

Bart Cammaerts

Social media and activism

Book section

Original citation:

Originally published in Mansell, R., Hwa, P., *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*. Oxford, UK : Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, pp. 1027-1034.

© 2015 The Author

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/62090/>

Available in LSE Research Online: June 2015

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's submitted version of the book section. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Social Media and Activism

Bart Cammaerts

London School of Economics and Political Science

b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk

Word Count: 4,259 (excluding abstract, keywords and bio)

Abstract:

This entry provides an overview of the ways in which social media and digital networks are contextualized and examined in relation to social movements and activism. A number of communicative practices that activists deploy are identified and the ways in which information and communication technology (ICT)-mediated practices are embedded in roles and functions relevant to activists and social movements are addressed giving attention to the importance of social ties and networks online and offline and to constraints and limitations of ICT use. Networks and communicative practices increasingly manifest themselves as a field of contention which is giving rise to a digital rights and freedoms agenda that is being embraced by activists, non-governmental organizations and social movements.

Keywords:

Activism, censorship, citizenship, communication networks, computer-mediated communication, empowerment, information and communication technology, political communication, social change, social media, social networks, strategic communication

Author Biography:

Bart Cammaerts is Associate Professor and Director of the PhD programme in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the former chair of the Communication and Democracy Section of ECREA and vice-chair of the Communication Policy and Technology section of IAMCR. His most recent books include: *Mediation and Protest Movements* (eds with Alice Matoni and Patrick McCurdy, Intellect, 2013), *Media Agoras: Democracy, Diversity and Communication* (eds with Iñaki Garcia-Blanco and Sofie Van Bauwel, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), *Internet-Mediated Participation beyond the Nation State* (Manchester University Press, 2008) and *Understanding Alternative Media* (with Olga Bailey and Nico Carpentier, Open University Press, 2008).

Social Media and Activism

Until recently research in the political science field and in social movement studies had little to say about the precise role of communication and communicative practices in the construction of collective identities and protest movements, their sustainability or the development and spread of contentious politics. This is surprising as communication and mediation can be positioned as a pivotal component in a wide variety of mobilizations and struggles throughout history.

A social movement is a social process through which collective actors articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to identified problems by engaging in a variety of collective actions. These movements have three features: 1) they are conflictual and have clearly identified (ideological) opponents; 2) they are structured through dense informal networks; and 3) they are geared towards developing, sustaining and sharing collective identities (della Porta and Diani, 2006)

The emergence of digital networked technologies has led to the convergence of channels of distribution and communication formats including social media. The profound impact of networked technologies on societies economically, socially and politically has led some to claim that we have entered a new era of the Information, Network or Knowledge Society. The emergence of the Internet has resulted in a polarized scholarly debate about the impact and normative consequences of ICTs and social media, in particular. In this entry ICTs are referred so as to include mobile communication and the Internet which support social media platforms. However, even sceptics of the potential of ICTs to fundamentally alter power relations in society acknowledge the opportunities for disadvantaged groups to self-represent themselves, communicate independently and organise transnationally. Social media are playing an increasingly constitutive role in organizing social movements and in mobilizing on a global level.

A large segment of the literature in this area focuses on whether, how and to that extent, networked technologies and social media platforms are related to the mobilization for, and the organisation of, contentious politics with an emphasis on five themes:

- 1) Types of usage and forms of communicative practices
- 2) Roles and functions of social media
- 3) Networks, ties and the relational
- 4) Opportunities and structural constraints
- 5) Online spaces as a field of contention

Some studies focus on identifying the types of use of social media by social movements and activists and the variety of media and communicative practices that are being developed. These practices serve certain functions and fulfil certain roles in support of organising, coordinating and engendering social change. These developments have an impact on social networks and social ties which are important to understand to make sense of the relational aspects of mobilisation and organisation. Researchers often examine the

specific affordances and constraints associated with the use of social media the conflicts over, for example, online privacy.

