



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation

Poell, T.; van Dijck, J.F.T.M.

Published in:

International Journal of Communication : IJoC

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2016). Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation. *International Journal of Communication : IJoC*, 10, 226-234.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation

Introduction

THOMAS POELL¹

JOSÉ VAN DIJCK

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

This introduction to the special section on the construction of public space in social media activism discusses (1) the types of *social media practices* involved in the construction of publicness during contemporary episodes of popular contention, (2) the particular *political institutional contexts* in which these practices are articulated, and (3) the *technocommercial architectures* through which they take shape. Building on the five articles in this section, we argue that public space is not readily available for today's citizens and activists, but is conquered and constructed through processes of emotional connectivity.

Keywords: social media, activism, popular contention, public space, emotion, governmentality, technological infrastructures

From the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa to environmental protests in China, and from LGBTQ festivals to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have seen major forms of popular contestation in different parts of the world. In these protests and festivals, activists and citizens embrace social media, trying to appropriate these media as public spaces. This special section examines how public space is constructed in social media activism. In this introduction, we highlight (1) the types of *social media practices* involved in the construction of publicness during protest, (2) the particular *political institutional contexts* in which these practices are articulated, and (3) the *technocommercial architectures* through which they take shape.

Thomas Poell: Poell@uva.nl

José van Dijck: J.F.T.M.vanDijck@uva.nl

Date submitted: 2015–11–06

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Amsterdam Center for Globalization Studies (ACGS) for this Special Section.

Building on the five contributions to this special section, we demonstrate that appropriating social platforms as public spaces is by no means a straightforward or uncomplicated endeavor. First, activist social media activity often clashes with the efforts of state authorities to maintain public order, most evidently in the case of authoritarian regimes such as China and Egypt. Yet, the Edward Snowden leaks make clear that liberal democratic states also have developed mass online surveillance programs, often in collaboration with major social media corporations. Second, although the connection between social media and activism seems natural, these media are not designed to facilitate activism. In fact, the technological architectures and user policies of social media are primarily informed by commercial considerations and frequently clash with activist interests and objectives.

Hence, it is at the intersection of online popular contestation, the controlling efforts of states, and the technocommercial strategies of social media corporations that the construction of publicness needs to be situated. Exploring these connections, we, at the conclusion of this introduction, critically reflect on the conceptualization of publicness in the tradition of public sphere theory, which has been the main conceptual framework through which the relations among popular contestation, mediated communication, and power have been examined. The various contributions to this special section suggest that new forms of activism articulated through social media cannot be adequately understood through public sphere theory. We argue that a new approach is needed to gain insight into how current technological, commercial, and cultural changes affect contentious communication.

Emotions

All of the articles in this special section highlight the vibrant protest activity via social platforms. They tell stories of abundant *creativity*, of intricate ways in which *online and offline* protest blend, and, most important, they emphasize the *emotional* character of what has become known as social media activism. All of these elements are on display in Lynn Schofield Clark's study of 22 American high-school-age students of color, who considered participating in a walkout in solidarity with the 2014 Ferguson protestors. Clark shows how the students used Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter to receive and exchange photos, videos, quotes, and commentaries that exhibited their emotional investment and participation in the protests. Analyzing the dynamic of these exchanges, she points out that it is important to not just focus on the creators and circulators of key materials, but also on the recipients of these materials. Many of the students she followed were hesitant about joining the walkouts, even after they learned that some of their fellow students were participating. Clark notes, however, that "the conversation shifted noticeably as they encountered more and more images, texts, and other evidence of how people they knew had been involved, physically or emotionally, in these activities." The materials shared through social platforms, in this sense, functioned as "artifacts of engagement," inserting recognizable actors in the protest narrative and confronting the students with the choice of whether or not to act. Hence, instances of publicness were constructed through the exchange between social media-sharing practices and on-the-ground action. The physical emotional character of the latter in combination with the flow of the former constituted a powerful dynamic of mobilization.

