

# Platforms as Partners? Dissecting the Interplay Between Civil Society Organizing and Social Media Platforms

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## Abstract

A few social media platforms have come to play a central role in civil society organizing, often functioning as organizing partners. But on whose terms? As organizing partners, commercial social media platforms shape the conditions under which civil society actors organize, also shaping organizational dynamics, visibility, and collective action. Far from being neutral partners, these platforms become battlegrounds where civil society actors and platform owners negotiate power, visibility, and control—differently affecting various forms of civil society actors and organizing. Therefore, we need to move beyond the notion of platforms as mere organizing agents to critically examine the opportunities and constraints they create for different civil society actors, as well as how different civil society actors navigate these. This requires considering both exogenous, contextual elements, and endogenous, actor-centered elements of civil society organizing. Doing so allows us to examine how organizing efforts emerge not simply *on* social media platforms but *with* them, requiring constant negotiation with platform logics. The collection of articles in this special issue shows how social media platforms enable civil society organizing, but also how platform-driven asymmetries emerge and play out differently according to the different features that characterize the civil society organizations at stake.

## Keywords

social media, civil society, activism, volunteering, organizing

## Introduction

Social media campaigns, large-scale social movements, and even viral individual messages share a critical commonality: They occur because some form of organizing efforts underpin them. At times, these organizing efforts are driven by collective actors, such as civil society organizations or social movement groups. In other instances, loosely connected individuals—such as concerned citizens or victims of injustice—may also play a key role in voicing grievances or coordinating crisis support through collaborative communication efforts. Often, it is a combination of collective and individual actors organizing—sometimes with, sometimes without, a central lead—to enable, advocate for or resist social change.

Across these organizing efforts, social media platforms have come to often play a central role. They did so, because they enabled the potential for visibility at a widespread scale, connecting individuals, informal groups, and formal organizations. Prominent examples include the 15M movement that erupted in Spain in 2010 (Treré & Mattoni, 2015), in the Egyptian movement that coalesced around Tahrir Square in

2011 (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), in the Occupy Wall Street mobilizations that occurred in New York City and many other cities across the United States in late 2011 (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Kavada, 2015), in the Gezi Park protests that unfolded in Turkey in 2013 (Jenzen et al., 2021), and in anti-Government protest in Poland (Domaradzka, 2024). In other cases, protests primarily developed on social media platforms to then reach the streets, like in the cases of the Black Lives Matter (Mundt et al., 2018) and the MeToo (Hartley & Askanius, 2022) movements, respectively

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concerned with violence against black people and violence against women, originating in the United States to then spread to other countries. Similarly, social media platforms have been central in coordinating crisis support over the past decade, including wildfires (Brengharth & Mujkic, 2016), the 2015 “refugee crisis” (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017; Uldam & Kaun, 2018), pandemic relief (Højgaard, 2022), earthquakes (Muralidharan et al., 2011), and refugee support in the recent wars in Ukraine (Weinryb et al., 2025) and the Middle East (Albu, 2023).

In all these organizing efforts, voicing discontent and providing support alike, the communication infrastructure provided by social media platforms became a key organizing element that allowed the spread of the movements and their concerns among individuals who participated in the same massive, at times global, uprising without necessarily sharing the same space and, on some occasions, not even the same time of protest or support. The logic behind these organizing efforts was and still is deeply tied to social media platforms and the algorithms on which they run, allowing them to become organizing agents in different types of grassroots participation, often giving centerstage to the individuals engaged in the mobilization. Research has indeed shown how social media platforms privilege individualized rather than collective organizing. Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012, 2013) notion of connective action has proven key to capturing this shift. While not claiming the disappearance of collective actors like civil society organizations and activist groups as organizing agents of mobilizations, campaigns and social movements, scholars drawing on the logic of connective action have put an emphasis on the assemblages between individuals and social media platforms, showing how platform affordances have come to play a central role in how civil society actors able to come together and coordinate their efforts. This research has shown how progressive mobilizations like the Occupy Wall Street mobilizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) as well as anti-democratic movements (Bastos & Recuero, 2023) relied on a logic of connective action. It has also informed analyses that show how individual grievances and individualized organizing can coexist with collective identity formation (Milan, 2015) and how leadership, albeit being soft, dialogic and interactive, continues to play a key role in informal organizing, for example, in the student-led Sunflower Movement in Taiwan (Tsatsou, 2018). With the continuous expansion of social media platforms in the past decades, studies on their role in mobilization, protest and support flourished and are still developing, also concerning the organizing dimension of civil society and social movements (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015), among other issues including collective identities (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015), algorithmic visibility (Etter & Albu, 2021), individualized boom-and-bust engagement in civil society organizing (Gerbaudo, 2016; Gullberg & Weinryb, 2022; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) affective intensifications (Just, 2024), and challenging widely acknowledged conceptions of

accountability (Gullberg & Weinryb, 2021). While this wealth of research shows how social media work as an organizing agent, we need to also consider other aspects in organizing efforts to fully understand the relationship between civil society organizing and social media platforms. In the following, we identify three aspects that play key roles in civil society organizing efforts of mobilizations, campaigns, and social movements: Context, affect, and orientation.

