ETHNOGRAPHY BEYOND AND WITHIN DIGITAL STRUCTURES AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

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Introduction

On April 21, 2011, I was carrying out participant observation on one of the mailing lists of the Corsari Collective, an autonomous collective that I had been following for over a year as part of a comparative ethno-graphic research on social media activism. That day I started following an email exchange between Franz, one of the key members of the group, and other activists. Writing from Lampedusa—where he was organizing actions in solidarity with refugees and migrants arriving to Europe—Franz wanted to know how he could share some videos on Facebook so that everyone in Milan could “witness at a distance.” His simple question initiated a group discussion among the collective as different members were skeptical of his use of Facebook, given the fact that Facebook was a corporate platform, and was going to appropriate the copyright of their videos. Armed with pen and paper to dutifully write my fieldnotes on the piece of digital ethnography I was carrying out, I started to remember all the different instances during my fieldwork in which activists raised similar questions. My fieldwork revealed that, in the study of social media activism, we need to appreciate how activists understand and negotiate with the corporate nature of social media platforms.

This chapter was inspired by this finding, and argues that in the study of social media activism we need to develop a digital ethnographic approach that simultaneously challenges deterministic understandings of technological impacts while taking into consideration how technological structures matter in the everyday life of social movements. It is clear that
this approach finds its roots in Hine’s earlier definition of “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2000), which was based on the understanding that ethnographers of the Internet need to consider both technological development on one side and technological appropriation on the other.

However, this chapter brings the argument a bit further. By using the concept of “digital ethnography,” I locate myself among the recent literature in the field that has shown that, today, we need a much more complex definition of the relationship between ethnographic practice and the Internet. Such a definition needs to take into account how Web 2.0 platforms combined with the extension of mobile and wireless technologies have created a “messy” situation (Postill and Pink 2012) whereby the understanding of the digital should be influenced by ideas of openness, complexity, and multiplicity (Pink et al. 2015) and should take into account new ideas of everyday interactions, embodiedness, and embeddedness (Hine 2015).

Moreover, with this chapter I wish to add to existing debates in the field by arguing that digital ethnographers often do not engage with critical questions about the political economy of the Internet and digital media (Barassi 2015a). This is particularly true if we consider the context of social media activism, where these questions are at the very heart of social movements’ everyday interactions with Web platforms. By rethinking the concept of “digital capitalism” as a methodological and theoretical tool, the chapter will argue that such a concept enables us to explore the complex and multi-faceted ethnographic tensions that emerge in the cultural encounter between activist cultures and the political economy of the Web.

The Study of Social Media Activism and the Problem of Techno-determinism

In the last five years, the emergence and survival of large-scale movements that relied on social media in order to mobilize and organize collective action has prompted a series of questions on the way in which these mediated platforms are transforming the experience of political mobilization and action, and what possibilities for bringing about social change do they really offer. These questions are at the heart of current research that seeks to analyze and understand the “revolutions” that have affected the North African and the Middle Eastern regions, the mass protests of the 15M movements in Spain, or the development and emergence of the Occupy movements in the US (Sreberney and Khiabany 2010; Postill 2014; Barassi 2015a; Gerbaudo 2012; Castells 2012; Juris 2012). What is becoming clear is that social media technologies have become a new repertoire of political action, and that the study of “social media activism” is an urgent topic of inquiry in the social sciences because it could shed light on the social complexities of contemporary forms of political participation.

The study of social media activism finds its roots in the earlier literature on digital activism. The theoretical frameworks on digital activism, which emerged at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, highlighted how Internet technologies were enabling new forms of political imagination and organization. Particularly influential in this regard was the work of Castells (1996, 1997) who argued that the Internet has created a situation for which the network became a privileged and more flexible mode of social organization and, in doing so, it created new political possibilities for social movements. These “new” political possibilities according to Castells (1997) could be seen in the political repertoires of the global justice movements, which strongly relied on networked affinities. Influenced by the Zapatista teachings and Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004)—and in a similar line to the classical anarchists of the nineteenth century, such as Kropotkin and Laundauer—the movements at the end of the 1990s represented a rupture with the “identity politics” of the 1960s, 1970s,
and 1980s, and argued that state relationships “capture” and “control” minorities (Day 2005). Hence they organized themselves collectively and non-hierarchically by relying on the concept of “network” (Graeber 2002; Juris 2008).

In understanding these new political imaginations that have affected the movements for global justice, scholars such as Hardt and Negri (2000) have thus emphasized the “power of networks,” and contended that we were witnessing the rise of a new form of networked struggle, which did not rely on discipline, but on creativity, communication, and self-organized cooperation (2000, 83). While the Italian autonomists talked about “multitude” (Hardt and Negri 2000; Virno 2004), others emphasized generalized concepts such as “mobs” (Rheingold 2002) or “networked individualism”/creative autonomy (Castells 2001, 2009). The overall assumption was that new information technologies had radically transformed older forms of political participation and action, and that if we wanted to understand the relationship between digital activism and social change we needed to look at the more flexible and networked forms of political belonging and participation that these technologies have enabled.

