Department of Government, University of Essex
Name: Dr. Carolina Matos
Title: *Gender politics, blogging and the 2010 Brazilian elections*

Introduction

The re-democratization of Latin America's social and political institutions since the decade of the 1990s has seen various changes affecting the whole continent since the collapse of military dictatorships, from economic reforms and demands for social inclusion and wider equality to media reform and the changing role of women in the continent. Undoubtedly, women are occupying many positions in the labour market, dominating in newsrooms (Abreu, 2006) and taking positions in politics, business and in other professions. Although traditionally Latin American countries have reserved for women a subordinate and minor role in politics and the public sphere, the continent also has a history of vibrant feminism activism in pursuit of the emancipation of women. Many activist women groups during the 1970s and 1980s were opposing right-wing dictatorships in their countries (Acosta-Belem and Base, 1993). Many women thus engaged enthusiastically in activities of resistance and human rights movements, challenging their subordination, the enforcement on them of a domestic life and of living up to the stereotypical image of a "sex object".

The predominant Brazilian culture of *machismo*, pay inequality, violence towards women and marginalization of the identities of more intelligent women who are occupying traditionally male occupations (i.e. politics) is still a reality. The openings and opportunities for women to take on posts of wider responsibility higher roles in the labour market are still very limited and are largely reserved for certain sectors of the upper to the connected middle class women, with the existence of a certain bias towards the new and old petty-bourgeoisie, lower middle or working classes, a situation that is somewhat similar to what Hobsbawn (1989, 217) detected in his discussion of women's role in 19th century Europe and the prejudices that existed towards those from less privileged backgrounds. In a context of expanding inequalities between the rich and the poor in the developed world and a stagnation of previous conquests from the 1960s and 1970s put forward by various disadvantaged groups, it remains to be debated how the existence still of negative attitudes towards women and other oppressed groups in the West can be further improved.

Moreover, the mainstream media in the country has also traditionally and historically contributed to reinforce rigid, outdated and limited gender roles, associating in general terms the ideal type of the "Brazilian woman", who should be attractive and intellectually inferior "girl", whilst marginalising the identities, disrespecting or attributing seriousness, complexity or the "strong women" stereotype to a selected few upper class "career" women, the ones who are permitted a wider level of equality with men. That said, improvements in the image of women in the media as well as their position in society have been a significant aspect also of the post-dictatorship phase in the continent, with a proliferation of research and debates on the contemporary role of the Latin American women reaching centre stage. Discussing the media's contributions in this process, the journalist Tereza Cruvinel, former president of the public platform in the country, EBC, stressed that one of the major roles of the public media in the country will be precisely to tackle gender inequalities, contributing to reduce stereotypes and to promote a more complex representation of the Brazilian woman.[i]

This paper looks at the particular case study of the historical 2010 presidential elections. The underlining tone of my concerns here is underpinned on a theoretical framework that sees inequalities in society – of gender, race and class – as having intensified in the last decades and not

having diminished despite discrimination and equality legislations and human rights acts throughout much of the Western world. The Brazilian *blogosphere* showed a high level of politicization in 2010. During the presidential election campaign, the web served as a tool for the articulation of new images of femininity and power. Since mainly the 2006 elections, the growth of the *blogosphere* shas been such that it has started to suffer attacks from the mainstream media, in what has been identified by some as attempts to limit media discussions, impeding further advancement of the democratization project.

The debates presented here are divided into three parts: the first examines the benefits and limits of networked politics; the second looks at some of the debates on feminism research and communications whereas the third and last part focuses on discussions of the discourses articulated by female politicians in the 2010 presidential campaign. Bloggers used the Internet to advocate particular causes and to challenge what some saw as conservative aspects and the limiting of representations in the media's public sphere of debate. Many more are making use of the web to promote the campaigns of Dilma and of other women candidates, such as Marina Silva of the Green Party. The Brazilian blogosphere has not just had a forceful role during elections: it has also been functioning as an important vehicle for democracy, and can have a positive role in invigorating public debate, undermining media concentration, boosting pluralism as well as assisting in education and political participation. In spite of the limits of access still to the Internet in Brazil, the web during the 2010 presidential elections served as a tool against the partisanship of sectors of the mainstream press, as we shall see.

The benefits of networked politics: the limits and challenges to democratic politics

Various theories have explored the numerous advantages of the web, including its assistance in globalization and its capacity to increase interconnectedness, permitting the rapid transmission of global events, the creation of global citizens and the formation of global civil society united in favour of particular political causes (i.e. Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003; Norris, 2001). Some of the key concerns raised in the digital divide controversy between information-rich and poor countries have mainly consisted in how to include larger sectors of the world population in the 'Information Society', providing the means for further democratization of access and connectivity.

Scholarship worldwide has shown that the hype with new technologies has not resulted in a diminishing of economic and social inequalities between and within countries, although at its best it has shown great assistance in the mobilization of protests for democracy in the Middle East in 2011 for instance. Nonetheless the spread of new technologies and the Internet across the globe since the 1980s has occurred in a context of increasing gap between the information-rich and poor across the developing world (Norris, 2001; 39), with only the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries having seen wider levels of reduction of inequality levels.

