Pre-print version of: Neumayer C, Rossi L (2018). Images of protest in social media: Struggle over visibility and visual narratives. New Media and Society, published online April 26, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818770602.

Images of protest in social media: Struggle over visibility and visual narratives

Abstract

While political protest is essentially a visual expression of dissent, both social movement research and media studies have thus far been hesitant to focus on visual social media data from protest events. This research explores the visual dimension (photos and videos) of Twitter communication in the Blockupy protests against the opening of the European Central Bank headquarters in Frankfurt am Main on 18 March 2015. It does so through a novel combination of quantitative analysis, content analysis of images, and identification of narratives. The article concludes by arguing that the visual in political protest in social media reproduces existing visualities and hierarchies rather than challenges them. This research enhances our conceptual understanding of how activists' struggles play out in the visual and contributes to developing methods for empirical inquiry into visual social media content.

Keywords

Images, Blockupy, social movements, protest, social media, Twitter, visual analysis.

Introduction

We follow a scene through the lens of a camera pointed out of the window of the Frankfurt am Main police station. The image is shaky, giving the impression that we are looking at a scene filmed on a mobile phone. Through the lens, we observe what is occurring outside the window: activists dressed in black, running in groups, throwing small objects (most likely stones and fire crackers), and setting

police cars parked outside the police station ablaze. The 30-second long video ends on a scene with a burning police car. Police and press photographers arrive and take pictures of the burning cars.

This is the most retweeted audiovisual content on the day of action of the Blockupy Frankfurt protests against the opening of the European Central Bank (ECB) on 18 March 2015. The video, originally posted by the Frankfurt am Main police, was retweeted 1,286 times, accompanied by the tweet: "Here a video showing the attack on the police station #Frankfurt and it's self-explanatory #18M #18nulldrei".[1] The hashtags are those that the Blockupy activist alliance identified as for use by participants in the protests against the ECB opening. The video was also posted on the Frankfurt am Main police's Facebook page, viewed 1,907,591 times, shared 23,829 times, received 4,900 reactions, and attracted 3,959 comments. Most of the comments (that have not been deleted by the moderators) praise and thank the police for their good work in keeping Frankfurt safe.

Images have always played a central role in activist communication from protest events (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014; Mattoni and Teune, 2014; Mortensen, 2013; Poell and van Dijck, 2015). Street protests are essentially visual phenomena or a visible expression of dissent (Mattoni and Teune, 2014). The documentation of protest events through images on social media has been conceptualized as eye-witnessing (Mortensen, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2015; Bruns and Hanusch, 2017), counter-surveillance practices (Kemple and Huey, 2002; Lyon, 2007; author), memes or iconic images from street protests (one of the most striking examples being the police officer pepper spraying protesting students at Berkeley; see Shifman, 2013; Bayerl and Stoynov, 2016), or producing a visual alternative to the mainstream framing of protest events. Activists' production and sharing of images in social media raise critical questions about how the inherent logics of corporate social media shape activist

[1] Quotes from tweets have been translated from German.

communication and privilege violent narratives to produce visibility over other collective action frames (Fuchs, 2012; Milan, 2015; Mirzoeff, 2017; Poell and van Dijck 2015). The centrality of violence in media images of protest events has been discussed through frame analysis of mainstream media (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes, 2012), as a radicalized form of collective action (Juris, 2015), and more recently as a dominant visual frame in protest coverage in social media (Askanius, 2013; Poell and Borra, 2012). Despite the widely recognized centrality of images in activist communication and the privileging of violent frames in the representation of protest, there have been few empirical studies based on actual social media data. In this article, we explore the visual dimension (photos and videos) of the Twitter communication surrounding the Blockupy Frankfurt protests against the opening of the ECB headquarters.

The Blockupy imagery

On 18 March 2015, around 15,000 participants followed the call for action against the opening of the new ECB headquarters in Frankfurt am Main. In the call for action, Blockupy mobilized for blockades around the ECB (or rather, around the building) throughout the day and for colorful demonstrations on the afternoon of 18 March. The Blockupy alliance has mobilized against the European Troika's austerity measures, which have been in place since 2011 in response to the financial crisis. With its slogan 'Resistance in the heart of the European crisis regime', Blockupy Frankfurt presents itself as a broad and colorful alliance acting against austerity within the geographical center of the crisis in Germany, represented by the ECB headquarters. On its international website, Blockupy Frankfurt describes its aim as: "Together we want to create a common European movement, united in diversity, which can break the rule of austerity and will start to build democracy and solidarity from below" (https://blockupy.org/en/18m/call/). Blockupy can be considered part of a longer history of actions

against capitalism and austerity measures, with earlier forms including the alter-globalization movement (Gupta, 2015).

