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# **Social media and activist communication**

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## **Chapter 46**

### **Social media and activist communication**

**Thomas Poell and José van Dijck**

#### **Introduction**

During the 2009 and 2010 protests against G20 summits in London, Pittsburgh and Toronto, the protest coordinators urged activists to report on the demonstrations using major social media platforms, including Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr (Bennett and Segerberg 2011; Poell and Borra 2012). In January and February 2011, the opposition against the dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt especially used Facebook and text messaging to share reports on the events in the streets, while Twitter played a vital role in the transnational communication on these revolutions (Lim 2012; Lotan et al. 2011). Inspired by the Arab Spring, large protests, subsequently, erupted in Spain, the US, Italy, and many other countries during the summer and fall of 2011. Again major social platforms were used for mobilization and communication purposes (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012).

The widespread use of social media in contemporary activism constitutes a new phase in the development of alternative communication. Historically, activists have tried to gain access to the mass media to communicate with larger publics. As Rucht (2004: 27) notices “from the local to the global levels, movements struggle for public visibility as granted (or refused) by the mass media.” Gaining public visibility through mainstream media has always proven difficult, as it forced activists to make concessions about how they present themselves publicly, catering to mass media’s need for spectacle, conflict, and flamboyant newsworthy individuals (Gitlin 1980; Lester and Hutchins 2009; Rucht 2004).

In addition, activists have focused on developing and using their own platforms for protest mobilization and communication to become less dependent on mainstream media (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Couldry and Curran 2003). Alternative media, such as SchNEWS and Indymedia, as well as a wide range of NGO websites have been created to counterbalance the dynamic of mainstream reporting, which often disregards the reasons and broader context of protests, focusing instead on its spectacular, newsworthy aspects. These alternative platforms have been considered

important, not only because they allow for more issue-focused reporting, but also because alternative journalism tends to explicitly foreground “the viewpoints of ‘ordinary people’ (activists, protesters, local residents)” (Atton and Hamilton 2008: 86). However, a major disadvantage of alternative media is that they generally do not allow activists to tap into mass audiences and bring about a shift in media power.

### **Media Power**

The rise of social platforms allegedly brought about a significant change in this regard. Research on the Arab Spring revolutions and the Occupy protests shows that hundreds of thousands and occasionally millions of people could be reached through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. For example, during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, in the week preceding president Mubarak’s resignation, the rate of tweets about the protests grew to 230.000 per day (Howard et al. 2011: 4). Even more people appeared to be using Facebook. Most visible was the ‘We are All Khaled Said’ Facebook page, created in June 2010 to protest against the police-inflicted death of Said, a young middle class Egyptian man. Several hundred thousand people commented on and ‘liked’ the posts that were shared through this page (Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012). To get a sense of the size of the overall public that was reached through these Twitter and Facebook activities, it is important to keep in mind that contributing users each have their own networks of followers or friends, which may include thousands of people. Thus, the actual reach of the social media protest communication was many times larger than the number of people posting, tweeting, or commenting on these protests.

Given the vast reach of social media communication, a crucial shift seems to be taking place in the distribution of media power, that is, in “the way social reality itself is defined or named” (Couldry 2003: 39). Activists have evidently become much less dependent on television and mainstream newspapers to influence public communication. As Tufekci (2013: 867) makes clear, “the ‘power-dependency’ relationship between media and the social movement actors has been fundamentally altered.” Mainstream media are no longer the only available option to reach large audiences. The examples of the Arab Spring revolutions and the Occupy protests show that social media allow activists, under the right conditions, to directly communicate with very large publics. From this perspective social media appear to resolve the communication predicament in which activists have historically found themselves.

However, as political-economic and software studies research has demonstrated, social media do not simply enable user activity, but very much steer this activity (Fuchs 2011; Langlois et al. 2009; van Dijck and Poell 2013). Through technological features, such as ‘retweeting’, ‘liking’, ‘following’, and ‘friending’, as well as algorithmic selection mechanisms, which privilege particular types of content, social platforms shape how users can interact with each other through these platforms. These forms of technological shaping do not necessarily correspond with user interests, let alone with activist interests, but are first and foremost informed by the business models of social media corporations. This chapter will show how social

media's techno-commercial mechanisms influence activism in ways that potentially undermine its long-term efficacy.

