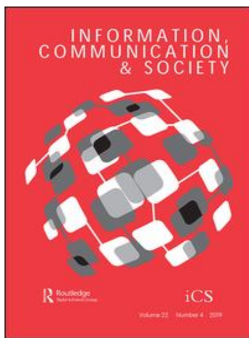

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# Mediated grassroots collective action: negotiating barriers of digital activism

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**ABSTRACT**

While so far social media have been largely constructed as the quintessential tools of collective action and praised for their potential to empower individuals to act as civic agents, this paper foregrounds the tension between expectations created by public discourse and citizens' own involvement with digital activism. This study adds to an understanding of barriers by examining how they are experienced by participants in mobilizations at the individual level. Looking at how obstacles of digital activism are experienced by citizens reveals the processes through which the structures of digital mediation impose limits over those who depend on them for their organization. By examining three regional Canadian cases, this research discusses the significant barriers mobilizers experience and finds that many of the obstacles organizers face point to an enduring need for a well-organized, tech-savvy, collaborative network as an organizing body to reflectively handle the challenges posed by digital grassroots civic mobilization.

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## Introduction

Amplified by large-scale mobilizations, such as the anti-austerity movements or the Arab Spring, social media have come to represent the quintessential tools of collective action. Repeatedly, traditional media have praised social media's potential to empower individuals as civic agents who can quickly and easily mobilize to pressure elites (cf. Dumitrica & Bakardjieva, 2018). Nevertheless, research suggests that this process is neither reducible to social media use nor devoid of burnout, friction, manipulation, or failure. In our own fieldwork across different cases of digitally mediated grassroots mobilizations, we have noticed that citizens enthusiastically embrace social media as tools, only to gradually come to realize their limitations and pitfalls. Raising awareness on these limitations is crucial to not only balancing expectations but also to sustaining long-term involvement in grassroots mobilization. During a recent workshop we organized with citizen activists, participants talked at length about burnout stemming from their digital activism. Attention to these barriers is crucial for an informed approach to grassroots mobilization but

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also for spelling out a 'comprehensive conceptual framework that recognizes the intricacy of interactions between media and movements' (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 252). Activists' experience of digital mediation remains an important yet insufficiently acknowledged layer of these interactions (Fominaya & Gillan, 2017). Furthermore, social movement studies rarely utilize communication theories such as mediation when analyzing the use of digital technologies by social movement actors (Mattoni, 2017; Treré, 2019).

Mediation refers to the ways in which communication media intervene in meaning-making processes (Lievrouw, 2009; Silverstone, 2002). This paper foregrounds citizens' experience of the barriers and limitations associated with their use of social media for mobilization purposes. We draw more attention to the 'dark side' of mediation *as experienced and conceptualized* by activists themselves. Importantly, this is not to negate the opportunities for collective action brought along by the integration of social media into everyday life. Attention to the negative side of mediation reveals how the interaction between media and collective action is shaped by the expectations, knowledge, and skill of organizers but also by platform design and general patterns of digital technology use among the population. Furthermore, this responds to the calls for recovering mediation in the field of activism (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Mattoni, 2017; Mattoni & Treré, 2014), by shedding light on how activists' own encounters with media become part and parcel of the collective mobilization. The paper also adds findings from three localized cases of grassroots civic engagement to a literature that has focused primarily on large-scale mobilizations such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement. We start with an overview of digital mediation in activism, outlining the three prevailing approaches in the literature. Using data from a larger collaborative project entitled [Social Media & Civic Cultures: Investigating Emerging Practices of Democratic Participation in Canada], we then systematize the different barriers shared through interviews into a typology that could be helpful in further studies of digitally mediated mobilizations. Awareness of these obstacles is crucial to the sustainability of grassroots digital mobilizations as organizers of (online) collective action have to learn how to leverage social media for mobilization and discursive purposes while also deal with the barriers they raise.

## The digital mediation of civic mobilization

Social media have become integral tools for those wishing to provoke social change. In cultural/critical media studies, mediation has been advanced as a 'promising direction for … conceptualizing communicative practices, technologies, and social arrangements as inseparable, mutually determining aspects of the communication process' (Lievrouw, 2009, p. 304).[1] Part of wider attempts to reinvigorate the theoretical discussion of the interaction between the 'moulding forces of media' (Hepp, 2012, p. 68) and social transformation, mediation emphasizes the mutually constitutive relation of society and technology (Lievrouw, 2009; Williams, 1976). Mediation refers to the processes through which communication media produce and circulate symbolic content. Against a simplistic vision of communication media as technologies whose features enable or constrain the exchange of meaning, Silverstone (2002) insists that mediation is both technological and social. Media of communication such as newspapers, broadcasting, and, social media are institutionalized social actors whose technological layer is shaped by commercial, cultural, political, and legal considerations. Furthermore, the symbolic content produced via

