Afterword: Is social media activism really activism?

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Is social media activism really activism? The papers we have gathered together in this Themed Section provide a contribution to our understanding of online activism. How these are to be placed in the field was laid out in the introduction to the issue. I wish to use this afterword to reflect a little more on what kind of research they represent in terms of our interest in activism and social media platforms, and also to reflect on what this might tell us about trajectories in media scholarship on social media more broadly. These reflections come not only as an afterword for this Themed Section, but also after having edited a number of volumes on this subject and having attended a range of events about social media and activism.

We noted in our Introduction that, in regard to activism, social media appears to give voice to those who formerly had none. It creates spaces for communities of those who share any kind of joint situation, ideas or perspectives to come together. At the larger scale, such scholarship accounts for how social media can be used to circumvent authoritarian regimes and even destabilize and challenge existing power relations. On another level it points to how a range of identity-based groups, or those with certain specific political or ideological orientations, can share information and push to raise their profile. This has included things like call-outs against racist actions or sexual misconduct in the workplace. Such ideological activism can also take on negative forms, where feeds include xenophobia or racism, where embittered national citizens are led to 'mobilize' against the liberal elite establishment and its favoring of immigrants and ethnic minorities against those of the ethnic 'Volk'. Finally, at a smaller scale, scholarship shows how consumer activists can challenge and mobilize against poor products or services, such as an inappropriate display at a local museum, shouting out when their favorite eco-brand has changed its package sourcing, or where our local Starbucks brand has terrible customer relations, or simply to leave reviews about AirB&B.

One question we can ask here is what is common across these things which constitute 'activism'? We are dealing with a broad list. I do not want to suggest here that some or all of these are not a kind of activism. But I wonder about the usefulness of

grouping them together, and whether this is defined more by the trajectories of academic work, rather than the thing which is taking place per se. To some extent, scholars have already signaled up these kinds of concerns. From the user point of view, Hodgkinson (2008) asked whether what we can now be active about is shaped by social media. So, do social media distract us from some kinds of activism as we become more personally focused, for example? And this is something less investigated. Is what is most significant about these fragmented collections on activism that some things are excluded? Does this have consequences for communication scholars looking at activism? Are we also lead or shaped by such limitations? As a consequence, is the scholarly study of activism also shaped by the very same set of constraints?

It is certainly important to question, also, if it is meaningful and productive to place instances of activism of the scale of the Arab Spring next to consumer activists. For one thing, such issues surely need to be treated in their own right in respect to giving them sociological depth. The upheavals labelled as the Arab Spring, often branded as one of the success stories of social media in regard to social justice as the people rise up, have subsequently been shown to be utterly misrepresented by these largely simplified western notions of the people's will to democracy (King and Maghraoui, 2019). As Enli (2017) notes, the field of social media studies has tended to throw around a number of typical cases to lay out its potentials, often focusing on a fairly limited realm of examples. What is needed, she argues, is a greater variety of cases from different contexts understanding what is specific about each.

In our Introduction to the Themed Section, we noted that the prevalence of technology in activism has also fundamentally altered how scholars and activists alike understand the "social" in social movements. So, perceptions have shifted from viewing social movements, pre-social media, as a more or less organized collection of actors oriented to the creation of a collective identity, to viewing them as something far more messy and continually changing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Is the change we are seeing here not so much a change in the nature of social movements per se, but at least what we group under the umbrella of social movements? And perhaps more importantly, does this say more about how, as communications scholars, we are now carrying out our research increasingly in a way that is defined by what is online, or at least from data that can be easily downloaded and analyzed as we sit in our offices?

I also feel that this focus on activism, voices from below, and civic participation is colored by something else related to earlier thinking about the potential of the Internet and social media, as well as the rhetoric that social media platforms themselves use. This is the discourse of the Internet as utopian. Facebook itself is still branded as part of bringing communities together, as creating a way for humanity to come together to discuss major issues (Zuckerberg, 2017). Apple branded itself as offering a set of tools for the individual to break with the monolithic control of mainstream media and institutions (Jobs, 1983). Facebook still has a headquarters called the Hacker building, on Hacker Way (Tsotsis, 2012). Here is the culture of the Internet as anti-establishment, as counter-culture, as fighting for

justice, and utopianism (Turner, 2006). Such rhetoric is maintained by the likes of Facebook and Twitter despite the 'platformization' of the Internet (Snircek, 2016), where these companies seek to become gateways where other applications plug in and become part of the same system of data gathering, channeling of traffic and targeting for advertising, as well as product promotion (Van Dijck, 2013). It is these discourses that could be driving this persistence, not in looking at what social media do, what takes place on them, how they shape things, but in looking for their revolutionary potential and the interest in activism.

Researchers demonstrate the massive shifts brought about by this process of platformization, which points to important changes in how we go about many things – where all cultural production becomes realized through the system (Nieborg & Poell 2018). Here all commodities, which can include ideas (such as in the cases of YouTube self-styled social and political commentators), information (in the form of news-provision [Nechushtai, 2018]), as well as goods such as fashion, music and other services, become packaged through this logic (Prey, 2016; Duffy, 2017). What is trending, processes of user engagement and retention, page views, likes, rankings aggregation of users and the-newest-at-the-top become the format for all things. So, the big question is, what does it mean if all cultural production is platform contingent (Morris, 2015)?

