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## ITIRA Conference 2002

# Social organization through the Internet: Citizens Assemblies in Argentina.

Susana Finkelievich  
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### Abstract

The crisis that crashed the Argentine financial system in December 3, 2001, did not just generate a powerful social explosion that caused the renounce of two Presidents: it also created a new citizens information outburst. Hundreds of email chains against the Government started circulating among the 3,5 million of Argentine Internet users. The night of December 19, when thousands of indignant citizens went to the streets clattering their pots and pans, in one of the first “cacerolazos”, to protest against the Etat de Siege, was the first of many citizens’ public manifestations.

In the beginning, these demonstrations were spontaneous, but in a few days, they were organized through the Internet. Neighbors in different areas of Buenos Aires, and in the largest cities, began to meet in street corners, cafés, or neighborhood clubs. They fixed some evenings a week to meet, and discuss “proposals for a new Argentina”, but they also started electronic forums to continue their face-to-face debates, and to inform the neighbors who couldn’t get to the meetings. They designed websites to spread their actions and proposals. Gradually, different neighborhood assemblies –currently, there are 43 of them in Buenos Aires- contacted each other, through e-mails, or their websites. Two weeks later, they had inter-neighborhoods Sunday meetings, for

debates and proposals. The results are disseminated through web sites, and electronic –as well as paper- newsletters. The new “Assembly” movement claims for a popular-Assembly-based government. Both leaders and members of these movements agree on one thing: this massive organization could not be implemented without the Internet.

This paper analyses this innovative ICT-supported massive citizens movement.

¿Are they socially revolutionary, or socially conservative?

¿Are ICTs a mean, or a goal in themselves?

¿Do they provide new participation platforms?

¿Are ICTs - supported social movements a way to e-democracy?

¿What is its future, now that the present Argentine government has shown a complete lack of interest towards the Internet, and that the peso devaluation makes it far less possible for the majority of the population to have access to ICT tools?

¿How can global citizen networks support these movements?

These and other issues are developed, as a contribution for an international debate.

*Key words:*

*E-democracy – community informatics –citizen’s networks – social movements - Latin America – Argentina*

## ITIRA Conference 2002

### **Social organization through the Internet: Citizens Assemblies in Argentina.**

Susana Finkelievich  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Buenos Aires  
Argentina  
[sfinquel@ciudad.com.ar](mailto:sfinquel@ciudad.com.ar)

The crisis that crashed the Argentine financial system in December 3, 2001, did not just generate a powerful social explosion that caused the demise of two Presidents: it also created a new citizens information outburst. Hundreds of email chains against the Government started circulating among the 3,5 million of Argentine Internet users. The night of December 19, when thousands of indignant citizens went to the streets clattering their pots and pans, in one of the first “cacerolazos”, to protest against the Etat de Siege, was the first of many citizens’ public manifestations.

Exhausted by four years of economic recession, indignant by the Economy Minister, Dr. Cavallo’s determination to block all the savings accounts, either in Dollars or in Pesos, angry with the President’s hesitant ways, tired of the incessant political corruption, the Argentines found that the government’s measure to implement an Etat de Siege, was the drop that filled the cup: it was too evocative of past dictatorships. In anger, citizens took to the streets.

In the beginning, these demonstrations were spontaneous, but in a few days, they were organized through the Internet. Neighbors in different areas of Buenos Aires, and in the largest cities, began to meet in street corners, or cafés, after hours. They fixed some evenings a week to meet, and discuss “proposals for a new Argentina”, but they also started electronic forums to continue online their face-to-face debates, and to inform the neighbors who couldn’t get to the meetings. They designed websites to spread their actions and proposals. Gradually, different neighborhood assemblies –currently, there are more than 50 of them in Buenos Aires– contacted each other, through e-mails, or their websites. Two weeks later, they had inter-neighborhoods Sunday meetings, for debates and proposals. The results are disseminated through web sites, and electronic –as well as paper- newsletters.

