing the social media war.”<sup>11</sup> The social media support may not have stopped the attacks from the IDF, but it provided an alternative space where these acts could be reinterpreted. In fact, as the phrasing of “the social media war” implies, the online sphere has become a separate front on which wars need to be fought, with its own distinct tactics such as [DDoS attacks](#). Considering the online and

offline spheres as separate but not exclusionary reveals how activism undertaken in one can change the perception of the other while obviating an exclusive focus on the unidirectionality of online activism towards offline results.

Two theoretical proposals about our current technologically driven moment inform the concept of imaging dissent. First is Martin Heidegger's proposal that the world has become a "world picture," which "does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture."<sup>12</sup> In the modern state of technological development, understanding the world is tantamount to being able to picture it through technological means. Yet, while Heidegger links this imaging of the world to its mastery, imaging dissent results from the impossibility of this mastery, a consequence of the surplus of images circulating online. In this regard, Lev Manovich's notion of "visualization" proves generative. Manovich theorizes "visualization" as the transformation of information into an image, which implies both that this information did not have a visual form until it was imaged and that this image is not a representation of the information but at once its re-scaling and reconfiguration.<sup>13</sup> Following these two lines of thought, imaging dissent is both the process of presenting a distinct image of the world and of bringing forth this image from various informational registers. Imaging dissent is not a visual representation of a protest, but a visualization of the world that runs counter to the perceived norm. Epistemically, imaging protest stretches beyond raising awareness precisely because of this relation between visualization and the image as a conceptualization of the world. Since raising awareness is meant to bring attention to the activism itself or to the cause being championed, there is an indexical relationship between the offline actions and their online representations, but imaging dissent re-conceptualizes the world including but not limited to the particular cause being championed. Imaging dissent is thus residual both in scale and temporality; it exceeds the efforts of any one group championing a cause and its effects may last longer than those of any one campaign.

Looking back at other instances of social media activism in Mexico can illustrate how imaging dissent has functioned long before the campaigns against the Telecommunications Bill. An example is the city #follow campaign, where people in the northern border states could keep abreast of dangerous zones by following the hashtag of their city (e.g. #MtyFollow, #ReynosaFollow). This campaign filled in the gaps of mainstream media's lack of coverage of everyday drug cartel violence in the northern part of the country.<sup>14</sup> The potential threat of this online campaign, particularly in

revealing quotidian aspects that were intended to remain hidden, did not go unnoticed by the government or the drug cartels. In 2011, two Twitter users who reported violent occurrences related to the government's war with the drug cartels were arrested on terrorism charges in the state of Veracruz, only to be released a month later.<sup>15</sup> In October 2014, angry cartel members executed the administrator of a citizen's journalism group in the border state of Tamaulipas and publicized her death on Facebook and Twitter as a warning for others engaging in these sorts of campaigns.<sup>16</sup> These campaigns to report on daily occurrences of drug violence only intended to keep citizens informed and thereby safe, but through this engagement—through the sheer aggregate of videos, tweets, and other posts depicting daily violence, the campaigns also provided an alternative image of what life was like in these Mexican states. The imaging process proved dangerous to the government, which wished to downplay its ineffectiveness at reining in this violence, and to the cartels, which resented the voices that stood against their purported control over the area.

Another example is the student-led movement called "YoSoy132". In the lead-up to the 2012 Mexican presidential election, the collective launched a social media campaign to counteract what was perceived as rampant political favoritism from the two television networks, prompting calls of a "Mexican Spring."<sup>17</sup> YoSoy132 social media activity not only provided an alternative avenue for obtaining information on electoral issues but also made the widespread discontent with both the frontrunner candidate and the television networks' practices visible. The federal government attempted to hinder their potentially damaging image effects by contracting spambots to drown out the tweets that expressed opposition.<sup>18</sup> Then, in December 2013, the [website](#) documenting testimonies from the December 1, 2012, protests against incoming president Enrique Peña Nieto, was shut down for three months—supposedly by request from the US Department of Homeland Security—yet reinstated for no apparent reason.<sup>19</sup> In this light, the Telecommunications Bill's proposed allowances for shutting down communications during government-mandated "periods of unrest" stands as the apex of the state's preventative action against social media activism.

