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### Enter the WhatsApp: Reinventing digital activism at the time of chat apps

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# Enter the *WhatsApp*: Reinventing digital activism at the time of chat apps

## by Stefania Milan and Sérgio Barbosa

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### Abstract

This paper investigates how the appropriation of chat apps by social actors is redesigning digital activism and political participation today. To this end, we look at the case of *#Unidos Contra o Golpe* (United Against the Coup), a WhatsApp “private group” which emerged in 2016 in Florianópolis, Brazil, to oppose the controversial impeachment of the then-president Dilma Rousseff. We argue that a new type of political activist is emerging within and alongside with contemporary movements: the *WhatsApp*, an individual who uses the chat app intensely to serve her political agenda, leveraging its affordances for political participation. We explore WhatsApp as a discursive opportunity structure and investigate the emergence of a repertoire specific to chat apps. We show how recurrent interaction in the app results into an all-purpose, identity-like sense of connectedness binding social actors together. Diffuse leadership and experimental pluralism emerge as the bare organizing principles of these groups. The paper is based on a qualitative analysis of group interactions and conversations, complemented by semi-structured interviews with group members. It shows how WhatsApp is more than a messaging app for “hanging out” with like-minded people and has come to constitute a key platform for digital activism, in particular in the Global South.

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## **Introduction: The chat app turn**

“If you believed that the *UCG* [*Unidos Contra o Golpe*] would be just a group of intellectuals chatting via WhatsApp, you are wrong. We are actually active activists, as well as chatting and being a great group of friends”, was a message posted in the WhatsApp private group *Unidos Contra o Golpe* (14 November 2016). The group *Unidos Contra o Golpe* (United Against the Coup, henceforth *UCG*) originated in 2016 in Florianópolis, in the Brazilian southern state of Santa Catarina, to mobilize against the controversial impeachment of the then-President Dilma Rousseff (Jinkings, *et al.*, 2016). Its members leveraged the affordances of the WhatsApp “private chat” functionality to advance progressive political values. At the time of writing, the group is still active, mobilizing against the extreme far-right agenda of President Jair Bolsonaro (Anderson, 2019). “What moved and continues to move our fight is our struggle against the coup, which is still going on, we cannot lower our guard,” wrote a group member. We “need to occupy the streets. Let’s talk without anger and hatred, but with hugs and love. Let’s organize rounds of conversation in our neighborhoods” (24 September 2018).

This paper takes *UCG* as a case study to investigate how the diffusion of WhatsApp is redesigning political participation and digital activism today. To date, researchers have largely focused on the role of social media, and little is known about the role of chat applications (henceforth apps) in “reformatting” the mobilization of online publics. WhatsApp — to name the most popular of these chat applications — has largely remained under the radar of scholarly scrutiny for it is barely accessible to convert observation and distant qualitative reading, especially in the case of “private” groups, with most research focusing exclusively on accessible “public” groups (see Caetano, *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, the high frequency of individual engagement with the app turns digital ethnography — one of the most popular qualitative methods to observe social interactions online — into a 24/7 exercise. WhatsApp however is worth observing for its unprecedented ability to i) reach people in real-time via an intimate technology like the smartphone; ii) broadcast messages to large groups, which can

write back; and iii) forge communities of interest on civic matters involving also politically inactive people.

This article leverages media studies and social movement studies to provide a working description of social actors who take WhatsApp (and/or other popular chat apps such as Telegram) as their main political playground, appropriating a commercial service for political purposes. We argue that a new type of politically active individual is emerging within and alongside with contemporary resistance movements: the WhatsApper, who intensely and primarily uses chat apps for political participation. For the WhatsApper, the app becomes the main terrain of articulation of alternative political imaginaries and the prime vehicle for digital activism and the organization of collective action, including street protests. Data for this paper was collected by Barbosa in the period April 2016 — March 2017 by means of an extensive qualitative analysis of *UCG* group interactions (Barbosa, 2017).

