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Social media, temporality, and the legitimacy of protest

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the rise of social media affects the temporal relations of protest communication. Following a relational approach, it traces how regimes of temporality are constructed and transformed through the entanglement between media infrastructures, institutions, and practices. These regimes involve particular ‘speeds’ – the rate at which media content is renewed – as well as ‘temporal orientations’ towards present, past, and future. The article questions how specific temporal regimes enable or complicate protestors’ efforts to gain public legitimacy. A large body of research suggests that it is difficult to gain such legitimacy in the mainstream news cycle, in which protest is primarily covered from an ‘episodic’ perspective, ignoring larger protest issues. The present analysis suggests that despite the participatory affordances of social media, it has not become any easier to generate sustained public attention for structural protest issues. Drawing examples from three case studies, it demonstrates that the dominant mode of social media protest communication reproduces and reinforces the episodic focus of the mainstream news. While other temporal perspectives on protest are certainly developed in the alternative and mainstream news, as well as in activist social media communication, these do not fundamentally challenge the prevailing temporal orientation towards the present, towards the event.

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The increasingly central role of social media in contemporary protest – from G20 demonstrations to the Arab Revolutions and from the Occupy Movement to Black Lives Matter – has triggered a renewed interest in the temporality of protest communication. The intense use of these media is said to change the speed and temporal orientation of protest communication, potentially transforming how protests are mobilized, sustained, discussed, represented, and remembered (Barassi, 2015; Kaun, 2016; Merrill & Lindgren, 2018; Petrick, 2017; Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2018). While valuable research has been done on social media and the temporality of protest communication at the individual, group, network, and movement level, what is still largely missing is a critical inquiry into how the activist use of these media reshapes the temporal

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relations of societal sense-making processes, in which protest is interpreted and (de-) legitimized. This article develops such an inquiry. Building on current research and drawing examples from three case studies, it considers how the rise of social media reorganizes the temporal relations of protest communication.

The article demonstrates that the exploration of temporality opens up the critical analysis of how media steer the public communication on protest. It argues that societal sense-making processes do not take place outside of time, but are fundamentally embedded in temporal relations. The examination of these relations provides insight into how changes in the media environment affect the horizon of opportunity for activists. Historically it has been particularly difficult to gain legitimacy and sustained public attention for protest through mainstream news media. Research suggests that mainstream protest reporting predominantly has a 'episodic' focus, leading journalists to ignore larger protest issues (Boykoff, 2006; Boyle, McCluskey, Devanathan, Stein, & McLeod, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001). The present analysis suggests that despite the participatory affordances of social media, it has not become any easier for activists to generate public attention for structural issues and problems. It shows that the dominant mode of social media protest communication effectively reproduces and reinforces the episodic orientation of the mainstream news.

This investigation is pursued through the following steps. In dialogue with current research on media and temporality, the article develops a relational approach, which understands media as evolving configurations of political-cultural institutions, techno-commercial infrastructures, and social practices. This approach assumes that media do not have an inherent temporality, but engender a multiplicity of temporalities. At the same time, as specific media institutions, infrastructures, and practices come to dominate the media landscape, it is argued that temporal regimes are established, which shape societal sense-making processes during particular periods.

Following this relational approach, the research starts with a reflection on the development of the 24-hour news cycle in the 1970s and 80s, which largely defines the temporal regime in which contemporary protest is publicly communicated and interpreted. Driven by cable and satellite television news channels, but also drawing in a wide variety of other media infrastructures, institutions, and practices, a regime of constant news updates has been established.

It is within this regime that social media intervene. The article argues that these media, like all media, facilitate a variety of temporalities. Yet, 'real-time' or 'live' social media reporting has become the dominant mode of protest communication, further accelerating the mainstream news cycle. Finally, I discuss how activists navigate and resist this temporal regime of continuous updates, trying to develop alternative temporal orientations.

