

EDITORIAL

From High Visibility to High Vulnerability: Feminist, Postcolonial and Anti-Gentrification Activism at Risk

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This editorial considers how this special issue on media and activism reflects or extends current debates in the field and how it explores the possibilities for progressive activists around the world to use the media to resist the current rise of the extreme right alongside the disturbing and growing evidence of the techniques of fascism: populism, propaganda and fake news, hate speech and hate crimes. It follows Graham Meikle (2018) in defining 'activism' as 'the widest range of attempts to effect [progressive] social or cultural change' whilst its understanding of 'the media' includes a broad range of communication platforms, from traditional journalism to digital networks.

The issue itself looks at macro- and meso-levels of activism with this editorial explaining how contributions reflect different critical and research approaches focusing variously on media as enabling activists to organise; the mediation of activism; and media as a tool through which activists can professionally deliver their strategic objectives.

It calls for measures to make digital space a safer place for activists; to help activists own their narrative without constant risks of hijacking and abuse; and to celebrate the thriving strategies and tactics that bring together activists and the public who care.

Keywords: media activism; journalism; public relations; social change; progressive; social media

On 20 August 2018, a 15-year old girl decided not to attend school. Her reason was far from trivial – the looming climate crisis was risking the planet to the extent of changing land, air and water and damaging peoples' lives. The name of the girl was Greta Thunberg, and her example of 'school strike for the climate' in front of the Swedish parliament was followed by hundreds of thousands of teenagers globally. They were abandoning classrooms to demand change from their governments and societies, galvanising 270 cities with their solidarity.

Greta's success did not happen in one day. Journalism outlets, political parties and numerous NGOs and international institutions have been warning the population about the climate

crisis for decades. But the movement needed a symbol – and the quietly spoken Scandinavian girl with two symmetric braids was an emblem both strong and fragile that activism needed.

Media activism is a long and laborious endeavour. The rise of digital media with its abundance of information, interconnectivity, visibility, channels of mobilisation and low threshold of participation creates communities not only for the progressive but for toxic forces too. This is why activism in the late 2010s to early 2020s needs to be both active and reactive, thoughtful yet loud enough so it does not get lost in internet storms.

In these times when hijacking of terms and stories happens on a daily basis, activism also means constant narrative recreation and damage control. Some scholars call the internet a patriarchal structure (Megarry, 2018) and there are voices that demand gender equality of online space. The rallying cry of 'We should all be feminists' (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) is turning into 'We should all be activists' as new reports emerge concerning male bias in AI (Crawford, 2016; Adam, 2006; Leavy, 2018), sexist coding of digital voice assistants (West, Kraut and Ei Chew, 2019), the inherent inequality of AI-assisted recruitment processes (Dastin, 2018), and inequality of activism too. Female protesters and activists of colour face more challenges than others – due to the outbursts of toxic masculinity, racial abuse, cowardly anonymous online attacks and imbalance of visibility when it comes to hierarchy of influence. These issues are as virtual as they are real – and they need to be addressed to maintain liveable societies.

As editors, we wanted to explore the possibilities for progressive activists around the world to use the media to resist the current rise of the extreme right along with disturbing and growing evidence of the techniques of fascism: populism, propaganda and fake news, hate speech and rise of hate crimes. We define 'activism' as 'the widest range of attempts to effect [progressive] social or cultural change' (Meikle, 2018: iii), while 'the media' includes a broad range of communication platforms, from traditional journalism to digital networks.

This editorial aims to consider how the research articles published in this *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* special issue on media and activism reflect or extend current debates in the field.

Media and activism is of interest to academics from a variety of disciplines. Sociologists examine the organisation of social movements, their mobilisation techniques and the role of collective identity in activism (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). All of these aspects are enabled by media, and are being challenged and transformed by digital media (Bennett and Segerberg (2012), Kavada (2015). Media and communication academics also explore the mediation of activism, and the ways in which media enable activists to frame messages and share information, while also providing a space in which to create meaning (Meikle 2018). In the recent *Routledge Companion to Media and Activism* (2018), editor Professor Graham Meikle of the University of Westminster sets out the key themes of media and activism as: the role of the media in communicating political contention; activism and civil disobedience tactics and strategies; the affordances of digital communication technologies; and the role of creativity, self-expression and art in activism.

