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Progressive Social Movements and the Internet

Social Movements in Communication Studies

Communication scholars have offered significant insight and provocation to the study of social movements. The praxis that results from the application of critical theory to the study of communication and social change allows scholars to document the role of rhetoric, symbols, media, and other communicative tools in social control, stagnation, protest, and revolution (Bowers, Ochs, Jensen, & Schulz, 2009). Early scholars of critical theory including Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School highlighted the way economic and political elites control and limit the terms of debate in the public sphere through control of language and media (Boikos, Moutsoulas, & Tsekeris, 2014; Durham & Kellner, 2009). These scholars observed that communication plays a central role in the cultural and political hegemony that prevents the masses from collectively overthrowing those in power. Through dominant communication and the resulting naturalization of dominant ideologies, the masses consent to social hierarchies and inequalities. While this work draws heavily from Karl Marx's 19th-century observations of class exploitation and Antonio Gramsci's subsequent theorizations of cultural hegemony, they continue to be applied by communication scholars to understand a range of questions related to power and inequality in late-capitalist societies.

Critical communication scholars also highlight the potentials of political resistance made possible through communication and developed analytical frameworks for theorizing power and counterpower. For example, language and symbols have been identified as important tools of resistance by scholars documenting the way ordinary people negotiate and oppose the ideological apparatuses of the state. Key to this resistance is the

agency of everyday people to reject, appropriate, and redefine dominant narratives (Durham & Kellner, 2009). For example, on the power of language, Del Gandio (2008) details how something as simple as a citizen using profane or dehumanizing language to publicly name-call a member of the establishment can subvert the socially sanctioned authority the latter carries and act as an expression of freedom in the face of repression that limits other forms of protest. Similarly, in her discussion of the use of “sister” and “sisterhood” by feminists in the 1970s, Beins (2010) details the way the interpellation of women as feminist subjects worked toward building the collective identity and solidarity needed in a social movement that required its base to subvert the social power they had previously learned to consent to.

Cisneros (2011) has documented how rhetoric and visual symbols work alongside one another in expanding definitions of political and cultural citizenship in the case of US-based immigrant rights protest. Symbols are polysemic and can be appropriated by activists to make persuasive political arguments outside the boundaries of traditional political discourse—the American flag as taken up by migrant rights activists speaks to this phenomenon. Cisneros details how the waving of the American flag in mass mobilizations by immigrants works to expand the civic imaginary wherein those mobilizing symbolically expand the terms of belonging to an American identity beyond binary definitions of citizenship relied upon by the law. In openly balking antimigrant forces that use the embrace of the flag to reject multiculturalism, migrant rights activists insist through symbol that migrants can simultaneously hold affinity to the culture of their home countries and enact citizenship practices in their new one.

Visual communication and embodied argumentation then, like rhetorical argumentation, is well studied by social movement scholars who have documented the way organizations such as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (Act Up), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Earth First!, and others use bodily argumentation to create compelling and easily distributed “picture bombs” that become emblematic of larger political arguments about identity, health, family, the environment, and science (Christiansen & Hanson, 1996; Del Gandio, 2008; DeLuca, 1999; Taylor, Kimport, Van Dyke, & Andersen, 2009). In the cases of activist organizations making cultural claims that are perceived as radical, the visibility and behavior of bodies themselves make symbolic and polysemic arguments that are accessible to a wider range of the public than only traditional argumentation would allow. For example, the kiss-ins of Act Up allowed people living with AIDS (PWAs) to make claims about the normalcy of their identities vis-à-vis the romantic kiss, which is a widely celebrated representation of love, loyalty, and family among heterosexuals. Likewise, the extremely vulnerable physical positions taken on by Earth First! activists in efforts to prevent deforestation compellingly communicate that nature and natural life is as valuable as human life. The physical occupation of space has also long been used by activists to make political demands for access to the public sphere. From the barricades of the French Revolution to the reoccupation of lands by the Indigenous people from whom they were stripped, spatial disruption by activists advances political demands by challenging the material power of the state (Wetzel, 2009).

