

### The Limits of Social Media Mobilization: How Protest Movements Adapt to Social Media Logic

Schaaf, Marlene; Quiring, Oliver

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schaaf, M., & Quiring, O. (2023). The Limits of Social Media Mobilization: How Protest Movements Adapt to Social Media Logic. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 203-213. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6635>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

# The Limits of Social Media Mobilization: How Protest Movements Adapt to Social Media Logic

Marlene Schaaf\* and Oliver Quiring

Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany

\* Corresponding author ([marlene.schaaf@uni-mainz.de](mailto:marlene.schaaf@uni-mainz.de))

Submitted: 21 December 2022 | Accepted: 2 May 2023 | Published: 3 August 2023

## Abstract

The emergence of social networking sites offers protest movements new ways to mobilize for action and draw attention to their issues. However, relying on social media also creates challenges, as social media follow their own principles. If protest movements want to be visible in news feeds, they have to adapt to so-called social media logic, as originally postulated in mediatization research. The principles of social media have been conceptualized. However, there is a lack of empirical research on how political actors perceive and orient to this logic, how they learn about it, and the consequences for mobilization (i.e., communicating protest issues as well as taking protest action). As protest movements are an integral part of modern democracies, use social media somewhat intensively, and usually build on a fluid network structure that allows us to examine adaptation processes in greater detail, they are particularly suitable for addressing these questions. Semi-structured interviews with activists organizing protest actions or managing social media accounts from 29 movement organizations in Germany ( $N = 33$ ) revealed that protest movements have internalized social media logic and paid attention to not only the design but also the timing of posts to suit algorithms. The protest organizations generally built on their experience with social media. The degree to which they followed these principles was based on available resources. Limits of this adaptation arose, for example, if sensitive or negative content rarely produced likes or, increasingly, personalization evoked a presumed hierarchy within the movements.

## Keywords

activism; mediatization; mobilization; protest movements; social media

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Social Media’s Role in Political and Societal Mobilization” edited by Jörg Haßler (LMU Munich), Melanie Magin (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), and Uta Russmann (University of Innsbruck).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

## 1. Introduction

Protest movements, such as Fridays For Future and Black Lives Matter, are an integral part of modern democracies, as they are considered a driving force for social change (Della Porta & Diani, 2015). Since the Arab Spring, social media are regarded as conducive to protest mobilization (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Activists use social media not only to draw attention to their issues (Quan-Haase et al., 2021) but also to mobilize supporters for protest actions (Chadwick & Dennis, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). Numerous studies have suggested a positive relation between the use of social media and protest behavior

(Jost et al., 2018; Masías et al., 2018). Thus, it is not particularly surprising that many movement organizations use social media intensively (Belotti et al., 2022; Billard, 2020; Wong & Wright, 2020).

However, if movement organizations want to generate awareness, recruit members, and mobilize for protest actions through social media, they have to adapt to the inherent logic of social media (Hutchinson, 2021). Such adaptation processes in media logics, in general, were originally postulated in the mediatization approach (Schulz, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Looking at the extensive research on the mediatization of politics, it is striking that numerous studies have traced adaptation

processes to journalistic media logic (Blumler & Esser, 2019; Fawzi, 2018). Comparatively few studies have focused on social media (Figenschou, 2020; Jost, 2022). In addition, less is known about the adaption of media logics at the meso-level (examining organizations instead of individual actors; Donges & Jarren, 2014) and the underlying processes that guide such an adaption. In this regard, protest movements seem to be very suitable for investigation, as they partly use social media intensively. Furthermore, they are usually less institutionalized (i.e., have a loose network structure). This allows researchers to shed more light on strategic considerations in such adaption processes as if they follow a bottom-up, rather than top-down, development process. In analyzing social media content, particularly on Twitter, some studies have aimed to identify selected social media strategies of prominent protest movements (Boulianne et al., 2020; Edrington, 2022; Sorce, 2022). However, it remains vague how these strategies are based on perceived social media logic and what consequences this might imply for mobilization (i.e., communicating protest issues and taking protest action).

To answer these questions, this article explored the use of different social media platforms and experiences with social media based on 33 semi-structured interviews with activists from 29 movement organizations in Germany that focused on a set of protest issues similar to historical protest clusters (e.g., the environment, labor, and feminism). Results showed that protest movements are in part strongly oriented toward the logic of social media (for example, by using postings that are more visual, humorous, and designed to encourage interaction). Activists' understanding of the underlying mechanisms was mostly derived from their experiences with social media. The interviews also revealed the consequences and limits of this adaption—for example, that professional photos of protest actions (should) serve as content or that sensitive topics simply did not lend themselves to generating likes.

## 2. Social Media Logic in Light of Protest Mobilization

Social media are widely considered to offer huge power in mobilization, at least since the Arab Spring (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Numerous studies have confirmed a positive correlation between the use of social media and participation in protests (Boulianne, 2015; Jost et al., 2018; Kruikeimeier & Shehata, 2017; Masías et al., 2018). These studies highlight the role social media can play in mobilizing for protest action, which makes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram particularly promising for protest movements. To ensure that movement organizations are noticed on social networking sites by like-minded others, the organizations have to adapt to the affordances that social media set: the so-called social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) or network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014).