The paper is divided in five parts. We review WhatsApp's role in mediating political participation today, focusing on its relevance for the Brazilian scenario and by extension the Global South. We present the *UCG* case and review research methods and ethics. We then introduce the notion of the WhatsApper as a novel political subject and explore its main features. We conclude by outlining a research agenda for investigating the evolution of political participation at the time of chat apps.



## **WhatsApp as a game changer for digital activism**

Social media have long been considered crucial for social mobilization, especially in countries where state regulation and/or surveillance over dissidents prevent or restrict information (*e.g.*, Gómez García and Treré, 2014; Cardoso, *et al.*, 2016; Agur and Frisch, 2019). Popular analytical interpretations such as Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) “connective action”, Gerbaudo's (2012) “choreography of assembly” and Milan's (2015b) “cloud protesting” have pointed to the emergence of specific forms of collectivities and movements shaped by the social affordances of platforms. However, the study of chat apps in relation to political participation and other aspects of modern democracy is still in its infancy (*e.g.*, Ling and Lai, 2016; Waterloo, *et al.*, 2018).

One of the world's fastest growing messaging services with 1.5 billion subscribers (2018), WhatsApp is the most popular of chat apps, steadily ranked first for average number of monthly active users globally (Kemp, 2019). As a “semi-public” platform,

it offers an “intimate and controlled environment” for political discussion, playing a “mediating role” in fostering participation [1]. The service, accessible from both computer and smartphones, was launched in 2009 and acquired by Facebook in 2014. In 2016 it rolled out end-to-end encryption, which however has not translated into increased user trust in the technology (Dechand, *et al.*, 2019).

WhatsApp has particularly high penetration rates in the Global South, where it is the primary venue for political conversations (Valenzuela, *et al.*, 2019) and for discussing and sharing news (Newman, *et al.*, 2019). Alongside with other similar services, it has played an important role in the coordination of resistance movements, from Hong Kong to Brazil, from Ethiopia to Iran (*e.g.*, Alimardani and Milan, 2018; Potnis, *et al.*, 2018; Weber, *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Chan, 2018). “Zero Rating” fees offered by telecoms in many non-Western countries allow users to access WhatsApp “for free”, replacing pricier short-text messaging (Casaes and Córdova, 2019). Vocal messages ease communication for individuals with difficulties in reading and writing (Spyer, 2017).

In Brazil, 96 percent of the population with smartphone access uses WhatsApp, nicknamed “Zap Zap”, as a “one-stop solution” (Saboia, 2016), with 53 percent privileging WhatsApp to find and consume news (Newman, *et al.*, 2019). The services is rapidly becoming a game changer in the Brazilian political life (Moura and Michelson, 2017). It played a role in the country’s turn to far-right populism with the election of Bolsonaro in October 2018. Taking advantage of the popularity of the app and of the limited digital literacy of the population (Helsper, 2016), the Bolsonaro campaign “weaponized” WhatsApp, employing both bots and the “digital militias” of his supporters (Dimenstein, 2019) to spread misleading content and misinformation throughout the country (Belli, 2018; Tardáguila, *et al.*, 2018).

We argue that the widespread use of WhatsApp for political debate and participation is one of the most original hallmarks of contemporary digital activism, in particular in non-Western countries. It is a game changer for at least two reasons. Firstly, it promotes a “mobile lifestyle” (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2015) centered on the app that, mediating a variety of essential daily needs, nudges users to ever-frequent interactions. A recent large-*N* research on the demographics of WhatsApp showed that most messages are replied within one minute (Rosenfeld, *et al.*, 2018). Secondly, in virtue of its “semi-public” nature, WhatsApp merges into a single digital platform the private and intimate sphere (of interpersonal exchanges) and the public realm (of group interactions), “integrating” the vernacular and the political. Taken together, these two features translate into a certain pervasiveness of content, including of political nature, and the immediacy of its fruition — with large-scale consequences on mobilization.

