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# Live Democracy and Its Tensions: Making Sense of Livestreaming in the 15M and Occupy

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## Abstract

Drawing on one hundred interviews with activists, this article examines the relationship between livestreaming and the democratic cultures of the 15M and Occupy movements. The article investigates how the technical affordances of livestreaming – immediacy, rawness, liveness and embedded/embodied perspective – connect with the movements' understandings of how democracy should be practiced, specifically in terms of political equality, participation and transparency. Our findings identify four sources of tension in the relationship between livestreaming and democratic cultures. Firstly, the use of livestreaming was associated with a radical interpretation of transparency as near-total visibility, which gave rise to tensions around self-surveillance. Secondly, the information overload created through the practice of radical transparency was in tension with the movement's accountability processes. Thirdly, livestreamers attempted to offer an unvarnished access to truth by providing unedited and raw video from the streets. Yet their

embodied and subjective first-person perspective was associated with tensions around their power to shape the broadcast. Finally, while livestreaming was used to facilitate equal participation in the movement, participation through the livestream took the meaning of equal access to the experience of the squares, rather than equal power in the decision-making process. Our research reveals that despite the national particularities of the contexts in which they arose, Occupy and the 15M were extremely similar in their interpretations and practices of livestreaming and democracy.

**Introduction**

The emergence of the 'movements of the squares' (Gerbaudo, 2017a) in 2011 marked a turning point in grassroots politics worldwide. Protesters occupied public squares in countries as different as Egypt, Spain, Greece, the USA and the UK, with *Nuit Debout* in France constituting the latest square protest in 2016. Corruption and lack of transparency were common grievances, as were the deep links between economic and political elites (della Porta, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2017a). In response to these failings of democracy, the movements of the squares attempted to imagine and practice an alternative model of organising and decision-making that was oriented towards direct participation and the construction of the common good (della Porta, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2017a). Decisions were

taken through consensus in public assemblies and processes were put in place to ensure openness, inclusion and political equality.

The movements employed a wide range of media to circulate information about the protest and to coordinate their activities. Among them was the relatively new application of livestreaming whose use was popularised by the 2011 protest wave. Protesters from the 'Arab Spring' used the live broadcasts to bypass media censorship and to disseminate their own information to the public (Bengtsson, 2013). Inspired by the protests in the Middle East and North Africa, activists from the 'movements of the squares' in Spain, the USA and elsewhere also used livestreaming to document their activities. Activists shared knowledge with each other and groups like Global Revolution played an important role in diffusing know-how about the new technology (Kaun, 2016).

Since 2011, livestreaming has become a mainstream technology and a core aspect of the social movement infrastructure. Yet in relation to other applications, such as social media platforms, live video transmission has been "[s]tudied much less than circumstances warrant" (Martini, 2018, p. 4039) even though the number of studies is steadily increasing (see for instance, Gerbaudo, 2017b; Kumanyika, 2017; Lenzner, 2014;  Martini, 2018; Mattoni, 2019; Montero Sanchez & Candon Mena, 2015; Poepsel and Painter, 2016; Thorburn, 2014, 2017).

This article adds to this growing literature by investigating the relationship between livestreaming practices and the democratic cultures of two 'movements of the squares', the 15M in Spain and Occupy in the USA and the UK. Our focus rests on the interconnection between the technical affordances and logics of livestreaming and the movements' understandings of how democracy should be practiced, particularly in terms of political

equality, participation and transparency. The article also traces the tensions between and within livestreaming and democratic cultures, perceiving cultures as contradictory and always in evolution. Hence, our research provides a snapshot of the cultures that activists developed around a nascent technology that has currently become mainstream within social movement communication.

The two movements that we investigate emerged around the same time: 15M took its name from the date of its first protest in Spain on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, while Occupy Wall Street appeared in New York three months later and quickly spread around the world. In both movements, livestreaming was used extensively and attracted significant audiences, with Occupy's live video feeds having up to 80,000 unique viewers per day at the peak of the protests (Costanza-Chock, 2012, p. 8).

In what follows, we first discuss the rise and characteristics of livestreaming and then outline the notions of culture that frame our analysis, including social movement cultures, media cultures and democratic cultures.

**The Rise of Livestreaming**

Livestreaming refers to the broadcast of live video through mobile devices, including laptops, tablets and phones, to an online audience who watches the broadcast synchronously and can comment or react to what they see online. Once the live broadcast ends, the videos can be archived on the platform and viewed or accessed asynchronously. Scholarship on social movements and activism has investigated the use of livestreaming in the 2012 Quebec student protests (Thornburn, 2017), the Black Lives Matter movement

(Kumanyika, 2017; Poepsel and Painter, 2016), the Dakota Access Pipeline protests (Martini, 2018), as well as Occupy Pittsburgh (Mattoni, 2019), Occupy Wall Street (Gerbaudo, 2017b; Kaun, 2016; Lenzner, 2014) and the 15M (Gerbaudo, 2017b; Montero Sánchez and Candón Mena, 2015). Such work considers livestreaming as a form of what Askanius (2013) terms witness and documentation videos. The former document "specific unjust conditions or political wrong- doings/doers, police brutality, human rights violations" (p. 6), while the latter record "activist marches, speeches, community meetings, direct actions, political happenings" and work "mainly as modes of auto-communication" (p. 7) with the aim of developing a sense of common identity and belonging.