institutionalized forms of cultural production (e.g., broadcasting or the press) is also shaped by audience consumption practices. Mediation is thus 'a process of cultural production and gatekeeping by powerful media institutions that intervenes in (and indeed, distorts) the relationship between people's everyday experience and a "true" view of reality' (Lievrouw, 2009, p. 313). This process is dialectical, because the representations that media produce (following their own 'logics' of production) are also domesticated by audiences. Yet mediation is also uneven, as 'the power to work with, or against, the dominant and deeply entrenched meanings that the media provide is unevenly distributed across and within societies' (Lievrouw, 2009; Silverstone, 2002, p. 762).

In the study of collective action, mediation via social media has been approached as a structure, a logic, and an ecology. While each approach focuses attention on particular aspects of mediation, the last one comes closest to the view of mediation outlined above.

### *Mediation as an opportunity structure*

Building upon the political opportunity structure theory in the social movements literature (Della Porta, 2013), this approach takes mediation as an important aspect of the social structures within which activists act (Cammaerts, 2012). Each channel of communication creates (or inhibits) different openings for collective action. These openings remain 'outside the control of activists' but are able to 'affect the development and success of social movements' (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 119). Along with opportunities in the political and discursive environments respectively, mediation 'has an impact on the available and imaginable repertoire of contentious action, it can even become constitutive of protest' (Cammaerts, 2012, p. 120).

This line of inquiry often reveals different opportunities and barriers that the new mediation structures – created through the ubiquitous integration of social media in the repertoire of collective action – open up. In terms of opportunities, social media have been found to provide activists with new means of: self-representation, diminishing their reliance upon traditional media (Lievrouw, 2011; Treré, 2015); self-organization via direct mobilization, where individuals can 'organize without organizations' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Shirky, 2008); and, action, such as Twitter storms, analytic activism or hacktivism (Karpf, 2016; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

Slacktivism and surveillance, on the other hand, are among the barriers enabled by this new mediation structure. Collective capacities develop through years of decision-making, organizing, and logistics work that build trust and enable activists to better face confrontational circumstances. When digital infrastructures reduce these efforts, they leave participants ill-prepared for the collective action necessary in contentious politics (Tufekci, 2014, p. 15). The lack of stable ties between activists makes it difficult to sustain collective action over time, as 'people might not feel motivated to engage in higher threshold actions as they can more easily pursue social and political change by clicking on a button and watching some ads' (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, pp. 1162–1163; also Theocharis, Lowe, Van Deth, & Garcia-Albacete, 2015). Yet slacktivism may not be entirely devoid of value (Christensen, 2011; Halupka, 2014) and its role in the subsequent engagement of citizens remains to be further established.

The literature also draws attention to the subversive tactics adopted by authoritarian regimes in countering digital activism. In some cases, governments have mounted

coordinated efforts to shut down social media profiles by utilizing platform terms of use agreements (Youmans & York, 2012). In others, social media have enabled governments to harass and intimidate activists (Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Kendizior, 2012). Across the world, power regimes which may have initially encountered digital media activism with ignorance are developing their own tactics for countering dissent (Lokman, 2015; Treré, 2016; Tufekci, 2014).

Examples of barriers in using social media are often secondary to the focus of different empirical studies. Our paper brings together these barriers and further adds to them, foregrounding their role in the integration of these technologies into grassroots mobilization processes. Furthermore, in this structural approach, mediation takes on deterministic valences and, as such, offers less insight into the daily struggles of activists themselves. Here, we prefer a more dialectical approach, able to foreground the intersection between technological means and individual meaning-making.

### *Mediation as logic*

Another perspective focuses on the impact of the medium – understood as a socio-technical system – upon the messages and repertoires of collective action. In this body of work, collective action is seen as pressured to adapt to the prevailing 'logic' (Altheide & Snow, 1979) of the medium (Askanius & Uldam, 2011; Kaun & Steirnstedt, 2014; Milan, 2015; Poell & Borra, 2011). Not unlike the printed press or broadcasting, social media encourage the production of activism as 'spectacular outbursts of protest' (Milan, 2015, p. 8). For Milan (2015), social media impact collective action in four different ways: 'digital performance' becomes the 'condition sine qua non of social action' (p. 7); the digital interpellation of fellows and opponents becomes a preferred strategy of collective action; the temporality of protest is expanded; and, social action can be constantly re-enacted (e.g., via shares or re-tweets). Similarly, Poell and van Dijck (2015) describe social media logic as foregrounding instantaneity, virality and personal narratives, all of which can counteract activist goals and mobilization needs (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). While this increases the visibility of collective action, it also makes it short-lived, reducing it to individual gestures rather than collective efforts. The consequences of adaptation to social media logic for collective action remain, however, in need of further elaboration, particularly in terms of how it is experienced by activists themselves. This approach foregrounds the overall trends in the adaptation of collective messages and strategies of action to medium specificities. The nature of the latter is often assumed, rather than examined in a dialectical manner. As such, this approach is less useful for our interest in activists' own encounter with mediation.