Paolo Gerbaudo also identifies this dual dynamic in his analysis of the Kullena Khaled Said and Democracia Real Ya Facebook pages, which played a central role during the 2011 protests in Egypt and Spain, respectively. He argues that "moments of digital enthusiasm" could be observed on the two pages. These moments should be understood as "necessarily transient phases of intense and positive emotional mood emerging in political online conversations in proximity of major protest events." Here, too, is a strong connection between what happens online and offline. The intense emotional character of the protests was first of all fed by the experience of the many thousands of people marching in the streets, occupying the squares, sleeping in protest camps, and debating in popular assemblies. The protests were further fueled by the emotional exchanges on Facebook pages and other social platforms. Hence, an important challenge for researchers of contemporary activism, as these articles suggest, is to trace the dynamic exchange between social media communication and street protests, an exchange that very much revolves around the channeling of emotions.

Reflecting on the Twitter communication during Toronto's 2014 WorldPride festival, Stefanie Duguay suggests in her contribution to this section that channeling emotions has not only mobilizing power, but also emancipatory potential. The WorldPride Twitter users employed the platform for personal and affective expressions, which can "help to form connections and challenge understandings of sexuality through networked identity work." Simultaneously, online exchanges facilitated "communal sense-making" processes. For example, a picture of a rainbow, which serendipitously appeared during the closing ceremony of the festival, was quickly labeled the "official rainbow of #WorldPride." Subsequently, such symbols were mobilized to challenge heteronormative discourses, in which LGBTQ people are portrayed "as unnatural and immoral." Twitter users responded to such discourses by circulating the rainbow picture with comments such as "Mother nature celebrates #WORLDPRIDE" and "Just in case you were still wondering whose side God is on."

These communicative actions, which Duguay labels as "networked identity work," are particularly interesting in the light of the observed fading importance of collective identity frames in contemporary activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; della Porta, 2005; McDonald, 2002). The contributions to this special section suggest that collective processes of identification remain important, even if playing a different role than they did in the past. As we discuss below, flashes of collectivity are produced through the mutual articulation of activist social media-sharing practices and the technocommercial architectures of social platforms. Such flashes of collectivity do *not* provide the basis for the construction of stable social movements, but they do keep people emotionally invested in the protest event.

Taken together, what these observations suggest is that social media sharing of emotionally charged protest material has become a vital element of contemporary activism. Platforms play a key role in processes of activist mobilization, emancipation, and identification, in which online and offline activity become inextricably entangled. It is through the mass sharing of emotions that (temporary) public spaces are constructed. To understand why such spaces are fundamentally transient, we explore, in the following two sections, how they are shaped by new modes of governance and by the technocommercial strategies of social media corporations.

Governmentality

Just as the character of social activism and civic engagement is evolving, so are the strategies and techniques of *governmentality*. Over the past decade, states have developed new methods in controlling popular protests. These strategies affect how protest unfolds both offline and online. In their study on the protests against the extreme right-wing Akademikerball ("Academic's Ball") in Vienna, Cornelia Brantner and Joan Ramon Rodríguez-Amat show how zoning laws and restrictive protest zones very much shaped street action and social media communication. The starting point of their analysis is the observation that the Akademikerball takes place at a highly symbolic location, the Hoffburg, which for centuries has been the political center of republics and empires. To keep protesters away from this location and from the ball's official participants, the authorities declared the area around the Hoffburg a "danger zone," in which independent reporting was hindered and in which it was forbidden to assemble and cover one's face. Consequently, demonstrations took place at the margins of this "meaningful space." As such, governance strategies defined the conditions of the protest performance, which involved "police, demonstrators, media, photographers, tweeters, and bloggers." Here too, we see offline and online activity becoming deeply intertwined. Brantner and Rodríguez-Amat write, "The interaction of physical and virtual spaces constructs an imaginary territory of possible networked connections and conquered spaces of decentralized political power. These spaces are structures of opportunity, expectations, and systems of connectivity." These observations underline that public space is not given, but should be conceived of as a space to be *constructed* and *conquered*.

