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Digital Media Activism

A Situated, Historical, and Ecological Approach Beyond the Technological Sublime

Abstract: This chapter engages with the notion of digital media activism. The starting point is that current studies often fall short in situating digital media activism within a longer historical trajectory and in the context of a complex media ecology, comprising both old and new media interactions. As a result, they frequently assume activism has been (and is) predominantly "digital". Countering this assumption, this chapter argues for the importance of establishing both a historical perspective and a contextualized ecological lens of this concept, allowing for a nuanced analysis of activist media practices beyond the technological sublime. In the first part, the chapter situates the notion of digital media activism within broader research on media activism and then disentangles its constitutive elements, i.e. "digital," "media," and "activism." In the second part, the chapter brings together attempts to historicize and contextualize digital media activism. It shows that a historical perspective is able to capture the continuities and evolution in relation to a long history of technologically mediated activism. Then, it illustrates how media ecology perspectives can contextualise digital activism by (a) identifying the coexistence of multiple media practices and artefacts; (b) elucidating motivations and obstacles in the adoption and rejection of digital tools; (c) shedding light on how citizens purposely disconnect from media technologies as a form of resistance.

Keywords: activism, media activism, mediated activism, social movements, media ecologies

As with other contributions to this edited volume, our chapter engages with a concept that has gained traction in the past two decades with intense debates and periods characterized by less emphasis on digital activism. In parallel with protest waves such as the current Black Lives Matter mobilisations, discussions of media practices also came and went, and digital media activism has emerged as yet another hot topic for academic research. As we already displayed in 2019 (Kaun and Uldam 2018), conferences, special issues and workshops are increasingly dedicated to digital media activism and, according to Google's ngram graph, references to digital activism have steadily increased since the mid-1990s. In connection with the growing interest in digital activism, different conclusions have

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been drawn in terms of its impact and consequences. For instance, Michael Hardt (2017) has linked the emergence of digital media activism to the speeding-up of the protest cycles more generally as a consequence of the focus on communication practices of social movement organisations and individual activists. The much-cited work by Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2013) foregrounds the organisational shifts in social movements that emerge with digital networked media, namely a shift from collective to connective action. More recently (digital) media activism has been approached from the perspective of social imaginaries (Barassi 2015; Ferrari 2019; Treré 2019) and frames (Sádaba Rodríguez 2019) that modulate and modify activism across digital technologies and political contexts. Here, the question of how activists relate to and make sense of digital technologies as part of the political repertoire is foregrounded. Others suggest to refrain from using the notion of digital media activism completely as it imposes an unnecessary and unfruitful overemphasis on technology (Kavada 2020).

In this chapter, we aim to historicise the notion of digital activism and make conceptual connections to other, earlier forms of media activism. In our contribution, we argue for the importance of establishing both a historical and contextualized ecological perspective on digital media activism that allows for a nuanced analysis of activist media practices beyond the technological sublime. We first provide a brief definition of digital activism and review earlier attempts at historicizing the concept and forms of digital activism. Further, we situate digital activism in the context of media activism. We conclude by proposing media ecology approaches to both historicise and culturally contextualize digital activism.

1 Digital Media Activism – A Definition

The notion of digital media activism itself is broad and ambiguous. Joyce (2010) defines digital media activism as a form of political engagement that addresses both fixed and mobile devices with access to the Internet, including practices such as hacktivism, denial of service attacks, hashtag activism and open-source advocacy. Other definitions are even broader. For example, Gerbaudo (2012) argues that any use of digital media for political purposes should be considered as digital media activism. Differences in defining digital media activism partly relate to the truly interdisciplinary character of studying digital media activism. Disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, media and communication studies as well as design studies are currently contributing to this growing field that is increasingly rich and disparate. While some studies

foreground forms of mobilisation, questions of opportunity structures as well as framing and information diffusion (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Garrett 2006; González-Bailón et al. 2011), other more cultural-studies oriented research expands on the broader context of digital media activism including the social, historical, political, and the broader media ecology that envelop digital media activism (Yang 2009).