The best designed and more complete is the Indymedia Argentina web page (<http://argentina.indymedia.org>), an international organization, which informs about protest in dozens of cities in the world. <http://elatico.com> features analysis on the national reality, and a “cacerolazos” agenda, among other articles. The web site Vaciamiento.com ([www.vaciamiento.com](http://www.vaciamiento.com)) was born from the Aerolineas Argentinas conflict; today, it analyses the national politics. In Yahoo! Groups (<http://ar.groups.yahoo.com>), in Politics and Government, and People’s Opinion, there are many tentatives to generate civic awareness about the importance of fighting together. Among other active sites, there are [www.Cacerolazos.com](http://www.Cacerolazos.com),

www.CacerolerosArgentinos.com, Argentinos de pie. Some of them, such as [www.plazademayo.com](http://www.plazademayo.com), a virtual site for political debate, were born on the days that followed the December 19, 2001, demonstration. Others were already in cyberspace. The new “Assembly” movement claims for a popular-Assembly-based government. Both leaders and members of these movements agree in one thing: this massive organization could not be implemented without the Internet.

This paper analyses this innovative ICT-supported massive citizens movement.

¿Are they socially revolutionary, or socially conservative?

¿Is ICT social appropriation a means, or a goal?

¿Is it a new participation form?

¿A way to e-democracy?

¿What is its future, now that the present Argentine government has shown a complete lack of interest towards the Internet, and that the peso devaluation makes it far less possible for the majority of the population to have access to ICT tools?

¿How can global citizen networks support these movements?

### **ICT–supported social movements: a new form of social organization?**

At present, Argentina continues being, in spite of the constant aggravation of its economic crisis, one of the speaking countries which features greater

dynamism in the Internet sector, considering the increasing number of users. In December 2001, there were around 3,5 millions of Internet users. A quarter of a million more are connected from cibercafés, booths, access centers, community technological centers, public libraries, etc. Internet has become, for the middle class sectors, its typical users, a fundamental organizational tool.

Neighborhood groups, either already existent, or hastily organized, then organized the protests, spontaneous in the first moments. The Assembly’s discussions were uploaded to web pages. Electronic lists of information and proposals for the country arose. In [www.cacerolazo.com](http://www.cacerolazo.com), “an international portal of civil protest”, according to its self-

definition, you can participate of a protest forum and leave messages: “we don't lower the saucepans, we have to have them visible, don't let them manage us.” “Let's all march to claim to May Square.” There is also an Albert Camus's quote: “The rebellion movement is not, in its essence, selfish. It can have, without a doubt, selfish determinations. But the rebellion is made as much against the lie as against the oppression”.

"Become a correspondent cacerolero of your neighborhood keep your community informed", invites the place [www.c-a-c-e-r-o-l-a-z-o.com.ar](http://www.c-a-c-e-r-o-l-a-z-o.com.ar). Neighbors can upload their information and become columnists of the events in the local assemblies. <http://www.rebellion.org> is an electronic newspaper that keeps updated its alternative information.

These movements are no longer limited to the middle-income groups: a convocation of the Federation of the Earth, Housing and Habitat of the Workers Power - an organization of blue collar workers, unemployed since the recent desindustrialization of the country -, disseminated by e-mails, invited the unemployed to dialogue with the victims of the financial *corralito*<sup>1</sup>, “so that the saucepans and the picketers may meet for the first time in May Square, as symbol of a new alliance of the workers, the unemployed, and the middle classes”. The alliance was brief, but it certainly lit an alarm red light for the politicians in power.

### **Democracy and public sphere**

Is the Argentina case an example of the construction of an innovative public sphere? In his classic book **Virtual Communities**, Howard Rheingold builds his concepts on the basis of the Habermasian conception of public sphere:

*"The idea of modern, representative democracy, as it was conceived by the Illuminist English philosophers, included the concept of a living communications network, from citizen to citizen, known as the civil society, or the public sphere. (...) In spite that elections are the main and most visible characteristic of*

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<sup>1</sup> “Corralito” (little corral) is the popular name given to the system implemented by the Government to inhibit financial outflows from the banks, in December 21. It blocks the bank accounts, so that account holders cannot touch their own savings.