The idea of public space as fundamentally contested is also the starting point of Elizabeth Brunner, Kevin DeLuca, and Ye Sun's study on online environmental activism in China. Their article suggests that citizens around the world can learn something from the wild and creative practices of Chinese protestors. They stress that activism everywhere is deeply influenced by "global surveillance," which makes China particularly interesting because this country "has long been under surveillance" and "its citizens have extensive experience working for social change in that environment."

Exploring how Chinese activists employ social media, Brunner, DeLuca, and Sun distance themselves from the notion of the public sphere. Instead, they propose the concept of "wild public screens," which especially refers to the combined use of smartphones and social platforms in popular contestation. In their own words, wild public screens are "places full of risk and void of guaranteed protection." They are "designed for commercial interests," but appropriated for activist purposes. Drawing on recent examples of environmental protest, Brunner, DeLuca, and Sun maintain that Chinese activists have learned how to protest in the face of omnipresent state surveillance. "When words are censored, they use images; when images are censored, they deploy walkie-talkie functions; when a certain phrase is censored, they replace it with one of the Chinese language's multitudinous phononyms." In this way, Chinese citizens overwhelm the censors and offer "hope through incessant creativity."

Examining how state surveillance and new policing tactics drive activists to appropriate social platforms as public spaces, it is important to also critically interrogate how contemporary practices of governance build on activist social media activities. Research on Chinese online contention shows that the central state does not simply repress citizen protest on social platforms, but rather tries to steer it in

particular directions and learn from its results to govern more effectively. Contentious online communication that directly criticizes and attacks the Chinese central state government or that is geared toward mobilizing people for street protest is indeed heavily censored. Yet, simultaneously, much online critique and satire focused on local and regional governments and corporations circulate freely on the Chinese Internet (Bamman, O'Connor, & Smith, 2012; King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). In the light of this evidence, it has been suggested that the Chinese state uses online protest as a governing instrument to keep potentially corrupt local and regional governors and polluting companies in check. In the absence of a democratic system of checks and balances, online contestation is one of the key mechanisms through which the Chinese state can keep track of popular discontent (Perry & Goldman, 2007; Poell, de Kloet, & Zeng, 2014; Shirk, 2011; Yang, 2009).

Along the same lines, it should be noted more generally that online protest communication allows authorities to track activist activity. Evidently, such tracking is not restricted to authoritarian contexts, but has become common practice in liberal democratic regimes as well. Real-time social media communication enables activists to take protest reporting in their own hands, but it also allows police and security forces to minutely survey street activity and intervene when deemed necessary. In the same way, the mass online data surveillance programs of the National Security Agency and other security agencies are focused on preemptively identifying potentially dangerous groups and individuals (Lyon, 2014; Trottier, 2012). In other words, whatever creative protest activities citizens develop through social platforms, temporarily appropriating them as public spaces, it is important not to lose sight of the intricate ways in which authorities develop governing and policing strategies in response to and around such activities.

Technocommercial Assemblages

As various contributions to this special section demonstrate, social media are not simply tools or spaces that can be appropriated for activist purposes. Instead, these media should be understood as *technocommercial assemblages*, which shape and translate user activity. Deploying techniques such as data mining, user profiling, and targeted advertising, social platforms structure how users can express themselves and connect with each other (Langlois, McKelvey, Elmer, & Werbin, 2009; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

First, social platforms do not, as is often assumed, facilitate horizontal activist networks. Like traditional mass media, these platforms enhance the visibility of particular actors and topics. Of course, this is not done through editorial selection, but through the specific technological architectures of social platforms. Gerbaudo shows how this works in the case of Facebook pages, which "display a strongly asymmetrical architecture of participation." The architecture of pages provides the page administrators with extensive means to shape communication. They control who can add posts to a page or start a photo gallery or event, and they can ban unruly users. Users, in turn, are often restricted to liking, sharing, and commenting on admin posts. This architecture puts the admins of the two Facebook pages examined by Gerbaudo in a perfect position to orchestrate moments of digital enthusiasm, which they did by constructing "hopeful emotional" narratives.

