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Online Technologies and the Struggle against Dam Building in the Amazon

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Online technologies, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, have become important to the struggle against the construction of hydroelectric dams in the Amazon. This has happened as individuals and organizations have increasingly taken advantage of online technologies to share their discontent with Brazilian government's plans to build several dams throughout the Amazon. As a result of this increased cyberactivism, the Internet as a whole and the space of specific online technologies have become populated with anti-dam content of various sorts. This content represents the voice of individuals from diverse social groups, age-cohorts, and professional backgrounds, from within Brazil and abroad, who challenge the notion that building dams in the Amazon is a cure-all for Brazil's energy needs and development aspirations.¹



Figure 1. Screen shot of Facebook page dedicated to support Chief Raoni as of March 18, 2014. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/raoni.com.en>

Since the 1980s, media coverage has been at the heart of indigenous struggles to defend their lands (Conklin & Graham 1995). In 1989, when the indigenous leader Tuíra touched her machete on the face of an electricity company director to express her dissatisfaction with Brazilian government's plans to build a 6-dam hydroelectric complex in the Xingu river basin, her action received national and international media coverage (Sevá Filho 2005; Souza 2006). This media coverage gave visibility to indigenous peoples' struggle to protect their lands from flooding, and helped increase support for their cause.

Nowadays, media coverage continues to be important to the struggle against dam building in the Amazon. However, the importance of mainstream media coverage has been reduced somewhat as a result of the global expansion of internet access since the early 1990s and the advent of online technologies that allow anyone with an internet connection and minimal computer knowledge to easily share texts, images, and videos online.

Online technologies have become relevant to the struggle against dam building in the Amazon for several reasons. They have allowed civil society organizations (CSOs) to directly share information with the public without the intermediation of the Brazilian mainstream media, which has for the most part echoed the narratives of pro-dam government authorities and electricity company executives. CSOs have used online technologies to keep the public informed about governmental actions to approve dams in the Amazon; to motivate the public to engage in online and offline protests against dams; and to call attention to irregularities and injustices in the licensing and construction of these dams. In the last months of 2013, for example, a number of CSOs used Twitter and Facebook to condemn Norte Energia, the consortium contracted to build the polemic Belo Monte dam, for failing to efficiently provide agreed-upon services for the population of the areas impacted by the dam.

Online technologies have also been important for offering spaces for the enactment of new tactics. Thousands of people, acting on their own or representing CSOs, have produced digital texts, images, and videos to challenge the government's overly rosy narratives about the merits of building dams in the Amazon. In cyberspace, these texts, images, and videos have created a different narrative, one that has at its core the negative impacts that placing dams in the Amazon will generate. Online technologies have also permitted people to participate in e-petition and crowd-funding campaigns, as well as to create their own culture jamming and spoof sites to defend the position that putting dams in the Amazon is a step in the wrong direction.² Moreover, people have used online technologies to show support for CSOs opposing dams in the Amazon. They have done this by "liking" content CSOs had published online, or by sharing this content within their own social media accounts. Lastly, some people have used online technologies complementarily. They would post new content rejecting dams in the space of one digital platform, say YouTube, and subsequently share links to the YouTube content in the spaces of other digital platforms. All in all, online technologies have enabled a number of actions and interactions that were not possible before their introduction and, in this way, they have contributed to expanding the tactical repertoire of those opposing the construction of dams in the Amazon.

Finally, online technologies have contributed to the expansion of the social movement that opposes dams in the Amazon. If early on few people were aware of Brazilian government's new plans for dams in the Amazon, this changed once the conflict over dams escalated and individuals and organizations intensified their use of online technologies to contest these dams. As cyberactivism expanded and the amount of content portraying the negative aspects of dams proliferated online, more people came to learn about the government's plans for dams in the Amazon. Some of these people subsequently opted to join the oppositional movement. This joining was accomplished through one's actions. By engaging in online and offline activities coordinated by CSOs, by creating their own forms of cyber protests, by helping publicize the grievances of the populations that are being negatively affected by the dams, and by following CSOs and core activists through one's social media account, people created ties with previously engaged movement participants. These new ties, albeit loose, helped spread the opposition to dams in the Amazon, like a growing rhizome (Froehling 1997).

Individual use of online technologies to contest dams was not homogenous. Certainly there were lurkers, people who observed the cyberactivism going on but did not react

to it online. At the lowest level of engagement, there were people who "liked" what others had posted online. Although requiring minimum effort, this action is not to be dismissed. The mere act of liking a piece of online content against dams serves to create some solidarity among dam opponents, and to show the strongly committed activists that they are not alone in their endeavor to stop dams in the Amazon. Moreover, the act of "liking" usually automatically produces a line of text in one's Facebook account, which helps spread information on governmental plans for dams and the opposition to it. At a medium level of engagement are people who, besides "liking," typed their own texts to express their perspectives online. At an even higher level of engagement are people who went beyond liking and posting texts to create their own images and videos to condemn the construction of dams in the Amazon, or who engaged in online discussions on the advisability of these dams. And finally, the outliers – people who went above and beyond in their cyberactivism – produced lots of new digital content, posted this content in the spaces of several online platforms, and took time to engage with others in cyberspace to advocate their perspectives. Through their cyberactivism, the outliers expressed a strong commitment to fighting dams in the Amazon and a belief in the potential of cyberactivism to promote social change.