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## Case study

In 2016, Brazil found itself in “disarray” due to a rampant economic crisis, the collapse of the congressional alliance supporting the government and growing popular concern about the presidency (Avritzer, 2016). The private group *Unidos Contra o Golpe* was launched on WhatsApp on 30 March 2016 by a politically active individual from Florianópolis, in the run-up to the lower chamber vote on the impeachment of president Rousseff. The group rapidly reached the maximum allowed of 256 users. Participants opposed the impeachment and later demanded Rousseff’s return to power. At the onset, virtually all group members were listed as “group administrators” able to add members. A heterogeneous group, UCG included professionals, journalists and students from southern Brazil, with a minority of members from other parts of the country, diaspora and foreign citizens. They positioned themselves as defenders of leftist values promoting equality and social change in the country. The group included both experienced activists (*e.g.*, trade unionists) and newbies to active politics. It hosted content of political nature (*e.g.*, news, memes, videos), calls to action and reflections on the political situation. At the time of writing, *UCG* is still active, although with declining membership.

Although our sample is somewhat limited and our qualitative research does not allow us to quantitatively characterize the spread of information within the group, *UCG* presents a fascinating testbed of the role of chat apps in contemporary digital activism. What makes this group interesting are its origins as an expressive space for like-minded individuals rather than a strategic move to start a mobilization. Mobilization was instead the outcome of group interaction, making *UCG* an example of activism which emerged “organically” in interaction with social affordances of the platform. We observe how its members exploited these affordances — *e.g.*, emoji, hashtags and the possibility of directly replying to specific users by quoting them — to explore innovative pathways to collective action, and how the group functioned as a protected environment able to introduce newbies to political activism. [Figure 1](#) shows the profile picture of the group.



**Figure 1:** Profile picture of the *UCG* group on WhatsApp.



## **Methods and research ethics**

An ethnographic approach is suited to investigate the political appropriation of WhatsApp by *UCG* for its ability to yields access to “thick data” (Blee and Taylor,

2002). Barbosa's analysis explored *UCG's modus operandi* (meso level) as well as individual motivations, values and expectations (micro level), adjusting his method to the ways "in which social practices are defined and experienced" online [2]. Specifically, data for this article were collected in three steps: a digital ethnography of the *UCG* group, a content analysis of chat messages, and semi-structured interviews with group members (for details, Barbosa, 2017). First, Barbosa engaged in overt observation of interactions in the private chat group over the period April 2016–February 2017, keeping fieldnotes throughout with the goal of understanding how *UCG* emerged organically from the bottom-up. He became an active member, disclosing his researcher identity and goals. Second, he engaged in the qualitative content analysis of a purposive sample of chat messages selected for being the most representative of group exchanges (*e.g.*, concerning a particularly controversial moment in the politics of the country), to study how *UCG* organized in a contingent manner in relation to the evolving political situation. Finally, he conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with self-selected group members, to elicit values, motivations and individual trajectories of engagement from the perspective of individual participants. While no biographical data were collected to protect the privacy and anonymity of the research subjects, interviewees aged 20–45, had access to higher education with most holding a university degree, and their monthly family income averaged between three and five times minimum wage.

As illustrated elsewhere (Barbosa and Milan, 2019), digital ethnography in chat apps calls for an innovative approach to research ethics. We should re-center the user within the research process and "avoid reducing research ethics to a one-stop checklist, to privilege instead a recursive, iterative and dialogic process able to engage research subjects; moving past the consent form as the sole and merely regulatory moment of the researcher-research subject relationship" [3]. Practically speaking, as far our case study research is concerned, informed consent was sought at regular intervals, mindful of the fluctuating membership and intermittent engagement inherent in groups of this kind. This is also in line with our "engaged" approach to research (Milan and Milan, 2016), which posits the research subjects as "skilled learners" and centers social actors' needs and desires. This is also why selected group members were involved in the design of the interview questionnaire.

Next, we illustrate how WhatsApp as a platform contributes to the emergence of a new political subject.



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## A new political subject



This article contends that WhatsApp supports the emergence of a new political subject, which we term “WhatsApper”. At its core of the notion is a novel role for individual action, visible for example in the recruitment role of group administrators and, as we shall see, in diffuse leadership as organizing principle. In a nutshell, the WhatsAppers are individuals who leverage the app’s social affordances for self-expression and mobilization. They dialogue with their peers in thematic private chat groups. Through the application, social actors are able to accrue personal, family, work and political functions. Their engagement with political activism emerges gradually in this intimate and familiar context and is facilitated by an omnipresent, personal device like the smartphone. The app thus comes to (re-)mediate political learning and participation, whose dynamics are shaped by the modes of interaction typical of the app (constant exposure to conversations and instantaneous engagement with content above all).

