Twitter, social movements and the logic of connective action: Activism in the 21st century – an introduction

Judith E. Rosenbaum,
University of Maine, USA

Gwen Bouvier,
Zhejiang University, China

From the news photographs of Alabama police officers setting dogs on African American civil rights marchers, to the images of women throwing their make-up into trashcans outside the Miss America pageant in New Jersey, to the pamphlets used by 1980s anti-nuclear war demonstrators to disseminate word about the next protests: technology has always played an important role in social movements. With the advent of social media, the role of technology has not only become more important but has also fundamentally changed how people communicate. This has resulted in a shift in the organization and dissemination of activist ideas and subsequent mobilization to action. This shift has been described and critiqued in a variety of ways but the framework that best captures how activism and our understanding of it has changed, and that forms the starting point of this Themed Section, is the *logic of connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Contemporary activism, when viewed through the lens of connective action, can be argued to differ from traditional activism in three respects: Its reliance on networked technologies, its creation of a loosely connected, continually shifting community, and its focus on individualized expressions of engagement.

Digital technologies in general and social media in particular have clearly changed how we communicate. They have transformed how we access and debate information and knowledge, how we engage with social and political issues, and thus, ultimately, how social movements are created and maintained. While technology has always played a central role in social movements, social media have fundamentally altered what activism looks like. Social media platforms, for one thing, appear to give voice to people marginalized from mainstream conversations (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2018). In addition,

the 'always on' nature of social media (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliviera, 2012, p. 268) means that the ability to share news and opinion is no longer restricted to the mainstream media. Instead, anyone with a social media account can share about ongoing events in real time without the need to rely on official news gatekeepers (Wen, 2017). This affords activists with the unprecedented ability to share their ideas and perspectives on ongoing events with the world at large.

Networked technologies also afford people a variety of ways to act on their beliefs. At the individual level, social media platforms and other digital technologies give consumers the ability to challenge and mobilize against poorly designed products or inappropriate marketing campaigns (e.g., Logan, 2015). On a societal level, social media can be used to counter corruption (e.g., Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015), circumvent authoritarian regimes, and contest existing power relations. Consider, for example, the ways in which digital media during the Arab spring enabled activists, reporters, and outsider influencers to communicate about the events unfolding in Egypt and Libya (e.g., Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013), or how social media facilitated the birth and popularity of #BlackLivesMatter (e.g., Freelon, McIlWain, & Clark, 2016).

At the same time, while technologies have afforded activists with the ability to reach wider audiences across physical and social boundaries, they have also limited who might hear about certain events through the algorithms put in place by the social media platforms (e.g., Sandvig, Hamilton, Karahalois, & Langbort, 2016). In short, whether for good or bad, the technologies that underpin today's social movements need to be recognized as 'organizing agents' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 752).

Furthermore, the prevalence of technology in activism has fundamentally altered how scholars and activists alike understand the 'social' in social movements. Perceptions have shifted from viewing social movements as a more or less organized collection of actors into a far messier, continually changing network. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) point out, activism prior to the birth of social media was in large part focused on the creation of a collective identity. Social movements were generally made up of multiple organizations working together to formulate goals, involve their members, and develop strategies for 'centralized mobilization' (p. 751; see also Leong, Pan, Bahri, & Fauzi, 2019). Contemporary activism, however, is different. It requires little more than a group of people sharing ideas about the same issues at about the same time (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The ease with which one can find and share information and the extent to which this information persists over time and space (boyd, 2010; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliviera, 2012) means that communities can form quickly through a cycle of distribution and reaction. These emerging communities evolve and grow as this cycle continues, involving and mobilizing users far outside their own physical community (e.g., Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020; Rosenbaum, 2018).

At the same time, though, the lack of a central organizing body that oversees the movement and its progress (or lack thereof) means that contemporary, online activism is often made up of 'shifting and messy relationships' (Brunner, 2017, p. 669). People use a

hashtag to post once and then disappear, others might stay engaged for a few days, while again others turn their online involvement into offline behaviors. In other words, there is no longer an identifiable, organized collective with a clearly identified hierarchical organizational structure (see e.g., Juris, 2012; Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017). This has raised questions about the nature of the ties that characterize contemporary activism. Strong connections between activists are usually seen as paramount to a movement's success (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), yet scholars disagree on the nature of the connections between activists and their impact on a movement's success. As Bennett and Segerberg point out, social media users simply behave in ways they commonly do on social media platforms: Share that what is important to them. If sufficient numbers of people share the same sentiments, 'the resulting action can resemble collective action' (2012, p. 752). While some argue that this kind of sharing can help to 'deepen ties' (Papacharissi & de Oliviera, 2012, p. 268), others have argued that today's activism is characterized by the weak ties that, on the one hand, are seen as helpful, and on the other, as detrimental (see Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018 for a discussion).