### *Mediation as ecology*

In this literature, social media are situated within the wider communication ecology of collective action (Mattoni & Treré, 2014). The emphasis here is on the inter-relation between different communication channels and their political-economic context (Bastos, Mercea, & Charpentier, 2015; Mercea, Iannelli, & Loader, 2016). In his study of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests, Poell (2014) found that activists rely upon multiple online platforms to mobilize citizens and amplify their own messages. Similarly, Mattoni (2017) argues that digital and non-digital communication form a hybrid media ecology, with activists

creatively combining older and newer media channels in their work. These combinations are in flux, changing with the life-cycle of collective action, the social actors involved and the type of action they perform (Treré & Mattoni, 2014). The emphasis within this approach to mediation is on what Treré (2019, p. 1) calls the 'quest for communicative complexity' – an effort to recover digital mediation as a complex ecology that becomes part and parcel of the multifaceted negotiations between the citizens pushing for mobilization and state/ political actors.

Such approaches foreground the interactions between media, practices of use, and the life-cycle of activism, countering the reductionism of the other two approaches. Mattoni (2017) suggests that attention to citizens' own practices of using social media for mobilization purposes can add insight into the various layers of the communication ecology of collective action. Citizens themselves recognize the complexity of this ecology, adapting their messages and techniques to the different platforms throughout the mobilization process (Comunello, Mulargia, & Parisi, 2016). This often leads to the blending of digital and non-digital channels, blurring the boundaries between alternative/traditional and online/ offline media (Mattoni, 2017). Our paper contributes to this line of inquiry by focusing on – and offering a typology of – the barriers of mediation as experienced by citizens. This builds upon McCurdy's (2013) suggestion that 'lay theories' of media – or the 'ways in which activists understand the modes, motives, and impact of media' (p. 62) – reflexively inform activists' tactics, constituting a 'layer of mediation and a type of knowledge that, for the most part, has been overlooked or relegated to a theoretical black box' (ibid., p. 71).

## Methodology

Interviews from three cases of grassroots collective action in Canada constitute the empirical material of this paper. These mobilizations were local (although one had transnational ties), initiated by citizens who had minimal prior experience as activists and relied upon social media as the main channels of mobilization and organization (see Table 1).

The mobilization of parents during the 2014 teachers' strike in BC unfolded against the background of a protracted conflict between the provincial government and the teachers' union. When the teachers' strike threatened to delay the beginning of the school year, leaving many parents struggling to arrange for alternative care for their children, parents mobilized. Safe Stampede, sought to change the culture of sexual harassment

**Table 1.** The three cases – an overview.

| | BC parents' mobilization<br>• 16 interviews | Safe Stampede, Calgary<br>• 8 interviews | Women's March, Edmonton<br>• 5 interviews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Geographical scope | British Columbia | Calgary, Alberta | Edmonton, Alberta |
| Duration | Summer 2014 | July 2015–2017 | October 2017 – January 2018 |
| Issue | The delay of the school year as a result of a protracted labour conflict between provincial government and teachers' union | Culture of sexual harassment during annual Calgary Stampede | Women's rights and protest against rising misogyny and racism associated with the US election of President Trump |
| Organizers | Parents across BC | Calgary women | Edmonton women |
| Goal of collective action | Pressure government into negotiating with teachers' union | Awareness raising & cultural change | Awareness raising, cultural change, & transnational solidarity |

accompanying the annual Calgary Stampede (a ten-day Western rodeo event). March On, Edmonton was held on the day following the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, as one of many solidarity 'sister marches' organized around the world. March On, Edmonton focused, primarily, on opposing misogyny at a local level and supporting women's rights as human rights.

Data used in this paper comes from 13 interviews with parent organizers for the BC case, 8 interviews with campaign organizers and volunteers in the #SafeStampede case, and 5 interviews with campaign organizers and participants in the Women's March in Edmonton case. The semi-structured interviews included the following topics: participants' involvement in the case, use of social media, and opinions on the effectiveness of these platforms for collective action. This data was examined through the lens of the following question: how did participants *experience* and *conceptualize* the limitations of their own use of social media for grassroots mobilization? Interview excerpts where participants brought up limitations and barriers in social media use were aggregated, leading to the emergence of three categories: technological, interactional, and personal. While the first two categories confirm discussions in the existing work, personal obstacles in using social media for grassroots collective action emerges as an additional barrier for consideration.