The appropriation of WhatsApp for political purposes represents the latest frontier of digital activism, as it enables the articulation of protest networks involving also individuals who discover political participation through app-mediated peer interaction. WhatsApp operates as a facilitator of political participation, able to involve also previously inactive people, bypass traditional movement organizations and break the correlation between a movement’s material resources and its ability to mobilize people. Group administrators act as modern-day “social movement entrepreneurs” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) overseeing a group’s symbolic resources and social capital. This new form of political participation co-exists alongside with “traditional” social movements and campaigning coalitions. But the potential of WhatsApp is to be found in its ability to appeal *also* to individuals who are politically inactive and/or do not see themselves as political activists, and to do so across age cohorts and, to some extent, political cleavages. Its familiar repertoire of communication (*e.g.*, emojis), the immediacy of the action and the flexibility of commitment (one can, after all, silence a WhatsApp group in busy times), make of WhatsApp a fertile ground for digital activism, and contribute to turn politics into an everyday affair.

In what follows, we touch upon four core dynamics of the phenomenon we observe, namely: the role of WhatsApp as discursive opportunity structure, the emergence of an app-specific repertoire centered on communication, the development of a sense of connectedness and of a bare organizational structure rooted on diffuse leadership.



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## **I. WhatsApp as discursive opportunity structure**

The discursive realm plays a key role in mobilizing collective action, performing as a “medium of social conflict and symbolic struggle” [4]. As Melucci (1996) explained, social movements generate new ideas and ways looking at social problems. Social networking services are today the prime terrain for this discursive struggle. They are at the core of the “mediation opportunity structure” that simultaneously empower and constrain movement actors and is the ensemble of the media opportunity structure (*i.e.*, mainstream media representations), the discursive opportunity structure (*i.e.*, social actors’ self-mediation), and the networked opportunity structure (*i.e.*, resistance through technology) (Cammaerts, 2012). Complementing the well-known notion of political opportunity structure (McAdam, *et al.*, 1996), the mediation opportunity structure “brings the active user and technology as a source of resistance into the picture” foregrounding the “communication strategies of activists in their self-mediation efforts” [5].

In Brazil, historically characterized by a centralized and polarized media system (*cf.*, van Dijk, 2017), movement actors refrain from looking at mainstream media for support. The networked opportunity structure has also lost traction, with alternative media and community radio stations losing ground to social media. Consequently, the discursive realm of chat apps stands out as the primary opportunity for social actors to articulate their vision and organize. It is in this sense that WhatsApp usage for mobilization and for articulating a collectivity through information exchange and debate can be understood as “media and communication practices that constitute protest and resistance in their own right” [6]. This self-mediation interests not only the “symbolic and discursive realms in which social movements operate” but is “also instrumental and material to realizing their immediate goals” [7]. WhatsApp thus serves both as a digital agora for articulating alternative imaginaries and an organizing apparatus to plan and coordinate joint action.

The discursive opportunity structure identified by chat apps has three important features. First, it emerges between the private and the intimate of interpersonal exchanges and the public of group interactions. Social actors perceive the chat app space as intimate and imbued with immediacy and informality, as it is where they relate to family and friends. In this sense, chat apps articulate a “(private) public sphere” which is “‘public’ in the sense of shaping civic discourse” although private companies set the rules of interaction (Myers West, 2017). Second, the real-timeness of exchanges on chat apps alters known temporalities of political participation (Milan, 2015b). The speed of connections and exchanges and the “fluidity” of engagement activate individuals on a minute-by-minute basis. Third, chat apps afford social actors an unprecedented level of autonomy in shaping their participation, whereby individuals can in principle partake “on equal footing”. Autonomy is however a relative notion in the realm of proprietary services like WhatsApp: individuals have

no control over the algorithms (*cf.*, Gillespie, 2018), bots can influence conversations and fake users can hijack them (Woolley and Howard, 2016). Next, we explore how this discursive opportunity structure pans out for *UCG* members.