Finally, mass media exploitation and the creation of alternative media are central to social movement communication. Alternative media created by movements is a well-documented strategy, as mass dissemination of activist messaging is crucial to promulgation and base-building efforts. Given that like other elite institutions mainstream media often reflect the needs and worldviews of the powerful, various groups have created their own tools of mass communication as challenges to the mainstream. From abolition to movements against lynching, segregation, and police brutality, African Americans have produced media with the explicit goal of making the case for their full political and social inclusion (Condit & Lucaites,

1991; Jackson, 2014; Squires, 2002). The feminist press similarly plays a critical role in making the case for women's rights, developing culturally resonant frames of dissent, and organizing collectives of women who might otherwise be isolated from social change networks (Endres, 2009). During the antiapartheid movement, and well before the creation of the Internet, activists developed a global network that challenged the racial hegemony of South Africa. This included the creation and distribution of films, books, newspapers, posters, buttons, art, and other multimedia texts and often required the coordinated smuggling of information out of the apartheid state (Downing, 2005). This activist media influenced the demand of institutional divestment from South Africa by university students throughout the world and pressure on global institutions like the International Olympic Committee to exclude South Africa from participation.

One of the most well-known activist strategies, culture jamming, makes use of media and other social movement communication strategies to critique and subvert, or "jam," the dominant messages of consumer culture (DeLaure, Fink, & Dery, 2017). Culture jamming and activist art more generally, then, take up the work of helping the public to think about themselves and the world at large differently, a cultural change-centric strategy that can work alongside strategies focused on change in the sphere of traditional politics and policy.

Ultimately, all local and global struggles for equality are tied to struggles over communication messages and technology. Because mass media is the primary location of political deliberation in the contemporary public sphere, the potentials of activist media must be treated with nuance and caution as nation states, corporations, and elite institutions continue to have disproportionate access to media creation and dissemination. Likewise, particularly wealthy and powerful countries, especially those in the Global North, dominate much of the global movement of media, further limiting the potentials of the global civil society envisioned by activists (Sparks, 2005). It is these conditions that activists have responded to as two-way communication networks via the Internet have made possible new formations of activist media and influenced the everyday workings of social movement organizing and implementation.

The Rise of Online Activism

As Hall (2011) has outlined, scholars began to imagine and theorize about the possibility and potentials of a society connected through widespread technological networks unbound by traditional delimitations of space and time long before the Internet came to exist. By the time early personal computers (PCs) became available in the 1980s, and the World Wide Web became increasingly accessible in the early 1990s, the Internet age had arrived. Although the technological infrastructures of the Internet look very different in the early 21st century than they did in the 1980s and 1990s, and certainly reach a larger number of people at much lower cost, activists immediately understood the importance of peer-to-peer communication in an increasingly globalized and neoliberal context. Groups facing the challenge of developing communication strategies that might be effective in the context of the privileged media access enjoyed by the governments and multibillion-dollar corporations they critiqued were among early adopters of Internet technology. The most notable social movement campaigns to take early advantage of the Internet were the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the global justice protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle.

Long before the Internet was a highly populated space centering the horizontal sharing of content, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a small group of indigenous Mexican revolutionaries, successfully built a global network of communication for the online promulgation of their literature and demands (Wolfson, 2012). The use of the Internet by the Zapatistas was an act of desperate creativity in a national and international media landscape that held up dominant neoliberal narratives that justified the North American Free Trade Agreement (which the Zapatistas saw as a form of genocide). The Zapatistas engaged in fully armed revolution, an act that given their underdog status in the face of a brutal, well-funded Mexican national army helped to gain the sympathies of activists, hackers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) across the globe. After the initial negotiation of a ceasefire with the Mexican government, it was through an online network of these activists and allies, including the Association for Progressive Communications that the Zapatistas made their case against neoliberal economic policy and for indigenous rights in Mexico. For example, Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos successfully communicated editorial content detailing the plight and demands of indigenous Mexicans via online allies who sent this content to major newspapers across the globe; journalists who only a few short months before had paid no consideration to questions of indigenous human rights in Central America had a story.