Besides digital media activism, a broad spectrum of other terms have been used to represent either the same or overlapping concepts including: cyberactivism (e.g. Carty and Onyett 2006), net activism (e.g. Meikle 2010), Internet activism (e.g. Earl et al. 2010; Tatarchevskiy 2011), online activism (e.g. Uldam 2013), web activism (e.g. Dartnell 2011), networked activism (e.g. Beutz Land 2009; Tufekci 2013), e-activism (e.g. Carty 2010), mobile activism (e.g. Cullum 2010), social media activism (e.g. Miller 2015), hashtag activism (e.g. Yang 2016b), digital activism (e.g. Hands 2011) and frontstage/backstage activism (Treré 2020). Several scholars have also adopted some of those concepts interchangeably (e.g., Kahn and Kellner 2004; Meikle 2010). Other related combinations include the description of protests and mobilizations as Internet, web-based or digitally enabled, and the prefix "net", for example "netroots organisations" for organizations that surged online (Carty 2010, 155) or "netizens" for (active) online citizens (e.g., Mason 2013).

The assortment of terminology in the field stresses the meteoric development and diffusion of the phenomenon and the changing landscape of meanings and significations attached to it. Often, scholars are quick to embrace new terms with scarce attention to conceptual nuances. Further, this changing terminology is clearly linked to technological developments. While "web" and "cyber" reflect early forms of online media, the terms "social media activism" and "hashtag activism" highlight instead subsequent developments following the emergence and spread of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Additionally, the choice of terminology is often related to a particular era in which a given term dominated the language discourse (Wolfson 2014), such as the term "cyber" in connection to activism which evokes "futuristic, science-fiction dimensions" (Lupton 2015, 13). Similarly, digital activism's positioning in a complex and interdisciplinary field has affected its conceptualization. It has been explored in communications, politics, public relations, marketing, and in the third sector. The contested and problematic character of this term relates to the nature of digital scholarship itself which, as Lupton (2015) has remarked, is necessarily interdisciplinary and incorporates works in the areas of computer sciences, digital anthropology, media studies, cultural geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, and mass communications as well as media, design and data studies.

Expressions such as online activism, cyber-activism, Internet activism and social media activism are not interchangeable. Joyce (2010) has pointed out that some of these terms are not exhaustive, because they only refer to Internet enabled technologies (e.g., online activism and cyber-activism). Other notions, she explains, focus instead exclusively on specific digital platforms (e.g., social media), and thus are not able to account for other digitally enabled forms of activism. This issue has been referred to by Treré (2012, 2019) as the "one-medium bias" in digital activism studies. Terms like "mediated activism" (Waisbord 2018), "information activism" (Stein, Notley, and Davis 2012), "ICT activism" (Hintz 2012) and "hybrid media activism" (Treré 2019) are deliberately broader, aiming to include many varieties of technologically mediated activism beyond the realm of the digital. Another term that has gained traction lately is the notion of "data activism" (Milan 2017; Lehtiniemi and Haapoja 2020), which refers to activism that addresses in particular the role of data in both political engagement and everyday life. Milan (2017) argues that data activism represents the new frontier of media activism and defines data activism as involving both practices that use big data for political purposes – which she calls pro-active data activism – and practices that are taking a critical position towards the collection of large amounts of data on citizens – which she names re-active data activism. While the connections and overlaps between digital activism and data activism are multiple (Beraldo and Milan 2019), most studies tend to separate the two, contributing to further exacerbating the terminological and conceptual confusion around the term.

2 Media Activism: Situating Digital Media Activism

In order to historicise digital media activism, we need to situate this concept in the broader context of media activism or mediated activism. This is of particular importance in the current moment as it allows us to reconsider emerging media practices and political activism in terms of changes and continuities (Waisbord 2018).