## II. A chat app-specific repertoire

WhatsAppers embrace a varied repertoire of action strengthening connections between an online, spontaneous collectivity with a peculiar style of interaction molded on the app functionalities and the actions, including rallies, occurring in other digital platforms as well as off-line. In the process, the online and off-line domain mingle and amalgamate. Communication is at the very core of such action repertoire, which is why we rather talk of “repertoire of communication”. In the literature, a “repertoire of communication” indicates the “set of activist media practices that social movement actors might conceive as possible and then develop in both the latent and visible stages of mobilization, to reach social actors positioned both within and beyond the social movement milieu” [8]. We expand the notion to embrace all mobilizing activities that have communication at the center, including but not limited to specific forms of calls to action like the *#vomitação* illustrated below. We distinguish six elements in the *UCG* repertoire of communication: information sharing, voicing and making solidarity, interpersonal dialogue as engagement, organic mobilization, innovative platform-bound protest and the social media pipeline.

*Information sharing.* *UCG* members used WhatsApp primarily to share in real time information ignored by mainstream media (the “media opportunity structure”), most notably footage and links to news and commentaries. They also posted information about protests taking place elsewhere. This explains the *UCG* members’ self-definition of “critics of the Brazilian political scenario”: as illustrated by the opening quote, they actively look for information and evidence rather than simply venting personal opinions. “*UCG* manages to make visible how people perceive Brazilian politics. Group members use dialogue as a way of strengthening their belonging to the group”, argued an interviewee (#14). Our conversations with *UCG* members expose the perceived urgency of sharing, believed to be able to break through the silencing practices of partisan media.

*Voicing and making solidarity.* In the group, members expressed and performed solidarity. Solidarity was conveyed by sharing emotion-rich content, including emojis and information about protest events in other parts of the country, to communicate a commonality of views and feelings. This contributed to identity-building, as ideals

quickly became perceived as collective, as visible also in the recurrent use of the pronoun “we”. Solidarity extended also to *UCG* members harboring divergent opinions, whose ideas were able to coexist in the flexible space of the group. *UCG* functioned as sounding board also for members in other parts of the country as well as diaspora Brazilians and beyond.

*Interpersonal dialogue as engagement.* An interviewee explained that *UCG* “provided me political experiences that I would not come in contact with if I was not there. It is a new way of living politics” (#8). We already noted how the app is primarily a terrain for self-expression and information exchange. The exchange that originates, however, becomes a form of political participation in its own right, as it activates political learning and agency. Directly tapping on the app affordances, the communication style consists in short statements and emotion-led pictographic symbols (emojicons and “emoji”), expressive hashtags condensing complex discourse (e.g., “#ForaTemer”, or Temer out, urging President Michel Temer, who replaced Rousseff, to leave power [9]), and “direct replies” (when a user replies to a message previously posted, quoting the message in question). Oftentimes this dialogue translates into street action. A paradigmatic moment in the *UCG* history was the Senate vote that culminated in the impeachment of Rousseff, which members followed live commenting in the chat, expressing indignation and calling for street action which resulted in some of them actually taking to the streets. But then it all seems to come back to the “cosy” space of the app: “sometimes in the political action we cannot get in touch with other *UCG* members. We see the banners, posters and there is no opportunity for dialogue. When we return to WhatsApp we can discuss a theme that there was no time to debate it during the protest”, claimed an interviewee (# 9).

*Organic bottom-up mobilization.* The private group chat functionality served to rally members to action, both within the app (e.g., expressing opinions and reinforcing outrage to foster mobilization) and beyond the app environment (e.g., calling for street demonstrations and encouraging outreach to raise awareness among family and friends). Our interviews show that the chat app group has been fundamental to mobilize people, including individuals who were not politically active prior and drastically altering the way people used to organize. Respondents recognized that if were not for the chat, organizing would have been harder or would not have happened at all. WhatsApp changed recruitment, the instantaneous dissemination of calls to action and organization of activities — all firstly unfolding in WhatsApp, and only then elsewhere. Interestingly, however, mobilization has emerged organically as a result of interaction and emotion sharing. Similar to what Harvey (2014) observed about “right to the city” activism, the mobilization was not necessarily a conscious project from the start, but emerged from what people did, felt and perceived, starting from their daily lived experiences.

