



CASE STUDY

Lessons from
Pandemic-Era Activism:
**SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES AND THE TACTICAL
INNOVATIONS OF CHILE'S YOUTH ORGANIZERS**

DEMOCRACY
MOVES

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Executive Summary

Globally, the introduction of social distancing and lockdown measures accelerated existing trends towards the shrinking of civic spaces. As such, many predicted that the pandemic would dampen existing organizing efforts and potentially bring an end to protest-based movements (Brannen 2020). In Chile, however, the public health crisis instead encouraged activists to adapt and extend their tactics, messaging, and outreach in innovative ways. In order to cope with a shifting political, social, and physical terrain, activists refocused their efforts on hyperlocal forms of mutual aid as well as novel forms of digital protest. Thus, even while the Plaza Italia—which had served as the hub for protests in Chile in years past—remained largely empty throughout 2020, political activists nonetheless remained engaged in the legacy and future of the student movement through other venues.

This case study seeks to elaborate the precise challenges that the pandemic-era shrinking of civic spaces has posed to Santiago’s student activists and how they were addressed. It draws on interviews conducted remotely over the course of 6 months from 2020 to 2021 with representatives of the FEUC (La Federación de Estudiantes de la UC) at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, former student activists of the 2011 Chilean Winter, and leaders of the Revolución Democrática party (which arose directly out of the student education movement.) Interviewees were asked to reflect on their present and past involvement in the movement, on the challenges of post-pandemic political activism, and on the future of digital activism in Chile. From these descriptions, the case study seeks to define best practices for not only the COVID- era political environment but also for a broader post-pandemic environment.

The study describes the ways that activists approached the threat of slacktivist forms of digital political engagement, the disappearance of public audiences from marches and demonstrations, as well as the closing of physical spaces that had previously provided a fulcrum of political leverage. In particular, the case draws on successful forms of virtual political spectacle—digital murals and socially distanced protest—and discusses how activists adapted their tactics to redirect energy towards social

urgencies, leverage the advantages of online organizing, and establish continuity with the 2006 and 2011 education movements and their logics of dissent.

Having explored the successes and limitations of youth activists in their attempts to politicize digital space and adapt to the rapid shrinking of civic spaces, the following best practices for establishing resilient forms of post-pandemic activism will be proposed. These recommendations are formulated in view of a broad application to a number of diverse contexts, both within and beyond the context of the pandemic.

Summary of Best Practices:

1. *During social crises, re-invest resources from long-term objectives into messaging that reflects immediate social urgency.*
2. *Join activists together in fostering community spaces organized around social services and mutual aid.*
3. *Build resilience to volatile political and social conditions by developing forms of protest that do not exclusively rely on freedom of movement, access to physical spaces, or face-to-face contact.*
4. *Direct calls for digital solidarity towards actionable and material results and away from the superficial.*
5. *In the face of uncertain access to conventional political venues, adapt existing forms of political demonstration for digital audiences by establishing continuity with pre-existing movements, their tactics, logics of demonstration, and their messaging.*

August 2021
Case study prepared on behalf of Democracy Moves
with support from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute
Johns Hopkins University

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Cover Photo:
Anti-government demonstrators assemble atop a bus in Santiago, Chile, on March 13.
(Luis Hidalgo/AP)

Background

Education reform is one element of a wider policy agenda that was enacted during the Pinochet dictatorship, an era that transformed virtually all aspects of Chilean social and economic life. Even after the 1990 democratic transition—where, a failed attempt to extend Pinochet’s rule and assure him the legitimacy of a popular vote led to the election of Christian-Democrat candidate Patricio Aylwin—the country nonetheless continued to sustain the intensification of social inequality under the retreat of the welfare state and the privatization of former state responsibilities. The democratic transition thus left in its wake high levels of social inequality and public malaise.

While mass protest ultimately erupted over equal access to education— high fees, student debt, and unequal access—it should be understood that these movements depended on the wide public support that saw in these activists’ demands a broader story about the concurrent disintegration of social security, health insurance, water-access, and labor laws. The social unrest of 2019–20, which erupted specifically over metro fare hikes, was ultimately more broadly aimed at this matrix of issue areas—protestors were demanding a wholesale rethinking of the neoliberal constitution inherited from Chile’s former dictatorship. The legacy of the student activists of 2006 and 2011 thus remain a central reference to understanding contemporary Chile—not only as the first significant public articulation of a critique of neoliberalism, but also as a rich source of protest strategies that would become invaluable in 2020, when the pandemic-era closing of civic spaces would require force Chilean activists to radically transform prevailing tactics.