Of course, the aims of these different online campaigns were squarely centered on offline results, such as keeping citizens informed of violent occurrences or influencing voting decisions. Yet, in pursuing these aims, and regardless of whether they achieved them, these campaigns also effected an image change. Imaging dissent proved a powerful threat from social media activism beyond, and in spite of, the other purported aims of this activism.

However, imaging dissent is not merely a corollary to, or a secondary effect of, online activism. Increasingly, activists seek to capture the residual capacities of imaging dissent and reignite them as a tactical tool. The video campaigns described at the beginning of this essay are a good example of this. In addition to these, activists used Twitter campaigns with English or multilingually intelligible hashtags (for example [#EPNvsInternet](#), [#EPNstop](#)) and icons representative of their opposition to the president's reforms (for instance, in the image below, the president's famously perfectly-coiffed hairstyle stands metonymically for his role) in order to spread their message and generate support. These efforts both engaged a more global, cosmopolitan<sup>20</sup> audience and created a distinct image of the country's lack of support for the president's bill.



Image 1

<http://static.adnpolitico.com/media/2012/05/18/anti-pea.jpg>

These activists' impetus to change the Mexican government's global image is best understood in contrast to the continued promotion of a "Mexican Moment" in the foreign press. Bolstered by celebratory articles in outlets such as *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal*, the "Mexican Moment" has become a constant refrain that presumes the country is on the way to economic prosperity and political openness.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the

president's proposed reforms, including the Telecommunications Bill, are cited as exemplars of the country's boom. When the "Mexican Moment" aura surfaced in foreign reports of the Telecommunications Bill, the expected changes to the television conglomerates' structure were celebrated as democratizing yet the more alarming changes to government overreach went unnoticed. Online campaigns were then poised to counter this celebratory image of the "Mexican Moment" by presenting an opposing one.

Importantly, the value and intended effect of this activism is precisely the creation of these oppositional images, through the tactic that I have called imaging dissent. Counteracting the perception of Mexico's reforms, particularly the Telecommunications Bill, as progressive measures became an important endeavor beyond the activist efforts to stop the bill from passing. In fact, this endeavor becomes even more pressing *because* the bill could not be stopped. Since both legislative bodies approved the bill on July 9, 2014, the online efforts to illustrate the potential problems it will engender in the future acquire an even greater weight. Merely accounting for the offline results of these campaigns would have obfuscated the continued importance of protest even after the legislative decisions.

Furthermore, since the logics of imaging dissent depend on addressing a more global audience, the campaigns against the Telecommunications Bill were best suited to this tactic because they appealed to a universal ideal<sup>22</sup>—that of an internet free from government surveillance—in order to mobilize international support. Other bills, which had their own vehement opponents, did not garner similar online global campaigns because their focus relied more heavily on national specificities.



Image 2

[http://img.timeinc.net/time/images/overs/pacific/2014/20140224\\_600.jpg](http://img.timeinc.net/time/images/overs/pacific/2014/20140224_600.jpg)



Video 3 <http://youtu.be/9eIjpg85GKE>

Finally, the online nature of imaging dissent means that campaigns benefit from platforms where various forms of activism can be aggregated to target a more substantial mass, which has implications not only in terms of scale, by being able to reach more people than mainstream media

reporting would, but also in terms of longevity, by producing an image of dissent that can be sustained for a longer time than the average news cycle. This latter aspect becomes crucial to capture the attention of a substantial audience in the contemporary information-saturated landscape, which typically frames protests as spectacular events rather than ongoing



