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Movement cultures and media in grassroots politics

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In the past two decades, a rising number of studies have investigated the complex relation- ship between the media and social movements. Within this body of research, media tech- nologies are considered as fundamental tools for the organization and mobilization of political action, as well as for the construction of resistant identities. Yet despite the insights generated by this emergent literature, a key question is still relatively unexplored:how cultures intervene in the relationship between movements and media. Are social movement cultures shaping how actors understand and engage with media technologies?And is the reverse also the case? Are media cultures affecting these actors' understandings and practices of the political? This special issue aims to paint a nuanced picture of this relationship by focusing on a diverse range of grassroots politics and their attendant cul- tures, from feminist tech-collectives to movements against austerity, from the labour movement to right-wing activism.

The concept of movement culture emerged in the field of social movement studies at the end of the 1980s (cfr. Polletta, 1997) and since then it has been employed to under- stand how activists and the organizations they are part of engage in grassroots politics. Culturalist scholars have focused their attention on frames and storytelling practices (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986), on cultural meanings (Touraine, 1981), and on emotions and identities (Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1996). They have investigated the understandings that lie beneath the activists' decision-making practices or their choices of tactics and strategies for making claims visible. And they have also looked at the production of cultural artifacts, such as songs, movies, and novels, as well as the broader creation of worldviews that spread across society. Yet, even within this culturalist strand, the definition of culture as a concept is still not entirely settled, as approaches andunderstandings vary greatly.

One tendency is to think of culture as the opposite of structure. Thus, culture is

con- sidered as malleable in contrast to the rigidity of structure, it is ‘local’ and contextual as opposed to the universality of structure, it is subjective and situated in the minds of indi-viduals in contrast to structure as something objective that exists outside and indepen- dently of individual perception. In this view, culture is conflated with agency, sinceboth are counterposed to structure (Polletta, 1999, p. 66). A related tendency is to think of culture as a specific sphere of activity that involves ‘the production, circulation, and useof meanings’ (Sewell, 2005, p. 158), such as art, theatre, music, media, and education. However, this view disregards the presence of cultural elements in all human activities, social structures, and political institutions, as it confines culture to a specific sphere.

In this special issue, we consider culture as the meaning-making and symbolic dimen-sion of all human activity. Culture thus becomes a heuristic that allows us to examine thebroader cultural changes that social movements attempt to bring to society. It also helps usto understand the specific cultures that they construct on the level of the movement, the universe of ideas, beliefs and emotions that brings movement participants together. In thisspecial issue, the concept of movement cultures operates as a lens for investigating how activists set the tone of their political strategies, actions, and interactions with society as a whole, and consequently with media technologies. Our goal is to demonstrate that a thorough understanding of movement cultures can shed light on the human possibilities and complexities that define the relationship between social movements and media tech-nologies whilst bringing back at the top of the research agenda the question of the mediated experience of the political. More specifically, with this special issue, we illustrate how a focus on culture can help us accomplish three crucial analytical tasks.

First, focusing on movement cultures allows scholars to shift away from media-centricand techno-deterministic approaches to the relationship between media and movements. Instead, a focus on culture allows us to examine the politics of media usage and how thesere late to broader understandings of the political. Different understandings of movement strategies and tactics are often associated with different ideas around what the media could and should do for social movements. For instance, contributions to this special issue show that while some movements may view the media as tools for the development of radical imagination and the flourishing of progressive values, others look at them as tools for fostering xenophobic and extremist views. This also draws our attention to the internal conflicts of social movements and activist organizations which may be both, at once and at the same time, about politics and media. Such conflicts give rise to cleavageswithin social movements or may be at the root of conflicts in their networking with otheractors. Therefore, examining how culture mediates

the relationship between media and grassroots politics can be an entry point in our analysis of the politics of social movements, and of their diverse understandings of what politics should be and how social change should come about.

Second, a focus on culture enables us to highlight the dynamic interplay between media and grassroots politics. What emerges clearly from the papers presented in this special issue is that the relationship between movement cultures and media practices is a dialec-tical one, an open-ended process that leads to unexpected media/movements interactions. For instance, the presence of certain affordances in a media platform might result in a negotiated usage of that platform, with activists accepting certain trade-offs that would necessarily modify their own movement culture in the near future. All this, of course, ren-ders the empirical analysis of culture in media/movement relationships difficult: while scholars might obtain solid information on certain mobilizations, or even protest events, it is much more difficult to disentangle the effects of movement cultures on the long-termrelationship between media and movements. As authors in this special issue demonstrate, qualitative research can provide a detailed account of this relationship in all its nuance andcomplexity.