Two years later, in 1996, the Zapatistas used this same network to call a meeting on developing strategies to fight neoliberal economic policies in the tiny province of Chiapas that was attended by thousands of people from over 40 countries (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Ultimately, the successful public campaigning of the Zapatistas, which did not exist in a vacuum but carried with it the cost of many lives and responded proactively to the history and needs of the Mayan people remaining in Chiapas, illustrated that global networks of contention and the dissemination and speed of global political debates has been radically changed by the capabilities of the Internet. While many have since attempted to directly apply the Zapatista model to other social movements, Wolfson (2012) argues that attempts to exactly replicate the strategy must take into consideration that the Zapatista reliance on Internet technology “emerged dialectically, through a series of confrontations, and was/is a fluid response to material conditions of struggle in Mexico” (p. 156). Thus the Indymedia network subsequently inspired by Zapatista activism struggled with questions of replicating, reforming, or creating new strategies as the technologies used by the Zapatistas also evolved to enable new applications.

The Indymedia network, which included anarchist and prodemocracy hackers across the globe, helped to organize and report on what would come to be known as “the Battle in Seattle” (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). When global justice activists descended on the Seattle meeting of the WTO in 1999, the mesomobilization made possible by the Internet was widely credited with the size and impact of the protests. Online networks, for example, were used to foster political coalitions between seemingly varied activist groups like unions and environmentalists, and the use of this technology alongside other developing personalized technologies like mobile phones allowed on-the-spot coordination among activists (Bowers et al., 2009). The use of the Web by Indymedia hackers for citizens reporting from the streets of Seattle was keenly observed by mainstream journalistic organizations who later moved to further develop and monetize technologies for street-level reporting (Kperogi, 2011).

Just as significant as the successes and innovations of these early cases of Internet activism is how establishments responded to them. By facing off with more technologically savvy agitators, establishments quickly learned about the power of the Internet to shape protest narratives and political contention across geographical boundaries (de Jong, 2005). In response to the Seattle WTO protests, for example, the US

government passed legislation creating “protest zones” at high-profile events that ensured activists, regardless of the efficiency and flexibility of their coordination, could not get close to political event venues (Starr & Fernandez, 2009). Such constraints have been legally and extralegally imposed by governments across the globe in response to the ability of activists to rapidly organize street protests with the help of technology and are seen by activists and their allies as encroachment on freedoms of speech and assembly.

Thus while the technological infrastructures and uses of Internet technologies were in part developed in response to democratic projects, they also developed in response to the more powerful political and economic demands of nation-states and corporations. The origins of the Web itself are tied to government projects of militarism and surveillance, thus making the evolution of Web technologies, and possibilities like live-streaming and going viral, fraught with the clashing needs of state power and the counterpower sought by social movement actors (Lee Kyung, 2015; McChesney, 2006; Thorburn, 2014). Further, media corporations actively learn from and appropriate activist uses of Internet technology; former hackers were hired to help develop Web platforms like Yahoo, and corporations have works to monetize activist content, for example running advertisements for revenue during YouTube videos of police suppression of activist efforts (Costanza-Chock, 2008).

Scholars responding to this history and context have studied both the ever-evolving technology of the Internet and its contextual uses. Specific characteristics of the Internet, including its temporality, rapidly changing infrastructures, and individualized nature, have led scholars to explore new definitions of collective action, the public sphere, and political power.

