CONSTRUCTING DIGITAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES AS A RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION AND POPULISM

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Over the past three decades, the relationship between digital media and activism has been subject to fraught debate. Though early promise was attached to the capacity of new media technologies to support protest (Kahn and Kellner 2004), there has also always been concern that particular forms of software and hardware can simultaneously undermine the aims of activist groups who use them. Environmental groups, for instance, have long struggled to ameliorate the carbon footprint and e-waste generated by the media they use (Pickerill 2003) while anti-capitalist movements have faced well-documented challenges in articulating their ideals in a commercial media system that can cut against their values (Barassi 2015). That said, the promise of digital media was often seen to outweigh any problems. With the rise of social media and its alleged displacement of the alternative and activist media that flourished in the 1990s and early 2000s (Juris 2008; Lievrouw 2011; Gerbaudo 2017), however, critique of mediated activism has gathered force (see Curran et al. 2016; Fuchs 2017).

A growing body of research has suggested that social media are intrinsically problematic for radical or even progressivist forms of politics, lending themselves instead to the tactics of populist and conservative groups (e.g. Schradie 2019). Yet such criticisms are not all pervasive, and other research has shown cautious optimism, pointing to ongoing potentials for digital media in general, and social media in particular, for supporting counter-public and counter-narrative formation that can challenge authoritarian populism (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015, 2016). Though not uncritical of social media, this work has pointed to contexts in which activists have successfully negotiated tensions associated with the platforms their work is entangled with, in order to push for social change, particularly in the context of anti-racist and feminist activism (Rambukanna 2015; Kuo 2018; Clark-Parsons 2019).

In the first half of this chapter, we trace the contours of these debates, touching on broader questions of de-politicisation, counter-publics, and frictions between activism and digital media technologies. The second half of the chapter then draws together a series of case studies that drill more specifically into the relationship between populism and the mediated activism that is trying to contest it. Before we begin this overview, however, it is important to add a brief clarification; we use populism here as shorthand for a constellation of movements that have
emerged in the wake of events including the election of Trump, Brexit, and the rise of the far right in European (notably Hungary and Poland), as well as other contexts (e.g. India and Brazil). What unites these disparate events and contexts is the vitriol targeted at perceived ‘shared enemies’ of particular (xenophobic) imaginaries of the nation-state, as manifested in the rise of racialised hate speech targeted at ethnic and religious minorities. Our overall argument is that although social media do create opportunities to contest hegemonic discourses that perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of those who are often the target of hate, these platforms also lend themselves to populist sentiment itself and are often used more effectively by those (broadly speaking) on the right.

**Shifting narratives of mediated activism**

In the 1990s a number of optimistic claims were attached to the internet in the wake of high-profile instances of its use to both critique and materially resist specific instances of neoliberal economic policy and governance. A number of political developments have resulted in digital media technologies being framed as lending themselves to anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical politics, in part due to the flourishing of online alternative media in support of the alter-globalisation movement’s push for a more just ‘other’ or ‘alter-‘ globalisation (see Juris 2008).

Perhaps the most influential instance of the radical potential of digital media was found in the tactics of the Zapatista National Army of Liberation. The Zapatistas’ 1994 uprising against the Mexican state garnered international awareness and solidarity after their communiqués, which connected the marginalisation and poverty of indigenous communities in Chiapas to specific transnational trade agreements such as NAFTA, were circulated via online networks such as Peacenet and Usenet (Cleaver 1997). Though the role of digital media has perhaps been overstated in ways that obscure other, more significant, aspects of the Zapatistas’ tactics, they have nonetheless been hugely influential on other mediated social movements themselves and scholarship about mediated activism (e.g. Castells 1997; Hands 2011; cf Wolfson 2012).

The Zapatistas were not alone in their political aims and for the alter-globalisation movement(s) that gathered force in the 1990s and early 2000s, the internet was seen as a counter-cultural space where activists could formulate ideologies and practices that offered alternatives to dominant-socioeconomic systems (Gerbaudo 2017). The emergence of the transnational alternative news network Indymedia, for instance, was an experiment in developing a publishing infrastructure that not only documented anti-capitalist actions but was also organised in accordance with the principles of direct democracy that were central to the alter-globalisation movement (Garcelon 2006; Pickard 2006).

