



Virtual Networks and Social Epidemics

Claudia Berbeo
Project Manager

W H I T E P A P E R



VIRTUAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL EPIDEMICS: THE CONVERGENCE OF TWO POWERS

ABSTRACT – Virtual social networks materialize and resoundly impact the attitude and behavior of global society. What is known about this phenomenon? How can its power be extended and leveraged?

“Matter is pure potential; it is nothing yet, but is capable of becoming anything.”

Aristotle

CLAUDIA PATRICIA BERBEO CALDERÓN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The generation of milestones in the history of the planet, in any organization or community regardless of its size, is related to phenomena over which many would like to exert influence.

Such phenomena correspond to times when a society modifies its forms of coexistence, ways of thinking, deciding, buying, etc., and for this reason the aspects that impact these changes become the subject of studies undertaken by publicists, politicians, economists, strategists and in general anyone interested in achieving a specific objective within a specified population.

Perhaps like never before, the capacity to exert influence in society is today within the reach of practically any human being, by way of virtual networks.

Virtual networks grant this power to whoever understands the way in which they work, together with another power: the power of social epidemics. In such circumstances technology and theory converge and virtual social networks arise, capable of producing transcendental phenomena and peak moments: milestones.

Virtual networks can reach any individual in the world. Social epidemics are capable of infecting individuals with an idea, such that they perform the actions we expect them to perform.

Colombia presents significant differences with developed nations in terms of access by its population to technological infrastructure. It has nevertheless manifested processes of appropriation of virtual social networks. We should recall that such appropriation is not measured in terms of the percentage of the population that participates in social networks, but rather in terms of the impact this percentage exerts in society, by indirectly converting those who are not part of networks into network users.

It is now time to see and understand how this was achieved and how the potential of virtual social networks may be used.

The White Paper, **VIRTUAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL EPIDEMICS: THE CONVERGENCE OF TWO POWERS** shows how virtual social networks operate and how desired goals may be converted into epidemics. Understanding these two phenomena and using them jointly may produce major changes and milestones in enterprises, communities and nations.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual social networks materialize and produce definite effects on attitudes and behavior in global society. Several investigations have identified the key success factors of virtual networks. But more than identifying these key success factors, networks must be understood in themselves as a new form of power in the world, just as significant as economic and military power.

With such networks as Facebook and Twitter, virtual networks began to focus on user activities instead of network activities, as users felt they were accessing their own websites instead of network websites.

Based on this new way of managing networks, all previous investigations need to be updated and need to regard this new concept as something given and not as a key success factor.

This White Paper ratifies and supports the potential of virtual social networks, and more than identifying their crucial aspects, seeks to explain the ways they can be used according to new theories, providing world class examples as support.

Chapter 1 presents a brief historical overview of the powers that have handled society and how virtual social networks have become a new global power milestone.

Chapter 2 presents a theory that calls attention to a process beyond the use and appropriation of technology: the transformation of human beings (attitude and active position in the world) following the virtualization of their lives and activity in virtual networks and the subsequent materialization of this virtual life and activities in the physical world.

Once the possibilities made available by virtual social networks for humans are understood, Chapter 3 addresses the social theory of epidemics and their key agents, as the basis for the generation of changes and production of impact in a society.

Chapter 4 analyzes a Colombian case, a globally recognized phenomenon, as the greatest expression of the current potential of virtual social networks. This analysis is based on the current situation of the social network Facebook in the country and of the agents of power of social epidemics that led to this recognition.

Finally, the Chapter on Conclusions is a compilation of what may be derived intuitively from this White Paper, which may be regarded as the results of the investigation.

1. MILESTONES OF A NEW HISTORICAL AGE

A brief historical review helps us understand the context in which the phenomenon of virtual social networks is developing.

Historical eras are marked by milestones indicating their start and their end. The ages of Western civilization are the following:

- Ancient Age: Start of civilization to the fall of the Roman Empire in the year 476 a.D.
- Middle Ages: From the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.
- Modern Age: From the year 1453 to the French Revolution in 1789.
- Contemporary Age: From 1789 to date?

Age changes have implied great political, economic and social changes rooted in the sources of influence in each age: fear, force, earth, merit, money, information, knowledge.

That which in the Ancient Age meant power is today a basic human subsistence need. For example, knowing how to read and write is not a privilege in the Contemporary Age, but was a privilege in other ages and as such granted power to those in possession of this skill.

Why mention a "current contemporary age" when this would imply redundancy, should be made clear. Many changes have taken place in society since the French Revolution, and for this reason a new age is conceivable, or naming the Contemporary Age differently.

It could be said we are in the "Dynamic Age," one in which changes occur rapidly and many types of power exist. However, there is one power that is beyond all others, and that is the power to dynamize thought, awaken opinions, mobilize masses, understand the feelings people have and affect them in small and large ways. Today this ability is not limited to those who have money, strength, merit or properties, it is within the reach of anyone and can be obtained through virtual social networks.

This "Dynamic Age" could begin with the end of World War, not because we have lost the war-waging habits seen at the start and end of the previous ages, but because we recognize the impact of increased globalization, framed within technological progress and the social and economic changes that took place after the war. In this age the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were established, the world divided into communists and capitalists, global awareness was generated about human survival in the face of dangers such as nuclear war and the subsequent Cold War, man reached the moon, chips were

invented along with computers, the Internet, the information society and the knowledge society, all the “e-isms” applications (e-learning, e-health, e-commerce, e-government, etc.), and more recently, virtual social networks.