More generally we can divide media activism into activism that

a) has media as an object to be revolutionized or reformed, for example the media reform movement (Pickard 2015), and Hacktivism (Coleman 2014). This is what we call media-centric media activism.

b) strategically employs media to put forward their political causes, for example Occupy, Movement of the squares, anti-austerity movements. This is what we call non-media centric media activism.

One could question if this distinction makes sense and if the boundaries are not increasingly blurred with (digital) media being so fundamentally engrained in all aspects of our lives. Regardless of the usage of the notion media activism – an increasingly popular concept as well (there are a number of research platforms like MARC[1] and a new interest group was founded in 2017 within the International Communication Association dedicated to Media Activism) – the interrelationship between social movements and the media has a long history including now classical studies such as Todd Gitlin's (2003) "The Whole World Is Watching."

Besides the specific focus or centrality of media in the study of media activism, we can, on a very basic level, divide between the study of social movements representation in the mainstream media on the one hand and activists' media practices on the other; but even this distinction might increasingly be blurred with boundaries between production and consumption of media content being diminished by social media. As we have argued earlier (Kaun and Treré 2018), typologies are always problematic while reducing complexity. However, these distinctions allow us to situate both media as well as digital media activism.

2.1 Defining Activism in Media Activism

Yang (2016a) argues that activism itself is an ambiguous term that has slowly replaced the usage of other, more radical terms for political action such as revolution both in academia and more generally. Activism, he argues, is now used for both radical, revolutionary action and non-revolutionary, community action. Hence, it potentially encompasses action both in the service of the nation-state and in opposition to it. Yang traces the etymological roots of the term activism from "advocacy of a policy of supporting Germany in the war; pro-German feeling or activity" to in the 1920s the more general meaning of "the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change" (Yang 2016a, 2). In that sense, activism has several different meanings; a philosophical orientation to life

1 https://www.asc.upenn.edu/research/working-groups/media-activism-research-collective, accessed on May 12, 2020.

and an economic strategy to mobilize citizens for national industrialisation and pro-German activities during World War I as well as vigorous political activity.

Today, activism includes all kinds of citizens' political activities ranging from high-cost, high-risk protests and revolutionary movements to everyday practices aimed at protecting the environment against corporatized NGO activism. In contrast, the usage of revolution declined steadily after the 1970s, in parallel with the rise of activism, NGO and civil society activism that tend to be moderate, institutionalized and corporatized. After the 1990s, activism has mellowed to indicate moderate rather than radical forms of action.

Yang argues that the current ambiguity of the term activism reflects the politics and purposes in the current age of ambiguity. In late-modern social movement societies, protest becomes increasingly institutionalized and bureaucratized, and civic rather than disruptive. The switch in language from revolution to activism marks – according to Yang – a de-radicalisation of civic action towards corporatisation and moderate NGO activism. Yang then continues to discuss online activism as an example for changes in the notion of activism and its ambivalence shifting between the politicisation of everyday practices to the corporatisation of political practices: the push and pull between politicisation and depoliticization.

2.2 Defining Media in Media Activism

If with Yang's elaboration we have addressed the activism in media activism, Raymond Williams (1980/2005) offers us a way to address the question of media in media activism. He suggests that we should analyze media along three types of transformation that appear in the context of mediation:

- Amplification that refers to everything from the megaphone to the more advanced technologies of directly transmitted radio;
- Duration (storing) that relates to direct physical resources to store media content such as sound recording;
- Alternative symbolic production that extends the conventional use or transformation of physical objects as signs, development of writing, of graphics and of the means of their reproduction.