In terms of format, livestreaming shares many of the features of mobile video. It is characterised by hypermobility, "by sudden and seemingly aimless camera movements" and a lack of focus on "a particular point of interest" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 345). It is also visually opaque: its quality is "blurry, dim and grainy" and full of "accidental forms of inscription, such as fuzziness, low resolution, poor lighting, ellipses and interferences within the field of vision" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 345). However, these characteristics are also providing live video with a sense of immediacy as reflected in its unedited and unstaged quality (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 345). Livestream videos often eschew traditional forms of journalistic storytelling, appearing as spontaneous recordings of events with no additional commentary (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 346). The rawness and immediacy of the videos convey a sense of urgency by depicting events as they unfold in all their confusion and ambiguity (Thornburn, 2017).

Livestreaming is also an activity that depends on the body of the streamer and on her physical presence at the place and time where the event is taking place. Livestream videos

are thus shot through the eyes of a participant, rather than a third party (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 347). They present "a subjectivized point of view: one that invokes a body within and responding to events rather than the 'objective' posture conjured by conventional journalism" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 353).

This connects with the broader journalistic ethics of livestreaming which are characterised by partisanship and a rejection of the norms of the journalistic profession around objectivity as detachment (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013, p. 347), as well as balance, professionalism and neutrality (Bengtsson, 2013; Thornburn, 2017). Thornburn (2017) calls this type of reporting 'participatory journalism' (p. 431), whose aim is to help marginalised communities and social movements by providing an insider perspective on these struggles.

Therefore, the livestreamers' claims to truth do not stem from objectiveness or distance or neutrality but from their honesty and openness about their biases. Livestreamers do not strive to be objective but to show "reality as it is" (Lee Maibes quoted in Poepsel and Painter, 2016, p. 101) without imposing any narrative spin on the content. Together with the rawness of the material and its unedited and unstaged quality, this confers livestreaming with a sense of truthfulness. The livestreamers' proximity to the action and their willingness to risk their personal safety by being physically present at the event further strengthens their claims to truth (Gregory, 2015).

Immediacy also means intimacy as it allows "for the direct and minimally-mediated transmission of the feeling of protest" (Thornburn, 2017, p. 434). Live video can convey a sense of being there at the event much more viscerally than other forms of reporting or media. This is connected with what Andén-Papadopoulos (2013, p. 347) calls 'affectivity', the capacity of citizen video to concentrate and direct raw feelings that lies at the heart of

its rhetorical power. While this may be true for citizen video in general, it becomes even more pronounced in live broadcast where strong emotions are difficult to tone down or censor (Thornburn, 2017).

These characteristics of live streaming can increase the engagement of online audiences with the material they see on the screen, generating "not only a higher level of engagement but also a qualitatively different kind of engagement" (Martini, 2018, p. 4039). Facilitating "live and increasingly immersive witnessing in real time by distant witnesses" (Gregory, 2015, p. 1383), livestreaming potentially increases the viewers' responsibility to act on the events that they are witnessing. It also strengthens empathy by allowing viewers to experience events through the eyes of the livestreamers on the ground, "making them feel what participants felt, and in that making them participants themselves" (Thornburn, 2017, p. 435). The immediacy and sense of urgency of livestreaming creates a pressing need for viewers to respond while the event is unfolding on their screens, and the easier expression of raw feeling helps to create bonds of trust between livestreamers and their audiences (Thornburn, 2017, p. 435).

This paper considers how these characteristics of livestreaming, namely immediacy, rawness, liveness and embedded/embodied perspective connect with the democratic cultures developed by 15M and Occupy. Adding to the work of Gerbaudo (2017b), Kaun (2016) and Mattoni (2019) on these movements, our article focuses on how activists made sense of livestreaming in relation to their perceptions of what democracy is and how it should be practiced.  It thus departs from other work that studies livestreaming mainly as a form of media witnessing during protests, since it looks at the uses of the technology for documenting, recording and broadcasting the general assemblies and other internal

meetings, as well as the everyday life of the occupations. Yet before we engage in this discussion, we outline some of the key definitions of culture that are essential to our analysis of livestream practices in the 15M and Occupy movements.