Chile's History of Student Activism | The 2006 Penguin Revolution

The 1973 university reform process was initiated under President Allende, who welcomed the participation of the University of Chile's Student Federation (FECH), a longstanding and prestigious student organization with a history stretching back to 1906. By September of that year, however, all reform efforts were violently suppressed by the 1973 military coup led by Pinochet, after which student federations were prohibited (Bellei 2014, 429). The CONFECH, the Chilean Student Confederation, emerged in the mid-1980s in opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship. CONFECH was only formally recognized after Chile's transition to democracy in 1990. In 1995, CONFECH began publicly speaking out against the economic model inherited from the Pinochet-era (Bellei et al. 2014, 429).

The 2006 Penguin Revolution—in reference to the protester's black and white school uniforms—was the first significant demonstration to occur since Chile's return to democracy in 1990 (Cabalin 2012, 223). High school leaders led the movement, protesting against the 1990 Organic Constitutional Act of Education, or LOCE, which was widely criticized for reducing the state's power in education to a solely regulatory and protective role, in turn handing over the responsibility of education to private and public corporations. Among protester demands were calls to defend public education, a rejection of for profit education providers, the elimination of existing disciplinary practices, as well as free education (Bellei et al. 2014, 432). In May and June of 2006, high school leaders of the Coordinating Assembly of Grade School Students mobilized university student federations at the University of Chile, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and the University of Santiago, and together held a national strike of more than 250 schools (as well as nearly 600 additional schools declaring solidarity). The number of students on strike was estimated to be between 600,000 and one million.

The students ultimately successfully pressured President Bachelet to sign the General Education Law, LGE, replacing the controversial LOCE, but ultimately preserving the

foundational structure of the Chilean education system (Olivia 2011). Among the legacies left by the Penguin Revolution, scholars note that the organizers established a repertoire of innovative uses of new information technology to recruit new supporters, coordinate them through social networks, and attract media coverage (Domedel and Peña y Lillo 2008). More than a decade later, the Penguin Revolution lives on in the nation's cultural memory, and has been drawn upon in later struggles against neoliberalization and education policy. It was these high schoolers, scholars argue, that stirred Chile's university student federations and started the process that would subsequently lead to the 2011 Chilean winter (Bellei et al. 2014, 429).

Chile's History of Student Activism | The 2011 Chilean Winter

The student protests of 2011, dubbed the Chilean Winter by international press in reference to the Arab Spring, began in May of that year in the form of a demonstration of a few thousand university students. By the winter months, the protests had rapidly gained momentum, drawing nearly 120,000 students to a bimonthly march on Santiago at the peak of the movement. These demonstrations were as massive as they were prolonged; the Chilean Winter witnessed 36 marches in total across the span of 7 months (Cabalin 2012, 224).

Demonstrators organized around an opposition to skyrocketing levels of student debt and, at a structural level, the shrinking of direct state investment in public services (in education and beyond) under decades of neoliberal policy. With a Gini coefficient of 0.46 in 2011, Chile has historically struggled with severely unequal income distribution. Additionally, according to a report by the OECD based on the PISA test, Chile has the most segregated educational system among its member countries. Chilean higher education consumes up to 40 percent of a middle-income family's budget (Muñoz-Lamartine 2012); and Chilean college students graduate with a rate of debt that is 174 percent of predicted future income. Despite these conditions, Chile stands to have one of the lowest levels of public expenditure per student—at a mere \$5,300 in 2017, compared to the OECD average of \$9,400 (OECD, 2019). In this national context,

the Chilean Winter foregrounds, as its central demands, that the state must strengthen and expand public education institutions, make access to higher education more egalitarian, and eradicate profiteering from all educational services (Bellei 2014, 432).

By the end of 2011, the movement had gained enormous levels of public support—contributing to draining President Piñera’s approval rating to a low of 26% while achieving for themselves a public backing of 80% (Cabalin 2012, 224). This support, scholars hypothesize, is due in large part to the confluence between the students’ demands and Chile’s greater economic and social malaise. The student movement articulated a critique of Chile’s educational system as a dimension of the country’s larger disintegration of public services. Healthcare, social security, housing and education had become, under the Pinochet regime, arenas for a nation-wide transition away from direct state investment in public services; in its place, services were marketized and privatized—former beneficiaries turned customers—and the market became, for many, the site for the reproduction and intensification of existing social and economic inequalities. So when the student movement erupted in 2011 to put pressure on the democratic center-left Concertación coalition (1990–2010) that followed the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–90)—criticising their preservation of the Chilean “Washington Consensus” model and further entrenchment of neoliberal policies—their demands resonated across numerous demographics. The democratic administration was due for a wholesale restructuring of the state’s approach to public institutions, starting with education (Muñoz-Lamartine 2012).