It is important to state that democratic politics plays a minor role in *cybperspace* in comparison to commercial transactions. The Internet is for starters heavily dominated by commercial corporations over independent individual blogs, NGOs and other party websites. Drawing from a wide range of political theories, Norris (2001, 107) asserts that the type of political organizations found on the Internet are closely linked to the process of democratization of a given country. This means that there is a clear connection between income and economic power, new technologies and wider political participation. Norris (2001, 26) further states that debates concerning the rise of the Information Society have been deeply contested, being usually cast in either an optimistic or a pessimistic light. The former group sees in the Internet the potential for the reduction of the traditional inequalities which exists between developed and developing societies, whereas the latter believes that the web will only reinforce disparities that exist offline. The fact of the matter is

that the power structures of the old media, and their tendencies towards concentration, have not disappeared and have actually been reinforced in a context of increasing expansion of new technologies, mergers between companies and other inequalities produced by globalization.

Developmental and technological accounts of the Internet see the virtual political system as affected by structural phenomena. The promotion of transparent information and interactive communications are some of the key functions of websites. This is a characteristic of the medium which represents a significant feature of their potential for democratization. It can be seen as a means of reflecting precisely these 'levels of pluralistic competition, political participation and political rights and civil liberties (which exist) within each political system' that Norris (2001) alludes to. For Bennett (2003), the Internet is just another communication media. Its specific features and capacities do not necessarily change who we *actually* are. Bennett (2003, 19) affirms that: 'Personal digital media offer capacities for change if people are motivated by the various conditions in the environment....The question if we go shopping or make revolution on the Internet.....is more the result of the human contexts in which the communication occurs than....communication media themselves...' (Agre, 2002 in Bennett, 2003, 19).

The Internet can thus be seen as being a space to advertise products to consumers and to trade, and not necessarily to improve the democratic quality of public and civic life (Margolis, Resnick and Levy, 2003, 65). These arguments seem to hit at the very core of the technological determinism theories, and the utopia surrounding the supposedly 'magical' powers of the Internet and of social networking sites to change real life problems, such as reducing poverty and combating race and gender oppressions. More utopian or highly optimistic theories on the Internet (i.e. Clark and Aufderheide, 2009) however have argued how the web has profoundly shaped contemporary life, from the selling of books to the ways in which politics is being practiced worldwide. In the summary of the report *Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics*, Clarke and Aufderheide[ii] (2009) underlined how digital public media 2.0 will become more of a key component of democratic public life. They see this media as being directed to the public and produced by it. This has been the case of the grassroots mobilization around the 2008 Obama electoral campaign, seen as proof of how the medium has opened up new avenues for civic engagement, and especially amongst the younger segments of the electorate, seen as the ones who are disengaging more from traditional party politics and shifting their attention to lifestyle politics and other single issue causes (i.e. animal rights, environment, etc).

Baker (2001) attempts to articulate an alternative conceptualization of elections, one which sees elections as performing a vital democratic role, but which understands them as being at same time institutionally limited. Drawing from Habermas, Baker (2001) believes that the crucial but limited democratic function of elections is to serve as one structure filter that helps public opinion to influence governmental will formation. Elections are thus one among other institutional political activities, which include legislative lobbying, committee hearings and agency hearings. According to this argument, *real* actual politics can take place primarily in the *unregulated* public spheres of civil society rather than in elections. The space provided by the Internet during election campaigns is precisely such a place.

Digital politics can thus be understood here in its broader sense, in other words, as the carrying out of political debate between voters, or as non-partisan discussions or forms of civic engagement by sectors of the community who gather online to deliberate on ways of improving their own lives. Much of the literature on online politics and cyber activism has spotted precisely this room for the articulation of debates on policy issues. High expectations have also been placed by cyber enthusiasts on the capacity of information and communication technologies of benefitting minor parties and other political voices marginalised from the mainstream. This can offer possibilities on the web for the creation of an alternative sphere of debate which can work to counter-weight dominant status quo discourses (i.e. Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003) or offer more

pluralistic and in depth discussions on governmental policies and other issues of interest to the public.

Judging from the previous studies discussed on media effects on voters and citizens, it seems clear that the impact of the Internet must be understood in relation to other social, economic and political factors, as well as on the intensity of the activism carried out by citizens at that particular moment in time. Key characteristics of Internet campaigning are undoubtedly the use of the web to store more information than traditional media as well as the interactivity provided by the medium. This includes the possibility of voters giving feedback and engaging directly with politicians without the intermediation of journalists. Political scientists have also hailed the potential of the Internet for reaching out not only to disinfected or disillusioned voters, but also for attracting the youth vote. Much before the Obama effect, the Labour Party in the UK in the 1997 and 2001 elections made use of the web to mobilise voters, as did the US candidate Al Gore in the 2000 campaign (Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003, 18).

