

SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES AND CITIZEN MEDIA

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Social movement studies is an interdisciplinary subject area located at the intersections of political science, anthropology and sociology; it draws on a number of intellectual and methodological traditions to explain processes of social mobilization, collective action and collective identity formation. Social movements may be understood as “(a) mostly informal networks of interaction, based on (b) shared beliefs and solidarity, mobilized around (c) contentious themes through (d) the frequent use of various forms of protest” (della Porta and Mattoni 2015:1496). Importantly, media, mediation and a variety of communication processes are at the heart of each of these dimensions of social movements, and bringing attention to the intersections of media and movements is vital to understanding processes of collective action, political identity formation and cycles of contestation. As a conceptual and theoretical horizon, citizen media has often been deployed in scholarly analysis to understand this media–movement nexus and raise questions about how civil society actors organize collectively and engage in activism in, through and about the media (Mattoni 2013b).

Social movement studies has traditionally paid only “tangential attention to media dynamics”, and a “persistent divorce” between media studies on the one hand and theory and research by sociologists, political scientists and historians on the other has created a certain fragmentation of knowledge on the topic (Downing 2008:41). This situation began to change at the turn of the century, and a growing body of work is now seeking to bridge these historic gaps. The notion of social movement media practices has proved a particularly fruitful unifying concept around which scholars are seeking to cross-pollinate perspectives from movement scholarship and media and communication studies. This entry focuses on social movement studies scholarship that approaches social movement media as a form of citizen media. Much of this work draws on the notion of media practices in contentious politics and proposes a turn to practice theory as a means of avoiding media-centrism, one-medium/platform reductionism and binary distinctions between digital and non-digital as well as old and new forms of citizen media (Mattoni 2017; Mattoni and Treré 2014; Kaun 2016a). Further, while ensuring that the broader historical trajectory of this relationship is not ignored, the entry pays particular attention to the adaptation and appropriation of digital media and later social media into social movement media repertoires and how this has influenced both strategic and expressive activities of social movement actors and organizations.

Finally, providing an account of citizen media from the perspective of social movement studies implies that privilege is given to the role of citizen media in movement building, collective action and strategic communication at the expense of the appropriation of such media and media practices in looser, more individualized and ephemeral forms of civic engagement and activism of unaffiliated citizens that have also become widespread since the 2010s.

Bridging social movement studies and media and communication studies

Traditional approaches to social movements – works rooted in resource mobilization theories, political process approaches and new social movement theories – have paid little attention to communication processes and only sketchily broached issues around media, mediation and communication, while failing to systematically address their role in mobilization and movement building, with few exceptions such as Cammaerts et al. (2013), Downing (2001), van de Donk et al. (2004) and Earl and Rohlinger (2010). Kavada (2016) argues that communication is indeed the spectre haunting collective action theory. The spectre, however, lurks in the background of key works in social movement literature: it underlies the conception of collective identity as a process of interaction in the work of Melucci (1996), just as it is implicitly present in the work of Tilly (2005), who considers contentious politics as “an ongoing conversation between claim-makers and their targets” (Kavada 2016:9).

The absence of a cross-disciplinary framework with which to understand citizen media more fully can partly be explained by the very nature of both media and communication studies and social movement studies, as the two are rooted in different yet equally fragmented fields – including sociology, anthropology, political science and psychology – that seldom speak to one another (Roggeband and Klanderfans 2007). An additional reason for the two fields’ fragmentation and blind spots in bridging knowledge on these matters may have to do with the fact that collaborations between their respective scholars are only rarely established in any formalized or sustained way. There are, however, signs that this situation is beginning to change as new technologies giving rise to new forms of mediated protest and collective actions are forcing a rapprochement between sociology and communication (Earl and Garrett 2017).

The emergence of digital media has thus brought media and communication into sharper relief in social movement studies (Kavada 2016), as evident in the notion of social movement media practices around which scholars are seeking to cross-pollinate concepts and perspectives from both fields. The work of Mattoni (2012, 2017) and Treré and Mattoni (2016) has been particularly important in making the connections between the two disciplines visible, as has the growing body of work on media and mediation in the Occupy Wall Street movement, the anti-austerity protest movements across Southern Europe and other protest movements across the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) regions. Important steps towards bridging the two fields have also been taken in the work of Kavada, who argues for the need to take communication seriously in social movement theory by proposing an understanding of collective action as “emerging in conversations and solidified in texts” (2016:9). Another explicit attempt to create cross-fertilization between the two fields involves deploying the concept of mediation opportunity structures, as proposed by Cammaerts (2012) and further developed by Uldam (2013) in her work on online mediation opportunity structures embedded in the anti-capitalist strands of the environmental movement. Work on mediation opportunity structures combines “theories of mediation with social movement theories that assess the opportunities and structural constraints for social movements as well as the logics they attribute to their protest actions” (Cammaerts 2012:122).