processes that address slow-moving, long-lasting changes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the more recent campaign to find forty-three missing students from Ayotzinapa, whose disappearance is linked to local and state governments and about which the federal government remained silent until pressure from online movements escalated.<sup>23</sup> [YouTube videos](#), [Twitter accounts](#), [Tumblrs](#), and more social media initiatives sprung up to demand action from and to publicly condemn the Mexican government, not only for the crimes against these forty-three students but also for the government's responsibility in allowing them to occur. As of early 2015, they have yet to be found, but the long term efforts of these campaigns sustain an oppositional image to that desired by the government, and, in doing so, continue to expose the purported myth of a "Mexican Moment."<sup>24</sup> Thus, imaging dissent, as one form of social media activism, should remind us that having both the online and offline spheres as potential spaces of protest requires expanding the rubrics by which we evaluate this activism, and the extent to which their effects are multidirectional and temporally divergent. If the Mexican government ever uses its newfound right to shut down communications in areas of unrest, then the mutual importance between offline and online activism will become even more salient, precisely because the latter's residual capabilities will be seriously compromised.

## Notes

- 1 Laya, Patricia. "Mexico Advances Telecom Law to Challenge Slim's Dominance." *Bloomberg News*. July 7, 2014.  
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-07/mexico-advances-telecom-law-to-challenge-slim-s-dominance.html>
- 2 Galperin, Eva. "Proposed Mexican Telecom Law Would Be a Disaster for Internet Freedom." *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. 5 May 2014.  
<https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/05/proposed-mexican-telecom-law-would-be-disaster-internet-freedom>
- 3 Incidentally, the woman in the Spanish promo is also more impassioned and sometimes less eloquent than the one in the English one
- 4 A similar observation is made in relation to testimonial documentaries by Sarkar and Walker in Sarkar, Bhaskar, and Janet Walker. *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 3.



- 5 Here I am following the distinction made by Alexander Galloway, who, in explaining W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of "the visual", posits it as distinct from the visible, where the visual refers to understanding in terms of an image which need not be perceived only via the optical—a distinction that becomes all the more important in discussions of online media's multisensorial affordances. See Galloway, Alexander. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012. 62.
- 6 See, for instance, Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The New Yorker* (October 4, 2010) <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3>>. Seay, Laura. "Does Slacktivism Work?" *The Washington Post* (12 March 2014). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/12/does-slacktivism-work/>
- 7 Examples with different approaches include, but are not limited to: Christensen, Henrik Serup. "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or Political Participation by Other Means?" *First Monday* 16.2 (7 February 2011). <<http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3336/2767>>. Murthy, Dhiraj. "Twitter: Microphone for the Masses?" *Media, Culture & Society* 33.5 (2011): 779-789. <<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/33/5/779>>. Costanza-Chock, Sasha. "The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net." *American Quarterly* 60.3 (September 2008): 851-864. Caren, Neal and Sarah Gaby. "Occupy Online: Facebook and the Spread of Occupy Wall Street" *SSRN* (24 October 2011) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1943168>>. Pollock, John. "Streetbook: How Egyptian and Tunisian Youth Hacked the Arab Spring" *MIT Technology Review* 114.5 (23 August 2011) <<http://www.technologyreview.com/featuredstory/425137/streetbook/>>.
- 8 Juris, Jeffrey. "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere" *American Ethnologist* 29.2 (2012): 259-279.
- 9 For instance, internet critic Nathan Jurgenson rebukes of the idea of slacktivism by arguing that revolts such as the Arab Spring prove how online activities can greatly benefit their offline counterparts. See Jurgenson, Nathan. "Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality". *Cyborgology* (24 February 2011).
- 10 For example, in the case of the Ferguson, Missouri, protests, the trending hashtags are credited with attracting national mainstream

news attention to the offline protests but social media conversations continue to showcase this struggle long after national news cameras have left. See Somashekhar, Sandhya. "Ferguson Protest Organizers: 'I sleep, eat and breathe this'." *The Washington Post* (11 November 2014) <<http://wapo.st/1EyR8Vs>>.