Characteristics of Online Activism

One notable challenge to studying the role of the Internet in social movements is the rapidly changing nature of Internet technology itself. Early scholarship considering the role of the Internet in social movements focused on infrastructures like bulletin boards, electronic mail (email), listservs, websites, and electronic forums because it was these that were used by the Zapatistas, the WTO protesters in Seattle, and other early mobilizations. However, the technological infrastructures of the 1990s and early 2000s are nearly unrecognizable in the context of latter Internet browsers, social media networks, and webcasting, video, and livestreaming sites. Even those that remain popular, like email, have evolved significantly, and the shift from dial-up on PCs to wireless and cloud technology on smartphones has shifted how scholars both define and theorize the uses of Internet technology (Coopman, 2011; Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004; Poell, 2014).

Internet activism does not and cannot exist in a bubble but rather responds to the larger media and activist ecologies of specific historical and technological moments. The study of transmedia mobilization—or the ways in which activists simultaneously make use of multiple old and new media platforms—has been crucial in illustrating new media ecologies. McKinney (2018), for example, has traced the role of HIV/AIDS activists in the 1980s as a significant cohort of early users of online bulletin board technology. Members of the PWA community who had the privilege of early access and literacy for Internet use printed the text files of medical research shared over bulletin board systems and ran them in the printed newsletters of activist organizations like Act Up and Critical Path to give PWAs lacking the same access this information. This helped to build movement solidarity between PWAs with and without access to medical trials and online

networks and contributed to building the underground network of illegal drug trials that many PWAs used to stay alive during the worst of the AIDS epidemic.

Likewise, Costanza-Chock (2014) has detailed how immigrant rights activists, who are often located in positions of particular precarity in relation to the state, have developed a “critical digital media literacy” that combines offline organizing and consciousness-raising strategies with digital media workshops to strengthen the ability of low-wage migrant workers and other members of their communities to participate in the public sphere. Importantly, these activists find Spanish-language radio most useful for galvanizing mass mobilizations and thus direct much of their online media strategy toward gaining the support and attention of radio, television, and print journalists and personalities who can help legitimize migrant rights frames and demands. Ganesh and Stohl (2013) have similarly argued that the seeming ubiquity of digital communication has not caused an abrupt or wholly new shift in activist organizing but rather has become one important part of a hybrid activist toolkit. Thus there is no disagreement that offline actions that take up space, make claims with bodies, engage in civil disobedience, organize individuals into communities, and perform collective acts of public resistance remain crucial to social movements in the Internet age. From Guatemala to Egypt, and on issues from abortion rights to racial profiling, transmedia ecologies contribute to crucial offline acts of resistance (Bivens & Cole, 2018; Graeff, Stempeck, & Zuckerman, 2014; Harlow, 2012; Lim, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Rapid shifts in technology and protest ecologies have led some observers to question the efficacy of Internet-fueled social movements to fully engage participants. In particular, the seemingly disorganized and increasingly individualized nature of activism in the Internet age led to public mediations on “clicktivism” and “slacktivism” and arguments that “armchair activists” have been lulled into a false sense of agency and impact wherein they opt to click “like” or reblog content online as a substitute for participating in offline organizing and street protests that more effectively agitate establishments. However, researchers have debunked this idea, noting that social movements have always been, and largely remain, rooted in public spaces and formal locations of public debate by those who are able and willing to put their time and bodies on the line. Rather than debilitating offline activism, these scholars argue, Internet technology has enabled a “critical periphery” of participants who do not, and might never, engage in the same ways as those who participate in both on and offline actions, but via entrée into social movement conversations online members of this periphery serve as important promulgators of activist messages to new networks (Barberá et al., 2015). Further, disability studies scholars have noted that many celebrated offline forms of social movement action have been exclusionary to those with physical disabilities or other access barriers—thus the Internet has challenged ableist definitions of political “action” and made it easier for those long excluded from public space to make their demands known (Trevisan, 2016).