Since distance and time no longer pose problems to the interaction of human beings, interaction reaches new levels. Virtual social networks not only affect human interaction but also attitudes, and transform humans into beings that awaken to physical action.

This is the potential of virtual social networks, and this is the capacity they offer to those who understand them and know how to direct them for their own purposes.

If there is anything certain, it is the fact that the power of these networks has already given them a place in universal history, as they have already become a milestone in the history of many nations.

2. FROM HUMAN VIRTUALIZATION TO ACTIVE MATERIALIZATION

For many years studies have focused on literacy, inclusion, the digital divide and many other related areas, pointing to the way in which human beings use and appropriate Information and Communications Technologies for their personal and professional benefit.

Today, through virtual social networks and similar applications, human beings have become “virtualized,” creating their profiles in a virtual world. Not happy with just this, they have also started sharing their lives, thoughts and feelings in this world.

Network users go from being a cold profile that enters and participates in certain forums, to becoming a person, with friends, who feels, learns, listens, shares and has an entire lifestyle in a virtual space. This initial process, shown in Figure 1, we call Human Virtualization.

Figure 1 – Human Virtualization Process



... profile, opinions, photos, occupations, likes, friends, coworkers, ...

Human Virtualization

Source: CINTEL

Through human virtualization people enhance their professional activities by finding new synergies within or outside the people they know. People can meet old friends from their past or contact those they believed lost, find out about events or activities they didn't know about, reactivate their social life, and even overcome social paradigms and publicly express their opinions.

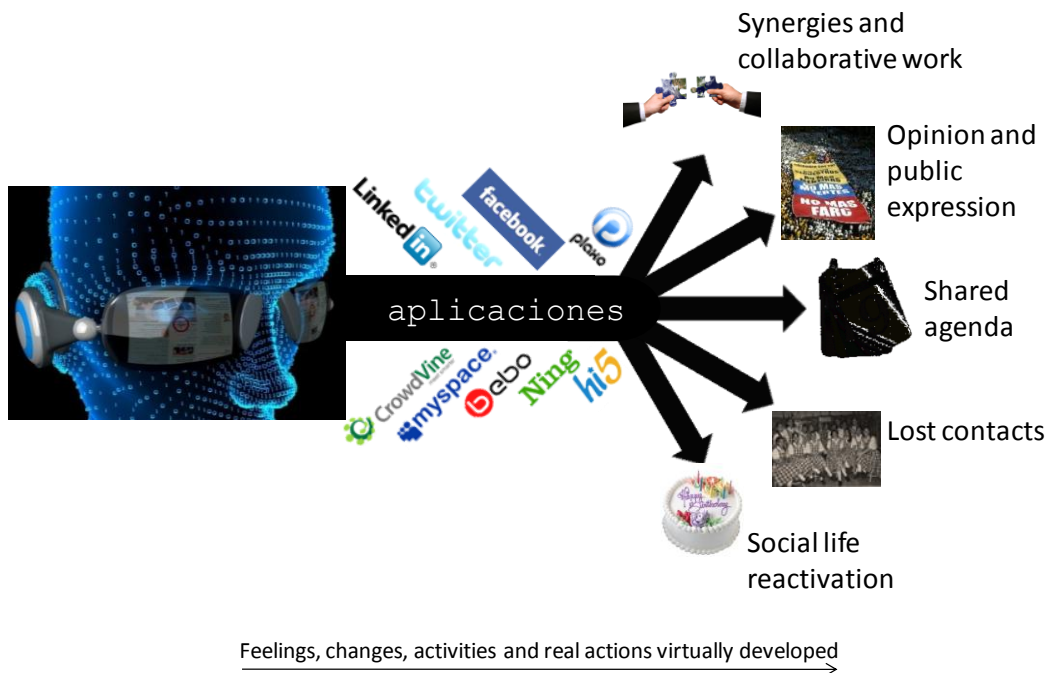
In this process human beings transform their virtual beings into beings that use senses to perceive what is happening and convey this activity to their physical

beings. This takes place in a second process we call active materialization.

Lavoisier’s Law is clear: “Matter is neither created nor destroyed, it is transformed.”

This is when humans respond to their virtual beings, as shown in Figure 2, and when consequently they engage in new businesses and make new contacts, attend events or activities that seem interesting to them, meet with the friends they have found, do not forget the special dates in their families or of their friends or acquaintances, and think more often about their country, and are even capable of uniting, organizing and generating political changes and transformations in their society.

Figure 2 – Active Materialization Process



Active Materialization

Source: CINTEL

The Active Materialization of Human Virtualization manifests when people feel or act in response to their activity in virtual social networks. The following chapter describes the agents of power of virtual social networks and how, via their convergence, major changes are produced in society.

3. SOCIAL EPIDEMICS¹

What is a successful virtual social network? How can the potential of virtual social networks be used? How can phenomena be generated through their use? These questions may be answered by analyzing various international studies found via a simple Google or Google Academic search of terms such as “key social network successes” or “network theory,” for example.