At the same time that Indymedia was rising in prominence, however, early forms of social media were also emerging throughout the first decade of the 2000s. These platforms grew to prominence to the extent that they were seen as displacing grassroots activist-led media. In academic contexts activist media initiatives were often declared ‘failures’ (Ippolita et al. 2009) in the wake of the ascendancy of ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicek 2017). These socio-technical and conceptual developments have resulted in dominant academic narratives about mediated activism effectively flipping, so the internet is no longer seen as lending itself to anti-authoritarian and progressivist narratives but instead is seen as the opposite. As Jen Schradie’s (2019) work on conservative US-based activism or Emiliano Treré’s (2018) analysis of the authoritarian populism of Italy’s Five Star movement suggests, the contemporary media environment means that those with money and power – often groups on the right – often have the necessary resources to use digital media to broadcast their views more successfully than those on the left.
The evolution of mediated counter-publics

Perhaps one of the most prominent frameworks for conceptualising these shifts has been Habermasian theories of counter-publics. Following Nancy Fraser’s definition (1990), counter-publics operate as a separate (counter) public sphere, constructing alternative narratives that may not be in line with mainstream debate. While early online activism was seen as holding potential to support the formation and spread of counter-public opinion (Ruiz 2014) – even though this process was complex (Downey and Fenton 2003) – today opportunities for exerting this influence are perceived as increasingly fleeting (particularly for the left). Since the early 2000s, these issues have only intensified, and it is not just the efficacy of progressivist counter-publics that has been called into question or even their capacity to form – though these concerns have indeed been raised – but the ongoing pertinence of Habermasian theory itself.

As activism has shifted from alternative media infrastructures (developed by the activists who use them) to social media, protest is argued to have become more ephemeral. Unlike the close-knit relationship between alternative media and activist identity formation that characterised initiatives such as Indymedia and McSpotlight, social media like Twitter have served as platforms for more instantaneous forms of mobilisation in relation to specific issues. Bruns and Burgess (2011), for instance, describe how ‘ad hoc’ publics regularly emerge on Twitter and form collective responses to specific social and political developments (see also Dawes 2017). Rather than the collective identity-building that is necessary to sustain counter-publics, what emerges is much looser networks of individuals who coalesce temporarily around specific issues before dissipating. These dynamics are not wholly negative and have potentials as well as drawbacks (as discussed next; see also Jackson et al. 2020).

Two particular issues, however, complicate wholly positive appraisals of these tactics. Firstly, as we elucidate shortly, such approaches lend themselves to authoritarian populism as much as progressivist critiques of contemporary political development. The second complicating issue relates more to the implications of Habermasian speech ideals. Despite well-documented concerns, social media platforms still often present themselves as contributors to ‘public conversation’ (Poole et al. 2020); such narratives evoke a Habermasian ideal that more speech equates to good speech and that if the fragmentation created by social media could be overcome – and different voices brought together – then a healthier public sphere would emerge. What is missing from such arguments is the fact that on platforms such as Twitter, different publics are often already brought together, converging on particular hashtags to engage in debate (Siapera et al. 2018; Poole et al. 2019). Yet these engagements rarely result in dialogue and mutual understanding but instead lead to what Karlsen et al. (2017) describe as a ‘trench warfare’ dynamic in which pre-existing standpoints are reinforced through argumentation. Before engaging with examples that can be used to conceptualise these problems in more depth, however, it is useful to turn to a slightly different body of work that can be used to point to some more hopeful political and theoretical trajectories.

Frictions and entanglements

For all the concern about social media, as internet use has shifted from being counter-cultural to everyday (Gerbaudo 2017), there has been a growing sense that contemporary activism is necessarily entangled with technologies that might create tensions but whose use is difficult to avoid. For this reason, a growing body of work has departed from deterministic narratives about how particular media constrain or enable activism. Instead, the focus is placed on how activists
navigate tensions – or ‘frictions’ – associated with the communications platforms their work is necessarily entangled with (Shea et al. 2015; Treré 2018; Giraud 2019).

Shea et al.’s 2015 edition of Fibreculture, for instance, contains a range of articles that examine moments when particular media platforms clash with the needs of activists, who are then forced to develop workarounds for these problems. Here friction is not merely a problem to be overcome but a site of agency; when confronted with tensions generated by their media use, activists are often forced to reflect critically on their practice and craft alternative ways of doing things. Commonplace tactics, for instance, included juxtaposing public-facing social media with alternative activist media or limiting how and why commercial platforms are used. These approaches have often created space for activist perspectives to be propelled to wider audiences. Others in the special edition use the concept of productive friction in a slightly different sense, in reference to discursive frictions that arise when hegemonic social norms conflict with online counter-narratives on social media (Rambukanna 2015). As with frictions associated with technologies themselves, here, too, space is often created for more critical voices to gain visibility beyond the communities from which they originate.