Forms of Communicative Practices

Research on communicative practices is concerned with what activists do with social media. A focus on communicative practices provides insight into how media and communication tools are embedded in activists' situated lives and how their actions fulfil both material and symbolic goals. Communicative practices provide opportunities for agency and users of social media have to contend with systemic structural constraints that impede or close down certain options. Practice theory is drawn upon to better understand how media and communication tools are embedded in the everyday lives of activists and how mediated practices are intertwined with non-mediated mechanisms and processes in societies.

Research on the use of networked technologies by activists and protest movements situates itself at the "intersection between social context, political purpose and technological possibility" (Gillan, et al., 2008: 151). What is possible, however, changes over time as a result of technological innovation by engineers and from the way users appropriate technologies and embed them in their everyday practices, retooling them to suit their needs and purposes. For instance, Twitter was not invented to coordinate protest events, but a social constructivist approach is helpful in understanding that technology innovation and practice is co-shaped by designers and users.

Different kinds of web protocols and online platforms enable various types of communicative practices. The main initial Internet Protocols (IPs) available to users included the Post Office Protocol (POP) and the Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP) making email possible; Telnet enabling one-to-one or few-to-few Internet Relay Chat (IRC); File Transfer Protocol (FTP) to upload and download digital files; and Usenet newsgroups, the precursor to online forums. These were followed by Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) enabling website development and the World Wide Web. Weblogs, social networking sites, podcasting, Voice-over-IP (VoIP) and streaming services complement these protocols, enabling additional practices.

The capacity and speed of the network infrastructure has dramatically increased in most parts of the world facilitating more possibilities and the experience of immediacy. The Internet, from its inception, enabled real time forms of communication (initially restricted to text) and delayed forms, providing users choices about when to consult, read, or view content. Web 2.0 and broadband infrastructures have increased opportunities for immediate 'in-real-time' online interaction. In addition to immediacy and delayed interaction, a distinction is often drawn among one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many multi-directional communication. Social media are seen as convergent technologies because they combine these different forms of communication into one platform. In addition to this social media also blur the distinction between what are private and what are public forms of communication.

Social media also enable few-to-few communication, which is especially relevant for activists and social movements. Chatting, for example, can take place on a one-to-one basis, but it can also be used to facilitate an online conversation between a few participants. Group communication through email listservs is a common example and VoIP enables cheap conference calls with a small group of individuals.

Some platforms are more conducive to one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many, to real time communication, and others to asynchronous communicative practices (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of different communicative practices

	In Real Time Mediation	Asynchronous Mediation
One-to-One	IRC, VoIP	Private message
One-to-Many	Streaming	Profiles, Podcasting, Video and Photo Repositories
Many-to-Many	Peer2Peer	Blogs, Online Forums
Few-to-Few	IRC, VoIP	Mailing lists, Open Source Pad's

A distinction can also be made between: 1) *Internet-based* practices, and 2) *Internet-supported* practices. The former “exist only because of the Internet” and highlight “the Internet’s creative function of new and modified tactics expanding the action toolkit of social movements”, whereas the latter “refer to the traditional tools of social movements that have become easier to organize and coordinate thanks to the Internet” (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010: 1148). A similar distinction can be made between ICT-use by activists that facilitates direct action, enabling activists to do what they have always done, but in a more (cost-)effective way and uses that constitute direct action (Cammaerts, 2012).

Roles and Functions of Social Media for Activism

The reasons that activists deploy social media and the roles and functions networked technologies fulfil for activists and social movements are also examined in the literature. One of the main differences in roles and functions that has been identified is between internal/inward roles and external/outward roles. Inward roles refer to organisation, coordination, internal debate and decision making while outward roles relate to mobilisation, recruitment, attack strategies and the creation of alternative or independent channels of communication that contribute to a vibrant public sphere.

