#StopDesahucios:  
Techo-Political Activism in the Spanish Movement Against Housing Evictions  

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I intend to explore, describe and map the techno-political practices of the Plataforma de Afectados contra la Hipoteca¹ (Movement of Mortgage Victims). This new social movement (Haro Barba and Sampedro Blanco 2011) is framed in the context of the current economic and political crisis in Spain, as well as of the subsequent community response to this situation. I hope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social practices of these kinds of collectives, as related with new media technologies. I will focus on its routines, mobility and social process (Pink 2006, Postill 2008). Further, I will be taking into account that these spaces can be considered as *glocolal* movements (Haro Barba and Sampedro Blanco 2011). That is one of the reasons I use qualitative methods, in order to answer the question: "How can we conceptualize the relationship between technological and social change at the local level? (...) Which conceptual tools do we have at our disposal to study the emergence of new internet-related forms of local sociality? (Postill 2008: 414)"

First, it is important take some time to explain in detail what the PAH is and what its role inside the Spanish political arena is, in order to understand more clearly the proposed objectives. Spain suffered deeply during the last financial crisis, which started in 2008 in the EEUU. One of the many reasons why Spain was so affected is that the previous two Governments, formed by the People's Party (conservative) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (socialist), enlarged the housing bubble through their specific politics on the construction business to develop what it was called “the Spanish economic miracle” (Plataforma de afectados contra la hipoteca, 2013). Immediately after the beginning of the financial crisis in the EEUU and the consequent bursting of the Housing Bubble, the rate of unemployment in the country reached new levels. Current estimates say about a 26% among the general population and a 55% among youth at the average age of 25 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2013).

The rising unemployment implies declining consumption and at the same time serious imbalances for financial institutions. The banks get bankrupt and the State, through public money, enabled the economic rescue of those institutions that cannot assume their debts. Many families, with practically all members unemployed, stopped paying their mortgages, and the banks. In order to resolve their own debt, the banks started to pursue the families for their non-payment (Arellano and Bentolilla 2012). According to the Spanish General Council of the Judiciary Branch, during the first semester of 2013 19,468 evictions were executed, making an average of 216 per day (Muñiz 2013). In 2012, at the beginning of the credit crisis, every 15 minutes a family was evicted (Romanos 2013:296). It is under these circumstances that the PAH was founded in February 2009. Its foundation is intimately bound up with the initial organizations of campaigns for the right to a home, which were

¹Abbreviated to PAH in the following.
pioneers in Spain in the use of techno-politics techniques. I can cite as example Plataforma por la Vivienda Digna (Platform for the Right to Housing) o V de Vivienda (H For Housing Movement) (Haro Barba and Sampedro Blanco 2011, Romanos 2013). However, it was not until 2011 that the platform gained notoriety, in part because of their symbiotic relationship with the social movement 15M and the effective use of the network (Casero- Ripollés and Feenstra 2012). Currently, there are 214 divisions of the PAH across the country. Its activities range from the effective stoppage of evictions, either administrative processes, civil disobedience, the proposal of parliament laws, the illegal occupation of houses, or through judicial and psychological tactics (Plataforma de afectados por la hipoteca 2014). It has become the most important and operative civil platform against evictions in the fight for housing rights in the Spanish State (Haro Barba and Sampedro Blanco 2011:1).

I believe it is interesting from an academic point of view, to study this platform, because, as John Postill observes, the PAH is an interesting social institution begging deep examination, because unlike other social agents from the political arena who are only active in the alternative space of the media/internet, the PAH is: “One notable exception to this general lack of institutional engagement (…). A group that has scored a series of PR goals through its savvy combination of techno-political methods across the mainstream media vs. alternative/social media divide” (Postill 2014). From the social point of view, as I said before, the PAH is the most effective and visible platform on the national level. Taking into account the seriousness of the Spanish mortgage crisis, there is no doubt about the social importance of this collective as a possible reference point for other political movements.

I believe that it is important to add a few words to clarify concepts and terms that are going to be used in this paper, as the theoretical framework for the empirical data.

First, I would like to reference the concept techno-political practices. Toret, among others (Postill 2013) explores what techno-politics entails, and subsequently distances these practices from two traditional concepts in digital media analysis: clicktivism and cyberpolitics: “the idea of cyberactivism is far away from the dimension of interface that techno politics is usually about, between the internet and the streets, of connecting bodies and brains in order to act with the internet but remain frequently outside (2013: 42)” Features of these practices are: massive organizational capacity mediated by the internet, a pattern of political self-organization, the prevalence of empowered moods and the ability to overcome media barriers (Toret 2013: 41-44).