We argue that these three transformations that appear in the context of mediation are also helpful to make sense of media activism and its role for social movements. Media amplify the political messages of social movement activists in many ways. Particularly social media with a broad spread have been heralded for their abilities to amplify political messages for mobilisation. At the same time, media technologies are crucial for preserving the histories of social

movements for internal identification, but also external memory practices. Further, media practices allow for completely new ways of (self-) expression, which can be captured by William's notion of alternative. They provide alternative ways of meaning making and signification. Furthermore, Williams concludes his text by alluding to the political importance of considering media not only as means of communication but means of production which are part of a broader struggle for social change. He argues that

> we shall have entered a new social world when we have brought the means and systems of the most direct communication under our own direct and general control. We shall have transformed them from their normal contemporary functions as commodities or as elements of a power structure. We shall have recovered these central elements of our social production from the many kinds of expropriator. (Williams 1980/2005, 62)

His point is that we, as political communities, should strive for "new means of production for more advanced and complex realization of the decisive productive relationships between communication and community." Digital media have been the latest of such means of production of relationships within communities through communication. That, however, does not necessitate the exclusiveness of digital media fulfilling this function. Rather, as we argue, the whole media ecology – a complex system of different means of production for communication – should be considered.

3 Historicizing Digital Media Activism

While the hype around digital activism is arguably a recent phenomenon, there is an overemphasis on newness in many studies of digital activism across different disciplines and contexts. This despite the fact that the so-called "digital revolution" started much earlier than the rise of social media in the 2010s. Before social media platforms, mobile phones, video handheld cameras and personal computers changed the way social movements self-organized and documented their activities (Askanius 2012). However, one can find only rare attempts to historicise the role of digital media for political activism. In an attempt to historicise digital activism, Trebor Scholz (2010) links political practices to the history of the Internet, going back to the 1970s. His focus remains, however, on technological development rather than activism. In contrast, Todd Wolfson (2014) traces the origins of the cyber left in the US back to the Zapatista movement in Mexico in the 1990s as one of the first movements to explicitly include "a network of communication among all our struggles" which in turn inspired activists in the US.

While Wolfson is an excellent example of historicizing digital activism, his focus remains on the US. Thus, there is a major research gap on histories of digital activism beyond this single dominant technological and cultural context.

Even though a more thoroughly written history of digital activism seems still to be missing, there are a few attempts at a periodisation of digital activism. Defining digital activism as political participation and protest organized in digital networks, Athina Karatzogianni (2015) explores four waves of digital activism. She identifies the first wave as starting in 1994 with the Zapatista and antiglobalization movements, including alternative media such as Indymedia. The second wave of digital activism stretches from 2001 until 2007 and is mainly constituted by the rise of digital activism linked to anti-Iraq war mobilisations. During the third wave after 2007, digital activism spread to the BRICS and other countries beyond the global north. The fourth wave, taking place roughly between 2010 to 2013, marks the mainstreaming of digital activism that is sparked and dominated by discussions of large-scale digital state surveillance unveiled by Wikileaks and Snowden (Karatzogianni 2015). In contrast, Paolo Gerbaudo (2017) distinguishes only two periods of digital activism. He identifies a first wave of digital activism in the mid-1990s characterized by cyber-autonomism within the anti-globalisation movement that was characterized by attempts to build independent digital platforms and infrastructures such as the Indymedia project. The second wave starts – according to Gerbaudo – in the 2010s and alludes to cyber-populism as constituted within the mass mobilizations of Occupy, the movements of the squares and the anti-austerity movements. In Gerbaudo's periodisation, cyber-autonomism that is oriented towards autonomous communication is contrasted with cyber-populism with a techno-political orientation that is instituted by a web of commercial Internet platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google and is mainly geared towards mass outreach.

While both these periodizations are insightful, they somehow struggle to balance a focus on the evolving media technologies on the one side with ideological changes and the socio-political context within which digital activism evolves on the other. Gerbaudo is critical of technological determinism and foregrounds an ideological analysis of digital activism practices and this surely contributes to a much-needed political and contextualized understanding of digital activism. However, many theorisations tend to lose sight of the character of activism that is specific to different digital media and formats, thus lacking media-specificity in its historical analysis (Kaun and Uldam 2018).