As Duguay's inquiry demonstrates, similar observations can be made regarding other social platforms. Twitter, she emphasizes, "allows for the high visibility of a small number of users with many followers." Her analysis makes clear that popular users function as connection points between the protest event and larger audiences. In this way, WorldPride gained public attention through affective messages by politicians and celebrities. On the downside, such popular users tended to "overshadow more diverse viewpoints and co-opt events like WorldPride in attempts to boost their status." Thus, social media give rise to new hierarchies, which potentially undermine the equality and democratic character of protest communication.

Second, it should be observed that the emotional character of much contemporary protest communication is reinforced by social media's technocommercial strategies. As Duguay notes, "social media are designed to elicit personal and affective information as part of their profit-making strategy." Examining "networked identity work" on Twitter, she argues, it is often unclear whether social traffic is driven by user intentions or by the "platform's invitation to share a certain type of data." It is clear, as Duguay stresses, that the Twitter architecture through its 140-character format homogenizes user expression, limiting it to "emojis, links, and photos without room for customized creativity." Similar observations can be made regarding other social platforms, which not only facilitate but also format emotional expression.

Moreover, as Gerbaudo points out, social platforms affect the *temporality* of protest collectivities. Exploring how emotions expressed through Facebook feed into the construction of digital enthusiasm, he argues that this type of connectivity has an important drawback: It tends to quickly fizzle out after a protest event ends. This fizzling out, as various other authors have also noted, can be connected to the specific architecture of social platforms (Couldry, 2015; Leistert, 2013; Poell & van Dijck, 2015). Gerbaudo maintains, "The popularity feature, the use of timeline and trending topic algorithms ends up making certain channels and topics subject to an inbuilt obsolescence." In this sense, moments of publicness are both sociocultural and technocommercial constructs. The ephemerality of contemporary protest movements is just as much a product of the technological infrastructure that mediates these movements as it is a product of the individualization of politics and society, which has been ongoing for several decades (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1997).

In combination, these observations suggest that even though social platforms greatly facilitate popular protest by enabling the expression and widespread circulation of emotions, they simultaneously introduce mechanisms that complicate popular contestation. Their viral dynamics just as quickly mobilize attention for protest as they shift it away to new sets of trending topics. And these platforms promote hierarchical forms of communication, which potentially obscure diverse points of view, undermining the participatory democratic spirit that reigns over the current protest wave.

Emotional Connectivity

The five articles invite us to critically reflect on the conceptualization of publicness in the tradition of public sphere theory. Such a critical reflection allows us to pinpoint the particular characteristics of publicness as it takes shape in social media protest communication.

First, although public sphere theory has gone through many phases and iterations, its core revolves around the idea that publicness involves public debate or dialogue and the ability of citizens to articulate their interests and opinions. This can take the form of a bourgeois public sphere, a multiplicity of public spheres, or a transnational public sphere. The five articles observe a completely different type of publicness in social media protest communication and mobilization. Not debate, opinions, or demands assemble the collective, but the rapid circulation of emotionally charged images and slogans. *Emotional connectivity* allows fundamentally different actors, identities, and perspectives to temporarily come together as collectives to challenge injustice and domination. This mode of connectivity is not characterized by dialogue or by a common ideology or political program, but by a shared emotional state and set of symbols.