The German Blockupy coalition includes the *Interventionistische Linke*, Attac, Occupy Frankfurt, unions, youth and student associations, Unemployment Forum Germany (*Erwerbslosen-Forum Deutschland*), the *Die Linke* political party, the Peace Cooperative (*Friedenskooperative*) network, and the *umsGanze* radical left alliance. Blockupy is thus a diverse coalition of activists and civil society groups, mobilizing numerous subnetworks with different levels of radicalization, such as the M18 alliance. Due to harsh police repression in response to Blockupy actions in 2012 and 2013 as well as lack of clarity regarding Blockupy's collective identity in the European anti-austerity movement, the events were mobilized mainly by German activists without prompting broader actions across Europe (Pianta and Gerbaudo, 2015). Nevertheless, activist collectives within the Blockupy network (such as in Italy, Spain, Greece, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden) participated in the blockades and demonstrations on 18 March to support the anti-austerity protests. In planning for this protest, Blockupy designed a social media strategy that emphasized maximizing visibility. Part of this strategy was to focus on Facebook and Blockupy's blog during the event's planning and organization phase and to rely mainly on Twitter (used through shared accounts and disposable phones) to report live from the protest (see author).

Twitter's status as the medium of choice for reporting live from the event was visible not only in activist communications but also in communication by Frankfurt's police force, which was extremely active on Twitter, with a dedicated social media team (see authors). While the event had a longer online life in social media (e.g. producing Facebook interactions before and after the event as well as YouTube videos mainly after the protests), the present research focuses on the event's *live* visual

representation. The initial phase of this research (see authors) used a social network analysis of Twitter communication to explore the main actors involved in the communication processes and sought to identify groups of users behind the production and dissemination of Twitter messages during the Blockupy day of action. This research produced two major results: It confirmed the relevance of visual content in Twitter propagation dynamics (see also Suh et al., 2010; Bruns and Hanusch, 2017), and it observed the central role of the official Frankfurt am Main police account's use of activist-created hashtags during the protest event (authors).

Images and visibility in social media

The role of images in producing recognition and visibility has changed dramatically in recent years, with various actors sharing their visual self-representations in protest events through social media. Images are key to rendering protest events and particular perspectives on political contestation visible or invisible. The large quantity of images produced and disseminated by a multiplicity of actors in social media creates challenges for understanding the struggle for visibility during protest events (author). Social media tactics for gaining visibility and recognition within the sea of images go hand in hand with tactics of self-censorship to avoid surveillance and control (Uldam, 2017). These tactics join algorithmic control and professional gatekeeping (by actors such as journalists, broadcasters, editors, police, and activist collectives) as primary mechanisms for structuring and accumulating images of protest. Simultaneously, actors such as the police successfully employ their own tactics to narrate their perspectives of protest events in social media, using the information flow created by the activists in the form of Twitter hashtags (authors). Both activists and authorities are thus engaged in a social media struggle over representation of protest events.

This multiplicity of tactics and actors leads to a contested and complex flow of digital images in social media. This struggle is not new. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) describe movements and media as interacting systems engaged in a struggle over meaning of protest events as a legitimate form of action to express legitimate grievances. They stress a power imbalance and dependency that favors the media at the expense of social movements, given that gaining voice depended entirely on representation by journalists. Whereas authorities, public officials, and established organizations (such as the police) receive automatic standing in their representations, movements must struggle to establish their standing if mass media are to convey their message – rather than distort, mistranslate, or ignore it entirely (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: 117). In parallel, certain ideas, values, and languages are welcomed while others are less popular or rendered invisible by media norms and practices. These meanings, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argue, often push activists into adapting to the language of the mass media and the mainstream, which is particularly evident in visuals adhering to the media spectacle.