Recently, Bart Cammaerts has provided a historical overview of the ways in which activists and protest movements have both appropriated and shaped media and communication technologies "to fit a set of self-mediation practices in support of their broader movement goals" (2019, 98). Cammaerts carefully balances both

material affordances and the social shaping of technology on the one side, and regulation and the interplay between the state and activists on the other. His overview is able to foreground the continuous dialectic between structure and agency which we believe is essential to understand digital activism. To both further historicise and radically contextualise digital media activism, we suggest employing media ecological perspectives.

4 Contextualizing Digital Media Activism: Media Ecology Perspectives

Media ecology perspectives have recently been adopted to explore digital activism and the media practices of contemporary social movements (Barassi; Mattoni 2017; Treré 2011, 2012, 2019). Inspired by the media ecology tradition that conceives media as complex environments, the key strength of this approach lies in its holistic gaze. This gaze does not privilege any specific media technology, but instead investigates how activists, through their communicative practices, make sense of, navigate, and merge newer and older media formats, physical and digital spaces, internal and external forms of communication, as well as alternative and corporate social media platforms (Treré 2019). This conceptual lens is able to foreground the coexistence of multiple media practices and technologies within contemporary movements and activist collectives, casting light on how they often rely on both digital and analogue technologies and artefacts. Hence, media ecology perspectives allow the researcher to better appraise the effective participatory potential of each technology within a full spectrum of activist practices (Foust and Hoyt 2018; Mercea, Iannelli, and Loader 2016).

This perspective has often been combined with a media practice approach (for an extensive review, see Stephansen and Treré 2019) to shed light on the complex, hybrid and multi-faceted nature of the media systems within which activists operate. These two conceptual lenses, as Treré (2019, 205) illustrates, implicate – and reinforce – each other: on the one hand, an analytical approach anchored in practice theory puts us in a position to ask holistic questions regarding a whole array of media used by activists; on the other, a media ecology perspective illuminates the complex interrelations among multiple types of media (old and new, corporate and alternative, online and offline, etc.).

Research based on media ecology perspectives has greatly complicated claims regarding the alleged digital exclusiveness of contemporary activism. It has unveiled how old technologies still play a fundamental role in contemporary activism and counteracted the uncritical celebration of the benefits of the latest

technological platforms to appear on the scene. Treré (2011, 2012, 2018, 2019) has extensively theorized and relied on a media ecology approach to overcome the communicative reductionism that defines most of the literature on social movement and communication. His nuanced ecological explorations of different social movements and activist collectives in Italy, Spain, and Mexico have revealed how the complexity of activists' practices critically unfold over a multiplicity of online and offline spaces, spanning unexpected constellations of old and new communication technologies. Scholars like Bonini (2017) have reached similar conclusions, demonstrating the significance of radios in the protests that took place in Turkey in 2013. The Italian scholar studied the role played by Açık Radyo – the only independent and listener-supported radio station based in Istanbul – in the Gezi Park protests, concluding that radio has not lost its value as citizen media, but has only repositioned itself within the changing media ecology, blending itself with social media in order to continue amplifying radical political discourses and enabling activists to network. Similarly, in her comparative study of the media ecologies of various political organisations in Spain and the UK, Barassi (2013) emphasized the enduring political relevance of print magazines. Even in the digital era, these traditional forms of activism continue to operate and are continuously redefining their role in order to compete within a crowded media ecology where social and mobile media are given more prominence in relation to the spread of political messages.

As these examples illustrate, by embedding digital activism within a history of never ending adaptations, displacements, and abandonments, a media ecology approach allows us to appreciate not only how different technologies co-exist but also how, why, and under what circumstances they co-evolve and subsequently how their role changes.