These search results provide a large number of documents, as numerous as they are prestigious, considering that their authors include well recognized bestsellers and/or the largest universities in the world.

Now, adopting a specific theory, the questions raised initially could be answered by defining a successful virtual social network as one that is capable of producing a major difference or change in a really significant aspect of society. The theory of “social epidemics” is the most appropriate way of understanding the success factors of virtual social networks.

Associating the generation of these major changes with epidemics is a simple way of understanding how they arise, based on the use of networks.

Epidemics are contagious and propagate among actors who are exposed to it. They in turn infect others, all of this via means that are favorable to the propagation.

The association with the generation of major changes takes place when the epidemic becomes a large-scale phenomenon that unleashes milestones in the history of those affected. Moments such as these are called “tipping points.”

The following three power agents of change help us understand the development of epidemics:

1. **Pareto’s Law** (actors): Also known as the 80/20 Principle, according to which 80% of results arise from 20% of the causes. This principle applies in various fields, such as: 20% of the customers generate 80% of the profits, 20% of the population holds 80% of the wealth, 20% of criminals commit 80% of crimes, etc.

The 80/20 principle applied to virtual social networks implies that 80% of the work is done by 20% of participants. The key then is to identify and focus on that 20%.

¹ This chapter is based on the theory presented in the book “THE TIPPING POINT: HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE”, Malcolm Gladwell, ISBN 0-316-31696-2, 2002.

Within this group there are 3 types of individuals in a social epidemic with virtual networks:

- Connectors: They are highly sociable and have many contacts. The type of person that knows everyone. The most active link in the Six Degrees of Separation theory.²
 - Experts: They have ample knowledge and are recognized for the accurate information they handle and their influential opinions. They are a referent, the type of person everyone believes in and whose recommendation is followed without question.
 - Sellers: They are specialists in persuasion and convincing. As individuals they project energy, enthusiasm and charisma, and infect others with their emotions. They know how to handle their verbal and body expressions to the point of being “irresistible.”
2. **The Contagion Factor** (the contagious or “sticky” aspect of the epidemic): The strategy used to promote an idea must be memorable, must be necessarily identified with the reality of people, and must generate action by people.

Memorable strategies can be identified in Colombia, mainly involving messages related to national historical milestones or advertising campaigns. Have you used any of the following expressions? *“In these times of effervescence and heat,”* or *“Work, work, work.”* [These allude to the Colombian cry for Independence and to a Colombian presidential election campaign].

Have you ever participated in a conversation like the following? *“New, eh? Well, Vell Rosita!”* [Alludes to a Colombian TV commercial about a liquid detergent to wash that gets clothes like new. The liquid detergent is called “Vell Rosita”].

Have you ever been told or told anyone: *“I think you’re in the wrong place.”* [Alludes to another one Colombian TV commercial. The commercial is about a Bank called “Davivienda”. Its slogan says: *“if you (your money) are not in Davivienda, you are in the wrong place”*].

These phrases are memorable for Colombians. Each one is a contagion factor which, converging with power agents, surely generated, in its peak moment, an epidemic that led people to action: the cry for Independence, the election of a president, increased sales of a product or the number of customers of a financial institution, etc.

² The theory of Six Degrees of Separation dates from 1929, when the Hungarian Frigyes Karinthy stated that everyone on Earth is connected to every other person by a chain of acquaintances of not more than five links. It wasn't until 1967, however, with the experiment done by US psychologist Stanley Milgram, that the theory consolidated and the discoveries arising from the experiment were published, inspiring the phrase “six degrees of separation.”

3. **The Power of Context** (favorable means of propagation): Epidemics are sensitive to time and local conditions and circumstances, and these in turn facilitate propagation or make it more difficult. Context itself can make it possible to identify the contagion factor, and the risk lies in the fact that the successful conditions of the first two agents may not be replicable at different times and in different societies.

At the point where certain special conditions of the agents of power converge, dramatic changes will be produced in the societies where the epidemic is taking place.

Now, the principal change that ratifies the potential of virtual social networks is the Active Materialization among masses of Human Virtualizations, and the most relevant global evidence of this manifested in Colombia on February 4, 2008.

The following chapter describes what happened on that date and how a group created in a virtual social network called Facebook reached a threshold in the agents of power.

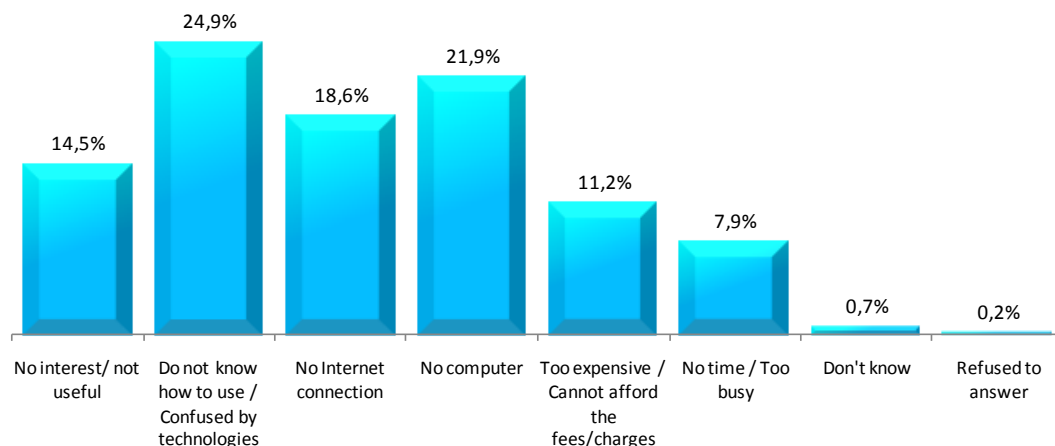
4. FACEBOOK AND THE COLOMBIAN CASE

Just as different information and communications technologies must be known and appropriated in order to be used, the same thing applies to virtual social networks.