**The notion of culture: Social Movements, Media, Democracy**

Defining Social Movement Cultures

In this paper we adopt Jasper's (1997) definition of culture as a group's "shared mental worlds and their physical embodiments" (p. 12). These common understandings may include "cognitive beliefs, emotional responses, and moral evaluations of the world" (Jasper, 1997, p. 12). They thus refer to what the world is, what it should be and how we should feel about it. Following Sewell (2005), we also think of culture as consisting of two interacting components that mutually constitute each other: a system of symbols and meanings – a "deep' logic that can be abstracted from the "complex messiness of social life" – and everyday practical activity that takes place in specific contexts and that is "shot through by wilful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction, and change" (p. 161). Culture is continuously negotiated and altered through the interaction between these two components with the everyday practice of culture both shaping and being shaped by deeper systems of meanings.

In the study of social movements, research on culture focuses on two interrelated processes: first, the ways in which social movements develop their own cultures and, second, their attempts to effect cultural change in society at large. With regards to the first process, scholarship shows that the emergence of social movements is tightly bound with the

construction of a distinct culture, of their own set of moral, cognitive and emotional understandings. Following Melucci (1996), we consider the creation of shared cultures as an open-ended and interactive process through which social movement participants make sense of what brings them together and what distinguishes them from their environment. Yet, these cultures are not perfectly coherent and harmonious. While social movements are bound by vague common understandings, theirs is a unity in diversity, a unity that articulates a plurality of meanings into a fragile assemblage (Flesher Fominaya, 2010).

Movement cultures develop in relation to the systemic change that movements aim to effect. In contrast to other political formations, social movements revolve around conflicts that challenge the boundaries of the system (Melucci, 1996). For Touraine (1981), these are conflicts over the control of 'historicity', "the overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society" (p 81). Thus, to effect change, social movements need to identify these dominant rules or master codes, to imagine different ways of thinking and doing, and to render both these master codes and their suggested alternatives intelligible to the rest of society (Melucci, 1996). Social movements attempt to promote their alternative cultural codes both through their discourse – through what they say – and their action – through what they do (Melucci, 1996, p. 183). For prefigurative movements such as Occupy and the 15M, movements that attempt to prefigure in the present the world that they would like to see in the future, action is often more important than discourse when it comes to effecting change. Hence, the everyday practice of culture, in all its contradictions, becomes a core aspect of their political project.

*Social Movements and Media Cultures*

Social movement participants also develop common understandings with regards to the media (Mattoni, 2012; McCurdy, 2011) or their own media cultures. Costanza-Chock defines *social movement media cultures* as "the set of tools, skills, social practices and norms that movement participants deploy to create, circulate, curate and amplify movement media across all available platforms" (p. 375).

Media cultures are informed by the movement's goals and the change that it aims to effect in society. For instance, Barassi (2015) has investigated the information ecologies created by the environmental movement in Spain showing how activists used the technologies available to them according to the movement's political cultures. Similarly, Kavada (2013) has examined the internet cultures within the Global Justice Movement, demonstrating that different interpretations of strategic, organising and decision-making processes result in divergent understandings and appropriations of digital media technologies.

However, as these and other scholars illustrate, the relationship between social movements and the media is one of mutual shaping as the media are not neutral tools that social movements can use as they wish. Instead, the media are characterised by specific technical affordances that affect, but do not determine, the activity of their users. According to Hutchby (2001), the affordances of technological artefacts are "a material aspect of the thing as it is encountered in the course of action" (p. 27). These may include the material forms, technical capacities, and the design of media technologies, as well as "platform architectures", the "interfaces and algorithms that format, organize, and process the flow of user data" (Poell, Rajagopalan & Kavada, 2018, p. 44).

The media are also invested with ideas and discourses, with both utopian and dystopian horizons of possibility, that affect how users interpret and use the media. These ideas can shape the culture of social movements and their perceptions of social change. A powerful example comes from Juris's (2008) research on the Global Justice Movement which charts how the use of the internet became associated with the rise of a "cultural logic of networking", rendering the network "a powerful cultural ideal, […] a guiding logic that provides a model of, and a model for, emerging forms of directly democratic politics" (p. 11).

Therefore, media cultures and social movement cultures are deeply interconnected. Social movements develop their own media cultures that are shaped by their understandings and perceptions of the change that they should bring in society and of the ways in which this change can be achieved. At the same time, the affordances of the media, as well as the ideas and imaginaries they are invested with also shape social movement cultures.

In this paper we analyse the relationship between the media and social movement cultures by focusing specifically on livestreaming and the movements' understandings of democracy. Before we move on to this discussion, we define in greater detail the notion of democratic cultures, particularly in relation to political equality, participation and transparency that constitute key aspects of our findings.

*Democratic cultures and publicity*
In line with our broader definition of culture, we consider democratic cultures as involving the diverse meanings that democratic models attach to the dimensions of civic participation, political equality and inclusion (Young, 2000). These understandings are in

turn reflected in the ensemble of decision-making rules and concrete practices characterising various systems.

