

No Puppet's Land: The Role of Social Media in Puerto Rico's Mainstream Television

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Abstract: This article explores the role of social media in the boycott and eventual cancellation of Puerto Rico's highest rated TV gossip show, titled *SuperXclusivo*. The show, hosted by a puppet character called “La Comay” (in English, The Godmother), ignited a controversy in 2012 when it was implied that the murder of a local publicist was caused by soliciting the services of a sex worker hours before he was killed. Within 24 hours of the comments being made, a social media movement emerged calling a boycott of La Comay. Through an online ethnography and a close textual analysis this article offers a close read into this event in order to show how it embodies two larger social and political phenomena: 1) the ways social media demonstrates an unexpected networked power vis-à-vis the entrenched power of a major media corporation and 2) the ways the movement is reconfiguring a cultural citizenship while it subsidizes a second-class citizenship attached to Puerto Rico.

Keywords: cultural citizenship, La Comay, second-class citizenship, social media movement, Puerto Rico

Introduction

The children who grew up in Puerto Rico during the late 80s and early 90s experienced a variety of televised, feathery, celebrity puppets. Puerto Rico's relation with the US gave Puerto Ricans access to three telegenic puppet birds who taught not only the alphabet, colors, and shapes, but also what it meant to be a “good” kid—behavior that was conditioned by the American standards of the time. There was, of course, the enormous yellow canary-ish thing

called Big Bird,¹ as well as his Spanish-speaking, more colorful avatar known as Abelardo² and Puerto Rico's own invention in this genre known as "Pollito Yito."³ However, perhaps due to the fact that an audience grew up on television puppets, the idea seeped into the more adult purview of Puerto Rico's national TV. These puppets were often given the jester's license to say things that concern the gossipy side of the lifestyles of celebrities and politicians. One of the most successful of these puppets, "La Comay,"⁴ became the hostess of Puerto Rico's highest rated TV show, titled *SuperXclusivo*.

On December 13th, 2012, *The Daily Show's* correspondent and comedian Wyatt Cenac flew to Puerto Rico to do a special report about La Comay. Cenac's goal was to understand why "Puerto Rico's most trusted news figure" was the one of a puppet. However, he left the island without a clear answer to his query. His TV segment also failed to tell the audiences that *SuperXclusivo* was facing a public boycott that ended up by the puppet losing his prime-time spot after 13 years in the air. On January 9, 2013, *SuperXclusivo* was canceled as a result of a social media movement and boycott of the show after comments made on a live broadcast of *SuperXclusivo*. The puppet implied that the murder of a local publicist was partly due to the fact that, hours before he was killed, he was on a street on which "male or female prostitutes" plied their trade. In this regard, a fascinating collision occurred between the old-line corporate media, led by WAPA TV,⁵ which hosted the show, and a social media movement that took place on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

To approach this case study, I conducted an online ethnography and a close textual analysis of six different stages of the social media movement. These are: a) the informative stage (dissemination of the news); b) the viral stage (#hashtag diffusion); b) the structural stage (the

¹ Even though there is some ambiguity about Big Bird's species identity, there are certain clues. In the book *"G" is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*, Big Bird is called a canary. However, *Sesame Street* obviously tried to keep Big Bird's species identity ambiguous, arguably a progressive gesture. However, in an episode, of *Sesame Street*, when Big Bird was asked if he was related to the cassowary, he replied, "I'm more of a condor." Regardless, he is always described as being flightless (Fisch and Truglio 2000).

² Abelardo was a more parrot-like bird that was part of the puppet cast of the Spanish-language adaptation for Mexico and Latin America of *Sesame Street*.

³ "Yito" was aired through the local network of Telemundo. The puppet was part of *Teatrimundo*, a children's television series broadcast by Telemundo (WKAQ-TV) in Puerto Rico in the late 1980s, in the form of edutainment.

⁴ *Comay* is a term that derives from the term *comadre*, which means co-mother or godmother.

⁵ WAPA TV is an independent television station located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The station is owned by Hemisphere Media Group, a joint venture between InterMedia Partners (which owns a 73% interest) and Azteca Acquisition Corporation (which owns 27%). It began broadcasting on May 1, 1954, as the second television station to be licensed to Puerto Rico.

creation of a Facebook page); c) the direct-messaging stage (individual pressure to big corporations); d) the creative stage (creation of original content such as memes, videos, etc.); and e) the perpendicular stage (the movement from an online to an offline environment).