A comparison can be made between the expansion of digital democracy in Brazil in the 2010 elections with the uses of the web in the Obama 2008 presidential campaign. According to data gathered by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* survey, some 74% of Internet users, or 55% of the adult population, went online in 2008 to get news and information about the election. More than half of the population used the Internet then to get involved in the political process. Two-thirds of voters between the age of 18-24 also engaged in political activity on these sites in 2008. The Internet is used also as a tool to mobilize what is called the 'organic voter', or those who constitute the most engaged sectors of the electorate who have been voting in the same party for various elections (in Lima, 2007, 99). Online political activism has been said to have played a major part in the tumbling down of the Mubarak regime in Egypt in early 2011. Similarly to what many Americans did in 2008, but taking into consideration the lower levels of Internet use in Latin America in overall, many Brazilians in 2010 went online to share their views on the dispute with other citizens and bloggers. Brazilian politicians in the 2010 elections also attempted to copy the 2008 'Obama effect' by actively going on the Internet to attract voters.

It is more correct then to say that the web is emerging everywhere around the world, either in Egypt, Brazil or the UK, as a valid space for opposition groups, or parties who feel marginalised from the mainstream, from either the Conservative or Progressive side of the political spectrum. The Internet can have various functions, such as reinforcing prejudices, partisan beliefs and stances in the same way as it can be empowering for many disadvantaged groups and others neglected to the margins. It can also provide room for opposition groups to attack each other, or strive to debate particular socio-economic and political issues that can have an impact on policy decisions. From whatever perspective we look, it seems to be the case that these 'multiple discourses' which are being articulated on the web can assist in the creation of a more *vibrant* public sphere of debate in the Habermasian sense, especially for transitional or emerging democracies like Brazil. It can also strengthen freedom of expression and boost political pluralism.

If commercial Brazilian television still frustrates aesthetically as well as offering rigid avenues for political debate, the Internet can be perceived as a growing site for the wider circulation of information from different and conflicting sources. It can provide more details to the public on party policies and biography of politics, as well as scrutinising the activities of Congress and providing more transparency in party-funding, radio and TV concessions and approval of laws. In this sense, it can stimulate more engagement, assuming a role that has been envisioned for the public media. Before looking at the particular case study of the uses of the Internet for political campaigning and blogging of alternative views to the mainstream media in regards to female leadership and gender politics, it is worth providing a brief introductory summary of the international debates on feminist scholarship in communications and the problems concerning the position of women in Brazil.

Feminism in the Brazilian blogosphere: an avenue for female empowerment?

The developing world today is becoming a driver of the global economy, with the rise of multiple regions of growth, expanding middle classes and billions of people rapidly joining the world economy. In such a context, women's oppression in an age of globalization, international migration, increasing exchange of cultural flows between First and Third World countries, multiculturalism and economic global recession has acquired a whole new significance which goes beyond a mere oppression of women by men in the West. It is juxtaposed to various other layers, including race, ethnicity and class oppression, and is closely tied to global capitalism and to the ingrained Eurocentric mentality that still largely dictates the rich nations' international relations with the rest of the world.

The women question in developing countries is inextricably linked to the whole global capitalist model of accumulation and has its roots in European colonialism (Mies, 1988; Saffioti, 1978 in Acosta-Belem and Bose, 1993, 61). Both women *and* colonies have been seen as having served the very foundations of industrial development of the key Western nations (Acosta-Belem and Bose, 1993). First World feminism has been charged of paying too much attention only to issues of sexual freedom and preference, as well as to the relations between men and women in advanced democracies, further reflecting the racism of their own cultures and adopting a narrow understanding of issues of equality, justice and difference (i.e. Mohanty, 2000). As Mohanty, Russo and Torres' *Third World Women and the politics of Feminism* argued in its introduction, First World feminism has a narrow view of the struggles of women and does not take the struggles of Third World women seriously, thus doing very little to understand the subjection of women in contemporary society within a deeper framework that correctly intersects various layers of oppression, including race, gender, class, nation and ethnicity, linking both local, national and international relations of oppression.

Van Zoonen's (1992) studied the role of the media in constructing a public identity for women's movements in the Netherlands in the late 1960's and early 1970's based largely on specific storylines, such as how feminism was seen as 'deviant' (in Creedon, 1993, 6). In the book *Feminist Media Studies*, Van Zoonen (2000) further analysed some of the myths of femininity of "Third World" women, underlining the exotic quality attached to visions of African femininity and the modest and deferential nature of Asian women. It can also contribute to undermine the stereotypical and outdated visions of the West in regards to the 'Third World' Latin American and/or Brazilian woman (Mohanty, 1990; Lugones and Spelman in Kolmer and Bartkouski, 2005), and even in regards to Brazilians in general. Thus the granting of wider space for Latin American women throughout the continent has the potential of – even symbolically at least - contributing to create greater acceptability, normalising their participation in politics in the region even more.