We will develop a critical perspective on the techno-commercial dynamics of social media in dialogue with the current research on the 2011 protest wave (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013; Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012, 2013; Lotan et al. 2011). Researchers have examined how activists *use* social media in complex processes of protest communication and mobilization, providing detailed insights in how online contention is deeply entangled with offline activist practices, and how local and global communication networks are fundamentally connected with each other in contemporary protest. Moreover, protests should be understood within their particular cultural, social, and historical contexts. While this research is highly valuable, it leaves unexplored the problematic role of the techno-commercial infrastructure of social media platforms in today's protest configurations.

We argue that it is not just important to examine contemporary activist communication as complex *socio-cultural* processes, as the above-mentioned researchers do, but also as *techno-commercial* processes—that is the architectures and business models underpinning social platforms. This preliminary exploration focuses on two vital developments in social media-driven contemporary activism: the *acceleration* and *personalization* of activist communication. Social media greatly enhance the speed and reach of protest communication and mobilization, elevating their reliance on the mainstream media, while simultaneously undermining the ability of activists to focus public attention on the larger issues at stake in political contestation as well as undermining their attempts to build durable networks and communities around these issues.

### **Acceleration**

The first development we would like to highlight concerns the acceleration of activist communication propelled by social media. In combination with the ubiquitous availability of advanced mobile communication devices, social platforms allow users on the move to massively exchange information in real-time. Consequently, the Web is transforming from a relatively static environment primarily focused on information retrieval to a highly dynamic ecology of data streams, which constantly feed users with new information (Berry 2011; Hermida 2010).

This transformation greatly speeds up the exchange of information between activists. On the one hand, acceleration can be interpreted as a form of empowerment. Social platforms allow activists to document (almost in real time) unfolding protest events, and massively share their emotions regarding these events (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Examining the social media communication of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests, Poell and Borra (2012), for example, show that by employing various social media platforms, protestors were able to meticulously report and communicate the unfolding events on the streets of Toronto. Omnipresent police activity was documented in particular detail. Exploring Twitter communication during the Egyptian revolution through the most widely used hashtag, #egypt, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012: 273-74) discern a similar 'ambient' information-sharing

environment. They use the term ‘instantaneity’ to describe the instant online recording and reporting of unfolding events, and to capture the tone and urgency of the language individuals used in retweeting and requesting instant updates. Such near real-time and ubiquitous forms of protest communication, which far outstretch the reporting capabilities of mainstream media, can be of strategic importance for activists.

On the other hand, though, protesters’ social media reporting practices tend to mirror much criticized mainstream reporting by focusing on the violence and spectacle that accompanies many protests. Historically, alternative activist reporting has been considered especially important because it allowed activists to counterbalance mainstream reporting and highlight the larger issues at stake in political contestation. In the early 2000s, NGO sites and alternative online news outlets, such as Indymedia, were celebrated precisely because they facilitated the long-term articulation and polarization of protests issues. By reporting on such issues and linking alternative sites to each other as well as to corporate and governmental sites, activists constituted ‘issue networks’ (Bennett 2004; Dean 2002; Marres and Rogers 2005). As Jodi Dean (2002: 172-173) has pointed out, such networks made it possible to move away from the “drive for spectacle and immediacy that plagues an audience oriented news cycle” as they “work to maintain links among those specifically engaged with a matter of concern.” Evidently, the event-oriented focus and ‘real-time’ nature of social media protest communication runs the risk of shifting the perspective of online activist communication from the actual protest issues to the protest spectacle.

It is crucial to note that the event-oriented focus of social media communication is not merely the result of specific user practices, but is also prompted by the technological architectures underpinning social platforms. Various social media sharing mechanisms, such as ‘liking’ and ‘retweeting’, are pushed by the platforms themselves, as well as by many mainstream and alternative news sites in the form of social buttons (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Omnipresent sharing features stimulate users to spread and repeat breaking news. Further adding to the newsy character of social platforms are the ‘hashtag’ and ‘trending topic’ features, which are particularly prominent in the Twitter architecture, but have more recently also been taken up by Facebook. Hashtags instigate users to share and search for news on specific subjects, whereas trending topics further highlight breaking news. Especially Twitter has developed their trending-feature into a sophisticated popular news barometer by identifying the ‘most breaking news’, and by allowing users to breakdown trending topics by region, country and city (Parr 2010).

