

The Creation of an On-line Community: The Spanish Case.

David Casacuberta
Fronteras Electronicas España (FrEE)

Abstract

The main aim of this talk is to explain how an on-line community of Internet users has been developing in Spain, devoting an special attention to political issues. That way we can describe several interesting phenomena in the cyberrights arena in Spain using the concept of on-line community as a unifying criterion. Once the Spanish community has been described, I will briefly compare it with the conception of on-line community described by American Internet activists and theoreticians.

1. Introduction

A set of Internet users do not make an on-line community per se. A city, a region, or a country may have hundreds of thousands people connected together to the Internet, but if there are no unifying criteria, no common aims, no feelings about being a community, what we get is only an unconnected set of individuals. On-line communities are an interesting subject of study, and my plan today is to describe how the Spanish community was created, and use that description to state several facts about the situation of cyberrights in my country. Finally I will use the description to analyze several cliches about how on-line communities behave, specially comparing it with the -let us say- «American view» versus a «European one».

2. A brief history of the Spanish on-line community

I am not an historian, but I think it is safe to say that everything started with the flat rate issue. Before that in Spain there were only individuals that owned a computer, a modem and an Internet account and use them to join the net. Those days the telephone still was a monopoly and prices for local calls were extremely abusive. Little by little, internauts started to realize that they had a common problem: their «hobby» was extremely expensive because of the abusive telephone rates.

Everything started in the Spanish newsgroups; newsgroups to talk about the flat rate, or against *Telefónica* (our PTT) and its monopoly were created. In a few weeks, activist groups and organizations such as «Plataforma la Huelga» (Strike Platform) or «Plataforma Tarifa Plana» (Flat Rate Platform)

sprang up like mushrooms. These organizations had only one aim in mind: to get a flat rate for Internet calls as soon as possible in Spain. They never considered other issues, such as cyberrights. As a matter of fact, not even «universal access» was a revindication.

In the beginning, the proposal went more or less unnoticed. Suddenly, several media entrepreneurs - that wanted to start on-line businesses - saw in the fight for a flat rate the perfect space to sell their product and get a captive audience, strongly attacking *Telefónica*. It is mostly around these on-line centers (free newspapers, usually very demagogic) where the on-line community started to grow and get the strength to organize strikes and boycotts against *Telefónica*, like the famous boycotts of not using the telephone for a whole day to force *Telefónica* to drastically reduce the rates.

The first movement of *Telefónica* and the government was to silence the movement attacking the internauts, trying to show that they were egoistic people that wanted the off-line citizens to pay higher telephone rates so they could continue their «expensive and frivolous hobby». It is not by chance that in the beginning both politicians and media presented the problem in sophistic ways like this: «Do you think it is right to raise telephone rates so a few elite can get cheaper prices to connect to the Internet». Even more outrageous was the declaration from our *Ministro de Fomento* (the minister that is in charge of telecommunications) stating that he couldn't understand why a person should be connected to the Internet more than half an hour per day.

These attempts only helped to reinforce the movement, so more and more people joined the organizations, used e-mail to spread the campaigns, and even collaborate in «real life» demonstrations.

Suddenly, all the media - which were sensing that the public was a little bored of the «Internet is the demon» tales - saw in the fight for the flat rate a perfect trick to sell their supplemental services devoted to the Internet and computers. Then, all the journals, radios and even television started to see the movement positively and attacked *Telefónica* instead.

In that time the several organizations that mattered joined together and start a new association, the *Asociación de Internautas*⁰ which start to have serious conversations and negotiations with both the PTTs and the government. The fight still continues, but in the meantime telephone rates are getting lower and a flat rate is certainly on the horizon.

Besides this specific goal, what we got in Spain because of that was an on-line community of people connected to the Internet that have a common political view of what Internet is and should be.