### 2.1. Social Media Logic as “New Media Logic”

Based on the idea of the mediatization of society (e.g., politics) and its ascribed adaption of social areas or actors to media logic, researchers have long been interested in the question of what forms “media logic” (Hjarvard, 2018). Altheide and Snow (1979, p. 294) defined media logic as “a form of communication and the process through which media transmit and communicate information,” resulting in a type of “institutionalized...interpretative schema” (Altheide, 2014, p. 22) that is taken for granted and guides social interaction. Although there are differences between the types of media (e.g., television vs. newspapers) and media outlets (e.g., quality press vs. tabloids) in the way they produce such schema, these principles are seen as “a basic underlying conceptual logic which applies to every mediated communication” (Tsurie et al., 2021, p. 1984). With the recent emergence of new digital communication technologies, however, the paradigm of a single media logic underwent a shift, and the concept of media logic was transformed into two concepts: “mass media logic” and “social/network media logic” (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

In comparing social media logic to mass media logic, van Dijck and Poell (2013) pointed to four dimensions that characterize social media logic. Social media are guided by an automated process that follows hidden algorithms that arise as a result of users' behavior rather than through the human editorial process (*programmability*). However, mass media logic and social media logic follow the idea of generating public attention (*popularity*). Unlike mass media, social media are said to generate equal attention for all users. Today, we know that underlying algorithms manage this process, which, in turn, are controlled by popularity cues (Porten-Cheé et al., 2018) and therefore favor visual, emotionalizing, and negative content (Jost, 2022; Larsson, 2021). Furthermore, these algorithms form *connectivity* between users and users and between users and content, although in an automated technical rather than personal way. Additionally, regarding the amount of data generated and used, social media provide deeper insights into audiences and users (*datafication*). Similar to the concept of social media logic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) is the concept of network media logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). However, there are three major differences based on the production, distribution, and use of information. Network media logic is characterized by inexpensive information selection and content generation driven by the audience's individual preferences. Lay users not only create new content but also distribute it to like-minded others. Moreover, interaction among users during reception matters even more than in light of mass media logic feeding underlying algorithms and therefore increasing public attention. However, although social media logic has been widely conceptualized, there is still a lack of empirical evidence

regarding how such social media logic is recognized or perceived by users.

## 2.2. Adapting to Social Media Logic

Given the idea of social media logic, research on political communication and journalism has examined the extent to which political actors (Jost, 2022) and journalists (Tsuruel et al., 2021) adapt to social media logic. Research on the penetration of social media logic in news production revealed that journalists, in particular, working for social media news feeds are aware of the mass and social media logics and often struggle to balance them (Tsuruel et al., 2021). They had a strong orientation toward news factors such as emotionalization and surprise, which are perceived to match their users' preferences and generate more visibility within the news feed created by the algorithm (Lischka, 2021). Looking at the style of headlines, Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019, p. 58) also detected a "shift towards a more subjective and positive style of communication." Such adaptation processes appear to be continuing to evolve, as well as the emergence of new platforms such as TikTok (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

Regarding the communication practices of political actors, studies have shown that politicians also aim to adapt social media logic. In a long-term content analysis of Facebook posts from 2010 to 2015, Jost (2022) showed that politicians used message features that had previously been demonstrated to increase the number of interactions (i.e., emotionalized messages or directly addressing followers in posts). Regarding platforms that feature hashtags such as Twitter, studies have revealed an increase in use, pointing to the idea that politicians strongly adapt to the idea of connectivity (Enli & Simonsen, 2018). In contrast, Kelm et al. (2019) showed that the social media activities of German politicians were nearly constant between 2012 and 2016, contesting the idea that social media logic gained prominence in politicians' perceptions. Furthermore, their social media activities appeared to be independent of their perceived social media influence, pointing to the assumption that adaptation processes might be used specifically for election campaigns. This perceived "power of likes" was emphasized by Verdegem and D'heer (2018) during election campaigns. As one of the few studies in this field, Figenschou (2020) examined how social media are learned and integrated into the public relations activities of government organizations. A top-down process became apparent, which was complicated by the fact that, until then, government organizations had concentrated more on dealing with news media.

Only a few studies have examined how movement organizations use social media in this regard. Johansson and Scaramuzzino (2019), for example, found that movement organizations today aim to personalize their campaigns to emphasize their presence in online environments. Building on such trends, local Fridays For Future

organizations frequently used Thunberg's postings on their local accounts (Sorce, 2022). In the case of the Fridays For Future movement, Belotti et al. (2022) pointed to the broader strategies that activists followed in bridging online and offline settings. Furthermore, Boulianne et al. (2020) emphasized the global perspective on the organizations' tweets, which were mainly about sharing information and therefore, also documented local events across the globe. In addition, Black Lives Matter organizations tried to play on identity-building strategies in their tweets (e.g., by highlighting common values or creating a common enemy), as Edrington (2022) showed. However, this strategy was not noticeable in the interaction rates of their followers. As these few studies mostly examined single prominent movement organizations and focused on single platforms, we cannot conclude how protest movements in general follow the logic of social media or how they learn and internalize these principles.