The fact of the matter is that many Brazilian women are still seen by conservative Brazilian elites - as well as by traditional Western standards that patronise them as "Third World women", mingling a toxic combination of racism, sexism and classism - as a unified group of young, attractive, half-naked and "intellectually inferior" creatures who deserve to be exploited for capitalism's profit. This contestation is but an indication of the persistence still of sharp levels of gender inequality worldwide and discrimination towards women, especially towards women's skills, intelligence and capabilities, a result of an ingrained hierarchy of expectations and capacities that is seen as deemed fit for mainly upper middle class women from the developed countries in contrast to the "Third World" or to others from less privileged backgrounds of the rich nations. Such factors pose a serious impediment for further advancement of democratization in Brazil as well as the reversal of the rights conquered by less advantaged groups in the developed countries in the last decades.

Theories regarding the impact of women leadership styles on general improvements of women's conditions in society are contested. Some authors claim that women in power imitate the

aggressive, competitive and sometimes 'corrupt' behaviour of men, or in their efforts to be taken seriously, they get can perform worse than their male counter-parts. Others argue however that women can be a force for social change in developing societies, lowering corruption levels due to their honesty and wider cooperative and inclusive style. They can further contribute to grant institutions greater credibility, thus working to reduce oppression in society's social and political structures.

As Buvinic and Roza (2004, 1) have stated, Panama elected a woman president in 2003, Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), and soon afterwards Chile and Argentina followed by electing the former president Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010) and Cristina Kirchner (2007), wife of the previous president Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007), respectively. A 2000 Gallup poll conducted for the Inter-American Development Bank with a random sample of 2.022 voters in six major Latin American cities (Bogota, Colombia; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Mexico City; Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil and San Salvador) revealed that the average voter had positive opinions concerning women's place in politics (in Buvinic and Roza, 2004, 8). The authors (2004, 12) added that in a 2001 poll conducted in Brazil, the majority surveyed believed that women in senior positions were more honest than men.

It is hoped by many that the election of Dilma Rousseff in 2010 can slowly begin to contribute to pave the way for change and for greater equality. It remains yet to be seen if the granting of wider participation of women in ministerial roles in Dilma's government (2011-2014), of 25%, can produce deeper changes in the structural gender inequalities of Brazilian society. Thus for many it is still an open question that needs to be further tested and researched, mainly if these new female voices will assist in the elimination or diminishment of female oppression, including the reduction of pay inequalities between men and women in the workplace and improvements in the general treatment of most women, acknowledgment of their achievements and an undermining of barriers to their progress and participation in society as full and equal members. Despite the presence of high profile female candidates in the 2010 elections, according to the Supreme Electoral Court of Justice (TSE), a total of 79% of men (15.780) ran for various political positions (governor, Senator and MP) against only 20% of women candidates, or 4.058.[iii]

In spite of the elections in the last decade of women throughout Latin America, most women in the continent still face economic, social, cultural and political barriers to not only full political participation, but equality in the marketplace and in mainstream society. They also occupy in overall low status positions in the international labour market force, a direct result of European imperialism and the treatment of colonial women as inferior, to both men in the colonies as well as to men and women in the developed world.[iv]

It is no surprise then that the limitations towards women's identities, self-expression and full exercise of their talents and skills in Brazil is a result of the persistence of discrimination in a culture that is still overly conservative and negative towards subordinated groups, with women constantly being deprived and experiencing hostility, even coming from other women brought up in a patriarchal and hierarchical society with rigid notions of one's place, towards most women who step outside rigid straightjackets. It is no wonder that one of Dilma's emphasis in her elections was that women should not be impeded by society to grow and achieve, having personally made it an issue to include in her cabinet women ministers. There is still a considerable lack of promotion of women to positions of wider authority either in the Legislative, Justice and Executive bodies and/or in the business sector.

The last decade in Brazil has also seen another political phenomena that is a result of political democratization and the growing powers of the press in scrutinising politicians and reporting their wrongdoings. Since the impeachment of former president Fernando Collor in 1989 and the publication by the press of corruption practices by members of the Lula government in 2005, there has been a rise in political cynicism and growth in the publication of corruption scandals. Such a volatile political environment has created a fertile ground for the emergence of strong women

leaders, many of which are perceived by the public as more trustworthy. It is in such a scenario of increase of educational levels, gradual decline of the *machismo* culture, rise of political cynicism and shifts in social habits that women have slowly began to rise to leadership positions, taking on the vacuum left by traditional oligarchic politicians and business elites.

Gender politics and blogging in the 2010 Brazilian elections

The core themes which dominated the Brazilian presidential election campaigns since 2002 have been the shift away from the strive for economic stability, which marked the decade of the 1990s, to debates on development policies, including the role of women in society, but mainly the granting of a wider place for the state in the application of social democratic politics and in the mediation of debates with citizens. This includes the means to boost social inclusion, foster greater income distribution and strive to reduce poverty levels, topics which were placed on the public agenda by politicians mainly from the centre and centre-left since the mid-1990s. The key themes of the 2006 elections were political corruption and the reduction of inequality. The 2010 presidential Brazilian race on the other hand was marked by the shadow of the legacy of the two Lula government's (2002-2006; 2006-2010) and by the entry in the dispute of two strong women candidates, Marina Silva and Dilma Rouseff.