*democratic societies, it is assumed that these elections are supported by discussions among citizens from all society levels, on issues that are important to the Nation” (Rheingold, 1993).*

In present democracies, communication may be classified in two fundamental notions:

1. Democratized, or participative and alternative media, including computer-mediated communications, and
2. Social groups and movements, which use these media to protest, build proposals, and generate social changes.

The origin of ideas on the public sphere, and their central role in democracy goes back to ancient Greece. The Greek definition of public and private has strongly influenced the occidental concepts about these terms, and democratic ideals still incorporate the Greek notions. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989), Habermas develops a normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life, in which citizens can exchange viewpoints on important issues for common good, forming public opinion. This public sphere exists when individuals meet to discuss political issues. Habermas’s work is based on the description of the historical moments during the 17th and 18th Centuries, in which cafés, salons, and other social meeting points had become debate centers. He extends these concepts to a participation ideal in the present public sphere. The discussion process must adopt the form of a critic, and rational debate. Participants have a common interest: truth.

### **The role of communication and the Internet in democracy**

Habermas stresses the fact that a citizen’s individual opinions, when given as an answer to a specific demand (e.g. a public opinion survey) do not constitute the public sphere, because they are not inscribed in a process of public opinion construction. Habermas (in Porter, 1996) argues against the “envy of Athens”. He states that, if *democracy is implemented in the present huge, complex societies, the idea of a physical collective of consenting members should be overcome*. He proposes instead that citizens who are not necessarily present can develop other non-physical ways of communication.

Habermas (in Porter, 1996) perceives deterioration in this public space, and he blames publicist in the first place. Public opinion can only be built if there is a public engaged in a rational debate. Plebiscites, public opinion surveys, and similar mechanism do not offer a potential for democracy, because they do not offer the opportunity to conform a discursive will. Communication does not mean just to unveil what individuals have already decided or learnt: it’s a process of debate through which public opinion is created.

Far from the Athenian democracy, the Internet holds the potential to build public opinion, according to the Habermasian ideals. In “Virtual Communities”, Howard Rheingold states that, since public sphere depends on free discussion, and the communication of ideas, “as soon as a political entity grows larger than the number of citizens that can get into the meeting room of a modest City Hall, this “marketplace”, vital for the generation and discussion of political ideas, can be powerfully influenced by changes in communication technologies”. Virtual communities may help citizens to revitalize democracy, by enabling massive participation in the political process, or they may cheat them into buying attractively packaged substitutes of democratic discourses.

### **ICTs and the multitude**

The motto “Internet for all” is spreading around the world. Internet’s defendants claim that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), sooner or later, will satisfy the democratic ideal of universal access to knowledge, as well as genuinely democratic societies, based on transparency, solidarity, citizen’s participation, and human rights. A less utopian position states that ICTs can be used to impose hegemonies that tend to benefit the already existing elites, deepen social gaps, accentuate social inequalities, and, as a consequence, debilitate the smaller or marginal economies, and the most fragile countries (León, Burch, and Tamayo, 2001).

Both situations (as well as many other, from both sides of the spectrum) are feasible. They can be facilitated by ICTs. The sort of technologies used, the goals pursued by these means, and the results obtained, will depend on the social agents that participate in these process, the correlation of strengths in the power structure, and the social structures in which ICTs are used. In the present world, ICTs use, if governed only by market-imposed rules, contributes to the aggravation of social contradictions. However, the current tendencies of social appropriation of ICTs are a powerful counterbalance to this. ICTs are now an object of social claim. They are powerful tools for the organized civil society, and in more recent times, for “the multitude”, a whole new concept<sup>2</sup>.

Paolo Virno, Italian philosopher, and a pillar of the so called "new left", struggles to refund an utopia without opposing globalization, but trying to discover, in it, its creative potential. In his book **Il ricordo del presente (Remembrance of times present)** Virno emphasizes the existence of a new political subject: the multitude. In Argentina, who are these *many*? From December 2001 onwards, the multitude was the middle-income social groups that react against their savings expropriation; it’s civil society, wanting to go beyond “politics” and “politicians”, and who assume the duty of saying no, and “basta” to the State’s abuses; it’s the

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<sup>2</sup> Notes on Virno are taken from Josefina Ludmer’s paper: **ARGENTINA, EN LA SERIE DE SEATTLE, La multitud entra en acción**, <http://www.clarin.com/suplementos/cultura/2002-01-19/u-00201.htm>

urban poor, claiming for jobs and food for their children. It's maybe the first urban anti-globalisation massive protestation in the country. It could be what Virno<sup>3</sup> calls "the multitude".