A media ecology approach is thus complementary with historical analyzes (see the previous section) that examine how the role of particular activist technologies has developed within specific social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Rinke and Roder 2011). For instance, in her study of the media of anti-capitalist food activism in the UK, Giraud (2018) demonstrated how Indymedia, one of the most emblematic online alternative media during the first half of the 2000s, has changed significantly due to shifts in activist media practices and in the broader media ecology. Giraud illustrates that in the context of food activism in the UK, Indymedia has not vanished but continues instead to fulfil an archival function, alongside other newer media that are used for coordinating more pressing political actions. Likewise, in her ethnographic case study of the Salvadoran group Activista and the launch of its "Todos Somos Agua" campaign, Harlow (2016) demonstrated that online social media like Facebook were reconfigured as a form of activist citizen media in El Salvador. The activists interviewed by Harlow pointed out that they believed Facebook offered a space

that allowed people with non-mainstream views to voice an opinion, making it possible for them to share news about mining, water contamination, and other social issues that the public would otherwise never learn about. Moreover, they saw Facebook as a reclaimed media territory for the youth, who are normally excluded by mainstream media. Harlow's study complicates linear and uncritical conceptions of digital activism by showing how social media can be appropriated in non-hegemonic and alternative ways.

Further, media ecology perspectives can also elucidate why some activist groups still prefer or are simply not able to use digital tools in their activist practices for a variety of different reasons, difficulties, and obstacles (Arcila, Barranquero, and González Tanco 2018). While the dominant narrative of many digital activism accounts is that activists around the world have massively adopted digital tools, indigenous communities, and community radio activists still grapple with several forms of digital divide and inequality that prevent them from fully exploiting the possibilities of digital activism. But more crucially, it should not be assumed that digital technologies are inherently better in serving the needs of some communities and activist groups (Sartoretto 2016). As years of research on community radio and alternative media demonstrate, many communities are often better served by local radio and television stations (Rodríguez 2001). However, one should also resist the temptation to conclude that connectivity levels can unequivocally determine the intensity and spread of digital activism. As the manifold experiences in Latin America (Pertierra and Salazar 2019), Africa (Mutsvairo 2016) and Asia (Postill 2014) clearly demonstrate, vibrant digital cultures and activist practices have flourished despite several infrastructural, political and economic obstacles.

Finally, a media ecology perspective has also sparked reflections about the interplay between connective and disconnective practices within digital activism (Kaun and Treré 2018). Emerging accounts of digital activism practices are increasingly taking into consideration (Lim 2020; Natale and Treré 2020; Syvertsen 2020) how citizens purposely disconnect from digital technologies as a form of resistance, further complicating the concepts of digital media activism and connectivity. Disconnection is here not understood in straightforward terms. Rather it is ambiguous in itself; never stable and always shifting in its expression. The argument to consider disconnection in the context of digital media questions their centrality for political activism. Instead, we situate digital media both in a complex web of other media (the media ecological perspective) as well as media practices including non-use and disconnection. Hence, adopting disconnection as an entry point for understanding activists' (dis)engagements with media technologies unsettles traditional assumptions about the reliance on and the taken-for-grantedness of digital infrastructures and tools.

Conclusion

Digital activism has been one of the rising stars in the conceptual sky of media and communication studies. As often the case, rising stars may fall. In this chapter, we have critically engaged with the concept of digital activism to firstly situate the term and idea of digital activism historically. We provide both short definitions and histories of the digital and activism to carve out the crucial contributions that the notion of digital activism can still make to the field at the intersection of social movement and media studies.

Secondly, we argue that only with a historically and culturally contextualized approach towards digital activism can we fruitfully explore contemporary expressions of political activism that employs a plethora of media in endless variations, constellations, and combinations (Constanza-Chock 2014; Sartoretto 2016). While the empirical expressions of digital media activism change in relation to technological developments, at the same time, activism always also shapes and reconfigures the forms and possibilities of media itself.

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