Theorizing media and temporality

This investigation is developed against the backdrop of a number of influential macro-sociological accounts of media and temporality. Especially prominent is the work of Virilio (2005, p. 117), who argues that the development of 'multi-media' brings about the 'acceleration of all reality: of things, living beings, socio-cultural phenomena'. The

past, present, and future give way, according to him, to the primacy of ‘immediacy’. Much less deterministic, but equally all-encompassing, Giddens’ (1990) account of modernity also connects the development of media technologies to vital temporal changes. From his perspective, these technologies facilitate a separation of time and space, leading to a general ‘disembedding’ of social relations. Thinking along similar lines, Castells (2000) coins the notion of ‘timeless time’ referring to the breaking down of the sequential order of phenomena, as new information technologies enable the simultaneity of social practices in different geographic locations.

While these macro-sociological theories provide highly relevant insights in how new communication technologies potentially enable a reorganization of temporality, they do not allow us to understand how temporal relations take shape in *practice*. The development and use of new communication technologies does not reshape the temporality of social interaction in a uniform fashion, as the above macro-sociological accounts suggest, but in a much more heterogeneous manner. Studying how social actors integrate specific media technologies in their daily practices, recent scholarship demonstrates that social relations are characterized by a *multiplicity* of temporalities (Barassi, 2015; Burchell, 2015; Kaun, 2016; Keightley, 2013; Wajcman, 2015). As Keightley (2013, p. 60–61) makes clear, the challenge is to trace and theorize ‘the different ways in which time is actively produced and negotiated, differing according to social and cultural context.’ Pursuing such research, she finds that media can be positioned and operated in heterogeneous ways, ‘supporting and facilitating particular experiences of time.’ Temporalities associated with mediated experiences should, consequently, be understood as ‘multilayered, intersecting and potentially competing’.

These micro-sociological studies of media practices allow for a more nuanced and precise insight in how temporality is constructed. At the same time, it is crucial, especially when examining protest communication, to understand how temporality is connected with broader societal power relations. Most research on media practices and temporality focuses on the individual or group level, examining how particular communication technologies are employed. Yet, as Barassi (2015, p. 79) points out, there is a ‘bound connection between hegemonic constructions of social time and people’s practices’. To understand the dynamics of this connection, I will, in the following sections, examine how: dominant regimes of temporality are established and transformed over longer periods, as well as how such regimes are reproduced and contested in daily activist media practices.

Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) theory of mediatization is a helpful starting point in pursuing such an investigation. Building on the work of Elias (1994) and Rosa (2013), these authors stress that time should be understood *relationally*. A shared sense of time, from such a relational perspective, is enabled through ‘an ever larger system of interdependence and obligation’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 105). Media and information infrastructures play a key role in this system of interdependence. Couldry and Hepp maintain that these infrastructures ‘achieve more than “technical acceleration” [...], they actually shape the figurations through which [...] intensified relations of interdependence are enacted.’ Important to note is that these figurations have a normative force, which is ‘worked out *in time* and cannot be understood without consideration of how meaning unfolds in time’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 103). This connection

between temporality, communication infrastructures, and meaning production is at the center of the present inquiry.

Studying particular temporal configurations, it is vital to keep in mind that media are not characterized by immanent temporalities, nor do these temporalities simply evolve from media practices. Audiences or users do not 'freely' organize the speed and temporal orientation of public communication in their daily media practices, but do so in relation with the political-cultural institutions of government, civil society, work, and family, as well as the techno-commercial infrastructures of media, which in combination steer how these practices take shape. Thus, following a relational approach, we can trace how temporal relations are constructed and transformed through the entanglement between institutions, infrastructures, and practices; as these are continuously evolving, temporal regimes change as well. The challenge is to explore how these evolving temporal regimes are reproduced, contested, and potentially transformed in contemporary activist communication, in which social media play an increasingly central role. A multiplicity of temporalities can be observed at the individual and group level, but how do these temporalities feed into temporal relations at the societal level? How are dominant regimes of temporality established and transformed?

The 24-hour news cycle

Many of the key features of the news system in which today's protest is communicated and interpreted have been developed in the 1970s and '80s, when the 24-hour news cycle came into being. Reflecting on the changing media landscape of the 1970s, Kaun (2015, p. 101) maintains that 'there was a further acceleration of speed in the (re)production process of media content that intersects with the increased commercialization and globalization of the media technologies employed.' This is the period when television became the dominant medium, offering a constant flow of narratives. In terms of the production and circulation of news, which is important for activism, television with its regular news updates sped up the day-by-day pace of the news cycle, which for a long time was determined by printed newspapers. This process of acceleration continued into the 1980s, with the advent of cable and satellite television news channels, such as CNN, leading to the development of the 24-hour news cycle, characterized by constant news updates and live broadcasts (Silvia, 2001; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2009).