Across several months of demonstrations, organizers used both traditional avenues of collective action—e.g. mass marches, occupation of buildings, school strikes, work stoppages, assemblies—as well as more innovative and creative activities associated with new social movements, like flash mobs, mass races, kiss-ins, viral campaigns, and costume gatherings (Barrioneuvo 2011). This broad repertoire of strategies enabled activists to retain the attention of the Chilean mainstream media (Guzman-Concha 2012, 409). The movement also enjoyed largely favorable international coverage, especially on its more creative moments like a performance

put on at La Moneda, the presidential palace, around which at least one student jogged at all times, aiming to complete 1,800 laps, one for every million dollars demanded for Chile's public education system (Barrioneuvo 2011).

The movement contributed to the replacement of the former minister of education with one who would more strictly enforce prohibitions on for-profit activities. They also won scholarships and new interest rate controls for the poorest 60 percent of the population. (Bellei 2014, 433) Irrespective of these wins, however, the country's neoliberal inheritance largely remains intact. The student movement failed to generate structural reforms (e.g. free public education), leaving the government to settle on the creation of government agencies and superintendents to oversee quality and accreditation standards, while allowing to remain a system centered around a voucher system, private competition and policies supporting school-choice.

Of course, while the 2011 demonstrations concluded quietly, it must be said that student activists nonetheless contributed to a country-wide criticism of neoliberal policies, generating a sustained public discourse on the country's spiraling levels of inequality and the importance of direct political participation. Furthermore, the demands articulated during the Chilean Winter circulated activists spaces long after 2013, and eventually made their way into the agenda of the 2019-20 protests. Another lasting legacy can be found in the broad repertoire of strategies that re-emerged again and again in street performances, school strikes, etc.

Legacies of the Education Movement & Covid-era Organizing

The 2019 protest movement—first sparked by student opposition to Santiago's metro fare hikes and later erupting into a wholesale critique of Chile's neoliberal organization of civil society and its continued inability to address rampant social inequality—was, even by December of that year, showing little signs of relenting. The movement increasingly mobilized demographics who had never before participated in political action, gaining public sympathy as protestors faced police repression. Chile appeared to be at the forefront of the age of mass protest (Brannen et al. 2020).

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, movement momentum ground to a sudden halt. The Chilean government rapidly closed its civic spaces. Along with other countries like the Philippines and Turkey, Chilean authorities saw the health crisis as an opportunity to use pandemic-related restrictions to censor critics and regain control over political dissent. Even without explicit efforts to repress mass protests, the combination of social distancing measures, restrictions on movement, and the shrinking of public spaces led to a significantly weakened student movement. Terrain that in February had been controlled by demonstrations were by the end of March completely cleared out – art and graffiti washed away by the police who were for the first time in months able to take back the symbolic centers of these clashes, sites like Plaza Italia.



Figure 1. [File: Ivan Alvarado/Reuters; Caption: Lucia Newman 5 Aljazeera] A combination photo shows demonstrators setting fire to a dummy representing President Sebastian Pinera during a protest against Chile's government at Plaza Italia in Santiago in this December 13, 2019 photo, and (bottom) a view of an almost empty Plaza Italia, now known as Plaza de la Dignidad (Dignity square), following the coronavirus outbreak, March 24, 2020



Research Approach & Methods

This case study seeks to elaborate the precise challenges that the pandemic-era shrinking of civic spaces in Santiago poses to student activists and to document challenges and responses for adapting to this new environment. It does so towards the broader aim of defining best practices for not only the pandemic-era political environment, but also for a broader post-pandemic political and social order—practices that promote broader activist and movement sustainability amidst potential instabilities. The case draws on interview data collected remotely over the course of 6 months from 2020 to 2021. Interviews were conducted with FEUC representatives at the University of Chile, former student activists of the Chilean Winter, and core leaders of the Revolución Democrática party (which arose directly out of the student education movement.) Interviewees were asked to reflect on their present and past involvement in the movement, on the challenges of post-pandemic political activism, and on the future of digital activism in Chile.

Analysis

With the arrival of the health crisis, activists and protestors faced numerous obstacles. Gathering en masse in public spaces, for instance, shifted from being a relatively low-risk activity (in countries that promote freedom of expression) to high-risk activism—either due to risk of infection or the intensification of government suppression (Pinckney and Rivers 2020, 25). As the pandemic spread, protest movements that had previously relied heavily on street presence and tactics that required mass gatherings struggled to respond to new restrictions, in many cases resulting in a halt of movement momentum. According to data collected by the ACLED data project (Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset), April 2020 saw more than a 60% drop in public protests (Pinckney and Rivers 2020, 24).

