

Advocacy and online Petitions: considerations from the RENCA case and green movements

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Abstract: *Electronic social networks have allowed a number of groups to organize themselves around ideas and, in the process, to voice their opinions and demands. Advocacy is the term that defines this action of vocalization of opinions and demands in the public sphere, and online petitions are tools that favor this process. This study aims to discuss the connection between advocacy and online petitions to generate engagement and mobilization of civil society in order to produce changes. For this, an analysis of an online petition promoted on the Avaaz platform was carried out, aiming to prevent the change in RENCA - National Reserve of Copper and its Associates, in the state of Amapá, in Brazilian Amazon, in August of 2017, that would allow to explore ore in this currently protected area. As research techniques, the case study was used, based on available online data. It was observed that online petitions constitute an excellent tool for engagement and mobilization and can contribute to the defense of causes, but it cannot substitute other ways of engagement.*

Keywords: *Advocacy, online petitions, engagement*

Competitive track: Public sector and Non-profit marketing

I. Introduction

Public participation on governmental decision is an important trend in the whole world. In some countries or regions, it is expected that individuals or groups be capable to decide by themselves all the choices, while, amongst the most of the countries, people are represented by agents (elected or not) with whom they have identity, interlocution capacity (Miguel, 2011) and a promise of vocalization. Various civil society organizations have begun to gather around causes, vocalizing their opinions and demands in the public sphere and participating in the debates that define what and how public policies will be developed by the government. They have tried influencing the way the government have decided, by advocacy. Thus, these organizations started to act politically with the purpose of generating social change, by influencing the state decision-making process, constituting themselves as agents of non-electoral representation and, therefore, as an alternative to the system of electoral representation.

For the purposes of this study, advocacy is defined as the set of actions carried out by strategically defined and articulated civil society organizations, with the aim of influencing those who have the power to decide, in order to promote changes in municipality, regional and national and international public policies. In order to influence the members of the public power able to promote the desired changes, they must have access to them. As these organizations do not always have this access, they engage and mobilize civil society so that it can press the member of the public power that is the target of the advocacy action.

The pressure exerted by organizations is indirect. Therefore, engaging and mobilizing civil society is essential to be successful, and social networks have become an important tool, enhancing the capacity for engagement and mobilization of civil society around causes. Facebook, twitter and online petition platforms have completely changed the political act. At the same time that the message of a particular group can reach thousands of citizens, there are hundreds of messages disputing their attention. As a result, they live in a "war for attention". Of course, the proliferation of online petition platforms does not diminish the disruptive effect that war for attention has. It can be said that the success of an advocacy action is measured by the social change generated. If there are so many messages being conveyed, the citizen's attention is in constant dispute, how have civil society organizations used these tools in their advocacy actions, especially online petitions?

Given this framework, the present manuscript aims to discuss online petitions as a tool for engagement and mobilization in advocacy actions. To achieve this goal, the case study of an online petition was chosen.

The relevance of this study lies in the scarce literature on the subject. Some previous studies have focused on signer segmentation, for example, Sheppard (2015), who compared the profile of those who subscribe to

physical and digital signatures in Australia, found that women were more likely to participate in this type of participation, or on how online petitions viralize on internet, for example, Raminelli and Oliveira (2011), and Bottche, Woolley-Meza and Brochmann (2017), who dealt with the temporal dynamics of an online petition, in terms of how they spread, or not, on the Internet .

