Grassroots political voices and social media in the Chilean educational conflict

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Of the many turbulent global events that took place in 2011, a significant number were not only reported and commented upon through social media such as Twitter, they were to varying extents organized, promoted and mediatised by this burgeoning, influential channel. While certain events in Egypt, Morocco, etc, were then picked up by ‘traditional’ broadcast media, somewhat less global (in media and academe) attention was given to the conflict between Chile’s government and the student movement. This paper therefore aims to address the significant role that Twitter usage played in representing the interests of both the Chilean protestors and also the government whose neoliberal educational policies – leftovers from the Pinochet regime – reinforce inequality and class division (UNESCO/Muñoz 2011) and which provoked the many social conflicts seen in cities across Chile throughout 2011.

By examining data from the Twitter accounts of President Piñera’s government alongside the tweets of key student leaders during the height of the 2011 conflict, this paper examines how issues of power, authority and voice are constructed and expressed in the innovative discursive practices of social media. It also seeks to understand the extent to which traditional models of analyzing political discourse (Beard 2000, Chilton 2004) are applicable to ‘new’/social media such as Twitter (Murthy 2013, Zappavigna 2012). What discursive strategies are evidenced through the (re)presentation of the respective positions in the educational conflict by each ‘side’? How is language (in general) and Twitter (specifically) used to pursue discursive objectives in the battle for the narrative on this issue, which provoked some of the biggest anti-government demonstrations since the Pinochet regime? Is Twitter redefining the substance of grassroots political discourse as well as the style of its delivery?

This paper seeks to answer these questions through the corpus of Tweets from the Chilean case study.

Keywords: political discourse, social media, protest.