This case study prompts larger questions about the reconfiguration of cultural citizenship as social media extends its reach. In the Puerto Rican context, cultural citizenship is inextricably entangled with the idea of second-class citizenship that is attached to the island. First, there is the relatively straightforward second-class citizenship that comes from a colonial relation with the United States that goes beyond the lack of voting rights for the president and Congress. One of the consequences of this relationship is Puerto Rico being subject to rules and decisions issued by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)⁶ on such issues as regulation, ownership, and licensing. Secondly, there is another layer of second-class citizenship attached to certain factions of the population on the island—members of the LGBT community, Dominicans, and Afro-Puerto Ricans—who experience not only social, but also media disenfranchisement. In this article, I am going to use the La Comay incident as a lens to show how this layering of second-class citizenships has been altered by the emergence of a cultural citizenship, which came from within the social media movement.

A cultural citizenship refers to the use of objects and practices offered in the realm of popular culture to define and regulate the subject's relationship with the state (Hermes, 2006; Nayar, 2010) and generally takes its stand on the fundamental right of knowing and speaking that has preceded, in the political discourse, the advent of the Internet (Miller, 2008). My approach departs from Joke Hermes (2006) approach that a project of cultural citizenship “use (popular) media texts and everyday culture to understand, take up, reflect on and reform identities that are embedded in communities of different kinds” (p. 303).

In this instance, the community bonding that emerged from within the social media movement was conditioned by the increasing visibility of a whole social sector of previously invisible subjectivities. But visibility, here, is utterly dependent on the media that “makes visible.” In this incident, we have, in purified form, a conflict of visibilities between two media

⁶ In Puerto Rico, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is the agency that rules the television industry (and communications in general). According to the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC is the agency with the task of guaranteeing citizens that broadcasters serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity (Miller 2007). From a practical standpoint, its jurisdiction over the island's communication industry is identical to that over the US and the other territories. The agency runs most aspects pertaining to the television industry, such as the assignment of frequencies, the granting and renewal of licenses, the evaluation and approval of construction permits, and requests for changes in frequencies, potency, and ownership.

forms. The claim of space in the media, rights, and community building by marginalized groups such as the LGBT community, Dominicans, and Afro-Puerto Ricans on the island are first mounted in a media that is peer accessible—the social media—and used against the traditional asymmetrical media power of television.

To understand the events that led to the cancelation of *SuperXclusivo*, it is necessary, first, to have some understanding of its genre. The program was pitched as a solid primetime entertainment and presented itself stylistically as a televised tabloid that generated and transmitted gossip about the famous. In order to understand the power of a show like *SuperXclusivo* in Puerto Rico's televisual landscape, it is important to contextualize the show within the historical parameters of the *industria del chisme* (gossip industry) in Puerto Rico. In the next section, I will tackle the question of how a low-budget production show—hosted by, of all things, a puppet—became the highest rated show on the island. I will also discuss what it was about La Comay that granted this puppet moral authority in Puerto Rico and how this led to controversies with certain sections of the population, particularly the LGBT community.

This background the media event triggered by the particular crime story: the murder of publicist José Enrique Gómez-Saladín. The subsequent online protest gained its salience within the context of the evolution of the social media movement as a force in Puerto Rico. Finally, what the cancelation of *SuperXclusivo* tells us is that we are in the midst of a profound reconfiguration of a cultural citizenship that affects both layers of the second-class citizenship. A second-class citizenship attached to Puerto Rico in two ways: as a territory of the US ruled by the FCC, and also to certain factions of the population who have experienced social disenfranchisement. Here, as has become common in the digital landscape, we are watching an ongoing revolt of the spectator.

The Power behind the Foam Doll: The Configuration of the Puerto Rican Gossip Industry