## Technological barriers

Technological barriers have less to do with innate technical features and more with the platform's commercial goals. Facebook and Twitter seek to 'service' their users in order to keep them online (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 25), and to extract value from them to generate profit (Fuchs, 2014). Algorithm design decisions are informed by these goals; such decisions, subsequently embodied in software, structure the possibilities of use and are experienced by activists as an external and immutable force to which they must adjust. Our participants shared three types of technological barriers: the decentralized circulation of messages (the network logic); the creation of filter-bubbles (the echo-chamber effect); and the significance of social media metrics (the popularity contest).

### *The network logic*

Social media enable individuals to create, share, and easily add to existing content with their friends and, by extension, with their friends' friends and so on. However, in collective mobilization, this can lead to loss of control over the message. This is the case not only in more formally coordinated actions, where hierarchical organizations lead the mobilization effort (e.g., Fenton & Barassi, 2011), but also in grassroots mobilizations. While the network logic means collective action can be sustained in a decentralized manner, it can also lead to the dilution of common frames and identities. The latter are crucial to long-term mobilization and to visibility of movements in the public sphere (Benford & Snow, 2000; Melucci, 1989).

In the case of the BC parent's mobilization, our participants saw social media as decreasing the cost of mobilization by enabling collaborations among individuals and groups. Yet the network logic posed its own problems even among such a horizontal, grassroots spurred collective action. Informed by a vision of the Occupy movement, one participant described his own attempts to mobilize others as a form of 'open source

activism': 'It's not the traditional command and control. It's like: here's an idea, why don't you play with it and see what *you* can do. You share, you pass on stuff … So, it's a different framework of activism'.

This also meant that the message could not be easily controlled. Acutely aware of the fragility of their efforts, three citizen activists were actively trying to mobilize parents under the banner of a positive message: collective action as a playdate, where parents bring their children to play in front of the office of an elected official, captured by the hashtag #MLAplaydate. The three put great effort into choosing the right words (shifting from their original idea of 'occupying' an MLA[2]'s office to that of organizing a playdate) in order to allow people across the political spectrum to identify with them. To do so, however, they had to engage in constant monitoring of social media to reinforce their message and prevent co-optation by other actors of (ideological) agendas: 'it's like beta testing,' they told us. 'You don't know where it's going to fly.'

Organizers of #SafeStampede remarked on the constant need to defend the discursive framing of their hashtag. While #SafeStampede was designed to address sexual harassment broadly, the Twitter community applied the term to other concerns like preventing impaired driving and protecting animals, particularly the horses involved in chuckwagon races. Beyond well-meaning stretching of the hashtag, others challenged the gendered-nature of the problem framing. Organizers found themselves constantly monitoring online discourse to prevent loss of message fidelity and defend the borders of their messaging.

### The eco-chamber effect

An appealing promise of social media is that they democratize message flow. Instead of relying upon mass media to pick up their frames, citizen activists can (allegedly) use their own networks to amplify their messages. Nevertheless, social media algorithms play a gate-keeping role: as individual networks grow, the algorithms increasingly intervene in filtering which messages will be made visible. Given the criteria used in making these decisions, algorithms engineer filter bubbles or spaces of likeminded people (Tufekci, 2015). Across all cases, participants discovered that they eventually end up talking to those sharing the same views. Their understanding of algorithms was often translated into lay terms – the discussion focused more on the filter bubbles than on the programmed variables that perform editorial choices in rendering material visible to specific users. One BC organizer shared concern over the reach of their message:

> It quickly becomes apparent that we're just talking to each other. You know, there's the group of people who are part of the conversation, maybe it even grows when there's something big that happened … but you're sort of talking to the people who are already converted for the most part.

Two participants in the Women's March in Edmonton echoed these feelings. The responses they had received to their Facebook posts on the march were overwhelmingly positive. One of them explained: 'I tend to be friends with – or at least I see in my Facebook stream right now – people [who are] fairly in line with what I'm thinking.' Thus, it was not only that her Facebook contacts were like-minded people; rather, those who were made visible by the platform – and, presumably, those to whom her own posts were made visible – shared similar views.

Several of the #SafeStampede participants identified Facebook as a place where they spoke to like-minded people, where most of their contacts were friends they knew personally. It is on there that they discussed their early concerns, framing the problem. One of the organizers reflected:

> I find for a lot of this activism for starting conversations, Facebook is far and away the best place to have actual discourse, but again, you're mostly talking to your own friends, so it does become a bit of a feedback loop.

