



Bringing the citizens back in. The role of electoral monitoring organizations in the knowledge society

In the knowledge society the amount of information available is unlimited. However, the greater availability and consumption of information does not seem to affect levels of understanding. "Although information is accessible, it does not appear to be accessed," says Robert Proctor, a historian of science who studies the spread of ignorance.

This paradox of information is embodied in a multiplicity of social tensions. In 2009 the current president of the United States falsely suggested that Barack Obama had not been born in that country. About 7 years later and after several publications of his birth certificate in Hawaii, 72% of Republican voters still think Obama is not a US citizen (NBC, 2016). Despite the fact that 97% of scientists agree that climate change is a product of human activity, 28% of American adults believe that there is still a debate about the true causes of global warming (Nature 2016). In Colombia, the plebiscite to endorse the peace accords was defeated, in part, thanks to a communication campaign that sowed imprecise statements in well-segmented audiences. For example, 55% of those polled by a media alliance said that Colombia is at risk of becoming the new Venezuela, one of the messages promoted by the opposition campaign.

This document aims to highlight the role that civil society organizations dedicated to electoral monitoring can play in a context where the overwhelming availability of information and its variable quality conspire against citizens. We propose that CSOs should contribute by providing an interpretation of information that (i) qualifies individual decisions in policy and (ii) supports better policy recommendations for the State.

Context: The knowledge society

The paradox of having more information and less capacity to interpret it is not a philosophical deviation of the type "the more I learn the more I realize how little I know". On the contrary, it is the result of a combination of structural variables and the will of certain political and economic agents



interested in causing confusion. Structural causes may have to do with the quality of education. While the MDGs targeted and achieved universal primary education coverage by 2015, gaps in educational quality remain in place.

On the other hand, the political and economic actors who, through their media influence, confuse the contents of communication and obscure the debate are perhaps the main cause of the information paradox in the knowledge society. We are witnessing a scenario of complex truths that do not go through the mediating control that opinion leaders, the media, or authority figures in the family used to make. Consequently, a **Like** or **Retweet** become means to propagate all kinds of exaggerated or misinterpreted information.

According to The Economist (2016), the origin of the post-truth phenomena can be traced to at least three causes. The first is the natural scepticism towards leaders and institutions. The second is the climate of hatred and discrimination against a growing segment of the population that feels marginalized and deceived by the political and economic *status quo*. And the third is the instant proliferation of gossip and the atomization of information sources that has allowed the rise of social networks.

The Role of Electoral Monitoring Organizations

In our countries, some developed, some developing, the problem of information publicity is becoming less urgent (as it is in the context of the knowledge society), as electoral institutions are increasingly open and professionalized. The Open Election Data initiative, funded by NDI, USAID and Google, lists timely, granular, available for free on the internet, complete and in bulk, analysable, non-proprietary, non-discriminatory, licence-free and permanently available as the basic principles or conditions for open electoral data. With caveats and things to improve, it is not risky to say that a good portion of these principles is fulfilled in our countries of origin.

But in which of our countries is there is a civil society capable of blocking the attempts of political and economic elites to misinform, sow doubt, raise uncertainty? Moreover, in which of our societies are citizens provided with



tools to contextualize the raw data to which they have access and then invited to make their own opinion?

These are two concerns that should be addressed by an electoral monitoring organization. In the knowledge society, our role is transferred to the field of information interpretation. And the result of this role is threefold. First, qualify citizens' interpretation of politics, providing contextual information that allows them to understand, interact and control politics; Secondly, to ensure that political control remains somewhat anonymous; and third, to generate better policy recommendations to the State.

The challenge of providing useful information is expressed in the design and construction of a series of tools and / or knowledge products. In Colombia's Electoral Observation Mission (MOE), we are currently monitoring the dynamics of registration of voters for the 2018 Congress and President elections. The preliminary analysis has detected that three peripheral municipalities (Castilla la Nueva, Taraira and Puerto Gaitan) present levels of voter registration that potentially anticipates crimes related to electoral transhumance. In other knowledge products, MOE correlated levels of political participation with the influence and presence of illegal armed groups to determine collaboration between politicians and paramilitaries. This investigation operated as a key input for the Supreme Court of Justice to prosecute about 35 Congress members.

The impact MOE's research (driven by a comprehensive access to open electoral data) is a good indicator of the potential of other civil society organizations to exercise political control in their respective states and increase the accuracy of public policy designs.

However, among the open data repertoire, data on the financing of political parties is still unsatisfactory. The openness, availability and truthfulness of this data depends on civil society organizations growing control over politics. The challenge in this area is to create tools like Pilasconelvoto.com, which in an anonymous way allows citizens to exercise political control.



Conclusion

The knowledge society produces a series of important challenges for the citizens: too much information and of varied quality difficult its interpretation. The role of civil society organizations dedicated to electoral monitoring should be to interpret available information and imprint contextual contents that allow citizens to fully understand its relevance. The final aims should be qualifying individual decisions making while strengthening the quality of policy recommendations made to the State.