The circulation of images, videos, and other visuals through social media as well as protesters' ability to share these directly adds another domain of visibility in which this struggle over meaning in protest events occurs. In this domain, traditional gatekeepers (such as journalists and moderators) together with the algorithms (such as trending topics), business models, services, and policies of social media corporations can amplify the visibility of such visuals. Images that receive public attention and visibility are algorithmically privileged over those that remain unnoticed, and 'social media logic' (Poell & van Dijck, 2015) favors images that are spectacular and depict violence (see also Gillespie, 2010).

This article conceptually and empirically unpacks how the visibility of social media images from protest events plays out in this domain. It does so, by investigating the visibility of Twitter images within the three dimensions in which this domain forms: a) visibility of images on Twitter, focusing on the quantitative structures, conditions, and elements that describe images becoming visible on Twitter; b) visual hierarchies and visualities, focusing on different actors' contributions to the 'spectacle of violence' by their sharing of images containing violence on Twitter; and c) hegemony and meaning of visual narratives, focusing on the contested narratives that emerge in images shared on Twitter.

Visibility on Twitter

Over the past years, researchers have sought to overcome limitations and devise a quantitative measurement of retweeting activity in the context of Twitter propagation studies (Suh, Hong, Pirolli, and Chi, 2010; Yang and Counts, 2010; Harada, Darmon, Girvan, and Rand, 2017), with retweeting measures often being considered fairly indicative of overall Twitter visibility. Although social media data is highly quantifiable, it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of users who have been exposed to an image or video on Twitter. Metrics such as number of followers, number of retweets, and combinations of these two are affected by well-known problems (e.g. non-human actors, dead or inactive accounts), and the numbers should be understood as potential viewers rather than as actual viewers (Davis, Varol, Ferrara, Flammini, and Menczer, 2016). More precisely, the number of followers is strongly affected by Twitter's large number of inactive users and large number of bots and fake accounts (Davis et al., 2016). At the same time, more activity-based metrics, such as the number of retweets or interactions, fail to include lurkers and less active users (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, and Karrer, 2013). Within these limitations, the quantification of retweets is one means of measuring visibility on Twitter, and it is the strategy we decided to adopt in the present research.

Twitter propagation in form of retweeting also has other advantages since it can be directly linked to an explicit action performed by another user. This activity has also been studied to identify the key drivers of viral diffusion. Previous research (Petrovic, Osborne, and Lavrenko, 2011) has shown how structural network elements – such as the sender's number of friends and followers – can have a large impact on the retweets received by a message. Nevertheless, in the specific context of political hashtags, users tend to be more selective when deciding what to retweet, relying more on the features and properties of the message itself than on characteristics of the network (Bastos, Raimundo, and Travitzki, 2013). Within the technological architecture navigated by image tweets, structural network elements such as numbers of retweets, friends, and followers as well as message properties may influence a tweet's visibility. Identifying how these structural characteristics may impact the probability of retweeting contributes to our understanding of how visibility can be measured through retweets.

Visualities and the spectacle of violence

On Twitter, the images become part of larger narratives through the manner in which they are presented within a hashtag or as part of the tweets from a network of followers. In her essay *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1977: 6) argues that images are activated by their frame, become "furnished evidence" and at the same time "a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality." Social media (in this study, Twitter) also function as a frame in addition to the camera, arranging the images in a flow of information sorted by algorithms and visible to the individual by way of hashtags or the individual's own Twitter feed. The corporate hegemony of images of riots (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith, 1996) and international news media attention to these forms of action, particularly in the alter-globalization movement, have been observed since Seattle 1999

(DeLuca and Peeples, 2002). Like every other actor, social movements must "deal with the media's interest in spectacle" (Gamnson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: 125). While everyday activism often remains unnoticed, 'performative violence' gains visibility in the media spectacle (Juris, 2005). Poell and van Dijck (2015) argue that social media logics present similar hegemonic narratives, with violent images being privileged over activist grievances.

