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Marketing: Between the Promotion of  
Communication and Moralistic Solipsism**



**Bernardo Sorj**  
**Working Paper 2, March 2006**



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**The Edelstein Center for Social Research**  
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# **Internet, Public Sphere and Political Marketing: Between the Promotion of Communication and Moralistic Solipsism<sup>1</sup>**

Bernardo Sorj<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The empirical basis of this article is taken from material that circulated on the Internet during the campaign for the referendum on arms trade, which took place in Brazil on the 23rd of October, 2005, and resulted in a landslide NO vote against arms trade prohibition. My forth-coming argument is that the over-optimistic forecasts maintaining that new communication technologies (would) enhance democracy, as is widely claimed in the literature on this issue, have been merely wishful thinking and should be contrasted against the backdrop of historical experience. The case of the aforementioned referendum implies that the impact exerted by the Internet on political dynamics shows a far more complex reality, and that alongside Internet's positive aspects are also negative ones, such as its potential to destroy the public sphere.

The libertarian expectations raised by the Internet resemble those of the neoclassical economic view on the market: the freer people are to act without any external interferences or regulations, the better the results. Our conclusions are critical of such a viewpoint, and are geared to a different perspective: both the public sphere and the market demand an effort by the public to construct a

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collective realm with minimum regulations, possibly established by the users themselves, so that it may operate responsibly and be kept free from control by individuals or groups often related to economic power and political marketing, who manipulate the Internet language and use it anonymously, with no commitment to civic values or democratic fair play.

### Internet and Democracy

The Internet was welcomed by the vast majority of social scientists and policy makers as if it offered a unique opportunity to renew democracy in general, and in particular, enabled extensive participation of people in politics. The www and e-mail would allow for the emergence of new interrelating mechanisms between public institutions and citizens, favoring the transparency of public budgets now accessible on-line, facilitating comments and claims regarding services, enabling new forms of organization as regards public services, and making information available to the general public.

Moreover, new communication technologies would ensure new forms of horizontal civilian participation, which are not dependent on traditional means of mass communication, or major political organizations' communication.. Eventually, each individual could actively participate in the construction of a truly democratic public opinion sphere<sup>3</sup>.

The Internet would be particularly relevant for the development of civil society, as it would permit the creation of flexible networks, fast mobilization for ad-hoc campaigns, dissemination of alternative information, and furthermore, it would facilitate the formation of national and international networks of activists not associated to traditional political structures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Manuel Castells, *The InternetGalaxy*, Oxford: Oxford University, 2002, cap. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Warkentin, *Reshaping World Politics: NGOs, the Internet, and Global Civil Society*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001.

Negri and Hardt advanced a revolutionary interpretation on the role of the Internet, which is seen as a new alternative realm of the crowd (broad conception referring to every potential questioning of imperialistic power). According to Negri and Hardt the Internet "... is the prime example of a democratic network structure. An indefinite and potentially unlimited number of people like us, interconnected and communicating without any central control whatsoever.... Such a democratic model is what Deleuze and Guattari call rizoma, neither a hierarchic nor a centralized network structure."<sup>5</sup>

The potentially negative effects of the Internet were generally associated with the use of the web by organized crime or terrorists. Also, there has been growing concern over authoritarian states attempting to control Internet content, even counting on the support of major system providers and search engines, such as Cisco and Google. China, Cuba and some Muslim states are among the countries posing such a threat. In addition, the so-called "war on terrorism" has recently led democratic governments to clampdown on control over content circulating on the web.

Some scholars began to question the role played by this new means of communication in bringing new life to politics. The first generation of such works was, implicit or explicitly, based on the "traditional" concept of social link. According to this view, effective social relations depend on face-to-face personal contact among the people. According to Bauman,<sup>6</sup> this new means of virtual communication severely reduces face-to-face interaction, breaking down the formation of the agora, impairing the foundations of the public sphere and increasing the possibility of state control over the population. Other authors emphasized the capacity of private interests and big corporations to appropriate the new technologies, transforming information into commodities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Império*, Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2001, p. 320. See also Toni Negri's interview Toni Negri (2002), <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0201/msg00142.html>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The book edited by Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, *Democracy and New Media*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003, is representative of this transition period, in which most of the articles are based on guessing the future, strong normative orientation and limited empirical bases.