One key difference between systems of Western liberal representative democracy and models of participatory democracy, such as the ones practiced by Occupy and the 15M, lies in their understanding of political equality. In the Western liberal system, political equality is conceived in terms of equal voting rights allowing each citizen one vote. Within participatory models, political equality is perceived in much broader terms as "equality of power in determining the outcome of decisions" (Pateman, 1970, p. 14). This implies that all citizens should have equal capacities, in terms of knowledge, access and resources, to influence and participate in the decision-making process.

Therefore, participatory systems tend to conceive participation in maximal, rather than minimal, terms. In its maximalist form, participation occurs in multiple spaces, not only in institutionalized politics (Carpentier, 2011, loc. 259-260). Maximal participation is linked with what della Porta and Mattoni (2013, p. 175) call 'high participation' which stresses the inclusiveness of equals in decision-making processes rather than the delegation of power to representatives. In such systems citizens can undertake a variety of roles within the democratic process beyond the act of voting. Democratic models also differ in how they perceive of the distinction between rulers and the ruled, with some participatory systems attempting to eliminate this distinction altogether.

Understandings of inclusion, participation and political equality are in turn related to how different models perceive the role of the media in a democracy, in terms of visibility, transparency and access to information. For Young (2000), 'publicity' is a core dimension of every democratic system. By 'publicity' she means "the interaction among participants in a

democratic decision-making process" (p. 25) that leads to the formation of publics "in which people hold one another accountable" (p. 25). Publicity is in turn associated with different conceptions of transparency, of what information should remain in the private domain and what belongs to the public. Understandings of transparency may vary with regards to the kinds and amount of information about the democratic process that should be made visible, in which ways and to whom, as well as the ways of establishing that the information provided is truthful and accurate. This is in turn related to accountability processes and to perceptions around the role of the media in recording and document information that is crucial for accountability. Finally, different democratic systems operate on divergent understandings about how the media can be used to facilitate participation in the decision-making process. Should they simply be spaces for the circulation of information that is necessary for civic participation? Or should they also be used as tools for mediating participation in actual decision-making processes? As our findings show, in more participatory models, the second question becomes very relevant.

**Studying the democratic cultures of the movements of the squares**

This article draws on two research projects that explored the media practices of Occupy and the 15M through in-depth interviews. The first project includes interviews with Indignados activists from Madrid, Barcelona and Seville that were carried out in 2015. A snowball sampling strategy was used to select twenty participants covering a range of social movement organizations. Five additional short email interviews were undertaken in 2018 with media activists of the Indignados who were particularly active livestreamers, raising the number of interviews to twenty-five. The study of the Occupy movement comprised in-depth interviews with seventy-five activists from Occupy Wall Street, Seattle, Boston,

Sacramento and London and took place between 2012-2014. In both projects, interviewees included actors who played key roles in organizing and producing media about the protests, such as live streamers, journalists, web developers, social media curators, graphic designers, media activists, hackers, and precarious academics. In-depth interviews allowed the researchers to familiarize themselves with social movement cultures, and to explore how activists appropriated specific media technologies.

While the two studies were not originally thought as part of a comparative project, to fulfil the aims of this article, interview data relating to livestreaming were brought together and re-analysed. Our investigation identified patterns with regards to how activists made sense of this technology and how these meanings related to their understandings and practices of democracy. The dimensions of transparency and equal participation emerged as salient during this analysis. The difference in the number of interviews carried out in the two projects did not impact the study as the 15M project, that included fewer interviews, had nevertheless achieved a satisfying level of data saturation (Fusch & Nesch, 2015).

We initially expected to find differences in the livestreaming and democratic cultures of Occupy and the 15M. We also anticipated some regional variation between different occupations, for instance in London and New York. However, as we demonstrate in our findings, both movements were very similar. We attempt to provide some explanations about this similarity in both our findings and conclusions.

**Radical transparency and its tensions**

Our research shows that Occupy and the 15M used livestreaming as an always open and real-time window into the movement. Hence, they practiced a radical kind of transparency that entailed a near-total visibility of every movement activity, including internal meetings. The radical transparency facilitated by livestreaming was part of an effort to erase the boundary between insiders and outsiders, core activists and simple participants, the backstage and the frontstage, by providing equal access to information to anyone who was interested in the movements' activities. It was thus related to the two movements' understanding of political equality as horizontality, with an effort to give all participants equal power in the decision-making process.

In Occupy Wall Street, activists organised 24-hour live broadcasts from the square that included meetings and talks, as well as some programming elements such as interviews and music (Kaun, 2016, Loc 835). Justin (personal communication, January 22, 2014), an activist who was instrumental in the social media team of Occupy Wall Street, referred specifically to this notion of radical transparency:

> Our meetings weren't just open. Many of them were live streamed, you
>
> know, live tweeted. [...] especially at the height of the occupation, we had
>
> this sort of *radical transparency*. The notion that, why not just put it all out
>
> there, everything that we're doing. (Emphasis added)

In a similar vein, SuySuLucha (personal communication, January 19, 2015), one of the most active livestreamers of the 15M, argued that:

We never worked through encryption, never in the dark. There has always

been a debate if we had to be protected in our communications, but we

finally decided that, since we didn't have anything to hide, we weren't

doing anything illegal, and we were just fighting for a real democracy, we

had to upload and make public all the acts, all the debates, all the

streamings.