John Postill, who also uses the term techno-politics, raises an interesting debate and discusses concepts and terms that are important to analyze in detail. For example, the convenience of the term Network developed and disseminated by Manuel Castells, emphasizing the use of the social field as a valued alternative, as initially proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Postill assumes that the social field is more appropriate because the concept of network implies the overcoming of symbolic and cultural capital, stressing social capital (Postill 2008:417-418). For that purpose, Postill tries to unify Bourdieu’s theory of the social field with Fligstein and McAdam’s fields of strategic action in order to analyze the social media and Internet and its relation to new social movements (Fligstein and McAdam 2011).

A third important concept I consider important to stress is hybridization (Domínguez Figaredo 2011, Hine 2005). I believe that this concept is intimately bound up with techno-politics techniques, and I will try to explore it not only theoretically but also empirically in a recent ethnography. Hybrid Spaces are those in which: “Sociability is produced inside a series of digital spaces that interoperate with physical dimensions of reality, allowing for the expansion of the capacity of action of the actors in different orders” (Domínguez Figaredo 2011:204)
METHODOLOGY

- J², “I do not want to damage you with my work, I mean, I do not want to come into the wrong hands” (referring to the police)
- “Those ones?! They have no idea about anything. They are completely lost!”

ACCESS NEGOTIATION

In the first place, I think is important from a self-reflexive point of view, but especially for methodological concerns, to relate briefly, how and why I decided to write about the PAH. My aspirations, my doubts and my reflections, which are relevant to this decision. One of the most important steps for an anthropologist is having informants during the fieldwork phase. The negotiation of the access to the fieldwork is the first step described in the Atkinson and Hammersley Handbook (1994). Without such access, the research may be complicated and even sometimes unethical. In my case, this confirmation came to me from the informant. This supposed ease can imply, paradoxically, future difficulties that I guessed I had to deal with as soon as possible. A good and old friend of mine, well known for her militancy in squat movements and organizations for the right to a home, proposed in December 2013 that I participate in a project she had had in mind for a long time. I agreed to participate, not too convinced because of the lack of time, and especially because at that time I was living in Berlin and not in Madrid. However, Sarah Pink’s article (2006) changed my opinion and another one by Adolfo Estalella and Elisenda Ardevol (2007) reinforced my position. Both authors in these articles talk about a compromised, applied and almost activist ethnography. The methodology is extensively participative and collaborationist.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

First, I wanted to conduct my research through discussion groups, participant observation off/online, as well as through qualitative interviews. Unfortunately, I had to limit my work to online qualitative interviews, as well as some days of offline participant observation in Madrid in December and March, and online participant observation limited to the virtual platform used by the regional PAH Madrid and their followers.

The interviews are open and semi structured (Guber 2001). I used Hine’s handbook (2005) as theoretical support in the design of the interviews, taking into account that I am working with interviews that are technologically mediated and that it is a relatively new field for me. For the selection criterion, I use the theory developed by John Postill.

The 3MP formula:

“for those for those The numeral ‘3’ stands for the three leading categories of technology expert (…) The letter ‘M’ refers to the miscellaneous (or motley) crew of other knowledge specialists that at precise times and places (…) the letter ‘P’ stands for the citizenry or general population of a country undergoing a period of social turmoil and protest (Postill 2013:6)

In this way, I tried to represent all the political agents that are connected with the platform, who are participants in the process of social change and their use of

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²In order to preserve the anonymity of our informants, I use only the initial letters of their names.
concrete techno-politics technics. The questions were open; furthermore, I tried bringing in Bourdieu’s concept of active listening as a decisive element.

Figure 1 Conversation with Ju on Skype

Figure 2 Access negotiation on Facebook

FIELD DIARY AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

I maintained two different diaries field: one for myself and one other shared via Google Docs with my main informant. In both cases, the field diaries generate a series of categories that allow for a careful reflexive process. I categorized based on several perceptual elements from my observations at the time of writing. For better visualization, I differentiated between these categories using font size and font type:

- Inferences: indentation of the text by 1cm
- Self-analysis: -italics-
My perspective and notes during observation: (Between brackets)

Verbal references: “enclosed in double quotes and italics”

Each entry starts with the exact time and the day. The problem of field research on the internet is its immeasurable availability and openness, so I decided to impose on myself a time limit (one hour every day) in order to be able to define the research field.

To map the social field, I looked at how other ethnographers had done their research on the internet. For example, “John’s practice as a social media researcher consisted of five overlapping sub-practices or routines: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. Below we show that these became part of how the digital ethnographer produces knowledge and creates elements of her or his research environment (Pink and Postill 2012:6)”. For that I connected my Facebook and Twitter accounts to the PAH accounts and its supporters, not only following but interacting; used Delicious for collecting any links that might have to do with the Platform, and joined the PAH Madrid listserv and all the other tools that are suggested on the website.