Republic.com, a book by Cass R. Sunstein<sup>8</sup>, stands out among the new generation of studies analyzing social processes in progress, however, it lacks systematic data. The author argues that the Internet may generate a republic of solipsists, people who only access information that they are interested in, thus avoiding debate, when debate is a fundamental factor in the public sphere. The Internet would favor their tendency to surf websites where information and issues could be selected a priori according to their individual interests only, thus radicalizing their standpoints due to lack of knowledge, touch or interaction with conflicting information and stances.

Peter Levine<sup>9</sup> refers to five potential risks posed by the Internet: less access, limited use and content production by the poverty stricken; a severe drop in the number of face-to-face social relationships, thus undermining the construction of solid social links; a tendency towards group self-isolation, out of touch with diverse standpoints and public debate; internet users becoming mere consumers of products which include both information and beliefs; destruction of individual and group privacy, as well as internet users being turned into mere e-mail addressees, that is to say, address lists organized according to the interests of service providing/sales organizations.

Further analyses stress the impact of the Internet on “old fashioned” communication means: newspapers and television. Whereas television seems to be undergoing a digital revolution, which endlessly multiplies the number of channels available and becomes ever more interactive, newspapers are suffering a significant decrease in the number of readers (who consist mostly of older age-groups) and issues. Information is sought more and more on the Internet, not only through the newspapers’ websites themselves, but also on blogs, which nowadays amount to millions. Even television, which during its heyday threatened newspapers, is now losing ground as the main news source.

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<sup>8</sup> Cass Sunstein, *republic.com*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. See a summary of this argument in: Cass R. Sunstein, *Is the Internet really a blessing for democracy?*, <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR26.3/sunstein.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *The Internet and Civil Society*, [www.imdp.org/artman/publish/article\\_29.shtml](http://www.imdp.org/artman/publish/article_29.shtml), July 11, 2002, 8:00 am.

If this whole process has had any beneficial impact - resulting in the breaking down of the old mass media monopoly - it has also tended to marginalize a central player in the democratic system, that is, newspapers which historically became journalistic benchmarks as regards trustworthy information, which the public could refer to. Still, many believe that in time, the growing number of blogs could possibly undergo a screening process, resulting in some of them emerging as real sources of serious and reliable information.

#### A brief incursion into the bibliography on e-political marketing

Viral marketing (where the concept “viral” has no negative connotations) “...refers to marketing techniques which exploit already existing social networks in order to produce an exponential increase of brand awareness, in a process which resembles an epidemic outbreak. The definition of viral marketing was originally coined to name a practice carried out by several free e-mail service providers, who add advertisements to messages sent to their users. Supposedly, if an advertisement reaches a “susceptible” user, such a user will be “infected” (that is, he/she will open an account) and then this user will be able to “infect” other susceptible users. Each infected user on average sends e-mails to more than one susceptible user (that is, the basic reproductive rate is more than one). Standard epidemiological results show that the number of infected users will grow according to a logistic curve, whose first segment is exponential”.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is considered illegal and companies and institutions do not acknowledge it, SPAM<sup>11</sup> (non-requested e-mails, sent under false sender names or by senders that maintain no relations whatsoever with the addressees, through e-mail listings that feature millions of users, obtained in underhand ways and sold illegally on the market) has become an important tool for political communication. In fact, viral marketing and SPAMs have been adopted by all advertising and political marketing companies.

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10. [http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing\\_Viral](http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing_Viral)

11 See: <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/SPAM/> Specialists also refer to a special type of SPAM, the *Hoax*, an e-mail with false, generally alarmist content. Obviously, in many cases the limits between a SPAM and a Hoax are not easily definable.

It is possible to consider SPAMs and Hoaxes as contemporary forms of traditional rumor. They are different from the latter due to the way and speed in which they can be disseminated. A rumor is a short and simple message conveyed by word of mouth, whereas SPAMs and Hoaxes can contain a lot more information and even images. They can be more effective, but also more easily neutralized by means of counter SPAMs and Hoaxes transmitted almost simultaneously.

Studies on the use of the Internet in political processes are still scarce, although several papers on new communication technologies regarding elections particularly emphasize the role played by cell phones in message sending, as occurred in recent elections in Spain, Hungary<sup>12</sup> and India.