The so-called “industria del chisme” (in English, the gossip industry) in Puerto Rico consists of a conglomerate of TV-shows, characters, content production, circulation, and consumption of gossip that is parasitic to the consumption of “news.” It emerged on the island almost simultaneously with the advent of the television in Puerto Rico during the late 50s, when

it was identified with a popular TV character known as “Madame Chenchá.”⁷ The character of Chenchá was interpreted by television producer, composer, and singer Myrta Silva. Her televisual presence was an interesting symbiosis between the working-class *comadre* and a fortuneteller. As discussed by Melissa Camacho (2012) in her cultural history of the icon of the *comadre* in Puerto Rico, the godmother figure played an “important part in the lives of Puerto Ricans...by serving as domestic helpers, caregivers, and friends, they help each other in the daily struggle to survive the patriarchal social norms and inequitable gender relationships imposed upon them by their colonizers” (p. 127). Madame Chenchá was an outsized production of this social phenomenon, and her stock in trade was the dissemination of rumors about the entertainment industry in Puerto Rico, with an emphasis on those connected with telenovelas. However, the shortage of productions of telenovelas during the late 70s created an exodus of Puerto Rican celebrities to the US, Venezuela, and Mexico, which produced a corresponding gap in the gossip mill. These industrial changes, along with the plethora of controversies between public figures and the television stations, eventually forced Silva to leave her program and migrate back to New York City, where she had begun her career as an entertainer.

In the wake of the cancelation of Madame Chenchá, the gossip industry did not reawaken in Puerto Rico until the early 90s. At that time, the industry experienced drastic changes in the content and format of the shows and, of course, the characters. One of the biggest transformations was that the interlocutor of the gossip was not a real-life person, either in *propria persona* or acting out a role, but instead a character embodied in a puppet doll made of foam. This is how the ventriloquist/comedian Antulio “Kobbo” Santarrosa reinvented the gossip industry on Puerto Rican television.

Like Silva, Santarrosa was a television producer, comedian, and actor. He was also a journalist and puppeteer. His portfolio of puppets included “La Cháchara” (The Joker) and “La Condesa de la Bochinche” (The Countess of Gossip). He soon launched other foam personalities, who appeared on local radio and television shows during the 90s.⁸ Each life-sized puppet was of a woman in her late 50s to early 60s who sat on a big chair with gloved hands, big hair, and a

⁷ Madame Chenchá was part of a show that Silva produced known as *Una Hora Contigo* (in English, An Hour with You). The show, transmitted by WAPA TV, included the innovative character of Madame Chenchá, historically known as the first TV character dedicated to gossips in Puerto Rico.

⁸ It is important to mention that even though most of these characters embodied female bodies, a less successful character of a male puppet known as “El Compay” (The Godfather) tried to compete with La Comay for a few months without success.

knee-length colorful muumuu dress. The atypical thing of the puppet was that both legs and one hand were those of the puppeteer. The other hand was attached to the chair because the puppeteer used his hand to control the head.

In the late 90s, a more gracious version of La Chachara and La Condesa del Bochinche, known as La Comay, continued the legacy of gossip-puppeteer TV interventions in Puerto Rico. Even though it all started with a segment on Telemundo's *El Show de las Doce*, the popularity of La Comay, the growth of the gossip industry, and an increasing tendency in turning public figures (i.e. politicians, sports figures, etc.) into celebrities gave La Comay a solid base for an hour tabloid show on prime time TV known as *SuperXclusivo*, which aired in the year 1999.

According to local ratings reported by Mediafax and Nielsen, *SuperXclusivo* was the most watched television show in Puerto Rico during its thirteen years of broadcast (Santana, 2010 & 2012). Cultural critic Ed Morales (2012) succinctly described La Comay and *SuperXclusivo* as:

Miss Piggy-liked puppet...the epicenter of a strange conjuncture between entertainment gossip, tabloid journalism, and what some might consider investigative reporting...a cross between TMZ and 60 Minutes has become a kind of town hall for the small-town culture that permeates the island, with La Comay playing the old lady of the barrio, chief gossip and guardian of the truth.⁹

The live broadcast daily show reported the latest gossip from the island's *la farándula* (show business) with occasional tidbits from the US mainland. The shows included an entourage of a co-host and on-site reporters and, sometimes, live breaking news announcements. A long list of celebrities appeared on camera and/or on the live show to be interviewed by La Comay. Gubernatorial candidates and even actual governors of Puerto Rico appeared on the show to discuss their political platforms and/or to offer explanations for the situation of the island.¹⁰ The content of the show ranged from celebrity divorces and politicians' extramarital relationships to controversial court cases, all of which served as material for La Comay's sometimes spicy comments.

⁹ Retrieved from: http://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/Entertainment/puerto-rico-television-la-comay-super-xclusivo-tv/story?id=17213898

¹⁰ Governors Luis Fortuño (2008-12) and Aníbal Acevedo Vilá (2004-08) were interviewed by La Comay while they were in office.