II. Theoretical foundation

The role of civil society with the intention and the desire to influence the formulation of public policies, so that governments meet their demands and modify something with the force of laws and procedures can be defined as advocacy (Brelaz, 2007). The most diverse social actors are able to carry out advocacy actions, among them non-governmental organizations, institutes, foundations, associations, associations of associations, etc. (Brelaz, 2007, Benine, 2011). However, there is a specificity, the action of these organizations should be directed exclusively to the promotion of public good and to the defense of major social causes (human rights, environment, eradication of slavery and child labor, etc.). It is important to emphasize, however, that the meaning of advocacy can change according to the experiences, the understanding of the world, the historical and social context of the organization and the people that compose it. Therefore, each organization must collectively build the "its" meaning of advocacy, taking into account its mission, vision and values. Advocacy is the deliberate process, based on solid evidence, to directly or indirectly influence decision-makers, stakeholders and the relevant public to support and implement actions that contribute to the rights of women and children to be respected. Since the purpose of advocacy actions is to influence the decision-making process of public policies, isolated actions to raise public awareness, clarification or information on a specific theme or fundraising can not be defined as advocacy actions.

In the last three decades, Brazil underwent profound changes and the process of redemocratization experienced expanded spaces for civil society participation, as well as possibilities for dialogue with the State, which redefined the relationship between these actors. However, the power of civil society organizations to influence the decision-making process and the implementation of public policies is still very small. To overcome this obstacle, these organizations have adapted and grouped themselves around causes (Prakash & Gugerty, 2011).

Its visibility has grown and the internet is an essential actor in this process, as it provided the opportunity for groups that, before in silence, could manifest themselves. Due to this, the phenomenon of popular participation through the internet has become more potent, and some governments have created platforms to incentivize citizen participation. For example, Brazilian government, aware of the challenges faced by these groups came to provide some electronic solutions for consultations, allowing citizens to express themselves through texts and polls (Maia, Gomes & Marques, 2017). The Federal Senate and the Chamber of Deputies are examples of making bills available to society, which has the opportunity to participate in thematic forums or even to vote whether they agree or not. The portal of the presidency allows citizens to post content to be debated and to position themselves (Maia, Gomes & Marques, 2017).

In addition to this direct link, electronic social networks such as Facebook and Twitter constitute new channels for the dispersion of causes, conversion of new followers, consolidation, organization of events and demonstrations. Add to that the emergence of online support demonstration platforms, which do something like electronic petitions, known as online petitions (Harrison & Dumas, 2017). Online petitions are becoming popular and some promoted petitions reach more than a million signatures.

2.1 Generating social change with a signature?

Advocacy can be an excellent strategy for making civil society organizations more effective. However, influencing public policies is not something simple, which can be achieved in a casual way, without organization and planning. With advocacy, it is possible to leverage the power of civil society by broadening its participation in the decision-making process on public policies, developing a culture of transparency and accountability, and deepening and further consolidating democracy in our country. It is also possible to ensure that numerous socio-environmental problems that lack attention and that do not yet have the appropriate treatment are inserted in the public agenda.

Taking into consideration that democracy means to participate in the decision-making process and that advocacy is the voice of civil society, organizing and planning a set of strategically defined and articulated actions is of paramount importance for solving specific problems through concrete changes in policies and programs.

It is well known that online petitions have been used by various NGOs to demonstrate to the government the support they have, even if such documents have no legal value. Social networks have served to discuss issues and causes publicly and to raise public awareness. Social media is characterized as an alternative to traditional media, but relies on the formation of a network of supporters to publicize the cause in a timely manner, such as

Flash Mobs or "tweets," including online live streaming on the internet, blogging and even brainstorming or crowdsourcing (Marcilio & Amora, 2011, Harrison & Dumas, 2017).

In that sense, it is necessary to grasp how online petition platforms are being conceived within the umbrella of organizations' advocacy action plans. Are they an end in itself, or are they part of a more comprehensive strategy? This question is relevant, since the existence of a new virtual public space (Sorj, 2014) does not replace the presence of political participation, since the virtual does not replace the real in its entirety, once the real participation can be more effective than just a virtual signature.

In this sense, the proliferation of online petition platforms is worrying, as they may encourage the emergence of a new type of protester - the "couch activist." Someone who would have reduced political participation in relation to the debates, but who signs diverse online petitions, sometimes even conflicting.