Furthermore, individual use of online technologies to contest the building of dams in the Amazon was not constant over time. It increased over recent years as the Brazilian government pushed more aggressively for the construction of new dams, and as access to online technologies became more widespread. People's use of online technologies in relation to Amazonian dams increased specially throughout 2010 and 2011 as the government took bigger steps to approve the controversial Belo Monte dam. Within a given year, cyber protests peaked in the days before and after governmental agencies were expected to make big decisions along the dam approval process. In these moments, CSOs would lead online campaigns to protest dams through their websites, blogs, and social media accounts. Members of the public would respond by sharing information about the campaigns in their own social media accounts, and by posting their own forms of protest online. In 2011, for example, there were a number of "Tuitaço" campaigns (Big Twitter campaigns), when the public was invited to express their rejection of the Belo Monte dam by posting hashtags such as #pare-belomonte in their Twitter accounts. In other moments, however, online protests slowed down and only the most engaged people remained active online. This fluctuation is not uncommon when it comes to cyberactivism.

For the struggle against dam building in the Amazon, there are limitations to using online technologies for social mobilization and protest, and, ultimately, for promoting social change. These limitations are no different than what previous studies on social movements and cyberactivism have already identified (e.g. Myers 1994; Della Porta & Mosca 2005; Carty & Onyett 2006; Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010). Here I mention two limitations that apply more directly to the struggle against dam building in the Amazon. First, there is the concern about the reliability of the information that one finds in the Internet, since there is no quality control over what is published online (Ayres 1999). One partial remedy for this problem relies on the reputation of those placing content online. Information coming from, or endorsed by, organizations and individuals that have an acquired reputation for being trustworthy, are more likely to be perceived as reliable and worthy of sharing in cyberspace than information coming from organizations and individuals that are unknown or are infamous for their unreliability. Another partial remedy for this concern is getting the information "straight from the horse's mouth." For example, news posted on the website of the Public Prosecutor (Ministério Público) and shared through its Twitter account is likely to have reliable information about the prosecutors' legal actions to correct injustices associated with the construction of dams in the Amazon. Lastly, some content posted in cyberspace merely reflects one's point of view and, therefore, is valid on its own merit.

Second, there is the concern about the digital divide, which persists worldwide (Norris 2001; Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010). The digital divide has to do with the fact that those using computers and the internet, be it for cyberactivism or other activities, are mostly from middle and upper classes and are concentrated in developed countries, or in more developed cities within a country. In the case of struggle against dam building in the Amazon, this problem has been somewhat minimized because low-income communities that are going to be impacted the most by the dam building activities have usually found support from

CSO representatives and individual cyberactivists, who have taken these communities' grievances online. Still, individuals from these low-income communities have a harder time to autonomously express themselves in cyberspace as compared to, say, an educated middle class citizen of Rio de Janeiro. The persistence of the digital divide reinforces the importance of building alliances across different groups if taking advantage of the possibilities offered by online technologies is desired.

Another issue related to the struggle against dam building in the Amazon is that dam opponents are not alone in cyberspace. Dam supporters are also online and using online technologies to defend their perspective – the perspective that, without dams in the Amazon, Brazil is on the path to darkness. The cyber presence of dam supporters became more evident in November 2011 when the CSO Movimento Gota D'água (Drop of Water Movement) released a provocative video in which Brazilian soap opera celebrities raised several concerns about the Belo Monte dam.³ This video created uproar in cyberspace, which led to heightened cyberactivism by both Belo Monte opponents and by supporters and, subsequently, to further circulation of digital content about the government's plans for dams in the Amazon.

Online technologies are likely to continue to play a key role in the struggle against dam building in the Amazon, accompanying long-term governmental policies towards increased hydroelectricity production. The plight of indigenous and other Amazonian populations to defend the rivers and land they rely on will therefore continue to appear in the spaces of online technologies that many people worldwide use on a daily basis. The sustained online visibility of this struggle will, in turn, continue to mobilize new supporters for the fight against dams in the Amazon. In addition, as long as the Internet remains a contested space, where dam supporters can also voice their perspectives, dam opponents will need to constantly reinvent their online tactics if they are to have an advantage on the use of online technologies to promote their perspectives. This advantage is especially important to dam opponents since dam supporters have an upper hand in other communication channels, such as in the mainstream media. As social movement leaders recognize, using online technologies to protest dams in the Amazon is not a cure-all; it is unlikely to stop dams if not followed by actions that go beyond the spaces offered by online technologies. Therefore, on-the-ground protests against dams as well as warranted lawsuits will continue to be much needed if we are to see the revision of governmental projects for dams and more justice for indigenous and non-indigenous peoples who are affected by these projects.

Notes

¹ Since 2011, I have closely followed the controversy related the construction of dams in the Amazon through the Internet. For my dissertation research, I collected data on the use of online technologies in the case of conflict over the Belo Monte dam. My methodology combined key informant interviews, a 6-month online ethnography, and the analysis of news and previous publications on the Belo Monte conflict.

² Culture jamming consists of altering a company's logo and advertising to create new meaning. A spoof site is a site that imitates an organization's original website, but which has humorous content in it.

³The video is called Gota D'água +10 and it is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAAAdXrdXSpM> (Accessed on March 20, 2014).

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