Organizers determined that the privacy of their social network which protected them from online attacks also prevented their message from reaching the public audience they hoped to impact. Thus, they opted to make campaign claims through public Twitter profiles and through Tumblr, in an effort to breach the echo chamber effect.

## The popularity contest

On social media, algorithms manipulate the visibility of the message by taking into account various factors (e.g., newness, likes, shares, and comments received). This raises problems for citizen activists: on the one hand, they have to constantly create new content to alleviate the newness requirement in a mediated environment characterized by information hyper-abundance. One of our BC participants commented on difficulties created by the fleeting nature of content on social media, partly driven by the platforms' algorithm. On Twitter, for instance, content changes so fast that people may actually miss it. One participant noted that 'a tweet on Twitter … dies really quick … Often it just goes by so fast, you don't see very much.' While the life of a Facebook post can be longer (particularly if it is commented upon), its visibility remains, nonetheless, shaped by the algorithm in ways that may be counter-productive to civic mobilization: 'Facebook has put a gate on what you see … you're only seeing about fifteen to seventeen percent of what your friends post.'

On the other hand, organizers have to produce content that is likely to elicit the types of metrics – likes, shares, comments – that the algorithm takes into account when making a message visible to others. With that in mind, one of the March On, Edmonton organizers outlined their platform-specific strategies for improving visibility according to the different algorithms.

> With Facebook and Instagram, you have to be careful of the algorithms, so if you're posting too much, you're not going to get as wide of an audience … With Instagram, … if you posted three or four really good pictures with good descriptions and hashtags a week, you're going to get more of a response than if you're posting like, you know, five times a day every day. So, you want to be kind of conscientious in what you're posting, and how often.

Practice taught these citizen activists to deliberately space out posts on Facebook and Instagram and to take advantage of scheduling features. The strategies of use that they had developed were intuitively informed by their observations of what was and wasn't working. Thus, on Twitter, they approached posting with a 'real time' logic, and they quickly became aware of the differences between pages versus personal profiles in pushing content. They were conscious of how other forces – such as mass media coverage – can drive the metrics up by giving further visibility to their online profiles.

## Interactional barriers

This type of barrier had to do with the mediation of social interaction. In their efforts to mobilize others, citizen activists had to establish, maintain, and assess the quality or depth of social ties. Social media were often seen as powerful tools for connecting people with each other, thus enabling collective action and bringing down the costs of working together. Organizers interviewed were enthusiastic about the possibility of finding others sharing their views and willing to work together to bring social change. This was described as a source of strength, motivating them to keep on pushing. Yet the quality of the digitally mediated social ties was also seen with skepticism. Furthermore, the ease with which opponents could make use of the same social media spaces to undermine mobilization efforts was seen as a major drawback.

### *Working with allies*

The activists we interviewed looked to social media hopefully and credited technology for their ability to reach large audiences and mobilize support but also reflected on the obstacles posed by mediation. BC parent mobilizers spoke about slacktivism as a major downside of digital mobilization. One participant argued that the mobilization done on social media cannot and should not replace the visibility of the body in a public space:

> We have people who drive by and say, you know, 'good for you'. Or I had one guy who dropped by yesterday and said 'I'll find my kids and I'll be right there with you', you know, so things like that … on the Internet you can be so invisible.

Similarly, #SafeStampede mobilizers talked about the importance of face- to-face personal connections for sustaining the core volunteers involved in organizing for collective action. Such connections, they told us, were critical backstage efforts that led to a stronger front-stage appearance for their campaign. They saw the social media campaign as the public face of this work,

> There is always stuff going on in the background. I don't think anything exclusively happens on social media anymore. I think at some point in time, in order to get actual change happening, there needs to be a point where things transcend social media and you end up having real conversations with people and you build relationships.

While social media allowed for general public support, the organizers themselves credited one organizer's personal connections to key influencers as driving the change. In both of these cases, digital mediation was conceived as a mask, either allowing people to hide behind a screen and passively consume rather than engage or masking the backstage work that goes into mobilization processes.

### *Facing opponents*

One of the strongest constraints on the usefulness of social media in collective civic action comes through the subversive tactics adopted by those in power. While early uses of social media for grassroots action may have taken the establishment by surprise, those with resources can quickly catch up and appropriate technological means to their advantage.

In fact, 'resources' is a key word here – because having resources makes it easier to deal with the obstacles mentioned earlier.