Others, like Earl and Garrett (2017), have sought to systematically integrate perspectives from political communication into social movement studies to explain how the rise of new forms of digital protest renders traditional assumptions about the media and movements increasingly irrelevant or outdated. Shifting the focus from strategic communication and media tactics to the audiences of social movement communication and how messages are received, they argue, can enrich our understanding of citizen media in the digital era and expand social movement scholarship more generally (ibid.:480). Flesher Fominaya and Gillan (2017) further propose approaching the issue from the perspective of a technology–media–movements complex (TMMC) to inquire into the use of media in social and political movements and allow for a better integration of the different intellectual traditions that are currently focused on technology, media and movements as separate strands.

Common to these perspectives is an explicit focus on how media, mediation and communication are involved in the very construction of collective struggle and identity formation, and hence cannot be written off as secondary or merely ancillary dimensions of action repertoires. Instead, these approaches place communication processes and the role of citizen media in these processes at the very heart of how we might understand collective action and protest movements today.

Citizen media and/in social movements

Early studies on media–movement dynamics are often divided into two strands of related inquiry, focusing either on mainstream/news media framing of social movements (Gitlin 1980; Halloran et al. 1970; Snow 2004), together with the effects or resonance of these frames (Snow and Benford 1988), or on the production and circulation of alternative, citizen media to create counter–frames and produce autonomous spaces and public spheres. In the first strand of literature, scholars have focused on the asymmetric relationship and power dynamics between mass media and social movements. Mass media have traditionally been crucial to social movements, not least because they “carry movement ideas to a broad audience and give activists leverage in institutional and political processes” (Rohlinger and Vaccaro 2013:736). Other studies have examined the reasons for and consequences of the tendency to frame social movements and protests negatively with reference to the practices, conventions, frameworks and business models inherent to journalism and the media system. The second strand of scholarship highlights instead the different creative, potentially subversive ways in which social movement actors create new or re-appropriate existing media for activist purposes, partly as a response to being misrepresented or ignored in mainstream media and partly based on the impetus to operate outside or in the margins of state-run or commercial media systems (Downing 2001; Rodríguez 2001). Beyond examining available tools to counter-frame and respond to mainstream media, scholars belonging to this strand have examined citizen media as a critical dimension of intra-movement communication and an important part of collective identity construction and symbolic meaning-making processes.

With the emergence of the Internet, attention to the role of media in social movement literature increased dramatically. When the Zapatista movement emerged in Mexico in 1994, it received considerable attention among both social movement and media scholars and is often highlighted as one of the first examples of a collective actor to engage in these new forms of digital and online-based citizen media practices. Explicitly drawing on the networks of communication offered by the Internet in their struggle for indigenous autonomy, the Zapatistas in turn inspired the alterglobalization movement, primarily in the US and Europe, which to a large extent built its communicative infrastructure around the online site Indymedia to protest neoliberal globalization in the late 1990s and into the first years of the millennium (Pickard 2006).

Yet another upsurge in academic attention to citizen media and social movements occurred with the 2009–2011 spread of protests worldwide, from the popular uprisings in the Middle East and the so-called movements of the crisis protesting austerity measures and education cuts in Europe (della Porta and Mattoni 2015) to the Tea Party Movement and Occupy Wall Street in the US. Often understood with reference to specific media technologies and labelled as the Facebook and Twitter revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring and beyond, some of the interest in questions around social mobilization and the media technologies which facilitated and to some degree orchestrated the protests were, however, saturated by media-centrism and some degree of Internet optimism. This gave rise not only to unfruitful and simplified perspectives that implied a direct causal relation between media and social change, but also disregarded the broader geopolitical contexts and historical trajectory into which these events were inscribed; Kaun and Uldam (2017) offer a critical discussion of this post-2010 hype. In the wake of these facile interpretations, and partly as a response, social movement media scholars have offered sobering empirical accounts of actual media practices – rather than technologies and technological affordances – and the possibilities

and limitations offered by technological developments, along with in-depth ethnographies of the everyday workings of media technologies as experienced by social movement actors (Barassi 2015a). An extensive body of critical research has thus emerged on the role of social media in anti-austerity protests (Figueiras and do Espírito Santo 2015; Treré et al. 2017), including the Indignados protests/15M encampments (Postill 2014; Gerbaudo 2012), anti-capitalist movements (Barassi 2015a), the climate change movement (Askanius and Uldam 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2011), the immigrant rights movement (Costanza-Chock 2014), feminist movements (Fotopoulou 2017) and the Occupy movement (Costanza-Chock 2012; Juris 2012; Kavada 2015; Kaun 2016b).