To understand how features such as trending topics shape activist communication, it is important to see that these features do not directly translate user interests, but that they algorithmically process combinations of user signals (Bucher 2012; Gillespie 2014). By including and excluding particular signals and giving them relative weight, social media algorithms co-determine what is considered ‘relevant’ or ‘trending’. As the Occupy protestors found out, social media’s algorithms can conflict with what users themselves consider relevant. In the fall of 2011, at the height of the occupations, these protestors noticed that despite their intense use of #OccupyWallStreet and #OccupyBoston, these hashtags trended almost anywhere in the US except for New York and Boston, whereas less popular Occupy-related terms and hashtags made it into the trending topic lists of the two cities. Suspicious Occupiers subsequently accused

Twitter of manipulating its trending topics. However, as Gilad Lotan (2011) has demonstrated, no censoring appears to have taken place; it was the “outcome of a purely algorithmic mechanism”, pointing out that the consistent attention given to #OccupyWallStreet and #OccupyBoston in NYC and Boston did not result in attention spikes. As Lotan explains, trending topics are not simply determined on the basis of the volume of tweets containing a particular hashtag or term. Instead “the algorithm adapts over time, based on the changing velocity of the usage of the given term in tweets. If we see a systematic rise in volume, but no clear spike, it is possible that the topic will never trend” (ibid.) In other words, Twitter algorithmically privileges breaking news and viral content dissemination over long-term issues of interest. Similar observations can be made concerning Facebook’s News Feed algorithms (McGee 2013).

Given how this event-oriented focus is fundamentally built into social media platforms’ architectures, it will be very difficult to reverse or adjust the perspective of social media communication. This becomes especially difficult as activists increasingly build their communication strategies around social platform’s sharing mechanisms and orient these strategies towards the platform’s algorithmic selection principles. Occupy protestors’ obsession with Twitter’s trending topics is symptomatic of this tendency as is the activists’ practice of promoting particular hashtags, such as #g20report in the case of the G20 protests, #sidibouزيد during the Tunisian revolution, and #25jan in the early stages of the Egyptian revolution.

The real-time dynamic of protest communication is not just constituted through the mutual articulation of social technologies and users practices, but also through the ways in which mainstream and alternative news sites draw from social media data streams. This could be clearly observed in the case of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests. Exploring the online ecology of these protests, Poell (2013) noticed that alternative news sites, such as Rabble.ca and the Toronto and Vancouver Media Co-ops, picked up the posts and links shared on Twitter and Facebook aimed at reconstructing the confrontations between protestors and police. These sites, just as various Canadian mainstream news outlets, heavily drew from the constant stream of photos, videos, and text updates from the major social platforms.

A similar event-oriented dynamic could be observed during the Arab Spring protests. Leading news organizations such as the BBC and Al Jazeera, as well as individual journalists like Andy Carvin from National Public Radio (NPR), directly built on the flood of user-generated content (UGC) shared through social media (Hänksa-Ahy and Shapour 2013; Hermida, Lewis and Zamith 2013; Lim 2013). At the same time, activists made concerted efforts to pull together new sources of information and opinions on the uprisings posted on social platforms. Alternative media sites, such as Global Voices and the collective Tunisian blog Nawaat, played a vital role in these efforts and became central information hubs where relevant social media posts were verified, translated, and aggregated in a structured fashion, making news from the ground accessible for Al Jazeera and other international media (Poell and Darmoni 2012; MacKinnon, 2012).

These examples show how, during large protests, online ecologies emerge in which social, alternative, and mainstream media are deeply entangled. The central role of social platforms in such configurations offers strategic advantages to activists, who

are able to quickly disseminate information throughout the online media landscape. However, it also means that social media impute their logic onto activist communication practices. The instantaneous ‘always-on’ dynamic of social platforms intensifies mainstream media’s focus on breaking news and renders alternative media increasingly event-oriented. As such, alternative reporting effectively becomes more ‘mainstream’.

### **Personalization**

The second development enhancing the reach and speed of activist communication while simultaneously undermining its long-term efficacy, is ‘personalization’. Understood from a socio-cultural perspective, the personalization of activism implies that individuals’ own narratives rather than collective identity frames become important in activist mobilization and communication processes. Moreover, it means that ‘digitally networked individuals with multiple affiliations’ instead of social movement organizations become increasingly central to such processes (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 772).

