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Commentary

Social Movements and Political Agency in the Digital Age: A Communication Approach

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Abstract

Digital media pose a dual challenge to conventional understandings of political agency. First, digital media destabilize long-held assumptions about the nature of collective action, about social movements and their capacity to effect change. This is because digital media are thought to facilitate more decentralized, dispersed, temporary and individualized forms of political action that subvert the notion of the collective as singular, unified, homogeneous, coherent, and mass. One way of resolving this challenge is to view the collective in looser terms, as a process rather than as a finished product, a conceptualization that can be influence our understanding not only of social movements, but also of other political actors and of society as a whole. Second, digital media highlight the need to take communication seriously in how we conceptualize both collective action and political agency. Placing communication at the centre allows us to develop this looser and more processual understanding of the collective by studying it as a process that is constituted in and through communication. Inspired by organizational communication and particularly the work of Taylor and van Every (2000), this essay proposes a conception of collective action as emerging in conversations and solidified in texts. This conceptualization allows for a more multiplex and variegated view of political agency that takes into account the specific context where agency is exercised and the power that different actors can exert in a communicative process of negotiation, persuasion and claim-making.

Keywords

collective action; communication; digital media; political agency; social media; social movement

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Political Agency in the Digital Age: Media, Participation and Democracy”, edited by Anne Kaun (Södertörn University, Sweden), Maria Kyriakidou (University of East Anglia, UK) and Julie Uldam (Roskilde University, Denmark).

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The digital age challenges conventional understandings of political agency. Within social movement research this challenge is, I would like to argue, two-fold. First, digital media destabilize long-held assumptions about the nature of collective action, about social movements and their capacity to effect change. Second, digital media highlight the need to take communication seriously in how we conceptualize both collective action and political agency. In what follows, I outline these two interrelated challenges and suggest how they can be addressed.

The emergence of digital media has led to an intense questioning of the meaning of collective action

and of the collective in general. Digital media are thought to facilitate more decentralized, dispersed, temporary and individualized forms of political action that subvert the notion of the collective as singular, unified, homogeneous, coherent, and mass. This is evident, for instance, in the declining use of the collective identity concept in recent studies of social media and activism (Treré, 2015). Instead, scholars like Bennett and Segerberg (2013) are exploring how the coordination mechanisms of digital media platforms bring disparate individuals together without the need for a coherent collective identity or formal organization. Bennett and Segerberg consider such action to be

‘connective’ rather than collective and explicitly position their influential framework against ‘earlier models that insisted on stable identities, ideologies and organizations as a prerequisite for civil society mobilization and action’ (Bakardjieva, 2015, p. 986).

One way to address the debates around the nature of the collective and to navigate around controversies over categorisation (is it connective or collective action?) is to think of the collective in looser terms, as a process rather than as a finished product. This is a conceptual move that requires us to delve into theoretical work that has attempted to transcend the ‘static and often structuralist or psychologically reductionist’ (Bakardjieva, 2015, p. 986) models of collective action against which scholars like Bennett and Segerberg are reacting. The work of Alberto Melucci (1996) is very useful in this respect as it is based on a definition of the collective as an open-ended process that is always in a state of becoming. Melucci (1996) thus invites us to study the interactive processes through which an aggregation of individuals becomes a collective with its own distinct identity, a question that, as he notes, ‘is apparently raised by no one’ (p. 84). ‘The theoretical problem for us today’, he suggests, ‘is this unity, the creation of a collective subject of action as process which needs to be subjected to explanation’ (p. 84).

But once we embrace such a conceptualization of the collective, why stop at social movements? Why not consider the various institutions and organizations that social movements engage with, from the police to the state to the media, also as open-ended processes and not as finished products? Movements are by definition less formalized actors, their structures more uneven, their seams and stitches showing. By contrast, institutionalized actors have sophisticated procedures that render them seamless, smooth and opaque to the outside, their backstage operations and internal divisions safely tucked away from public view. Yet this does not mean that they aren’t also actors in the making.