Second, the notion of the public sphere suggests a relatively stable set of relations, which can be identified as "public." However, what we are seeing instead in contemporary protest is publicness as a *dynamic construction process*. In this process, public or publicness is never given or self-evident, but is always contested, questioned, and in flux. For one thing, social platforms are not public but commercial spaces managed by large corporations. These platforms can be temporarily appropriated as public spaces, facilitating protest communication. However, channeling protest and indignation through social platforms necessarily means that such expressions are highly formatted by the platforms' architectures. Furthermore, such moments of publicness will certainly be brief, as social media are geared toward continuously connecting users to new trends and advertisements. Public space in its physical manifestation is not self-evident either. The development of ubiquitous surveillance, zoning laws, restricted protest zones, and other preemptive security measures means that publicness, as a space of public contestation, needs to be conquered and occupied. Hence, rather than looking for a public sphere, we propose to examine *trajectories of publicness*, which entails tracing how public spaces are constructed, that is, opened up for public expression and contestation, as well as how they are closed down. The objective is to gain insights into how moments of publicness are created, sustained, and dissolved through the mutual articulation of citizen and activist practices, media infrastructures, and the governing strategies of states.

Finally, public sphere theory starts from the assumption that public space needs to be facilitated by public media, which operate independent from commercial and political interests. However, contemporary activism and civic engagement primarily take shape through *commercial* social platforms, with noncommercial public media playing a minor role. As social platforms gain a dominant position in the media landscape, they become *obligatory passing points* in the organization of protest mobilization and communication. This is the reality today's citizens and activists have to live with. Given this state of affairs, we think it advisable to shift the focus from arguing for independent public media and criticizing commercial (social) media to critically examining how instances of publicness are composed through commercial platform infrastructures. The challenge is to gain insight into how the technocommercial mechanisms introduced by these infrastructures shape the articulation of publicness. On the basis of such an analysis, we can begin to consider how the construction of public space can be supported. Whatever form such interventions might take, the starting point will need to be a critical understanding of commercial social platforms as both opportunities and obstacles for the formation and reproduction of public space.

References

- Bamman, D., O'Connor, B., & Smith, N. (2012). Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media. *First Monday*, 17(3). doi:10.5210/fm.v17i3.3943
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bimber, B., Flanagin, A., & Stohl, C. (2012). *Collective action in organizations: Interaction and engagement in an era of technological change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Couldry, N. (2015). The myth of "us": Digital networks, political change and the production of collectivity. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(6), 608–626. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2014.979216
- della Porta, D. (2005). Multiple belongings, flexible identities and the construction of "another politics": Between the European social forum and the local social fora. In D. della Porta & S. Tarrow (Eds.), *Transnational protest and global activism* (pp. 175–202). Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and post-modernization: Cultural, economic and political change in 43 societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, 107(2), 326–343. doi:10.1017/S0003055413000014
- Langlois, G., McKelvey, F., Elmer, G., & Werbin, K. (2009). Mapping commercial Web 2.0 worlds: Towards a new critical ontogenesis. *Fibreculture*, 14, 1–14.
- Leistert, O. (2013). Smell the fish: Digital Disneyland and the right to oblivion. *First Monday*, 18(3).
- Lyon, D. (2014). Surveillance, Snowden, and big data: Capacities, consequences, critique. *Big Data & Society*, 1(2), 1–13. doi:10.1177/2053951714541861

- McDonald, K. (2002). From solidarity to fluidarity: Social movements beyond "collective identity"—The case of globalization conflicts. *Social Movement Studies, 1*(2), 109–128.
doi:10.1080/1474283022000010637
- Perry, E. J., & Goldman, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Grassroots political reform in contemporary China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Poell, T., de Kloet, J., & Zeng, G. (2014). Will the real Weibo please stand up? Chinese online contention and actor-network theory. *Chinese Journal of Communication, 7*(1), 1–18.
doi:10.1080/17544750.2013.816753
- Poell, T., & van Dijck, J. (2015). Social media and activist communication. In C. Atton (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to alternative and community media* (pp. 527–537). London, UK: Routledge.
- Shirk, S. L. (2011). Changing media, changing China. In S. L. Shirk (Ed.), *Changing media, changing China* (pp. 1–37). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Trottier, D. (2012). *Social media as surveillance: Rethinking visibility in a converging world*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing.
- van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication, 1*(1), 2–14.
doi:10.12924/mac2013.01010002
- Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.