The visuality of performed violence as part of street protests represents a visible expression of dissent, and violence is often performed to gain media attention (Mattoni and Teune, 2014). However, the depiction of damage and riots may also constrain the movement, result in the movement's public condemnation, and push the movement's actual political grievances into the background (Cammaerts, 2012). Even the making visible of unjustified police violence by activists might contribute to the spectacle of violence and distract from the political grievances for which activists are struggling. Mirzoeff (2011: 476) argues that visuality is a "discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects." The classification of subjects through the aesthetics of their representation (in this case, the rendering of protest events and their actors into spectacles of violence) prevents actors from cohering as political subjects. Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to analytically relate the type of violence performed in images from protest events to the actors who contribute to the spectacle of violence through their sharing of images.

Power and contested visual narratives

Mediatized images can amplify conflicts due to their affective and spectacular nature (Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær, 2014). The interacting systems of movements and media are characterized by power and dependency imbalances, which privilege the media as well as officials and authorities due to their pre-established legitimacy (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). As we have shown elsewhere,

the police use hashtags on Twitter to express their own perspective on events (authors). The struggle between these different actors who use visuals from protest events can (at least temporarily) challenge power. The sharing of images from protest events is essentially an act of witnessing by those 'being there' and bearing witness 'as it happens' (Durham Peters, 2001: 717). Citizen reporting and eye witnessing through smartphones may have changed the dynamics of how protest events are witnessed (Mortensen, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2015). For acts of bearing witness, Twitter is particularly relevant as it facilitates the "speedy establishment of such connective witnessing practices" (Bruns and Hanusch, 2017).

In protest events, eye witnessing is often used to document police violence and injustice. In conflictual events such as political protest, the identity of the actor relative to the visual content becomes particularly relevant. In the context of social movements, Donatella della Porta (2013: 15) argues, political violence "can be explained as an outcome of the interactions between social movements and their opponents." Violence directed against activists occasions images of an unfair state, delegitimizes police action, and produces solidarity with activists and greater acceptance of activists' violent actions in response (della Porta, 2013). Simultaneously, the alter-globalization movement (relative to environmental movements) has been portrayed in the media as a group of criminals (Boyle, 2011; della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter, 2006), pushing its political grievances into the background. Images of political violence have a relational component as they aim to make visible the opponent's violent action and thus to challenge power. It is necessary to also explore how this arrangement of protest images as a complex social situation becomes interwoven into larger narratives about protest events and protest imagery or, in Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993: 117) words, "the negotiation over meaning."

Unpacking the visibility of image tweets from protests

The conceptual unpacking of visibility within three dimensions forms the analytical framework for our empirical inquiry into image tweets visibility in the Blockupy action. With the overall aim of empirically unpacking image tweet visibility in protest events, the inquiry is based on three research questions: a) Which elements describe the most successful visual content from protest events on Twitter (quantified by retweets)? b) Which actors produce and share images containing violence in the events? c) What are the visual narratives of the #Blockupy actions against the opening of the ECB? To answer these questions, we combine statistical exploration, content analysis of images, and identification of narratives as detailed in the following sections. While these three dimensions collapse within the experience of Twitter users trying to achieve visibility for their messages, they have been analytically untangled and explored through distinct methods.

Methods and data

This research is the second phase of an analysis of Twitter data collected during the Blockupy Frankfurt action using event-specific hashtags (#Blockupy, #Destroika, #NoTroika, #M18). The data was collected using Discovertext (Shulman, 2011), which uses both REST and STREAM Twitter API to gather data. The collected hashtags emerged as relevant during an ethnographic study (detailed in authors). While we are aware of the possible limitations of collecting Twitter data through publicly available APIs (Morstatter et al., 2013), the relatively small size of the event we are describing permits a high level of confidence regarding data completeness. For the current analysis, we use only the tweets written on the day of the event, from 00:00 on 18 March 2015 to 00:00 on 19 March 2015. This 24-hour dataset of tweets is composed of 137,865 messages written by 49,993 unique users. Of these, 11941 are original tweets containing images. In line with the focus on the communication and

visual production immediately surrounding the event, the number of retweets was counted at the end of the analyzed day.