In relation to previous movements which practiced transparency by circulating widely the

minutes of meetings, Occupy and the 15M were some of the first to broadcast internal

meetings live, both through livestreaming and live-tweeting.  In contrast to the minutes of

meetings, this left a record that was raw and difficult to edit, exposing a greater amount of

sensitive information to the public.

The turn to radical transparency cannot simply be explained by the technical capacities

offered by new applications. The fact that these capacities were taken up and used in this way

had to do with the specific political context in which these movements emerged and the

cultures they were imbued with. Radical transparency, in this sense, can be seen as a reaction

towards both national and global regimes of secrecy, corruption and repression that these

movements were attempting to upend. In the US and elsewhere, Occupy activists viewed the

lack of transparency and participation as a defining characteristic of a corrupt political system

where the democratic process "is determined by economic power" and where politicians are

accepting large donations from the same corporations they are meant to be regulating

(Occupy Wall Street, 2011, para 2). In Spain, the 15M reacted against the static, uncritical,

and institutionally biased Culture of Transition that after the death of Franco dominated the

country for almost forty years before the emergence of the movement (Montero Sánchez &

Candón Mena, 2015). While this Culture largely depoliticized cultural production, favouring conformism and adherence to the *status quo*, 15M activists created critical, political and experimental cultural projects placing horizontal participation and transparency at the centre of cultural creation. Both movements' drive for transparency and openness should also be seen within the historical context of the last two decades when "[t]he transatlantic states have certainly committed enough sins of secrecy […] to warrant the fervour of belief in the powers of openness" (Birchall, 2011, p 8). In the USA and elsewhere, 9/11 was a turning point that marked an increase in surveillance and anti-terrorism activities and a heightening of state secrecy in the name of national security.

Thus, in Occupy and the 15M the practice of radical transparency was an implicit critique to the political system and a prefigurative practice, a way in which the movements could build in the present the world that they would like to see in the future. As Robin (personal communication, April 10, 2014), an activist from Occupy Boston, noted: "we were always really clear that we wanted to be transparent […] because we knew all these corporations weren't being and we wanted to be like 'look we're doing what they're not doing'".

Furthermore, the drive towards radical transparency can be connected to the changing cultures around transparency and access to information associated with the rise of the internet. For Nathan Schneider (personal communication, January 23, 2014), a journalist who participated in Occupy Wall Street, the contrast between the abundance of information on the internet and the opaqueness of the political system seems to have contributed to the politicisation of a new generation of activists who are used to information being readily accessible online:

What this 2011 moment is about was the sense of the failure of democracy. That we have all, in all these countries, been told we live in a democracy […] and these young people show up, and they're like, 'We're not.' And so the disconnect between the rhetoric and, I think, the online, the experiences with more direct democracy, the transparency that they have online, especially online, create this contrast with the corruption of their political systems that make them lose faith […]

The turn towards radical transparency can further be attributed to these movements' links with hacker cultures, free software/culture movements, as well as with organisations like Wikileaks and Anonymous. Free software and free culture movements fervently defend open access to knowledge and information and mobilise against restrictive copyright regimes. According to Kelty (2008) free software exemplifies "a reorientation of power with respect to the creation, dissemination, and authorization of knowledge in the era of the Internet" (Loc 161-162) which stresses the availability and modifiability of information. A core aspect of hacker culture is also the belief in freedom of information and in unfettered access to knowledge. Wikileaks, which emerged from the hacker community, shares this faith in freedom of expression and in the public's right to know. Anonymous, a frequent collaborator of Wikileaks in hacking the private information of powerful actors, is another "by-product of the Internet" (Coleman, 2014, p. 16). Emerging out of the 4Chan platform, "Anonymous rises up most forcefully and shores up most support when defending values associated with this global communication platform, like free speech" (Coleman, 2014, p. 16).

In Spain, free/open culture activists played a significant role during every phase of the 15M (Postill, 2016), and were key in shaping the technopolitical imaginary of the movement, where digital technologies were invested with the power to bring effective social and political change (Treré, Jeppesen & Mattoni, 2017). Such activists were also part of the Occupy movement, playing an instrumental role in its tech teams who were charged with building the technological infrastructures of the movement. They also influenced the values of the movement. In its principles of solidarity, Occupy Wall Street described itself as an 'open source movement' which meant a commitment not only to use and develop free software applications, but also to make the 'code' of the movement – the knowledge and information it created – available to everyone. This understanding of the accessibility of information is also evident in the case of livestreaming as in the 'Streamer Journalist Code of Ethics' created by activists from Occupy Los Angeles and Occupy Chicago, livestreamers are urged to "[p]rovide all raw live footage in an open-source manner" (n.d.: 4) so as to be accountable to the communities and people that they cover. The connections with Wikileaks and Anonymous are perhaps more indirect but still in evidence. Julian Assange spoke at Occupy meetings, including the one in London, while Anonymous masks were ubiquitous in both Occupy and 15M camps.