The acceleration of the news cycle is significant, as it greatly increased the competition for market share among media companies, which became more focused on spectacle and entertainment in their efforts to draw viewers and readers (Bennett & Entman, 2000; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999; McChesney, 1999). In turn, this had implications for how protests were communicated. Responding to the demand for entertainment, the new social movements of the 1970s and 80s became progressively geared towards staging protests in correspondence with the needs and expectations of the mainstream news media, employing professional public relations officers and developing elaborate media strategies. Greenpeace is a prominent example of this trend, employing a professional public relations staff and staging symbolic and strictly non-violent protest actions, geared towards drawing mass media attention (Anderson, 2003; Delicath & Deluca, 2003; Rucht, 2004). Delicath and Deluca (2003, p. 315) call this type of protest 'image events', which 'are staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination'.

Important to note is that these activist media strategies not only responded to the acceleration of the news cycle, but also to the temporal orientation of mainstream news reporting. As Iyengar (1991) points out, it makes a crucial difference whether protest reporting is 'episodic' or 'thematic'. The former primarily entails a focus on the present, on the unfolding protest event, while the latter involves a thematic reflection on protest against a wider temporal horizon. Research on mainstream protests reporting from the 1970s onwards found that this reporting tends to have an episodic-orientation (Boykoff, 2006; Boyle et al., 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Smith et al., 2001). This particular orientation is considered to be a central element of what has been called the 'protest paradigm', a routine template that journalists use to report protest (McCluskey, Stein, Boyle, & McLeod, 2009; McLeod & Hertog, 1998). Following this template, the focus is primarily on the noise, performance, spectacle, and conflict of street demonstrations. This particular temporal orientation has major implications for public sense-making processes and relations of power. Smith et al. (2001, p. 1417) make clear that episode-oriented reporting leads the attention away from 'systemic explanations for the problems protesters are seeking to address' to 'elicit individualistic (or nonsocietal) attributions of responsibility for most of the issues studied'.

The 24-hour news cycle clearly poses a challenge for activists trying to gain public legitimacy. At the same time, it should be observed that there are always a multiplicity of temporalities at play in any media system. From this perspective, particularly important for protest communication are activists and community media, aimed at challenging mainstream media's philosophy of objectivity and at reversing the 'hierarchy of access' to the news by giving marginal actors a voice (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011; Harcup, 2011). Pursuing this aim, Harcup (2006) suggests that these media effectively develop a different temporal orientation than can be observed in the mainstream news cycle. Studying how alternative media report on health and safety stories at the local level, he observes how episode-driven mainstream news reporting is counteracted by using marginal actors, such as factory and shop workers, pensioners, and minor government officials, as primary sources. Whereas mainstream news media by comparison tended 'to notice health and safety stories only when there was a disaster', the alternative press, building on a wider variety of sources, exposed 'potential health risks before even the workers or their trade unions were aware of them' (Harcup, 2006, p. 133). In principle, activists and community media -not caught up in the 24-hour news cycle- aim to provide systematic explanations and insights in structural societal problems, acting as 'agents of social change' rather than as 'agents of social reproduction' (Mowbray 2015, p. 27). Hence, these media potentially enable the construction of temporal relations more conducive to communicating protest.

It would, however, be a mistake to simply contrast mainstream and alternative media. Mainstream news media are by no means only defined by the 24-hour news cycle. These media also offer public affairs programs, talk shows, and investigative reporting, which tend to have a more thematic orientation, exploring the broader socioeconomic and political context in which protest takes place. With the growth of the internet, the abundant availability of news, and the need to stand out in an over-saturated media environment, one can also potentially expect these kinds of news formats to become more prevalent.