Virno's concept of multitude appears in his paper "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus", in the book **Radical Thought in Italy**<sup>4</sup>: he sketches a political theory of the future, based on the exodus, as action, and on the multitude, as social subject. Virno's political theory is based on resistance, which authorizes the use of violence each time that a positive prerogative is altered by central power. "Civil disobedience" (e.g. refusal to pay taxes, to obey certain laws) is for Virno the *sine qua non* condition for political action; this disobedience is different from the one conceived by liberal tradition, because it questions the State's command capacity.

Exodus, says Virno, is an action model capable of confronting the large issues articulated by Hobbes, Rousseau, Lenin, and Schmitt: command/ obedience, public/private, friend/enemy, consensus/ violence. It's not a protest, but an act of collective imagination: a massive escape from the State. The key-words of the exodus potential politics are: *right to resistance, disobedience, intemperance, multitude, soviets*, and — surprisingly — *miracle*.

The concept of *multitude* opposes the concept of *people*, linked to the State. For those who defend the sovereign power in the 17th Century, writes Virno, "multitude" is a negative concept: the entry of the State in civil society's nature. Citizens, when they revolt against the State, are "the multitude against the people", states Hobbes (Hobbes, 1668). But this negative destiny has reached its end, because today, the multitude is not a "natural" phenomenon, but the historical result of a process of social transformations. Virno writes: the "many" burst in the scene when a crisis in the work society has taken place, and the usual dichotomies public/private, and individual/collective are no longer useful.

The multitude that resists obedience is a multiplicity without political unity. It never achieves the status of legal persona. It is incapable of making promises, agreements, of acquiring or transferring rights. It expresses itself as an ensemble of "acting minorities", neither of which aspires of becoming a majority. The multitude develops power, but it refuses to become a government. What the multitude does is to obstruct the mechanisms of political representation. Today, democracy is the construction and the experiment of non-representative, extra parliamentary forms of social functioning: councils, leagues, citizen's assemblies, which reduce the State's structure, because they interfere with its administrative apparatus. The multitude – increasingly organized – together with the already organized civil society (NGOs, citizens organizations, etc.), is demanding public access to the Information Society's tools. It is using them to achieve their own goals. Argentina has become a laboratory for innovative social experimentation.

## What is the future of neighborhood electronic networks?

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<sup>3</sup> Paolo Virno, **Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico** (Bollati Boringhieri, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> **Grammatica della moltitudine** (Rubettino, 2001). In English: **Radical Thought in Italy** (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), anthology, co-edited with Michael Hardt .

Will the Argentinean population continue using Internet for social organization? The answer is not easy: it is certain that in late 2001, a remarkable increase in the use of home banking, cibercafés, Internet booths, Community Technological Centers (CTCs –free-use public access places to the Internet), etc. has taken place in Argentina (3.5 million individual Internet users, 250.000 public Internet users). The question, at present, is what it will become of ICT and Internet use, in a country whose middle class (typically the main information technology users) becomes impoverished, because of unemployment, the lack of new sources of revenues, or for not being able to use their savings. According to a Prince & Cooke study, from February 2002 onwards, one million telephone users have resigned their telephone connections, and many Internet users have cut their connections to servers, as well as diminished drastically their telephone expenses (Prince and Cooke, 2002).

On the other hand, availability of band width has decreased, because many ISP found it difficult to pay the cost of it, so too, of international carriers, which reduced the bandwidth of international connections. Under extreme conditions, Argentina runs the risk of becoming a giant Intranet, without exit platforms to the external cyber world.

Another risk is the fast climb in cost of informatics goods and services, which are imported and valued in US Dollars. The Chamber of Computer Services Companies (CESSI) has already warned both the national Government and the community about a new danger: the stopping of informatics and telecommunications supplies, derived from the current economic policies.