*Creative platform-bound protest.* The *UCG* group harbored creative protest ideas that leveraged the app affordances such as emojis, conveying emotions but especially condensing other, more complex meanings (Waterloo, *et al.*, 2018; see also Seargeant, 2019). In a “#vomitação”, Portuguese slang for vomiting, hundreds of individuals would simultaneously post a “vomit” emoji as a comment to a news item or social media post, to indicate their disgust towards the political situation. The action, called for in the WhatsApp group, would be performed in other platforms: *UCG* members would “leave” WhatsApp at a given time and post in a coordinated manner the “vomit emoji” on Temer’s Facebook profile. “How to” files detailing how to start a “vomit action” were frequently circulated to encourage *UCG* members to launch such an action. In this way, *UCG* might function as an “innovative hothouse” able to generate new tactics that “can then be diffused to the broader activist community — who may be less skilled or more specifically engaged” [10].

*Social media pipeline.* Information/emotion-sharing and solidarity voicing followed the “capillarity” principle (Barbosa, 2017), meaning people would leverage their presence in multiple channels and platforms to replicate the information they cared about and spread it as wide as possible. “Forwarding” to other individuals and groups relevant information received through social media turned *UCG* into a flywheel of action in other platforms as well. Due also to the numerical limitations imposed on membership, “offspring” private groups were created from the “mother group”, including task-specific groups devoted to, *e.g.*, materials and posters or reading. Individuals also connected to each other within other social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube and to a much lesser extent Twitter, creating “Facebook events” mirroring *UCG* discussions. Members however appeared to favor WhatsApp over other social networking services. The many-to-many interaction in WhatsApp might have a more ephemeral nature yet it is perceived as more compelling as “in the WhatsApp private chat as soon as a message is posted, all registered users will read or at least the message will appear to them” (interview #7). Our interviewees reported a higher level of engagement in the WhatsApp group as opposed to Facebook.



### III. Connectedness

I met my peers at the *UCG*. Here in the South most of people are right-wing, so you feel very lonely. Finding your peers is a useful advantage of WhatsApp. (...) Although [*UCG* members] knew each other only through WhatsApp, they met when they went on the streets. We agreed to use something red like a ribbon, for example,

to identify ourselves during protests. (...) If I had not been in the group, I would be sadder, more isolated (#8).

For a group to mobilize and survive the challenge of time, a collective identity has to emerge that binds people together and encourages them to take action and feel responsible towards each other. A collective identity can be viewed as the “creation of connectedness” [11] and of “relationships of trust” [12] among social actors. Chat apps and social media are today “the key site where protest identities are created, channelled, and contested” [13]. Said protest identities emerge in interaction with the individuality, visibility and performance promoted by digital platforms, and are rooted on a flexible set of “minimum common denominators open to interpretations” [14] thus allowing for the co-existence of distinct and even contradictory identitarian elements and values (Milan, 2015a). Similarly, we have identified an “all-purpose” identity-like connectedness as the building block of groups like *UCG*, resulting from group interactions.

This connectedness is the result of two main factors. First, the reproduction of a conversation style typical of real-life interactions and other familiar practices contributes to “brin[g] social activism and citizenship closer to the world of life and people's experiences” [15]. It creates a sense of familiarity and intimacy between individuals who for the most part have not met in person. Furthermore, our empirical material seems to indicate that WhatsApp “private groups” are associated with a stronger sense of belonging rather than network-based Facebook, pointing if not to the social affordances of the app. Second, WhatsApp interactions are grounded on members expressing emotions and “passions” (Mouffe, 2016), from formulating feelings of discomfort and rage to the ignition of discussions. Interviewees reported enjoying the feeling of belonging to a group, “taking part of something”, “integrating”, “build” something expressing the desire to “unite against the coup”.