Declared Wars: La Comay and the televisual construction of otherness

One of the elements that distinguished La Comay was her role as the “voice of morality” on the island. Melissa Camacho (2012) goes even further to say that the character is somewhat a community activist. She adds:

She is a woman who is not afraid to offer her opinions, and does not shrink from controversy or criticism. She also perceives herself as someone who is looking out for her community. [The show]...serves this function by investigating claims of corruption and other misdeeds going on in Puerto Rican society. La Comay not only acts as the show’s representative in these instances, but also uses these opportunities to remind public figures that they are accountable to the Puerto Rican public (p. 132).

In keeping with this persona, the puppet was no mere news announcer, but a sometimes pugnacious and socially conservative pundit. Her opinions kept her continually embroiled in controversies with the LGBT community, Dominicans, and Afro-Puerto Ricans, among others.

In her social commentaries, La Comay would mix items of gossip with moralizing judgments that usually targeted peripheral groups. The discussion of issues like infidelity, homosexuality, and immigration led the puppet to make homophobic, sexist, racist, and xenophobic remarks. She displayed a particular animus against Dominicans on the island. At the same time, these were the opinions of a puppet—a liminal figure whose artificial form helped deflects questions about the ultimate seriousness of the views she was purveying.

As I mentioned before, second-class citizenship was attached to these certain factions of the population—members of the local LGBT community, Dominicans, and Afro-Puerto Ricans¹¹—who experienced not only social but also media disenfranchisement. Historically, these groups have experienced discrimination on many fronts, including economic, legal, and cultural. For example, members of the LGBT community have been marginalized on the island. According to scholar Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2009), “It is not an understatement to affirm that divergent sexualities (notably same-sex attractions and interactions)...have historically been and still are sources of contention, mistrust, and provocation in Puerto Rico, censored by the state...by many churches, by medical establishment, and by ordinary individuals” (p. 15).

¹¹ According to Jorge Duany (2005), the vast majority of the immigrants are employed as domestics, cleaners, waitresses, security guards, construction workers, and other unskilled and blue collar work and have not attained a degree of political empowerment in proportion to their numbers because most are either undocumented or have not become US citizens. Economically and politically, the Dominican population is still marginal to Puerto Rican society, but not to Dominican society.

Although Puerto Rico's House of Representatives passed a comprehensive LGBT rights bill prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in 2013, marriage equality and adoption rights have been highly contested by factions of senate. In fact, marriage equality was possible in the island by default after the Supreme Court decision. However, as recent as July 2015, members of the Senate Chambers were requesting the Supreme Court to overrule the marriage equality decision.¹² Discrimination is, however, pervasive in the realm of popular culture. For example, in radio and television, gay characters have always been stereotyped as effeminate and flamboyant while the lesbian stereotype continues to be along the butch-masculine line (Olivares, 2013).

In the case of Dominicans, Jorge Duany (2005) states that Dominicans on the island experience "intense stigmatization, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion... The racialization of Dominican immigrants permeates their incorporation into Puerto Rican society—from finding jobs and housing to schooling and marriage patterns" (p. 259). He argues that this is in part a result of the racialization of Dominicans, for the Puerto Rican mainstream classifies and represents Dominicans as black or mulattos. Yeidy Rivero (2005) extends Duany's argument by saying that "despite the widespread prevalence of the ideology of an egalitarian national space, the island is not racially harmonious society" (p. 15). She states that this is evident in the "ongoing racial prejudice against Puerto Rican blacks in general and, more recently against Dominicans" (p. 15). Along those lines, popular radio and television programs in Puerto Rico have tended to ridicule not only Dominicans, but also black Puerto Ricans as comic, ignorant, vulgar, and unruly characters.

La Comay, which cast itself as the voice of a more rural, more "pure" Puerto Rico, naturally picked up this discourse, often in the crudest ways. , For example, Magali Febles, a black Dominican-born celebrity hairstylist and former owner of the Miss Puerto Rico pageant was often referred as "mona" (in Spanish female monkey) by the puppet. Similarly, broadcast journalist and TV presenter Belen Martinez-Cabello was labeled a "black whale" in obvious reference to her weight and skin color (Varela, 2013). In 2012, La Comay dedicated a whole

¹² Marriage equality arrived to the island by default when on 26 June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled for marriage equality and that same-gender couples have the constitutional right to marry in all 50 states and all U.S. territories. However, as recent as July 2015, members of the Senate Chambers were requesting the Supreme Court to overrule the marriage equality decision.

segment of the show to “outing” local celebrities and politicians, using the slang term, *pato*.¹³ Accused of homophobia by LGBT activist Pedro Julio Serrano, who went as far as to contact the FCC after the marionette used the derogatory word for a male homosexual in Spanish,¹⁴ the producers of the program were forced to apologize publicly by the administration of WAPA TV and vowed never to use the word again.