Parents organizing the MLA Playdate experienced organized opposition in the form of misinformation and spin. Participants referenced the presence of 'digital influencers' on social media – people paid by the provincial government to spread the government's message online.[3] Given that governments have considerably vaster resources than individual citizens, our participants were particularly concerned with 'calling out' on these digital influencers and the effects of their alleged activity on social media. When it comes to resources, citizen mobilizers were also confronted with the lack of resources in designing and maintaining their online presence, which they often felt was not professional enough.

In both 2017 and 2018, Edmonton Women's March organizers were targeted by what they described as trolls. In the second year, it was an online policy statement telling march participants that the choice to wear 'pussy hats' despite some exclusionary concerns was up to the individual that led to massive backlash from social media accounts not based in Edmonton. Organizers believed it was a gender-biased, calculated attack generated by those who were searching terms like 'transgender' and 'pussy hat.' The organized and focused attacks 'exploded' a few days before the second year of the march, necessitating constant actions of 'block, delete, report, repeat' at an already stressful time as they worked to replace a last-minute speaker cancellation and finalize plans. 'It had to be done, and we just tried really hard not to let all of our time and emotional energy get sucked up by that.'

In 2015, #SafeStampede organizers faced detractors who were primed to challenge their campaign. It had only been a few months since many of the organizers had called for respectful behaviour at hockey playoff gatherings along a popular stretch of bars with a previous campaign using #SafeRedMile. Before #SafeStampede ever appeared in a Twitter post, several Reddit users speculated about whether these activists would attempt to ruin the fun of Stampede. In one post shared by a reporter who had also covered #SafeRedMile, one Reddit member called on Stampede attendees to document the nastiest behaviour as part of a bet. During the first year of the campaign, it was a Calgary Reddit moderator who repeatedly challenged #SafeStampede spokespersons via Twitter on several discursive fronts.

## The personal cost

When citizens turn to digital activism, this takes a toll on their personal and professional life. While such costs are often minimized by participants, they do lead to burnout, making long-term involvement unsustainable.

Organizers of the BC Parent mobilization expressed concerns about how their activism might disrupt personal relationships. While social media allowed citizen-organizers to tap into their personal networks to initiate a viral effect, several participants were very much aware that their contacts and online audiences could object to and ignore their mobilizing calls. One participant explained that she 'did try not to ruffle a whole lot of feathers' by posting about the strike on the Facebook groups that she was a part of, as 'we do have members that are across Canada, so the strike didn't necessarily apply to them.' While participants felt motivated by the outpouring of emotions online, they also talked about the impact of trolls, backlash, or hyper-aggression onto social media. Two of the BC participants were heavily invested in creating and maintaining safe spaces for public discussion,

constantly monitoring an important Facebook discussion group in order to deal with verbal abuse. While backlash is an obstacle presented by opponents, the cost for facing it is quite personal. Even when supported by other members of the online community, the emotional toll they experienced was significant.

> There were some pretty brutal things that people wanted to say … people would say the things they wanted to do to local politicians or teachers, or whoever their target was.

> You attract negative comments on you … attract people who feel they have the right to attack you … I try not to think about this too much, having too much information out there leaves me open to potential stalkers, or people who want to harm me or my child.

Given timeliness matters on social media, BC parent mobilizers felt the need to constantly monitor and react. Several noted that they were spending almost eight-hours-a-day on social media, dealing with the messages, generating conversation, trying to motivate others to participate, circulating information. Importantly, they had to do it all when their followers were available– in the evenings or during weekends. As a result, the use of social media for mobilization was not only becoming a full-time job, but it was also imposing its own rhythms upon their private lives (for instance, one participant talked about rushing home in order to be online during the lunch-break). This feeling of having to invest more time and consequently more energy than expected was heightened for those who identified themselves as not being tech-savvy enough. In the absence of expert knowledge, they had to devote significant time to learning how to use social media – a process that was often fraught with self-doubt, adding to the emotional toll that the mobilization work was putting on them.

Organizers of all three cases described periods of time in which monitoring social media became the only thing they could do. Safe Stampede organizers talked about the emotional cost to making online feminist claims. One of the primary grassroots organizers chose to redirect challenges to their message on social media. Early in the campaign, Twitter users questioned why #SafeStampede focused solely on women and did not consider the sexual harassment some men experience. Others questioned the idea of a 'safe' stampede when the animals at the events were in danger of injury or death. Her response was to validate such concerns but reaffirm that this particular hashtag was intended to reduce the culture of sexual harassment. She said she felt the need to speak for the campaign since many of the campaign supporters had careers in which they might face financial consequences for making disruptive social media claims. As a writer, she did not report to a particular corporate structure.