By appropriation of ICTs is understood the point in which a technology is used for the personal or professional benefit of its user, when it is no longer the end in itself (learning to use it) and instead becomes a means, a simple resource that supports the attainment of an objective.

In Colombia the mobile phone has been appropriated, people use it to fill communications needs and sometimes even for entertainment. The opposite happens with computers and the Internet. These technologies have demanded more effort from the Colombian population in learning to use and benefit from them, due mainly to the access costs of these technologies and to the lack of training and culture regarding their benefits. This is demonstrated by the results shown in Figure 3, the answer to the question, *What is the main reason for which you do not use the Internet?*, asked of Internet non-users as part of the study undertaken by WIP (World Internet Project) and CINTEL in 2008.

Figure 3 – Reasons for Not Using Internet

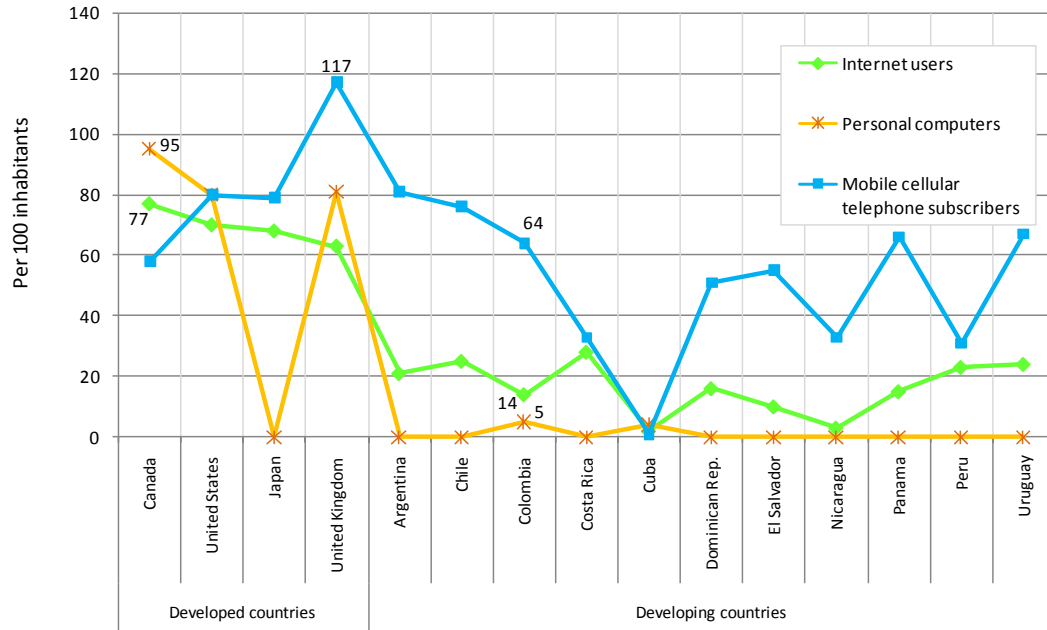


Source: WIP (World Internet Project) - CINTEL 2008 Survey Study

Less than a year ago only a few people in Colombia had used virtual social networks, mainly for basically 2 reasons: the first, because accessing the Internet required accessing a computer and the Internet and such access, as shown in Figure 4, is low compared with developed nations; and secondly, the social networks

known until then focused their attention on the activities of the networks themselves and not on the activities of their users.

Figure 4 – Penetration of Telecommunications Services in Developed Nations and Latin America – 2006



Source: CINTEL, based on World Telecommunication / ICT Indicators Database 2007, International Telecommunication Union – ITU, 2007.

Internet penetration in Colombia, according to Ministry of Communications data for 2007, is at 28%.

Although the above indicators are significantly higher in developed than in Latin American nations,³ by mid-2007 Colombia started using Facebook (a network that does not center its activities on itself but on the activities of its users) and, in one month (time during which the March of February 4 was prepared), the barriers of Internet and computer access were broken, and a dramatic change was produced in the appropriation of social networks in Colombia. During this appropriation the steps of learning how to use and benefit from them were skipped, and the highest level was reached, a natural and almost transparent use.

In what follows we will see how neither the country's Internet penetration nor its 5 computers for every 100 inhabitants posed obstacles to the globally recognized international phenomenon that happened, the greatest demonstration of the power of

³ Latin American nations are classified as developing nations, except for Haiti. Source: UN Statistical Division, standard country or area codes for statistical use, 2007 version. [<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49.htm>]

virtual social networks in society⁴: the Colombian case of the March of February 4, 2008, created and organized in a Facebook group.