In an article about the use of SPAMs by the extreme right wing in the political campaign in Germany, Alan Connor<sup>13</sup> remarks that many SPAMs are methodically elaborated, despite their apparent simplicity. They are made up in such a way, that when they reach an addressee they seem to have already passed through many users; they are always written in informal language (“my friend”, “colleague”, “dear...”) to show that they are not related to an official source, they even include common spelling mistakes, as if they had been written by “someone like us”. Such SPAMs usually call the readers’ attention to some important “fact” that they should know about, (pretending to help readers so that “they do not get fooled”) and many times these messages are linked to sites where the piece of news “can be corroborated” (usually they hold links to big magazines or newspapers that have no relation whatsoever with the content of the message). Many readers, impressed with the content, forward such e-mails to friends and acquaintances, which makes the information seem to be even more legitimate for those who receive it.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.osa.ceu.hu/kampanyarchiv/english2.html>

<sup>13</sup> “ Spam with everything in Germany’s election”, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-edemocracy/spam\\_2535.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-edemocracy/spam_2535.jsp)

One of the more successful SPAMs, which has circulated on the Internet for several years now, “informs” that school books in the USA do not regard the Amazon region as being part of the Brazilian map anymore and show “photos” and texts (with several English spelling errors) supposedly extracted from such school books. I have received this SPAM periodically, sent to me by university colleagues. This makes us conclude and worry about the fact that people tend to candidly rely on messages that confirm their prejudices, regarding them as trustworthy. They are then led to validate and disseminate such information, without making any efforts to verify the contents.

The book by Joe Trippi<sup>14</sup> on the Howard Dean primary campaign for Democratic Party candidate for the presidency of the USA, is one of the very first attempts to analyze the impact of the Internet on an election process. Trippi states that besides playing a traditional role, such as raising funds and distributing campaign material, Dean’s campaign on the internet was revolutionary as blogs and communities spontaneously organized themselves on the Internet to support the “Dean for America” campaign, which greatly improved the candidate’s position in the poles. Trippi sustains that the internet, despite the unequal access due to income, will enable the breaking down of control by big donors’ and economic lobbies’ over political campaigns.

Internet use was of great importance in the last US presidential campaign, particularly due to banners placed in widely visited sites, which were useful both for fund -raising and also to undermine rivals’ campaigns. According to Michel Bassik<sup>15</sup> the banners that produced best results were those placed on websites where users usually spend a longer time looking for banal information, like sports and weather sites. The author concludes that political marketing specialists still have not discovered the Internet’s potentials, nor have they assumed the need to review the use of traditional media, given the impact that the Internet has exerted on them.

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14 Joe Trippi, *The Revolution will not be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything*, New York: ReganBooks, 2004.

15 *Online Political Marketing Secrets Unveiled*, [www.personaldemocracy.com](http://www.personaldemocracy.com), 28.01.2005- 3:46 pm

## The referendum

Despite the fact that most of the Brazilian people do not possess firearms and have no intention of acquiring them, which in principle should favor the vote for disarming the population, the proposal to impose a ban on arms trade was rejected by a huge two-thirds of the vote. The decisive factor for such a result was probably the government's unsatisfactory public security policies and the consequent sensation of insecurity and helplessness felt by the population. Campaign arguments certainly exerted a specific impact; however, the people's disposition to cast a protest vote was possibly decisive in making them ignore the YES campaign arguments.

Systemic political factors were fundamental, as they undermined the YES vote against the prohibition of arms trade; but undoubtedly media campaigns exerted a relevant impact, although their relative weight is hard to assess.

The publicity of the official campaigns stressed, on the one hand, the right of the people to acquire arms vis-a vis a State unable to ensure public security, and on the other hand, that guns are inefficient when confronting potential aggressors, as well as highly destructive in terms of the loss of human lives. People who actively participated in the campaign shared the sensation that the exchange and circulation of "non official" information via the internet played an important role in the defeat of the YES vote. The importance of the internet in the referendum campaign was relevant due to various factors. Firstly, between 15% to 20% of the Brazilian population has access to the Internet (considering access both from home and work, the latter being difficult to quantify<sup>16</sup>). Such percentages increase if one considers communication among those who have access to the web and those who do not. Secondly, a large part of the population had not assumed any definite stance until the very date of the referendum. People took a long time to take notice of what the vote was actually about. However, during the few campaign weeks, awareness of the ongoing debate was remarkable. Thirdly, the referendum was not at all related to public

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bernardo Sorj e Luis Eduardo Guedes, *Internet y pobreza*. Montevideo: Editora Unesco - Ediciones Trilce, 2005.

personalities or parties, towards which the people had established any previous loyalty or support for (or rejection to). Finally, the referendum favored the debate by presenting a simple bipolar choice: voting for or against legal firearms trade.