This work of message framing became far more intense when the campaign encountered a controversy in its first year. A video of a sexual act in the Stampede parking lot appeared in social media. With concerns about consent for the filming of the incident and the posting of it online as well as the possibility of intoxicated consent in the act itself, this organizer called on the local Reddit moderators to remove the video. This erupted into intense dialogue among many parties with differing views on the controversy. With news media, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and other media's attention, she spent several days actively engaging with bitter dialogue often personally directed at her for defending the woman in the video. Other campaign organizers opted to watch the scene, discuss among themselves or their private Facebook network but avoid public comments on the issue.

Another #SafeStampede organizer described how she had a developed Twitter account with a network of thousands of followers. Just months before the #SafeStampede initiative, she had been professionally involved in using Twitter for electoral campaigning – where she experienced a lot of online abuse. Following the election, she deleted that professional account and opened a new one with far fewer followers. She chose to no longer engage in controversy, maintaining a low profile: 'I had enough of my own Twitter abuse for a while. I just really did not feel like I needed to step into the fray again.'

A third #SafeStampede organizer is a musician and has similar career flexibility; however, she also expressed hesitation in engaging in social media controversies. 'There's only so much that I want to be in it,' she said; 'It's an act of self-preservation, to shut it off or shrug it off.' This organizer said that she has discovered that she will not have conversations about misogyny, sexism, and racism with strangers online anymore. She found the ensuing conversation from that video repulsive as the social media public vilified the woman while making heroes of the men. She, like others, was worried about her friend for spending the time dealing with the most difficult conversations on Twitter. Following the social media fire storm of the controversial video, she said she took a week off of social media to recover.

Organizers also expressed concern that their visible activism may create potential career risk. One BC parent mobilization organizer expressed concern over how his involvement in this mobilization process may impact his future career. The concerns some expressed about the career risk in making controversial online claims has merit. One #SafeStampede supporter who photographed sexually suggestive advertising and questioned its use through social media faced criticism from her employers. She was attending a company event when she took the photo. She was interviewed about it on news media. Her engagement with #SafeStampede quieted after her employers warned her of the potential consequences for such claims making.

## Discussion

In the cultural/critical media studies tradition, the notion of mediation draws attention to the mutual shaping between media and sociocultural change. This paper considers how mediation appears from the perspective of those involved in collective mobilization. In recounting their experiences, activists were often animated by expectations of the mobilizing power of technology: 'social media has become just completely invaluable … Eventually it is going to be the best way for people to communicate,' one participant told us. Such feelings were echoed across all three cases, even when participants ran into the barriers discussed above. To a large extent, they blamed themselves for not knowing how to deal with these obstacles. They pointed to their lack of knowledge, skills, or resources to reconcile their enthusiastic expectations with their particular experiences of roadblocks. As the cases examined here had a certain degree of success in terms of gaining visibility and traction in the public sphere, this is also likely to re-legitimize enthusiasm for the mobilizing power of social media. The experience of mediation thus involves expectations on technology (in terms of functionality and practices of use), but also re-assessments of one's own knowledge, skills, and resources in light of the actual mobilizing outcomes.

Where the literature insists mediation involves an ongoing tension between agency and structure (Cammaerts et al., 2013, p. 4), to those directly involved in a social practice,

mediation appears as a technologically-driven change that demands adaptation and leaves little room for agency vis-a-vis the design and the adoption cycle of social media. This is not to deny the actual practices through which participants reclaimed their agency, as they also told us of their tactics (De Certeau, 1984) for circumventing or appropriating the functionalities of the platforms. The point here is that, in our interviews, such instances were not articulated as examples of agency; rather, they were presented as temporary solutions to a technology that appeared outside our participants' control and influence. While citizen activism may entail the creation of emancipatory civic technologies (media developed for participation and community building, rather than profit-making cf. Gordon & Mihailidis, 2016), this was not the case here. The tactics that organizers deployed were mostly related to choosing a platform for outreach, framing discourse, reaching out to digital influencers and recruiting allies. Personal and political capital heavily influenced these choices. These were learned by doing or by talking to others. When activists organize with skills acquired through professional and personal experience, their capacity to negotiate technological features or even to circumvent them by creating their own technological solutions increases.