## 2.3. Consequences of Adapting to Social Media Logic

In addition to the questions of how and to what extent (political) actors adapt to (social) media logic, research on the mediatization approach broadly discusses the consequences arising from such adaptation processes in particular in light of mass media logics (Esser & Matthes, 2013). Because adapting to (mass) media logics usually involves a certain amount of effort invested in media activities (Donges & Jarren, 2014; Reunanen et al., 2010), it has long been discussed that adapting mass media logics might disturb or replace core (political) activities such as decision-making (Fawzi, 2018; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Meyer, 2009). A similar debate could be held regarding social media. However, researchers have broadly confirmed that adaptation to media logic is visible in the communication practices of politicians (Blumler & Esser, 2019) or political parties (Donges & Jarren, 2014). However, less is known about whether the orientation toward media logics might also affect other activities, such as decision-making (Landerer, 2015; Viehmann, 2020) or, in this case, communicating protests and mobilizing for action in the streets.

From a theoretical perspective, adapting to social media logic implies being confronted with some of the challenges of social networking sites: Communicating on an emotional and personal level might trigger hate speech (Ziegele et al., 2014). At the same time, personal communication, in particular, can raise questions concerning personal privacy and data protection among activists (Cable, 2017). Moreover, following social media principles might also increase the risk of ending up in echo chambers, as like-minded others are usually addressed by underlying algorithms (Bright et al., 2020). Considering the relatively small amount of empirical research on adaptation to social media logics (Figenschou, 2020; Jost, 2022), it is not surprising that we know hardly anything about the consequences of such an

adaption process for protest mobilization. Özkula (2021) pointed to two major challenges in the adaption processes examined by the nongovernmental organization Amnesty International. The first is an internal struggle, as activists face network structures being replaced by a hierarchy that had moved in. The second is that the use of social media forces activists to form new action repertoires driven by the idea of connective action. As a by-product of the Fridays For Future's personalization strategy, identification, and leadership were changed, as Sorce (2022) found.

### 3. Research Questions and Method

Contemporary media systems provide protest movements with a wide range of options for drawing attention to their activities. As social media are often considered to drive mobilization, their use seems very promising for protest movements. Several case studies have shed light on how prominent movement organizations use social media (Edrington, 2022; Sorce, 2022). However, less is known about how these strategies are built on a perceived social media logic and the consequences. Thus, this article first addresses the extent to which activists representing movement organizations perceive and orient toward a social media logic for mobilization (RQ1). To further enrich mediatization research, which has focused on the adaption of mass media logic and examines processes at the micro-level, this article then examines how activists and movement organizations learn about social media logic (RQ2). Moreover, the article sheds light on the consequences of adapting to social media logic for mobilization (i.e., communicating protest issues and taking protest action; RQ3).

To address these questions, we conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with 38 activists in Germany. This method allowed us to dive into participants' perceptions and (strategic) thoughts (Loosen, 2014). Moreover, a qualitative approach provides the opportunity to examine the mechanism for adapting social media logic and explore the consequences (addressed in RQ2 and RQ3), which have seldom been investigated in mediatization research. Sampling was based on theoretical considerations and aimed at achieving maximum variation. Various issues, organizational, and protest characteristics were taken into account (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File). The protest movements selected varied concerning the issues they addressed, but a set that is similar to (historical) protest clusters in Germany was created (e.g., environment, labor, and feminism; Rucht, 2001). In addition to these issues, their organizational structure was considered. Organizations that are active at the local, national, or even international level or claimed to be active at these levels were considered. Furthermore, sampling was based on the organizations' protest activities. Organizations that frequently arranged protest events (up to every week) and organizations that had events once or twice a year were considered.

As movements are commonly defined as "organized and sustained effort of a collectivity of interrelated individuals, groups, and organizations" (Neidhardt & Rucht, 1991, p. 450), we sampled 29 organizations that claim to belong to 15 larger protest movements. All had organized at least one protest action (e.g., a demonstration or petition) within the past few years. The organizations were contacted through e-mail or their social media accounts, and an interview with an activist who was a member of the organizing team or in charge of media-related tasks (e.g., managing social media accounts) was requested.

The interviews were conducted between September 2, 2021, and May 10, 2022, mainly online and one-to-one due to Covid-19 constraints. In some cases, activists were asked to be interviewed in groups of three to four. Interviewees were mostly activists with an organizational role who, on average, had been active in the group for four years and were, on average, 42 years old. Among them were 21 women, 16 men, and one non-binary person. The interviews followed a guidebook that focused on the use of different social media platforms, scenarios for promoting topics and events on social media, specific experiences, and global assessments related to social media. The interviews lasted, on average, one hour and 21 minutes and were recorded with two recording devices, transcribed, and anonymized.

Analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted using MAXQDA software. To examine the strategies more closely and to further explore perceived social media logic, adaption processes, and challenges, in the first step, one-third of the interviews were randomly selected and open-coded. Based on the codes developed in this process and codes derived from previous research on mediatization processes (e.g., Donges & Jarren, 2014), a qualitative content analysis of the remaining material was conducted following Kuckartz's (2016) suggestions. All the material was first coded with superordinate main codes. Then, subcodes were inductively developed based on the main codes. Finally, the entire material was coded again according to the subcodes.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Perception and Orientation Toward Social Media Logic

Examining the perceived social media logic and which protest movements oriented to it (RQ1), the interviews showed that most of the organizations had a clear understanding of how to communicate their issues on social media platforms to mobilize supporters (i.e., using visual content, fewer words, emotional statements, concise messages, personal stories, and prominent faces). Although none of the activists interviewed regarded themselves as experts, they knew a lot about what is required for mobilizing on social media platforms:

That's where my knowledge ends somewhat....What I have noticed is that the channels should be used regularly, and that information should be sent to consumers on a regular basis. And not just now and then...there are times when it should be better to post, so as to bring news higher up in the newsfeed and so on. But I don't have that much experience. (Extinction Rebellion Berlin, organizer)

To stand out among the supposedly familiar features of social media, some activists used the strategy of relying on humorous content (e.g., memes):

So, we already have guidelines that we follow, goals that we pursue, and how we get there. And one of them is that we want to be humorous because we also have the feeling that people often talk very seriously about problems, especially on social media. (Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen, social media manager)

In the composition of the messages, from the activists' point of view, it was very important to remain authentic, which manifested in a professional appearance (particularly with visual content) but with a personal tone: "I think a good hashtag is important. To find that...it has to be personal, it has to be authentic, just personal and authentic" (#IchBinHanna, organizer).

Among the platforms, some activists considered different design features for mobilization (e.g., in terms of the use of hashtags and emojis or the length of the posts). However, their social media work rarely differed across platforms; instead, they mostly shared similar content on the networks, which was usually due to a lack of resources: "Because our resources are limited, we've basically always posted the same thing on all three platforms" (Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen, social media manager). The main way to generate visibility on social media was through continuous posting. The timing of the posts was also seen as crucial (as illustrated in the first quote). At the same time, it was important to communicate interactively with users (i.e., to moderate their own pages and accounts). However, many of the groups were limited in carrying out such ongoing social media mobilization due to a lack of time or personnel:

Well, as soon as you get over a certain number of followers, the account alone is a lot of work, and we all do it completely on a voluntary basis. So, none of us gets paid for it, and all of us have another job. (CatCallsOfHannover, social media manager)

There were differences due to the overall sizes of the movement organizations. Larger, established organizations (e.g., Fridays For Future) were in a slightly better position than smaller newer ones (e.g., Animal Rebellion), as the burden could be shouldered by more than one person. Although most groups were very aware

of what it takes to get attention when mobilizing through social media, many of the activists still saw the underlying algorithms of the platforms as a mystery: "I tried to understand Twitter...because somehow it didn't make sense at all how it all works and what happens there and what now appears in my timeline and on my homepage" (Darmstadt unbefristet, organizer).

#### 4.2. Learning About Social Media Logic

Usually, only a few people within the movement organizations were in charge of social media efforts. In some cases, there were separate teams within the groups. Otherwise, the task was carried out by single activists who functioned as experts. Their knowledge of social media logic (RQ2) rarely stemmed from a professional background: "I had already done social media before and naturally passed on a lot of knowledge" (Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen, social media manager). To some extent, protest movements, particularly those with young members, benefited from the daily experience that activists had gained. Groups that addressed broad topics relevant to a large part of society also had an advantage, as they were also more likely to attract professional social media managers or at least interested individuals as members: "The more people who participate, the more likely it is that there will be people who are somehow social media-interested" (Animal Rebellion München, organizer). However, as several activists had little personal exposure to social media activities before their political engagement, learning by doing was more common:

We did that a few times, that we addressed [a politician] directly, and he then also answered, a discussion arose....And once we also organized that many people do that at the same time. And that also worked out really well...and then, of course, you have a debate on Twitter. (ausgestrahlt, organizer)

Learning was also based on direct feedback from users. However, the experiences were often reflected on or intuitively judged together within the movement or the team. More rarely, the activists also analyzed data: "We look and measure whether we are in social media, of course we already look at which post has which outreach" (Land schafft Verbindung Rheinhessen, organizer). One reason was that only a few had professional experience and were not familiar with the analysis tools and possibilities. The groups also sought to share their experiences regarding social media activities with other organizations (at least in the same range of topics). Particularly in the field of environmental movements, single organizations offer cross-organizational workshops in which activists share experiences and teach social media strategies: "Fortunately, there is also more and more information available. For example, I think Ende Gelände [protest movement against coal mining] has an info channel

on Telegram....They also offer social media training, for example" (Animal Rebellion München, organizer). Internal training also took place, particularly in large movement organizations (e.g., Fridays For Future). Those mostly prominent protest movements, in turn, act as role models for many smaller movement organizations: "For example, Fridays For Future does a lot via messenger services" (ausgestrahlt, organizer).