In contrast to the so-called post-industrialized advanced societies of Europe, passionate political campaigns and rallies still occur throughout Latin American countries during key national elections. Despite the rise of professionalism in political campaigning, market research, focus groups and other "modern" practices in politics since the 1990s, and especially during the elections of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1994 and afterwards (Matos, 2008), the life and blood of Brazilian politics has not altogether disappeared. The political arena in the country thus still provides room for the articulation of conflict and for the competition of ideas, for the battle for the agenda of public opinion, the predominance of a particular form of thinking over a topic in opposition to another and for the use of media actors to endorse particular political views.

Arguably, there is a positive correlation between exposure to the media and political participation (Norris, 2000). Research has shown that party websites do not make much difference in terms of changing voting patterns. Focus group studies in the UK, Sweden and the Netherlands for instance have revealed mixed reactions (Nixon and Johansson, 1999a; Crabtree, 2001 in Ward, Gibson and Nixon, 2003, 25). Many surveys have also indicated a reluctance of parties to engage in open dialogue with voters. As Gibson and Ward (1999: 364) have most correctly signalled out, '...providing online channels for participation...is not the same as empowering members'. Having said this, the authors do recognise that the Internet can make more of an impact in emerging democracies, including destabilising one party regimes and serving as a counter-weight to one-sided media discourses.

The power of the Brazilian blogosphere as a counter-public sphere and as a vehicle that is contributing to boost media pluralism, political diversity whilst also undermining the concentration of the mainstream media and its position as the ultimate definer of the public agenda, has grown considerably in the last years. Certain Brazilian civic websites, like *TVoto*; *Repolitica*; *Eleitor 2010*, *Transparencia Brasil* and *Vote na Web,* have began to occupy a niche and somewhat prominent space in the Brazilian political blogosphere, contributing to stimulate public debate and civic engagement and assisting citizens with knowledge on the political process. These websites provide citizens with information on politicians' biography, including the means to assess the performance of their chosen representatives. The aim of the website *Vote na Web* (www.votenaweb.com.br) for example is for citizens to follow closely the work of Brazilian MPs, including checking the proposals that they sent to Congress and monitoring how they voted on particular issues.

The consolidation of the web as a space for independent journalism has also been significant. The Brazilian political *blogosphere* has become to challenge the "tolerance" of the mainstream media, creating a series of reactions and attacks: in early 2013, the Brazilian journalist blogger Rodrigo Vianna was required to pay 20.000 *reais* (approx. 6.500 pounds) to the director-general of Journalism and Sport from *TV Globo*, Ali Kamel, in response to a humoristic critique made on the web. Accusations of press censorship and arguments highlighting an "aggression" to the Brazilian blogosphere started rapidly to circulate in the country's mediated public sphere.

Although the Internet has been featuring in the everyday life of middle class sectors of Brazilian society and in much of Latin America since mainly the mid-1990s, its adoption by politicians is a much more recent task. Online democracy started to have its presence felt more strongly in Brazil mainly during and after the 2006 elections. A major component of the 2010 presidential elections in Brazil however was the massive presence of the Internet in political campaigning as a means of promoting candidates and providing varied information about their political personas to voters. Prior to the start of the 2010 elections, there was a lot of debate on the nature of the impact of new technologies on the outcome of the race. The Rio politician Cesar Maia, interviewed for this research, claimed to have started using the web in 1996, an early starter. Maia argued that the adoption of the Internet by politicians in the 2006 general elections was still very restricted, expanding mainly in 2010. Coordinator of Marina Silva's presidential campaign, Alfredo Sirkis added that the web began to have influence in 2006, having correctly predicted that in the 2010 elections, its use would be 'intense[v]'.

Lima (2007) has argued that bloggers were already active during the 2006 elections, with the Internet offering a space for the articulation of a discourse capable of going against or challenging the hegemony that had been constructed in the mainstream media. Lima (2007) has defined the web's role in political campaigning in Brazil as having contributed to promote active niche circles of debate. In the 2006 presidential dispute, the female candidate of the then far left party, PSOL, Heloisa Helena, emerged as a leading frontrunner in the race that culminated in Lula's re-election. It was however only in 2010 that the country elected its first women president, Dilma Rouseff, who won the dispute in the second round with 55.7 million of votes (56.05), against 43.7 million given to her rival, Jose Serra of the PSDB (43.95%)[vi].

