

Active agency, access and power

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In this special issue on active agency, access and power, we move beyond media representations of people, objects and events during war and conflict, which often underpin research at the intersection of Media and War Studies. We do so by focusing on active citizenry, participation and journalism in different communication networks, across societies and communities, and from a diversity of perspectives. More specifically, the individual contributions to this special issue explore, question and challenge – in different ways – how agency, access and power are negotiated through multiple media discourses, technologies, outlets and everyday practices during war and conflict. They articulate and emphasize the need for a plurality of voices and levels of participation in the interplay between social actors and technology, and they demonstrate how agency emerges in, and is shaped by, distinct media practices, institutions, emotions and affects in this context.

Before we introduce the individual contributions that make up this special issue, we briefly engage with the key notions that underpin the debates they address. Agency is multi-faceted and, at times, ill-defined. Yet, here, agency is understood as

constituted through the use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts; at the same time, agency is transformative of the structures within which it is embedded by making use of knowledge and resources in creative and often radical ways. (Kaun et al., 2016: 2)

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In short, agency may be experienced as a ‘capacity to make a difference’ (Giddens, 1984: 14), i.e. to have a form of power. Thus, power is understood as something existing in social interactions and as something constructed in relation to, for example, political, moral, intellectual and cultural issues (Hall, 1987: 20–21). Moreover, during times of war and conflict, trust in authoritative voices is challenged; and while people actively look for and are in need of reliable information (Loveless, 2008), access to this information is often restricted. However, access to technology, media outlets and news sources does not by itself challenge power relations nor does it support active agency or increase levels of participation, as also exemplified by many of the contributions to this special issue.

People’s ‘activeness’ in producing and looking for information is also likely intensified during war and conflict, making this a dynamic and uneven process. In relation to journalists, existing research shows that they often take an active stance in conflict frame-building, especially when politicians and parties with political power are involved (Bartholomé et al., 2015). However, while journalists may have visibility and online presence in this context, they often lack physical presence – and their presence may be limited by different forms of repression (e.g. García Santamaría and Salojärvi, 2020; Workneh, 2021). This also limits their political agency, which emerges through information networks that combine online and offline practices in conflicts (Bruijn et al., 2015). In addition, research shows that people seek political agency through online and offline interaction in times of conflict and look for alternative sources of information when access to it is restricted (Behrouzian et al., 2016; Salojärvi, 2017). Thus, capacities of access and active participation form key aspects in the micro and meso level power struggles, e.g. ‘struggle to be seen’ (Guidry, 2003; Salojärvi, 2019) or to access information, where the media holds the power to grant publicity.

The individual contributions to this special issue engage and enact a diverse set of actors that exist and practise at different levels and scales within wider media networks. They span a wide range of perspectives, media, topics, communities, groups, contexts, geographic regions, methodological approaches and theoretical positions. Richard Stupart’s article on emotion and ethics in the practice of journalism in the context of the conflict in South Sudan, foregrounds journalists’ own perspectives. While journalistic professional norms favour emotional detachment in journalistic work (Cottle, 2013), Stupart shows how journalists experience a tension between certain journalistic professional values and their own personal feelings. Taking a different perspective, in their article on refugee portrayals in news media, Emel Özdora-Akşak, Colleen Connolly-Ahern and Daniela Dimitrova approach the notion of agency as a way of making visible the power structures and lack of agency experienced by refugees. They do so by comparing how national newspapers in Turkey, Bulgaria and the UK portrayed Syrian refugees in the time period immediately after what they term ‘the Syrian refugee crisis’ (2011 to 2014). In their study, the authors demonstrate how refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are denied agency by the media. They show how the media are instrumental in securing and maintaining the power and agency of the local political elite, while victimizing refugees through distinct discursive strategies and journalistic practices. The research underpinning Miraji Hassan Mohamed’s article on how young people in Kenya negotiate

political agency in what the author terms ‘the age of “new terrorism”’ is grounded in analyses of regional and national Kenyan newspapers as well as focus groups with those ‘othered’ in these media outlets. Here, the ‘others’ are Kenyan youth who are, as the author notes, continuously depoliticized through media discourses that construct them as dangerous ‘others’. This image is, however, challenged by the participants in Hassan Mohamed’s study, as they claim political agency through articulations and activities that (re)define their identities.