While early mainstream reporting noted the end, or at least marginalization of many mass movements across the globe, the spring and summer of 2020, however, demonstrated quite the opposite. The Black Lives Matter protests in the US in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and the yellow vest movement in France, to name just two examples, drew immense turnout despite bans and restrictions on large gatherings. Indeed, more recent research has shown that despite many of the challenges of the pandemic, "movements are already adapting to their new operating environments amid COVID-19. Activists have broadened their tactical repertoire" (Pinckney and Rivers 2020, 25).

The following analysis articulates two of the more pressing challenges that activists faced in their steady adaptation to their new environment, a social and political context that will likely remain in some form even when the pandemic passes. These are (1) the problem of ever-shrinking civic spaces and (2) the difficulties of cultivating effective digital activism.

Challenges: Slacktivism

In a survey of over 500 activists, Pinckney and Rivers discovered that, in response to the pandemic and lockdown measures, nearly all participants (97 percent) reported that "at least some of their activities had shifted from in-person to online since the beginning of the pandemic." 'Digital campaigns', in fact, were "the most common form of tactical innovation in response to COVID-19 that activists described" (Pinckney and Rivers 2020, 33-4).

Political artists in Chile, for example, have taken to virtual modalities to criticize government responses to the pandemic. Unable to physically protest before administrative buildings, artist-activists such as Paloma Rodriguez used digital illustration (Figure 2) to create virtual adaptations of murals on the Palacio De La Moneda (the seat of the President of Chile). Her message calling for total quarantine has been shared and viewed by thousands on social media (McGowan 2020).



palomarodriguez.cl
Palacio De La Moneda - Santiago De Chile



Figure 2. Paloma Rodriguez, *Untitled*. Source: @Palomeradriguez.cl; Charis McGowan, "How quarantined Chileans are keeping their protest movement alive" *Aljazeera*.

Such forms of digital activism are, however, not without their own attendant challenges. A popular worry, for instance, is that an individual's effort to share and personally signal solidarity with a political cause ultimately falls into an ineffective form of slacktivism. The ease of such forms of participation lends itself to an overreliance on "ephemeral" forms of engagement that do not require long-term or sustained commitments from participants (Earl et al. 2015). Furthermore, since the willingness of someone to engage in such types of participation are almost entirely based on self-motivation, the difficulty is that "without the accountability structures of formal membership, it can be harder for movements to overcome collective action problems" (Bennet and Serjeburd 2013).

The question then becomes, how might activists promote digital forms of political engagement and protest in a way that produces concrete material changes and outcomes and promotes genuine commitment from participants. To answer this question, it is worth turning to a series of ways that Chile’s activists have drawn on the vivid history of student activism in the country, innovating upon already established, socially intelligible tactics and logics of the education movement.

It is worth noting that the challenge of “slacktivism” is perhaps not a universal one; indeed, the worry that digital politics will devolve into personal virtue signalling may very well be specific to certain national contexts and discourses. In the Chilean context, however, interviewees described social media engagement, especially those born of formal organizations like university student federations, as a place to organize collective action and disseminate concrete information about protests and discussion fora, rather than a space for individual performance. Posts that promoted hashtags, calls for solidarity, and infographics tended to orient themselves towards an end like a cacerolazo or a meet up (digital or physical). For many Chilean organizers, then, digital tools are being used for community-based mutual aid rather than what have been caricatured as “the flashy, [ephemeral] Twitter-fueled calls to action” (Pinckney and Rivers 2020).

Response: Social Media For Concrete Community Building

In an interview with FEUC president Nacha Henriquez, she describes the ways that the federation relied on Instagram and Discord to foster community among its students. These platforms were then also used to organize socially distanced versions of familiar modes of dissent such as the cacerolazo—balcony-bound banging of pots and pans. During the pandemic, the FEUC used Instagram to call for cacerolazos.



Figure 3. Translation: National Cacerolazo -- 16 March @ 8:00 PM / Image: "In all of the houses / In all of the balconies / the people united will stop the coronavirus." Caption: "We invite you at 8 PM to protest in a responsible way with pans from our houses. We can defeat the COVID-19 united, and we cannot let it render our demands and mobilization for a more just Chile invisible!" Source: Instagram page of the UC Student Federation (FEUC) @feuc_2021. Translation provided by Daniel Quezada.

Similar pages published guides to protesting from home advocating for individuals to decorate their balconies with signs and participate in cyberactivism.