The available empirical material does not allow us to evaluate the specific impact of the internet referendum campaign. However, material covering voters' predisposition shows that many of the arguments justifying the NO vote did not originate in the official campaign, but were inspired by the standpoints that circulated on the web.<sup>17</sup>

### The campaign and the websites

Both the referendum results and the opinions of those who participated in the campaign, even the opinions of those who worked for the YES campaign, demonstrate the fact that the NO campaign via e-mails was more successful. Why?

The campaign contents on both official websites presented arguments very similar to those broadcast on radio and TV programs. Both were used to offer their activists arguments and materials that might be reproduced as propaganda booklets or signs.

The NO website (<http://www.votona.com.br/>) was particularly simple, it even reproduced several components of the YES website. The website consisted of the following sections: "Why vote NO", with a list of 6 different arguments; "News", which contained news-items or articles previously published in newspapers; "Statistics", where only a table with data from other countries was shown. It was briefly stated that there is no correlation whatsoever between the number of murders in those countries and the number of households with guns; "Articles", generally extracted from newspapers, some of which were written by

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<sup>17</sup> Christina Vital da Cunha "Referendo das Armas: Propaganda Televisiva e Percepções da População", ms.

intellectuals, well known journalists or politicians (who were not household names); “Popular Opinion”, with texts supposedly written by “the people”; “True Stories”, with texts about parents whose children had been murdered by robbers, who, despite the fact that they did not own guns and did not intend to own them, defended the right of the people to obtain arms; links to other websites, most of them from the USA; “Do your own campaign”, with guidelines on how to collaborate with the campaign; “Cards and wall papers”, showing illustrations favoring the NO vote, consisting of variations of the Brazilian flag as a backdrop. The site included access to TV and radio programs.

Another practically semi-official website was sponsored by the *Rede da Cidadania da Associação Nacional dos Proprietários e Comerciantes de Armas (ANPCA)*,<sup>18</sup> - People’s Network of the National Arm Owners and Traders Association, the main supporter and financier of the NO campaign. This website was a lot more aggressive, and on its first pages showed the following editorials:

- A Vile Law. The Fascist Nature of the Disarmament Statute.
- Every Man for Himself! – Why Do Disarmament Supporters Only Talk about Murders?
- Jews and Disarmament. A Warning for the Israeli Minority in Brazil.
- The Myth of a Disarmed Society, or the Primer on Utopia · Free Drugs and Prohibit Arms. Both Theses Always Walk Hand in Hand.
- Another Childish Prank by Garotinho (Governor of Rio de Janeiro State, whose name means “little kid” in Portuguese). An Example of Public Security Policy.
- Brain-Washing. A Message to the Young.
- Who is interested in Disarmament? A Brief Explanation for the Unwary.
- Ask the People. Certain Opinion Polls do Bother.
- Back to Dictatorship. A Further Step towards Totalitarianism.
- Get Ready for Confiscation! The Next Campaign.
- Missing Aurora! Was the "Wild West" Actually Wild?
- Gloomy Horizon. Prophetic Editorial from ARMARIA, oct/94.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.armaria.com.br/>

- The Return of the National Guard. –Why such an Effort in Disarming the People?
- The Damn Gun! Is the AR-15 Actually So Terrible?

The YES campaign website ([www.referendosim.com.br](http://www.referendosim.com.br)) was disseminated through other websites, generally belonging to NGOs which publicly declared their support for the prohibition of arms trade. However the legislation prohibited the participation in the referendum of organizations which receive foreign support (the case of most NGOs). This inhibited their participation and led to the judiciary order closing temporarily one of the sites of a leading NGO. Besides featuring sections similar to those of the NO website, the YES website also featured thorough information on violence and the use of guns in Brazil and lists of names of companies, religious institutions and women's' organizations that supported the ban on guns trade. If one compared both websites, one would think that the YES vote was bound for victory. It counted on the support of most of civil society organizations, of many businesspeople and it featured arguments solidly supported by facts; whereas the NO campaign only represented one specific group – the arms manufacturers, traders and owners -, featuring arguments that lacked relevant factual support.