Third, an emphasis on movement culture shifts our attention away from simplistic one-medium studies towards the multifaceted media ecology that movements operate in. Acti-vists and their organizations develop a holistic understanding of the varied media in whichthey are immersed. While they might decide to use Facebook and reject Twitter, for instance, such choices are made on the basis of a movement culture that refers to the whole spectrum of media they employ for their activism. Thus, even for studies focusingon a specific type of media outlet or technology, a concern with movement cultures allowsthem to situate the use of the medium in question within the activists' broader under- standing of how a diverse media ecology fits with the movement's strategies and everydaypractices.

To reflect on the role of the political in current research on social movements and media technologies, this special issue includes two theoretical pieces and five empirical articles. The theoretical pieces aim to engage in a critical reflection about what frameworks and concepts are useful in grasping the relationship between media and movement cul- ture. Hence Khasnabish focuses on the concept of radical imagination and the methods necessary to study it in action. For him, the radical imagination is central to the under- standing of movement cultures and their processes of mediation and meaning construc- tion. He sees the radical imagination as a collective activity produced through dialogic encounters rather than an individual possession or faculty. The radical imaginationthus represents

the opening up of new horizons for meaning-making that have the poten-tial to transform society. Whilst Khasnabish explores the concept of radical imagination,Dencik and Wilkins focus on the example of trade unionism and show not only how the movement's alternative vision of society is directly related to their media practices, but also how digital activism has affected the political imagination of the movement.

If the theoretical contributions of this special issue highlight what concepts and frame- works can be employed to understand the dialogic and dialectical relationship between movement cultures and media practices, the empirical articles explore how these dialectics affect the everyday practices and beliefs of different social movements. Pavan and Main-ardi, explore the fascinating example of the 'Unicorns in Tech' (UiT) a case study that sheds light on how women and LGBT workers experience media and tech companies as a vast space that is characterized by gender imbalances which should be challenged
and re-imagined through tech-resistance. Mattoni instead focuses on the empirical example of the Greek Indignants (Αγανακτισμένοι) and explores the question about how movement cultures of participation shape the activists' communication strategies. She argues that we cannot consider movement cultures as a monolithic construct transver-sally affecting activists' usages of both digital media and non-digital media.

Both articles on the Unicorns in Tech and the Greek Indignants focus on the nuances and granular observation from within a specific movement or collective. The other three empirical articles instead explore the relationship between movement cultures and mediapractices from a comparative perspective. They demonstrate that a comparative approach enables scholars to understand the relationship between movement cultures and media practices for their social and cultural specificities and complexities. They also show how similar media practices and ideologies, which emphasise techno-utopian discourses of transparency and democracy, often conceal very different political intents.

Deseriis, for instance, explores the examples of the Pirate Party of Germany (PPG) andthe Italian 5-Star Movement (5SM) as two digital movement parties that share several ideological features, including their roots in anti-establishment movements, their refusal to position themselves on the Left-Right spectrum, and their belief that the Internet increases the capacity of ordinary citizens for self-government and self-representation. In his work, he clearly shows how the technopopulist orientation of both parties conceals in fact radically different conceptions of political participation and internal party democ-racy. Kavada and

Treré, instead focus on one specific media practice, live streaming, andhighlight how this practice is understood and imagined within the different – yet interconnecting – political cultures of the 15M and Occupy movements. They show that the two movements are characterized by very similar understandings of how the technical affor- dances of livestreaming – immediacy, rawness, liveness and embedded/embodied perspec- tive – can be leveraged in the practice of democracy, specifically in terms of political equality, participation and transparency. Yet they also identify four tensions in the relationship between livestreaming and democratic cultures that refer to the balance between radical transparency and self-surveillance, the impact of information overload on accountability, as well to the power of livestreamers and their audiences within the movement. Castelli and Bouron examine the communicative dimension of extreme right mobilization, which remains an under-researched area in media studies. Their paper offers an empirical and comparative reflection of two emerging extreme-right social movement organizations: CasaPound Italia in Italy and Les Identitaires in France. Rather than treating them as incidental beneficiaries of media populism, the paper disentangles the various ways in which these groups interact with the mass media, discussing the forms and meaning of their activism in relation to extreme right political culture, and differentiating between inward-oriented and outward-oriented media practices.

Taken together, the diverse contributions to this special issue demonstrate the importance of untangling the relationship between grassroots politics, media, and movement cultures. It is only by doing so that we can fully appreciate the role of media technologiesin the advancement of specific political projects, which can transform our societies and impact on our democratic futures.

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