Although social media activism is seemingly less radical than the grassroots, participatory alternatives that inspired so much hope at the end of the millennium, therefore, perhaps it offers a slightly different hope for narratives against populism to reach beyond the activist communities in which they originate and make incursions in the public sphere. Indeed, in the examples we focus on next, these potentials have been borne out. At the same time, these platforms’ concurrent use in spreading hate speech offers a reminder that any such hopes should remain modest.

**Networked publics**

Our own research into digital activism followed the hashtag #StopIslam on Twitter for 40 days after the Brussels terrorist attack on 22 March 2016 (resulting in a final dataset of 302,342 tweets) (Poole et al. 2019, 2020). We became interested in this hashtag after a large number of mainstream news sources (CNN, Washington Post, and Nigeria News, amongst others) reported that it was trending because people were posting counter-narratives on Twitter against the intention of the hashtag, which was originally formed to spread Islamophobic hate speech. Common examples of counter-narrative tweets included attempts to negate the relationship between Islam and terrorism and using memes to demonstrate peaceful messages in the Quran. We found a prevalence of these counter-narratives, particularly in the 24 hours following the terrorist attack, in terms of the most shared (or retweeted) posts using the hashtag. For example, nine out of the top ten retweets contained counter-narratives; one of these, the post that was shared the most, was retweeted 6,643 times, compared to the most shared dominant narrative (attacking Islam), which was retweeted 1,500 times.

These findings resonated with other studies, which have demonstrated how digital media platforms such as Twitter have ‘technical architecture’ that offers democratic potential, allowing groups who were previously marginalised from the mainstream media to form counter-publics. Jackson and Foucault-Wells’s (2015, 3) study of the hashtag #myNYPD, for example, extends Fraser’s (1990) work arguing that not only do online publics play a role in ‘legitimising and sustaining marginalised communities’, but they also ‘explicitly and strategically seek to challenge the “dominant knowledge” inherent to the mainstream public sphere’.

The hashtag #myNYPD was initiated by the New York Police Department as a publicity campaign in 2014 but was quickly co-opted by online publics to highlight police misconduct against African American communities. A significant finding of this study was the importance of ‘crowdsourced elites’ (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012) in counter-public activism.
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The platform’s features, such as retweeting, allow for the emergence of these non-traditional leaders, who are then able to expose wider publics to alternative narratives (a dynamic they also observed in the case of #Ferguson; Jackson and Foucault Welles 2016). While Jackson and Foucault Welles found a traditional broadcast structure with a few influential individuals in their study (whom they later conceptualised as ‘brokers’; 2019), these were a diverse range of actors who had previously had relatively low profiles. The hashtag therefore worked to connect disparate messages and actors, raising its visibility and meaning overall (and into the mainstream media, as explored next).

Other studies, in contrast, have shown how right-wing groups have harnessed the affordances of social media in a more structured, instrumental way than those participating in counter-narratives (Siapera et al. 2018). Our own project demonstrated how the networks of (mostly US) right-wing actors tweeting the dominant narrative of #stopIslam were much more tightly clustered around significant nodes and, through persistent and consistent use of ‘flak’, or what has also been known as social media mobbing (Blevins et al. 2019), were able to close down counter-narratives and afford their messages more longevity.

Likewise, Siapera et al.’s (2018, 207) work on refugees and voice on Twitter demonstrates how ‘power is exercised by those who are successfully able to create, tap and steer information flows in ways to suit their goals’, illustrating that right-wing groups have become particular adept at such tactics. Although the affordances of Twitter allow for the emergence of grassroots activism, this power is ‘liminal’, they suggest, because of the structural dynamics of Twitter, where publics coalesce around established actors and narratives. The refugee crisis, for instance, could be easily politicised by ‘densely connected’ US Trump supporters to garner support in the presidential race, due to its resonating with existing (negative) tropes and discourses about refugees in the mainstream media (see also Holohan 2019). Echoing these tactics, a growing body of work has pointed to the way that ‘trigger events’ (Copsey et al. 2013), such as terrorist attacks, are regularly used to gain visibility for extreme right views, with white supremacist groups explicitly offering guidelines about how to use news events as a means of disseminating and normalising xenophobia via social media (Siapera 2019). In addition to activists working to contest populist rhetoric on uneven discursive terrain in comparison to those perpetuating it, a number of studies have also pointed to the role of uneven levels of affective investment.