4.1 FEBRUARY 4, 2008

On January 4, 2008 a group was created in Facebook called “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” [A Million Voices Against the FARC].⁵ That same day the group closed with 920 members and a proposal made by one of them to hold a march one month later, with the goal of globally expressing an opinion against that guerrilla group.

The following day the group had 3,177 members and one week later, 51,320. By January 26 there were 226,025 members.

During the month between the group’s creation and the march, group members organized and began to appoint city and country coordinators on a volunteer basis. The principal organizers met physically a few days before the march, having used Facebook (the group created and the Inbox) to communicate. From this they went to personal mail, providing their private data and information. They subsequently became consolidated in a website whose name Colombians clearly remember: “Colombia Soy Yo” [“Colombia is Me” / “I am Colombia”].

In September of 2007⁶ a similar case occurred in Burma, a dictatorial military state in Southeast Asia. The population there protested against fuel price hikes imposed by the regime, in demonstrations calling for democracy directed by Buddhist monks. The demonstrations were organized following the publication of information on the regime’s repression, which started circulating via Internet blogs and a Facebook group called “Support the Monks’ Protest in Burma.”⁷ In less than 10 days 100,000 people had gathered in this group. Currently it has 364,512 members, 1,168 discussion topics on the Discussion Board, 9,621 messages on the Wall, 1,577 photos, 1,607 news in Publications and 70 videos.

While these figures are not high compared with the larger groups in Facebook, they do show an important feature also seen in “One Million Voices Against the FARC” [“Un millón de voces contra las FARC”] and which the large groups lack: they use the means of communications provided by the groups tool in Facebook. In groups

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/video/?videoid=3136832001>

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=a6dd3a3b8ab722dd8188915fcff8d1de&refurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fs.php%3Fk%3D200000010%26c1%3D4%26sid%3Da6dd3a3b8ab722dd8188915fcff8d1de&gid=6684734468>

⁶ HUGE FACEBOOK GROUP SHOWS ROLE OF INTERNET IN BACKING MYANMAR PROTESTERS, International Herald Tribune. The global edition of the New York Times. Publicado el 28 de septiembre de 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/09/28/europe/EU-GEN-Britain-Myanmar-Internet.php>

⁷ <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=653924934&ref=name&pub=2309869772#/group.php?gid=24957770200>

such as “Let’s break a Guinness Record! 2009 Approved by guinnessworldrecords.com,” the largest Facebook group worldwide, currently with 3,684,279 members⁸, activity is limited to adding users. Similarly, the group “Experimento: Seis Grados de Separación” [“Experiment: Six Degrees of Separation”], the largest in Latin America, has 1,950,454 members⁹ and centers its activity on the Wall (10,220) and the Discussion Board (1,704 topics).

“Support the Monks’ protest in Burma” and the demonstrations held in Burma turned the eyes of the world on that state, generating rejection for the situation of the country by the international community.

“Un millón de voces contra las FARC,” in contrast with “Support the Monks’ in Burma”, transcended the international sphere and held demonstrations in 166 cities around the world, 38 of them in Colombia, with an absolutely unprecedented mass response and participation. The March of February 4 is the world’s largest mass movement in contemporary history (“Dynamic Age”) convened for a specific cause by a single nation.

In the Facebook group each individual participates with his/her own name, there are no nicknames. By November 27, 2008 “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” had 440,840 members, 3,531 discussion topics in the Discussion Board, 56,572 messages on the Wall, 4,482 photos, 135 news in Publications and 121 videos.

Just like with the group “Support the Monks’ Protest in Burma,” the Colombian group uses all the tools Facebook groups use to communicate, and has also become a national opinion referent for extraordinary events, since participation rises sharply with the news ---such as, for example, the financial destabilization of the country due to pyramid-type schemes, the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, the appearance of hooded individuals in several Colombian public university campuses, the collapse of stock exchanges around the world, and the liberation of Ingrid Betancourt by the armed forces of Colombia, among many others---

The constant activity given to group tools in “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” is a clear example of Human Virtualization. The millions of people that took to the streets in Colombia and in 128 other nations around the world are a clear example of Active Materialization. The Active Materialization of the Human Virtualization of Colombians is the clearest demonstration of the potential of virtual social networks to influence the world.

⁸ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=19584649016>

⁹ <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=18788870878>

4.2 AGENTS OF POWER IN THE DEMONSTRATION

The greatest challenge faced by virtual social networks is learning to exploit their potential. In what follows each one of the agents of power in the social epidemics theory is analyzed in the Colombian case.

4.2.1 THE 80/20 PRINCIPLE

The important thing about this agent of power is identifying the characteristics of the people that mobilized and attained the success seen on February 4, and based on this, identifying who the connectors, experts and sellers were. This could begin by analyzing the profile of current Colombian Facebook users.