On the cyberrights front, it is also important to mention the infamous mailbombing of a radical Basque Country publication: *EuskalHerria Journal*¹. Those days, the terrorist group ETA just killed a young Basque politician, Miguel Angel Blanco, after a 48-hour kidnapping that generated one of the greatest demonstrations - if not the greatest - in my country. Several people started mailbombing the server that contained the on-line publication *EuskalHerria Journal*, a radical website that seemed to defend some of the ideas that ETA was fighting for. The mailbombing started as something small but suddenly the most important journal of my country, *El País*, spread the news about the mailbombing and made two mistakes. First: they didn't condemned the act and, second, they gave the electronic address where people could write to start their own mailbombing. The final result was that the mailbombing grew in intensity until *EuskalHerria Journal* was retired from the server.

As you probably remember, the event gained international attention and was seen as a plain sabotage². Some people even argued that it was directly prepared by the government, but I think that the hypothesis of a on-line spontaneous riot powered by the news in *El País*³ makes more sense.

Thanks to the newborn on-line community the news about bad publicity around the world and the creation of mirrors of the EHJ site spread, so the idea of freedom of expression in the net started to

have practical implications for the Spanish internauts.

Nowadays, I think that an event like the EHJ mailbombing is not going to happen again in Spain, because people understand how important freedom of expression is. As a matter of fact, some months later, the main heads behind *Herri Batasuna* (the political branch of ETA we could say) were imprisoned because they wanted to show - during the Spanish elections - a video made by ETA. The judges considered it an «apology to terrorism», so this video was forbidden in Spain. *EuskalHerria Journal* decided to put it on the web, in realvideo format. Almost all the activists around the world were preparing themselves for another masive mailbombing from Spain, but nothing happened. The vast majority of the Spanish internauts learned the lesson.

3. Characteristics of this on-line community.

Nowadays, our on-line community is opened to more issues than the flat rate. Subjects such as spamming, privacy, freedom of expression are currently discussed and there is at least general agreement about them: they matter.

Other issues that are getting more and more public attention is language (how to spread both Spanish and other minority languages in my country such as Catalan or Euskera), copyright issues, privatization, the power of corporations in the web and especially hacking. After being demonized by the press, more and more people started to see them as the new heroes, the only people that can stop the progressive commercialization of the net, so as to come back to the free net we loved so much.

This fact is easier to understand if we consider piracy in my country. Everybody knows it is a crime to make illegal copies of software but only a very few people see it as a crime. The point is more the opposite. If you have some piece of cool software and you don't make a copy for your friends, then you are a very nasty and egoistic person. Hackers are, after all, the people that make it possible for illegal copying happen, so people consider them heroes.

Another important fact is that hackers in Spain are avoiding the classical prank style of going to a website and change the normal pictures for pornographic ones, and are starting to get a political consciousness. This January, for example, the group !hispatch⁴ found a hole in the security of the Guardia Civil (one of the branches of our police, the one that takes care of computer crime, among other things) server, that made it possible not only to sabotage their website but even to gain access to their intranet. Instead of using that knowledge to pull off a prank they decided to inform the Guardia Civil and the press about it and offer their help to solve the problem⁵.

4. The on-line communities of Italy and Spain.

Most of the things that Giancarlo has told you about Italy are also true about Spain: there is still lots to do to get the same connectivity rates as in Scandinavia or the States. Things are changing and finally, in the general elections in Spain, internet, connectivity, telephone rates or schools on-line are in the programs of all the main parties. But there is still lots to do.

The press also played a very bad role, just depicting an evil internet full of robotic people addicted to computers, plus the classic list of terrorists, paedophiles and mafiosi. Fortunately this is also changing too, little by little...

The general structure of the net presents similar problems. There are very few service providers, almost no serious e-business initiatives and there are hundreds of local connection providers. Bureacracy also makes things very complex. The Domain Name System in Spain is old-fashioned and somewhat corrupt. Rules make it theoretically impossible to register names that do not correspond to organisations registered, and makes it impossible to use generic names or names with less than four letters. The

final result is that almost ten percent of the Spanish hosts are under .com instead of .es.

But at the same time it is quite corrupt because names related to political parties, like PP have been accepted, despite being only two letters long, or terra.es - telefonica's portal - despite being a generic name.