The YES website was constantly attacked by hackers, who often succeeded in blocking it. This obliged the people responsible for the website to transfer it to a more secure server based in the USA; nevertheless, the site continued to be attacked, which at its peak reached 9,000 attacks per hour.

On the last week of the campaign the YES website welcomed over 30 thousand visits a day, reaching 36,341 hits on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (unfortunately, such information regarding the NO website is not available). This is undoubtedly a low number of visits, considering that the 30 million Brazilian Internet users were going to vote on the referendum, except those under sixteen.

The campaign: e-mails and SPAMs

Both campaigns were supported by Internet users who sent e-mails to their own e-mail address lists. It is difficult to evaluate and follow up “private” campaigns and their impacts. So, we will focus on SPAM<sup>19</sup> campaigns on a larger scale and consequently on e-mails that can be easily tracked.

The YES campaign was carried out by the same group of people that organized the YES website. It consisted of a daily e-mail (YES-Express), whose basic language coincided with the one used on the website. Given its institutional format, the YES-Express anticipated its content; it lacked the “something new” kind of appeal that SPAMs from no obvious senders featured. The YES-Express mailing list, consisted of 15,000 e-mail addresses at the beginning of the campaign, and reached 30,000 e-mail addresses by the end of the campaign. It was made up of e-mail addresses of people who supported and were close to the NGO Viva Rio. The number of e-mail addresses was extremely low and somehow redundant: it represented the universe of people who already supported the cause.

The number of e-mails received by the YES website, about 200 to 300 a day, was indeed far too low, which possibly reflected the lack of enthusiasm and activism on the part of those who supported the ban on arms trade. A few internet users supporting the YES vote carried out their own private campaigns with their own texts or texts extracted from the press, but this only involved a very limited number of people.

During the campaign, a big private company decided to send an e-mail to its mailing list of over one million e-mail addresses supporting the YES vote, repeating the central arguments put forward by the official campaign. Other NGOs also transmitted e-mails supporting the YES Campaign. The case of Greenpeace stands out, whose cyber-bulletin supporting the YES campaign reached over seven hundred thousand individuals, which shows an organization that certainly has command over the use of communication means.

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<sup>19</sup> SPAMS: unsolicited or undesired bulk electronic messages

Differently from the people who do not own guns, gun owners and traders were indeed a committed group of activists. Although they are a minority of the population (less than 10%), this group really made a strenuous effort during the referendum campaign via the Internet, spreading SPAMs elaborated by the NO campaign.

The NO campaign was mainly carried out through SPAMs sent to mailing lists that consisted of hundreds of thousands, or even millions of internet users. We cannot prove that these SPAMs were elaborated by the NO campaign committee, but the quantity and quality of such SPAMs strongly suggest that they were financed. Many of these SPAMs were translated from materials originally written in English, which follow the same argument line globally inspired by the National Rifle Association (NRA) of the United States.<sup>20</sup> The Brazilian referendum on arms trade was regarded as a very significant episode by the NRA. As their spokesman, Andrew Arulanandam, put it: “We view Brazil as the opening salvo for the global gun control movement. If gun control proponents succeed in Brazil, America will be next”.<sup>21</sup>

The NO vote SPAM campaign started in September, and it reproduced the characteristics of the German campaign, that is, personal e-mails (“Let’s reflect on this together”, “I changed my mind”), which gave the impression of having already circulated among many users who thought the messages were relevant and consequently decided to forward them. As mentioned above, this type of SPAM, because it is apparently non-institutional, is generally very convincing and seems to be sincere and legitimate given the personal tone of righteous indignation, although they often contain information which is hard to verify. This strongly suggests that the apparently non-institutional nature of these SPAMs makes them exert a stronger impact than explicitly institutional propaganda. Besides, only the latter appears as propaganda, which makes the reader suspicious about it.