Influenced by these works, the study of digital activism in the last decade has been highly dominated by the understanding that the relationship between media technologies and social movements needed to be theorized by focusing on the concept of “network.” Social movements scholars argued that the logic of networks, which was triggered and facilitated by Internet technologies, was radically transforming the ways in which social movements understood and acted political participation.

With the development of social media technologies, we have seen the emergence of much scholarship which—influenced by the literature in the 1990s—claimed that social media technologies “determined” the emergence of new forms of political organization. Castells (2012), for instance, argued that the mass uprising of 2011 was determined by the use of social networking sites. He argued that social media created a “space of autonomy” where activists could express their feelings of collective outrage and hope, and enable a form of mass emotional contagion. It was by looking at the grassroots forms of emotional expression and organizing that Castells concluded that social media technologies have become the material support of a new type of political participation based on horizontal networks and leaderless organization. In contrast to Castells, Gerbaudo argued that far from being “horizontal” and “leaderless” these movements often have their leaders and reference points and social media technologies, in fact, enable the creation of a “soft” type of leadership (Gerbaudo 2012). According to him, social media enabled the choreography of participation bringing people together in the streets and the squares.

Like Gerbaudo (2012), other scholars have tried to move beyond the concept of “network” by introducing new conceptual terms such as “commons” (Hands 2010) or “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) to address the new “logic” of political participation that is fostered by social media activism. All of these contributions have been important to the emergence of the field of social media activism as they mapped the changing repertoires of political action, and the role social media technologies played in the development of new forms of protest cultures.

Although insightful, the works in the field of social media activism of the last decade have been marked by a profound techno-determinism. Scholars focused on how technologies have determined the rise of new forms of political organization. This is to the detriment of a careful appreciation of the fact that the relationship between political activists and social media technologies involves open-ended and complex processes of social construction and human negotiation, which change from context to context, from group to group. This lack
of engagement with the cultural specificity of movements on the ground can be found in
the work of Castells (2012) or Gerbaudo (2012) who focused on the example of different
movements, from Egypt to Europe and the US without providing us with a thick analysis of
the different cultural and political contexts in which these movements emerged and without
exploring the different types of social media activism they engage with. As the next part of
the chapter will show, this techno-determinism has been challenged by the emergence of the
work of those scholars who have focused on the analysis of movements’ media practices and
who have employed the digital ethnographic method.

A Critique of Techno-determinism: The “Media as Practice”
Approach and the Importance of Digital Ethnography

In contrast to the implicit techno-determinism of scholars such as Castells (2012), in recent
years we have seen the emergence of a variety of studies that, drawing from the understand-
ing of “media as practice” (Couldry 2004; Brauchler and Postill 2010), have provided us
with a variety of scholarship on activists’ uses of Web technologies (McCurdy 2011; Mattoni
2012; Barassi and Treré 2012; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Feigenbaum et al. 2013; Barassi 2015a;
Dencik and Leistert 2015). In a well-known article, Couldry (2004) argued for the impor-
tance of moving beyond functionalist approaches in the study of media and analyzing media
as practice. For Couldry (2004), the emphasis on practice as theoretical paradigm presupposes
an openness to the variable and complex organization of practice, and a concern with the
principle and beliefs whereby practices are ordered, both of which are pivotal if scholars want
to avoid functionalist approaches. Prior to Couldry, the concept of practice has often been
central to the anthropology of media. However, as Postill (2010) has noticed, one problematic
aspect of the media anthropology literature is represented by the fact that the concept of prac-
tice has not been properly defined or problematized. Together with Bräuchler, Postill (2010)
has therefore collected in recent years important contributions, which thoroughly engage
with practice theory and propose a more nuanced and thorough understanding of media as
practice (Bräuchler and Postill 2010).

In the understanding of social media activism, the practice approach is perceived as funda-
mental because it enables us to analyze the different forms of media practices that define the
everyday life of social movements without being constrained by techno-centric perspectives.
This body of work focuses on the tension between old and new media technologies (Mattoni
2012; Treré 2012; Cammaerts et al. 2013), on the relationship between digital practices and
beliefs (Barassi and Treré 2012; Postill 2014), on the connection between digital environ-
ments and offline spaces (Juris 2012; Feigenbaum et al. 2013), or on the emergence of new
temporalities (Barassi 2015b; Kaun 2015). Current research on social movements’ practices
is insightful and necessary especially in the study of social media activism. This is because it
challenges techno-deterministic assumptions on the pervasiveness and agency of social media
technologies, and provides us with more nuanced and context-specific understandings.