This perspective on personalization has been most extensively developed by Bennett and Segerberg (*ibid.*, 2012, 2013) who maintain that the development of social media has enabled a new form of activism termed ‘connective action.’ Rather than relying on the formal organizations and collective identity frames that traditionally drive activism, connective action revolves around easy-to-personalize ideas, such as ‘we are the 99 per cent’, ideas mostly shared through social platforms. Reflecting on the 2011 Spanish 15-M movement, the authors note that this movement, which was not directed by formal organizations, was able to build strength over time using a mix of social media and other online platforms in combination with “face-to-face organizing, encampments in city centers, and marches across the country” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 741).

Scholars interrogating such instances of online connective action notice that the personalization of activism certainly does not preclude the development of a strong sense of solidarity during protests. In their analysis of #egypt, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012: 275) observed ‘overwhelming expressions of solidarity’ and ‘camaraderie’. Gerbaudo (2012: 159), drawing from several case studies on the 2011 protests, concludes that “social media have become emotional conduits for reconstructing a sense of togetherness among a spatially dispersed constituency, so as to facilitate its physical coming together in public space.”

A crucial question is whether such instances of solidarity or togetherness can eventually translate into more durable networks and communities that provide the basis for political contestation in the long run. Community formation has always been considered a central objective of alternative activist communication and more generally of projects of political emancipation (Atton 2002; Couldry and Curran 2003; Fraser 1990). Do social media also facilitate this objective? Taking up this question, Castells suggests that instances of togetherness, generated through a combination of intense social media interaction and the physical occupation of city squares can very well trigger processes of community formation. He sees contemporary protestors “setting



out to discover potential communality in the practice of the movement.” Thus, Castells argues, “community is a goal to achieve, but togetherness is a starting point” (Castells (2012: 225).

However, if we examine the personalization of activism from a techno-commercial perspective, it remains questionable whether there is a natural progression from ‘togetherness’ to ‘community’. Personalization as a techno-commercial process involves social platforms prompting users to explicitly make ‘personal’ connections through a variety of technological mechanisms. Moreover, personalization uniquely depends on these platforms’ propensity to algorithmically connect users to content, advertisers, and each other (van Dijck and Poell 2013: 9). As such, social media are not simple ‘tools’ for constructing personal networks or mere ‘vehicles’ for public sentiments. Instead, social platforms *steer* users towards personalized connections, while at the same time introducing viral mechanisms in public communication that *produce* moments of togetherness.

Major social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube personalize the user experience on a number of levels. First, they push users to create and extend their personal networks by ‘following’ or ‘friending’. They also stimulate users to create their own communication spaces, for example through hashtags such as #egypt, #sidibouزيد, or #OccupyWallStreet, or in the form of Facebook Groups and Pages, like ‘We are all Khaled Said’. Finally, social platforms algorithmically select for each user the content that is most likely to meet their interests, hence serving customized media diets. Thus, the techno-commercial flipside of personalization is customized services that steer users towards particular types of connections and content.

Social media corporations have become increasingly sophisticated in personalizing the user experience. For example, discussing the 2013 update of Facebook’s news feed, one of the corporation’s engineering managers, Lars Backstrom, explained that the platform has evolved from considering only a few user signals to assessing more than “100,000 individual weights in the model that produces News Feed” (McGee 2013). The algorithmic balancing of these user signals determines *which* of the on average 1,500 available stories a user gets to see. Backstrom elucidates how not only individual user signals play a role in this process, but how Facebook also looks at global interactions, which can outweigh the signals of individual users if these interactions are strong enough. In practice this means that viral protest messages can appear at the top of users’ News Feeds, outweighing posts by family and friends.

The particular business models of social media corporations directly inform the technological development of personalization. These models primarily revolve around user profiling and targeted advertising - the largest source of revenue for most corporations. User profiling is pursued through the systematic collection and analysis of user metadata (Fuchs 2011). Through personalization social platforms are able to profile user interests, allowing both customization of information and targeted advertising. Identifying trending topics is an essential aspect of social media exchange because these features enable corporations to develop real-time public sentiment tracking services as additional sources of revenue. Since 2010, Twitter has delivered such services through its ‘data resellers’, such as Topsy, Gnip, and DataSift (Dwoskin 2013). More recently, Facebook started to develop similar data services (Goel 2013).