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<sup>20</sup> David Morton, “Gunning for the World”, *Foreign Policy*, January/February, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

Some of the NO campaign SPAMs, maintained that in the eventuality that the ban on the arms trade were passed, Brazil would not be able to export weapons anymore, because there is a law in vigor stating that products whose trade is forbidden within the country cannot be exported. This is obviously senseless information, because even if the ban on arms trade were sanctioned, weapons would still be sold to the Armed Forces and public security forces. Even so, I was impressed by the number of “well-informed” middle class people I talked to who thought this piece of information was trustworthy (in some of its versions, this SPAM “informed” that the principal interested party in the arms trade ban was Globo Networks, as they would be about to close a deal with a German gun manufacturer, through which Globo would become their exclusive importer in Brazil).

A typical SPAM example featured a revolver and a condom, along with the following question: “What do you prefer to use in case of rape?”. Another SPAM from the NO campaign, which was extremely influential, showed images of the Nazi concentration camps as a back drop, with texts that held no relation to the images whatsoever, presenting distorted “facts”, where disarmament was related to a series of different massacres and genocides, regardless of any logic or chronology; political facts that took place in the 1920s were related to facts that took place decades later. The ANPCA (*Associação Nacional de Proprietários e Comerciantes de Armas* - National Association of Arm Owners and Traders) also used the image of Hitler, which appeared in a poster where the dictator is performing the Nazi salute, with a text demoralizing the YES vote. Some other SPAMs tried to demoralize personalities who supported the YES vote featuring photos that distorted their images, associating them to historical personalities, such as Hitler and Stalin. In general, the NO vote SPAMs related those who supported the YES vote to old Fascists, Communists or else to those who had defended the Brazilian military dictatorship.

In sum, NO vote SPAMS promoted conspiratory theories, disqualifying and misinforming, as well as using personal offenses and fear tactics. The use of such language, as aforementioned, was facilitated by the internet: those

messages appeared as being “personal”, thus the style was one of strong “indignation” and “denunciation”.

### Conclusions: Internet, democracy and political marketing

The internet Yes campaign was particularly weak. It lacked strategic coordination with the YES TV and radio campaigns; it simply reproduced the messages broadcast by these two media. Moreover, it did not capture the potentials and particular language of the new medium. The YES campaign was undermined by the NO activists’ efficient use of the internet.

The campaign also made evident certain weaknesses on the part of the NGOs. They are very fragmented, and despite the fact that most of them have been using the internet for years now, they do not possess numerically relevant mailing lists. Neither do they cooperate effectively with each other in a network fashion, so as to reach a wider public. As aforementioned, the only exemption was Greenpeace, who managed a far more advanced communication technology campaign as compared to local NGOs.

Accustomed to working with people that sympathize with their campaigns, NGOs use a self-satisfied, or rather self-referential language directed toward people who already lean towards their position, discourse and/or intellectual style. Brazilian NGOs are absolutely unprepared to carry out political campaigns where their opponent resorts to all possible schemes in order to disqualify them. Meanwhile, the NO campaign activists were united and knew how to exploit the different potentials of each means of communication, The YES campaign just reproduced the “controlled” language of traditional media.

Possibly, a good deal of the spurious messages used by the NO campaign played only a secondary role in this general context. The intelligent mobilization of the people’s feelings of insecurity and fear, given the faulty and unsatisfactory public security policies, was enough to trigger the NO vote. However, the referendum experience may happen again in the future, and that

brings us to a broader issue, which is the Internet as public sphere and its impact on the dynamics of democracy, and more specifically the question of how to confront an aggressive SPAM campaign without leaving our ethical posture behind.

The emergence of a new means of communication demands a strenuous effort to reflect upon the role it plays within the public sphere. The public sphere has never been a homogeneous realm. On the contrary, it has always been multi-faceted and formed by various layers of different groups and organizations, most of these being rather self-centered, be it trade unions or religious, political, Masonic organizations, etc. The new public sphere found on the Internet tends to jeopardize the relatively “reserved” character of the aforesaid organizations, retracing the borders between the public and the private. For instance, what is ORKUT<sup>22</sup>? A private space for exchanges among individuals with common interests, or is it rather a public information bank, even used by companies to find out about the individual profile of prospect employees?