It is within this body of literature that we generally find the employment of the digital
ethnographic approach and we can fully appreciate its importance (Juris 2012; Postill and Pink
2012; Postill 2014; Treré 2015; Barassi 2015a; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Within this body of
literature the digital ethnographic approach has been developed mostly by combining field
research among activists with online participant observation. The overall understanding is
that there is a deep interconnection and integration between online and offline ethnographic
contexts (Miller and Slater 2001; Hine 2000), and therefore we can only gain an ethno-
graphically thick analysis of social media activism if we appreciate how online practices, texts,
and personal choices are based on the real-life dynamics, beliefs, power relationships, and political imaginations that define the everyday life of the groups studied.

By developing digital ethnographic accounts that look at the interconnection between social media platforms and everyday life, these works in social media activism are important because they challenge contemporary communication research in the field. They do so by showing that focusing merely on the online dimension can lead scholars to overlook how online information and practices relate to activists’ political cultures (Barassi 2015a) and produce quantitative data (e.g. number of tweets) that do not really talk about the lived experience of social media activism (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Yet they are also important because they provide the field with subjectively thick understandings of the complexity involved in the encounter between political participation and social media technologies.

One of the advantages of digital ethnography is represented by the fact that, as Hine (2000) and Markham (1998) have argued, this method enables scholars to learn through direct experience. The richness of the ethnographic method in general lies in the fact that the ethnographer finds him/herself immersed in a different world and proceeds to explore it through the self. Dealing with social injustice, and becoming politically engaged through social media use is a very subjective and personal process, and the digital ethnographic method is thus essential in the study of social media activism, not only because it can challenge technodeterministic perspectives on the democratic potential of social media technologies but also because it can shed light on this level of social experience. This latter point is evident if we consider the edited collection by Juris and Khasnabish (2013) where they argue that activist ethnographers, through their subjective political engagement, produce new meanings and understandings of collective action. It is for this reason that digital ethnographers at present are struggling with the personal traces that they leave behind within the online contexts (Postill and Pink 2012) and with the fact that they may become political agents only by defining the particular site of their research (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). The challenges encountered by digital ethnographers are not to be understood as deterrents but rather as opening up new possibilities for social research in the study of social media activism.

Although important for developing a new way in which we can understand social media activism today, digital ethnographers are faced by a theoretical and methodological conundrum. On the one hand, they are rightly aware of the fact that their method is essential in order to avoid techno-centric and deterministic perspectives. On the other hand, they need to come to terms with the fact that—in the study of social media activism—technological structures matter. This is especially true if, as emerged from my field research, not only do we realize that social media platforms are shaped by corporate discourses and practices, but we also take into account the fact that political activists whose values are rooted in anti-capitalist political cultures perceive the use of these platforms as challenges. In the final part of the chapter, I will therefore draw on my own research to discuss how I dealt with this conundrum in the field.

**Digital Ethnography beyond and within Technological Structures and the Question of Digital Capitalism**

In the last five years I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork among three collectives of activists in the UK, Italy, and Spain. My ethnographic research focused on activists’ “social media practices,” and questioned how social media activism impacted on the political strategies of the groups studied, on their political imaginations, and on their internal politics. As argued elsewhere (Barassi 2015a), one of the main findings of my research had to do with the
tensions activists faced as they tried to come to terms with the corporate nature of social media technologies. Not only were activists aware of the fact that social media technologies exploited personal data for corporate purposes, but they also thought—as Javier, a Spanish environmental activist once explained to me—that social media were “privately owned spaces,” which were structured in a particular way that guaranteed the “standardization of profiles” and the commodification of human relationships.

This understanding shares many lines of similarities with current communication research on the political economy of Web 2.0. However, while political economic scholars argue that social media corporations have a remarkable advantage over users, whose creative content and free labor is systematically exploited (Fuchs 2007, 2013; Terranova 2000, 2013), the activists I worked with believed that this advantage is not that granted, and that they can negotiate with the corporate structure of social media, and use these technologies in instrumental ways. In fact, in the same chat with Javier, he argued for the importance of using social media technologies in tactical ways to build different types of values, and different types of social relationships that escaped the logic of capitalism.