More generally, the temporal orientation of news and related processes of sense-making, are not set in stone, but *continuously evolving*. Research demonstrates, among others, that mainstream sourcing practices are or have become more varied than was originally theorized by media scholars. Previously marginal sources can under particular circumstances become secondary or even primary sources (Cottle, 2003; Manning, 2001). Studies on the media coverage of the democratic globalization movement in the US, for example, show how mass media increasingly used movement members and other marginal sources in their reporting (Rauch et al., 2007; Rojecki, 2002). These more diverse sourcing practices led to a shift in temporal orientation, from the protest spectacle to larger societal issues. Examining the media coverage of the movement, Rojecki (2002, p. 159) maintains that the ‘initial focus on surface features – costumes and stunts – quickly deepened to the underlying issues they symbolized’. Albeit much more cautiously, Rauch et al. (2007, p. 131) arrive at similar observations. They write ‘delegitimizing language was constant over time, evoking the protest paradigm and riot, confrontation and circus frames’, but they also found ‘evidence of frame dynamism, suggestive of a possible evolving sympathy through which movement members improve access to reporters and get their issues across to the public’.

Where the temporal orientation of mainstream news is potentially subject to shifts, the focus of alternative news efforts might be evolving as well. Gurleyen and Hackett (2015) question the opposition of alternative news to fact-based, event-driven reporting. They point out that especially in countries in which protest movements are confronting authoritarian regimes, ‘objective journalism’ tends to become a popular demand and a prominent goal of some alternative media. Trying to provide fact-based news, these media, consequently, deliver more event-driven protest reporting than might be expected on the basis of alternative media theory. The next sections will argue that this observation does not only apply to authoritarian contexts, but is becoming a dominant tendency in alternative journalism and activist communication more generally. While activists have for a long time tried to take protest reporting in their own hands – from socialist organizations purchasing printing presses in the 1950s to Indymedia in the early 2000s – social media platforms enabled, for the first-time, *mass* grassroots reporting. This not only entails a possible shift in media power, but also affects the temporal orientation of alternative media and activist communication.

It is in this complex and evolving configuration of temporal relations that social media platforms intervene. How does the activist use of these platforms affect the speeds of protest communication? What kinds of temporal orientations are developed through these platforms? How does social media protest communication relate to the 24-hour news cycle and what are the implications for collective processes of sense-making?

Social media protest reporting

A key concept in efforts to understand the temporal dimension of social media communication is the notion of *real-time*. This term has been used to ‘describe media characterized by fresh, dynamic or continuously processed content’ (Weltevrede, Helmond, & Gerlitz, 2014, p. 126). It highlights that on today’s web, content becomes a ‘flowing stream of data getting published, republished, annotated and co-opt’d across a myriad of sites and tools’ (Borthwick, 2009). The development of the real-time web

can be seen as continuous with the acceleration of the news cycle: it entails a speeding up of the pace at which content is renewed. And just as in the case of the mainstream news cycle, this speeding up is not immanent to social media platforms or to the web at large, but the result of the entanglement between infrastructures, institutions, and social practices. As Weltevrede, Helmond, and Gerlitz (2014, p. 141) emphasize, real-time is fabricated through the ‘interplay of content, its storing and algorithmic processing, interfaces, search and rank algorithms, queries, user activities, but also time and date’. Build into this sociotechnical fabrication of real-time are political economies. By ‘pacing’ content differently and making it ‘sticky’, platforms give prominence to promoted posts, featured pages, recommended tweets, and other forms of advertising (Weltevrede et al., 2014, p. 142).

Another key concept that is helpful in gaining insight in the temporalities of social media communication is the older notion of ‘liveness’, which has been developed in research on ‘live’ radio and television broadcasting (Auslander, 2008). This notion highlights that ‘realtimeness’ through social media is continuous with and embedded in a larger media environment increasingly geared towards immediate connectivity. Van Es (2017) has argued that liveness is particularly relevant in the contemporary media context: from the revival of live broadcasting of public events to live video streaming through Facebook Live and Twitch. Building on the work of Coudry (2004) and Scannell (2001), she maintains: ‘What live media share is that they establish that something needs to be attended to now rather than later’ (Van Es, 2017, p. 1249). Similar to how Weltevrede and colleagues conceptualize real-time, ‘liveness’ needs to be seen as a configuration that ‘is the product of an interaction among media institutions, technologies and viewers/users’ (Van Es, 2017, p. 1250).