Affective labour

According to Siapera et al. (2015), the information flows that characterise online narrative and counter-narrative formation are propelled by affective investment. There has been a growth of interest in ‘digital affect culture’ (Evolvi 2019, 4; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; Papacharissi 2015) and, in particular, the relationship between mediated emotional politics and the rise of populism and nationalism, evidenced by political shocks such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump.

Multiple studies show how hashtags can be used as an ideological and organising tool for harnessing collective power (#BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #Baltimoreuprising, and #myNYPD) to raise the visibility of alternative narratives in relation to marginalised groups. However, again, the combination of affective engagement – or ‘collective affect’ (Abdel-Fadil 2019) – and the tightly clustered networks described earlier have also advantaged right-wing groups. Several studies note how the emotional tenor of Twitter is dominated by ‘rage’ (Sills 2017; Evolvi 2019). According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019), for instance, right-wing populist groups use anger strategically (and performatively) to mobilise support through discursively constructed grievances as well as enemies, forming ‘affective frames’ for their arguments (Jackson and Foucault-Wells 2019). Some individuals, defined as ‘stokers’ by Jackson and Foucault-Wells (2019) in
their analysis of the networked publics circulating #Baltimoreriots, are especially influential in this respect.

Muslims have been a particular target for this kind of hostility (see Poole 2016) and while, as outlined earlier, Twitter has opened a degree of space for anti-Islamophobic counter-narratives, it has also enabled the spread of hate speech. Drawing on Mouffe (2013), for instance, Evolvi (2019) argues that Twitter engenders ‘antagonistic’ interactions that limit democratic participation by seeking to exclude Muslims rather than include them in debate. Her studies of #Islam-exit (Evolvi 2018) and #Brexit (2019) demonstrate how Muslims avoid confrontation with Islamophobic users.1 This was also evident in our analysis of #stopIslam, in which any attempts at rational debate or even defensive communications by Muslims or ‘would-be allies’ were worn down by the tactical interventions of the right.

**Discursive strategies and tactical interventions**

Providing alternative frames is a key strategy for digital activists, as a number of studies have found, notably Jackson and Foucault-Welles’s work on racial justice hashtags (2015, 2016, 2019; see also Jackson with Freelon et al. 2018). In the case of #Baltimoreuprising, #Ferguson, and #myNYPD, they argue that a key strategy of networked counter-publics is to shift mainstream debates about racial politics using collective power (i.e. ‘network framing’). In their case studies, some of the discursive strategies used by activists (from different political positions) in the face of conflict included retweeting posts in line with their own ideologies to ‘crowd out’ alternative views, engagement to reconcile difference (though this was more limited), and appropriation, particularly in the case of #myNYPD.

In our own work, we suggest that the approaches used by key actors in mediated activism often serve as ‘tactical interventions’ (Giraud 2018; Poole et al. 2020), wherein users attempt ‘to interfere in complex communication ecologies by modulating the affordances of particular media, a sort of digital weapon of the weak intended to counteract the growing power differentials in this realm’ (Lezaun 2018, 224). In the case of #stopIslam, for example, activists were able to circumvent power-law effects that tend to give prominence to already well-connected actors and hegemonic opinions, but, again, populist groups used similar tactics and, indeed, were often more successful. Schradie (2019) argues that having a single message about freedom, along with more hierarchical structures, enables the right to be more effective and consolidate power (whereas we found that the topics of counter-narratives tended to be somewhat more diverse).

In the case of #stopIslam, for instance, although the most prominent retweets circulating with this hashtag were counter-narratives (supporting Muslims), the way they were framed generated tensions that undermined their aims (Poole et al. 2020). Most of the counter-narratives used generalised criticisms of hate speech to contest #stopIslam, defending Muslims and Islam and criticising Islamophobia, often using memes to underline their points, including quotes from the Quran. However, this approach left openings for self-identified right-wing Twitter users to undermine them with more specific counter-evidence. This approach (using ‘alternative facts’ often sourced from influential right-wing websites) and the frequency with which the right responded to the counter-narratives had the paradoxical effect of the counter-narratives contributing to the greater circulation of the hate speech they sought to contest. In this case attempts to appropriate right-wing propaganda (#stopIslam) were, in turn, ‘hijacked’ by the right to reinscribe representational inequalities.