### **Moving beyond platforms as organizational agents**

The articles in this special issue address the notion of platforms as organizing agents (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), showing how civil society organizing not only takes place *on* social media platforms, but *with* social media platforms. But, in doing so, they also demonstrate how context, affect and orientation play key roles in civil society organizing. This allows us to consider social media platforms as a broader context for civil society organizing, in which negotiations take place between the platforms’ affordances and the needs of civil society organizing efforts, intersecting with affect and orientation as key elements that characterize the organizing of mobilizations, campaigns and social movements. In other words, while social media platforms often may come to work as partners in civil society organizing, the collection of articles in this special issue warns us against opting for a media centric perspective in analyzing these processes, whether they pertain to loosely organized networks of individuals (Turunen & Weinryb, 2020), informally organized groups, or formally organized civil society organizations. The challenges that come with the dependence on a few commercial social media platform providers (Zuboff, 2022) to accommodate civil society organizing are often opaque for individual, networked and organizational users alike (Kavada & Poell, 2021). Indeed, civil society organizing on social media platforms is not neutral. On the contrary, both social media platforms and the organizing they afford are embedded in wider power relations (Uldam, 2018). Social media platforms may challenge important institutional rules and norms, potentially putting democratic practices at risk (Gustafsson & Weinryb, 2020).

Capturing this crucial aspect of social media platforms while avoiding a media deterministic perspective, we need to pay attention to the wider power relations in which social media platforms are embedded, as well as the ways in which civil society actors engage with them. This entails recognizing that the possibilities of civil society organizing on social media platforms are shaped by the relationship between users and the digital architecture of a social media platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), often commercially designed to generate certain behaviors and privilege certain actors (Helmond, 2015; Uldam, 2016). While this goes for any online network infrastructure, social media platforms provide specific types of affordances. Research has pointed to

the ways in which the profit-driven logics that underpin commercial social media platforms are designed to generate certain behaviors and output (Helmond, 2015; Leonardi & Treem, 2020). By offering specific services, functionalities, and types of engagement, they shape possible forms of collective organizing. With the popularization of commercial social media platform such as Facebook and Twitter in the 2000s, activists moved from alternative media, including independent information websites like Indymedia, to a more widespread use of commercial social media platforms to reach beyond their usual audiences of like-minded users to wider publics (Uldam, 2016). Following the first appearances and subsequent massive diffusion of commercial social media platforms, civil society actors further expanded their repertoire, including the use of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, revolving around the production and circulation of visuals (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016; Arafat & Khamis, 2025; Lee & Abidin, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2024; San Cornelio, 2022; Uldam & Askanius, 2013).

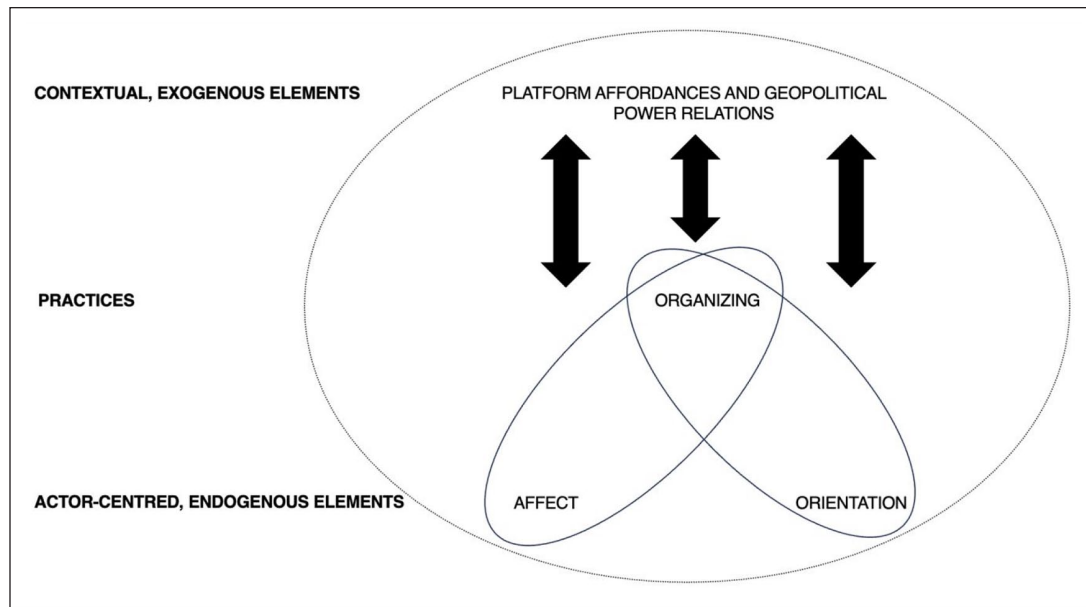
No matter the form of the content—from written posts to pictures and videos—behavioral visibility (Leonardi & Treem, 2020) based on profit-driven logics entails both possibilities and challenges to civil society organizing. Indeed, using commercial social media platforms was described by an Indymedia programmer in the following way: It is like holding all your political meetings at McDonalds and ensuring that the police come and film you while you do so (Yossarian, Indymedia programmer, 2008, cited in Uldam, 2016). The organizing mechanisms of social media platforms increasingly lead to challenges related to sources and quality of information, as well as the reliance on and evaluation of knowledge and expertise (Farkas & Schou, 2019). This is brought to the fore by the spread of misinformation combined with the increased steering of information feeds by bots and algorithms (Bennett & Livingston, 2021; Kavada et al., 2023), as well as the frequent refusal to moderate content, including disinformation, on the part of tech giants such as Facebook/Meta. These challenges, of course, also relate to the wider power relations in which social media platforms are embedded. Fully capturing such power relations also require us to pay attention to contextual elements, including how civil society organizing relies on social media platforms in different countries, also those with hybrid when not openly authoritarian regimes (Faris & Meier, 2013; Litvinenko, 2023), as well as the use of systemic disinformation in more democratic countries, which aims to delegitimize civil society actors and erode trust in public institutions (Bennett & Uldam, 2024), thus curtailing the capacity for civil society organizing. With disinformation not just tolerated but actively enabled by their owners, commercial social media platforms therefore constitute an important shift (Zuboff, 2022) in how we can think about civil society organizing that happens through digital media and technologies. This is because social media platforms become intermediaries that shape civil society and social movement organizations'

