

# Redes sociales: blessing or curse? | LAB

<https://lab.org.uk/redes-sociales-blessing-or-curse/>

Social media outlets, such as Twitter and WhatsApp, played a major role in the protests that spread across the Americas in 2019. In Chile, hashtags raised awareness of the protests online and explained the reasons why Chileans were taking to the streets. #Chiledespertó (#Chilewokeup) and #ChileQuiereCambios (#ChileWantsChanges) were two commonly used examples.[1] This also meant that users across Chile and the world could follow the protests in real time. In Ecuador, social media was used to publish graphic details of violent action by soldiers against protestors in October 2019. A notable example of this appeared from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.[2]

Across the border in Colombia, social media was a means to arrange protest, such as deciding the meeting place, planning activities and responding to any changes[3]. In October 2019 Colombian trade unions called a national strike and Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were used to spread the message throughout the country.[4]

## Rigging the count

On the other hand, there are accusations that internet technology has been used to rig election vote counts in the Americas. In the Honduran election in 2017, the Organization of American States (OAS) Electoral Observation Mission reported problems with the Electoral Vote Counting and Dissemination System.[5] The Mission reported access to vote count servers from remote locations. Indeed, the OAS Mission concluded that it 'observed a low quality process' and that the problems 'precluded full certainty regarding the outcome.'[6]

There were similar accusations of accessing servers to manipulate the vote count in the October 2020 election in Bolivia. The OAS report argued that there was a hidden computer server that tilted the vote count towards Morales.[7] Political leaders can seemingly appear democratic by holding an election, but also ensure their victory through the use of technology.

So, internet technology and social media have both positive and negatives impacts on democracy. This comes at a time where support for and satisfaction in democracy in the region is lukewarm at best. Eighty per cent of under 25s in the Americas regularly use social media. But, it is the young who are also overall shown to be less supportive of democracy.[8]

Technology and social media can engage and reach people who have historically not been involved in politics, such as young people, or people who have felt far removed from politics. There are now other ways, aside from the traditional campaigning outlets of TV and

radio, where political campaigning and discussion can take place.

In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, the 'millennial' president, has given orders via Twitter, which his ministers then carried out.[9] Yet Bukele avoided interviews and debates during his victorious election campaign, using Twitter, Facebook and Instagram instead. Jose Miguel Cruz, a Salvadorian political analyst, said that this allowed him to take his message to the people in a more personal and effective way"[10]. One might also infer that it was a much less risky way than live Debates or hustings with opponents or sceptical journalists.

In the 2018 Brazilian election, Jair Bolsonaro qualified for very little airtime on traditional TV and radio political outlets, because Brazilian law allocates media coverage by the size of the political party. However, he was very influential and active on social media, and in 2018 had significantly more 'likes' on Facebook than ex-President Lula.[11] Social media worked to his advantage.

### **Fake news**

Technology and social media have made possible a vast increase in the spread of misinformation. The spread of misinformation is often achieved by manipulating the algorithms of social media platforms or using fake accounts to make posts that are often tailored to encourage emotional responses when seen.[12]

Some accused the Colombian government of being behind the strategy to engender panic so as to justify the use of force to end the 2019 protests. There were online reports of hooligans entering residential blocks and causing havoc. This was denied by police chief Óscar Atehortúa[13] however it motivated some residents to form vigilante groups to defend their property.

Senator Roy Barreras called on the authorities to investigate the 'reports of vandalism made to spread panic and delegitimise peaceful protest.'[14] Enrique Peñalosa, the former mayor of Bogotá added 'the most dangerous [social media platform] is WhatsApp, because people receive messages from those they know and have confidence in. People often think that if they receive something from someone they are close to, it must be true.'[15]

In Bolivia, misinformation has been widespread on social media following the controversial elections in October 2019 and the subsequent resignation of Evo Morales in November 2019, and it was used both in support of and to attack Morales and MAS. Fake stories include a video purporting to be a Bolivian military helicopter opening fire at some houses. The video had been falsely labelled and actually originated from a Mexican anti-drug trafficking military operation in Tepic in 2017.[16] Also, a photo appeared online of Evo Morales apparently standing alongside Pablo Escobar and 'El Chapo' Guzman. The photo was actually a doctored image of three different photos.[17]

As its use, reach and influence increased, social media has also served to increase political polarisation. Today, many social media users operate in a 'vacuum,' whereby they only interact exclusively with people who share their opinions and often react in extremely negative ways, dismissing out of hand posts with an opposing view.

Alongside its polarising effect, social media use has allowed fringe groups to occupy as much space and influence as far larger and more established mainstream groups and organisations. For instance, in Brazil right wing influencers such as 'Movimento Brasil Livre' (Free Brazil Movement) and YouTube pundit Olavo de Carvalho have been able to extend their coverage and become widely popular in ways that would scarcely have been possible prior to the advent of social media platforms[18].

In the future, it will be fascinating to see how this influence develops. On the one hand, political participation is supported and protest is aided. On the other hand, technology and social media boost misinformation, polarisation and vote rigging.

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