During my fieldwork, therefore, it became clear that I needed to address the issue of technological structure when studying social media activism, and tackle critical questions on the corporate logic of social media technologies. Within “practice theory” scholars have often considered questions of technological structure by relying on a non-techno-deterministic perspective. In fact they have explored not only how structural models are internalized—as Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1986) pointed out—but also how human actors simultaneously reproduce technological structures while circumventing them and creating new possibilities for social organization (Orlikowski 2000). The approaches of virtual and digital ethnography, as mentioned in the introduction, have been dominated by such understandings (see Hine 2000, 2015) regarding the importance of simultaneous considerations of technological design and structures as well as issues of adaptation and appropriation. However, as argued elsewhere (Barassi 2015a), what is missing from contemporary digital ethnographic approaches is an engagement with the literature on the political economy of the Web and digital technologies (Fisher 2010; Fuchs 2007; Curran 2012; McChesney 2013). The two fields remain separated and defined by a specific research position. On the one hand, political economic approaches neglect a careful consideration of everyday social practices and of how people negotiate with and resist the political economy of the Web. On the other hand, digital ethnographic approaches often do not take into consideration the broader political economic factors that shape digital environments.

It is for this reason that, during my fieldwork, I decided to analyze activists’ everyday negotiation with the corporate structure of social media technologies by rethinking and reframing the concept of digital capitalism. Schiller (2000) demonstrated that in the 1990s—under pressure of the neoliberal logic of Western governments (and in particular the US)—the Internet began a political economic transition in order to support “an ever growing range of intracorporate and intercorporate business processes” (2000: 1). This process led to the establishment of a communication infrastructure network that is highly shaped by neoliberal logic. Such an understanding is broadly shared among critical communication scholars (Curran 2012; McChesney 2013) who have argued that the establishment and strengthening of digital capitalism was tightly linked to the refashioning of the World Wide Web as a consumer medium (Schiller 2000, 89–142). With the development of Web 2.0 technologies, and especially corporate social media, such critical approaches have become particularly important. This is because it became clear that, as mentioned above, Web 2.0 technologies were in fact consumer media that were designed to exploit user data for profit, and hence were largely shaped by corporate discourses and practices (Fisher 2010; Fuchs 2007; Curran 2012; McChesney 2013).
Despite being insightful in raising critical questions on the political economy of the Web, the concept of digital capitalism as used in communication research is grounded on a monolithic perspective (Wheeler 2000) and does not consider the cultural tensions of digital capitalism, and how people are understanding and experiencing the political economy of the Web. In contrast to these approaches, during my research I decided to use the concept of digital capitalism as an analytical and methodological tool that enabled me to explore the corporatization of Web platforms, by looking at how technological structures are often shaped by cultural processes that are rooted in the history of capitalism, such as individualism, time regimes, or the exploitation of free labor (Barassi 2015a). At the same time the concept has also enabled me to explore the ethnographic tensions that arise in activists’ encounter with digital capitalism through their everyday Web uses, and I have focused on three different tensions: networked individualism, the temporal context of immediacy, and the exploitation of digital labor.

Although my own ethnographic research focused on the concept of digital capitalism, and on the social and cultural tensions that digital capitalism creates, especially in the context of political activism, I certainly believe that “cultural experiences witnessed on Web platforms” cannot be “simply dismissed as yet another form of corporate control over culture, or Orwellian dataveillant machine” (Langlois et al. 2009, 1). However, I wanted to focus on the cultural experiences created by digital capitalism, because I feel that we have little data available on how activist cultures—that have been fighting for years against capitalism—are dealing and negotiating with the corporate nature of social media. This understanding, I believe, is essential to critically reflect on the advantages and challenges of social media activism for political activists, and to rethink the importance of the digital ethnographic method beyond and within technological structures.

Conclusion

In order to understand the way in which social media technologies are transforming political participation and action, it is important to maintain a critical perspective that challenges the techno-determinism implicit to current research. In this framework the ethnographic method is essential. The understanding of the way in which social media is transforming political participation and action can only be really achieved on the ground; by looking at activists’ everyday experiences, and by considering the cultural and context-specific issues that emerge on the field. The extension of the digital ethnographic method within the study of social media activism has been crucial precisely for this reason: it has highlighted the cultural nuances of social media activism and the unpredictability of activists’ experiences of these technologies. Furthermore, the digital ethnography of social media activism, as different scholars have shown, is also important because it sheds light on the fact that political participation on social media technologies is a very subjective process.

Digital ethnographic approaches in the study of social media activism, therefore, shed light on how Web 2.0 technologies are impacting on political participation and imagination, by moving away from techno-centric and deterministic perspectives. However, as this chapter has argued, digital ethnographers are challenged by a theoretical and methodological conundrum. Although it is clear that in the study of social media activism we have much to gain if we move away from techno-determinism, it is also clear that in the everyday life of political activists, technological structures matter. This is particularly true if we consider the fact that activists are aware that social media technologies are highly shaped and defined by corporate discourses and practices. By reframing the concept of digital capitalism, therefore, this chapter aimed at discussing this conundrum and at taking a first, tentative step in the development
of a digital ethnographic approach that enables us to appreciate the impact of technological structures while understanding how people actively negotiate with them.

References


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