The transformation of the public sphere caused by the Internet is a process under way, which will surely demand further and ongoing research. In another paper<sup>23</sup>, we maintained that the end of communism and of politics centered on class conflict, combined with the trend towards individualization and social fragmentation, plus current political marketing techniques, have brought to an end the polarization of ideologies, which reflected political conflicts in terms of opposition among social interests. In this new scenario, political parties tend to lean towards the center, and new utopias are constructed by NGOs, whose discursive axis is the defense of human rights. Such a discourse, which appears as demanding public policies from the State, leads to a political dynamic where all interests are concentrated around a consensual standpoint regarding the minimum that every individual should be entitled to.

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<sup>22</sup> [www.orkut.com](http://www.orkut.com)

<sup>23</sup> Bernardo Sorj, *A democracia inesperada*, Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004.

Chantal Mouffe<sup>24</sup>, in a parallel argument, writes about the end of politics, because politics can only take place if we acknowledge that the the construction of collective identities is built on conflict and opposition, which are the foundation of political life. In such a scenario, the Internet could have an important role to play in revitalizing political life. Nevertheless, such a conclusion seems far-fetched.

Instead of promoting the return to politics based on the interests of players, the Internet seems to be the other side of the coin of official politics. This medium maintains the same moralizing discourse found in political parties and civil society. Only that instead of bringing people together, it polarizes the public through demoralizing the other and through character assassination. Polarization does not take place centered on affirmative proposals or bringing together similar interests or projects, but rather due to demoralization and the promotion of a paranoid, moralistic and distorted vision of opponents. Moreover, when e-mails are anonymous, apocryphal and hard to respond to (the addressees have no access to the mailing lists and address from where those e-mails were sent).

If we complement this sort of “moralist agony” with Cass Sunstein’s arguments, the result is “solipsist agony”. Such a solipsist trend is favored by the new advertising techniques (commercial and political) geared to a target public (defined by age group, social status, race, religious beliefs), where political campaigns lead to thematic fragmentation, thus dissolving political discourses that view society as a whole. Furthermore, such solipsism is not alien to the moralist discourse of many NGOs, which deceived by their self-perception as “pure” agents of the good, overlook rich and complex social issues, as well as common people’s sensitivity.

The potential “solipsist moralist agony” represented by the Internet does not prevent us from acknowledging the positive aspects of this new communication

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<sup>24</sup> *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2000.

tool. However, such potential must be taken into consideration in order not to profess an ingenuous view of the Internet, disregarding trends that permeate contemporary society, such as self-centered individualism and fragmented association tendencies based on groups brought together only because of personal affinities. If on the one hand, political campaigns on the Internet may increase the active participation of the people, the moralist-solipsist trend fostered by the new medium could lead to viewing political institutions as being ever more illegitimate, and to lowering the quality of the democratic debate.

The Internet is indeed becoming the main medium within the public sphere. The challenge we face now is how to prevent this tool from being colonized by antidemocratic groups, or that the potential exchange and debate of ideas be thwarted by the dynamics that the new medium itself may generate. There are good reasons to be suspicious about States trying to control the contents and messages that circulate on the Internet. Notwithstanding, given the fact that the Internet is becoming the privileged medium for public debate, it is now necessary to ponder about the specific characteristics of communication via the Internet, so as to create regulating mechanisms, which as far as possible do not depend on State interventionism.

In conclusion, I will just mention three issues that, I believe, are fundamental to reducing the moralist-solipsist trend, which could take hold of the virtual public sphere:

- 1) In order for the internet to work effectively as the main tool within the public sphere, it is fundamental that participants are confronted with the contents they transmit and be held responsible for them. In the near future, it may be possible to universalize a certification system which ensures that message senders are actually identified, and that SPAMs sent by non certified users are automatically eliminated.

- 2) The school system has a central role to play in the education of Internet users, regarding the potential risks involved in the use of the Internet. Learning how to read critically contents circulating in the Internet is a basic factor in the

education of future citizens, thus it should be part of the basic school curriculum. The ultimate issue regarding digital exclusion is not merely technological. On the contrary, it is rather the capacity to critically interpret the information found on the web.

3) Groups and particularly NGOs that support democratic values should revise their communication strategies, generating websites and messages that trespass the borders that encircle their own ghettos, promoting a true debate of ideas, presenting the whole range of arguments involved, so as to first and foremost educate citizens capable of critically analyzing the standpoints in question. Democratic forces have never succeeded in a terrain where the other is demonized; their only chance of success is to set barriers against antidemocratic groups by means of different and convincing discourses, which reach individuals by enhancing and valuing their capacity of discernment.

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