Finally, contemporary activism is said to be characterized by a highly personalized involvement with political and/or social issues. With activism shifting to online spaces that were initially created for people to express themselves, social movements have become more about sharing personal experiences than working toward a collective goal (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bouvier, 2020). This *civic narcissism* connects the personal with the public and allows for the creation of a shared narrative (Papacharissi, 2009). Moreover, the role of emotions, often sidelined as irrelevant to political discussions (see e.g., Horowitz, 2013 for a discussion), has been recognized as central to online activism, with affect driving many of the conversations surrounding activist hashtags, including those used in the Arab Spring and the #MeToo movement (e.g., Bouvier, 2020; Papacharissi, 2014, 2016).

In short, the activism we see today is not characterized by the *logic of collective action* that was used to describe social movements prior to the birth of social media, i.e., they are no longer centered on social and political organizations that take the lead in shaping the movement and motivating people into action (Benett & Segerberg, 2012). Instead, activism is best captured by the logic of connective action. Viewing activism through the lens of connective action means recognizing that it has become highly individualized and technology-driven. Activism is no longer a top-down endeavor backed by a well-organized set of structures, but is what happens when social media is used to engage in 'self-motivated sharing of personalized content' (Leong et al., 2019, p. 174), content that is then disseminated by 'the loose networks facilitated through technology platforms' (Loader & Dutton, 2012, p. 613). Taking this approach to understanding activism raises a number of questions, not the least of which is how effective these connection-based social movements are in instigating change.

The platform most commonly pointed to as the source for most activism today is Twitter (e.g., Tufecki, 2017; Jackson et al., 2020). As such, this Themed Section of *Participations* examines activism and citizen engagement on Twitter. Centering on the logic

of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), this Themed Section provides insight into how individuals collaborate to engender change, how individual stories are melded (or not) into a larger narrative, and how current forms of Twitter activism can be problematic as well.

In the first article, 'Circulation, impact, and the use of Twitter in contemporary museum activism', Alexandra Reynolds examines the role that museums play in contemporary social media-based activism. Foregrounding communicative capitalism, Reynolds investigates how social media have altered the impact of museum-based activism. The article looks at museum-based initiatives, on the whole driven by the logic of collective action, as well as activist responses to museum actions, which qualify as the connective action-based activism described above. Drawing on lessons learned from each case study, Reynolds argues for a use of offline and online strategies that are both more critical and self-reflexive, and that work to acknowledge the shape and tensions inherent in the power structures they are working to confront.

The second article, '#CripTheVote: How disabled activists used Twitter for political engagement during the 2016 presidential election', by Heather Walker, examines the #CripTheVote hashtag, a Twitter movement aimed at gaining national recognition for disability access and inclusion. Unlike other, more spontaneous, social media campaigns, #CripTheVote was organized by three disability activists who communicated the campaign's goals – to increase the visibility of disability issues and the political engagement among the disabled community – from the outset and organized Twitter chats to further their agenda. Using the logic of connective action, Walker examines the individual action-frames utilized by the #CripTheVote activists to understand how disabled activists used the hashtag to create a collective narrative centered on engagement and mobilization.

Next, Lorenza Parisi, Francesca Comunello, and Andrea Amico examine the nature of digital volunteering in their article 'Networked volunteering during the 2013 Sardinian floods.' Using the connective action framework, the authors provide insight into the nature of user-driven communication during a natural disaster, revealing how the connective practices used by digital volunteers are similar to those used for online activism. Contrary to most crisis communication research, this work offers insight into how self-organizing crowds utilize social media to communicate, and how effective their methods of communication are. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors examined who the most active contributors to the Twitter conversation about the floods were, and how these contributors worked to curate and integrate flows of information.

