

DAILY GREETINGS FROM THE PRESIDENT

ARGENTINEAN PRESIDENT KIRCHNER'S MEDIA STRATEGY IS REACHING ITS LIMITS ON THE INTERNET

Kristin Wesemann

On the evening of 3 September millions of Argentines had settled down comfortably on their sofas. It was 10pm, the time when television stops broadcasting endless political talk shows and switches to football, the very popular series *Graduados* and *ShowMatch 2012*, a sort of sing-off show where Joe Blogs can take on B-list celebrities. Football, *Graduados* and *ShowMatch* are broadcast in prime on public television and do not just rack up good ratings. They also become the meat of conversations on the way to work, in the office or bar and at dinner. And they provide a distraction from the horrendous inflation, the government's corruption scandals, the tax authorities' inspections, rising unemployment, political conflict and, above all, the perceived omnipotence of the president. So, on Monday evenings, the public's attention is firmly fixed on the television. And knowing this is tempting, especially for a president who is keen to speak about her policies. That is why she often uses prime time to wax lyrical about the "model" Argentina is meant to be developing. In actual fact, it is a mixture of Evita's miracles for the poorest and government forced import substitution from the last century. Thus, on the evening of 3 September, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who has been the Argentinean President since 2008, took unannounced control of all short, medium and long waves in the country yet again, forcing citizens to either listen to her or change channel.

The president often broadcasts on Cadena Nacional with a giant Evita graphic in the background. These broadcasts are regulated in Act 26522 on Audiovisual Communication



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Services. According to this law, the government can transmit on television and radio broadcasters in grave, exceptional or institutionally significant circumstances. In the past, heads of government have used Cadena Nacional to announce the Falklands War (1982) and the national bankruptcy (2001). Nestor Kirchner, Mrs. Fernández de Kirchner's predecessor and deceased husband, spoke to citizens by nationwide broadcast twice in his time in office between 2003 and 2007. The current president has made 52 of these broadcasts in the last three years. Therefore, Argentina must be a country on the abyss and in need of encouragement from above at least once per month. But her announcements are more reminiscent of election campaign and morale-boosting speeches.

Thus far in the last few months the President has interrupted her favourite television and radio programmes three times per week. She announces social good deeds, reminisces teary-eyed about "Él" ("him"), her husband Nestor, takes on her critics, whether journalists, real estate brokers or party allies, and recommends to the tax authorities that they take another look at certain electoral candidates' incomes. In short: in her appearances she justifies why she and her small team are taking a little more control of the country every day. In one of her most recent addresses to the nation she also announced that people should have fear of God and of her, Cristina, at least if they were a civil servant appointed by the president.¹ The civil servants in the audience applauded their boss. But on social networks, in the newspapers and in the streets the God comparison was met with outrage. And the address on 3 September on the "Day of Industry" had already tested many of her countrymen's patience. Within minutes the ratings collapsed. Cable broadcasters are profiting from viewers switching from public stations. Many people even preferred the documentaries being shown on the Discovery Channel to what their president had to say.

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1 | Original: "Sólo hay que tenerle temor a Dios y a mí, un poquito. Por lo menos los funcionarios que dependen de mi nombramiento. Es responsabilidad mía. Todos y cada uno de los funcionarios." You can watch a video on: "Hay que temerle a Dios y a mí, un poquito", *Clarín*, 6 Sep 2012, http://clarin.com/politica/temerle-Dios-poquito_0_769123357.html (accessed 18 Sep 2012).



Likes to broadcast herself during Prime Time: President of Argentina Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. | Source: Presidencia de la N. Argentina (CC BY).

PROTESTS WITH POTS AND PANS

Opposition organisations have used the social networks Twitter and Facebook to call on people to disrupt the broadcasts with noise. Two of the best-known groups are Cazerolaszos anti-K and Somos el 46% ("We are the 46 per cent" – i.e. those who did not vote for the president in the October 2011 election). The head of state had barely begun her address when many annoyed *Porteños*, residents of the trend-setting capital city Buenos Aires, took to street corners, their balconies or front doors, to bang their pots and pans. For an hour and four minutes – as long as Fernández de Kirchner spoke – the *cazerolazo* could be heard. Since Argentina went bankrupt in 2001 this has become the largest and most frequent form of political protest in the country. This is how the middle classes in particular show their dissatisfaction. The spontaneity of the Monday protest was inevitable, as the president's speech on Cadena Nacional had not been announced in advance. And anyone not watching the TV or listening to the radio could tell that the president was making another broadcast address from their neighbours banging pots.