#### *4.3. Consequences of Adapting to Social Media Logic for (Communicating) Protest Action*

Building on the perception of social media logic and learning about it, we asked about the consequences this adaption process might have for mobilizing (i.e., communicating protest issues and taking protest action; RQ3). Due to the organizations' orientation toward social media principles, some of the organizations have built strong interactions between organizing protest actions and communicating via social media platforms. There were often informal exchanges between the working groups, particularly in the large movement organizations. When specific protest actions were planned, attention was paid not only to creating strong images that were suitable for social media content but also to ensuring that these images were perceived as being as professional as possible: "The information we really want to get across and of course the quality of photos and videos is really important....We always try to have professional photographers with us who take good photos" (Animal Rebellion München, organizer). Particularly in the case of movement organizations that practice civil disobedience, there were challenges. Sharing substantial information with the community quickly and transparently sometimes clashed with the timing of social media activities:

In the case of civil disobedience, you have to be a bit careful, because otherwise....By now, we no longer have a puppy status....That's why you can't go on a broad discussion about all kinds of plans; that's just not possible....Then you have this Telegram channel, then you see this announcement that something will take place and maybe already a date, but just no place at all yet. (Extinction Rebellion Berlin, organizer)

Limits in adapting to social media logic also arose in communications regarding protest issues. Often, activists saw using the brevity required or joining trends in social media to maintain visibility as challenging. Personalization trends also ran counter to protecting the privacy of individual activists or the group, and, in some cases, caused debates within the movement:

On social media, the speech of Luisa landed, who was somehow not directly involved in the planning...Luisa was then used again for this, because it is simply...so Luisa's face is somehow associated with Fridays For Future Germany. But internationally there was criti-

cism from BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] people and also from others that it verges on white saviourism...yes, so there is still a bit of stress inside. (Fridays For Future Mainz, organizer)

As social media typically call for interaction (likes and shares) to be visible on feeds, movement organizations had to generate such user engagement. This not only required considerable resources but also exposed activists more often to hate speech. This raised the question of the extent to which they accepted this to remain visible: "And on a very technical level, of course, it's like the algorithm, it doesn't care if people comment on us to abuse us or to support us. That's why we often let it run because the algorithm likes that" (Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignern, social media manager). From the activists' point of view, following the platforms' rules also entailed the risk of acting even more strongly in echo chambers: "But, yes, it's really like that, you have to avoid it becoming a bit of an echo chamber" (Bundesverband Lebensrecht, organizer). In particular, groups that addressed sensitive topics, such as experiences of discrimination, also perceived it as a barrier to achieving likes and shares for negative postings, and thus explicitly turned away from this social media strategy: "They're highly personal stories that we post there and that's why we would never instrumentalize that in a way that we would say 'oh my god, physical assaults get more likes, we need to post more physical assaults'" (CatCallsOfHannover, social media manager). Social media's structure also allowed groups to network and support each other across organizations. In this regard, protest movements were encouraged to make their networks as public as possible. However, and even more than in the offline context, this entailed the risk of being undermined by opponents or other groups:

That went really fast. We had a lot of members, then at some point, I turned the open group into a closed one. Because I thought, oh, if all the right-wingers now dial in there and then start abusing us, so it's better that you have to register. You now also have to answer three questions. We now also look at the profiles before we accept someone. Not only the profiles but also their friend lists. (Omas gegen Rechts Deutschland, organizer)

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

As many studies have assumed that social media have great potential to mobilize for protest actions (Jost et al., 2018; Masías et al., 2018), it seems to be highly promising for protest movements to communicate their concerns and organize protest actions through social media. At the same time, social media have their own logic and thus pose specific demands (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Thus, if protest movements want to generate attention on these platforms,

they must adapt to the platforms' logic, in the sense of the mediatization paradigm. However, despite extensive research on mediatization, less is known about how far protest movements orient toward these functional principles to mobilize supporters, how this adaption process takes place, and the challenges of adapting to this social media logic. We sought to answer these questions using semi-structured interviews with activists from 29 different movement organizations in Germany regarding their issues, organizational level, and protest activities.

The results indicated that the activists internalized the structures and mechanisms of social media deeply and adapted their strategies to the needs of the platforms, for example, by posting short, emotional, highly visualized messages to mobilize supporters (RQ1), confirming, for instance, the results for politicians' social media adaption that Jost (2022) found. However, the degree to which the activists followed these principles varied—not only but mostly depending on the available resources (i.e., know-how, time, and staff). Due to a lack of resources, movement organizations often used the same content on their pages and accounts, although in some cases they perceived differences in the social media logic between the platforms or used them differently. This problem is linked to the discussion of the concept of social media logic: Is this truly an overall logic that applies equally to all platforms, or is it a matter of different platform-specific logics? From a theoretical point of view, it can be argued that the underlying principles of social media are similar (e.g., all networks are concerned with the necessary interaction rates, which algorithms use as the basis for generating feeds). However, the specific form and mode of this social media logic seem to be conditioned by platform-specific features and affordances (e.g., when the algorithm prioritizes image content; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Hase et al., 2022). These different features must be considered more strongly in a conceptual way to provide more empirical evidence. Furthermore, some of the described social media design guidelines (e.g., personalization) closely match the selection criteria (news values) of mass media logic, which raises the question for future research and conceptual development to what extent there are links between the two logics and to what extent they are empirically reflected in the perceptions of users or recipients.