What this research on liveness and real-time makes clear is that the contemporary, digitized media environment is characterized by a strong orientation towards the present, towards the event. However, as this temporal orientation is constructed through the interplay between a variety of media infrastructures, institutions, and practices, it takes shape different on particular platforms and in specific contexts.

Multiple and contested temporalities

To illustrate how this works in practice, the analysis draws from three case studies on activist social media communication during: the 2010 Toronto G20 protests (Poell, 2014), the early 2011 uprising in Egypt (Poell, Abdulla, Rieder, Woltering, & Zack, 2016), and the protests following the gang rape incident in New Delhi in December 2012 (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). While these case studies, developed in previous research projects, cannot be discussed in detail in this article, they provide insight in the tensions and correspondences between different temporalities and objectives at play in contemporary activist communication. Comparing the three cases, it becomes possible to arrive at more systematic observations on how multiple and contested temporalities are constituted. First, the *variation* between the three cases is explored to enhance our understanding of how particular media infrastructures, institutions, and practices are involved in the construction of specific temporal orientations. Subsequently, in the following section, the discussion turns to activists’ efforts to developed *alternative* temporalities, which allow for other forms of collective sense-making than afforded by the dominant temporal regime.

Analysing the three cases, crucial variations can be observed in how specific modes of liveness were constituted. These variations depend among others on what platform(s) the analysis focused on, which actors communicated through a platform, the character of the protest event, what phase of a protest was under analysis, and the institutional context in which the protest took place. In the case of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests, the analysis focused on the #g20report hashtag, promoted by the Toronto Community Mobilization Network (TCMN). The network called upon protestors to 'broadcast breaking news' using Twitter, YouTube, or Flickr, tagging their reports #g20report. This can be understood as an effort to crowd-source alternative news reporting through commercial social media platforms. Similar efforts, often emerging more bottom-up, can be observed in every major contemporary protest. During the Toronto G20, #g20report was continuously used on all three selected platforms, especially also by protestors on the streets. While the pace of updates on the three platforms varied widely, in combination the 'hashtagged' tweets, photos, videos, and hyperlinks constituted a continuous stream of mostly visual reports on the unfolding protest event. This stream can be seen as an accelerated, user-generated version of the mass media news cycle. Exploiting the affordances of commercial platforms, the protestors actively constructed a 'live' or (almost) 'real-time' communication system, which during the height of the protests had a substantial reach. Some of the social media reports, especially a couple of YouTube videos depicting police violence, generated over 100.000 views.

For the G20 protestors, these live protest reports were of strategic importance, as it allowed them to document in detail the excessive police presence and violence during the protests. From hour-to-hour and minute-to-minute, it was reported how the Toronto police patrolled the streets, checked for IDs, and searched, arrested, detained, and beat protestors. Earl et al. (2013, p. 469) have argued, examining the 2009 Pittsburgh G20 protests, that such social media reporting practices contribute to reducing the 'information asymmetry' between protestors and police. From the perspective of public communication and collective processes of sense-making, the consequences of these practices are, however, more ambiguous. They allowed activists, on the one hand, to generate their own protest accounts, which also fed into the mainstream news cycle, informing G20 reporting by Canadian public television and national newspapers. On the other hand, these social media practices, just as most mainstream protest reporting, tended to draw attention away from the larger political-economic and sociocultural issues at stake in the protests. In this regard, they effectively constituted a mirror version of the mainstream protest paradigm.

A similar tension between immediate strategic advantages and long-term protest objectives could be observed in the second case study. This study focused on the Twitter communication in the year following the New Delhi gang rape of December 2012, which sparked mass protests in major cities throughout India. In the aftermath of the protests, feminist activists and journalists used Twitter to connect with each other and to continue generating publicity for new cases of gender violence. Simultaneously, by focusing the attention on 'the crime of the day', the Twitter communication also drew attention away from structural protest issues: patriarchal societal power relations and systemic gender violence.