In addition to such efforts, FEUC social media accounts published regularly about issues of feminism, medical debt, income gaps, and institutional reparations. According to Henriquez, this had always been a strategy to preserve interests among the study body during school breaks, but which now carried over into quarantine. The accounts brought attention to the ways that being home-bound have exacerbated issues that they had campaigned about previously, such as femicide and wealth inequality.



Figure 4. Translation: Image (top left) "Manual for protesting from the house: just because we're in quarantine we cannot abandon the fight. there are many ways in which you can take advantage of this time in your house," "Be careful of the virus" (top right) "Decorate your balcony / share your favorite songs with your neighborhood" (bottom left) "Explore your creative expressions" / "Don't lose your rhythm, because we will see each other again in the streets!" (bottom right) "Cyberactivism: share and divulge information only with reliable sources!" "Follow the fight from home" Source: Instagram page of the UC Student Federation (FEUC) @feuc_2021. Translation provided by Daniel Quezada.

When approaching the question of how to build sustainable digital forms of political engagement with the movement, student organizers thus focused less on the issue of slacktivism and more on challenges historically specific to the trajectory of the student movement: decreased public visibility and lack of media attention. In the recent past, student activists largely relied on the press to build public support for the 2011 education movement. Favorable coverage of peaceful protest and marches, for

instance, balanced by negative coverage of police brutality and failures by the administration to negotiate with student leaders, contributed to impressive levels of public approval for the activists demands (which, at its highest, reached nearly 80% at the same time that Piñera's approval rating plummeted to a mere 26%) (Watt 2018, 75).

Challenge: Disappearance of the Political Stage and its Audience

Alicia del Campo argues that one of the key elements to the 2006 and 2011 student movement's success was its effective use of social theatricalities to communicate with the Chilean public. She details the ways that staging scenes and dances were used to express protester's demands and even rearticulate urban spaces (a university campus, a city park, a statue) into politicized spaces of dissent and contestation. Del Campo argues that the movement carried with it a fundamental appreciation of the importance that spectacle has played in Chile in its transition to democracy since 1990, and drawing upon this history, its leaders turned urban spaces into a theatrical stage (del Campo 2016, 172).

The strategy of *tomas* for instance, organized the systemic occupation of schools across the country, transforming neoliberal spaces into democratic communities, as territories marked by "the scenography of student chairs piled up against fences" to serve as a place for "consultation, dialogue, decision making, grassroots organization, and identity formation" (del Campo 2016, 183). In addition to *tomas*, the student movement also organized numerous flash mobs, spontaneous, ephemeral yet visually arresting actions that reappropriated the central spaces such as La Moneda, where protestors ran thousands of laps to represent their budget demands, and the national palace, where medical students danced to Thriller while dressed up like the living dead in order to represent the burden of student debt (del Campo 2016, 172). These kinds of political scenes, the *tomas* and flash mobs performed a critique of the neoliberal city that gripped its public audience.

Consider also when, in 2011, the minister of education, Joaquín Lavín, sought to undermine the massive school occupations by

declare[ing] that he was moving winter vacation up several weeks, attempting to create an image of nonstrike by sending students on winter vacation. Students reacted to this gesture by the Chilean government quickly and creatively by mounting a theatrical parody of a Chilean seaside resort in the middle of the Plaza de Armas and in this way offering to Lavín a destination for his vacation. (del Campo 2016, 188)



Figure 5. "A Beach for Lacin," July 5, 2011. Source: Alicia del Campo, "Theatricalities of Dissent" 2016.

In the announcement's aftermath, the drama of the activists' political performances relied not only on a physical stage (the Palacio De La Moneda, the Plaza Italia) but also an attentive audience, both of which became significantly more challenging to secure during the pandemic. While in 2006 and 2011, flash mobs captured the attention of citizens of Santiago, activists during the pandemic had to innovate against the changing organization of the city.

]Response: Bringing Political Spectacle Home

In one instance, Coordinadora 8M, a feminist advocacy group, projected the images of protesters and victims of state repression onto the buildings throughout Santiago. “We continue to organise ourselves in these weeks of pandemic and pain, but from our homes,” said Coordinadora 8M in a statement. “Without letting go of the protests, of the desire for another life” (Vergara 2019; McGowan 2020).