In March of 2008 just over 2,187,000¹⁰ people in Colombia had a Facebook account, representing approximately 4.97% of the total population. Currently there are about 2,400,000 users.¹¹

The profile of Facebook users in Colombia, according to the WIP (World Internet Project) - CINTEL 2008 Study Survey is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Profile of Facebook Users in Colombia

AGE		GENDER		SCHOOLING		STRATUM ¹²		CIVIL STATUS		OCCUPATION	
<= 17	13.9%	M	45.8%	Primary	2.8%	1	0.0%	Single	75.0%	Employee	30.6%
18 – 22	37.5%	F	54.2%	Secondary	27.8%	2	19.4%	Married	19.4%	Home	0.0%
23 – 27	19.4%			Technician Degree	8.3%	3	45.8%	Living together	4.2%	Student	52.8%
28 – 32	9.7%			Attending o attended university	31.9%	4	19.4%	Divorced /separated	1.4%	Unemployed	1.4%
33 – 37	5.6%			University degree or above	29.2%	5	5.6%	Widow(er)	0.0%	Retiree / Pensioner	1.4%
38 – 42	5.6%					6	9.7%			Self-employed	13.9%
43 – 47	1.4%										
48 – 52	5.6%										
53 – 57	0.0%										
58 – 62	1.4%										
63 – 67	0.0%										
68 – 72	0.0%										
73+	0.0%										

Source: WIP (World Internet Project) - CINTEL 2008 Internet Users Survey

¹⁰ CINTEL, calculated according to the CINTEL – 2008 Internet Survey, the Colombian population as of 2007 (Source: www.dane.gov.co) and a 28% Internet penetration, according to Ministry of Communications data.

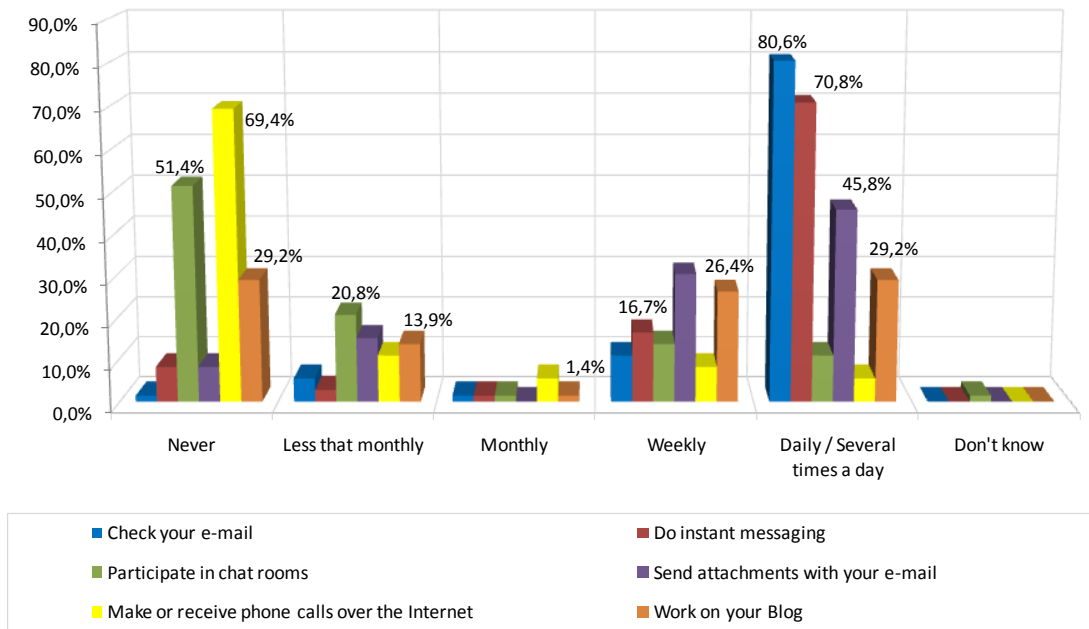
¹¹ CINTEL, considering growth estimates for the Colombian population for 2008 according to the DANE and the growth of Internet subscribers (not users), which between Deember 2007 and June 2008 grew 28.46% according to the Ministry of Communications.

¹² Social and economic income level (estrato – stratum) as shown on the telephone bills of survey participants.

In the above table the predominant user characteristics are highlighted in red: users are mainly between the ages of 18 and 22, their social and economic strata is 3 [Colombian municipalities are classified into 6 strata], they are single and principally students. It is also important to know which media they use most frequently to communicate over the Internet and what entertainment activities they participate in, in order to identify their motivations and preferences.

Figure 5 indicates that the principal communications activity engaged in by Facebook users is checking e-mail, which 80.6% of those surveyed do once or several times a day. The next service registering high use frequency is instant messaging. In terms of working on personal websites in social networks or blogs, 29.2% of the respondents said they do this once or several times a day, and 26.4% stated they do this on a weekly basis. In addition, 29.2% never work on their websites, from which it may be concluded that they are network activity observers.