Eight core logics for the use of social media by protest movements and activists can be identified (see Jordan and Taylor, 2004; Cammaerts, 2005; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012):

ICT-supported communicative practices to

- organize internally, recruit and network,
- mobilize for and coordinate direct action,

- disseminate movement frames independently of the mainstream, and
- discuss/debate/deliberate/decide.

ICT-based communicative practices to

- attack ideological enemies,
- surveil the surveillers, and,
- preserve protest artefacts.

Inward-oriented communicative action relates to the potential of social media to make internal organisation more efficient through the mediation of internal communication. The use of social media may lower the transaction costs of participation which, in turn, potentially fosters recruitment and retention of recruits. Social media are seen as being instrumental in enabling more fluid membership and asynchronous participation, although this potential should not be exaggerated. Lower costs do not automatically lead to higher overall levels of political participation. Furthermore, the continuing importance of face-to-face communication for building trust and keeping information safe from state security services has to be emphasized too in this regard.

Another feature of social media is that they increase the ability of social movements to organise across borders on a transnational level, to link up with other organisations building large networks that overcome time/space constraints, potentially leading to movement spill-over.

Social media play an important role in facilitating the mobilisation for, and coordination of, direct actions offline. An overemphasis on the Internet is present in some studies and mobile technologies and text messaging often play a very important role (Gillan, et al., 2008). For example, SMS and mobile phones played a role in mobilisations against Philippine President Joseph – ‘Erap’ – Estrada, leading to his resignation in 2001 illustrating a substantial change in political communication and mobilisation in the Global South. Lowering the cost and increasing the efficiency of mobilization and coordination with a view to offline direct action is one of the main features of social networking sites and smart phones, enabling on-the-spot or in-real-time communicative practices.

Social media enable activists and protest movements to ‘self-mediate’ and to distribute movement goals or frames more easily. Social movements and activists have always done this, but social media are said to greatly increase the capacity to transmit text and visual discourses. It is often argued that social media potentially provide (new) opportunities for citizens and subordinate groups in society to bypass state and market controls and the mainstream media to construct alternative collective identities.

In addition, social media tools can potentially facilitate internal debate among activists. Online forums and mailing lists are used extensively and these tools are considered an integral part of many movements, to the extent that some have started to use online platforms and forums for decision-making (Gillan, et al., 2008: 157). This has been studied mainly from the perspective of how online deliberation has the potential to strengthen the public sphere.

In recent years, a number of other roles that are related more to Internet-based practices than to Internet-supported practices, i.e. they are more constitutive than instrumental, have forcefully asserted themselves. The network is used against the network; indeed activists are using the Internet and social media platforms as weapons to strike at their ideological enemies. ICTs are therefore being used as instruments of direct action as “hacktivist” tactics demonstrate (Jordan and Taylor, 2004).

An example of this is the tactic of *sousveillance* – surveilling the surveillers or bottom-up surveillance by citizens/activists on the state or public figures. Pervasive handheld cameras on mobile phones used with networked infrastructures and platforms have made this tactic possible. *Sousveillance* is the result of what Mathiesen (1997) calls the synoptic viewer society or the many watching the few. The filming and photographing of police behaviour during demonstrations can be seen as a passive aggressive counter-tactic to monitor and expose police or state-sponsored violence. Social media are used to distribute content uploaded by protesters which can go viral and may be picked up by international media. *Sousveillance* tactics played an important role during the student protests in the United Kingdom in 2011 and during the Arab Spring.

Closely linked to *sousveillance*, social media provide an archive, a memory and a repository of text and audio-visual symbolic content relating to protests, tactics, organisations, and ideas. The self-mediations of protesters and activists contribute to a global archive of protest artifacts. The permanent nature of these artifacts enables the symbols embedded in these discourses to be culturally transmitted, feeding struggles and contributing to a collective memory of protest.

In this way, social movements transfer knowledge and can influence future movements through what is called *movement spillover*. The protests in Tunisia spreading to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria are an example as is the rapid diffusion of the occupation of symbolic public spaces as a direct action in the Arab World spreading to the indignados in Spain, to the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere with the Occupy movement.

