

# Social networks in the activation of collective identity: the case of the Official Cristero National Guard Facebook

***Las redes sociales en la activación de la identidad colectiva: el caso del Facebook de la Guardia Nacional Cristera Oficial***

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the characteristics of the memory activation through the analysis of the social network of the *Guardia Nacional Cristera*. It highlights the role played by this Facebook platform in the reinterpretation and updating of the links of the Cristero community. It delves, in fact, into the characteristics of the publications, following the methodology proposed by Robert Kozinets (2015) in *Netnography. Redefined*, which allows for a punctual review of

the content of the publications, and therefore interprets the results in the light of theories of memory, post-memory and forgetting.

## **KEYWORDS**

social network, memory, activation

## **Resumen**

El trabajo indaga en las características que reviste la activación de la memoria a través del análisis de la red social de la Guardia Nacional

Cristera. Se destaca el papel que desempeña esta plataforma de Facebook en la reinterpretación y actualización de los vínculos de la comunidad cristera. Profundiza, en efecto, en las características de las publicaciones, siguiendo la acertada metodología propuesta por Robert Kozinets (2015) en *Netnography. Redefined*, que

permite realizar una revisión puntual del contenido de las publicaciones, y por lo tanto, interpreta los resultados a la luz de las teorías de la memoria, la posmemoria y el olvido.

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

redes sociales, memoria, activación

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Facebook platform was created in 2004 and emerged as a university social network.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, it would experience a significant diffusion that turned it into a “generalist social network” (Caldevilla, 2010, p. 60). Specialists attribute the growth of this type of virtual networks to the ludic and plastic possibilities that the platform offers; for example, the ample opportunity for interaction, the potential for personalization, the use of multimedia content and the richness derived from editing, as well as the direct feeding of its participants (Caldevilla, 2010).

The same author states that social networks are born as “a gathering of people, known or unknown, who interact with each other, redefining the group and feeding it back” (Caldevilla, 2010, p. 47). Although the administrator is primarily responsible for publishing and curating content, the community is the one that issues opinions and shares publications in a process that favors the growth and flow of multidirectional communication (p. 47).

Social networks, in fact, can be equated in structure to discourses and traditions, since they

have a starting narrative, a trajectory and an end that includes biases, silences, forgetfulness and suppressions (Hall, 2005). It is a statement<sup>2</sup> that changes in the face of the “burden imposed by the enunciator”, which requires considering the succession of hands that carry it, as well as the modifications they undergo (Latour, 1998, p. 112). If we follow this approach, it becomes essential to identify how individuals and groups construct their memories through the narration of some specific moments that are chosen throughout their evolution (Hall, 2005).

This paper aims to identify the role of networks in the processes of activating community memories<sup>3</sup>. To this end, it analyzes the publications on the Facebook page of the Catholic group called *La Guardia Nacional Cristera Oficial*<sup>4</sup> (The Official Cristero National Guard). It should be remembered that this group has its ideological roots in the Cristero War, which the Mexican state fought against Catholic groups in the central region of the country at the end of the 1920s. It should be noted that the Cristeros, in the conflict, used not only weapons,

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1 The term “social network” is used to designate networks that seek to continue a relationship, usually “offline,” while “social networking” contemplates social networks that are conducive to the initiation of relationships. In this framework, Facebook is considered a “social network” site (Sinn, 2014, p. 97).

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2 Latour points out that by statement: “we understand anything that is launched, sent or delegated by an enunciator [...] that refers to a word, a phrase, an object or an apparatus and sometimes to an institution” (1998, p. 112).

3 The concept of community used is the one elaborated by Benedict Anderson and defined as imagined because its members will not get to know most of their peers: “although in the mind of each one lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1993, p. 23).

4 See <https://www.facebook.com/Guardia-Nacional-Cristera-Oficial-951497078224610>

but also other means of propaganda to spread their ideas in newspapers and photographs, which have recently been activated through their social network.

It should be noted that the group called Guardia Nacional Cristera opened its Facebook page on May 4, 2015, intending to serve as an “official organ of information and linking of the Cristeros”, as happened with the David magazine, in its second period (1952 and 1968). It should be remembered that this Cristero organ began its publication in 1936, and managed to print 59 issues. It intended to strengthen the ranks of the Ejército Popular Libertador and maintain the Cristero spirit (Flores, 2015).