But that case was not the first time the show had attracted the scrutiny of human and civil rights activists. In 2010, six New York City officials¹⁵ delivered a letter expressing their full support for claims filed before the FCC asking the federal agency to look into homophobic language used on Puerto Rican television. Unfortunately, while the media report about a history of complaints to the FCC made not only by individuals but also by organizations, there was not one response by the FCC to include in my article. I would argue that the FCC is ill prepared to address Puerto Rican television’s primarily Spanish-language content, which is also rife with local island references. Notwithstanding these scandals or even perhaps because of the notoriety they gave the show, *SuperXclusivo* remained the highest rated show in Puerto Rico’s TV history.¹⁶ Such was the case until the offline world collided with the online realities of social media.

#TodosSomosJoseEnrique and Boicot a La Comay: The Social Media Movement

Things changed for La Comay and *SuperXclusivo* in December of 2012 when the show ignited another controversy after the puppet made her assessment regarding the notorious murder of publicist José Enrique Gómez-Saladín. Gómez-Saladín, who was reported disappeared on November 29, 2012, was kidnapped, burned, and beaten to death after allegedly being forced to withdraw \$400 from his bank account. Regarding the disappearance, La Comay’s said:

¹³ In Puerto Rico, three terms are considered to be as offensive as the term faggot. These are *pato*, *loca*, and *maricon*. In the show, La Comay used alternatively the term *pato* and *loca* when referring to local celebrities and politicians.

¹⁴ La Comay used the word *pato*.

¹⁵ They were Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez, Council Speaker Christine Quinn, and Council members Melissa Mark-Viverito, Rosie Mendez, Daniel Dromm, and Jimmy Van Bramer.

¹⁶ WAPA Television was the highest-rated broadcast station in Puerto Rico in 2010, beating both Univision and Telemundo in Full Day (6 a.m.-2 a.m., Mon-Fri) and Primetime viewing (6 p.m.-11 p.m., Mon-Fri) in households and all key demographic categories, according to Nielsen Media Research. WAPA Television is the largest producer of local programming in Puerto Rico and produced the top-rated local show on the island, *SuperXclusivo*.

The question here is what José Enrique Gómez-Saladín was doing at Calle Pedial, a place filled with homosexuality, prostitution, and many other things. I asked myself was this murder related to sex, drugs, homosexuality, and prostitution, whatever it is. [My translation]¹⁷

In this regard, La Comay was not only implying that Gómez-Saladín could have been a homosexual, but also equating homosexuality with prostitution and drug dealing. The murder of Gomez-Saladin was at this time much discussed nationally in the social media realm. Already, interest about the case had become endemic on the Internet. Thus, La Comay's provocative comment was uttered in an atmosphere of heightened emotions, which were poured into the campaign to shut the *SuperXclusivo* program down.

The use of social networking to boycott *SuperXclusivo* is not a strange thing in the context of Puerto Rico. According to a study conducted by the Interactive Advertising Bureau,¹⁸ Puerto Rico's Internet users spend more time on social networks than any other activity online. The report showed that: a) 51.4% of Internet users dedicate more than three hours a day on social networks, b) while 39.2% are connected between one and three hours and c) 88.1% said they connect to social networks every day. The trend in this study was impressive as well, with an increase in Internet access from 79% in 2011 to 84% in 2012. Three of the five preferred sites among Puerto Rican Internet users were social networking and user-generated content sites: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. In summary, Puerto Ricans are online, and the social media movement mirrored that active presence.