Finally, Diana Zulli takes a critical look at #BlackLivesMatter in her article 'Evaluating hashtag activism: Examining the theoretical challenges and opportunities of #BlackLivesMatter'. #BlackLivesMatter, a movement that exists both on and offline, forms a hybrid between connective and collective action and provides a great deal of lessons that can be learned from the utilization of technologies to promote activist behaviors. Using the theoretical frameworks of appropriation and liveness, Zulli offers up a critique of how

hashtags are utilized in contemporary activism and offers suggestions for future hashtag use.

Biographical notes:

Judith E. Rosenbaum is Associate Professor of Media Studies in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Maine. Her research focuses on the impact of digital media on daily life, political dialogue and meaning making on social media platforms, media selection and enjoyment, and media and health literacy. She can be reached at Judith.rosenbaumandre@maine.edu.

Gwen Bouvier is a Professor in social media and communication at Zhejiang University. Her main areas of research interest are social media and civic engagement from a multimodal critical discourse perspective. Professor Bouvier is the Associate Editor for the journal *Social Semiotics,* and review editor for the Journal of Multimodal Discourses. She can be reached at gwen.bouvier@gmail.com.

References:

Bennett, W.L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739-768.

Bouvier, G. (2020). From 'echo chambers' to 'chaos chambers': Discursive coherence and contradiction in the #MeToo Twitter feed. *Critical Discourse Studies*, forthcoming.

boyd, d. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In Papacharissi, Z. (ed.), *A Networked Self: Identity*, *Community*, *and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 39-58). New York: Routledge.

Brunner, E. (2017). Wild public networks and affective movements in China: Environmental activism, social media, and protest in Maoming. *Journal of Communication, 67*, 665-677.

Bruns, A., Highfield, T., & Burgess, J. (2013). The Arab Spring and social media audiences: English and Arabic Twitter users and their networks. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 871-898.

Freelon, D., McIlwain, C.D., & Clark, M.D. (2016). *Beyond the hashtags: #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter and the online struggle for offline justice*. Report published by the Center for Media and Social Impact.

Horowitz, L.S. (2013). Toward empathic agonism: Conflicting vulnerabilities in urban wetland governance. *Environment and Planning, 45*, 2344-2361.

Jackson, S.J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#Hashtag Activism: Networks of race and gender justice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Juris, J.S. (2012). Reflections on #Occupy everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist, 39*(2), 259-279.

Leong, C., Pan, S.L., Bahri, S., & Fauzi, A. (2019). Social media empowerment in social movements: Power activation and power accrual in digital activism. *European Journal of Information Systems, 28*(2), 173-204.

Loader, B.D., & Dutton, W.H. (2012). A decade in Internet time. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 609-615.

Logan, N. (2016). The Starbucks Race Together initiative: Analyzing a public relations campaign with critical race theory. *Public Relations Inquiry, 5*(1), 93-113.

Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structure of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication and Society, 19*(3), 307-324.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paparachissi, Z. (2009). The virtual sphere 2.0: The internet, the public sphere, and beyond. In A. Chadwick & P.N. Howard (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (pp. 230–245). New York, NY: Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z., & de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012). Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on #Egypt. *Journal of Communication, 62*(2), 266–282.

Pew Research Center (2018, July 10). Eight-in-ten Blacks say social media shed light on rarely discussed issues; the same share of whites say these issues distract from important issues. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/11/public-attitudes-toward-political-engagement-on-social-media/pi_2018-07-10_social-activism_0-20/

Poell, T. & Rajagopalan, S. (2015). 'Connecting Activists and Journalists.' *Journalism Studies*, *16*(5), 719-733.

Rosenbaum, J.E. (2018). *Constructing digital cultures: Tweets, trends, race, and gender*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Sandvig, C., Hamilton, K., Karahalios, K., & Langbort, C. (2016). When the algorithm itself is racist: Diagnosing ethnical harm in the basic components of software. *International Journal of Communication, 10*, 4972-4990.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas*: *The power and fragility of networked protest.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Vaast, E., Safadi, H., Lapointe, L., & Negoita, S. (2017). Social media affordances for connective action: An examination of microblogging use during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. *MIS Quarterly, 41*(4), 1179-1205.

Valenzuela, S., Correa, T., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2018). Ties, likes, and tweets: Using strong and weak ties to explain differences in protest participation across Facebook and Twitter use. *Political communication, 35*(1), 117-134.

Wen, A. (2017, March 17). How social media is revolutionizing real-time information in six ways. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://medium.com/@awenz/how-social-media-is-revolutionizing-real-time-information-in-six-ways-335b3a1624ed.