Regarding the ethical problems during my research, I would like to illustrate one of the first annotations I made in my field diary on 27.02.2014:

1. I was not sure if it was going to be a good idea to work with a friend of mine. I still don’t think it is a good idea. Why? Because in the end, I am mixing personal stuff with professional stuff. For example, I have to submit my paper in six weeks. I am person who likes to take the control of the situation and obviously, my main informant has another rhythm.

2. I told J that I was insecure about doing field research with her because I know me. And sometimes I tend to be a little bit cynical with the studied subject. How can I explain to her that when she is talking to me, I am simultaneously trying to read between the lines and get to my own conclusions? I am afraid this experiment is going to separate us.

3. I am also afraid of not being able to do what she is asking to me to do.

4. I am afraid of getting too involved in this project.

5. On the other hand, I would say that I love it. Especially today when I read this article:

   Low and Engle (2010): She explains how Anthropology and activism can be done together, even further, should be done together. Said already stated that is impossible to separate politics and knowledge. I was working on this topic for the last two weeks for another subject. And I think it can be really useful to talk about these doubts and to reflect about these ethical dilemmas in this diary.

6. I should be really careful about my pre-conceived notions and should try to be alert to them.

   a) J is my friend and her circle are her relatives. So, obviously I feel sympathy for them.

   b) I feel also sympathy for this movement. I agree with their ideas and with the the way in which they proceed. I should be careful because I do not want to idealize them.
I perhaps also idealize social media and the internet as new ways of doing activism. I appreciate the contribution of Manuel Castells and his recent book about social networks.

DATA

“We hold the view that strategic action fields (hereafter, SAFs) are the fundamental units of collective action in society. A strategic action field is a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field’s rules (...) All collective actors (for example, organizations, extended families, clans, supply chains, social movements, and governmental systems) are themselves made up of SAFs. When they interact in a larger political, social, or economic field, that field also becomes an SAF” (Fligstein and McAdam 2011:3).

Using this field definition, it can be concluded that the different political actors intend to impose their criteria in order to obtain a specific objective. The way in which I suggest exemplifying the functioning of the social field around PAH Madrid is through following what Hine defines as the Internet Event (Pink and Postill 2012). The next image is a self-made graphic in which I try to illustrate the online social field of PAH.

![Figure 3 Online Social Field of PAH](image)

Much literature has already been written on the practice of techno-politics in the 2011 15M movement in Spain (Casero-Ripollés and Feenstra 2012, Haro Barba and Sampedro Blanco, 2011, Postill 2013, Toret 2013). I must reference this social phenomenon because many authors (Romanos 2013), as well as many of the consulted informants suggested that PAH had a huge expansion when some of their members participated in this social movement. However, while collecting my data, I can testify to an important difference between the PAH and 15M movements: PAH techno-political practices have some kind of temporary persistence, and at the same time, we can observe pictures of digital activity like we could for the 15-M movement, of those moments of preparing for the goal of making it go viral. (Postill 2011) So,
how are these intermittent digital activity pictures created to make PAH a lasting social movement compared to other temporary social movements? In addition, how do they use techno-politics technics?

One of my informants explained to me that the platform has a communication commission which bears the labor of spreading the call for organized action. Once a week the platform has an offline assembly. In these meetings they decide on which kinds of actions, and how, when and where they will be organized. The internet event I use as an example is about the cancellation of the immediate eviction of a family in the suburb of Vallecas.

![PAH's action calendar in its website](image)

**Figure 4 PAH’s action calendar in its website**

Let us start from the beginning. Carlos, who cannot pay the mortgage anymore, has been unemployed for a long time. He contacted the PAH Madrid over the internet. After participating in some offline assemblies and used all the legal means at his disposal to halt the eviction, the assembly decided to physically resist it, by occupying the house on the specific date. When the resistance action is concrete, the PAH communication commission try to recruit as many people as possible in order to increase the pressure and make bad publicity. In the words of my informant: “Banks are business companies, if we make them look bad in the press, and we play with their public image we can really hit them. Especially taking into account the poor image that banks currently have in Spain.”

The day of the eviction, the action is upload to the PAH website, Facebook and the first Tweet is launched. Twitter is a digital tool valued highly by my informants. One of them had even stated that this social platform is “literally occupied by social movements.” This point brought to my mind one of the particularities of Toret’s techno-politics definition: “The re- appropriation of digital tools for generating shared moods and notions, mutual empowerment, getting people on the streets, taking the lead on common issues and facilitating collective behaviors (Toret 2012)” The informants consulted agree that Twitter was the most effective social network and much more widely used than Facebook in their political practices. In fact, I should say that another reason why I have chosen this organization is because my main informant told me that they were able to direct the media agenda through Twitter. She confessed to me their ability to direct the headlines in newspapers and TV shows. When I asked how this was made

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3 Ju (PAH activist) in conversation with the author, March 2014

possible, the answer I got was: “you want to know how to touch off a trending topic.”