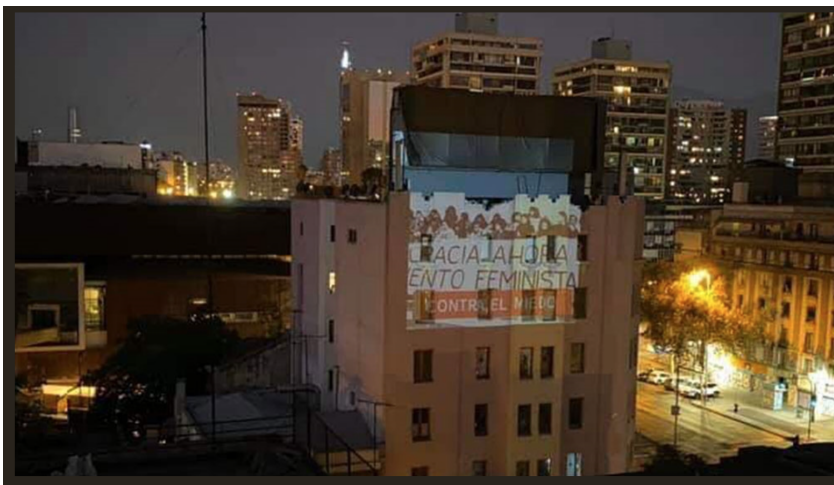


Figure 6. Images from Chile's feminist protest movement are projected on the walls of a home (McGowan, “How quarantined Chileans are keeping their protest movement alive”, Aljazeera)
Source: Coordinadora 8M.

While flash mobs had previously sought out spaces of circulation—of high foot traffic and historical gravity, today, at a moment where most were quarantined at home, the Coordinadora 8M’s project brought the visual performance into a more intimate space, adapted for a more static environment.

A similar performative tactic was employed by artists of Delight Lab. “When arts duo Delight Lab projected the word Hambre (Hunger) onto Santiago’s tallest building mid-pandemic, confined Santiaguinos responded with a chorus of pots and pans” (Bell 2020)

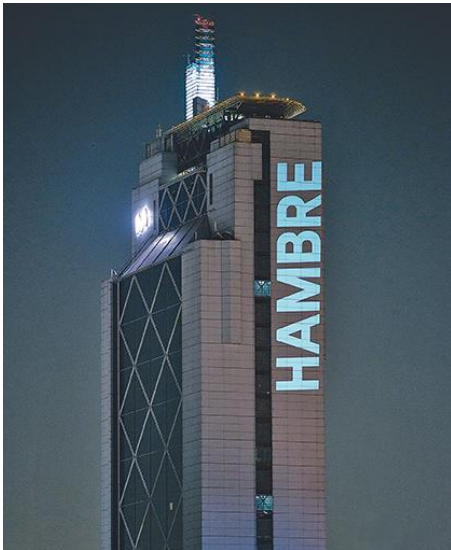


Figure 7. (Top) Delight Lab’s projections of the word Hambre [hunger] onto the Telefónica tower on 18 April, 2020. Source: Delight Lab



Figure 8. (Bottom) Projections by Delight Lab onto the Telefónica tower during October 2019. The names are of the victims of police repression. Source: sourmagazine.cl

DelightLab was able to establish a sense of continuity between their previous messaging and the COVID-19 context by implicitly referencing their 2019 battle with Santiago’s police over projections on the Telefónica tower. Doing so served to remind their audience of the hostile relationship between officials, the police forces, and citizens—especially their role in protecting private and political interest over public need—a message that remains salient in light of continued violent police presence and the perceived failure of the administration to handle the health emergency.

In these ways, activists were able to quickly and effectively rebuild a political stage and regain a public audience when, otherwise, the pandemic left political performances without a venue or any significant media coverage. Activists’ ability to adapt to these conditions, as well as their sensibility about the conditions that had previously made their movement successful in 2006 and 2011, ensured that the closing of physical spaces did not foreclose the possibility of articulating their messages to a wide audience.

Challenge & Response: Returning to the Local

While most of the examples discussed above center around the novel tactics that activists developed over the pandemic, activities that focused on maintaining existing relationships and mutual aid networks were just as integral to preserving movement momentum during this time.

Chilean political organizing, characteristic of Latin American movements, utilizes bottom-up, grassroots approaches and is generally based on broad coalitions across civil society (Foweraker 2001). Given this structure, the foundations of political activism—face to face, personal outreach, word of mouth—were hit especially hard when physical gathering was restricted. The pandemic, one interviewer describes, posed the particular challenge of “cutting many of the channels that are used not

only from organizations, but from bottom up organizations to build themselves.” He goes on to explain that

[since] we don't rely [heavily] on money, or on having access to the news or to the newspapers or to the radio, our political construction relies on being able to see ourselves face to face and, and protest and be part of a larger movement. So were social distancing measures a hard blow to the organization? I'd say, yeah, it shifted a bit the way the whole social revolt was going.¹