Regarding the question of how these functional logics are internalized (RQ2), the interviews showed that some activists introduced professional know-how into the protest movements. More often, however, it was (still) the case that social media logic was learned during the process of doing. Due to the network structure of movement organizations, it is not surprising that there are clear differences compared to Figenschou's (2020) findings on the adoption processes within government organizations. Rather than a top-down process, joint development emerged within the movement organizations. Protest movements with young members in particular benefited as the activists have more frequent con-

tact with such platforms in everyday life (Belotti et al., 2022) and, therefore, pick up mechanisms more quickly. This finding raises the question of whether a kind of digital divide is emerging (Chen, 2017). As protest is considered a meaningful form of political participation (van Deth, 2014), this development is worrying.

The exploratory interviews also revealed the consequences and limits of the adaption of social media logic for mobilization (RQ3). For some groups, the orientation toward social media logic was closely intertwined with the organization of street protests. This was exemplified by images that were produced specifically for this purpose, sometimes very professionally, or by close coordination between the action and social media teams regarding the timing of the event or the publication of corresponding information. This also resulted in significant additional efforts for protest movements in some cases. The limits of social media logic also arose in the communication of protest issues. From the activists' point of view, complex, and sensitive issues in particular were not only difficult to communicate but also generated less resonance in the networks (i.e., likes and shares), which could be seen as a disadvantage in terms of visibility. In addition, the strong personalization concept of the platforms was in part contrary to the grassroots or network character of most movement organizations, which often leads to internal discussions. These results confirm Özkula's (2021) findings. Further research is needed to better understand the (strategic) considerations in dealing with these challenges, as well as to examine the extent to which these problems occur equally across the movement landscape and what other mediating factors play a role.

Although protest movements strongly internalized social media logic, they have not fully adapted to it. Many of the groups tended to perceive themselves as self-critical and not particularly professionalized. Although some groups had sophisticated social media strategies, others seemed to feel overwhelmed by their opportunities or were still learning how to use social media. The extent to which protest movements oriented toward social media logic was decided in light of target groups, existing know-how, available resources (time and staff), and the experiences that movement organizations had gained in dealing with social media.

The present results are too heterogeneous to conclude to what extent and how protest movements can and should use social media for their own purposes. The use of social media should not only be seen as an opportunity for mobilization. In many of the movement organizations interviewed, dealing with social media seems to be part of their own development process. Against this backdrop, movement organizations should network and cooperate more closely with one another to share experiences and lessons learned. From a practical perspective, tools that evaluate the organizations' social media activities should be used, which rarely occurs due to a lack of resources or knowledge. Based on such an



evaluation, it would be possible for activists to adapt more adequately to the functional principles of social media platforms. Another question that arose and is discussed within organizations is whether it makes sense for protest movements to adapt more to social media logic. This point must be discussed critically, even in light of the potential consequences and limitations. It is also relevant to question to what extent social media actually represent a suitable bypassing tool for protest movements if it also reveals a dependency on functional logics and algorithms. Protest movements need to assess the extent to which they rely on social media in view of their goals, target groups, and concerns.

Although the explorative approach of this article offers insights into the considerations of protest movements in dealing with social media, this approach had limitations. In all cases, activists who had a general organizational role in organizing protest events or managing social media accounts were recruited for the interviewees, as these individuals usually possess an overall perspective and are able to provide more information on strategic considerations. In their role, these activists often represent their movement organization. Nevertheless, the network-like structure of the organizations in many cases and internal discussions within the movement organizations indicated in the results suggest that individual statements may not fully represent the entire organization. As the control of social media accounts is mostly in the hands of individual activists, the lines between personal and organizational communication are blurred. The fact that activists spoke plainly about their (non-existent) knowledge or challenges with social media contrasts the possible effects of social desirability. However, it also seems possible that the activists downgraded their strategic calculations due to the interview environment; they were sitting in front of communication scholars. As protest as a form of political participation is usually formed by (political) culture (Verba et al., 1995), taking a national perspective on German movement organizations raises the concluding question of which political and digital culture may also shape the results.

