Book Reviews

13-M: Multitudes on line

Sampedro, Víctor F., ed.

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After the terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004, horizontal communication through

mobile phones and the Internet appears to have weakened the control of information by the Spanish government. Víctor Sampedro, a leading figure in Spanish political communication, has now edited a collection of 12 research articles on the so-called *night of cell phones*, March 13, when nearly 20,000 Spaniards gathered at the local headquarters of the ruling conservative People's Party (PP), demanding to know—before the next day's general elections—who was responsible for the attacks. Short text messages (SMS) and posts on antiwar and antiglobalization Internet portals notified thousands of citizens, who peacefully assembled at PP headquarters all over the country. The crowds complained about government attempts to blame the Basque organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuda (ETA) for the bombings, when all the evidence pointed to Islamist groups linked to Al-Qaeda. The protesters accused the ruling party of deceiving the public in an effort to hold onto its majority in parliament.

The commuter train attacks injured 1,500 and killed 192 people 3 days before the general elections. The PP had a good record of fighting the local violence of Basque separatists and enjoyed popular support on the issue, but after backing U.S. President George W. Bush in his invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister José María Aznar saw his approval ratings drop to their lowest level. All preelection surveys predicted a PP victory, but the Socialists, who had opposed the Iraq war and promised to withdraw Spanish troops, won the elections by a margin of 1.3 million voters.

The unexpected turnaround made March 13, 2004, one of the most controversial dates in the history of Spanish democracy. For the left, the outcome was a popular reaction against government's "big lie," in words of the new prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. For the right, the *night of cell phones* was a flagrant violation of Spanish electoral law, which bans political demonstrations the day before an election: The radical left commanded, in effect, a *coup d'etat*, which the Socialist party managed from the shadows through its left-wing media apparatus, agitating for the protests on its popular radio network, Cadena Ser.

The volume aims to debunk these arguments. "Part of our effort in this book is dedicated to take apart the conspiracy theory," writes Sampedro in the opening essay. The authors' main thesis is that, instead of being called together by any party, the demonstrators gathered themselves through new media to express their disagreement with a strategy of government disinformation involving the mainstream media. The large state and commercial media did not dare to question Aznar's attempt to blame the Basque separatists.

The protesters were part of what the authors call "the social left," a term with a blurry definition sometimes linked to antiglobalization and pacifist movements, as well as to postcommunist ideologies. The *night of cell phones*, write the authors, was a horizontal response across a social network that had been growing because of unpopular government decisions during Aznar's second term (2000–2004). To Sampedro, the fundamental consequence of the demonstrations was the "collapse and reopening" of the public sphere. Communication via cell phones and the Internet challenged state control of information. Despite the existence of press freedom, he argues, Spanish media have adopted a policy of "informative belligerence" when dealing with terrorism. Editorial balance that would question the official government version on the topic is seen as "a proof of moral cowardice and lack of civic commitment" (p. 238). This policy prevented the mainstream media from criticizing the Aznar administration decision to blame the Basque separatists.

Sampedro appeals to the *prudential lie theory* of Kuran (1995) to explain the behavior of the authorities and the media. The government bet on ETA responsibility to eliminate any connection between the attacks and its participation in the war in Iraq. The press (and even the Socialist opposition)

played along, fearing that criticism would put them on the wrong side. What impact the protests had on opinion in the electorate is difficult to quantify, but Sampedro contends that the protesters had a symbolic influence, especially among political elites, government as well as opposition, whom the demonstrators asked to define their positions. Only after the *night of cell phones* did the government admit to any clues pointing to Islamists. The Socialist party then accused Aznar of lying about the source of the attacks.

The book divides into two approaches. After the editor's introduction, the next three chapters use qualitative focus groups with students and activists involved in the demonstrations. The next four chapters conduct either analyses of secondary data from audience ratings or content analyses of counterinformation Web sites. The editor then contributes a conclusion.