Of course her re-election a year ago was a clear victory, winning 54 per cent of the vote. And a large majority of the powerful provincial governors also come from her

“Front for Victory”. But since the election, surrounded by a small group of mainly young and above all absolutely loyal technocrats and ideologues, the president has found it almost impossible to defend her former popularity. The country is not only struggling under rampant inflation, currency restrictions, indebted public companies, dramatically rising drugs-related crime, drug trafficking and public unrest, striking police, teachers, underground train drivers, taxi drivers and bin men, but also the loss

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of their identity. The discomfort began with the memorial events held to mark the 30th anniversary of the Falklands war. On 2 April 1982 Argentina launched a surprise attack to take the British properties off the country’s coast and failed miserably. The manoeuvre was the last gasp of the economically and morally bankrupt military dictatorship. President Fernández de Kirchner, who had previously projected an image as an underground fighter against the dictatorship, now had the country marching in major events to commemorate the anniversary of the defeat against the United Kingdom. She sought to have her compatriots commit to a sort of nationalism that they had never known before. It was followed by a barrage of political decisions that alienated the middle class above all: in what almost appeared an invasion, the government nationalised the Spanish oil company YPF. Dollar currency controls and restrictions for private households followed overnight. Argentineans must now apply to travel abroad, as was once the case in the GDR. Anyone spending more than 1,000 pesos (approximately 160 euros) in a supermarket must fill in a form with their personal details, which the company must then submit to the feared tax authorities. The controls on people’s lives are growing and unrest is spreading among the population.

Argentina views itself as a middle-class country. Regardless of how rich an Argentinean is, he always counts himself as part of the middle class. Only the poorest of the poor, 2.3 million people according to government statistics,² and closer to 9.5 million of Argentina’s 40 million strong

2 | Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, Incidencia de la pobreza y la indigencia en el total de aglomerados urbanos y regiones estadísticas. Segundo semestre 2011, http://www.indec.mecon.ar/nuevaweb/cuadroas/74/grafpobreza1_ephcontinua.xls (accessed 8 Oct 2012).

population according to independent estimates,³ admit their plight – working very hard to one day become part of the middle class. However, president Fernández de Kirchner is suspicious of the middle class and uses every opportunity to make cynical remarks to show that she is concerned with “all Argentineans”, but of course not with those who disagree with her policies. Furthermore, the head of state fraternises with counterparts such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, whose recent electoral success she celebrated as if it were her own, and who has already assisted her with cash donations to her election campaign, as have Bolivia’s president Evo Morales and Ecuador’s Rafael Correa. On the other hand because of her bizarre appearances such as at the UN General Assembly at the end of September, or in Harvard, she has alienated the West, which many Argentineans still see as home, a model and a place of shared values. At these appearances she caused controversy regarding Christine Lagarde by saying that the president of FIFA had a better track record than the head of the International Monetary Fund. The IMF had recently warned Argentina to finally publish realistic growth and inflation figures. Argentina’s president also attacked industrialised countries, blaming them for the economic crisis and accusing them of only looking for inferiors. But Argentina is a free country according to her. And yet again she attacked the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands. She spoke to university students twice: at Harvard and in Washington. On both occasions she handled questioners with abrupt contempt and a great deal of cynicism. This provoked harsh criticism back home. Since then sources in her closest circles say she has decided to do without the middle class politically. Venezuela has just proved that it is possible to be elected president without their support. But: there is probably no other country where belonging to the middle class is such an important life objective as Argentina.

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Protest slogan at the presidents palace Casa Rosada: Fernández de Kirchner was not able to sustain her popularity. | Source: Alex Proimos / flickr (CC BY).