An experimental approach to the topic of agency is presented by Nili Steinfeld and Ohad Shaked in their article on using eye tracking in a simulated virtual intergroup contact to study participant ocular behaviour in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Here, notions of access and agency are addressed as they come into play in intergroup relations. Focusing on participants’ prior attitudes to the outgroup (Palestinians), they explore the extent to which participants’ emotions, perceptions and positions towards this group changed after a simulated video dialogue between them and members of the outgroup. While Steinfeld and Shaked’s contribution creates a space, using innovative technologies, where ‘the enemy’ is brought into conversation in an everyday setting, Gregory Asmolov shows how participatory technologies have enabled people to experience the nature of warfare as part of their everyday lives. Both contributions, respectively, bring ‘the enemy’ and the nature of warfare closer to ‘home’. Asmolov does so by demonstrating how warfare is both digitally mediated and, partly as a result, domesticated. Such technologies offer institutional actors new means of control, while, at the same time, empowering users and giving them an opportunity to participate without leaving their homes. Using a case study approach, Asmolov focuses specifically on how digital mediation, such as memes, shaped users’ perspectives and their environment in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Sara Creta’s article explores how people on the move (migrants and refugees) in Libya use digital media to raise human rights violations and challenge EU policies and UNHCR practices. In so doing, she provides a grounded exploration and understanding of how digital media enables people on the move to bring to light rights claims, contest official narratives and become active narrators of their individual struggles. At the same time, she notes how issues of digital access and communicative capacity influence visibility and self-expression in the digital space of appearances.


In addition to foregrounding different actors, the contributions to this special issue approach active agency at different levels and in distinct contexts, while they highlight how technology, emotions and notions of power underpin and facilitate active agency. At a high level, the individual contributions show that technology provides basic access and that technological solutions enable active agency. However, notions of access also require us to ask: access for whom, access for what purposes, what does having access enable? The articles engage with these questions in different ways and from different perspectives. Creta emphasizes how digital media enables refugees and migrants on the move to make informed decisions about their own lives, while Hassan Mohamed notes how both Kenyan youth and media engage in practices of meaning-making. For Asmolov, social media offers new ways for people to participate in and gain access to warfare, using memes as examples. As Steinfeld and Shaked demonstrate in their contribution, access to and use of innovative technologies also hold the potential to offer new

opportunities in peacebuilding efforts through eye-tracking technologies, thus articulating agency as it materializes in intergroup contact and relation-building.

The notion of an ‘emotional turn’ in journalism studies (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020) points to an emerging focus on the role of emotion in and generated by the media. Yet, emotions can – and indeed should – be considered in the context of active agency, as also evident from some of the contributions to this special issue. Emotions are grounded in reasoning; they require thought and evaluation (Ahmed, 2004) and are thus not separate from decision-making. Thus, emotions can also be considered as actions (Ahmed, 2004); they have a purpose and a direction. The questions of how and why people act are grounded in emotional responses. Contributions to this special issue also demonstrate this. For Stupart, emotions play a critical role in the practical and ethical reasoning of journalistic practice in South Sudan, while Özdora-Aksak, Connolly-Ahern and Dimitrova highlight a different aspect of the ‘emotional turn’ by showing how news reporting on refugees aims to invoke emotions in the audience. Emotions are therefore a critical aspect and mechanism of the media’s own agency. Steinfeld and Shaked, instead, discovered that, by using their experimental research design, participants’ anger and hatred toward Palestinians decreased.

By exposing power relations and tensions between specific power holders and how they are resisted through active agency and access, the contributions to this special issue challenge the foundations upon which information axes rest. Importantly, however, several of the contributions also demonstrate how the media is itself a system of information flows and control that plays a critical role in constructing and maintaining the legitimacy of existing power. Collectively, the contributions to this special issue call for greater attention to be paid to notions of active agency in the form of media participation and a plurality of voices in media discourses, while challenging received notions about access and power. They do so in distinct ways – employing diverse methods and theoretical positions, while providing new and fascinating empirical insights.

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