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War Waged on Social Media in Ecuador

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The publication of a photograph of President Rafael Correa with two Ecuadoran migrants in what looks like an Amsterdam mall triggered a virtual war between supporters and opponents of the South American regime on social media sites (NotiSur, Aug. 16, 2013). The president says he’s in the war to counter lies not to act against freedom of expression or to try to silence voices of his critics.

Absurd virtual conflict

The photo of the Ecuadoran president apparently buying things in Amsterdam was posted on a Facebook page named Crudo Ecuador in mid-January. The site satirizes several Ecuadoran public figures, usually putting ironic phrases next to images distorted by memes.

In his Saturday broadcast on Jan. 17, President Correa referred to the publication of that photograph calling it part of an organized and systematic plot designed to ruin his credibility. Correa said that the message they use to discredit him is: "We’re going to have a tough year and we haven’t been able to raise public employee salaries, but the president goes shopping in Europe."

Correa said that creating the Crudo Ecuador Facebook page requires a major economic investment, adding that such funding comes from a right-wing opposition party using software similar to what the US used to locate Osama Bin Laden.

These criticisms, says Correa, are made anonymously, so he offered to begin an investigation and reveal the names of those behind the Crudo Ecuador Facebook page as well as those persons using Twitter to criticize his government. "We’ll see if they are so funny once their identities are known," he said.

Finally, the president called on his followers to counter the attacks in social media and said that he will have some 10,000 volunteers who will respond with the truth to every tweet that offends him.

This call to a virtual war backfired. As of Monday, Jan. 19, there were more than 15,000 new followers on the Facebook page, bringing the total to 302,000, and 10,000 more followers on Twitter. Crudo Ecuador thanked the president for the increase in the number of followers by publishing the following: "Already more than 302,000 followers … and without a Super Bowl appearance. We already have a publicist; we have Rafael."

During the president’s next broadcast on Jan. 24, Correa showed a photo and revealed the name of an 18-year-old who had threatened him on Twitter. During the week, his followers had also published addresses and photographs of other twitterers. A series of threatening messages was begun and many of those identified with Twitter accounts stopped tweeting. The Crudo Ecuador page was also offline a few days.

"It’s uncomfortable to know that they could be investigating you … and here they charge you for any sort of crime and we know who wins," said the person responsible for Crudo Ecuador, a young computer professional who has managed the page for nearly five years and is far from being part of
a right-wing plot or having the human or technological resources Correa says he does. He said he would continue to publish the page as long as his identity is not disclosed. Nevertheless, he doesn’t deny being somewhat afraid since many Correa supporters following presidential directives have begun to threaten him. One message sent to the page said, "Be assured that we will find you soon and we will give you what you deserve, beginning with your family so you suffer."

This virtual war went beyond national borders to the point that John Oliver, an English comedian with a weekly HBO program, mentioned the controversy on two programs. Between jokes, he criticized President Correa’s hypersensitivity and his desire to control the media through trials and harassment of journalists.

**Controlling social media**

Under the Correa regime, control of news and public opinion has been one of the president’s priorities. Nevertheless, his attempts to control social media have not been successful despite having an absolute majority in the Asamblea Nacional and having one of his most submissive followers in control of the Superintendencia de Comunicación, which regulates media content and sanctions those who issue negative opinions of the presidency that it considers lies or slander.

In the Communications Law, known as the "Gag Law," approved by the Asamblea in June 2013 (NotiSur, July 19, 2013), the government has already tried to regulate social media content and access in an effort to eliminate anonymity, threatening the principles of Internet freedom.

Pressure from citizens and international media organizations prevented the law from putting restrictions on social media. However, the government did not give up and renewed its efforts to criminalize opinions disseminated through social media with regulations the Asamblea approved in February 2014 and that became effective in August that same year.

In the debate prior to approval of the new code, eliminating anonymity on social media and criminalizing opinions expressed on social media were again considered. Nevertheless, the presidential suggestions were not approved, and criminal sanctions were limited to slander and dissemination of restricted information.

Social media has been a headache for the president, especially because of his hypersensitivity to criticism. For that reason, he has responded personally to messages he receives and has moved his response to his weekly Saturday broadcast because social media is one of the ways people can protest the establishment, especially with the use of irony and humor just as the Crudo Ecuador administrator expressed, saying, "It is the only thing left. Social media lends itself to this, to go one-on-one with power."

**Trials and corrections**

Fundamedios, a nongovernmental organization that tracks the state of freedom of expression laws, says that, between 2008 and 2014, there have been 237 trials or administrative proceedings against journalists and communications media across the country. Similarly, there have been 32 cases of censorship, 17 of them involving the Internet with digital platforms told to take down videos and information contrary to President Correa.

On the Internet, especially on networks like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, it is common to delete comments or videos that refer to the president. The government has companies that monitor
Internet content and ask virtual platforms to eliminate posts, primarily alleging violation of copyright.

Every Monday following the Saturday broadcasts, the Instituto Ecuatoriano de Propiedad Intelectual (IEPI) registers all reports on the president’s speech so that any use of the Saturday images for commentary or criticism is prohibited and can be used to request elimination on the Internet.

Government agencies and social organizations that follow governmental directives initiate trials against the media and journalists. An example was the recent case against the cartoonist Bonil. The president mentioned him in his Saturday report; 14 organizations then echoed the government’s request, charging Bonil with racism for having drawn a cartoon that criticized an Afro-Ecuadoran deputy for mediocrity. Bonil has already faced two other proceedings for his political cartoons.

Fundamedios also registered 364 attacks on journalists perpetrated by government supporters in the same period of time; hence the concern about the presidential campaign to reveal the identity of those who make statements in social media that are either critical or ironic as it exposes them to reprisals from Correa’s supporters and these attacks can be very serious when driven by fanaticism and incitement.

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