It is also important to note that participation in counter-narratives was not equally open to all; some of these counter-narratives were circulated by (self-identified) Muslims, although they were less visible than other voices (15.8 percent of 4,263 retweets examined through manual
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quantitative analysis). This could be strategic, given the hazards attached to making identity claims online; these tweets received more flak than others, and so most Muslims did not attempt to engage with any Islamophobic responses (also, potentially, to curtail further circulation). However, there was evident of support from Muslims for some counter-narratives, particularly to those posted on celebrity accounts, with many Muslims offering thanks for this. Eckert et al. (2019) suggest that Muslims constitute ‘hyper differential counter-publics’ precisely because they have to navigate difficult and shifting environments, creating ‘hyper-situational responses’.

Responses to counter-narratives (in the form of comments) were much more likely to be in line with the original intention of the hashtag, with minimal interaction from more progressive voices. Right-wing actors used tactics that included disputing, dismissing, and refuting the claims of counter-narrative tweets, as well as defending their own ideological positions. Additional tactics included appropriation, affirmation, and sarcasm to disrupt the counter-narrative hijacking of their hashtag. Affirmation through volume was a typical response; sharing memes using sarcasm and humour is a well-documented characteristic of Twitter content and often functions to complicate and legitimise racist discourse (Brock and Brooker cited in Sharma and Brooker 2016). The appropriation of international news items to reinforce agendas also contributes authority to the right’s ‘evidence-based’ approach. The dynamics of this hashtag demonstrate the tensions generated in trying to counter right-wing activism online without further reproducing existing inequalities by opening up avenues for further disinformation to be propagated.

Conclusion: understanding populist media ecologies

Despite tensions generated by social media, existing studies show how the collective labour and contestation that gives alternative narratives visibility online also translates to mainstream media. The newsworthy element of hashtag campaigns being ‘hijacked’ has led to prominent media organisations reporting on this trend in the case of #stopIslam, #Muslimrage, #GazaUnderAttack, #Ferguson, #myNYPD, #Baltimoreuprising, and, in particular, #BlackLivesMatter. Far from operating in echo chambers, then, these studies show how Twitter debates can cut across a range of social issues, intersectional identities, geographical localities, and media platforms.

However, once noticed in the mainstream public sphere, counter-narratives can be subject to criticism. Even online, dominant publics monopolise (with whiteness at the centre of internet use; Nakamura 2002) and re-establish hegemonies through strategies such as social media mobbing. Populism itself has been successful in taking advantage of a ‘hybrid media system’, circulating material from extreme right sources on social media with the aim of normalising these values (Siapera 2019). In the case of #stopIslam, the tightly structured networks of the right combined with the structural constraints of the platform not only undermined the longevity and coherence of counter-narratives but also subtly modulated the affordances of Twitter in ways that enabled these users to extend their voice outwards (by navigating Twitter’s policies on hate speech through the appropriation of mainstream media stories, for example). A further issue with counter-narratives is that they remain reactionary and so can sometimes be counter-productive in contributing to the continued circulation of stereotypical tropes, reinforcing them by seeking to prove otherwise and thus inadvertently opening up spaces where racism is presented as something that can be ‘debated’ (Titley 2019). For example, encouraging Muslims to condemn actions of political violence also allows dominant groups to frame the discourse around their representation (Law et al. 2018). Hence, we should be considering how progressive groups might be instrumental in constructing alternative narratives rather than seeking to contest hate speech.
Overall, the studies touched on here demonstrate how the digital and mainstream media are not separate discursive spheres but critically intersect, and therefore, it is necessary to study the relations within these media ecologies. While digital spaces offer marginalised communities some opportunities to claim social power, we should remember that they are located in socio-political systems where the distribution of power is unequal; hence, structural inequalities tend to be reproduced online. Due to its organisational power, black Twitter has been somewhat successful in being able to reframe media discourse about specific events; for counter-narratives about Muslims to succeed, however, according to Law et al. (2018, 14), these networks must be mobilised to ensure that the ‘core political, media and populist value that Islamophobia is . . . exposed, denigrated, dismantled and de-normalised’.

Note
1 This is not to suggest Muslims are a homogenous group but that they often share similar political positions in the face of Islamophobic attacks.

References
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