In light of these techno-commercial mechanisms, which underpin the socio-cultural forms of personalization, it should come as no surprise that activist communication

and mobilization processes based on social media have generated loosely connected protest networks, which just as quickly fall apart as they are stitched together. Personalization, real-timeness, and virality are part of social media's DNA. The technological architectures and business models of these media are geared towards the viral dissemination of affective messages through personal networks. For activists this is both a blessing and a curse. As social media penetrate deeply into day-to-day personal communication in ways alternative media have never been able to do, activists can reach categories of people who would otherwise not be reached by activist communication. At the same time, the interactions and interests that tie dispersed social media users together to form protest movements, generating instant moments of togetherness, inevitably dissolve when social platforms algorithmically connect users to the next wave of trending topics.

Whereas alternative media are technologically and intellectually designed to sustain interest in particular social and political issues and to build communities around such issues, social media are focused on connecting users only momentarily. To sustain their structural commercial appetite for online engagement, social platforms continuously introduce the next set of topics that satisfy user interests, whatever these interests might be. Indeed, social platforms are both technologically and commercially antithetical to community formation. In their pursuit of profiling and targeting users, commercial social platforms have no real interest in community formation except for rhetorical purposes. Hence, there is no natural progression from 'togetherness' to 'community' (as Castells suggests), but rather the reverse appears to be true: in social media-dominated online environments, processes of togetherness are always ephemeral, always already on the point of giving way to the next set of trending topics and related sentiments.

### **Reconsidering media power**

Examining the ways in which social platforms shape personalization and the instantaneous viral circulation of content forces us to revisit the question of media power. While the rise of social media has made activists much less dependent on television and mainstream newspapers, this certainly does not mean that activists have more control over the media environments in which they operate. Media power has neither been transferred to the public, nor to activists for that matter; instead, power has partly shifted to the technological mechanisms and algorithmic selections operated by large social media corporations (Facebook, Twitter, Google). Through such technological shaping, social media greatly enhance the news-oriented character of activist communication, shifting the focus away from protest issues towards the spectacular, newsworthy, and 'conflictual' aspects of protest. Simultaneously, social platforms not only allow users to engage in personal networks but also steer them towards such connections. While personal networks and viral processes of content dissemination can generate strong sentiments of togetherness, they are antithetical to community formation. In sum, the ways in which social media shape and steer activism trigger critical questions regarding the long-term efficacy of social media protest communication.

In the wake of the partial power shift towards social media, alternative media are as important for activism as they ever were. They are vital forces providing a counterbalance against dominant media—that is, mainstream press and large social platforms combined. Providing such counterweight has also become increasingly complex. In contrast to traditional mass media, social technologies are intricately intertwined with activist mobilization and communication processes and hence with alternative reporting practices. Evidently, social media platforms have been greatly beneficial for alternative activist reporting in terms of speed, reach and variety of information sources, so abandoning commercial social media platforms is not an option. At the same time, it is crucial for alternative media to remain at a critical distance from these forms of communication and to provide a genuine alternative to the event-oriented focus of social-media-driven protest communication. The challenge for activists is to profit from the affordances of social platforms while simultaneously gaining public attention for the fundamental issues at stake in contemporary protests, and to continue building communities around these issues. If the recent resurgence of activism is to lead to real political change, it remains important not only to mobilize people, but also to raise their political awareness and to tie them into durable networks, which can press for change in the long run.

### **Further Reading**

Castells (2012), Gerbaudo (2012), and Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) have produced the main theoretical claims regarding the role of social media in the 2011 protest wave. Lim (2012, 2013), Tufekci and Wilson (2012), Lotan et al. (2011), and Poell and Darmoni (2012) analyze in detail how social platforms are used in the particular political and cultural context of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Similar studies for the Occupy protests have been provided by Juris (2012), Thorson et al. (2013), DeLuca, Lawson and Sun (2012). For techno-commercial perspectives on social media and activist communication readers can consult Youmans and York (2012), Poell (2013), and Langlois et al. (2009).

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