One marking feature of the campaign was the revival of the clashes between sectors of the mainstream media with Dilma's candidature on the Internet. It was widely used for attack campaigning and the exchange of accusations between the two main parties of the dispute, the PT with Dilma and Jose Serra's PSBB. Enthusiastic bloggers campaigned in favour of the PT's candidature during the 2010 elections. But the PT was not the only party that had enthusiastic bloggers behind them. One month before the 2010 October elections, Marina Silva (www.minhamarina.org.br) was pointed out as being the most popular candidate on social network sites due to her influence on the youth vote, according to experts. She held the biggest number of participants in her online profiles in social network sites such as *Orkut* (46.584) and *Facebook* (41.977), whilst Serra dominated in *Twitter*, with 455.186 followers, appearing ahead of Marina (244.057), Dilma (235.519) and Plinio Sampaio of the PSOL (41.064).[vii]

All of the official websites had links to other blogs and social network sites, from *Youtube* to *Flickr* and *Facebook,* as well as requests for online donations, information on campaign events, future policy proposals and a space to answer voter's questions. Dilma also explored widely the women's vote during her campaign, with her website (www.dilma13.com.br) containing links to various other women's blogs. This included *Hip Hop Mulher*, *Galera da Dilma*, *PCdoB Mulheres* and *Viva Mulher*, as well as detailed information on gender politics in Brazil.

One of the most talked about events of the presidential campaign though was the ironic and humorous reaction of *bloggers* towards the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo.* Bloggers ironically criticised what they thought was a biased campaign coverage that attempted to assign blame to Dilma to all the errors committed by particular individuals or ministers of the former Lula

government. In response to a story published by *Folha* on how light consumers paid R\$ 1 billion *reais* for an error committed by Dilma,[viii] a group of agitated bloggers created a popular tag on *Twitter* called *DilmaFactsbyFolha*. This soon reached the third place of the most commented theme on the Internet, according to the ranking of the *Trending Topics Brazil*.

The *bloggers* went on the web to question the objectivity and partiality of the newspaper by coming up with fictional headlines that attempted to emphasis the partisanship character of the accusations, and by attributing random blame to the candidate for various disconnected and irrational facts. Fictional headlines included ironic sentences like: "*Folha* has proof that Dilma was responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire"; "*Folha* suspects that Dilma was responsible for the fall of other airplanes"; "Dilma said to Bush: in six months you will sort out the Iraq business" and "Because she is a masochist, Dilma tortured herself, says general to *Folha*".

In other Latin American countries, the Internet has also started to emerge as a strong political space: in Cuba the *blogosphere* is being used by activists to criticise the dictatorship in the country, with the blogger Yoani Sanchez gaining notoriety. In Venezuela, both Hugo Chavez sympathisers and opponents are using the web to organise political protests and to endorse or reject particular causes. The government also has claimed to have increased in 900% the access to the web: 820.000 people had access to it in 2000, but in 2009, the number was of 497.5 million users.[ix]

It seems clear that the web has the potential of exercising wider influence and a political role in countries like Brazil, especially once the access to these new technologies is significantly expanded, with the digital divide decreasing and the medium becoming truly used for the public interest. Theories on the potential of the web for *cyberdemocracy* claim, as we have seen, that the web has limits regarding its capacity to reduce offline inequalities, but it can act as a persuasive tool for political campaigning, contributing to lay the seeds for the articulation of counter-discourses about particular disadvantaged groups that in the short, to especially the mid and long run, can assist in the *empowerment* and in the changing of attitudes towards these same groups.

The fact of the matter is that we know little about the actual effect of the Internet on the transformation of the formal political process. We know however that the Internet can offer opportunities for smaller parties and candidates to get to know voters better, providing ordinary citizens with a voice and a chance to criticize political and media institutions. It can be perceived as being an extra tool in mobilization, policy discussions and wider proximity with citizens beyond the two existent types of political party programmes broadcast on radio and television. It remains to be further researched however how the Internet can contribute more to participatory democracy in the country and throughout the continent.

The Internet as a vehicle for participatory democracy in Brazil

Latin America is quickly becoming the world's growing Internet market. According to the statistics provided by the International Telecommunications Union (ITC), the number of Internet hosts in Latin America grew at a rate of 136%, ahead of North America (74) and Europe (30). The numbers vary according to the source, methodology applied and the quantity of participants. Access to computers is rapidly expanding in Brazil. The Internet has grown faster in contrast to cable and satellite television, which has remained at 5 to 6%. The 2005 *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilios* of the IBGE underscored the existence of 32.1 million Internet users. This represents 21% of the Brazilian population of 10 years or over. In the 2008 study, this number went up to 55.9 million, or 34.8% of people, reflecting more accurately the 30% of the population with access to the web.

This is not much different from the 35.5% who use the Internet in Chile, although it is much lower than China (49.2%), according to the *2006 World Internet Project* (in Cardoso, 2010). According to a more recent research conducted by *ComScore* (May 2010), these numbers have increased to 73 million users, including children starting from the age of 6. These indicators are higher than the readership of the mainstream newspapers in Brazil, which varies between 7 to 9 million per day and was of 6.9 million in 2002 (Matos, 2008), although are well below the viewing of commercial television, which accounts for over 90% of the population.