Will this decrease the dissemination and appropriation of ICTs? Evidently, domestic connections to Internet could be replaced by Community Technological Centers (CTCs). At present, from the original 1.300 CTCs, 700 still survive, coordinated by the National Communications Secretariat (SECOM). CTCs would be an excellent solution for citizen's networks, but even this is complex, since CTCs have become a political stake. The SECOM was a cephalous for almost four months, and CTCs has become a desirable prey for the politicians and local leaders who favor clientelism. For example, they used to grant CTCs equipment only to specific neighbourhood leaders who belonged to their political parties. On January 9, a small group, brandishing a note of a Secretary of Municipalities of the Ministry

of the Interior, attempted to take the Program Information Society of the SECOM that the CTCs coordinates. They used physical threats and verbal aggressions to intimidate the officials that tried to defend to the Program, and only departed when the press intervened.

ICTs are and will continue to be a key part of the new social movements and in the power stakes. However, it's difficult to foresee their future development.

#### **Issues to debate:**

Some questions arise: are these movements representative symptoms of the present society? Are they socially revolutionary, or socially conservative? Will they be successful in generating political, economical, social cultural changes, in the targeted population, or in the wider society?

Based on the research I have conducted and coordinated, as well as the information and research in the bibliography, I believe that these social movements are, indeed, representative symptoms of the present society. As Litz Vieira states: "... the democratization process has stopped to be fleeting and functional to become it forms permanent. It's a process of adjustment between legality and genuineness, between morals and Law. This new interpretation opens a space for the social movements and civil society organizations, while it incorporates new concepts, including a revision of the public sphere, into the democratization process. He adds: "The processes of reproduction of cultural patterns become political forms in the public space" (Vieira, 2001). A space that, as the anti-global social movements have proved it, belongs as much in the physical space of streets and cities, as in the space of flows in the Web.

These social organizations enlarge the concept of public space, exceeding political parties, incorporating new topics to political agendas, and playing a fundamental part in the construction of a new public sphere, supported by electronic networks. In this sense, they are movements, neither revolutionaries nor conservative, but socially innovative. They have been successful in generating social and cultural changes in the target population, and in society, in a wider sense: the creation of a new associative concept of democratization, identified with the practice of citizenship, highlighting the limitations of both the State and the market, and allowing the concept of democracy as a social practice, with the citizens - Virno would say "the multitude" - as direct actors in the democratization processes.

One of the most direct cultural impacts –a process, and a tool - is the social appropriation and the dissemination of the Information Society tools, no longer available only to an elite. Another is the construction of a social, public subjectivity: the values and present actions in the civil society which frankly oppose the characteristic systemic values of the State and the market, and generate new forms of sociability, as well as the reciprocal alteration among instances of social practice, and the production of subjectivity. Yet another is the

practice of operational solidarity, through which the neighbours have implemented organized and sustained help to elderly peoples' homes, street children, unemployed parents, and other kinds of needy social groups.

The impacts are less perceptible in the formal political sphere, although, as Vieira outlines, the plural occupation of public space can carry an imbalance in the relationship between the actors and the political system, with prevalence of the political society, and with the insertion or participation of civil associations in the State, conferring them a semi-public status (Vieira, 2001). It is certain, however, that at least some of the political and social claims will find a place in the political agendas, in national, and international organisations. At economic level, however, no impacts have yet been registered.

In the digital era, another world is possible. Another Argentina, too.

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<http://www.argentina.indymedia.org>: Alternative communication network

<http://nuevasbases.org> : Contributions to build a new Argentina

<http://www.cipe.org/pfc> : Journalists fighting corruption

#### **International sites:**

<http://www.derechos.org> : Human Rights in the Internet

<http://www.destroyimf.org> : Alternative press in USA

<http://www.efa.org.au> : Citizens rights in the Internet

<http://www.globalexchange.org>: Globalization, free exchange

<http://www.nettime.org> : New journalism

<http://www.nodo50.org> : Alternative information, social movements

<http://www.rebellion.org> : Alternative information for Latin America