Unpacking the visibility of image tweets during the Blockupy Frankfurt action and answering the three research questions requires a unique combination of methods. First, we ranked the tweets containing images and manually coded the most retweeted 1% (N=119) of the dataset. This sampling strategy was chosen due to the highly skewed distribution of retweeted content. While this strategy prevents us from causal inference, it allows to study the images that have been retweeted by a large number of Twitter users (here intended as a proxy for visibility). Linear regression is thus used in this context, as a descriptive tool to explore the most engaging visual content in our sample. The rationale behind this decision is to understand visibility on Twitter as (within limitations) quantifiable, potentially contested, and challenged by different actors. The visibility created by Twitter images combines several, potentially conflicting, communicative strategies. By sampling the most retweeted messages within the hashtags, we do not limit our observation to users supporting one side or the other in the conflictual protest event but instead focus on the logic that appeared dominant.

In a second step, we manually coded the pictures to identify the types of users (activists, media/journalists, politicians, police, others) who produced the tweets and the presence of violence (see Table 1). User types were identified on the basis of the self-description in their Twitter profiles. We further coded the image tweets to differentiate between explicit violence, the direct execution of physical violence; latent violence, not directly executed but latent expressions of authority and/or destruction (Fishman and Marvin, 2006); and no violence. After an initial discussion of the coding strategy, the whole dataset (N=119) was independently coded by two coders. Initial agreement between the two coders was extremely high (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.97). The entire research team

then discussed the images on which there was disagreement until full consensus was reached on the whole dataset. The data was then analyzed through a statistical generalized linear model (Table 2) to understand the variables underlying the propagation process and to verify the relationships between the type of users and the type of violence present in their tweets through a contingency table (Table 3).

We understand contributions to the spectacle of violence as part of a relational process that is intrinsic to the struggle over visibility and hegemonic narratives between activists and authorities. As such, it is important to understand more about the perpetrators and those exposed to violence in the images. As a quantitative coding of this dichotomies would have left us with too many ambiguities, we in parallel identified narratives emerging from the images and videos shared on Twitter. We did so by a close reading of all images and videos in the dataset of most retweeted image tweets, arranging them within the wider narratives of which they might form a part and relating these narratives to the wider context of the Blockupy Frankfurt protests and images from protest events.

The analysis of factors supporting propagation assumes a beyond-the-hashtag perspective. This means that the content production explicitly occurs within the topical space defined by the hashtag, but the propagation can be made possible either by the visibility provided by the hashtag or by the users' subsequent connections – thereby potentially engaging a larger Twitter audience that was not interested in the original hashtag. The analysis of the type of violence present in the tweets adopts a user-level perspective, focusing on how actors (or cohesive groups of actors) select particular images and content to share. The identification of emerging narratives takes into account the visual stories implicitly told by the image tweets and how they reproduce and challenge existing hegemonic narratives and visualities (see Spector-Mersel, 2011; Mirzoeff, 2017). While these methods have

often been used individually in the context of online research (Radzikowski, Stefanidis, Jacobsen, Croitoru, Crooks, and Delamater, 2016; Bastos et al., 2013), their use in combination is, to the best of our knowledge, unique. Combining these methods allowed us to empirically observe a) the structural and quantifiable elements of images becoming visible on Twitter; b) different actors sharing images containing violence; and c) the contentious narratives emerging from Twitter images in the wider context of social movements and protest events.

< *Table 1. Details of the coding frame.*>

Visibility of images on Twitter

This research considers retweeting activity as a quantitative method of approximating the final visibility of image tweets. As explained above, measuring the "real visibility" of a specific tweet is challenging, but retweeting (within the context of the topical space defined by the Twitter hashtags) suggests a desire to participate and make something visible by sharing a specific piece of content. Although Twitter users act in accordance with personal retweeting practices within multiple loosely connected conversational contexts (boyd et al., 2010), retweeting in the Blockupy Frankfurt action means not only sharing content about the event but also selecting a particular visual representation of the event. To enhance our understanding of how image-tweets become visible (i.e. their frequency of retweets), we describe the elements that contribute to the visibility of the most retweeted tweets in our sample, focusing on three factors: original author of the tweet, type of content embedded in the tweet, and type of violence (if any). (See Table 1 for details on the coding scheme.)