If all cultural production is platform contingent, what does it mean where things we are labelling as 'activism' are part of these logics? Less research has considered this: to focus on what is taking place here, and how ideas about justice, rights, and mobilization may be shaped by platform contingency. I wonder if we may to some extent still be rooted in these older sentiments and rhetoric of the Internet as potential utopia, which is why things we can classify as activism are able to serve our purposes for edited volumes.

But most importantly these older sentiments may prevent us from looking more closely at these individual cases in other terms. Here, I have in mind the lesson learned in media and communications studies about the time I was doing my PhD: that we cannot answer all our questions about media by content alone. We need to also understand what people are doing with media, why, and in what context. In media studies, we realized we have to look at what people are doing when they watch television. How do they use different programs and how do families talk about them? In sum, it is about media use in everyday lives and situations, and doing justice to this as researchers (Barker, 2006).

As for social media, we know already that users become highly limited in regard to what they become exposed to concerning alternative perspectives and ideas (Sunstein, 2001; Shirky, 2001, 2003; Adamic & Glance, 2005). And we know that social media feeds are often messy (Brunner, 2017), where posts may have less coherence than the hashtag suggests (Paparisti, 2015), that the feed may be more of a series of monologue-type of comments than any form of collective debate or mutual engagement (Bouvier, 2020). We know that many who engage with the pressing issues they encounter on feeds may do so in an ephemeral way, while they wait in a queue for coffee as they also check the weather, and check out a picture of their friend's dog (Ott, 2017). But how and why this is meaningful to people, what broader ideologies these forms of social media engagement actually carry,

what users are actually doing, is less clear. Unless we go beyond allowing the Internet and the platforms themselves, as well as older romantic notions of the potential of the online environment, and engage with the users themselves, it is hard to answer such questions. In the 1980s, media studies realized the importance of not forgetting the circumstances, that media are part of lives and situated in the world.

Let me end with one short example from my own research on activism. This relates to an ongoing project on Twitter call-outs of people who are deemed racists. In such call-outs, there is usually mobile phone footage of a person in a rage, verbally attacking another person in xenophobic or racist terms. Should the video go viral and become widely shared, hashtags appear with the aim of calling-out the person in the fashion of a kind of gladiator sport, with insults, calls for them to lose their job, social ostracization, contacting employers, etc. The actions of the person making the outburst are usually pretty awful, but that is not what I want to get into here. What takes place on these Twitter feeds has all the characteristics of social media communication observed in the paragraph above. They are chaotic, contradictory. Those posting are hardly engaging with each other, yet firing out comments that, for the most part, demonstrate their own moral righteousness, as much as anything else. And in the process, what is racism, or I should say racism in society, appears to fall to the wayside a little. The culprit becomes thrown in with the worst fascist regimes in history. Certainly here, text analysis can allow us to see such things. And at this level we can ask whether it is best to call this a form of activism. But in carrying out ethnography online, through engaging with those posting, we get to learn more. For example, I looked at the activities of one particular woman, typical of any posting. She made an angry outburst about the vile racism not being typical for people in her country. At the same moment she posted this short tweet, she was also busy on other Twitter feeds and other platforms. One post related to the incompetence of her daughter's hockey coach, about which she was very cross and intended to rally parents to make a complaint. She was also managing car payments. And she had just left a negative review about a product she had purchased online. And in addition, she was engaged in an assortment of casual bursts of chat with friends and family. The anti-racism 'activism' post blended into this stream of activities. My thought here is whether it is useful to think about it in this way at all, as 'activism'. Or is it more a question of this requiring us to study what is activism in this situation? Can we use her 'activism' to theorize about 'weak' or 'strong' community ties or about the creation of political spaces? We approached this Themed Section thinking in terms of politics and the *logic of connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), which replaces the pre-social media notion of *the logic of collective action*, in other words a shift to an individual engagement with politics, reliant on technologies, where there are shifting communities of engagement which may even be quite weak. The process of doing this led me to certainly see that there are shifts that need to be documented and understood. But it also resulted in me asking questions about our very drive to do so, the concepts and categories we are using, and the very methods we use to carry out our research. And what is striking about the woman's participation in this online activism against racism, here activism against the bad hockey

coach and against the bad products, is that it all takes place through platforms and represent a shift in how we do things (Nieborg & Poell 2018). Such anti-racism is not really anti-racism in terms of combatting structural inequalities in society, but leaving a fast message on a feed at which you may have only glanced, fueled in part by your irritated state at your disappointment with the product you ordered and the bad hockey coach.

Scholars have long pointed out that it is not useful to make a distinction between the online and offline world, given the way that social media and the Internet are so intertwined in our lives. But this should be no excuse to then allow research to be defined and shaped by the Internet. For the most part I worry we now do this, often because it is simply so convenient. At least we need to reflect on how we gather, classify what it is in the social world that we seek to study. And above all, we need to carry out studies that have sociological depth rather than running diverse issues together under convenient labels.

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