social interactions, as well as activists' social relations with different types of audiences, including protest targets, rather than merely facilitating them (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Paying attention to these contextual elements enables analyses of how different civil society actors face different possibilities and constraints in leveraging social media affordances for organizing. For instance, formally organized collective actors such as trade unions played a key role in the 2011 uprisings in Egypt (Lim, 2012) while they were more peripheral in the M-15 protests in Spain (Bennett et al., 2014). Informally organized collective actors have been shown to experience implications of social media platforms and the data collection they afford on both individual and collective levels (Højgaard & Egholm, 2024; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2024). At the individual level, each activist faces implications in relation to their own position, e.g., in terms of demographic characteristics, political culture, and contentious issues that they work on (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2024). At the same time, on a collective level, implications are related to the broader social media platform's influences on decision-making processes within civil society and social movement organizations (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2024; Odilla & Mattoni, 2023). Overall, the uses of social media platforms for organizing—both for mobilizations and visibility and for the nitty gritty of everyday activism in periods of latency (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2024)—seem to facilitate horizontal participation (Bennett et al., 2014), but they also facilitate different forms of stratified engagement (Weinryb et al., 2019). In studies of crisis support, for instance, commercial social media platforms have been shown to create stratified access (Weinryb et al., 2019), e.g., by giving more visibility to group administrators and moderators (Uldam & Kaun, 2018).

### **Theorizing the intersection between civil society organizing and social media platforms**

The extant research discussed so far testifies to the importance of examining the role of social media platforms in civil society organizing. However, the fields of media studies and organization studies rarely engage in dialogue when they focus on the topic of social media platforms and civil society organizing. Important research in both fields has examined how commercial social media platforms, including their infrastructure and algorithms, influence civil society organizing. For example, research in media studies has shown tendencies toward individualized organizing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), boom-and-bust organizing predicated on individual fickleness (Gerbaudo, 2016), and an increasing concern with visibility and surveillance (Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Uldam & Kaun, 2017; Milan, 2015), arguing that communication (Kavada, 2016; Kavada & Poell, 2021) and affect (Papacharissi, 2015) play key roles in constituting digitally



**Figure 1.** A model for social media and civil society organizing.

facilitated organizations and organizing. Research in organization studies has shown tendencies toward social movement opacity (Etter & Albu, 2021), fluid social collectives with sometimes complex hierarchical dynamics (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Gullberg & Weinryb, 2022), moves from accountability toward transparency (Gullberg & Weinryb, 2021), and from anarchy toward hierarchy (Husted, 2019; Swann & Husted, 2017). This points toward more nuanced organizing mechanisms at play when civil society actors use social media platforms, but these theorizing efforts have seldom engaged with each other.

This special issue seeks to fill this gap by bringing together perspectives from media studies and organization studies to explore the role of social media platforms in civil society organizing. This includes an array of civil society initiatives, ranging from immediate crisis and longer-term organizing, local and transnational organizing, small-scale and transnational movements, support and protest organizing, progressive and anti-democratic organizing. Indeed, in this special issue we draw on an extensive understanding of civil society organizing, leaning on Walzer's (1992) definition of civil society as "the space of uncoerced human association as well as the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space" (p. 1). This broad definition captures what is often divided into a range of literatures on this topic including studies of non-profit organizations, also referred to as non-governmental, third-sector organizations, or civil society organizations and social movements, also referred to as protest movements and activism. This includes social movements that adopt an orientation toward political contestation and public protest, as well as coordinated individual-based networks oriented toward providing support in, for example, a crisis context.

These various types of civil society organizing are sustained by more or less dense networks of interactions among different types of organizations and different types of individuals, from protest participants to activist organizers. Understanding civil society organizing from this perspective allows us to appreciate the similarities in the interactions with social media platforms across different types of grassroots initiatives, not necessarily always producing disruption through public protest. Indeed, no matter their specific forms of collective action and goals, the organizing of civil society actors seems to be more prominently linked to two contextual, exogenous elements that, in turn, combine with two actor-centered, endogenous elements at the level of civil society organizations, as Figure 1 below illustrates.