< *Table 2: Linear model, formula = N. of RT ~ type of user + type of violence + type of content*>

To explore how these factors may have influenced the propagation process, we constructed a Generalized Linear Model. The model defines the intercept as the combination of user type (intercepting from 'activist'), violence (intercepting from 'no violence'), and content type (intercepting from 'photo'). The model accounts for a moderate amount of the data's general variability (adjusted R^2 = .175, F-statistic 3.084, p-value < 0.000) and deliberately does not take into account elements that are known to play a role in Twitter-based propagation processes, such as number of followers, sender's number of friends, and sender's listed status (see Petrovic, Osborne, and Lavrenko, 2011 for general aspects influencing Twitter propagation). Moreover, we adopt GLM as a descriptive tool to explore the effect within our sample of the factors we have previously discussed. Within this perspective, the results of our GLM should not be interpreted as general inferences but instead as estimates of the conditional distribution of the outcome (n. of RTs) given the tested variables (type of user, type of violence, type of content).

It is evident that, compared to activists, the police achieved a higher number of retweets, with the highest coefficient among the various types of actors. While type of violence is not significant, the multimedia content of the image tweets is. Videos and links to external news articles significantly increase the number of retweets.[2] The results of the statistical model thus identify two factors as most relevant for visibility in form of Twitter retweets during the #Blockupy actions: a) the institutional and centralized nature of the user account (in this case, the user accounts of the police and fire brigade), and b) the formats of videos and links to external news sources.

Sharing images of violence

[2] Estimates for the type of messages "Meme" are not available due to the perfect co-linearity between the Memes and the type of violence = n.a.

While the previous section explored the features that contributed to propagation of the messages, we have not investigated the content that various actors shared on Twitter. 56% of the most retweeted images on the day of action contained some form of latent or physical violence. As these types of images contribute to the spectacle of violence and potentially push activists' grievances into the background, it is necessary to relate the content to the actors who are witnessing these situations during the protest event. Table 3 shows the relationships between types of users and the types of violence present in the images shared by those users. User profiles coded as activists mainly shared non-violent images (46.5% versus 18.6% of images containing explicit violence and 14% containing latent violence). In contrast, media primarily used images containing explicit violence (56.8%) and only shared a small number of images with no violence (18.2%) or latent violence (11.4%). Police mainly shared images containing latent violence (53.8%) and explicit violence (30.8%). These values, supported by a strong statistical significance (p-value < 0.001) and relevant size of effect (Cramer's V .309), show that the different user accounts behind the Twitter communication gained visibility in form of retweets by sharing very different images on Twitter. While the majority of the image tweets shared by the police and media include either latent or physical violence, the majority of images shared by activists do not include violence.

<Table 3: Crosstabulation of user types and represented violence (X2 45.5, DF 20, p<0.001, Cramer's V .309)>

The three types of user profiles present in the data – the network of activists, the network of news and media organizations, and the Frankfurt police – opted for different representations of violence in their most retweeted online communications. Every actor, or the collective actor emerging from a plurality of strongly connected accounts (as in the case of the activists' network, see authors), represents its

version of the event unfolding on the day of action. The co-presence of identifiable communication strategies in terms of images of violent action performed by different (potentially conflicting) actors makes evident that social media should be understood as contested spaces with multiple actors. In the shared communicative space of Twitter hashtags, the diverse protest imageries produced conflicting visual narratives about the Blockupy Frankfurt actions.

Contentious visual narratives

While the content analysis gives us an idea of different Twitter user accounts using violence in their protest imagery, we must take a closer look at the different visual narratives in the image tweets to learn more about the potential consequences for social movement visibility and recognition. The predominantly violent (physical and latent) images from the police and media as well as the images without violence (mainly produced by activists) tell different stories about the event. In the following, we identify the different visual narratives emerging from image tweets during the Blockupy actions.

Burning cars and riots

The most widely shared image tweet of the #Blockupy Frankfurt actions was a video of riots in front of the police station in Frankfurt am Main (see Introduction). The video and other images of activists rioting in the streets of Frankfurt or showing the results of riots were most widely shared by the police and media. Activists in these images are usually seen from below, making them appear threatening, in black clothes and balaclavas, with a backdrop of burning police cars or barricades and with the ECB building far in the distance. This type of image frames activists as violent pariahs, distanced from the actual cause and endangering civilians, who require police protection. The sizable police presence and the violent tactics of the police appear to be an appropriate response. Although both the police and journalists also use professional photographs, the videos presumably recorded on mobile

phones provide a feeling of presence, authenticity, and bearing witness to the events. They give the feeling of being in the center of the destruction, a sense of danger, and – in the case of the police – the need to regain control over the situation and restore security. This is supported not only by images showing physical violence as it happens but also by images of destruction caused by activists. A widely shared image tweet published by the fire brigade depicts a damaged fire truck, suggesting that activists were responsible for the damage. The image is not spectacular in the manner of the burning police cars, but it feeds into the narrative of activists as dangerous criminals pursuing senseless destruction. While the police's image is ambiguous since they are also depicted as violent and brutal by activists' eye witnessing images, the fire brigade is clearly a victim of the destruction.