Gerbaudo (2017) argues that the emergence of social media marks a fundamental shift in social movement media practices, from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism, and that the two periods of digital activism correspond not only to two phases of technological development of the Internet (the so-called Web 1.0 and Web 2.0), but also to two different protest waves, first the alterglobalization movement, and later the movement of the squares that began in 2011. Whereas the first wave was “informed by the 70s and 80s counter-culture, DIY culture, and the tradition of alternative media, from pirate radios to fanzines”, the second wave adopted what he considers a technopolitical attitude which sees the Internet as “a space of mass mobilisation in which atomized individuals can be fused together in an inclusive and syncretic subjectivity” (ibid.:479). Social media are, however, not necessarily best understood as citizen media in the sense proposed by Baker and Blaagaard (2016a), or even as compatible with social movement activism. Some scholars suggest we should see social media as replacing or subsuming some rather than embodying new forms of citizen media, as the latter are traditionally built on ideals of democracy and participation that are very different from those underpinning the business models and algorithmic design of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter. Several studies have sought to draw attention to the dangers associated with allowing these corporate platforms to take over the spaces and tools that make up the motley array of independent and non-commercial citizen media and the problematic aspects of conflating citizen media with social media, conceptually and in practice. Activists are increasingly being subjected to surveillance and censorship or are inhibited in other ways and deterred from engaging online. In her studies on British Petroleum’s surveillance of activists in the climate change movement, for example, Uldam (2018) shows how activists face increasing challenges in protecting their online security and privacy and argues that while social media may afford an unprecedented level of visibility for social movement actors, this visibility comes with the risk of being monitored not only by governments but increasingly also by corporations looking to manage and eliminate reputational risks. Others stress that the commercial logics of profit-driven social media are not only not designed for activism but are also potentially detrimental to the activist cause (Askanius and Gustafsson 2010; Barassi 2015a; Youmans and York 2012).

Finally, the widespread use of social media by social movement actors has raised questions relating to issues of historicity, time and democratic practice. These emerge from divergent temporalities between the slow political processes of movement building and organizing and the accelerated pace and cultures of immediacy of these technologies. In her work on three historical movements of the dispossessed in the US, Kaun (2016a) discusses the contradictions between the long-term organizing for social change in social movements and the time regimes of the media used for these purposes. She traces the increasing social acceleration related to media technologies employed by activists in relation to their political work and identifies a desynchronization between what she calls social media time on the one hand and political time on the other. This desynchronization essentially disrupts activists’ ability to connect past and present struggles in meaningful ways and to build viable political projects. Similarly, Milan’s (2015) work on cloud-protesting and collective identity demonstrates how social media are primarily built for social movements operating in the present moment, because these media work through algorithms that compute popularity and interactions and produce regimes of “real-timeness” (ibid.:890).

Future directions

Since the turn of the century, scholars have been calling for research on media–movements dynamics that avoids media-centrism/techno-determinism, goes beyond binary conceptualizations of offline/online and new/old media, ensures holism in approach and design, and pays attention to history by contextualizing studies of contemporary forms of collective action and the role of citizen media in them.

Avoiding media-centrism in the study of citizen media is among the most widely debated in the literature. Adopting practice-based approaches has been put forward as one way of pursuing a non-media-centric perspective. Couldry's (2004) much-cited call for media research to enter a new paradigm by adopting a practice-based approach urged scholars to focus on what people are actually doing with media instead of assuming that technological affordances necessarily enable or empower citizens in specific ways. In social movement scholarship, numerous studies have since sought to marry media studies and practice theory, proposing concepts such as activist media practices (Mattoni 2012), social movement media practices (Costanza-Chock 2014) and citizen media practices (Stephansen 2016; Stephansen and Treré 2019) as overarching frameworks with which to approach the movement–media relationship analytically and conceptually. The reorientation towards practices offers a way of embracing all the processes involved in citizen media (production, content/text, reception, appropriation, recirculation/mediation, archival practices, memory work) in ways that challenge reductive accounts of citizen media as restricted to one process or practice. On a more fundamental level, a practice-based approach offers a means of avoiding communicative reductionism and of bringing a non-media-centric framework into the analysis of citizen media in social movement politics.