While much of the literature on social movements and the Internet discussed thus far draws on critical and post-structuralist theories in some way, several scholars have issued calls to more clearly and deeply locate questions about resistive identities, globalization, the public sphere, and transmediated space in online activism within preexisting Marxist and post-structuralist frameworks for understanding power and resistance (Bratich, 2014; Brunner, 2014; Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2013).

Critical Insights on Social Movements and the Internet

The theoretical and methodological questions connected to the study of social movements and the Internet have been taken up most prominently by Castells (2007, 2012), Bennett and Segerberg (2011, 2013), Papacharissi (2010, 2014), and Fenton (2008, 2016). These scholars and others have engaged a lively and theoretically complex debate on the role of Internet technology in a diversity of 21st-century social movements. In this body of work are questions related to the role of affect; collective versus connective action and community building; personalization, individuation, and autonomy; temporality and geographic flexibility; and perhaps most importantly questions of how to define social transformation, power, and politics in the digital age.

Castells (2012) considers the role of online activism in Tunisia, Iceland, Egypt, Spain, and the geographically unbound but US-rooted Occupy movement. In documenting how individuals and organizations committed to a range of demands, from the overthrow of a dictator to financial regulation, come to form social movement networks, Castells argues that social movements in the Internet age are now typified by individuation and autonomy, a multiplicity of networks and spaces, and collectively nurtured affect. Castells contends that the movements occurring on and through online networks “embody the fundamental project of transforming people into subjects of their own lives by affirming their autonomy” (p. 230). He views the structures of the Internet as uniquely enabling a decentralized, leaderless, and polysemic politic that allows individuals who feel invisible in mainstream political institutions to articulate their needs and experiences in a structure that then allows the freedom to build online community with similarly minded people. This is supported by later work by Funke and Wolfson (2017), who argue that the connections between various Internet-enabled movements from the Zapatistas to Podemos in Spain represent a new “epoch of struggle” that is characterized by a heterogeneity of issues and definitions of politics. Such work suggests that ultimately cultural change—or the change of collective imagination—is the most measurable impact of the uses of the Internet by global activists as they explore new forms and expressions of individual autonomy alongside visions of collective freedom.

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) likewise take up the question of what they term the “personalization” the Internet has enabled as well as the multiplicity of communication networks—online and offline, organizational and crowd-sourced—that make up contemporary social movements. Yet they caution against sweeping claims that the Internet and the social movement communication it enables can be directly replicated in different contexts and offer the significant contribution of distinguishing between connective and collective action and frames in online social movement communication. Specifically, Bennett and Segerberg note that prior to the evolution of the Internet, social change communication was primarily studied through theories of collective action that posited that successful movements required supporters to share collective repertoires of dissent and shared methods and analysis for social change. Collective action also revolved around organizations, leaders, and other structures that set the terms of politics and then worked to create solidarity around those politics. This collective tool box, they argue, has been upended by the connective logics of the Internet that allow personal engagement and individual stories to vary widely as activist work is taken up in a wide range of spaces and methods. Work by Neumayer and Valtysson (2013) has similarly illustrated this phenomenon as they trace how networked publics centered variously on antifascist activists, NGOs, and ordinary German citizens overlap to protest Nazism despite experiential and methodological differences.

Notably, connective action as defined by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) still requires face-to-face and street-level engagement in activism but depends on values of self-motivation, individual creativity, technological

skills, and personal action frames. Thus effective contemporary social movement discourse such as “Another World Is Possible” or “We Are the 99%” is intentionally broad and polysemic—responding to connective networks who envision meaning and articulate politics through personalization. They conclude that “connective and collective action logics do not compete; rather, they complement one another and extend the range of analysis” (p. 196). This, and work by Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, and Flammini (2013), acknowledges the limitations of technologically enabled networks and personalized frames of contention; without the building of some collective identity, individualization of activism makes social movements more vulnerable to loss of support and interest based on personal whims.