Probably the main difference between the Italian and the Spanish case lies in the different political style between the on-line communities. In Italy there were also strikes and boycotts against their own PTT system, they also had lots of press coverage but they never attracted enough people to make them successful. Certainly, there is on-line activism in Italy, probably more than in Spain⁶, but seems that in Italy there is no on-line community backing them.

5. The American view and the European view of on-line communities.

By «American view» I understand the position, as defended for example in John Perry Barlow's «Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace»⁷ that on-line communities are worlds apart, not related to the «real world». They have their own rules and nobody in the virtual world should get in contact with these poisonous people usually known as politicians. Besides that, usually the American ideology implies the concept of industrial self-regulation as the only guarantee for a free internet.

When I talk about «American» and «European» I am just using tags. CPSR, besides being American does not certainly defend that point of view, and I know lots of people in Spain that agree completely with this right-wing anarchist position described in the former paragraph.

However, what I want to argue here is that this is not the position that the Spanish on-line community defends. Even when it started, the goal was not to develop a virtual utopia, but to have access to politicians so as to convince them to get a flat rate for Internet calls. Nowadays, most of the campaigns organized in the «Spanish cyberspace» have «real world» political questions behind them. For example, while I'm writing this, lots of people are sending e-mail against Pinochet's return to Chile and are asking our government to do something against it.

In Spain, the concept of activism is closely related to what we could call the «left side». Some may be more «leftist» than others, but we all agree in the concept that market self-regulation is not good per se. We think that the government can play a good role in society. What's more, we think that democratic governments have to play a role if we want to live in a democratic and egalitarian society. In Spain the American concept of a right-wing anarchy where the Market is the supreme coordinator is as terrible as an Orwellesque 1984 where Big Brother is watching you.

This has important implications for a key question when cyberrights are considered. Namely, freedom of expression. In Spain, in Europe, we don't have a First Admendment, so freedom of expression is viewed in a more relativistic way. Of course it is important, but other rights may be more important than freedom of expression. This explain, for example, the excesses that lead to the EHJ mailbombing.

But the «first amendment rules» position is also a dangerous one. We do not think that activists should fight for freedom of expression «no matter what is said». What is said matters, because it may put a more basic right in danger. Social equality and solidarity may be more important than freedom of expression sometimes. Deciding is not easy, and in case of doubt, I think is better to defend freedom of expression, but I believe if there is some tension between freedom of expression and privacy, then privacy is more important. That's certainly the view of the Spanish community and probably the European one.

Conclusions.

On-line communities with real political consciousness can start because of a very simple and specific issue, such as the fight for a flat rate in the Spanish case.

The vortex where the on-line community grows may be derived from the individual and egoistic interest of a few demagogues. Sometimes private vices may generate public virtues.

Practical issues are usually more helpful to make people understand several points about cyberrights than theoretical arguments.

There are several differences between the American concept of on-line community and the one in Spain. Some of them are:

- * In the Spanish case, the main aim is not to develop an utopian space far from governments, but to create the political tool to pressure governments so as to change things in the «real world».
- * In Spain piracy is widely extended and viewed as «normal», even as «ethical».
- * A great many of the members in the Spanish community can be considered «leftist» and they favour the intervention of governments so as to avoid the excesses of corporations in the on-line world.
- * No cyberright is absolute in the Spanish community. Not even freedom of expression.

References

⁰ <http://www.internautas.org/>

¹ osis.ucsd.edu/~ehj

² You can read, for example, the GILC position about it: <http://www.gilc.org/speech/spain/igc-statement-en.html>

³ <http://www.elpais.es/>

⁴ <http://hispahack.ccc.de/>

⁵ <http://hispahack.ccc.de/introes.htm>

⁶ Several publishing houses in Italy are releasing a meaningful number of books about cyberrights, anarchism on-line or cyberpunk. They are certainly a minority, and the movement is not as active as it was in the Eighties, but the situation is better than in Spain where these subjects are almost non-existent. Hacking cons with a political twist are common in Italy, in Spain until today there are only about technical issues.

⁷ http://www.eff.org/pub/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/barlow_0296.declaration