In conclusion, this article provided interviews that shed detailed light on activists' views on using social media and adapting to so-called social media logic to mobilize supporters. Many studies have highlighted the opportunities of using social media to promote protest and thus advocate orientations toward social media logic. However, it became apparent that protest movements internalized the functional logic well as they had learned quickly from their experiences with social media. However, unrestricted adaptation to the algorithms has its limits. These challenges could be further explored to estimate the extent to which protest movements benefit from social media.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

### References

- Altheide, D. L. (2014). *Media edge: Media logic and social reality*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1401-4>
- Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1979). *Media logic*. SAGE.
- Belotti, F., Donato, S., Bussoletti, A., & Comunello, F. (2022). Youth activism for climate on and beyond social media: Insights from FridaysForFuture–Rome. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 718–737. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072776>
- Billard, T. J. (2020). Movement–media relations in the hybrid media system: A case study from the U.S. transgender rights movement. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(2), 341–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220968525>
- Blumler, J. G., & Esser, F. (2019). Mediatization as a combination of push and pull forces: Examples during the 2015 UK general election campaign. *Journalism*, 20(7), 855–872. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918754850>
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information Communication and Society*, 18(5), 524–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542>
- Boulianne, S., Lalancette, M., & Ilkiw, D. (2020). “School Strike 4 Climate”: Social media and the international youth protest on climate change. *Media and Communication*, 8(2), 208–218. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2768>
- Bright, J., Marchal, N., Ganesh, B., & Rudinac, S. (2020). *Echo chambers exist! (But they're full of opposing views)*. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2001.11461>
- Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2017). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 233–253). SAGE.
- Cable, J. (2017). Communication sciences and the study of social movements. In C. Roggeband & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Handbook of social movements across disciplines* (pp. 185–201). Springer.
- Chadwick, A., & Dennis, J. (2017). Social media, professional media and mobilisation in contemporary Britain: Explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the citizens' movement 38 degrees. *Political Studies*, 65(1), 42–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321716631350>
- Chen, G. M. (2017). Social media: From digital divide to empowerment. In C. P. Campbell (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to media and race* (pp. 117–125). Routledge.

- Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of social movements*. Oxford University Press.
- Donges, P., & Jarren, O. (2014). Mediatization of political organizations: Changing parties and interest groups? In F. Esser & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Mediatizations of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies* (pp. 181–199). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Edrington, C. L. (2022). Social movements and identification: An examination of how Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives use identification strategies on Twitter to build relationships. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 99(3), 643–659. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990221106994>
- Enli, G., & Simonsen, C.-A. (2018). “Social media logic” meets professional norms: Twitter hashtags usage by journalists and politicians. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(8), 1081–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301515>
- Esser, F., & Matthes, J. (2013). Mediatization effects on political news, political actors, political decisions, and political audiences. In H. Kriesi, D. Lavenex, F. Esser, J. Matthes, M. Bühlmann, & D. Bochsler (Eds.), *Democracy in the age of globalization and mediatization* (pp. 177–201). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fawzi, N. (2018). Beyond policy agenda-setting: Political actors’ and journalists’ perceptions of news media influence across all stages of the political process. *Information, Communication and Society*, 21(8), 1134–1150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301524>
- Figschou, T. U. (2020). Social bureaucracy? The integration of social media into government communication. *Communications*, 45(s1), 513–534. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2019-2074>
- Hase, V., Boczek, K., & Scharrow, M. (2022). Adapting to affordances and audiences? A cross-platform, multi-modal analysis of the platformization of news on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. *Digital Journalism*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2128389>
- Hjarvard, S. (2018). The logics of the media and the mediatized conditions of social interaction. In C. Thimm, M. Anastasiadis, & J. Einspänner-Pflock (Eds.), *Media logic(s) revisited* (pp. 63–84). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65756-1\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65756-1_4)
- Hutchinson, J. (2021). Micro-platformization for digital activism on social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1629612>
- Johansson, H., & Scaramuzzino, G. (2019). The logics of digital advocacy: Between acts of political influence and presence. *New Media & Society*, 21(7), 1528–1545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818822488>
- Jost, J. T., Barberá, P., Bonneau, R., Langer, M., Metzger, M., Nagler, J., Sterling, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2018). How social media facilitates political protest: Information, motivation, and social networks. *Political Psychology*, 39(11), 85–118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12478>
- Jost, P. (2022). How politicians adapt to new media logic. A longitudinal perspective on accommodation to user-engagement on Facebook. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20(2), 184–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2076271>
- Kelm, O., Dohle, M., & Bernhard, U. (2019). Politicians’ self-reported social media activities and perceptions: Results from four surveys among German parliamentarians. *Social Media + Society*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119837679>
- Klinger, U., & Svensson, J. (2014). The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach. *New Media & Society*, 17(8), 1241–1257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814522952>
- Kruikemeier, S., & Shehata, A. (2017). News media use and political engagement among adolescents: An analysis of virtuous circles using panel data. *Political Communication*, 34(2), 221–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1174760>
- Kuckartz, U. (2016). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung. Grundlagen-texte Methoden* [Qualitative content analysis: Methods, practice, computer support. Basic texts methods]. Beltz Juventa.
- Landerer, N. (2015). *Mass media and political decision-making: Analyzing mediatization in Switzerland*. Nomos; Bloomsbury.
- Larsson, A. O. (2021). The rise of Instagram as a tool for political communication: A longitudinal study of European political parties and their followers. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211034158>
- Lee, F. L., Chen, H.-T., & Chan, M. (2017). Social media use and university students’ participation in a large-scale protest campaign: The case of Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(2), 457–469. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.08.005>
- Lischka, J. A. (2021). Logics in social media news making: How social media editors marry the Facebook logic with journalistic standards. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 22(2), 430–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918788472>
- Loosen, W. (2014). Das Leitfadeninterview—Eine unterschätzte Methode [The semi-structured interview—An underestimated method]. In S. Averbek-Lietz & M. Meyen (Eds.), *Handbuch nicht standardisierte Methoden in der Kommunikationswissenschaft* [Handbook of non-standard methods in communication science] (pp. 1–15). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-05723-7\\_9-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-05723-7_9-1)
- Masías, V. H., Hecking, T., & Hoppe, U. (2018). Social networking site usage and participation in protest activities in 17 Latin American countries. *Telematics*