ARGENTINA'S POLITICS ON THE INTERNET

Argentinean politics were not spared from 2008's "Obama-Effect". The current U.S. president's modern election campaign communication has set the bar and acts as a blueprint that many attempt to copy. Above all, since 2010 Argentina's politicians have been using Twitter and Facebook to communicate. The figures speak for themselves: well above half of all Argentines have internet access. The government is often behind this figure: for example, San Luis Province guarantees free internet access in all public buildings and parks. The capital Buenos Aires is also involved. Additionally, the government has launched nationwide programmes such as Internet para todos (Internet for everyone), which equips all schools with computers and internet access. By 2011, 91 per cent of all internet users were members of social networks – the equivalent figure in Germany was only 53 per cent. Argentines spend one third of their online time on Facebook and Co. In comparison: they spend four per cent of their online time finding information and seven per cent writing e-mails.⁴ In Argentina, social networks rank as the most

4 | Cf. Laura Zommer, "In the Midst of a Revolution, with an Unusually Active State", in: Andrew Puddephatt, Dixie Hawtin ▶

used websites. Facebook alone currently has eleven million members, representing approximately one quarter of all Argentineans.⁵ In the 15-64 age group this figure climbs as high as 42 per cent. The video platform YouTube follows. It is used by almost 60 per cent of internet users and is slightly ahead of Taringa, an Argentinean website founded in 2004 that covers an almost unlimited variety of topics.

Thus, at least in theory, a large majority of electors can be reached via the internet. Having your own website, Twitter account, a Facebook profile or a YouTube channel has long since become standard for many politicians in the country. 1.3 million followers now receive the president's tweets. That makes her by far and away the country's most-followed politician. The first lady of the land has an approved media strategy defined down to the tiniest detail and in which the internet plays an important, but subordinate role. Like her predecessor Nestor Kirchner, Mrs. Fernández de Kirchner has a very distant relationship to the press and independent journalists. Whether it is the internet or TV: she refuses dialogue and focuses on monologues. Her tweets are also anything but original: "The economy is changing every day because of internal and external factors, and society's expectations."⁶ Fernández de Kirchner tweets many government economic statistics and also likes to quote her deceased husband, like this sentence from 2004: "Thank you. Let us embrace each other tightly for a different country."⁷ She also tweets tirades against newspapers such as *Clarín* and *La Nación* or television channels that have not yet sworn absolute allegiance to the government. The president's tweets are very similar to her speeches on public television and radio.

et al. (eds.), *A New Frontier, An Old Landscape*, London, 2011, 84, <http://global-partners.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-new-frontier-an-old-landscape-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 18 Sep 2012).

- 5 | Interactive world map about the spreading of the social network Facebook: Zdenek Hynek and Martin Pulicar, "Placebook", <http://www.geographics.cz/socialMap/index.php> (accessed 18 Sep 2012).
- 6 | Original quote from 23 Jul 2012: "La economía se construye todos los días; tienen que ver factores exógenos-endógenos y también las expectativas de una sociedad."
- 7 | Original quote from 6 Jul 2012: "Muchísimas gracias y abracémonos fuertemente por un país distinto."

SCARCE PRESS CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT

Journalists are given no opportunity to ask the head of state any questions. Press conferences have been eradicated from the president's daily schedule and those of the members of her government, as have cabinet meetings. Meanwhile the overall media landscape has been changing at breakneck speed, becoming increasingly government-friendly. Of the six national radio stations only one remains relatively independent, the rest being controlled either directly or indirectly by the government. The situation is similar with the capital city's five television stations, which broadcast across the entire country. Three of them have thrown themselves onto the president's side. The situa-

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tion in the capital's print media is even more critical: only five of the more than twenty titles now publish critical articles about the government. The government's official voice is homogenous and is growing louder. Anything that cannot be controlled by the state is dealt with monetarily. Fernández de Kirchner supporters, such as the businessman Cristóbal Lopez, have bought up TV and radio stations. That is what happened to the very popular broadcaster C5N (TV) and Radio 10. Pro-government channels not only receive positive messages from the state news agency Télam, but also financial contributions. The amounts involved can only be estimated because there are no official figures and those making the estimates do not want to be named. But they have calculated the following for 2011: Crónica TV, an Olmos Group broadcaster, received 15 million pesos (2.5 million euros), CN23 (Veintitrés Group) was given 12 million pesos (2 million euros), C5N received 30 million pesos (5 million euros). From the government's point of view it is a sound investment. The news broadcasters disseminate praise for the Casa Rosada's work, place the president in the spotlight, repeat scenes from her addresses by the hundredfold, such as how the head of state is celebrated at major events. Additionally there are the government-financed broadcasting rights for the first and second football leagues. Games are often broadcast simultaneously on three public channels, and include advertising for the Presidenta de la Nación.