Latent expressions of violence become even more complex when they are more abstract, such as images showing smoke over Frankfurt. While these clearly belong to the narrative of conflict and destruction, this image was shared by activists and news media alike. The smoke symbolizes both the burning cars and barricades (i.e. destruction caused by activists) and the tear gas used against rioters and peaceful protesters alike (i.e. narrating a story of police brutality). Perhaps even more powerful are images of destruction juxtaposed with mundane scenes in the streets. An example is a food stall with burning cars in the background. These images give the impression of the city of Frankfurt under attack from activists, pushing the actual political grievances into the background. They act within the spectacle of violence and produce a memorable narrative of a city under attack rather than of legitimate collective action based on political grievances such as economic inequalities and austerity.

Colorful protests as an alternative

Since the riots started early in the morning, the mass action in the afternoon, including various forms of performative action as well as mass protests, take the form of an alternative narrative. Images

showing musical performances surrounded by soap bubbles and colorful peaceful mass demonstrations are accompanied by tweets with the actual concern of the activists: “They want capitalism without democracy. We want democracy without capitalism. #Blockupy #BlockupyFrankfurt #ECB”. The most frequently retweeted image of this type explicitly attempts to counter the morning’s narrative of violence and damage. The image is accompanied by the tweet “Those who only report on violent action are wrong. It’s also been colorful, loud, and peaceful for hours. #Blockupy #18M”.

As the previous social network analysis of Twitter data (authors) shows, these images have not been retweeted in a similar network structure as have the videos of burning cars published by the police. The police’s image tweets were shared through a strongly centralized (quasi-star) network with a central hub (the Frankfurt police account) and a large number of individual retweeters. Content generated by the Blockupy network, on the other hand, had a more horizontal propagation, with several actors producing content and retweeting one another within a cohesive structure (authors). In other words, while the narrative of the riots was disseminated widely, the images of colorful mass action were mainly shared within a horizontally connected cluster of activist accounts, rather than creating an alternative narrative to that of violent spectacle.

The two contentious narratives also rupture and hijack one another. This becomes particularly apparent with images of the rainbow bloc, a group of Italian activists wearing rainbow-colored balaclavas and blue jackets. Their colorful clothes represent a reaction to the negative portrayal, stigmatization, and representations of criminality associated with the black bloc. The rainbow signifies peace, which creates a contrast to the heavily armed police, who construct a black, threatening formation against the colorful protestors. The police are, however, quick to react. The

images of rainbow colors and peaceful protests are challenged by an aerial shot from a police surveillance camera, which shows an unidentifiable mass of activists dressed in black. The rainbow bloc is visible only in the bottom-right corner of the image. The image is accompanied by the question "Colorful protests in [name of street]? #18M #18nulldrei #18null3 #blockupy", using the activists' imagery as a reference and challenging their attempt at positive representation of the events.

Injustice symbols and justification

One of the images shared widely within the activist cluster shows a female activist in a hospital bed. We can only see her bruised and bloodied head resting on a pillow, with closed eyes. The tweet tells us that the activist suffered severe head and face injuries caused by police brutality. The activist appears defenseless, a victim of police brutality and injustice. This image becomes what Olesen (2015) terms 'injustice symbols', iconic representations of unjustified violence by authorities. The narrative of police injustice is supported by images that directly bear witness to police violence. A widely shared image shows an activist on the ground covering her head, with two policemen standing and using violence directed against the activist. The heavily equipped police appear intimidating, highlighting the power imbalance between authority and civilian. A similar narrative is told in an image showing a woman sitting on the ground and surrounded by standing police, one of whom is pulling her hair, seemingly trying to force her to stand. This narrative of police brutality, however, was mainly retweeted within the activist cluster consisting mainly of affiliated activist collectives. Solidarity for the activists thus remains within the extended activist cluster.