Papacharissi (2014) similarly centers the uniqueness of connective action in Internet-enabled social movements (as opposed to traditional interrogations and theorizations of collective action) and notes the importance of individual and personal investment in digital-era politics. Innovatively, Papacharissi offers an intervention into other work on the Internet and social movements by insisting on the centering of affect and storytelling in understanding how individuals “feel their place” in the new era of nonlinear and nonhierarchical social movements (p. 131). Papacharissi argues that any theorization of politics that centers or privileges rationality fails to take into consideration how connective ties are built through an embrace of personal politics, individual stories, and “digitally afforded affect” that build political ties not through collective agreement on specific definitions of politics or demands but sentiment and authenticity (p. 8). Papacharissi suggests that the networked public sphere and any democratic potentials it extends must consider the conditions of affective narrative.

Fenton (2016) also sees the value of affect and the ways in which discourses of contestation have moved across time and space from the Zapatistas, to Seattle, to the Arab Spring, to Occupy and others. Yet Fenton strongly cautions against the impulse she reads in other scholarship on the Internet and social movements to assume that digital networks are inherently liberatory, or even political, simply because they allow for a greater number of stories to be told. She argues that technologies are “never neutral” but “enmeshed with the systems of power in which they exist” so that just as various Internet platforms may be useful in mobilization, personal politics, the expression of affect, and the building of connective ties, they also are widely used in neoliberal projects of global capitalism and hyper-commercialization that forgo and distract from social change (p. 162). Thus Fenton largely rejects the contention of scholars who have argued that the introduction of ideas, cultural disruptions, and reappropriations that envision a more equal and democratic society are alone political, insisting instead that for social movements to make real and lasting radical change they must engage with formal institutions of political power. Fenton argues that for “critical democracy” and a more democratic public sphere to exist scholars and activists should spend more time planning policy interventions and less time preoccupied with the sweeping hopes of technologically determined revolutions. In response to this call, communication scholarship that directly examines how activist demands and calls for more inclusive democracy are translated through grassroots organizations that work specifically to influence electoral politics and policy advocacy is of interest (see Carty, 2010; Karpf, 2012).

Together, these scholars agree on several important characteristics of social movements in the Internet age. First, the Internet has collapsed the limitations of time and space that drove social movement logics in a predigital era, making it possible for citizens and activists to rapidly share real-time information as they go about offline organizing and protest activities. Second, the immediacy of posting online and across borders also means that activists no longer must wait for the attention of the traditional news cycle and structures that have historically mediated activist communication for the public to become aware of their grievances

and claims. This does not mean the mediation and frames of elite news organizations are no longer crucial to global politics but that traditional coverage of social movements exists in a media ecosystem that includes a larger range of content and more accessible alternative frames. Third, direct communication from activists has taken on a far more varied nature as individuals with assorted levels of social movement engagement and a wider range of organizations from radical to traditional social movement organizations speak around and to one another's networks.

Identity, Power, and Activism Online

Scholarship on the Internet and social movements arises from a diverse set of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches within and overlapping the field of communication. Critical scholarship has documented networked social movements, traced infrastructures and uses of digital technology, and offered debates about the measurable role of the Internet in challenging and remaking political power.

Communication scholars have also extended debates about the role of the Internet in social transformation by drawing on feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race frameworks.

For example, scholars have found that long-existing political critiques grounded in indigenous, black, and other axes of racially marginalized experience do important cultural and political work online and that digital networks extend the building of identities defined by marginalization and offer new entry points for alliances. For example, racial justice hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson have become not only important sites for long-existing counterpublics to spread narratives that challenge white supremacist violence online but have worked virally with offline actions to infiltrate mainstream media and political debates in the United States (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). Further, as Florini (2014) details, websites created by black activists are playing an important role in recontextualizing neoliberal political narratives of the past that have rendered radical politics and radical reorganizations of social power invisible. Florini argues that the intertextual nature of Internet hypertext plays the role of consciousness-raising and public education for those both experienced in and newly arriving to black radicalism.