Networks and Ties

Networks and the ties between actors within a social movement can be understood as being constitutive of collective identities that are “constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups)” (Melucci, 1995: 43). They invoke mutual interaction and, sometimes, the development of strong ties. In adopting a network perspective is important to ascertain the quality of the ties between various network nodes.

Tie-theory has provided the basis for insightful contributions by identifying strong, weak and latent ties. Weak ties are often seen as primarily instrumental, strong ties are seen as being emotional and as leading to more

frequent exchanges and interactions. The *strength of weak ties* is understood to lie in the ability of individuals and organisations to draw support from weak-tie networks in the form of experience, information and resources. The strength of strong ties tends to be emphasized in the social movement literature and is associated with strong motivation and loyalty. “Latent social network ties, used here to indicate ties that are technically possible but not yet activated socially” (Haythornthwaite, 2005: 137) are particularly relevant when networked technologies are involved.

The interconnections between actors within networks are a crucial aspect of social movements and activism because they influence their impact and their ability to sustain and coordinate social action. Bennett (2003) suggests using Gerlach and Hines’ SPIN-model to make sense of networked movements that are self-reflexive, democratic and deliberative. In their study into religious organisations in the 1960s, Gerlach and Hines (quoted in Bennett, 2003) identified four main characteristics of a SPIN model:

1. **Segmentation** - fluid and diverse in demands and aims
2. **Polycentric** - leaderless and containing a multiplicity of identities
3. **Integration** - horizontal structures and the building chains of equivalence
4. **Networks** -non-hierarchical, complex interconnections and flows of information

In this model, weak ties turn into strong ties if (online) interaction and mobilization turns into offline collective actions potentially creating bonds, collective identities and a common sense of purpose. Technology is not treated as an end in itself, but is seen as being used strategically to facilitate direct action offline and to integrate mobilization and recruitment strategies with the distribution of information and movement agendas.

In this context, the differences and overlaps between online and offline ties are important. In the literature, there is a negative perception of weak ties and online activities may be seen as being less genuine or ‘real’ than offline activities. Many forms of protest require offline activity and have a need for trusted strong ties if only to avoid infiltration by security forces, but there are also many new forms of networked resistance based on the strength of weak ties, mobilising millions of people who voice their support or rejection of claims. It has also been argued, however, that “lazy” activism, e.g. slacktivism, sometimes called clicktivism, resonates with citizens who fail to make time in their lives for “active” activism. These forms of ICT-mediated resistance are a way of bearing witness to injustice that contributes to collective identity and global awareness.

Increased transnationalization is one of the important ways in which social media are impacting on social movements and protest. Transnational advocacy networks pre-date the Internet, but networked technologies are providing new opportunities for activists and their organisations to organise at a transnational level (Tarrow, 2005). As a result transnational networks are becoming virtual, more fluid, more decentralised, more de-institutionalised and more global.

It is necessary to distinguish several types of transnationalisation. The first is *trans-international activism*, i.e. strongly organized and integrated with staff or members dispersed internationally and aiming to translate local “grass roots” issues and interests to the global level of governance. A second is *trans-national activism* where there is a common frame of reference such as a brand, but local/national cells are relatively independent and link up with local struggles with an international or regional agenda and vice versa. The third type is *glocal activism* referring to the appropriation and adaptation of transnational discourses and action methods in a local context underpinned by movement spill-overs and the diffusion of ideas and tactics. This is not a new phenomenon. Tarrow (2005: 103), for instance, points to the worldwide diffusion of Ghandi’s tactic of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, but asserts that “with the growth of internationalization and global communication, diffusion has both increased and accelerated”.

Opportunities and Structural Constraints

The opportunities networked technologies provide for activists and social movements have contributed to a techno-optimist view of the role of social media in protest movements, but this view is countered in empirical studies that highlight the (structural) constraints and impediments.