To delve deeper into the characteristics of the interactions that take place on this social network, a netnography and content analysis of the publications over the course of a year was chosen. This required delving into the events that led to the formation of the group, with the intention of properly situating the community's references. The review focused on the content of the posts, the characteristics of the images and the community's response, to clarify the elements that the community has selected as its own and, thus, to identify the relevance of the social network in the integration of a geographically dispersed community.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Cristero conflict in Mexico arose from the publication of the Calles Law on 31 July 1926, which was called the Penal Code of the Federal District and Territories on crimes of the common law and crimes against the federation in matters of religious worship and external discipline. This law sought to limit ecclesiastical power with measures affecting the Church's internal life, which was to provoke the outbreak of the first rebellion. In effect, it prohibited the wearing of religious clothing in public places, the participation of foreign priests in worship, and decreed secular education. It also imposed restrictions on freedom of association and the religious press; above all, it denied the Church's legal personality (Avitia, 2006).

The Mexican Episcopate, faced with the anti-clerical measures of the government, responded with the publication of a Pastoral Letter that decreed the suspension of public worship as of July 31, 1926. The State's frontal attack on the Church would provoke, in August and September 1926, the first Cristero uprisings in the states of Zacatecas, Jalisco, Michoacán and Durango (Avitia, 2006). The Cristero struggle, at the beginning, would be characterized by the execution of dispersed actions that would reach greater strength with the arrival of General Enrique Gorostieta as sole chief of the Cristero Liberation Army, on October 28, 1928 (Avitia, 2006).

The struggle between the Cristero and federal forces, in fact, maintained a certain warlike intensity until the death of General Gorostieta, on June 2, 1929. His death marked the decline of the armed struggle, which helped the Church and the State to reach a political agreement that led to the signing of an armistice that put an end to the conflict. However, after the arrangements, the State once again violated the relationship with the Church by adopting measures aimed at limiting ecclesiastical power in public life, which would provoke a second rebellion from 1934 to 1936.

It should be noted that, forty years after the end of the Rebellion, and being at the limit of the period to carry out the transmission of the memory -as pointed out by specialists- (Assman, 2011 ), the old Cristeros took action, with the purpose of “vindicating the truth of the movement and the memory of the fallen.”<sup>5</sup> The effort of the Cristero community to transmit their memories to future generations can be traced through the recording and gathering of information, to the recent application of the memories by the current community.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Now, before entering into the study of the activation of memory on the Facebook page of the Cristero National Guard, it is necessary to point out that this work supports its analysis on the proposal made by Tzvetan Todorov (2003) in his work *Hope and Memory*. This is an obligatory reference for the examination of this topic. Indeed, the author identifies three stages in the process of memory configuration, which are the establishment of facts, the construction of meaning and the application or activation. The first

includes the selection of the traces of the past that one seeks to preserve and that will play a decisive role in the construction of memory, in the understanding that it is a conscious and voluntary process of choosing the traces that are considered worthy of perpetuating .

The construction of meaning, on the other hand, is based on the establishment of facts to understand the past and the present, to discern their causes and effects (Todorov, 2003 ). Finally, the phase of activation or application is characterized by the use of the past to serve the objectives of the present (Todorov, 2003 ). This is a three-phase practice that usually coexists and may begin with an idea of application of knowledge and experience that precedes the search for and collection of facts. Todorov stated that one usually looks to the past to legitimize an action in the present, since “memory is selective by nature and there must be a criterion for selecting what is preserved from a mass of information received and this conscious and unconscious criterion is a guide to the uses we make of the past” (Author’s translation. Todorov, 2003, p. 128).

It should be noted that the Facebook page of the Cristero National Guard, which emerged as a result of the National Assembly held on April 11, 2015, uses on its cover a photograph of the Southern Division, which was in charge of Jesús Degollado Guízar, who was responsible for the discharge of the Cristero troops on June 21, 1929 (Peña, 2019). Degollado would call his followers in a Manifesto not to give up the struggle and to remain united with the motto “God, Homeland and Liberty”. This act took place two weeks before the agreements signed by the prelates of the Church with President Emilio Portes Gil, in 1929 (Puente, 2002 ).

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<sup>5</sup> See *David's* second period, in particular, number 20.

**Figure 1**

Cover image, Facebook Of  
ficial Cristero National Guard.<sup>6</sup>



The cover image is closely related to the page profile, as it uses the shield of the Cristero National Guard<sup>7</sup> to represent the group. The symbol of the cross formed with a feather and a rifle incorporates the motto “Dios, Patria y Libertad” (God, Homeland and Liberty). The dates of the first rebellion “1926-1929” are included, alluding to the reinterpretation of the struggle and, of course, the Cristero symbols (see fig. 2).

**Figure 2.**

Profile image. Official Cristero National Guard Facebook.



An initial review of the social network makes it possible to identify a community with an interest in Cristian practices and beliefs, as the group participates in the construction and strengthening of links between local communities and in the creation of ties with members who cannot participate directly and express their support virtually<sup>8</sup> (Peña, 2019 ; Kozinets, 2015 ).

The community actively participates and interacts through publications that incorporate topics that can be considered significant and even controversial. For example, in the first category, it is possible to identify the dissemination of the liturgical calendar such as Candlemas, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week or Christmas. In a second order, there are publications that delve into polemic topics such as those related to the current pontificate.