Our arguments here echo Moberg's (2018) findings that the incorporation of (new) media into the communicative repertoire of activists appears to be one of adaptation and conformity, rather than active shaping of the medium itself. Moberg suggests that discourses on what digital technologies can do, and how they should be used, provide social actors with a technologically deterministic frame for understanding technology. In the end, individuals feel they *have to* adapt to new media. In our study, the experience of digital mediation as an external force, imposing adaptation and conformity, is not solely a discursive matter. It is also a matter of dealing with an infrastructure that requires particular knowledge and skill. In the field of grassroots activism, few citizens have the necessary skill to intervene upon a platform. Furthermore, given that the ways in which algorithms impact the visibility of content or of social ties is often proprietary information, citizens end up having a vague and general 'idea' of how things work. This idea becomes fine-tuned with experience – but this might also involve misinterpretations of what and why something did not result in the desired effect. Mediation thus becomes interpreted as a personal responsibility to adapt and stay relevant in a context of constant technological change.

Finally, the everyday appropriation of social media for grassroots mobilization appears less open and flexible than we had anticipated. A certain 'materiality' of social media, along with the unequal means of technology use can stifle the long-term sustainability of grassroots social media activism. This illustrates the unevenness of mediation (Silverstone, 2002). 'Materiality' – or, rather, the deterministic semblance of an immutable materiality – stems from the features programmed into algorithms, something outside of the control of citizens. Powerful actors, with more resources at their disposal, can make better use of (or bypass) algorithmic features. In fact, given their commercial goals, these platforms better serve those able to pay for premium content and those able to maintain an ongoing stream of customized content (both of which require financial resources). In other words, the affordances and barriers associated with these technologies take shape in an already structured environment, where powerful social actors catch on to the newest (digital) practices and appropriate them for their own purposes.

## Conclusion

Grass-roots civic mobilizations increasingly integrate social media with claims making and mobilization efforts. Approaching digital mediation as an ecology foregrounds the importance of taking into account the multiple interactions between citizens and media throughout the various dimensions of collective action. In this paper, we show that these interactions are shaped by assumptions and lay theories that activists developed regarding the effectiveness of different social media tools and practices. These assumptions and lay theories are not stable; they shift with the dynamics of the mobilization process but also with changes in the political economy of the digital platforms. Attention to how the dynamics unfold at the level of activists' use of social media reveals that mobilization for collective action remains complex and often unpredictable.

Participants do not explicitly acknowledge the tensions between the expected and often hyper-inflated benefits of social media with their actual experiences. This results in either self-blame or cognitive dissonance. Rather than acknowledging the technical limitations, they are more inclined to blame their struggles on their lack of expertise or mishandling of tools. It is important for citizen activists to develop an awareness of the limitations of technology in order to expand their mobilization repertoire. Indeed, in her own research of activism, Barassi has argued that 'activists' ambivalent relationship with internet technologies is not surprising. Ambivalence is always present within ideological constructions especially when they influence everyday practices and dynamics. Real life experiences always clash with ideal understandings' (2009, p. 22). We advise for more open reflection upon these ambivalences, accompanied by increased literacy on the political economy of social media platforms, with the goal of moving beyond a positive technologically deterministic take on social media as the quintessential tools of grassroots mobilization.

Our research shows that the digital mediation of citizen activism involves many personal struggles. Worryingly, several interviewees expressed a high degree of burnout. Facing these obstacles involves a difficult process of negotiation, as their effects are not straightforward but always mediated by citizens' own adaptation processes. In the course of this adaptation, the 'social technical potentialities of social media' become realized within situated contexts, creating the potential for resistance and for creativity in dealing with these platforms (Costa, 2018, p. 3653). By means of concluding recommendations, we suggest that citizen activists should become aware of and openly question the trade-off for their adaptation to network logic when utilizing specific platforms for outreach and organizing. This trade-off should be carefully considered against the particular message they want to circulate and amplify. Preparing in advance for framing challenges and making strategic decisions regarding which challenges to engage with and which to block or ignore might also be best accomplished with a collaborative body of organizers. Actively investing in a collaborative body of organizers can reduce the cost of grassroots mobilization while amplifying the reach, as well as expand the pool of technological know-how and the capacity for adaptation to changes in the political economy of digital platforms. Such collaborations are a source of personal strength and support, providing safe spaces and enabling activists to share the burnout experienced during the mobilization process.

## Notes

1. In the disciplinary tradition of technological affordances, the relation between technology and society is approached through the prism of technological design and human-computer interaction (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). Mediation emphasizes the interrelation between media and the sociopolitical context, while affordance focuses on the relation between users and technology. Both concepts reject technological determinism. Further explorations of how two traditions may speak to each other are warranted (Nagy & Neff, 2015) but fall outside the scope of this paper.
2. MLA stands for Member of Legislative Assembly. In Canada, an MLA is an elected representative in the provincial parliament.
3. In 2015, the local newspaper *The Province* reported that the government had spent more than $350,000 on social media communication during the strike. This campaign was run by KIMBO Design Inc, a branding agency that had also worked on the provincial premier's leadership campaign.


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