Early empirical research on the Internet and political participation often concluded that the Internet had failed to produce increased political participation as promised by the techno-optimistic scenario (Bimber, 2001). One difficulty is the challenge of reaching beyond those who are already active politically or at least interested in politics. The Internet (and social media), is a pull-medium insofar as citizens need to be informed and interested enough to seek information about activists and their aims. While networked technologies have the potential to reduce certain costs and to lower barriers to participation, there are new barriers such as the uneven distribution of access and the need for specific digital skills. Some analysts also warn that movements need to communicate beyond the like-minded and online micro-audiences to achieve success.

State and market control of the networked infrastructures remains strong and offline power structures are being replicated online. While ICTs have emancipatory potential, they are also instrumental in strengthening the prevailing powers that be. As revelations of the surveillance program, PRISM, indicate, online surveillance by state agents is rife and the discourse of netwars and cyber attacks positions hacktivism or online civic disobedience within the framework of (cyber-) terrorism rather than activism. The notion of private communication online is being eroded and this has consequences for confidential communication among activists.

Social media platforms are also, in addition, commodified spaces controlled by companies that often act to repress the aims and tactics of certain activists and social movements when the terms and conditions of their platforms are invoked to sanction unwanted content. For example, a corporate clampdown and purge occurred with the unannounced removal in April 2011 by Facebook of some 80 political groups that had rallied against the United Kingdom

government austerity measures. The justification was that ‘Facebook profiles are intended to represent individual people only’, and not ‘a brand, business, group, or organization’ (quoted in John, 2011).

Despite these constraints, some have strongly argued that digital cultures and social media do provide networked opportunities for activists and social movements and potentially enrich civic cultures (Cammaerts. 2012). The dramatic impact of WikiLeaks, the events in the Arab world, the viral emergence of the Occupy movement, and the modest successes of e-participation projects attest to this.

There are several attempts to link research on the opportunities and constraints of networked technologies to the social movement literature using the concepts of opportunity structure, repertoire and logic of contentious action to examine the interplay between strategies of agency and the structural constraints of networked technologies. Costanza-Chock (2003) and Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) use the notion of repertoires of contentious action to support their claims that a “new” electronic, digital or networked action repertoire has emerged. della Porta and Diani (2006) refer to the logic of numbers, damage and bearing witness to injustice, while Bennett and Segerberg (2012) discuss the logic of connective action.

The concept of the opportunity structure is understood as those contextual factors that are beyond the control of a social movement, but which impact and influence the degree of resonance and ultimately its success and sustainability. Opportunity structures are traditionally situated at an economic and political level, however more recently we have seen it being used in the context of discursive opportunity structure and mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012). However, instead of assuming that structures are beyond the control of a movement, the mediation opportunity structure is seen as being more dynamic, co-shaped by movements, activists, and other actors and operating in a dialectical relationship with structure and agency.

Online Spaces as a Field of Contention

The way in which information is distributed in society and the tools of communication enabling this distribution have always been contentious insofar as governments and authoritarian rulers have sought to control and regulate means of communication that threaten the status quo. The Internet is targeted by governments and businesses to safeguard their interests leading to debates about the transparency of state institutions, what is permissible to protect state security and whether the Internet should be regulated. This has given rise to new social movements specifically focused on defending an open Internet and digital rights.

One site of political struggle concerns the regulation of online content using IP-blocking or removal technologies. Pioneered by Saudi-Arabia and China (enabled by Western technology), blocking and filtering has spread with some 40 countries suspected of filtering content. These practices challenge the notion of a borderless Internet and geo-blocking, whereby content can only be

accessed in one country, e.g., BBC iPlayer content, is a further example of barriers to accessing content across national boundaries. Copyright protection measures also result in online filtering and blocking, e.g. blocking the Pirate Bay website, in response to requests by the content producing industries and legal actions against users of peer-to-peer platforms.