The social media response to La Comay emerged almost immediately and in multidimensional ways. Through and online ethnography and close textual analysis, I was able to immerse myself in the in the digital revolt as an observer during a month. I completed a textual analysis of the online demonstrations while collecting news about the events that were published in the newspapers of *El Nuevo Día* and *Primera Hora*. During the process I was able to identify six stages: a) the informative stage (dissemination of the news); b) the viral stage (#hashtag diffusion); b) the structural stage (the creation of a Facebook page); c) the direct-messaging stage (individual pressure to big corporations); d) the creative stage (creation of original content such

¹⁷ Mi pregunta es qué hacía José Enrique Gómez Saladín en la calle Padial, en Caguas, donde es un foco de homosexualismo, prostitución y de cuanta cosa hay. Yo me pregunto, sería esto un asesinato donde estuvo envuelto el sexo, las drogas, el homosexualismo, la prostitución, lo que sea" (Retrieved from: <http://www.primerahora.com/entretenimiento/tv/nota/hablaelcreadordeboicotacomay-734224/>)

¹⁸ Retrieved from: <http://iabpuertorico.org/>

as memes, videos, etc.); and e) the perpendicular stage (the movement from an online to an offline environment).

The first stage of the movement was the dissemination of comments regarding La Comay's reaction to the event. This stage of the movement took place mostly through Facebook statuses and tweets that were produced moments after La Comay re-victimized publicist José Enrique Gómez Saladín by suggesting he allegedly was in an area known for "prostitution and homosexuality." At this stage, there was already mass sensitivity about the disappearance of the publicist, who had become the object of a sort of collective projection of identity—hence the slogan, "we are José Enrique." The next stage, which followed promptly, was a more organized manifestation: the proliferation of a #hashtag and selfie sort of viral movement.

Hundreds, including celebrities like pop star idol Ricky Martin, posted selfies holding a sign in their hands that read "Todos somos José Enrique" (in English "We are all José Enrique"). The slogan "Todos Somos José Enrique" could be interpreted from several standpoints. The first one is that connecting José Enrique's story to ours meant that we can all be victims of defamation. The second interpretation is that in spite of the fact that José Enrique was not a public figure, he was a victim twice. He was a victim of the wave of crime on the island, but also a victim of La Comay's history of defamation. The pictures became viral instantly on the social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook. Still others tweeted messages of solidarity with the hashtags #TodosSomosJoseEnrique, #LosBuenosSomosMas (in English, "There are more of us who are good"), and #BastaYa (in English, "Enough Already").

According to Bruns and Burgess (2011), the #hashtag is a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between more or less large groups of users, which does not require previous connection through 'follower' networks. This interconnectivity is what happened in this particular case in which the social networks of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were linked by the use of #TodosSomosJoseEnrique. In this case study, the use of the #hashtag also served in the articulation of "movement identities." According to Mercea (2010), "movement identities are seen as a prerequisite to engagement in collective action" (p. 157). The author states that social media movements produce and circulate movement identities among their support base and use them as vehicles of online distributed narratives of common purposes.

In this case, of course, the identity was inscribed on the very face of the slogan. It personalized the harm done to José Enrique's posthumous reputation. The organization of these

movement identities leads us to the third stage of the movement, which was the creation of a Facebook page. This happened approximately 24 hours after the comments were made and called for a boycott of La Comay. The speed of these reactions was a product of the acceleration that is the key to the media mode that the web inhabits. It is, in this respect, much “faster” than offline media, even live TV shows.

In less than a week, the page attracted the attention of more than 70,000 people who were in solidarity with the cause. The page was created by Carlos Rivera, an Internet-savvy Puerto Rican from New York. The Facebook page has by now become an archetypal moment in the creation of social movements (for instance, in the “Arab Spring”) that demonstrated the “interoperability between Facebook and other Internet sites, enabling the viral, simultaneous cross-posting of messages” (Bodle, 2011). These platforms served not only to show solidarity with the case of José Enrique Gómez-Saladín, but also, in a rather bizarre side note to the case, aided in finding one of the suspects. After pictures of one of the suspects of the murder surfaced and circulated on Facebook, the mother of Edwin Torres, one of the alleged criminals, reportedly recognized a picture of her son and made him turn himself into the authorities. Such was the complexity of the response both to the murder and to the TV show that the two were somewhat entangled, even in the #hashtag. However, that entanglement amplified the moral power of the protest against the show, which could seem to be a protest against the murder itself, as though the show were an accomplice. Unlike other complaints about La Comay, this one rode on a wave of larger feeling that the victim, assassinated physically by his murderers, was assassinated again by La Comay, who attacked his character.