The grassroots character of Chile's organizing efforts, however, did not doom the movement. Indeed, at the same time that these critical channels were cut, there remained many activists who were themselves members of the communities they served. It was these activists who were able to access and organize deep local connections during the pandemic. Common pots (*olla común*) are one such result from organizing around these connections. “In poor sectors of Santiago”, an organizer explains, “where people were losing their jobs [and] didn't have money to buy food,”

the community would come around the common pot to ensure that everybody could have something to eat. A lot of people in my party [Revolución Democrática] were working in these common pots, donating and cooking food, being a part of the organization.²

“The most immediate memory of the common pots dates back to the crisis that hit the country in 1982,” Nicolas Angelcos, professor at the University of Chile professor, explains. During the pandemic, numerous neighborhoods resurrected the tradition in order to support their community in the absence of government aid. Residents of the REPUBLICA neighborhood, for instance, reported that

For the past two months or so, with the desire to be with the people and respond to the needs that we live and suffer today along with others, together with Sr. Berta Tapia Cena and Sr. Gabriela Vergara Ríos, we join the community work of our neighborhood in the “*olla común*”. Every Thursday and Sunday, we get together along with other men and women, young and old, to cook for around 160 people (Bell 2020).

¹ Echecopar, Interview by Felicia Jing, June 4, 2020.

² Echecopar, Interview by Felicia Jing, June 4, 2020.



Figure 9. "Chile: The "olla común" (common pot), a responsible answer," October 10, 2020. Source: Dominican Sisters of Presentation.

From the experience of gathering around local solidarity, organizers thus found that while the pandemic halted many on the ground organizing activities, it did not erode the personal relationships and communities behind these activities. Here, at the level of the hyperlocal, organizers could rely on a wellspring of familial relationships that has, in the history of Chile's activism, served a foundational role to social movements. In the education movement of the 2011 Chilean Winter, for instance, these relationships were mobilized in the "Marcha familiar por la educación," which turned out women, young children, and even grandparents in support of student activists. When COVID-19 foreclosed the possibility of these marches, these hyperlocal relationships and neighborhood networks of mutual aid proved as integral to political organizing as

the more innovative and novel tactics—discussed above—that enjoyed more attention from international press (McGowan 2020).

Conclusion

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, most forms of efforts of political organizing, especially those that relied on the occupation of physical space like street protest, marches and public spectacles, were forced to grind to a halt. The physical city of Santiago, its monuments and squares, could no longer serve as a stage for student demonstrations. However, the pandemic did not put an end to the student movement itself. Activists adapted their tactics and developed strategies that redirected energy towards immediate social needs and inequities, leveraged the advantages of online organizing, and played upon the 2006 and 2011 movements and their logics and theatricalities of dissent. This case study explored the successes and limitations of youth activists in their attempts to politicize digital space, perform anti-neoliberal logics online, and adapt to the rapid shrinking of civic spaces.

By drawing on interviews with FEUC representatives at the University of Chile, former student activists of the Chilean Winter, and core leaders of the Revolución Democrática party (which arose directly out of the student education movement) as well as digital media published on online social media platforms, the following tactics have been articulated as best practices. They reflect the present and past involvement of these activists in the student movement, their reflections on the challenges of post-pandemic political activism, and on the future of digital activism in Chile.

Best Practices

1. During social crises, re-invest resources from long-term objectives into messaging that reflects immediate social urgency. — Activists and organizations in Santiago quickly reworked existing campaigns to address a much narrower set of short-term social issues. Feminist organizations who had previously campaigned for

abortion rights and legislation reform, for instance, now coalesced around issues of domestic violence and femicide, both matters that were exacerbated by the pandemic, as social distancing measures confined women to unsafe domestic conditions. Student activists at the FEUC likewise moved from what had previously been a broad set of campaigns – anti-sexist curriculum reform, HIV prevention and treatment, student debt reform, Chile’s history of human rights violations, carbon neutrality, equal access to healthcare, anti-privatization of education—and now focused on a consolidated set of pandemic-relevant campaigns, namely worker and subcontractor rights to safe and sanitary conditions, food drives, sensible and transparent covid response from the school administration.

While longer-term goals like legislative change remain important even in moments of public emergency, activists and organizers who develop an ability to stay in tune with social urgencies within their communities are better positioned to provide critical aid while also maintaining political relevance. This is a strategy that remains salient beyond the pandemic and could apply to economic crises, extreme weather events, and moments of extreme social unrest.