The first thing I noticed was the use of the word construct, because it implies the existence of a methodological process, which had been previously studied and whose effectiveness had been proven based on experience. In other words: “the construction of dispositifs and events that are first desired and projected digitally (before they are lived) and then spread through multiple layers ranging from twitter to the streets (Toret 201:23).”

So, the first tweet is published and it must give detailed information about the family and its current situation:

This first tweet is always launched at 11 am and 6 pm. In addition, it is always one day before in order to not been forgotten amidst the mass of internet activity. It is also distributed to all the many PAH headquarters and the other related organizations which fight for decent housing rights as well as those supporters that “we know have a lot of followers on Twitter or Facebook”. I suggest, as Toret does, that the PAH uses the “network capacity for using the internet for constructing political collective identities in continuous interaction and feedback with the environment (Toret 201:23”. This tweet also uses the hashtags that will became the flag of the current action: #CarlossequedaVK, #Stopdesahucios, #Sisepuede, #PAHVallekas… among other hashtags that are directly related with PAH claims.

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Figure 5 PAH’s first Tweet, 12 March 2014

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6Ju (PAH activist) in conversation with the author, March 2014.
At the same time, they send a press release to conventional media. When the PAH Tweet becomes a trending topic, journalists who work for conventional media get in touch with the communication commission for details.

The day of the eviction, the people involved in the action participate in a WhatsApp group created for that occasion. Apparently, the use of WhatsApp is “fundamental to organizing ourselves and being continuously in contact”. One of the persons who suffered an eviction said that they were aware of the presence of the police close to the house, which means that it could be difficult (they even said practically impossible) to stop the eviction. If they know of the police presence beforehand, they have the opportunity to be prepared inside the house. Another

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6Independent Journalist in conversation with the author, March 2014.
informant said: “If there are too many police officers, we advise each other through this group and we try to recruit more followers. We also publish tweets asking for help”. The development of the resistance action inside the house is continually covered over Twitter.

![Figure 8 Announcement of the streaming in Twitter](image)

In this social platform, what we can call nano-relates, are created. Nano-relates describe practically any little action and movement of the participants. The supporters of the collective just tweet, but some of them, who could be included among those whom Postill calls technology experts: “(1) geeks and hackers, (2) copyleft lawyers and (3) technology journalists” (Postill 2013) retransmit in streaming platforms what is going on.

They interview some of the actors involved in the action: the family, lawyers and activists. This information is posted to their blogs, YouTube channels and other social media platforms.

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7Ju (PAH activist) in conversation with the author, March 2014.
At the moment of the resolution (in this specific case the eviction was prevented and there was no confrontation with the police). Twitter starts to get very active but hashtags are changed to #Sisepuede, #OtroOtro and the celebration is illustrated with pictures of joy.
CONCLUSION

My objective was to map and describe the techno-political techniques used by this civil platform. In order to achieve my goal I used the theoretical concepts that are currently being developed in the field of New Social Movements and Digital Anthropology. Above all, my purpose was to apply these notions to ethnographic practice. It was to elaborate a conceptual process with the aid of empirical material, in order to develop the analysis and its possible extrapolation to other social movements or social organizations.

Somehow, I consider this work as an introduction to another bigger research project that needs much more dedication either offline or online. I envision continuing with the project that my main informant had proposed at the beginning of this project. In fact, we had already started a website where we are trying to explore new ways of collaborationist, extensive and engaged digital anthropology. The project it was presented during the celebration of the congress IV Encuentro de la Red de Estudios de la Ciencia y la Tecnología. So, I can say that this work helped start a solid and long term project which may help me to answer the questions raised:

As we have seen, in this platform the energies and agendas of different political actors converge, and we should describe more deeply the kinds of behavioral patterns that emerge, and how they integrate them in their day-to-day life as well as in their political activism.

Other questions may be ethical. How can we combine social research and activism, and if it is possible to resolve anthropological questions when we are aware about our political engagement?

Lastly, in terms of effectiveness, we should ask ourselves if new technology could be a distinctive guideline while talking about social movements. As we said before, a much deeper and long-term research project is necessary in order to address these questions.

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8 http://redescts.wordpress.com/2014/02/04/iv-encuentro-de-la-red-de-estudios-de-la-ciencia-y-la-tecnologia-llamada-a-comunicaciones/
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