The limits of the uses of the Internet as a public medium are also interrelated to its interactive potential and the lack of mass access still to the medium. It seems evident that any discussion regarding the strengthening of the web as a public sphere of debate in Brazil, as a vehicle for the public interest and a tool in wider democratization, cannot be separated from other social reforms and from the level of political maturity of the country. This includes improvement in educational indicators of *all* sectors of the population, from elementary school to university level. Both the Internet *and* the public media (understood as television broadcasting) cannot yet be considered mass mediums in the way that commercial television and, to a certain extent, community radio, are in Brazil.

Most significantly, the development of software technology is still heavily concentrated in the US, culminating in what Nederveen Pieterse (2010) sees as a tendency of ICT4D (information and communication technologies-for-development) to reaffirm the dependency of developing societies on these same technologies. Regarding Internet connectivity**,** Thussu (2006, 238-240) has pointed to the problem of infra-structure faced by countries of the South, underlining how the cost of equipment and software makes it inaccessible for a vast majority of people who do not have a telephone.

Governmental efforts to increase Internet connectivity have become more pronounced in Latin American countries in the last years. The first mandate of Lula (2002-2006) included wider digital inclusion and access to new technologies as a national public policy capable of guaranteeing citizenship rights. It launched ambitious programmes such as the project Citizen Connected – *Computador para Todos*, part of the "Programa Brasileiro de Inclusao Digital" (Brazilian Programme of Digital Inclusion), equating the use of technology with local development and the deepening of democracy. Governments however have not been capable of providing access to *all* citizens to Internet access, with businesses having to play a leading role here. As Lugo-Ocando (2008) states, 'many....nations divert resources from areas such as infra-structure, education or agriculture subsidies to acquire digital and interactive technologies in the first world.'

Notably, the five biggest Internet providers concentrate 50% of the Internet users in Brazil, with the main providers being *Brasil Telecom*, which provides access via *Ibest*, I*G* and *BrTurbo,* as well as the portals *Terra*, *Pop* and *UOL*. The main providers of paid access to the Internet are *UOL*, *AOL* and *Terra*. Lugo-Ocando (2008, 5) also argues that there is not enough evidence to suggest that the massive investment in information and communication technology and telecommunications during the past 10 years throughout the continent has made much difference to the lives of millions of Latin Americans in terms of narrowing the social and economic gap between the richer and poorer citizens, providing further improvements in the teaching of IT skills.

As we have seen, in spite of the limits of access and connectivity, the Internet during the 2010 elections functioned as an important tool to counter-weight the discourses articulated by the mainstream press. Blogging contradictorily arose as a significant force against the partisanship of the mainstream media, at the same time that many bloggers used the web to advocate particular causes or to defend particular candidates. This was the case of the group of bloggers who reacted against perceived biases of newspapers like *Folha de Sao Paulo* in their coverage of the presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff.

Furthermore, a key problem that arises in the debate regarding the Internet is actually one which is similar to the case of the commercial global media: the concentration of the medium in

the hands of corporate organisations. The latter is accused by scholars of being heavily skewed towards a few dominant commercial players and economic forces, leaving little room for alternative voices or small groups to compete on equal terms in the *blogosphere* and making its use as medium for the public interest become more problematic. The capacity of *blogs* to stimulate civic engagement and political participation was also positively viewed by the respondents in the survey that I conducted with university students from the Communication Department at the Federal University in Rio (UFRJ). Eighty-one per cent saw a role for blogs in reinvigorating debate, although a small minority see these as being a complement to newspapers (11% or 16)[x].

Conclusion

The use of the web in Brazil has been rapidly expanding since especially the 2006 elections, but has been growing considerably throughout the continent since the mid-1990s. It has been widely used by citizens, journalists to politicians and voters, serving to offer counter-discourses and representations of disadvantaged groups outside the scope of the mainstream media; it has been assisting in the provision of in depth political information by political parties to voters; it has helped monitor Congressional activities and it has been used by journalists and amateur journalists alike to conduct independent and critical journalism that functions as a counter-weight to the mainstream press, among others. Such activities attest to the increasing importance of the Internet in the country and its potential to strengthen public debate, boost political diversity and wider freedom of expression.

As we have seen, the Internet in Brazil is providing alternative spaces to play out politics away from both the mainstream media and Congress, assisting in the scrutiny of politician's activities and pressuring in favour of the approval of particular welfare reforms, especially in a context where the mainstream media are still fortifying their commitments to professionalism and balance in news reporting (Matos, 2008) and struggling with political and economic pressures. At its best, the Internet can provide an avenue to fortify media pluralism and undermine media concentration; it can help disseminate a host of political ideas and articulate discourses that are rarely seen in the mainstream media; it can be used as a tool for wider civic engagement and political mobilization during election campaigns; it can serve as a vehicle to scrutinise governmental power as well as assist in the support of certain causes. This includes the articulation of discourses around the "new" Brazilian women that has began to emerge in the country with greater strength in the last decades and particularly during the 2010 elections, as we have seen, and which is slowly contributing to undermine authoritarianism, the predominant *machismo* culture and the traditional male Latin American oligarchic leaderships.