2. Join activists together in fostering community spaces organized around social services and mutual aid

— When the pandemic disrupted the momentum of Santiago’s protest movement and numerous other social organizations, activists turned their efforts towards sectors of the city where workers were losing their jobs and didn’t have money to buy food, and established ‘common pots’, community kitchens that provided hot meals to residents of Santiago’s poorest communes. College students joined with representatives of political parties and former activists of the education movement to support the community kitchens. The common pot was organized around a pressing social urgency and thus brought activists together at a moment when the health crisis curtailed most other forms of physical gathering.

Beyond the pandemic, the fact that activists were able to return to mutual aid networks demonstrates the importance of maintaining local relationships. When other

avenues for outreach closed, the hyper-local provided a reservoir of information about social needs as well as bodies of those willing to organize their immediate friends and families. In a post-pandemic political and social order, activism that prioritizes not only innovation but also the preservation and maintenance of already-existing, organic, local networks will be more prepared against future threats to outreach-as-usual. Whether public spaces are shuttered by political unrest, government repression, or another public health crisis, activists can nonetheless remain tuned-in to the needs of their neighbors and organize around them.

3. Build resilience to volatile political and social conditions by developing forms of protest that do not rely on freedom of movement, access to physical spaces, or face-to-face contact.—

As the pandemic closed public squares and city buildings, physical protests, marches, and demonstrations became difficult to orchestrate (however, clashes with the police continued regardless as authorities escalated crowd control measures, using teargas and corralling tactics despite the health crisis). Activists, instead, found socially distanced ways to protest injustices, especially those related to the Piñera government's response to the health crisis. These include distanced cacerolazos where, instead of banging pots and pans in the streets, citizens returned to the traditional cacerolazos to show their support from their balconies. Student activists also found opportunities to pressure the university leadership and the Ministry of Education by holding an unprecedented online strike, refusing to attend online classes until financial support is promised to students with limited access to the internet (Hurtado 2020). Boycotts, strikes, digital petitions, and online discussion groups thus gave students a way to participate in politics while complying with social distancing measures.

Through the pandemic, activists learned important lessons about the wider variety of methods that could be used to mount pressure against the administration. While physical occupations disrupted everyday life by interrupting the circulation of the city, viral media campaigns offered an analogous form of public spectacle. By flooding news feeds with slogans and images about the mishandling of health restrictions, for

instance, activists were able to use viral campaigns to force the public to stop and consider their relationship with the politics of health in Chile, thus raising awareness and pressure in a way not dissimilar to a massive march. Boycotts and strikes thus served as an even more direct means of putting pressure on targeted structures of power and stood as an important resource for activists facing restrictions on movement or physical gathering.

4. **Direct calls for digital solidarity towards actionable and material results** — It is a common concern in discourses surrounding digital activism that its more performative modes— sharing educational material online, participating in viral acts of solidarity with social media networks—more often than not, fail to result in any material benefit to the cause. Of course, performative sharing, in doing important work to raise awareness and educate others about urgent issues, cannot be wholly discounted. This is even more the case in the context of a long and widespread anti-neoliberal movement in Santiago, where such performances quite naturally go beyond education (since the movement has already, especially in recent years, mobilized widely across demographics) and instead directly include material demands and calls to action. The social presence of the FEUC, for instance, does not simply publish infographics and letters of solidarity but, importantly, coordinates collective actions that serve to pressure city officials (i.e. *cacerolazos*) or organize material resources for those acutely struggling (i.e. *common pots*).

The pandemic provoked a shift towards digital activism that is likely to persist long after its conclusion. In order to distinguish digital campaigns from slacktivism, activists have made conscious efforts to ground them in material aims—doing so makes the difference between campaigns like #BLM, which began as a hashtag and has moved towards enacting material reform to policing in the U.S., and the less-efficacious trend of adding banners to facebook profile.

5. In the face of uncertain access to conventional political venues, adapt existing forms of political demonstration for digital audiences by establishing continuity with pre-existing movements, their tactics, logics of demonstration, and their messaging. – DelightLabm for instance, was able to maintain continuity between their position on police brutality and state violence in 2019 and the failing of the administration in 2020, thus quickly and effectively rebuilding a political stage and regain a public audience when, otherwise, the pandemic left political performances without a venue or any significant media coverage. Activists' ability to adapt to these conditions, as well as their sensibility about the conditions that had previously made the student movement successful in 2006 and 2011, ensured that the closing of physical spaces did not foreclose the possibility of reaching a wide audience even if their physical venues remained inaccessible.

These lessons apply beyond just the pandemic-context given that police forces are often able to cede political venues from the control of protestors. Closing these spaces risks disrupting continuity of political messaging and losing their public audience unless activists are able to re-establish and adapt these tactics, logics and messaging for alternative (e.g. digital) spaces.

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