The message against La Comay was not confined to standard Facebook status updates; it evolved creatively in the social media networks, which have long allowed creative input from the user. For example, more than a dozen memes, most of them using humor as narrative trope, were created and disseminated through the networks of Facebook and Twitter. Also, members of the civil society, along with community leaders and celebrities, created a series of videos that were uploaded to YouTube and dispersed along the networks of Facebook and Twitter. For example “Dile No A La Comay,” was a one-minute long manifesto-type video asking people to not support *SuperXclusivo*.¹⁹ These creative manifestations kept the momentum and interest in the event. It also increased the number of visitors to the Facebook page, “Boicot a La Comay.” The

¹⁹ Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duB3m5NmzWA>

increase of visitors was crucial in the fourth stage of the movement—the pressure on corporations.

According to Henry Jenkins (2013), when corporate websites emerged by the mid-1990s no one fully realized how substantially they would shift the company's relationship with its audience. He states, "companies now face building pressure to use their online presence not just to communicate their own messages but to respond to the demands of disgruntled customers as well" (p. 23). In this case, Puerto Rican audiences used not only the direct e-mail or contact page of the corporate website, but also the brand's Facebook profiles to make their public complaint. The "Boicot a La Comay" page asked their members to visit the Facebook pages of those companies and brands that advertised on the show and demand that they revoke their financial support. This was the moment the direct-messaging stage began. The results were almost immediate. In less than four hours, Walmart made a public statement about them stopping their advertising during the show. Other brands, including Coca Cola, Ford, and Sprint removed their ads and made public statements about the end of a relationship with the show and that their companies did not sympathize with the show's remarks. For example:

We want to inform you that Triple-S's media plan does not provide for any additional ads in this program. We wish all our Facebook fans a beautiful day full of peace and peaceful coexistence.²⁰

In the end, 45 brands cut their business relationships with La Comay. *SuperXclusivo* lost its sponsors, which was why it was forced out of WAPA TV.

The week after the online movement started, it tracked to the more traditional offline forum of the demonstration. On December 14, members online were invited to be part of an offline protest that would take place in front of the installations of WAPA TV on December 22. Even though the participation was moderate to low (not even 100 participants), it served to make visible some of the actors and protagonists of the online movement and created material for news coverage by traditional media such as radio and TV and other TV stations. This is the kind of offline manifestation that Summer Harlow (2012) has explained in reference to such Internet-driven political events as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring:

The emergence of an Internet-based 'Activism 2.0' alongside the Web 2.0 provides an opportunity to use the framing approach and social movement theories to explain how an online

²⁰ Retrieved from: <http://newsismybusiness.com/latest-boycott-of-la-comay-could-be-costly-for-wapa-tv/>

activism organized by social network sites gave birth to an offline activism that took to the streets (p. 227).

She argues that scholars tend to view the Internet's role in social movements as two-fold: a) the Internet as an instrument to develop traditional offline activism by enhancing a movement's existing mechanisms through the addition of instruments such as e-mail lists, online petitions, and even virtual sit-ins or b) creating new forms of activism and resistance. In the case of Boicot a La Comay, the Internet worked on both sides of the fold, as a channel to voice an existing offline issue and as a materially innovative way of circulating and articulating the message. In contrast with earlier protests against La Comay, this protest used all the resources of the web.

One of the most important aspects of this case is its resonance with the cultural politics of second-class citizenship. The issue of second-class citizenship is unavoidable when discussing in depth anything relating to Puerto Rico's connection to the US. In this case, it is the lack of Puerto Rican control over the regulatory bodies that decide things about Puerto Rican broadcast media. But the resonance here has another level, as it also pertains to the treatment of a certain faction of the population, particularly members of the local LGBT community—specifically the incident of the La Comay comment—and the history of disparagement of Dominican immigrants and Afro-Puerto Ricans.

The Emergence of a Cultural Citizenship

In his work on cultural citizenship, Toby Miller (2007) argues that modernity has produced three partially overlapping notions of citizenship: political (conferring the right to reside and vote), economic (the right to work and prosper), and cultural (the right to know and speak). Miller's classification concurs with Gerard Delanty's (2003) definition of cultural citizenship as the form taken by common experiences, learning processes, goals, and discourses of empowerment. Renato Rosaldo (1997) distinguishes between legal citizenship, which allows one to participate in the meaning and scope of the community, and cultural citizenship, which means having a place and a voice in the public sphere while claiming rights and recognition in relationship to other citizens. Along similar lines, Joke Hermes (2006) has shown how cultural citizenship can also be used in relation to less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, which occur within the process of bonding and community building and reflection on that bonding. Reflection in modern society implies partaking of the text-related

practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of popular culture. But how do these definitions accommodate the increasing share of public discourse that operates within the context of the digital culture? Perhaps what we are seeing is the displacement of former places of encounter, of bonding, and a displacement, too, of former literacies. Social networking sites and user-generated content platforms operate as a convenient and powerful space for becoming an “enabler of encounters...across belief systems” (Burgess and Green, 2009, p. 76).