Civil society organizations are not frozen in time and do not float in a void but are continuously shaped by an amalgamate of relevant exogenous elements. Together, these elements constitute the context that stems from developments related to politics and policies in a given country that embed civil society organizations in different geopolitical configurations. The context in which civil society organizations are embedded, therefore, combines transnational elements like social media platform affordances with more local systemic elements, like the political systems with which civil society organizing efforts have to deal. However, to fully grasp the organizational dynamics of civil society organizing, we also need to consider two further elements, that are less contextual and more tied to the actors that participate in the making of civil society, hence being endogenous: first, the emotional reactions and interactions of those who act in civil society organizing efforts, since organizers, activists, and participants experience affect in multiple forms, also through social media platforms and their global affordances. Second, the

orientation of civil society actors, i.e., the extent to which they work on the basis of political contestation aiming for fundamental reform or on the basis of providing support, e.g., in a crisis context.

In other words, we argue that understanding civil society organizing in relation to social media platforms requires going beyond seeing these platforms merely as organizational agents. This, in turn, involves recognizing the key elements that shape the organizational patterns and features of social movement and civil society organizations. On one hand, there are contextual, exogenous elements linked to different geopolitical configurations; on the other hand, there are more situated, actor-related endogenous elements such as orientations and emotions. Together, these elements allow to develop a careful analytical entry point for the structure-agency nexus that shape the organizational patterns and features that civil society organizing efforts have, ranging from more structured and formal hierarchies to more fluid and horizontal networks.

As we tease out both exogenous and endogenous elements to understand how they are connected and, in so doing, shape and reshape the role that social media platforms play in civil society organizing, we are thus dealing with a complicated interactive dynamic that is demonstrated in different ways by the papers in this special issue. In what follows, we illustrate how we might look at civil society organizing, discussing its intertwining with social media platforms from different angles, drawing on the model that we have presented above. First, we discuss the relevance of social media platform affordances and the broader geopolitical context for the understanding of civil society organizing, looking at how social media platforms acquire different roles in civil society organizing according to where and how they are appropriated. Next, we consider the relevance of affect and emotion as well as orientation, for civil society organizing in connection to social media platforms. Subsequently, we also discuss some relevant methodological aspects that the paper collection presented in this special issue outline when considering civil society organizing, and we conclude with the implications of the papers in this collection.

### **Affordances as a contextual element for civil society organizing**

The collection of articles in this special issue signal that the social media platforms themselves and, more specifically, their affordances, that is, the specific features of social media platforms that enable or constrain civil society organizing, relate to the actual space of mediation and communication through which civil society organizing takes place. In previous research, this can be seen, for example, in terms of the ability of organizing efforts to become visible and attract supporters in different settings and for different purposes (Tufekci, 2017), but also in the case of their organizational patterns (Barassi, 2015). In the collection of articles in this

special issue, most of the social media platforms investigated have a predominant transnational spread—Twitter/X, Telegram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram—while some have more of a localized language-domain prominence (Vkontakte). Nevertheless, although provided by companies headquartered in different countries, these platforms are available in multiple languages and across continents. This means that, while all the cases analyzed in the special issue are localized in some way or another, they all deal with social media platforms that to some extent feature globalized affordances. Together, the articles show how these affordances entail similar challenges and opportunities for formal civil society organizing and more informal social movement groups alike regarding their organizational patterns. For example, we find that the accountability of both social movement organizations, as in the case of the protest movement in Hong Kong by Li, and formal organizations, as in the case of the Red Cross in Sweden by Gullberg and Gustafsson, is influenced by platform affordances. In other words, the social media platforms, their contingencies, shape conditions for accountability, i.e., “giving and demanding reasons for conduct” (Roberts & Scapens, 1985, p. 447), for civil society organizations, no matter how structured and professionalized they are. Indeed, affordances that enable visibility and interactivity seem to shape the development of accountability patterns of organizing efforts. Similarly, we see how recruitment of new members is shaped by affordances in both recently formed movements, as in the case of the article covering local protests in Russia by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov, and in established organizations, as in the case of the article investigating Danish labor union by Friis Hau. In sum, the articles indicate that different organizational patterns and practices interplay with platform affordances, which in turn has implications for a range of organizational elements constituting their coordinated action, both online and offline.

We find a strong processual dimension in the organizational elements of social movement organizing in the special issue articles, where the platforms and their affordances are of relevance. Both Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov’s article on local protests in Russia and Odilla’s article on far-right camps in Brazil emphasize distinct organizational processes interactively organized with social media platforms, involving the mobilizations of protesters against local constructions and green zones in Russia, and anti-democratic protesters against the 2022 election in Brazil. In the Russian case, Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov outline how this involved coordination, communication, and recruitment on social media platforms, in the Brazilian case, Odilla describes more explicit consecutive stages involved mobilizing, organizing, sustaining, and remobilizing. In the case of the anti-democratic protests in Brazil, Gerbaudo’s (2016) notion of boom-and-bust cycle is transformed into a boom-and-burst cycle, where social media platforms enabled protesters to organize outbursts of violence. Also of interests in this

regard, Peng, Wu and Sun's paper on protests in China orchestrated by a group of the Chinese diaspora in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies informal modes of organizing also interactively informed by the platform, using distant witnessing (Chouliaraki & Vestergaard, 2021; Kyriakidou, 2021) as part of an activist repertoire for mobilization.