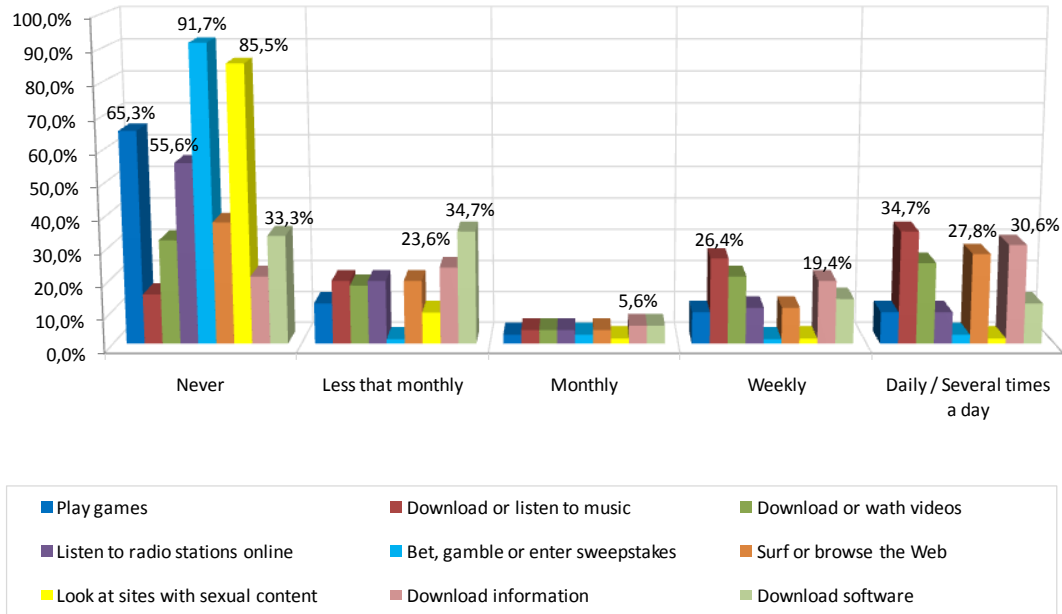
Figure 5 – Facebook Users – Frequency of Internet-based Communications Activities



Source: CINTEL, CINTEL – 2008 Internet Users Survey

Figure 6 reveals that most Facebook users do not play games online. To a lesser extent they also state they do not visit adult sites and do not engage in betting or gambling. The principal source of entertainment for these users is downloading and listening to music, as well as downloading information or simply browsing the web.

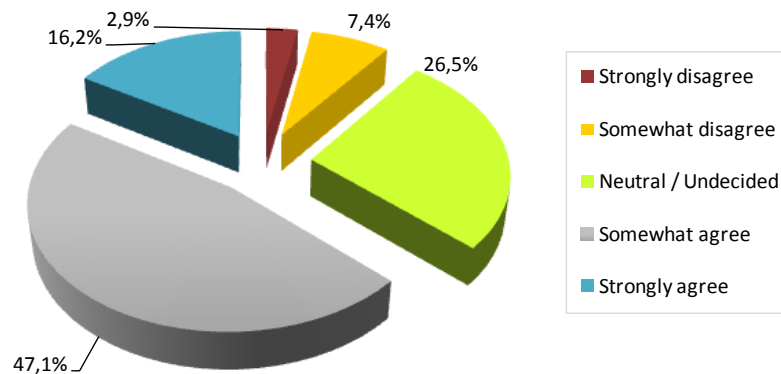
Figure 6 – Facebook Users – Frequency of Entertainment Activities on the Internet



Source: CINTEL, CINTEL – 2008 Internet Users Survey

Finally, Facebook users were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the Internet has helped them understand politics better. The answers given are shown in Figure 7 and they indicate that 63.3% either agreed or fully agreed with the statement. This grants virtual social networks potential political influence in the country.

Figure 7 – Do people like you understand politics better by using the Internet?



Source: CINTEL, CINTEL – 2008 Internet Users Survey

Now that Facebook user profiles and preferences are known in terms of Internet communications and entertainment tools, the three types of key individuals who were surely involved in the process leading to the February 4 March are analyzed in what follows.

The number of members in the group "One Million Voices Against the FARC" as of January 26, 2008, the last date for which figures are available, is 226,025. The first thing to be said about these users is that the majority of them are Connectors, because it was through the contacts of this 0.51% of the Colombian population¹³ that the initiative became known worldwide, and also made possible the physical replication thereof with connectors, experts and sellers.

One thing is certain and it is the fact that not all the million people who marched in Bogotá and the 11 million that marched in other cities around the world had Internet access nor computers. This confirms Pareto's Law, and the elimination of the access barrier as an obstacle in the face of an event with the characteristics of the Colombian demonstration.

Now, noting what was stated earlier in the sense that prior to the march all the Facebook group communications tools (Wall, Discussion Board, Posted Items, Photos and Videos) were used by the members of "A Million Voices Against the FARC" ["Un millón de voces contra las FARC"], there were also many Experts who posted information principally in Posted Items, Photos and Videos, or simply provided data for analysis on the Wall or in Discussion Boards. This does not necessarily imply that all the information posted is real or objective, but much of it is [real and objective], nevertheless. Individuals who maintain a constant presence in the group can easily determine who among current members posts truthful

¹³ CINTEL estimate based on the number of members in the group and the Colombian population estimate for 2007 (source: www.dane.gov.co).

information and becomes a referent in the group. Just like the Connectors, the Experts are not the only group members nor do they provide information exclusively via electronic media. At the physical level there were also Experts, such as for example the different organizations that supported the march and backed this opinion with data that was being presented to the world.

Finally, the Sellers in the Colombian group are those who through their constant participation in the Wall, by responding to commentaries and inviting people to participate and convincing participants to reply to messages, inevitably infect others with their energy and confidence regarding what they want to do. At the physical level, Sellers are all those who by word of mouth or other means of communications were able to convince people to participate in the march, such as, for example, the media, who through their power to reach the nation on a mass scale, persuaded and invited others to participate.