The fact that football is the key to Argentines' hearts is also reflected in the Tweets made by many political actors. Political heavyweight and government critic José Manuel De La Sota, governor of the Province of Córdoba, and Mauricio Macri, the successful mayor and thus governor of the capital Buenos Aires, send extremely sport-centred Tweets and comment on match results and performances. In terms of follower numbers, with 390,000 Macri is in second place behind the president. His fame and popularity admittedly also come from the fact that, for several years, he was president of Boca Juniors, the country's most important football club. Next comes Aníbal Fernández, chief of staff until the end of 2011 and now senator for Buenos Aires Province. Place number four goes to the vice-president Amado Boudou, whose tweets quite happily underpin what the president has to say. "Here we are with a united and organised people to keep building and transforming the country – under the clear leadership of our president!"⁸ With 161,000 followers, Daniel Scioli is in 7th place. He is the most powerful governor in the country, governing Buenos Aires Province, the area around the politically and economically all-determining capital city. Furthermore, just like Macri and De la Sota, the peronist is an aspirant for the 2015 presidential election.

But quantity is not quality. One-way communication, i.e. simply making announcements, does not fit the contemporary world. Modern communication would involve discussions, invitations to dialogue, using the knowledge of the internet community. Most politicians, however, "still do not understand how to conduct politics on the internet".⁹ The political consultant José Fernández-Ardáiz says it is clear that above all the 257 congressmen and 72 senators see the internet as a sort of window: you make an announcement to the people standing outside then quickly pull the curtains closed again. As a result, the information that ends up on politicians' websites and Facebook walls is mainly the same information that is also sent to the media. There is almost never a dialogue with voters, whether or

8 | Original quote from 22 Aug 2012: "Aquí estamos con un pueblo unido y organizado para seguir construyendo y transformando el país con el claro liderazgo de nuestra Presidenta!"

9 | Cf. José Fernández-Ardáiz and Ana Doria, *Indice Senadores Nacionales Argentina 2011*, Buenos Aires, 2011, 2.

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not they comment, send an e-mail or tweet a response.¹⁰ The traditional media dominate Argentina's information landscape. Consumption of these media, with a literacy rate of 97 per cent, is high. Images still have an effect of newspaper reading Argentineans. Approximately 150 newspapers are printed every day and all are in private hands. The most important – *Clarín* and *La Nación* – are from the capital city Buenos Aires. With most newspapers, it is enough to read the italics to know whether they are pro or anti government.

An analysis by the lawyer and journalist Laura Zommer for the British news organisations Global Partners estimates that in 16 of the 24 provinces there are no longer any independent newspapers.¹¹ Why?: because most regional newspapers are dependent on the provincial governments' advertising budgets. They are often also owned by congressmen, public employees or their relations. An impressive example is Guillermo Jenefes. The politician owns Radiovisión Jujuy, which provides the province of Jujuy, for which he is senator, with radio and television programmes. He is the chairman of the Committee for Media and Communication in the senate. He used to be vice-governor of his province.

A POLARISING PRESIDENT

Since 2008, when Cristina Fernández de Kirchner first came into office, the Argentinean media landscape has been deeply divided between supporters and detractors of the president and her government. Just as Nestor Kirchner brought the country together after national bankruptcy, his successor has polarised the nation with her headstrong political style and its content. The battle between the Casa Rosada and the public is being carried out in the traditional media, and continued on the internet.

10 | Cf. Hugo Passarello Luna in interview with José Fernández-Ardáiz, "La Política 2.0 no es sólo comunicación, es Política", <http://argentinaelections.com/2011/09/jose-fernandez-ardaiz-la-politica-2-0-no-es-solo-comunicacion-es-politica> (accessed 18 Sep 2012).

11 | Laura Zommer, "In the Midst of a Revolution, with an Unusually Active State", in: Puddephatt, Hawtin et al. (eds.), *A New Frontier, An Old Landscape*, n. 4.