This case study suggests that cultural citizenship is becoming less hierarchical and more rhizomatic. First, there was a formation of an online movement with a common goal. In this regard, the social media platform of Facebook served as a point of encounter for those with a common goal: the cancellation of *SuperXclusivo*—even if they had different reasons for this goal. Another way in which a cultural citizenship was prompted was through the formation of alliances among different sectors of the civil society. According to Rina Benmayor and William Flores (1997), “a key element of cultural citizenship is the process of ‘affirmation,’ as the community itself defines its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership—who is and who is not part of its ‘citizenry’” (p. 13). In Puerto Rico, the LGBT community was one of the strongest advocates against La Comay before the online movement started. Since 2010, LGBT activist Pedro Julio Serrano has been denouncing the history of homophobic remarks made by La Comay.

However, Boicot a La Comay was the catalytic moment that fused other groups and sectors of the society in a common goal. For example, organizations like Colegio de Trabajadores Sociales de Puerto Rico (College of Social Workers of Puerto Rico), Asociación de Psicología (Psychological Association), and Centro de la Mujer Dominicana (Dominican Women Centre), as well as feminist leaders, actresses, sports figures, and politicians joined the movement. In addition, GLAAD, a US LGBT media advocacy organization, asked their members to call on WAPA TV and WAPA America to stop broadcasting the show because it fueled intolerance and violence.²¹ Along with GLAAD, other Latino and African organizations figured as signatories of GLAAD’s petition, such as Democratic National Committee Hispanic,

²¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.glaad.org/blog/open-letter-national-leaders-call-puerto-rico-media-reject-scapegoating>

The Anti-Violence Project (AVP), Center For Black Equity, and the National Council of La Raza (NCLR).

Another important component of the configuration of the cultural citizenship was the construction of a common knowledge, particularly knowledge on how to sustain social movements. To an extent, the social activist is fortunate in that the usual Facebook user has some knowledge on how to navigate around the web and is familiar with online petitions and polls, in as much as these are a permanent feature of the Facebook experience. However, in addition to this tacit knowledge, the social media movement created a series of tutorials on *how to* elaborate, distribute, and sign online petitions. It also prompted the massive creation of memes about La Comay. More complex manifestations, such as videos, were produced and uploaded to YouTube and eventually distributed throughout other social media platforms. The direct intervention on the sponsors' websites and Facebook pages and the proliferation of news about the movement was a result of the dissemination of that how-to knowledge.

Finally, cultural citizenship is always involved in struggles for the control of the media. It is important to recognize that the ownership of the main Internet access points remains centralized. However, it is relevant to consider that users of the Internet worked in collaborative agendas without the need of intermediaries. This lack of intermediaries makes participation "symmetrical and less hierarchical" (Bechmann and Lomborg, 2012, p. 3). The goal of Boicot A La Comay was not only to cancel the show, but also to make a bold statement to the FCC. After more than a decade of filed complaints, the FCC as a regulatory agency never applied the rules or even issued warnings against the kind of violent and discriminatory language used by La Comay in *SuperXclusivo*. It is important to remember, here, that the power invested in the FCC comes, in part, from the fact that the airwaves are public property rented by television corporations. However, what was described as a "perfect social media storm" lifted out the symbolic umbrella of the FCC and allowed Puerto Ricans to take control of their television content.

Today, no puppets occupy the televisual landscape in Puerto Rico. In the nearly two years since the La Comay controversy, the gossip industry in Puerto Rico is definitely more cautious. After the cancelation of *SuperXclusivo* and the disappearance of La Comay, two new shows were created as a response. The show *Dando Candela* (Giving You Heat) came as a sub for *SuperXclusivo* while *Lo Sé Todo* (I Know What's Going On) emerged as a competitor for the

former. However, the Facebook “Boicot a La Comay” page remains as a reminder that the viewer must not passively accept what happens on TV, but must instead be ever vigilant.

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