4.2.2 THE CONTAGIOUS FACTOR

The contagion factor is the agent of power that can be most clearly identified in the study of the Colombian case: NO MORE FARC.

The message sent by the group was loud and clear, was agreed upon and was defended so that connectors and experts would not change it.

It was so contagious in fact that the group proposed a logo based on it and on the following day both formal and informal businesses were selling it countrywide on T-shirts, and group users included it as photographs in their profiles and even in their Messenger service.

The message that characterized February 4 became even more contagious when it was included on a logo which was also the Colombian flag.

4.2.3 THE POWER OF CONTEXT

This is a determining power. All the above agents may be present in the best possible way, but if the context is not favorable, the expected results will not happen.

The first message on the Wall of “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” is from the creator of the group. It begins as follows: “Breaking News: The boy at the ICBF [Colombian Family Welfare Institute] is the son of Clara Rojas; this confirms the thesis that explains why the Farc didn’t release the hostages” [“Ultima hora: Niño en el ICBF sí es el hijo de Clara Rojas; se confirma tesis de por qué Farc no liberaron

rehenes”]. This message reflects the fact that the group was created in response to the context the nation was experiencing at that time.

One only needs to continue reviewing the messages in the Wall and the topics in the Discussion Board to see how the group became organized and stronger as news about the FARC came in and indignation about the boy Emmanuel grew.

A search in the portal of the daily *El Tiempo*¹⁴ of the first news reported by that paper about the February 4 march revealed two publications, from January 18, 2008, 14 days after the creation of the group. These publications were titled: “Secuestro ‘Sacude’ Opinión Pública” [‘Kidnapping ‘Shakes’ Public Opinion’] and “Indignación contra el secuestro moviliza a los colombianos” [‘Indignation Against Kidnapping Mobilizes Colombians’].

During the first month of the year events related to the FARC and the statements made by a foreign president against Colombia, coupled with his request to the international community to grant belligerent status to the FARC, produced rejection among citizens. The message NO MORE FARC, and the messages posted by Connectors, Experts and Sellers in the Facebook group, identified fully with this rejection and with the feelings of the nation.

In addition, and also in response to the context, a new “Contagion Factor” was generated. In response to statements seeking to delegitimize [and/or discredit] the national opinion represented by “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” made by opponents of the demonstration, the group started using the phrase “Colombia Soy Yo” [“Colombia is Me” / “I am Colombia”], a phrase which today has become an organization and which millions of Colombians empowered, seeking to recover their sense of belonging to the nation and acting as a result of this.

The context of February 4 could not have been more favorable to the march.

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<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/buscar?q=UN+MILLON+DE+VOCES+CONTRA+LAS+FARC&producto=eltiempo&a=2008&pagina=1&m=01&d=>

CONCLUSIONS

The world has changed too much since the Second World War to continue conceptually located in the same universal age of the French Revolution. It is not enough to speak of globalization if no age change is considered. What was regarded as an advantage in the 18th century is very different from what an advantage is today.

Virtual social networks are a new milestone in universal history. They are capable of materializing human opinions and thoughts into active actions when reaching any person individually, their human virtualization. These actions produce changes ranging from the way individuals work or socialize to global mass movements leading to political or economic changes in society, as is the Colombian case with the mobilization held on February 4, 2008, originated in a group in Facebook.

The theory of social epidemics explains how these major changes come about. An epidemic grows suddenly and exponentially. The first thing to consider in an epidemic is that it must be contagious; it must make it possible for it to “stick” to people (contagion factor, message, phrase, word). The epidemic initially infects key people who, owing to their contact with many other people (connectors), their influence (experts) or their vitality (sellers), in turn rapidly infect many more. This obviously takes place if the epidemic can propagate under favorable conditions in its context (time and place).

The notion of social epidemic applies to any movement people may wish to produce in society. Mass demonstrations can be generated, violence indexes lowered, company sales increased, industry icons created, plus infinite additional possibilities.

Virtual social networks facilitate the creation of social epidemics, but in order to succeed, they need to take into account the very agents of power of the epidemic: identification of the three key actors, definition of a contagious and memorable message/idea, and the conditions of the context in which the epidemic develops.

The mass media are not required to reach large numbers of people. What matters is knowing who has the contacts, who are knowledge referents, and those who easily create empathy and are persuasive. Through the work of these few individuals it is possible to reach anyone in the world.

If the right conditions are present among the agents of power, not only can the intended epidemic be successful, but also major barriers such as the digital divide and language differences can be naturally overcome.

The agents of power must exist from the outset of the epidemic or there will be no epidemic. Virtual social network users in Colombia are potential agents of power in the country, and as such it is important to acknowledge their characteristics, tastes



and preferences and to understand their behavior, when it comes to generating a social epidemic.

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- Universe: Colombian homes.
- Target Group: Men and women over the age of 12.
- Sample size: 400 surveys.
- Sampling: Simple random.
- Scope: National.
- Type of study: Quantitative, conclusive.
- Methodology: Telephone survey.
- Instrument: Semi-structured questionnaire with closed and open response options.
- Global margin for error: 5%
- Confidence level: 95.
- Study timeframe: March 8 – 18, 2008

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Av Calle 100 No. 19 - 61 Piso 8
TEL: 635 3538 Fax: 635 3336/38
Bogotá D.C. Colombia