Meanwhile public relations (PR) academics have only in the last decade started to research the use of the media by activists and activist organisations as actors with their own legitimacy; writing in the context of a largely corporate approach to public relations, where activists are routinely viewed solely as a threat to corporate success (Deegan 2001, Jaques 2014, Regester and Larkin 2008) to be managed by corporate PR professionals. Academics from the emerging critical PR tradition have started to explore the communicative activities of activists to challenge power holders, create pressure for legislative or individual change and deliver strategic goals, and are re-evaluating the history and aims of the PR discipline as a result (Adi 2018, Demetrious 2013, L'Etang 2016, O'Brien 2018).

These different critical and research approaches focus variously on media as enabling activists to organise; the mediation of activism; and media as a tool through which activists can professionally deliver their strategic objectives. All these facets of the relationship between media and activism are explored in this special issue.

This issue looks at macro- and meso-levels of activism. It explores the political opposition to journalist activism – the article by Tenford Chitanana and Bruce Mutsvairo reflects on the symbolic and real power of social media movements. As critical as it is hopeful, this piece zooms in on the digital-only campaign #ThisFlag against corruption and poor governance. This social media phenomenon brought people to the streets – becoming one of the first ever protest in Zimbabwe to be organised entirely online. This research provides the analysis of how exactly an online mobilisation brings organised activists and members of the public closer to each other. Another study on Zimbabwe by Khanyile Joseph Mlotshwa illuminates the inner complexities of what press freedom means for Zimbabwe; it demonstrates how the government and private media exchange rhetoric on anti-imperialism and neocolonialism. These discussions are timely and important in a wider context of decolonising and furthering postcolonial media studies.

Whilst so many studies on media activism focus on the internet and social media in particular, the Brazilian turn reminds us of the materiality of the medium of community radio. Thiago O. S. Novaes and Francisco Antunes Caminati emphasise that the 'nomadic transmitter' is used both as the symbol and the actual equipment to connect and empower people in Brazil's remote areas. The decentralised, liberating radio waves are making a difference on a quiet, community level.

Another example of 'grounded' activism takes place in Liverpool. Anthony Killick examines how gentrification of the city is taking a neoliberal turn, which comes at a cost to organic rejuvenation of the abandoned areas. While local galleries and businesses are about to be replaced by generic coffee shops and imposed art spaces, activists organise resistance at both a physical level and at the level of discourse. The alarm goes off about the capitalist appropriation of the word 'creative' (a very corporate and manufactured idea of what a creative place is), instead of welcoming that raw, 'lawless', community-inspired creativity of Liverpool's free spirits.

The feminist collective in Mexico called themselves Las Morras and started filming cat-callers in the streets – the resulting videos achieved viral fame and even interest from the United Nations. This digital campaign was, at first sight, successful – it enabled the activists to collaborate on launching a phone-reporting service on harassment. Yet the price for that victory was the mountain of online abuse that the group received on social media, which forced them to close their accounts. The insightful study by Stuart Davis and Melissa Santillana embraces the interplay of liberation and oppression, visibility and vulnerability of such online campaigns to gender power structures. This approach makes the study of Las Morras emblematic for digital feminism, not only in Latin America but across the world.

Lastly, with studies reporting that WhatsApp is becoming heavily influential on the political opinions of many people – especially in developing countries – Sérgio Barbosa and Stefania Milan ask how to research this encrypted, closed network. Their solution grows out of the classic code of conduct of media sociologists and ethnographers, but also brings a necessary update to it. It removes a cluster of questions for WhatsApp researchers so that they can start work immediately, without wasting time on doubts. This methodological work responds to the urgent need of unlocking the benefits and harms of digital intimate networks.

This issue looks at the symbols and sustainable strategies of activism, at framing and reframing – at agreeing on terms and following up with actions – and eventually at making activism more accessible and efficient. In these times when fascist and racist, misogynist and

nationalist narratives are so often revived from the 1930s, we need to adjust internet activism to protect both activists and the societies that they operate in. This special edition, firstly, calls for measures to make digital space a safer place for activists; secondly, to help them to own their narrative without constant risks of hijacking and abuse, and thirdly, to celebrate the thriving strategies and tactics that bring together activists and the public who care.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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