As an example of formally organized civil society organizations' uses of social media platforms, Gullberg and Gustafsson show how the Red Cross in Sweden had a short-term, scripted, and donor-oriented approach on Instagram and Facebook, and an abstract and ad hoc approach on X/Twitter. In addition, Friis Hau shows how in a Danish labor union, another formally organized civil society organization, social media platforms destabilized traditional leadership by privileging individualized narratives and anger. While this could be seen as inclusive, it also risked creating bargaining challenges vis-à-vis political organizations.

Across the papers in this special issue, the organizational elements point toward a fundamental tension in civil society organizing; while social media platforms provide potential possibilities for mobilization and visibility, they also impose constraints that are of relevance for civil society organizing efforts. Whether informally or formally organized, the civil society organizations covered in the special issue continuously negotiate platform affordances as they adapt to shifting algorithmic priorities and content moderation policies, and the evolving expectations of digital publics. This also happens according to the geopolitical context in which civil society organizing occurs, as we explain in the following section.

### **Geopolitical power relations and civil society organizing through social media platforms**

The articles in the special issue cover a range of continents and nations, each coming with specific geopolitical power relations, but also various ambitions to change these power relations through civil society organizing. However, we see that civil society organizing efforts interplay differently with social media platforms in democratic settings and in authoritarian regimes. In democracies, the actions of civil society actors are overt on social media platforms. This is illustrated in Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann's article on the climate movement in Germany and in Odilla's article on right-wing organizing in Brazil. In hybrid or authoritarian regimes, they operate in more subtle ways, as illustrated in Peng, Wu and Sun's article on mobilizations in, China, Li's article on online protest in Hongkong, and Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov's article on organizing in Russia. In such contexts, however, civil society organizing occurs amid strong concerns related to the safety of those who participate in mobilizations, campaigns, and social movements. A safety

that might be acquired or, indeed, lost also due to the use of social media platforms for organizing purposes.

Several articles in this special issue speak to this aspect of safety, highlighting how the risk of surveillance and repression is not only present in the use of social media platforms, but can also have serious consequences for civil society organizing that takes place outside of these platforms. For example, the article on urban activism in Russia by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov shows that activists engage in organizing through social media platforms while being aware of, and even accustomed to, being monitored. In some cases, the articles illustrate how civil society organizations' and activists' safety concerns seem to encourage organizing patterns that try to subvert or counteract some of the social media platform affordances. The engagement with practices of distant witnessing through social media platforms in the case of the online mobilizations related to China's position on the war in Ukraine in the article by Peng, Wu and Sun shows how organizing online while being based in another country might exploit the transnational availability of the social media platform to increase the safety of those who wish to participate in the protest campaign. In Li's article on protests in Hongkong, signaling support by signing up for attendance online without intending to physically participate in demonstrations illustrates another way that locality and platform usage intersect. In this way, the civil society organizing efforts taking place on the social media platforms also bring new ways of appropriating affordances that are most likely not intended by the tech companies that own them. In this manner, we may see that civil society organizations and activists, in specific contexts like hybrid or authoritarian regimes, seek to subvert social media platforms to serve the broader purpose of the organizing effort. In other cases, however, addressing security concerns related to civil society organizing through social media platforms may also mean leaving the online space. This is evident in the case of urban activism in Russia, where activists create safe spaces for organizing through offline meetings as described in the article by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov. However, it is important to note that security concerns can also be present in democratic settings. For example, threats may arise and even lead to physical violence due to the strong polarization of public debate that social media platforms foster, as happened in the case of reactions to climate activism in Germany as described in the article by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann.

Finally, in addition to prompting reflection on the relevance of the broader geopolitical context in which civil society organizing takes place, the articles highlight some commonalities when it comes to considering narrower, specific situations. In this regard, place-based physical organizing can be seen as strongly interlaced with the organizing that occurs through social media platforms. Examples include the connection between Telegram and physical meeting places in Russia in the article by Bederson, Chernysheva

and Semenov, long-term far-right protest camps in Brazil in Odilla's article, the interplay between Facebook and offline procedures for the establishment of formal organizational hierarchies in a labor union in Denmark in the article by Friis Hau, and Twitter/X, and the occurrence of disruptive physical interventions against the climate crisis in Germany in the article by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann. Overall, then, the articles point out that civil society organizing that occurs in physical spaces, rather than on social media platforms, might take place as an extension and expansion of platform organizing as described by Odilla, as a way to stay safe from it as indicated by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov, alternatively to gain visibility on it as described by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann. In contrast, in the case of formal organizing, it may be said to take place in plain defiance of the platform (i.e., continuing regular organizing procedures, e.g., in the case of the Danish labor union by Friis Hau). Overall, all of these motives to move away from using social media platforms are often entwined with the presence of an affective relationship, or at least of interactions between civil society organizations and social media platforms that also involve an affective element, as we discuss in the next section.