The same can be said for the social system itself. Macro-structures, and particularly the structures of domination that social movements attempt to challenge, are often perceived as rigid, monolithic, and all-encompassing and thus changed only through wholesale revolution. This does not leave enough space for considering the more gradual and partial kinds of social change, those that erode rather than smash the system and which unfold on multiple levels and at different times. Furthermore, and as Sewell (2005) puts it, ‘many structural accounts of social transformation tend to introduce change from outside the system and then trace out the ensuing structurally shaped changes, rather than showing how change is generated by the operation of structures internal to a society’ (p. 139). To address this issue, Sewell argues that ‘a theory of change cannot be built into a theory of structure unless we adopt a far more multiple, contingent, and frac-

tured conception of society—and of structure’ (p. 140).

A focus on communication helps us to develop exactly this conception of society and structure since it allows us to study the collective as a process that is constituted in and through communication. In other words, resolving the second challenge that digital media pose—the need to take communication seriously in our understanding of social movements and political agency—can go some way towards addressing the first.

Communication is a spectre that haunts collective action theory: it is always lurking in the background but rarely placed at the centre of enquiry (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). It can be found in the looming presence of Goffman and symbolic interactionism that has influenced work on framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). It underlies Melucci’s (1996) conception of collective identity as a process of interaction. It is most evident in the work of Tilly (2005) who studies contentious politics as a conversation between claim-makers and their targets. Yet the emergence of digital media has brought communication into sharper relief within social movement studies, leading to a shift in how we view the role of communication in collective action: from focusing on how already existing collectives communicate with other actors to also considering how communication is involved in the construction itself of the collective.

Such a change in perspective amounts to a paradigm shift in recent studies of digital media and collective action. For instance, scholars like Gerbaudo (2012, p. 138) and Bennett and Segerberg (2013, p. 8) view *communication as organization*, while Flanagin, Stohl and Bimber (2006) assert that collective action is a communicative phenomenon, ‘involving the crossing of boundaries between private and public life’ (p. 32). The field is marked by conceptual creativity as evidenced by the introduction of new frameworks like connective action or by the increasing cross-fertilization between social movement theory and media studies, with concepts such as mediatization (Mattoni & Treré, 2014) and media ecologies (Treré & Mattoni, 2015) crossing into social movement theory, while collective action concepts like political opportunity structures travel in the opposite direction as in Cammaerts’ (2012) analysis of the ‘mediation opportunity structure’ (see also Uldam, 2013).

The approach outlined in this essay belongs in this new wave of theorising. Based on organizational communication, and particularly the work of Taylor and van Every (2000), I propose a conception of collective action as emerging in conversations and solidified in texts. For Taylor and van Every, conversation involves the ordinary interactions in which people enact their world. In the case of social movements, this would involve conversations over objectives and the mission of the movement, its boundaries, resources and processes, as well as its targets and adversaries. These conversations are then recorded and codified in texts—from the minutes of meetings, to common statements, to

videos and photographs, to shared scripts of behaviour in meetings—that then affect the conversations of the movement in other times and spaces. ‘Text’ can be thought in broader terms here and it can encompass any stable patterning and materialization of conversation, including for instance software code and architectural design. Texts and conversations mutually constitute each other in a dynamic process that shapes and reshapes the organization.

Within this framework, the media can be thought as sites of conversation that have different affordances for interaction and ‘textualization’, for recording and codifying the conversations that take place in and through them. The media also have different spatialities and temporalities in terms of how they arrange interaction in time and space. Conversation sites—which can also include the spaces of face-to-face communication—are overlapping and interconnected through flows of people and information. Their articulation, boundaries, norms and regulations affect the collectives created through them (for a more detailed analysis, see Kavada, 2015a).

This conceptualization provides a more grounded perspective of the processes through which social movements come to constitute themselves as collective actors. It allows us to trace the sites, conversations and texts that play a crucial role in the creation of the collective and to study social movements as a dynamic process. This framework can also be applied to our understanding of the institutions and organizations that social movements engage with, and of social structures in general, allowing us to think of the social system in terms of ‘flexibility, adaptability, and evolutionary change emerging from the sum of social interactions’ (Chadwick, 2013, p. 16), rather than as a monolithic structure.