This type of political participation is not able to contribute to the construction of an organized and planned action, in which the interested parties in cooperation are considered and the causes that defend are aligned. Without this, the possibility of greater legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness in advocacy actions is low.

Advocacy is a viable alternative in the face of the crisis of representativeness it faces. However, with only an increasing number of organizations acting in an organized and planned manner, the power of influence of civil society will increase and public policies can promote the much desired development of equality and social justice.

III. Method and discussion

The following analysis considers data available on social networks, such as Twitter and Avaaz, on news sites, such as Folha de São Paulo based on a case study protocol. Systematic collection has extended to those available on these sites within a week, during the succession of related events. The case study method is justified by the importance of the case against the theoretical gap in the area, as well as its singularity, as a successful case. The data triangulation considered that observed in social networks from different sides in contention, the one described in different news portals and in the body of online petitions related to the subject (Lima et al., 2012, Yin, 2005).

The National Reserve of Copper and its Associates (Renca) is a reserve located in Amapá, on Brazilian Amazon, created in 1984, and has nine protected areas in its territory, being two indigenous reserves, a national park, a national forest, a state forest and four reserves ecological. It is an area of high potential of gold and the possibility of extraction of ores like molybdenum, palladium, iron, tin, copper and niobium. Because of this, the federal government proposed, in early August 2017, the release of mineral exploration in the area.

There was already a technical opinion from the Ministry of the Environment, emphasizing the need to maintain the mineral reserve, as well as the risks of increasing deforestation.

The decision mobilized many supporters of the case. Celebrities used their social networks to express their outrage at the situation, such as the actor Leonardo di Caprio and the model Gisele Bündchen (Twittera, 2017), who is already known for her role in environmental causes. On his Twitter page, she published

"We are not allowed to destroy our protected areas in the name of private interests" (translated from Portuguese by authors)

Other Brazilian celebrities, all of them with a huge presence on social networks, with many followers, such as actor Victor Fasano, singer Anitta, singer Caetano Veloso, Ivete Sangalo, Cauã Reymond, Thiago Lacerda, Regina Casé and Gaby Amarantos, also expressed their annoyance through publications and gave even more visibility to the causing the hashtag #TodospelaAmazonia (AllforAmazon) among Twitter Trending Topics. This all leveraged an online petition of the Avaaz platform, which garnered more than 870,000 signatures in five days.

As a result, the federal government withdrew the proposal. It was not the first proposal of Michel Temer in this direction that had the same outcome. On June 13, 2017, the president sent to Congress a bill that would withdraw 349,000 hectares of the National Forest of Jamanxim in Pará with the same objective of the current measure, but according to several critics, the action was vetoed (Folha, 2017). Temer posted on your Twitter, translated from Portuguese by authors:

"I saw today all the items of our acts have diminished the preserved area in the Amazon." (Twitterb, 2017).

IV. Final thoughts

The campaign "Prevent the Amazon from becoming a desert" showed the potential for engagement and mobilization of online petitions for advocacy. Coupled with celebrity engagement and Twitter, they are excellent

tools of political pressure. In spite of having no legal value in itself on Brazilian law, given the current Brazilian legal system, online petitions channel interests in a certain direction and allow the defender of the cause to illustrate how much he has of popular support, which guarantees him legitimacy to advocate. In the case under study, the online petition was successful because it inherited a history of mobilizations, a network already formed around the environmental cause and probably a willingness of the government to meet the demand, possibly retreating to proceed later, after further discussion .

An effective advocacy strategy should involve multiple engagement and mobilization tools, both online and face-to-face. After all, only one signature is not enough to generate social change, since the subject matter of Advocacy often involves multiple interest groups, with sometimes conflicting demands and low possibility of alignment.

Future studies could deepen the analysis of this case, mapping all the actors involved and the impact of the action with the members of the public power responsible for the desired change. It would be interesting to consider a comparative perspective, analyzing similar cases developed in different countries.

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