*Radical transparency and the tensions of self-surveillance*
Yet, although radical transparency can be a powerful critique of opaque institutions and a prefigurative practice, it can also facilitate the repression of social movements since it can operate as a form of self-surveillance. As Nafeesa (personal communication, June 10, 2013), one of the key livestreamers for Occupy London, suggested, some movement participants "felt strongly that this [livestreaming] was like a surveillance, they felt like I was doing a job

for the police". In fact, Nafeesa and other livestreamers were at times accused of being undercover police agents.

There were thus attempts to curb this near-total visibility by keeping sensitive meetings private, such as meetings planning direct action and civil disobedience. Some general assemblies in Occupy also enforced a 'no photography' rule (Justin, personal communication, January 22, 2014), while participants in meetings could request to sit in the blind spot of the livestream (Obi, personal communication, October 7, 2013; Mattoni, 2019).

Still, many of the activists we interviewed seemed resigned to the idea that they had little control over online surveillance, expecting that their online activities would be watched by the authorities. As Justin (personal communication, January 22, 2014) put it, in movements "like Occupy, where the meetings are in public parks, if you wanna keep secrets, you're failing miserably". Online surveillance was compounded by the increased monitoring of public spaces through CCTV cameras which made it almost impossible for activists to keep their participation in the movement secret. As Obi (personal communication, October 7, 2013), a livestreamer for Occupy London, remarked: "the problem is that those people I shoot in the blind spot of live stream, they were being seen by CCTV cameras outside anyway".

This attitude towards surveillance speaks to what Dencik and Cable (2017) call 'surveillance realism', a widespread resignation to the lack of transparency, knowledge, and control over personal data online, even among politically active citizens. This resignation is situated within the constraints of contemporary capitalism that is intimately linked to effective forms of surveillance, a new information order Zuboff (2015) calls 'surveillance capitalism'. This order is advanced in the form of 'big data', and a digital economy that relies on mass data collection and processing. Turow et al. (2015) argue that this order constitutes a new '21st

century imaginary' defined by the normalization of surveillance infrastructures, with ubiquitous and unjust data collection now accepted as 'common sense'.

However, activists also attempted to turn this lack of control over their visibility into a discursive advantage. The radical transparency of the camps became a tactic for delegitimizing state and corporate surveillance by making "their spying seems so petty and stupid" (Justin, personal communication, January 22, 2014) since the information was already available online. The practice of radical transparency through livestreaming thus operated as a critique of both the opaqueness of corporations and political institutions and of their efforts to surveil the movements that opposed them.

*The tensions between radical transparency and accountability*

Radical transparency can also be counter-productive to accountability, the real demand lurking behind the struggle for transparency. As Birchall (2011) puts it, the value of transparency stems from the opportunity that it "provides for holding those in power to account. Accountability is the real prize, for it is this what regulates a democracy" (p. 18). Yet accountability requires not only for information to be made publicly visible, but also the ability to locate relevant information, to reflect on it and understand it.

The information overload generated by radical transparency can therefore hinder processes of accountability. In the 15M and Occupy livestream videos were posted online with little curation and categorization as activists did not have the time to undertake such tasks, particularly while the camps were ongoing. As Emma (personal communication, 12 February, 2015), a 15M activist, put it:

We didn't really think about the consequences of streaming and uploading everything. It is something that works really fine when you're in the heat of the protest, but as you grow tired of it, it is increasingly difficult to make sense of all that flow of information… Also, it was hard sometimes to retrieve some specific and important videos in that mess, and to organize that incredible amount of information.

The disorganised archive of livestream videos reveals that livestreaming was valued for its immediacy rather than its capacity to document events for posterity. As we explain in the following section, livestream videos are largely unedited and lack a coherent narrative. They are meant to be watched in real-time and are thus less engaging and intelligible outside the flow of live communication when viewers may lack the necessary contextual information to understand the events that unfold in the video. In this respect, livestreamers from London (Obi, personal communication, October 7, 2013) and Boston (Rene, personal communication, April 9, 2014) noted the fickleness of online audiences, who would instantly abandon a livestream channel if it went offline. This explains why, as one 15M activist put it, transmitting information in 'real-time' almost became an obsession for several media activists (SuySuLucha, personal communication, January 19, 2015). Hence, livestream videos are less valuable as records that can be used for holding people to account.