Placing communication at the centre also has significant implications for how we understand political agency. A prevailing tendency within social movement research is to assess a movement’s political agency based on the effectiveness of its contentious performance and claim-making in the public arena. Tilly’s (2005) concept of WUNC—an acronym for Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment, the four characteristics that collective actions should exhibit in order to be effective—is exemplary in this regard. In this approach, ‘[c]ollective actors are mainly studied as “entities” appearing on a public stage and addressing themselves to other actors’ while their internal processes ‘remain essentially a black box’ (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004, p. 10).

Embracing a processual view of the collective and of society in general provides a more multiplex and variegated view of political agency. First of all, it points to the fact that the constitution of the movement as a political actor can, in itself, be a political outcome. In fact, a movement’s public performance may consist exactly of the process through which it creates unity. A

central component of the Occupy movement, for instance, was the public assemblies where participants were taking decisions following the rules of participatory democracy. What was essentially an internal process was rendered into a kind of public claim-making that functioned both as an implicit critique of the representative system of democracy and an example of what democracy could look like (Kavada, 2015b). In other words, rather than projecting unity in the sense of uniformity, such performances make the backstage public by shedding light on the processes through which the collective becomes a collective.

Furthermore, analysing the changes that social movements can effect on other institutions, and on society in general, needs to take stock of the specific communication episodes and sites of conversation where these actors interact. This entails a fine-grained analysis of the participants in each communication episode, of which parts of the movement are engaging with which part of society. It also requires a better understanding of where these communication episodes fit in the institutional processes that social movements aim to influence. What is more, paying attention only to public performances means that we lose sight of how political agency also hinges on secrecy, on access to elite spaces of power and on the preservation of closed internal spaces. Instead of training our vision only on a central public stage, our understanding of political agency needs to take into account the multiple sites of variable publicness where movements effect change. Dispersion might be as important as unity in this respect as it allows the movement to access and engage with institutions in different sites and communication episodes.

Within such episodes of engagement and interaction, the political agency of social movements can be thought in relation to their communication capacities. These are not limited to the effective public performance of claims, as the WUNC model suggests, but include the control, creation and manipulation of the rules of communication themselves and of the sites where episodes of interaction take place. In this respect, we can consider the following capacities: the capacity to *access* and participate in the sites of targets, adversaries, and the mainstream media; the capacity to *manage* and regulate the conversations with targets and adversaries; the capacity to *persuade*, to make compelling arguments, texts, visuals that sway public opinion, targets and adversaries; the capacity to *articulate*, to link different sites, actors, conversations and create alliances and coalitions; and the capacity to *represent*—to speak on behalf of (at least a part of) society, to assume and define its collective voice. Most importantly, communication power encompasses the capacity to *create* new codes that shape how society interacts, new sites of conversation that operate differently, to provide models of living and being that change the world in a way that conforms to the movement’s ideals and values.

The short length of this piece does not allow for an in-depth analysis of these forms of communication power. But what this essay points to is the need to understand how power and agency play out in specific communication sites and episodes where movements attempt to bring change. It thus allows us to ‘focus on the diversity of mechanisms and behaviors that enable power to be exercised in discrete contexts’ (Chadwick, 2013, p. 16). Yet, through the notion of ‘text’, we can also study how these communication episodes are shaped by macro-structures of domination that constrain the capacities of movements in different contexts. We can further develop a more grounded view of how movements influence and generate more enduring codes or texts that can be transferred to other contexts and thus lead to a more wide-ranging transformation of social structure.

New media have a disruptive effect on both social practice and the theoretical frameworks we use to study it. Resolving the dual conceptual challenge posed by digital media—the need to think of the collective as an open-ended process and the need to take communication seriously in how collectives constitute themselves—can advance our understanding of social movements and political agency. Placing communication at the centre can be a catalyst for much-needed conceptual innovation in an effort to not only understand the world but also to change it.

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Conflict of Interests

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