This internet-wide political participation began with the farmer's crisis of 2008, a conflict between livestock farmers and the executive, which has since spread in waves to all parts of the country's political life, and on 13 September 2012 reached its highpoint thus far. At the heart of the conflict was Resolution 125. Now just saying that number aloud is a symbol for mass mobilisation on the internet. But what happened? In March 2008 the then Minister for the Economy announced an increase in export tariffs on soya beans and sunflower products by government order. At the time prices and demand for these two products had increased dramatically on world markets. Furthermore, the world market price was intended to be decisive for export tariffs on a range of agricultural products in the future. The higher the price on exchanges, the higher the applicable tariff. The traditionally powerful farmers' associations called for unlimited strikes, street blockades, *cazerolazos* and other forms of protest, and set about organising these actions via social networks and by SMS.

The traditional media reported extensively on the movement, thus spreading the sentiment. The strikes crippled public life repeatedly until 15 July 2008, caused food shortages and at the same time pushed up food prices, leading to further protests. The government was planning to table "125" in parliament in June 2008. The vote was tied and vice-president Luis Cobos allowed the bill to fall. On the following day the government withdrew "125" and the farmers' associations announced the protest was over.

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Those few weeks demonstrated the momentum campaigns organised online can generate. The political blogosphere was also involved. But today it is divided: There are so-called "K-Bloggers", who support the president individually and on shared websites.¹² And there are bloggers critical of the government such as *clubpoliticoargentino.org* and, above all, journalists' opinion pages. Political weblogs discuss and analyse topics but rarely bring new topics onto the political agenda. Furthermore, the major opposition newspapers have failed with their expensive blog projects

12 | See i.e.. <http://artepolitica.com> (accessed 18 Sep 2012), <http://bloggersenaccion.blogspot.com.ar> (accessed 18 Sep 2012), or <http://labarbarie.com.ar> (accessed 18 Sep 2012).

because all they did was reproduce their publications' print and online content. The blogs run by *Clarín* and *La Nación* do not feature in the top 10 nationwide blogs.

A THIRD TERM BY CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT?

Argentina's political polarisation is continuing on the internet. Very important parliamentary elections are scheduled for next year. If the president's party – the "Frente para la Victoria" – win a two thirds majority they would be in a position to change the constitution and enable Fernández de Kirchner to stand for president again. Under current rules, the president is limited to a maximum of two four year terms.

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This prospect would be particularly damaging for the middle class. In recent weeks the country has experienced almost daily demonstrations against the government's policies. These protests are not always free of violence. The largest action yet was on 13 September after a speech given by the president on the "Day of Industry". Hundreds of thousands of people used social networks and mouth-to-mouth propaganda to meet and take to the streets across the country, singing the national anthem peacefully and demanding freedom. No speakers appeared and the political parties played no part in organising the protest. Rather, it was a national coming together of a proud people who still remembers how, despite many crises, they have successfully defended their democracy for thirty years. Even broadcasters loyal to the government such as Canal 7, Canal 9 and C5N reported these events, although they only showed the protests in Buenos Aires. They failed to show demonstrations in Córdoba, La Plata, Salta, Mendoza, Rosario and San Juan. In fact the president was on a visit to San Juan for the opening of a Lacoste factory and saw the protesting masses first hand. The fashion producer chose to build a factory in the country because they are now often unable to import their goods from abroad.

President Fernández de Kirchner and her government reacted immediately to the demonstrations, claiming that it was just the middle classes fearing for their dollars yet again. Whenever there are protests, journalists loyal to the

government and the head of state generally refer to “those people”. But if you watched the independent channels TN or Canal 13, you got an image of the number of demonstrators – including the protesters in San Juan who tried to drown out the president’s words by banging on their pots and pans. Meanwhile the president’s poll ratings are falling: only 24.3 per cent of Argentineans now agree with her policies, 60.6 per cent are against. Plus: 72.2 per cent of those surveyed want to continue banging their pots and pans together.¹³

13 | Cf. “Decae la imagen de Cristina”, 2 Oct 2012, http://clarin.com/opinion/Decae-imagen-Cristina_0_784721537.html (accessed 5 Oct 2012).