However, in order to delve deeper into the characteristics of the Facebook profile posts of this group and to understand the expressions of this social network, it was decided to carry out a year-long quantitative and qualitative analysis focused on identifying the most frequent themes, as well as the most salient features. The exercise used as a reference the method proposed by Robert Kozinets (2015) in his text *Netnography: Redefined*. The aim was to carry out research that combined archival work and online communication. Similarly, a technique developed in the field of health sciences was used; this technique was published by Henrik Eriksson, Mats Christiansen, Jessica Holmgren, Annica Engström and Martin Salzmänn-Erik-

6 [https://www.facebook.com/Guardia-Nacional-Cristera-Oficial-951497078224610/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/Guardia-Nacional-Cristera-Oficial-951497078224610/photos/?ref=page_internal)

7 The slogan was used by the National Catholic Party from its foundation in 1911 until its disappearance in 1914.

8 Rheingold defines it as a “social aggregation that emerges from the network thanks to the participation of enough people who play an active role in discussions for a more or less prolonged time and with involved feelings, in order to form networks of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993, p. 5 cited by Kozinets, 2015, p.8).

son, who applied it in a case study on images of nurses' tattoos (Peña, 2019).

Regarding Kozinets' method, it should be noted that it employs seven steps of analytical interpretation, which he defines as intellectual implements or techniques of qualitative network analysis. These implements, from the researcher's position, seek to transform the data into forms of representation given the possibility of imagining and constructing initial reflective ideas. The method then establishes the stage of recalling the data and carefully recording those that are remembered to initiate abduction, to relate and contextualize the ideas in different ways and from various points of view. Once the cultural patterns that permeate the objects of analysis have been understood, he points out that it is possible to continue with the visual abstraction of the individual and particular elements that are incorporated. One can even resort to artifying, which is the search for images or phrases that summarize the interpretation of the data obtained. Finally, the author recommends the cultural decoding or assembly of the information, and its revision through its exposure to different theories (Kozinets, 2015).

For the case study of the Facebook page of the Cristero National Guard, and with the methodological basis described above, the analysis focused on 381 publications disseminated on the page from January to December 2017. These were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, to differentiate the characteristics of the post, the elements of the image and text, and the response of the followers (Peña, 2019, p.

233; Kozinets, 2015, p. 67).<sup>9</sup> The immersion and compilation process was carried out from the researcher's personal profile, where the particular interest in the page of the Cristero National Guard was made clear.

In fact, the group was informed of the purpose and focus of the research, indicating to the administrator the interest in delving deeper into the nature of the publications that the group disseminated. However, no response was ever received. However, beyond the public nature of the information, followers are not always willing to consent to the use of data and images, as they may be interrogated and forced to confess. This may bring relevant ethical implications (Kozinets, 2015). Therefore, an intermediate level of blocking was used, which is presented as translucent to the context and social network in which the interaction takes place, although the identity of the participants is protected.

## 4. RESULTS

The content of the data obtained made it possible to investigate the processes of memory activation. They are contrasted with those historical records that were generated during the armed rebellion. The work deepened, in fact, in the analysis of the Facebook publications of the Cristero National Guard, following the premise that the concepts and articulations of memory are undergoing important modifications.

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<sup>9</sup> The registry included three sections: the text, the image and the community's response. Regarding the image, we identified whether it was a celebration or whether it was a portrait of a martyr or an image of Christ the King. In addition, the text was noted and the reason for the publication was identified, for example, if the interest is focused on calling or informing about a parade, ceremony, anniversary or a propagandistic action in favor of the Cristero National Guard and Catholic beliefs. The number of "likes," "I am amused," and the number of times it was shared, as well as the number of comments, were also recorded.

However, the results showed that most publications were oriented towards the dissemination of Cristero practices and Catholic beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Although, at a second level, those that disseminate the Cristero rides and ceremonies organized by the local chiefs<sup>11</sup> in the municipalities that participated in the rebellion stand out. Finally, and with a smaller number of publications, there are those aimed at disseminating the principles of the Cristeros<sup>12</sup>, as well as the anniversary of the martyrdom of some of their most illustrious participants.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the specific handling of text and images in each publication, it should be noted that most<sup>14</sup> of the publications incorporate text<sup>15</sup> and images of a generic nature that were taken by members of the community, in order to record and share with the page's followers their participation in the celebrations.<sup>16</sup> A smaller number of publications, but with a better response, are those made by the page administrator. These publications include the dissemination of the liturgy and Catholic principles, as shown in Figure 3.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 3**

*Publication with best response. December 22, 2017.  
Facebook Official Cristeral National Guard.*



10 Thirty percent of the publications are oriented towards strengthening the traditional nuclear family or are against abortion.