Activists in Canada, South Africa, and Australia, using hashtags to bolster networks of dissent on issues of institutionalized white supremacy and settler colonialism, have found the language and tactic of hashtags useful for speaking to both very local contexts and larger networks of dissent. For example, in the case of the youth-led Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) campaign in South Africa, the Twitter-facilitated collective project of challenging the celebration of colonist Cecil John Rhodes played an important role in the larger political ecosystem of the postapartheid state's debates about race, racism, coloniality, and reconciliation. Despite the realities of the digital divide and the limited Internet access of many South African citizens, #RMF also contributed to a "new biography of citizenship" for South African youth (Bosch, 2017). In Canada, Raynauld, Richez, and Boudreau (2017) found that long-standing indigenous cultural values and histories were translated into the logics through which #IdleNoMore made policy, governance, and socioeconomic demands while also building a strong global network of non-Indigenous allies. Vats (2015), and Petray and Collin (2017) demonstrate that hashtag activism on social networking sites need not be only serious in nature to perform important cultural interventions. In the case of sarcastic and ironic commentary in online networks that target the everyday mundaneness of colonialist and white supremacist logics on topics ranging

from food culture to student financial aid, online activism continues to draw from activist histories of culture jamming and détournement.

Likewise, feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer activists, who often overlap with networks engaging racial justice activism, have used the technological infrastructures of the Internet to stake claims of civic and social belonging and to build what in some cases are life-saving networks of support. For example, transgender and queer communities have used their liminality to build supportive websites, blogs, digital zines, dictionaries, video content, and cross-platform social media networks largely outside the cultural and political spaces in which their identities are disciplined and punished (Bailey, 2016; Cavalcante, 2016; Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2017). This online trans and queer world-making contributes to a larger queer politics of developing collaborative and experimental political projects while also contributing to shifting media, medical, and political narratives through collective representational demands (Hundley & Rodriguez, 2009; Rawson, 2014). Likewise, in her study of feminist cyberactivism in Spain, Nuñez Puente (2011) finds that online collectives preserve a sense of feminist agency that strengthen offline action and make space for a diversity of feminist positionalities within activist praxis.

In fact, some argue that the Internet has opened up new possibilities for the practice of feminist intersectionality politics as overlapping networks insist on speaking to multiple issues of marginalization and oppression at once while also facing new challenges of hyper- and invisibility and commodification (Jackson, 2016; Mann, 2014; Squires, 2016). Like other work detailed here, this scholarship recognizes the ongoing importance of the convergence between online and offline activism and the reality that just as offline activist spaces are often mired in and struggling through the reproduction of identity-based power hierarchies and inequalities, online activist spaces also risk replicating these (Fischer, 2016). Further, scholars drawing on postcolonial theory and black feminist thought also caution that Internet-enabled Western feminist activism can reproduce imperial fantasies of the other that work, often through the production of affect, toward a reinscription of colonial ideologies of civility and saviorism (Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Loza, 2014). Others call attention to the precarity of digital feminism in neoliberal contexts that confine the demands of feminist politics to narratives of individual choice and empowerment (Baer, 2016). Here then, we see that many of the same ideological constraints faced by offline activists are replicated online, where liberatory narratives and the development of radical political interventions exist alongside the general commodification of resistance and the specific consumption of narratives drawn from the most marginal communities.

Conclusion

In sum, communication scholars have led the historical, theoretical, and methodological development of the study of the Internet and social movements. These contributions have evolved alongside wider interrogation of the role of the Internet in society; communication approaches, in particular, have offered important critical interventions into the study of the Internet in fields such as network science, computer science, science and technology studies, and digital humanities. Central to studying the Internet and social movements through a communication framework are questions regarding culture and political power, the public sphere and civil society, collective and individual identities, and the ongoing role of the social hierarchies in the ways social movement actors have come to engage the Internet.

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