Bibliography

Abreu, Alzira de et al (2006) <u>Elas ocupam as redacoes</u>, Rio: FGV

Baker, C. Edwin (2002) <u>Media, Markets and Democracy</u>, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Barros Filho, Clovis, Coutinho, Marcelo and Safatle, Vladimir (2006) "Os usos das novas midias na campanha presidencial de 2006" in Lima, Venício A. de (2007) A <u>Mídia nas eleicoes de 2006</u>, SP: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 89-113

Bennett, W. L. (2003) "New Media Power: the Internet and Global Activism" in Couldry, N. and Curran, J. (eds.) <u>Contesting Media Power</u>, London: Rowman and Littlefield

Acosta-Belen, E and Bose, C. (1993) <u>Researching Women in Latin American and the Caribbean,</u> Boulder: Westview Press

Buvinic, Mayra and Roza, Vivian (2004) "Women, Politics and Democratic Prospects in Latin America" for Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, DC: Sustainable Development Department Technical Paper Series

Cardoso, Gustavo (2010) "Da comunicacao em massa a comunicacao em rede: modelos comunicacionais e a sociedade de informacao" in Moraes, Denis (org.) Mutacoes do visivel – da comunicacao de massa a comunicacao em rede, RJ: Pao e Rosas Editora, 23-53

Creedon, P. (1993) Women in Mass Communication, London: Sage Publications

Gibbon, R. K. and Ward, S, J. (1999) "Party Democracy Online: UK Parties and New ICTs", Information Communication and Society, 2 (3): 340-367.

Hobsbawn, E. (1989) The Age of Empire, London: Brown Book Group, 192-219

Lima, Venicio A. (2007) (orgs) A Midia nas eleicoes de 2006, Sao Paulo: Editora Fundacao Perseu Abramo

Lugones, Maria C. And Spelman, Elizabeth V. (2005, 2000) "Have we got theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism and the demand for the ''woman's voice" in Feminist theory: a reader, Kolmer, Wendy K. and Kouski, Frances Bart, N York: McGraw Hill, 16-27

Margolis, Michael, Resnick and Levy, Jonathan (2003) "Major parties dominate, minor parties struggle" in Gibson, Richard, Nixon, Paul and Ward, Stephen (eds.) Political parties and the Internet: net gain?, London: Routledge, 53-68

Matos, C. (2008) Journalism and political democracy in Brazil, Maryland: Lexington Books

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1990) Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity, US: Duke University

Norris, P. (2000) A Virtuous Circle-political communications in post-industrial societies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36-59

Norris, P. (2001) Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty and the Internet worldwide, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-92, 95-111, 232-240

Nederveen Pieterse, J. (2010) Development Theory, London: Sage

Thussu, D. (2000,2006) International Communication – Continuity and Change, London: Arnold

Ward, Stephen, Gibson, Rachel and Nixon, Paul (2003) 'Parties and the Internet: an overview' in Gibson, Richard, Nixon, Paul and Ward, Stephen (eds.) Political parties and the Internet: net gain?, London: Routledge, 11-33

Van Dijk, T. (2008) Discourse and Power, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Van Zoonen, L. (1994) Feminist Media Studies, London: Sage Publications

Documents

Clark, Jessica and Aufderheide, Patricia (2009) Public media 2.0: Dynamic, engaged publics, in Centre for Social Media – School of Communication of the American University

---

[i] "TV publica pode promover a igualdade de genero, dizem especialistas" (*Public TV can promote gender equality, say experts*, Flavia Villela, Agencia Brasil, 08/11/2009).

[ii] Conducted for the Centre for Social Media of the School of Communication of the American University (February, 2009), and part of the Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation.

[iii] "Eleicoes 2010 - As outras candidatas" (*The other candidates*, Ligia Martins da Almeida in *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 21/09/2010).

[iv] A Brazilian law of 1997 obliges political parties to reserve 30% of their vacancies to women candidates, although this has been having more effect on paper than in actual practice. The law is set to be revised by the Special Secretary of Politics for Women("Partidos que nao cumprirem cotas de mulheres poderao ser punidos", *Jornal do Brasil*, 17/03/2009).

[v] See *Media and politics in Latin America: globalization, democracy and identity* (I.B. Tauris, 2012).

[vi] Brazil gave women the right to vote in 1934, although most of Central and South America, as Desposato and Norrander (2005, 7) assert, gave women suffrage laws only after the Second World War.

[vii] "E se a eleicao fosse nas redes sociais?" (*And what if the elections were on the social networks?, Comunique-se*, 29/09/2010).

[viii] "Consumidor de luz pagou R$ 1 bi por falha de Dilma" (*Light consumer paid R$ 1 bi for Dilma's error*, *FSP*, 05/09/2010).

[ix] "Chavez vai a TV dizer que objetivo na Venezuela e acesso a informacao" (*Chavez goes on TV to say that aim in Venezuela is access to information*, Renata Giraldi, *Agencia Brasil*, 22/03/2010).

[x] See full study in Matos, I. B. Tauris, 2012.