Chapter 2 is in part a product of good fortune. Sampedro and Manuel Martínez Nicolás had formed four focus groups with students who were first-time voters, to study their perception of the role of media in politics, but after the attacks, the researchers expanded their project to study how the students' opinions—and their lives as participants in the democratic process—had changed in response. The young voters revealed that for them, interpersonal communication gained credibility to the detriment of the media.

Pablo Francescutti, Alejandro Baer, José María García de Madariaga, and Paula López argue in Chapter 3 that the *night of cell phones* could be the first popular mobilization through new information technologies to have direct influence on a democracy. Cell phones alone could not gather such large crowds, the authors caution. At least two other factors intervene: resentment toward the government and the paradoxical contribution of traditional media, which broadcast the demonstrations live, verifying that the mobile phone calls were no hoax.

In Chapter 4, Ariel Jerez Novara and Sara López Martín report their discussions with a group who were part of the "activist core" that sprang up in Madrid. "The real difference between putting up posters," says one activist, "and sending a cell message is that the latter goes through a network of confidants" (p. 99). The direct and personal quality of cell messages was a key factor in the success of the call for demonstrations.

In the next two chapters, Sampedro worked with Guillermo López García and then with Javier Alcalde and Ígor Sábada to analyze media consumption during the days from the attacks to the elections. Both chapters agree on the role the alternative media played. Online sites and mobile phones acted as peripheral public spheres, enabling a horizontal "quick deliberation" that questioned the vertical official truth aired in the mainstream media. Counterinformation sites acted as "mass mobilizers," receiving about 1.5 million visits the day of the protests. Alternative Web sites filtered news in from foreign media and allowed a call for civil disobedience, breaking down government control of information.

In Chapter 7, Gustavo Roig Domínguez and Sara López Martín, in a content analysis of four major counterinformation Web sites—Nodo 50, La Haine, Indymedia Barcelona, and Indymedia Madrid—conclude that all but the last overcame the "governmental block," the effort to place blame on Basque separatists and ignore Islamists.

The next chapter, by the editor along with Javier Alcalde and Igor Sábada, and the editor's concluding chapter find that the events of March 13 resulted from a public sphere entangled in a *prudent lie* of the government and mainstream media. The multitudes that emerged that day were "a response to the failure of democratic mechanisms of representation and debate" (p. 302). Sampedro ends the book with 10 theses about the characteristics of multitudes and the limitations of *technopolitics*.

The volume makes a valuable empirical contribution to understanding *the night of cell phones*. What was the impact of the March

13 bombings on public opinion and on the elections? This crucial question remains unanswerable. It appears that the attacks mobilized voters from the left, who had not participated on previous elections, tipping the balance in the Socialists' favor. In any case, *13-M: Multitudes on Line* shows that cell phones activated existing social networks (and did not create a new one), forcing political elites to reveal the Islamist connections.

The collection came out very quickly after the events, and some key assertions seem doubtful in hindsight. It may be mistaken in suggesting that those who voted against the PP did so primarily because of government misinformation. In a postelectoral survey (Michavila, 2005), only 8.2% of Spaniards mentioned misinformation about the attacks. A larger percentage mentioned government participation in the Iraq war (18.9%) or ruling party culpability related to the attacks (14.3%). The role the book assigns to the mainstream press is also questionable. Although the national newspapers in Madrid initially acquiesced in Aznar's attempt to blame Basque separatists, they did criticize the government communication policy before the elections took place. And the regional press, of great importance in Spain, spoke clearly about the Islamist connection from the beginning.

The collection also suffers from lack of distance. The authors identify themselves as participants in the events they report. Although it reserves its most political assertions to the editor's opening and closing essays, elsewhere an activist zeal appears to influence the research. Even so, the book should be on the shelves of any scholar interested on cyberactivism and horizontal political communication.

Despite these minor shortcomings, *13-M: Multitudes on Line* is a fortuitous contribution. It combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to explain what is not a unique phenomenon. A similar *smart mob* sustained the democratic revolutions in Lebanon and in Ukraine. The terrorist attacks and mobilizations just before a national election may seem unusual, but in fact—although one would want to be proved wrong on this point—no country is free of suffering through what Spaniards did on those dramatic 4 days of March.

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