Violent imagery prevails over more colorful representations of peaceful mass action. Depicting activists as rioting criminals justifies police action and creates space for narratives of the police being present to secure and protect the city. Ambiguous images of latent expressions of violence include

police officers standing in a row in full riot gear, positioned in front of a demonstration, and barbwire surrounding the ERC building. Within the alternative narrative of colorful mass action, these images tell the story of police forming a symbolic wall to protect capitalism from legitimate critique. From the perspective of authorities, yet again, it symbolizes a barrier that keeps the city of Frankfurt safe, guarding it from rioting criminal activists.

Conclusion

In this study, we have used a unique set of methods to examine the visibility of image tweets from the Blockupy Frankfurt actions. The results suggest that image tweets mainly maintain the *status quo* of the politics of visibility. They do so within three dimensions. First, and structurally, elements that support an image tweet becoming visible also reinforce existing hierarchies. In the network structure that Twitter provides, tweets from institutional authority (such as status as the official Twitter account of the local police force) were more retweeted than the average. At the same time, social media such as Twitter seem to support a disseminative and hierarchical propagation pattern. This first result is also aligned with what was observed in the detailed analysis of the #Blockupy Twitter network performed in a previous study (authors). Second, regarding different actors sharing images containing different expressions of violence, the police, journalists, and media predominantly share images including physical and latent violence, while the most retweeted activist images predominantly do not include portrayal of violence. Third, the narrative dimension shows that the story of activists as violent criminals seems to be hegemonic over the colorful protests that emerge as alternatives to the mainstream rather than actually challenging the mainstream classification of activists. The power of the police as a public authority with established legitimacy (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993) is reinforced by its own sharing of visuals of violent action performed by activists,

while the social movements' bearing witness to police violence mainly remains within the activist clusters of the network.

Within these three dimensions, this article has shown the interplay of activists' struggles and the visual in social media. In one sense, our research might simply prove wrong the idea that social media's more decentralized structure produces visibility for social movements' grievances, but more significantly, the research also describes 'regimes of visibility' (Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017) in activists' struggles and how these play out in the visual. While activists are clearly given voice, their grievances do not seem to gain wider quantifiable visibility in social media. The most retweeted images in the protest events reproduce visualities (Mirzoeff, 2006) of political protest with the visual configurations of riots, crime, threat, and spectacle of violence. These visualities not only push activist grievances into the background but delegitimize them and undermine activists' legitimacy as political actors. Rather than rupturing the hegemonic visuality of protest, the images shared on Twitter amplify and reinforce existing classifications and shift focus from social movements' grievances to the spectacle of violence. That the images' meaning might change depending on their audiences makes them unstable (author), but this does not in itself suggest the destabilization of regimes of visibility. The question then remains how visual narratives in social media can help destabilize visualities of protest and bring to the forefront the grievances of political agents. At present, these narratives seem to help maintain power and dependency imbalances between social movements, media, and authorities (as observed by Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993 in mass media), leaving limited room for voicing political critique.

Since studies of visual social media content and social movements are surprisingly rare (for exceptions, see Askanius, 2013; Mattoni and Teune, 2014; Mirzoeff, 2017), the present study has

attempted to conceptually advance the inquiry into images of protest in social media as well as develop a unique combination of methods to empirically tackle the problem. Rather than providing all the answers, this study raises new questions. While this study is particularly concerned with the visibility of image tweets, we have not yet unpacked the situated social practices involved in producing these images (see Mollerup and Gaber, 2015). Further research is necessary to fully understand how images travel between different contexts in protest events as well as between different media materialities – from the witness in a protest event to different social media platforms and news media. This includes the issue of how activists' grievances can become visible within the social media's techno-commercial structures (Poell and Borra, 2012; Poell and van Dijck, 2015; Uldam, 2017; authors). Digital methods have thus far focused on textual investigation (authors) and need to be developed to investigate visual content in socially complex situations such as political protest. Finally, we need to understand and conceptualize the consequences that the visual in social media has for social movement practices and to advance analytical awareness within social movements studies (see Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune, 2015).

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