Another emerging political struggle concerns debates about Freedom of Information legislation and the rights of whistleblowers and sites such as WikiLeaks to expose state as well as corporate secrets. Research in this area highlights contradictions between democratic ideals of open government and the veil of secrecy over government. While transparency is advocated for companies, political elites and democratic institutions, privacy and opacity is demanded for ordinary citizens – the Uppsala Declaration of the Pirate Party International states, for example, that a “democratic society needs a transparent state and non-transparent citizens”, a position that is becoming contentious in the wake of state and corporate surveillance and the potential for the growing use of big data sourced from networked interactions.

Intrinsically linked to this are demands for more privacy online and critiques of the degree of surveillance in democratic societies. These concerns are not new, however, the extent of online surveillance practices by corporate and state actors has arguably grown considerably in recent years. Corporate actors commodify the digital footprint we leave behind in return for the free use of social media. State security services have adopted dragnet surveillance practices harvesting data about the online behaviour of all internet users. This contentious debate pits those advocating national security arguments against those claiming the right to opacity. It is also of relevance for activists in view of protecting or the lack of protection of their mediated communications.

Priority areas for future research include: examining the way in which social media use by activists is embedded in a broader set of media and communication practices, assessing the risks for activists using social media to mobilise and coordinate direct action, and above all understanding how movement frames disseminated by activists through online platforms are received (or not) by non-activist audiences and users.

See also:

Social Media and Relationships, Social Networks, Privacy and Security, Surveillance, Social Media in Politics, Web 2.0 (and Beyond), CMC Social Media, Peer to Peer Content (incl. File Sharing, Music and Video), Anti-Terrorism, Political Speech, Privacy

References and Further Reading

- Bennett, Lance W. (2003) 'Communicating Global Activism: Some Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics', pp. 123-46 in Wim van de Donk, Brian D. Loader, Paul G. Nixon and Dieter Rucht (eds) *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, Lance W. and Segerberg, Alexandra (2012) 'The Logic of Connective Action', *Information, Communication & Society* 15(5): 739-68.
- Bimber, Bruce (2001) 'Information and political engagement in America: the search for effects of information technology at the individual level', *Political Research Quarterly* 54(1): 53-67.
- Cammaerts, Bart (2005) [ICT-Usage among Transnational Social Movements in the Networked Society – to organise, to mobilise and to debate](#). In Roger Silverstone (ed.) *Media, Technology and Everyday Life in Europe: From Information to Communication*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 53-72.
- Cammaerts, Bart (2012) 'Protest Logics and the Mediation Opportunity Structure', *European Journal of Communication* 27(2): 117-34.
- Costanza-Chock, Sasha (2003) Mapping the Repertoire of Electronic Contention. In Andrew Opel and Donnalyn Pompper (eds), *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil disobedience, and the global justice movement*. London: Praeger, pp. 173-91.
- della Porta, Donnatella and Diani, Mario (2006) *Social Movements: an introduction – 2nd Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gillan, Kevin, Pickerill, Jenny and Webster, Frank (2008) *Anti-War Activism: New Media and Protest in the Information Age*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Haythornthwaite, Caroline (2005) Social Networks and Internet Connectivity Effects. *Information, Communication & Society* 8(2): 125-47.
- Jordan, Tim and Taylor, Paul A. (2004) *Hacktivism and Cyberwars: Rebels with a cause?*. London: Routledge.
- John, Andrew (2011) Growing pressure on Facebook after political accounts disappeared. Digital Journal: <http://digitaljournal.com/article/306162> [Last consulted 20 November 2013].
- Mathiesen, Thomas (1997) 'The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's "Panopticon" Revisited', *Theoretical Criminology* 1(2): 215-34.
- Melucci, Alberto (1995) The process of collective identity. In Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (eds) *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 41-63.
- Tarrow, Sidney (2005) *The New Transnational Activism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Laer, Jeroen and Van Aelst, Peter (2010) 'Internet and Social Movements Action Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations'. *Information, Communication & Society* 13(8): 1146-71.