It is unclear how resilient to time is such sense of connectedness. The fact that the group is still active four years down the line seems to confirm how the relationships forged through the app have survived and are still producing consequences today including joint protest initiatives.



#### **IV. Diffuse leadership and experimental pluralism**

WhatsApp seems to offer a backbone that is in itself sufficient to support mobilization, thus allowing social actors to mobilize with little to no financial and

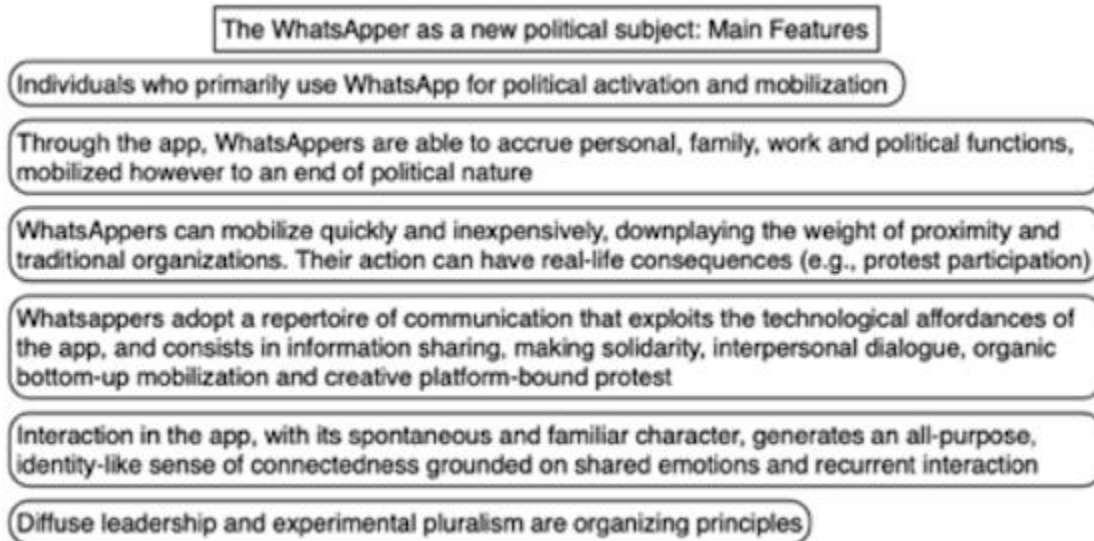
human resources. *UCG* has a very light structure, with two sole organizing principles: diffuse leadership and respectful pluralism.

How does diffuse leadership work in practice? Private chat groups are managed by “group administrators” acting as gatekeepers, adding or excluding members. While the app does not restrict the number of group administrations, typically these are a handful. Curiously, the quasi entirety of *UCG* members has been included from the start as group administrator. This signals a propensity towards a decentralized organizing logic already observed about social media protest (see Gerbaudo’s notion of “soft leaders” acting as “choreographers” of collective action). As it often goes in similar “structureless” groups, however, the so-called “tyranny of emotions” (Polletta, 2002) meant that the most vocal members become recognized as *de facto* leaders.

Furthermore, *UCG* members have held freedom of expression on high ground from the start. “Greater diffusion of opinions creates something different from what we have already been doing”, explained an interviewee with long-term experience in left-wing activism (#1).

Providing a voice to an audience that did not find space in traditional political channels, *UCG* nurtured non-dogmatic exchanges, supporting an experimental pluralism that welcomed and valued diversity. All opinions were allowed within the group, although against the backdrop of a leftist worldview, and all ideas could be debated — and they were, often in very heated exchanges. In addition, with no stated programmatic rules to be followed, members actively sought to be respectful towards other people’s opinions and polite with each other. This “politeness” returns frequently in the interviews as well, with several people proudly singling it out as the main trait of group interaction and a reaction to the perceived “violence” of the political situation.

[Figure 2](#) summarizes the main features of the WhatsApp.