### **Affect in civil society organizing through social media platforms**

Related to safety, but also moving beyond it, we see how the emotional dimensions of organizing are prevalent in almost all papers in the special issue. Emotions are encouraged by the affordances of the platform, as described by Gustafsson, Holmberg, Weinryb, and Larsson. This is related to previous research on emotions and social media platforms (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), but in this special issue, these notions are explicated and nuanced through the range of case studies of civil society organizing. For example, Gullberg and Gustafsson show how emotions are picked up by a large established civil society organization to handle different platform affordances. In their paper on German mobilizations, Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann demonstrate how emotions spur parallel organizational dynamics predicated by the platforms, which may counteract the larger aims of movements. This paradoxical development is also indicated in the study of an old established organization in the article on a Danish union by Friis Hau. In the case of distant witnessing in Peng, Wu, and Sun's article, it is particularly clear how intricately affective communication and emotional responses play out as key elements of discourse, particularly in a contentious transnational context. In short, we see how the affordances related specifically to emotions drive organizing on the platform, but also challenges, as described by Friis Hau, as well as supports, as outlined by Odilla, organizing that takes place outside of it. This emotionality is not solely related to fear, as in the discussion on safety concerns above. For example, Gustafsson, Holmberg, Weinryb, and Larsson

describe outbursts of positivity. Anger is also an important component of organizing, as found by both Friis Hau and Odilla. Perhaps most pronounced, Gustafsson, Holmberg, Weinryb, and Larsson's analysis of 100,000 Facebook posts of 125 Swedish civil society organizations over a 5-year period shows how social media retain the ratio of positivity over time despite post length increasing and engagement with posts falling. In other words, with time organizations of different types and focus areas of engagement become more isomorphic as regards the development of their affective communication, meaning that the absolute rather than the relative positivity increases. In turn, this type of inflation in emotional posts may decrease the pluralism of civil society and thus its potential to be an active part of a vibrant democratic conversation. At the same time, the ways in which platform algorithms privilege emotional and individualized posts influence and potentially challenge the hierarchies of formally organized civil society actors, such as the Danish labor union in Friis Hau's article. The privileging of emotions and individualized posts also reinforce polarization in informally organized activist networks as demonstrated in the case of the Letzte Generation in Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann's paper. This also creates an organizing mechanism that sustains certain protests that might otherwise fizzle out such as in the anti-democratic protests in Brazil in Odilla's paper. Overall, we may say that the papers indicate that all organizing on social media platforms entails relating to and being influenced by the emotional currency of various affordances. In turn, this may both support and challenge the overarching goals of the civil society organizing efforts.

### **Orientation in civil society organizing on social media platforms**

In the special issue, we have deliberately included different forms of civil society organizations and more fluid forms of individual-centered organizing, all of which are in one way or another part of civil society in a broad sense. This broad approach allows us to see at work the interplay between civil society organizing and social media platforms for different types of civil society organizations and activists. One relevant aspect that the articles shed light on is the orientation of civil society actors, understood as the general orientation that civil society organizing efforts have in terms of their desired outcomes and specific goals. Indeed, not all civil society organizing efforts focus on political contestation or organizing massive grassroots mobilizations to achieve social change. Others, focus more on providing support in crisis contexts but also on addressing long-term situations of exclusion and marginalization. For example, civil society organizations may engage in direct social actions (Zamponi, 2018), including mutual aid, community projects, or alternative service provision (Uldam & Kaun, 2018). These are civil society organizations whose orientation is not toward obtaining political change through protests, but that aim to produce

immediate, tangible change to those who suffer from a specific social problem.

The articles in this special issue suggest that the orientation of civil society organizing efforts contribute to shape their interactions with social media platforms. These orientations often align with differences between informal, extra-parliamentarian organizing outside official politics and formal, institutionalized organizing. The intersection of an orientation toward political contestation and informal modes of organizing include collective protest actions, such as direct action, where grassroots mobilization takes precedence over centralized leadership (Kavada, 2013; Uldam, 2019). We see this orientation reflected in several contributions in this special issue. Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann's analysis of *Letzte Generation* and Fridays for Future illustrates how the more confrontational orientation of *Letzte Generation* drives engagement through algorithmic amplification on Twitter/X, which boosts visibility but also spurs polarization and backlash. Similarly, Odilla's study on anti-democratic mobilizations in Brazil demonstrates how decentralized, extreme right-wing networks exploit disinformation to a sustain boom-and-burst cycle of mobilization, transforming online support into violent offline action.

In contrast, more formal, professionalized civil society actors—often oriented toward support—navigate social media platforms on the basis of hierarchical organizing. Gullberg and Gustafsson's analysis of the Red Cross in Sweden shows how the organization, in its uses of social media for crisis response, donor engagement, and reputation management, benefits from platform algorithms that privilege formalized accounts and structured messaging. Similarly, Friis Hau's study of a Danish labor union captures the tensions between traditional leadership and social media dynamics, where individualized, emotive content challenges collective bargaining processes, and disrupts established hierarchies. In Gustafsson, Holmberg, Weinryb, and Larsson's Facebook study of civil society organizations classified into fields of orientation, we also see how these organizations to some extent retain their field-specific organizing over time, while also being influenced by the platform. Together, these papers show how the interplay between orientations of civil society actors, whether toward contestation or support, and the affordances of social media platforms have implications for the orientation of organizing.