While an episodic focus could be observed in both case studies, there were clear differences as well. The G20 social media protest stream was primarily driven by on-the-ground protest accounts, mirroring and informing, but also partly competing with

mainstream protest reporting. As the analysis of the Indian case focused on the period following the street protests, the examined Twitter stream was not propelled by first-hand protest accounts. It was mostly constituted in interaction with mainstream news reports on gender violence and on the failings of the police and judicial system to adequately address this violence. Twitter users shared and commented on these reports, maintaining a continuously update and annotated record of relevant news. This is what Bruns (2008, p. 74) calls gatewatching, 'the continuous, communal observation of the output gates of conventional news organizations, as well as of primary sources of news and information'. Gatewatching gives activists agency over the curation of news, enabling an alternative news selection, but it also ties activist communication to the 24-hour news cycle.

The third case study, focused on the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page (We are Khaled Said), features yet another temporal configuration. The Facebook page, which was 'liked' several million times and received tens of thousands of daily comments at its height, became a vital stage for the expression of public grievances about the Mubarak regime in the months leading up to the Egyptian uprising of early 2011. It was initially created, in the summer of 2010, to protest against the murder of Khaled Said, a young middle-class Egyptian man, who was beaten to death by Egyptian security forces (Ghonim, 2012). Just as in the other two cases, the communication on this page was predominantly episodic, as both the page administrators and users constantly responded to ongoing political developments. Again, however, there are crucial differences.

Featuring a different social media platform, this case study allows for a reflection on the ways in which specific social media technologies and user practices generate a particular temporal dynamic and orientation. Examining the communication through the Kullena Khaled Said Page, it is striking how much the page administrators shaped the tone and orientation of the interactions on the page. Whereas the previously discussed Twitter networks were relatively horizontal, the sociotechnical architecture of Facebook pages provided the admins with extensive means of control. Kullena Khaled Said was, at least up to the uprising of early 2011, controlled by two admins. The main admin was Wael Ghonim, who started the page. Only these two admins could add posts to the page, while users were restricted to 'liking', 'sharing', and commenting.¹ Corresponding with this hierarchical structure, a specific temporal configuration developed: a few prominently visible daily admin posts triggered and steered streams of user comments, sometimes adding up to thousands of comments every hour. The admins, operating as 'connective leaders', used this temporal control to build an oppositional public through 'affective' messaging, inciting and celebrating protest, expressing grievances against the Mubarak regime, and stressing the unity of the Egyptian people.

Comparing the three case studies, it becomes clear that in each context a particular form of real-time or liveness was fabricated, respectively revolving around on-the-ground protest accounts, the curation of mainstream news reports, and the construction of affective connections. In combination, the case studies show that this type of social media protest communication generates new opportunities but also new problems for activists trying to affect societal processes of sense-making. Social media reporting enables activists to have a more direct and wide-ranging impact on public communication than alternative journalistic practices ever allowed for, reducing their dependence on mainstream news media. At the same time, the pre-dominantly episodic

focus that characterizes the 24-hour news cycle is reproduced in these social media protest practices, which reinforce, rather than reorganize, the temporality of this cycle.

Crucial to observe is that the predominantly episodic orientation of social media protest communication is not simply the consequences of user practices, but developed in interaction with the techno-commercial architecture of social media platforms. Not designed to support activism, these platforms are geared towards maximizing user engagement to facilitate and optimize personalized advertising and services. Commercial platforms algorithmically connect users to whatever content is generating most engagement. This can be protest related content, but also content related to other trending events and topics. Real-time connectivity is at the center of these techno-commercial strategies, allowing social media corporations to directly track, predict, and influence user activity and preferences (Poell & Van Dijck 2015). By massively employing social media, protesters are effectively inserting these techno-commercial strategies into their communication practices.

Alternative temporalities?

Just as the temporality of mainstream news media is not solely defined by the 24-hour news cycle, so does activist social media communication not exclusively revolve around real-time protest reporting. In the three case studies, content with a broader temporal orientation was frequently circulated as well. Activists habitually posted links to pamphlets, background articles, and speeches, in which larger political and socio-economic issues were extensively discussed. Moreover, they regularly shared videos, photos, and reports of past protests and controversies to demonstrate historical lineages and resonances. Finally, particularly striking was the routine use and remixing of iconic images, videos, and songs to enhance solidarity.

