



## Chile violates Human Rights (and everyone can see it on Twitter)

5 minutes to read

COLUMN Juan Eduardo Bonnin 12/11/2019

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On October 14th, a 3,7% metro fare price hike at the capital of Chile, Santiago, sparked massive protests. Students called for a massive fare evasion using the hashtag #evasionmasiva ("massive evasion"), widely distributed and well documented on social media. As a reaction, the government placed *carabineros* (local militarized police) at metro stations, who repressed teenagers with tear gas, sticks and riot guns. People on the streets began to show massive support to the students' evasion, while the president, Sebastian Piñera, was shown on social media with his family at a pizza place, an image that was interpreted as a proof of indifference with social reality. On the next day, Saturday, Piñera called for a state of emergency, installing a curfew across the country and sending military forces to the main cities for the first time since the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

This was too much: "*it's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years*" was a phrase which explained why hundreds of thousands of people went out to the streets, defying the state of emergency and the curfew, to protest against political authoritarianism, and social and economic inequality. A self-organized demonstration of more than 1.200.000 people in Santiago was followed by more protests. Yet, the military forces began to violently repress protesters: more than 20 confirmed deaths, hundreds of rapes and sexual abuses, thousands of injured and tortured persons in jails, hundreds of civilians kidnapped from their homes by *carabineros*.

While violations of human rights are systematic in Chile, and State violence is everywhere, we all see it on Twitter.

## Chile, Twitter and the Never Again report

Twitter –as well as other social media– sometimes requires an algorithmic, big data approach to be understood. Other times, on the contrary, it is best described from the specific reactions it awakens in an individual. Like other mass-tailored devices, it is massively individualistic, and each Time Line is different, despite being socially constructed. As the biographies of individual users, TLs are unique yet regular.

The effect of reading my Twitter feed these days was devastating: I felt as if I was reading, once again,

Argentina's Never Again report (Nunca más). Nunca más was the main report published by the Argentine National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP, in Spanish) in 1984. It revealed the repressive apparatus of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), its systematic violations of human rights and the mechanics and motivations of the forced disappearance of persons, currently estimated at 30,000.

## Reading my Twitter TL, I felt as if I was reading, once again, Nunca más.

To hundreds of thousands of people in Argentina, reading the Never Again report meant learning about the real dimension of the horror of the military dictatorship: torture, rape, kidnapping, murder for political reasons. I read it when I was eleven, in 1991. Most of what I read was incomprehensible to me: military ranks, political jurisdictions and historical accounts were far beyond my understanding.

I was impressed, however, by the testimonial dimension of the Report: a number of quotes describing task forces breaking into homes and kidnapping people who would never be seen again; tortures suffered in clandestine detention centers, narrated by survivors and witnesses; and murderers of thousands of people who remain disappeared to this day. It was a hypertextual reading, jumping from one quote to another, skipping the texts in between, going back and forth from texts to pictures, to the table of contents: a narrative of Roman Catholic priests celebrating mass at a clandestine center made me skip to the chapter on religious victims, and then to the pictures of the minuscule cells.

Reading my Twitter TL, I felt as if I was reading, once again, Nunca más. Former students and friends living in Chile were tweeting about the repression. Overall, they were sharing testimonies, pictures and videos, most of them under the hashtag #Chileviolateshumanrights. What did they show? Again, systematic violations of human rights, documented by mobile phones and distributed by social media; images of Carabineros (federal police) breaking down doors and kidnapping people from their houses; videos of the police shooting point-blank at defenseless people in the streets. It all recalls the discursive memory of State terrorism in Latin America, both as a rhetoric and as a practice.

## Is Twitter a contemporary Nunca más?

Piñera's government is not strictly a dictatorship. He has been democratically elected, separation of powers still exists in Chile and there is freedom of speech. However, the antidemocratic constitution, the heavy military presence in all areas of government and the violations of human rights during the last month repression are reasons to believe it is an authoritarian administration. As a demonstrator said: "*They are not the dictatorship, but they are the best tribute band.*" In this context, the role of Twitter in denouncing human rights violations can be further differentiated from traditional reports, such as Never Again.

The legitimacy of the Never Again report was legal-rational, in Max Weber's terms. The truth of reports, testimonies and documents depended upon the institutional apparatus and the political support of the recently elected democratic government. The authenticity of tweets, on the contrary, does not depend on institutions or traditions; it depends only partially on charisma (as in the cases of influencers, and social and political leaders). Mostly, these pictures, videos and testimonies are believed as actions; the community that validates them does not precede the actions performed. The hashtag is a bizarre Never Again which only exists as action. Will it be enough to generate long-term community, to sustain a discursive memory in time? Or will it pass, except for small, highly engaged groups, after the next viral challenge?



*Chili protests - Wikimedia*

The argumentative efficacy of the Never Again report lay, at least partially, in its careful writing. After all, two of the CONADEP members (E. Sábato and M. Ruiz Guiñazú) were professional writers, and they were assisted by other technicians who drew the layout of the clandestine detention centers or took pictures of them.

In #Chileviolateshumanrights, on the contrary, the quotes and testimonies, the audiovisual examples of torture, kidnapping and murder, are low resolution videos and pictures, out of focus and blurred, which index authenticity better than standardized memes and stylized, Instagram-filtered pictures. Will social media users still be able to watch these videos in one or two decades? Will their owners preserve them somehow?

## Social media and communities in action

Sometimes social media are democratic tools which help communicate violations of human rights and, in doing so, to build community in action, in its contemporary existence. But, in doing so, they seem to obliterate, or at least to fragment, the possibility of building a discursive memory.

Is Twitter the contemporary Nunca más? Will it survive its contemporaneity? Is there enough room to remember these crimes, these deaths, these rapes and tortures? Who will assert the truth of a discourse built on the platform of deception and deep fake?

During Argentina's dictatorship, resistance and denounce also used fragile channels (pamphlets, letters, handwritten signs) and weak social ties to preserve and promote a discursive memory which, hidden and repressed for years, never ceased to exist and finally claimed for - and partially obtained - justice. Beyond slacktivism and trending topics, shared experiences and interpersonal relationships may still be imperative to the future discourses about the political present.

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