**Livestreamers as portals to truth and participation**

Livestreamers acted as the portals to the reality on the ground for an online audience who could not be physically present. This was related to two sets of tensions that stem from the

movements' emphasis on direct participation and access to information and their resultant distrust of mediation and representation.

*Tensions around mediation and access to truth*

Both Occupy and the 15M attempted to prefigure a participatory and egalitarian model of democracy that, in contrast to the system of Western liberal democracy, would try to eliminate the distinctions between rulers and the ruled and ensure that participants had equal power in shaping decisions. They thus emphasized not only radical transparency, but also equal access to truth. The quality of information, in terms of its truthfulness and authenticity, was as important as its scale and quantity.

However, democratic cultures that value direct participation are also characterised by a distrust of mediation. This refers to a distrust not only of political representation, that adds a filter between the grassroots and the decision-making process, but also of media representation, that in similar manner filters and constructs reality. Within Occupy and the 15M, the distrust of mediation was evident in the two movements' attitudes towards representative democracy and professional politicians, as well as in their criticism of the mainstream media. Considering the media as tools of manipulation and propaganda (Antonio, 2015, personal communication, February 9, 2015; Sergio, personal communication, February 9, 2015), both movements felt they had to rely on their own media to provide accurate information. Livestreaming was thus conceived as a means to control the media representation of the movement (Obi, personal communication, October 7, 2013; Rene, personal communication, April 9, 2014).

The paradox here is that livestreamers are also mediators of the truth since they cover events from their own embedded, subjective and embodied first-person perspective (Gregory, 2015;

Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). This gave rise to a different set of tensions around the role of the livestreamer and their power to shape people's perceptions of the reality on the ground. For instance, there were debates about whether livestreamers should be simple documenters of the movement's activities or whether they can also be involved in the events they cover on the livestream. As Rene (personal communication, April 9, 2014), a livestreamer from Occupy Boston, remarked, "there are live-streamers who like try to be very objective, very proper with their journalistic approach, like documenters […] my own personal boundary that I never cross [is] participating in discussions about what to stream". However, others thought of themselves as citizen journalists, as being "on the citizens' side there as a journalist" (Rene, 2014, personal communication) which meant that they could participate more actively in the events they were reporting on.

Yet most importantly, livestreamers' claims to truth centred not on their objectivity but on the authenticity of their coverage, not on their access to a universal truth but on their honesty about their subjective perspective. As in other research on livestreaming (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Gregory, 2015; Thornburn, 2017), immediacy and liveness were crucial to the livestreamers' claims about the truth and authenticity of their broadcast. By making it difficult to edit, filter and curate information, immediacy and liveness weakened the power of livestreamers as mediators of the reality on the ground.

In both movements, activists used the technical affordances of real-time transmission to produce raw and unfiltered accounts of the happenings in the streets. This unstaged quality of livestream videos partly stemmed from the lack of skills and technologies to produce a seamless live coverage as many livestreamers did not have any media or journalistic experience before joining the movements. Livestreaming was also a new technology at the

time, and equipment and processes were constantly evolving. In addition, the technical affordances of live transmission restricted the livestreamers' capacity to edit their videos on the spot. As Obi (personal communication, October 7, 2013), a livestreamer from Occupy London, remarked, "we don't edit it at all.  People can actually download it if they want to and edit it themselves". This aspect was also underlined by 15M livestreamers, who felt that they often had to "sacrifice quality over immediacy" (Patricia, personal communication, 5 February, 2015).

This rawness and lack of editing or a journalistic narrative was also at the basis of claims around the truth of such videos. In his interview with Tim Pool, one of the most well-known livestreamers of Occupy Wall Street, Lezner (2014: 256) highlighted Pool's belief that "validity is ingrained within his marathon live streams because people have the ability […] to revert back to his raw footage and interpret what they see for themselves. For Pool, he is presenting unrefined actuality and believes that without creative treatment there is an undeniable 'truth' ingrained in his footage." Indeed, the livestreamers that we interviewed did take pride in "showing things as they are" (Stéphane, personal communication, January 20, 2015). Livestreamers reported that they were frequently thanked (Nafeesa, personal communication, June 10, 2013) through emails or social media comments for "the work we were doing to show the reality of the protest in real time, all the time" (SuySuLucha, personal communication, January 19, 2015). Thus, both movements' distrust of mediation led to the rejection of the staging, or even planning, of the events covered on the livestream.

*Tensions around participation: direct participation in experience rather than decision-making*

The movements further attempted to practice a radical understanding of participation that allowed everyone to be included in the activities of the movements. This was after all the purpose of transparency as near-total visibility: an attempt to erase the distinction between those being there and those watching from afar. As SuySuLucha (personal communication, January 19, 2015) put it:

> There was an obsession with streaming for the people who couldn't be in the squares. We were lucky we could physically be in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, but there were people that couldn't because they were taking care of their families, because they were working, or outside the city, or abroad. So we thought yes, let's stream it all for them!