Similar social media sharing practices have been observed by other scholars. For example, analyzing the circulation of videos on Twitter and YouTube during the Occupy protests, Thorson et al. (2013, p. 421) found a wide variety of content. Besides 'cell phone footage as eyewitness accounts of protest (and police) activity, they also detected 'news footage or movie clips posted months and sometimes years before the movement began', as well as 'music videos and other entertainment content'. More generally, current scholarship demonstrates that the creative remixing and recycling of all sorts of media content in the form of memes have become a central component of contemporary protest communication (Bayerl & Stoyanov, 2016; Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Shifman, 2014). In this sense, social media are very much characterized by a multiplicity of temporalities. Yet, at least in the three case studies, this multiplicity did not fundamentally challenge the predominantly episodic perspective of social media protest communication. On a day-to-day basis, the most shared content consistently had a strong orientation towards the present. Clearly, to a certain extent this is due to the episodic or 'exceptional' nature of the types of protest featured in the three cases, as opposed to more 'everyday' forms of protest, such as prefigurative and micro politics (Gillan, *Forthcoming*). At the same time, it should be noted that there is no 'natural' way to report protest. Historically most protest has been covered from a predominantly episodic perspective, but there have also been protests that have received a more thematic coverage. The question is how the balance between the two perspectives is organized within particular media environments. Social media communication appears to tip the balance further towards the episodic perspective.

Of course, commercial social media are not the only avenues to communicate today's protests. While embracing these platforms, activists have also continued to use a wide variety of other media. For example, in the case of the 2010 Toronto G20 protests, TCMN employed the Toronto Media Co-op blog. The blog was part of the Dominion News Cooperative, a Canadian network of local autonomous media cooperatives, which aim to 'combine participatory, democratically produced media with professional standards' (About the Media Co-op, 2012). Furthermore, an analysis of the hyperlink network in which the G20 social media communication was embedded showed that a large number of activist and community sites were reporting on the protests. Many of these alternative media, such as Rabble.ca, the Gleaner Community press, and Vancouver Media Co-op, were operated nationally or locally. In addition there were also many international alternative sites, such as Democracy Now!, anarchistnews.org, and Indymedia.org.

Interviews with activists make clear that an important reason why alternative media continue to be employed is to gain more control over the temporality of public protest communication. Social media are experienced as particularly problematic in this regard. In her ethnographic research on activist groups in Europe, Barassi (2015, p. 83), for instance, was 'constantly asked to understand the fact that social media were not a space for political discussion and elaboration, because the communication was too fast, too quick and too short'. Similarly, in the examined Indian case study, the interviewed feminist activists expressed dissatisfaction with the 'presentism' of Twitter communication. For this reason, Natasha Badhwar, co-curator of Genderlog, a crowdsourced group website on gender violence in India, often chose to first write a longer reflexive blog post or newspaper column before turning to Twitter (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015, p. 728). It is through 'slow' forms of civic journalism that attention could be generated for more structural problems and power relations.

Parallel efforts to control the temporality of protest communication are practiced on the ground. As various scholars have observed, contemporary social movements, such as Occupy, tend to practice slow and prefigurative living and decision-making (Kaun, 2016; Petrick, 2017; Yates, 2015). Petrick (2017, p. 496–97) points out that Occupy can, in this regard, be seen as 'a show of resistance to capitalism's speed imperative'. In opposition to speed, 'the prefigurative ethos stresses the importance of the process by which the decisions are made collectively, rather than or in addition to the outcomes of such deliberations'. Attempts were also made to translated this ethos to social media communication. It has been documented how some Occupy camps developed specific guidelines for the managers of social media accounts, insisting on collective deliberation and voting to decide what would be communicated through these accounts (Kavada, 2015; Terranova & Donovan, 2013). Moreover, while many protest camps live-streamed their general assemblies and protest marches, 'safe zones' were created for those who did not want to be broadcasted (Mattoni, 2019, p. 23). These practices can be seen as strategies to impose the pace and concerns of on-the-ground collectivity to online connectivity, rather than the other way around.