- 11 See, for instance, Paul Mason, "Why Israel is Losing the Social Media War Over Gaza" *Channel 4 News* (21 July 2014) <<http://blogs.channel4.com/paul-mason-blog/impact-social-media-israelgaza-conflict/1182>> and Jodi Rudoren, "In the Battleground of Words, Hatred and Muddled Reality" *New York Times* (21 July 2014): A1 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/21/world/middleeast/in-a-clash-between-israel-and-gaza-both-sides-use-social-media-to-fire-epithets-and-hide-behind-euphemisms.html>>
- 12 Heidegger, Martin. "The Age of the World Picture", *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Garland Publishing, 1977: 129-130.
- 13 Manovich, Lev. "What is visualization?" *Visual Studies* 26.1 (2011): 36-49.
- 14 Monroy-Hernández, Andrés, Emre Kiciman, danah boyd, Scott Counts. "Narcotweets: Social Media in Wartime". *Proceedings of the Sixth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (2012).
- 15 Soberanes, Rodrigo. "Veracruz desiste de su acusación contra dos 'tuiteros' y los deja libres". *CNN Mexico* (21 September 2011). <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2011/09/21/el-gobierno-de-veracruz-liberara-a-los-tuiteros-acusados-de-terrorismo>
- 16 McGahan, Jason. "She Tweeted Against the Mexican Cartels. They Tweeted Her Murder". *The Daily Beast* (21 October 2014) <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/21/she-tweeted-against-the-mexican-cartels-they-tweeted-her-murder.html>>
- 17 See Guillén, Diana. "Mexican Spring? #YoSoy132, the Emergence of an Unexpected Collective Actor in the National Political Arena". *Social Movement Studies* 12.4 (2013): 471-476. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14742837.2013.830563>> and Goggin, Gerard, and César albarrán Torres. "Political and mobile media landscapes in Mexico: the case of #yosoy132". *Continuum* 28.1 (2014): 28-42. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10304312.2014.870870>

- 18 Verkamp, John-Paul, and Mixani Gupta. "Five incidents, one theme: Twitter spam as a weapon to drown voices of protest". *3rd USENIX Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet* (13 August 2013) <https://www.usenix.org/conference/foci13/workshop-program/presentation/verkamp>.
- 19 Brandom, Russel. "Did GoDaddy and Homeland Security shut down a Mexican protest site?". *The Verge* (24 May 2014). <<http://www.theverge.com/2014/5/24/5746232/did-godaddy-and-homeland-security-shut-down-a-mexican-protest-site>>
- 20 I term this audience as "global cosmopolitan" because, arguably, those most likely to notice and empathize with the cause of an internet without government surveillance are people with continuous, ready online access. This audience was also most likely to be aware of the reports extolling the Mexican Presidents' reforms.
- 21 For instance, see Barbieri, Pierpaolo, and Niall Ferguson "Mexico's Economic Reform Breakout" *The Wall Street Journal* (26 December 2013). <<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304367204579268742046427468>> and "Mexico's Moment". *The Economist* (21 November 2012). <http://www.economist.com/news/21566314-enrique-pe%C3%B1a-nieto-mexicos-newly-elected-president-sets-out-his-priorities-mexicos-moment>
- 22 I refer to the universal as opposed to the particular, specifically in the ways that Anna Tsing has noted how the universal works in mobilizing transnational campaigns about local issues. See Tsing, Anna. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- 23 Ayotzinapa: A Timeline of the Mass Disappearance that Has Shaken Mexico" *Vice News* (6 November 2014) <https://news.vice.com/article/ayotzinapa-a-timeline-of-the-mass-disappearance-that-has-shaken-mexico>
- 24 Martinez Gutierrez, Paula, and Camila Ruiz Segovia. "Exposing the Fallacy of the Mexican Moment". *Brown Political Review* (20 October 2014) <<http://www.brownpoliticalreview.org/2014/10/ayotzinapa-exposing-the-fallacy-of-the-mexican-moment/>>