### **Methodological implications for the study of civil society organizing**

While so far we have delved into the theoretical aspects related to civil society organizing and social media platforms, the articles in this special issue also allow us to discuss and systematize some methodological reflections on how to study this topic. Indeed, the special issue presents a variety of methodological approaches that, taken together, provide a multifaceted picture of how we can build knowledge about the

interactions between civil society organizing efforts and social media platforms. The articles demonstrate how both qualitative and quantitative methods—and, in some cases, a combination of the two—can help shed light on what civil society actors do to organize their activities and mobilizations with social media platforms, how they use them, for what reasons, and with what consequences for their organizational patterns and characteristics.

Several articles in this special issue rely on qualitative interviews to gain in-depth insights into activists' experiences, strategies, and challenges in using social media for organizing, often triangulating these interviews with other types of data and analysis. Combined with other data sources, the article on Danish labor activism by Friis Hau draws on semi-structured interviews with grassroots trade union activists. The article on Russian urban activism by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov adopts an extensive qualitative approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with activists, policymakers, and urban planners, alongside additional interviews with local experts to cross-check findings with media reports and social media content. The study of the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests by Li is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with digital organizers conducted via Skype and WhatsApp, aiming to understand their role in producing leaflets, organizing events, and disseminating information on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram. Taken together, these articles suggest that to understand how social media platforms intersect with and both support and challenge civil society organizing, it is often necessary to speak with those directly involved in developing and coordinating protest campaigns and mobilizations. Through their firsthand experiences of engaging with different social media platforms, we gain a better understanding not only of what they do but also of how they reflect on their actions and their consequences for the civil society organizing efforts they are part of. In-depth interviews with activists and other actors thus allow us to grasp what civil society organizing through social media platforms entails, particularly in terms of the different activities and initiatives that unfold rapidly during times of mobilization.

While in-depth interviews provide accounts that blend firsthand experiences with retrospective reflections, other articles in the special issue also emphasize the importance of participant observation in capturing what happens in specific moments of civil society organizing. This approach accounts for both online and offline organizing activities. In addition to the Danish labor activism study by Friis Hau, the article on Brazilian right-wing protest camps by Odilla integrates participant and non-participant observation, including ethnographic fieldwork in a protest camp in Brasília and covert monitoring of three Telegram groups. This research approach helps elucidate the online-offline nexus that characterizes civil society organizing, particularly in cases where digital communities give rise to offline mobilizations. Collectively, articles employing in-depth interviews and participant

observation illustrate how qualitative methods offer rich, nuanced insights into how civil society organizers navigate the affordances of social media across different socio-political landscapes.

Other articles in this special issue, by contrast, employ various forms of social network analysis to explore how civil society organizers and organizations form online communities and interact through social media platforms. The article on German climate activism by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann applies network analysis of retweets to identify distinct online communities and their interaction patterns, using the ForceAtlas2 algorithm in Gephi to visualize user relationships and employing community modularity measures to detect clusters of like-minded users. The article on the Swedish Red Cross' social media presence by Gullberg and Gustafsson analyzes engagement metrics—including likes, comments, and shares—while examining user interaction patterns to assess organizational accountability. Taken together, these network analysis techniques offer insights into movement polarization, audience segmentation, and interaction structures, shedding light on the dynamics of civil society organizing via social media platforms.

Another way to understand how civil society organizing unfolds on social media platforms is to analyze the content that civil society organizers and mobilization participants produce and circulate. To this end, many articles in the special issue employ various forms of social media content analysis, combining manual coding with computational techniques. The article on Danish labor activism by Friis Hau analyses Facebook posts and comments from a public page, incorporating metadata such as likes, shares, links, videos, and images. The article on German climate activism by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann collects tweets using Twitter's Academic Research API (which was closed as Twitter became X), applying automated frequency analysis and a multimodal manual coding process to categorize tweets by interaction type (replies, mentions, retweets) and issue-specific frames. The article on Swedish civil society organizations by Gustafsson, Holmberg, Weinryb, and Larsson uses CrowdTangle (now closed by Meta) to collect Facebook posts and applies sentiment analysis with the AFINN lexicon to measure sentiments. The study of the Swedish Red Cross by Gullberg and Gustafsson examines social media posts across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, manually coding them based on purpose (awareness, advocacy, education, goods), speaker (organization, staff, beneficiaries), and geographic focus, offering insights into content and process accountability. Finally, the article on overseas Chinese activism by analyses tweets from an account on X/ Twitter, using a two-stage thematic coding process that integrates manual categorization with a theory-informed close reading to explore the affective and discursive dimensions of remote witnessing. Taken together, these articles demonstrate how textual analysis and computational tools facilitate systematic examinations of content produced in the context of civil

society organizing. Such analyses help reconstruct not only how organizers engaged with social media affordances but also the communicative impacts of their digital strategies.