These observations indicate that today's activists certainly try to tactically navigate and counteract the temporality of the mainstream news cycle and 'real-time' social media protest reporting. Such reflexive and disciplined media use is crucial, but also difficult to sustain, as dominant media practices are geared towards the latest update. This can not only be observed in the most shared content on social media platforms, but also in how

alternative and mainstream news media are drawing material from these platforms during protests. This was particularly evident in the Toronto G20 case. During these protests, activist blogs and alternative news sites were building heavily on the 'live' reporting from social platforms - YouTube videos, photos shared through Twitpic, and reports on Twitter - as evidence to reconstruct the ongoing confrontations between police and protestors. A similar use of social media protest content, albeit more cautiously, was developed by Canadian mainstream news media. The widespread, distributed use of social media by on-the-ground protestors produces a wealth of first-hand observations, providing attractive material for alternative and mainstream news outlets. Such a division of labor can be seen to emerge during major protests around the world, with professional journalists becoming more adept at verifying and curating social media content (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti 2013; Hänska-Ahy & Shapour, 2013).

From a temporal perspective, the integration of real-time social media reporting in mainstream and alternative news effectively means that the temporality of these social media practices is reproduced throughout the media landscape. In combination with the fact that activist social media communication often remains closely tied to the mainstream news cycle, this implies that public protest communication continues to have an overwhelmingly episodic focus.

Conclusion

Reflecting on how the growing use of social media affects the temporality of protest communication, this article suggested that these media provide new opportunities but also new challenges for activists trying to shape how protest is publicly perceived and legitimated. Adopting a relational approach, it explored how media infrastructures, institutions, and activist practices become entangled, shaping specific temporal configurations in which protest is communicated and interpreted. This exploration generates a number of vital questions for further research.

The first set of questions concerns the role of mainstream news media. Traditionally these media, operating in an increasingly competitive environment, have tended to cover protest from a predominantly episodic perspective, ignoring larger protest issues. In turn, activists, seeking mainstream news coverage have reinforced this tendency, catering to dominant news values. Recent scholarship shows, however, that these relations are by no means fixed or all-encompassing. In particular contexts, mainstream news media, building on social movement sources, do report more extensively on activist concerns and structural protest issues. The question is how this takes shape in a news landscape increasingly dominated by social media platforms. Does the availability of live social media reporting reinforce the event-oriented focus of mainstream protest news? Or does it stimulate a more issue-driven orientation as a way to differentiate in an over saturated media landscape? And how does the increasingly central role of social media in the curation and consumption of news affect the visibility of particular types of protest reporting?

Similar questions need to be asked about alternative news media. It has been argued that these media facilitate a broader temporal perspective on protest than mainstream news reporting, as alternative journalists build on more diverse sources and devote more systematic attention to structural societal problems. Yet, alternative news

practices are not static either. It appears that episodic protest reporting is becoming more central to activist communication and alternative journalism. This can most immediately be observed in how activists employ social media platforms. During major protests, it has become common practices for activists to produce real-time social media streams of on-the-ground textual and visual reports. Alternative news sites and blogs, in turn, build on these reports, in efforts to reconstruct unfolding events. The question is whether this trend signals a fundamental transformation in the temporality of activist communication and alternative journalism. Are these becoming more event-oriented? And what are the implications of this trend for the public interpretation and legitimation of protest?

Considering these questions, it is important to see that current changes in the temporality of protest communication take shape within the context of a fundamental transformation of the media landscape and a corresponding redistribution of media power. Activist social media practices, like all social media activity, fuse spheres that were formerly separated. Mainstream and alternative reporting becomes entangled with distributed protest activity, as social media streams of protest videos, photos, and text updates, develop into prominent news sources. And, vice versa the sharing of mainstream and alternative protest reports through social media increasingly shapes the distribution and reception of these reports.

While distributed social media users have become central to public communication, producing streams of protest reports and incessantly curating the news process, it has not become any easier to generate sustained attention for structural protest issues and gain public legitimacy. The current transformation of the media landscape especially also involves an enormous concentration of media power in a few large social media platforms. These platforms not only *enable* activist communication, but also *steer* activists towards particular types of activity, content, and interactions, which reproduces and reinforces the episodic focus of the 24-hour news cycle. Moreover, social media not only *connect*, but also constantly *reconnect* users with new content and activities, making it difficult to sustain public attention through these media.

Note

1. This hierarchical structure corresponds with how Facebook developed Pages, as a marketing tool for businesses and organizations.

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