Yet this also reveals a fourth source of tension: that in the absence of concrete mechanisms to include livestreaming audiences in the decision-making processes on the square, viewers could participate directly only in the experience of being there, but not in sharing the power to make decisions.

Livestreamers attempted to correct this power asymmetry by acting as delegates of their online viewers in the general assembly. This was particularly the case for the 'onliners', as Nafeesa (personal communication, June 10, 2013) called them, who invested considerable time in the movement.  Some of them worked tirelessly as a back office that supported livestreaming activities by uploading information and supporting the livestreamers on the ground. Nafeesa attempted to serve as the voice of the 'onliners' in the General Assembly and suggested that they be included in decision-making through interactive voting, but this was deemed too difficult to implement in practice.

Still, livestreaming made it possible for the 'onliners' to experience the movement vicariously through the livestreamer's activities and body on the ground. As the literature on livestreaming shows, live videos are shot from an embodied first-person perspective, that of the small, handheld camera (Gregory, 2015). The format of these videos thus provides a sense that one is watching the action through the eyes of another. Livestreamers would also constantly interact with their online audience and ask it to direct their activities and movement in the streets (Justin, personal communication, January 22, 2014; Nafeesa, personal communication, June 10, 2013). This sometimes made livestreamers feel as if their audiences were attempting to play them as a character in an online game (Nafeesa, personal communication, June 10, 2013). Livestreamers therefore "operated as a portal for those who could not be physically present on the squares" (Patricia, personal communication, 5 February, 2015), acting as the ears, eyes and body of the online audience in the streets.

The function of livestreamers as portals that connect the 'onliners' with the experience on the ground chimes with descriptions of the square protests as "experience movements' (McDonald, 2004). The term has been used to describe movements that "have moved beyond traditional political claims of representation and instead touch on a fundamental emotional need to feel included in processes of change, especially processes that affect people's own lives" (Tufte, 2017, p. 24). Thus, while the 'onliners' could not take participate directly in the movement's decision-making, livestreaming allowed them to be involved in its lived experience.

**Concluding remarks**

In this article, we investigated how 15M and Occupy activists made sense of livestreaming, looking at how these understandings were related to the movements' democratic cultures.

Both movements attempted to challenge the prevailing understanding of Western liberal democracy and alter the dominant interpretation of key democratic principles such as transparency, participation and political equality. Yet, as our article shows, cultures are messy and contradictory rather than perfectly coherent (Flesher-Fominaya, 2010). In this respect, our findings identified four sources of tension in the relationship between livestreaming and democratic cultures.

Both movements used livestreaming in ways that privileged a radical interpretation of transparency as near-total visibility of the movement's activities, including internal meetings that are often hidden from public view. This understanding of transparency was associated with the technical affordances of livestreaming technologies, as well as with the cultures of hackers, techies, geeks and free software activists who took part in the movements.

However, this interpretation and use of livestreaming gave rise to tensions as livestreaming could operate as a form of self-surveillance. While radical transparency was used as a powerful discursive claim against state and corporate surveillance, activists seemed resigned to the idea they had little control over online surveillance, speaking to a condition of 'surveillance realism' (Dencik and Cable, 2017).

The information overload created by the practice of radical transparency was also in tension with processes of accountability. The deluge of livestreaming videos posted online may have weakened accountability as this overload hindered the capacity to locate and make sense of relevant information.

The third and fourth sources of tension were linked to the role of livestreamers as mediators of truth and participation in two movements that privileged equality and direct

participation, and thus the absence of representatives and mediators. Livestreamers attempted to offer an unvarnished access to truth by providing unedited videos and reporting from an embodied and subjective first-person perspective (Gregory, 2015). However, whether and to what extent livestreamers should be understood as simple documenters of the movement's activities or whether they can also be conceived as actors who affect the events that they cover was a source of tension and debate.

The fourth set of tensions relates to participation. In line with other research on the topic (Gerbaudo 2017b; Mattoni, 2019), our article shows that both movements understood liveness as a way of facilitating inclusion and direct participation by erasing the boundary between insiders and outsiders of the movement. However, participation through the livestream took the meaning of equal access to the experience of the squares but not in actual decision-making practices. Thus, livestreamers operated as portals through which the online audience could experience vicariously the action on the ground, but not as delegates of the online crowd in decision-making processes.

Our article highlights how media cultures are deeply interconnected with understandings and practices of democracy. Dealing with a then nascent application, activists from the Occupy and the 15M appropriated the technology in an effort to fulfil the ideal of political equality through openness and radical transparency, as well as equal access to the reality and decision-making processes on the ground. In recent years, post-truth politics and right-wing populism have arisen as a radically different response to the same problems of Western liberal democracy that Occupy and the 15M strove to address. Against this backdrop, the cultures of 'livestreaming democracy' that these movements developed,

along with their tensions and failings, can be instructive in envisaging a kind of democracy that can withstand current challenges.

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