11 22% of the publications advertise the rides and report on them through images.

12 19% of the publications disseminate the image and slogan of the Cristero National Guard.

13 11% of the publications are oriented to the diffusion of the actions of the martyrs, on the occasion of the anniversary of their martyrdom or beatification.

14 In 2017, 1224 images were disclosed, of which 661(69%) were published by the community.

15 Of the year's 381 publications, 211 include a text and 45 refer to a ride.

16 Rides account for 60% of the images in the publications.

17 They include 7% of images dedicated to allusions to the Cristeros, 4% of images of a historical nature and 3.6% of portraits of martyrs, among others.

When reviewing the social network and, therefore, the publications generated by the community, it is possible to notice the notorious reappropriation of the Cristero rituals that arose during the armed struggle, which forced the realization of horseback rides and religious ceremonies in the open air. The publications give an account of this type of activities. In this framework, it is possible to identify the interest of the Cristero groups in reinterpreting the traces of the past and participating in the process of memory translation, through the incorporation of new elements that are inserted into the pre-existing structure (Peña, 2019). To this end, one of the most effective tools has been

the use of contemporary communication strategies that have favored a considerable growth in the Cristero National Guard group, as from 5400 followers in 2016, it has reached a figure that exceeds 24,000.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

When speaking of the scope of action of memory, it should be noted that it extends along two main axes; the first plays a leading role, thanks to articulating the sense of belonging. The second propitiates an interest in preserving something that one has and may disappear over time, which generates a sense of permanence (Muriel, 2013). If we follow this order, the first is clearly identified in the evolution of the Cristero community and its interest in preserving and activating the memory of the events. The second, on the other hand, identifies social networks as a tool for recording, preserving and disseminating memory.

Now, the interest in prolonging the sense of belonging and permanence coincides perfectly with the definition of Connerton (1989) in his work *How Societies Remember*, where he refers to memory as a process of "sedimentation" that is fixed through social practices (p.72). The first of these practices, known as incorporation, is determined by the messages that are transmitted through one's own body and are preserved through the ceremonies that continue to be practiced. The second feature that he points out in the sedimentation of memory is inscription, which he locates precisely in the registration in publications and, of course, in the incorporation into social networks.

It should be specified that this process of memory transmission is located between memory and post-memory, as well as between memory and oblivion. It should be recalled that the term postmemory, introduced by Marianne Hirsch (2012) in *Family Frames: Photography Narrative and Postmemory*, states that the concept of memory is the gap that separates the generations that experienced the events and their descendants based on the connection to the past. Indeed, the author argues that postmemory groups: "the experience of those who grew up dominated by the narratives that preceded their birth, whose stories were replaced by the stories of the previous generation and shaped by traumatic events that neither generation can understand" (Author's translation, p. 22).

However, the linking effect produced through the network's publications facilitates the construction of partial bridges between memory and post-memory, as well as -although in a different way- between memory and oblivion (Hirsch, 2012). In the case of Cristero, it is the exercise of post-memory that favored the selection and preservation of facts that strengthen the cohesion of the group. However, it also functions as an instrument of cohesion of the members of the community. It is clear that the community omits the use of references that account for the dimension of the struggle and the imperative of breaking the commandments of the Catholic Church, since it omits the remembrance of the violent episodes of the struggle.

From the establishment of the facts and the construction of meaning to activation, selective measures were carried out for their trans-



mission to future generations or for forgetting. According to Yerushalmi (1989), a community forgets when the generation that was in power of the traces of the past decides not to transmit them and/or the generation that receives them in inheritance decides to reject them. He argues that memory retains as a priority the history that can be integrated into the system of values that are judged exemplary for a people<sup>18</sup>.

process closely linked to the social network and the contents it incorporates and disseminates. It is, therefore, a platform, or rather a collection, based on a collective construction that actively participates in the identification and cohesion of the community through the selection, activation and fixation of symbols, concepts and experiences that are incorporated and sedimented within the group.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the role of social networks in the identification and transmission of community memory. In this spirit, it placed its object of study in the Facebook group of the Official Cristero National Guard. Its purpose was to establish the characteristics of the discourse that this community constructs in the social network.

The analysis identified the main forms of participation of the members, as well as the importance of the transmission and reinterpretation of the community's memory. In addition, it was highlighted that it is a selective act that concerns the post-memory sphere, which is determined by the integration of the elements that respond to its value system. Likewise, the selection makes it clear that the discursive construction is determined by the intention of the bearers to transmit certain features of the events, translating only the characteristics of the discourse they receive and what they are interested in disseminating.

The process undoubtedly made it possible to underline the updating of memory in a dynamic

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<sup>18</sup> Yosef Yerushalmi refers specifically to the *halakhah* value system although he states that "every people has its *halakhah* [...] the path along which it marches" (9).

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