- and Informatics, 35(7), 1809–1831. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.05.010>
- Mazzoleni, G., & Schulz, W. (1999). “Mediatization” of politics: A challenge for democracy? *Political Communication*, 16(3), 247–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/105846099198613>
- Meyer, C. O. (2009). Does European Union politics become mediatized? The case of the European Commission. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(7), 1047–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903226849>
- Neidhardt, F., & Rucht, D. (1991). The analysis of social movements: The state of the art and some perspectives for further research. In D. Rucht (Eds.), *Research on social movements: The state of the art in Western Europe and the USA* (pp. 421–464). Westview Press.
- Özkula, S. M. (2021). The unmaking of collective action: Changing organizing logics in civil society organizations through social media activism culture. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 1984–2002. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/15930>
- Porten-Cheé, P., Haßler, J., Jost, P., Eilders, C., & Maurer, M. (2018). Popularity cues in online media: Theoretical and methodological perspectives. *Studies in Communication and Media*, 7(2), 80–102. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-2-80>
- Quan-Haase, A., Mendes, K., Ho, D., Lake, O., Nau, C., & Pieber, D. (2021). Mapping #MeToo: A synthesis review of digital feminist research across social media platforms. *New Media & Society*, 23(6), 1700–1720. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820984457>
- Reunanen, E., Kunelius, R., & Noppari, E. (2010). Mediatization in context: Consensus culture, media and decision making in the 21st century, the case of Finland. *Communications*, 35(3), 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2010.016>
- Rucht, D. (Ed.). (2001). *Protest in der Bundesrepublik: Strukturen und Entwicklungen* [Protest in the Federal Republic: Structures and developments]. Campus Verlag.
- Schulz, W. (2004). Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept. *European Journal of Communication*, 19(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040696>
- Sorce, G. (2022). The “Greta effect”: Networked mobilization and leader identification among Fridays for Future protesters. *Media and Communication*, 10(2), 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i2.5060>
- Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. (2014). Mediatization of politics: Towards a theoretical framework. In F. Esser & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Mediatizations of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies* (pp. 3–28). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tsuruel, K., Dvir Gvirsman, S., Ziv, L., Afriat-Aviv, H., & Ivan, L. (2021). Servant of two masters: How social media editors balance between mass media logic and social media logic. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 22(8), 1983–2000. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919849417>
- Tufekci, Z., & Wilson, C. (2012). Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 363–379. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01629.x>
- van Deth, J. W. (2014). A conceptual map of political participation. *Acta Politica*, 49(3), 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.6>
- van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication*, 1(1), 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v1i1.70>
- Vázquez-Herrero, J., Negreira-Rey, M.-C., & López-García, X. (2022). Let’s dance the news! How the news media are adapting to the logic of TikTok. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 23(8), 1717–1735. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920969092>
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Verdegem, P., & D’heer, E. (2018). Social media logic and its impact on political communication during election times. In J. Schwanholz, T. Graham, & P.-T. Stoll (Eds.), *Managing democracy in the digital age* (pp. 119–135). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61708-4\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-61708-4_7)
- Viehmann, C. (2020). *Korsett und Machtressource: Die Medienöffentlichkeit in Verhandlungen von gesellschaftlichen Entscheidern* [Corset and power resource: The media public sphere in negotiations of social decision-makers]. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-32009-6>
- Welbers, K., & Opgenhaffen, M. (2019). Presenting news on social media. *Digital Journalism*, 7(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1493939>
- Wong, S. C., & Wright, S. (2020). Hybrid mediation opportunity structure? A case study of Hong Kong’s Anti-National Education Movement. *New Media & Society*, 22(10), 1741–1762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819879509>
- Ziegele, M., Breiner, T., & Quiring, O. (2014). What creates interactivity in online news discussions? An exploratory analysis of discussion factors in user comments on news items. *Journal of Communication*, 64(6), 1111–1138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12123>

## About the Authors



**Marlene Schaaf** is a research assistant at the Department of Communication at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She mainly does research in political communication. Her current projects take a look at the dynamic relationship between social movements and media as well as at the impact of media on political and economic elites' decision-making.



**Oliver Quiring** is a full professor of communication science at the Department of Communication of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany. His research interests include political, social, and economic communication; media trust; media and protest; and different kinds of sustainability and environmental communication.