Finally, some of the articles in the special issue discuss the ethical challenges that researchers must navigate when studying civil society organizing via social media platforms, particularly in high-risk geopolitical contexts. Even when data collection is conducted entirely online—such as through scraping social media content—ethical considerations are crucial. Anonymization of data, including specific media content, is especially significant. In the case of articles focusing on civil society organizing in Russia by Bederson, Chernysheva, and Semenov and Hong Kong by Li, anonymization is necessary to protect the identity of research participants interviewed in politically sensitive environments. Similarly, the study of overseas Chinese dissident activism by Peng, Wu and Sun, acknowledges the risks of government surveillance, making it necessary to anonymize media content, including entire posts, images, and tweet texts. A different yet equally complex ethical issue arises in the study of Brazilian right-wing protest camps by Odilla, where the researcher conducted covert observation to blend into the Brasília protest camp and its related online spaces. In this case, anonymity was not only maintained for participants but also for the researcher, who concealed her full identity to avoid detection in a politically sensitive setting. These ethical challenges highlight the complexities of researching civil society organizing and social media platforms, particularly in contexts where state repression, political polarization, and security risks pose significant challenges.

Overall, the special issue testifies to the broad range of methodological approaches, analytical frameworks, and ethical considerations involved in studying social media platforms and civil society organizing. By combining different methods—from interviews and participant observation to network analysis and sentiment analysis—these studies provide a comprehensive and multi-dimensional understanding of how civil society actors navigate social media platforms to organize, often having to deal with the constraints imposed by different socio-political contexts. The contributions in this special issue, hence, not only expand our theoretical and empirical knowledge of social media platforms and civil society organizing but also demonstrate the importance of methodological pluralism and reflexivity to investigate this topic.

## **Conclusions: social media platforms as battlegrounds for civil society organizing**

Across the contributions in this special issue, we see how social media platforms enable civil society organizing, but also how platform-driven asymmetries emerge and play out differently according to the different features that characterize the civil society organizations at stake. Formally

organized civil society actors may have more resources—including funds and paid staff—at their disposal for navigating these challenges through various organizational elements. The ways in which platform algorithms enable visibility hierarchies by privileging group and profile administrators as well as moderators suit formally organized civil society actors better than it does the fluid, sometimes anti-hierarchical organizing of informally organized actors. Others show how some civil society organizations navigate the tension between accountability and transparency by adopting professionalized, more corporate-like, communication strategies to maintain legitimacy in the digital sphere. This professionalization risks impeding informal organizing by countering anti-hierarchical or fluid organizing and imposing structures, and by requiring resources unavailable to most civil society organizations.

Despite these constraints, and moving beyond a platform centric focus, this special issue speaks to the agency of civil society actors in navigating these constraints, also considering a range of contextual elements. Several articles included in this special issue document how social movements and organizations develop tactical responses to the challenges posed by commercial social media platforms (Zuboff, 2022), whether by diversifying their digital presence across multiple platforms, adopting and developing tools to protect activists, or leveraging platform-specific affordances for creative forms of resistance and protest.

Taken together, the collection of articles in this special issue shows how civil society organizing in the digital age is not merely facilitated by social media platforms, nor is it determined by them. Rather, it unfolds through an ongoing negotiation between platform affordances and the evolving strategies of civil society actors themselves, always influenced by the contexts of both platforms and civil society actors. At a time when the political context is characterized by increasing use of systemic disinformation in democratic societies (Bennett & Uldam, 2024) not just tolerated but actively enabled by platform owners, as recently seen in Musk's privileging of far-right content on X and Meta's retreat from content moderation, the asymmetric conditions of civil society organizing are likely to intensify. Formally organized civil society actors may continue to adapt, leveraging professionalized communication strategies and platform affordances to maintain legitimacy and visibility. However, informally organized actors, particularly those challenging dominant political and economic structures, will likely face greater obstacles to sustaining engagement and finding themselves increasingly silenced, surveilled, or banned. Civil society organizing efforts that mobilize in hybrid or authoritarian regimes or facing democratic backsliding, as in the case of Hong Kong activists in the article by Li, could face even greater transnational platform restrictions. If climate denialism gains further traction on social media platforms, similarly but extending and exacerbating

the dynamics outlined by Meyer, Pröschel, and Brüggemann, even non-disruptive organizing could see their possibilities for visibility decline in favor of industry-backed narratives that downplay climate action.


By bridging insights from media studies and organization studies, this special issue contributes to a more integrated understanding of how civil society organizing interplay with social media platforms. Ways forward—such as collaboration across movement organizations and the development of alternative digital infrastructures (Kavada et al., 2023)—can help address the risks of viewing social media platforms as primary organizational partners. These efforts can benefit from the insights discussed in this editorial and throughout the special issue. Future research should continue to explore these intersections, particularly the evolving relationships between civil society actors, platform companies, and the broader political and economic forces shaping both platforms and civil society. As social media platforms increasingly become battlegrounds for civil society, the challenge remains not only to resist platform-driven constraints but also to reimagine digital spaces that genuinely support democratic engagement and civil society organizing.

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