**Figure 2:** Main features of the WhatsApp.


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## Conclusions

Investigating the negotiation of the public/private dichotomy constitutes an interesting terrain of observation for scholars of digital activism. In this paper, we explored the consequences of appropriating WhatsApp for social mobilization, analyzing the case study of *Unidos Contra o Golpe*, a spontaneous “private group” of leftist orientation which emerged in 2016 to protest the impeachment of then-President Rousseff and survives to date to oppose the Bolsonaro presidency. We analyzed the sociological processes supporting this novel way of mobilizing at the time of chat apps, showing how the multiple affordances of WhatsApp translated into mechanisms for activating resistance and for re-politicizing the familiar and the social. The *UCG* case shows that WhatsApp has become a legitimate channel for political participation, allowing individuals, including those not previously politically active, to instantly share information and mobilize quickly and inexpensively. We argue that the intimacy of the app and the familiarity of the repertoire of communication support the emergence of a new political subject that we named “WhatsApp”.



While our case study did not allow us to establish a causal relationship between WhatsApp and political participation, it helped to unravel the socio-cultural and technological factors surrounding the emergence of the WhatsApp as a political actor in its own right. Our analysis showed that WhatsApp is at the center of the mediation opportunity structure, embodying a plethora of discursive opportunities in the era in which mainstream media are less and less permeable and alternative media have lost ground. These discursive opportunities are crucial for both symbolic exchanges and mobilizing. On WhatsApp, social actors articulate a peculiar action repertoire centered on communication that takes advantage of the app affordances. This repertoire consists of information sharing, voicing and making solidarity, interpersonal dialogue as engagement, organic mobilization, innovative platform-bound protest, and the exploitation of the social media pipeline. The resulting group is characterized by a sense of identity-like connectedness based on shared emotions. It has a light organizing structure centered on diffuse leadership and experimental pluralism.

More work remains to be done to better understand the sociological consequences of WhatsApp on political mobilization and to see whether our working notion of the WhatsApp stands the challenge of further empirical analysis. For sure, these new forms of political participation funneled by and shaped around chat apps, so popular particularly in the Global South, call for a full-fledged research agenda within a broader reflection on “hybrid” forms of activism (Treré, 2019). Three larger questions stand out in this incipient research agenda. Firstly, if as we believe chat apps do not automatically promote political participation and do not support democracy by default, it seems necessary to investigate this popular correlation further, situating cases in their specific contexts and adopting a cross-disciplinary approach able to give adequate considerations to sociological and technological factors alike. Secondly, it is urgent to problematize further a persisting dichotomy in digital activism scholarship, opposing the supporters of the democratizing potential of the “digital agora” (Diamond, 2010) to those who lament a tendency toward alienation and demobilization (*e.g.*, Morozov, 2011; McChesney, 2013). Thirdly, we ought to bring into focus and acknowledge the role of distinct socio-political contexts, and the specificities of “Southern” epistemologies in particular (Santos, 2014), asking what is specific in the emergent digital repertoires in the “Souths” (Milan and Treré, 2019), and whether novel constructs are needed to capture the creativity of contemporary activism in non-Western countries. 

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## Notes

- [1.](#) Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2019, pp. 1–6.
- [2.](#) Hine, 2005, p. 1.
- [3.](#) Barbosa and Milan, 2019, p. 59; *cf.*, franzke, *et al.*, 2020.

- [4.](#) Koopmans and Statham, 1999, p. 205.
- [5.](#) Cammaerts, 2012, p. 120.
- [6.](#) Cammaerts, 2012, p. 117.
- [7.](#) *Ibid.*
- [8.](#) Mattoni, 2013, p. 47.
- [9.](#) Michel Temer took over as interim president after the removal of Dilma Rousseff, remaining into power from 31 August 2016 until 1 January 2019, when Bolsonaro took office (Watts, 2016).
- [10.](#) Rolfe, 2005, pp. 70–72.
- [11.](#) Diani and Bison, 2008, p. 284.
- [12.](#) Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 94.
- [13.](#) Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015, p. 866.
- [14.](#) Milan, 2015a, p. 896.
- [15.](#) Bringel and Pleyers, 2015, p. 15.

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