By increasingly approaching the study of social movements and citizen media from the perspective of practice theory, current scholarship is also concurrently challenging some of the tenacious binary oppositions that have long dominated the field. Such binaries include thinking about citizen media in terms of offline/online, real/virtual or analogue/digital. An early generation of studies which took an interest in online media and collective action had a tendency to draw up artificial boundaries between offline and online, seeing these as two separate spheres and sites of analysis. In moving beyond dichotomous and binary distinctions that gloss over the various ways in which the online/offline spheres tend to overlap and interact, scholars are increasingly encouraged to engage with flexible and organic research that spans both spaces (Treré and Mattoni 2016). Overcoming the online/offline dichotomy allows us to follow the changeable, criss-crossing patterns of activists' simultaneous engagement with a range of different platforms in both digital and physical contexts (Postill and Pink 2012).

Contemporary scholarship has also been critiqued for paying disproportionate attention to specific platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and specific types of citizen media instead of exploring their interdependence across different repertoires of communication within a broader media ecology. Research in the field to some extent suffers from the predominance of single case study approaches that prioritize the analysis of isolated platforms such as Facebook (Mercea 2013), Twitter (Penney and Dadas 2014), YouTube (Askanius 2014) or mailing lists (Kavada 2009), while failing to address the interrelated workings of these interfaces within a broader media ecology. Such studies run the risk of fragmenting the complex realities of the interplay between media and movements and of overlooking connections between multiple technologies, actors and their practices. Making practices rather than technologies the starting point for studying citizen media is one way of avoiding the one-medium/platform bias, and the concept of media ecologies offers a conceptual framework with which to ensure holism and understand the interdependence of different media. Media ecologies and neighbouring concepts such as protest communication ecologies (Mercea et al. 2016) and information ecologies (Treré 2012) thus increasingly form part of the vocabulary and toolbox of social movement studies.

Finally, future research on citizen media and social movements should avoid focusing too heavily on current outbursts of protest and the latest technological development as this risks losing sight of how

the social forces and practices that generate movements vary across time and place. As Mattoni and Treré (2014:255) point out,

although the disciplinary roots of social movement studies are well anchored in the work of historians, when it comes to research on media and social movements, literature appears diachronically fragmented due to the absence of a historical perspective on the development of the media/movement relation.

This predominance of presentism (Postill 2014) in contemporary scholarship – or what Melucci (1994) labelled the myopia of the present – “makes it difficult to spot underlying commonalities in the nature of communications, technological adoptions, agencies and power” (Flesher Fominaya and Gillan 2017:386). The lack of a historical perspective is partly due to the bias towards techno- and novelty-fetishism discussed above, but it is further exacerbated by the tendency to uphold the dichotomy of old versus new media. The focus on the very latest technologies, with little or no consideration given to the relevance prior media forms may continue to have in social movements, or to how new and old technologies converge and/or overlap in different contexts, results in reductive accounts that disregard how new forms of citizen media recruited for activist purposes may be reminiscent of historical forms, and how we might learn from these continuities. Being attentive to the broader historical trajectory of how media have shaped collective action requires investigating issues related to movement memory and legacies (Fernández-Savater et al. 2016; Zamponi 2018) and the role of digital media in activist archival practices (Askanius 2018; Kaun 2016b).

Ultimately, future scholarship on social movements and citizen media must strive for an understanding of the changing relationship between civic engagement and digital technologies; this understanding needs to be solidly anchored in research on the role of the analogue technologies and practices that came before these technologies, and with due attention to the historical trajectory of citizen media in earlier waves of contestation.

See also: activism; autonomous movements; diversity; film studies and citizen media; media ecologies; media practices; mediatization; prefiguration; social media; temporality

Recommended reading

Kaun, A. (2016) *Crisis and Critique: A history of media participation in times of crisis*, London: Zed Books.

Offering a valuable historical perspective on citizen media and social movements studies, Kaun explores changes in citizen media practices within the context of three major historic economic crises and related social movement struggles: the unemployed workers' movement during the Great Depression, the rent strike movement of the early 1970s, and the Occupy Wall Street protests following the Great Recession of 2008. This diachronic study provides an in-depth analysis of the cultural, economic and social consequences of media technologies and the changes and continuities in how they have shaped popular resistance to capitalism over time.

Mattoni, A. (2012) *Media Practices and Protest Politics: How precarious workers mobilise*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

As a social movement scholar focusing on processes of mediation and activist media practices, Mattoni's work offers a theoretical dialogue between social movement studies and media and communication studies. Although it examines the precarious workers' movement in Italy specifically, the book offers critical and broadly applicable perspectives on citizen media practices and social movement mobilizing and organizing more generally.

Stephansen, H. C. and E. Treré (eds) (2019) *Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, connections critiques*, London: Routledge.

An extensive collection of practice-oriented research on citizen and activist media. The volume continues and extends a growing tradition of scholarship within the media-as-practice paradigm, which took off around the mid-2000s in media studies, social movement studies and beyond.