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Materializing activism

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Abstract. Net activism shows how easily available tools allow the organization of social movements to be scaled up and extended globally. These media ecologies enable new forms of power. This one-day workshop gathers researchers focusing on the collaborative efforts within social movements, looking into the socio-technical systems; the organization of activism; the relations between traditional and social media; and the complex network of systems, information, people, values, theories, histories, ideologies and aesthetics underlying various types of activism. The workshop consists of brainstorming sessions where we materialize the intangible and develop our theories and ideas further through a collaborative design process.

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Background

Social activism consists of efforts to promote, or intervene, with the goal of bringing about social change. Networked online environments can effectively support the infrastructuring of social movements, and have the potential to enable more inclusive and decentralized power structures. In this regard, the popular appeal of social media has made such online environments central for social activists' communicative strategies (Askanius et al., 2011; Neumayer et al., 2016). The environmental movement has, in the past, made use of social media to engage a broad public around substantive issues (DeLuca et al., 2016; Goodwin & Jasper, 2014; Pang & Law, 2017). Other examples of activism where social media has played a central role include the Arab Spring (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017), the Occupy Movement (Kavada, 2015), and the #MeToo movement (Askanius & Hartley, 2018; Eilermann, 2018). More locally situated examples are movements such as the Gezi protests in Turkey (Haciyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015), Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising (Bohdanova, 2014), Indignados movement in Spain (Anduiza et al., 2014), the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong (Chan, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Tsui, 2015) and the Save KPK movement in Indonesia (Suwana, 2019).

All these dynamic movements are characterized by a liquid organization, where membership is performative and informal, and where leadership is value-based rather than based on institutional structures (Gerbaudo, 2012). A salient aspect of such social movements lies in the technologies and cultural practices that are involved, what in design contexts can be called the infrastructuring (Björgevinnsson et al., 2010; Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013), describing the socio-technical setting that supports, for example, a public. In this article we show how the infrastructure arrangements serve to circumvent hierarchies, strategize and act horizontally toward inclusion, while also lowering the cost of political participation (Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2016; Earl & Kimport, 2011). Rather than being part of a formal structure, political participation is here seen as a way to work in parallel towards shared goals and issues that are articulated by a scattered public and communicated broadly through shared manifests (Milan, 2017). Another aspect of these movements is the way transnational activism intersects with the national configuration of political work, such as, for example the feminist movement, where shared values can unite diverse national contexts (Sadowski, 2016; Scharff et al., 2016).

While these socio-technical arrangements often use a hybrid of media and methods to organize and reach out, some elements of the technologies in use are more dominant in their action repertoires (Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2016). Social media has also made the quantification of data easier by putting that data to new uses (Milan, 2017; Milan & Velden, 2016) or by providing activists with new

forms of arguments when surveys can extend to millions of people enabling a “rhetoric of collection” (Pickard & Yang, 2017). #Metoo demonstrates how activists crowdsourced data that made a massive impact on the public sphere. This has also been labeled as a *scientization* of activism (Kimura, 2017), and provides an interesting link between activism and citizen science (Paulos et al., 2008).

Furthermore, campaigns such as #metoo also show how online spaces provide opportunities for victims of discrimination, harassment and abuse to come out and receive support from other victims, and also to participate in public debates around these issues. Simultaneously, research also points at the negative consequences, which may render digital activism risky, exhausting and overwhelming (Mendes et al., 2018).

Yet activism has always been risky and those who make a stand put themselves in harm’s way one way or another. In particular, digital media may amplify such vulnerability that characterizes activism, by exposing and surveilling and contributing at times a digital panopticon, or a means to spread disinformation about activists (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Pickard, 2017; Uldam, 2018). Social media exposition makes it easier for companies and authorities to monitor activists’ activities (Dencik et al., 2016; Trottier and Fuchs, 2015; Uldam, 2016). Through technological affordances, user regulations and social norms these platforms are shaping and controlling the ways in which we communicate (Klang & Madison, 2016), such as by censoring LGBTQ activism, or through breastfeeding activism on Facebook.

Most often, social media users are aware of the limitations of the technology, but less aware of the potential social implications (Klang, 2016). The system of metrics that measure success in the number of friends, likes, retweets and shares, the reach of a message, helps to effectively map out the network of supporters by creating a perfect overview of the activism range and participants. Activism in social media thus creates new sorts of risks: the risk of relying on a technology that also is a mean for surveillance; the risk of relying on a crowd you might never meet face to face; the risk of disinformation especially linked to the unreliability of user-generated data. This might include, for example, a situation where activists mistrust official information, such as during the Gezi protests in Turkey (Haciyakupoglu, 2015). In this particular case, the technology created instead an opportunity to “aggregate trustworthiness” (Jessen & Jørgensen, 2011) from a large number of sources, where social trust and technical affordances are interdependent (Haciyakupoglu, 2015).

Following Haraway (1991), technology can be seen as a kind of *prosthesis*, which extends our “arms” and allows us to stretch beyond our bodies and reach what was previously unreachable. Looked at this way, trust is about trusting that the arms can reach out and carry what we expect them to do. There is always a risk that the prosthesis will fall off, but most of the time it goes well. The moment

of risk means that trust is required, which is why risk and trust are closely linked. The more risk, the greater is the trust needed.

Dahlberg-Grundberg (2016) suggests the concept of *media ecology* as a lens to capture the coexistence of, and interdependence, between human actors and technologies and to point out the dynamic and fragile interrelations of people, processes, practices and artifacts. From a media ecology perspective, the technology involves not just extensions or prostheses through which activists operate; they also embed us and define the range of actions possible, indicating that media structure our actions, just like cultural norms and practices.

These media ecologies are thus not primarily artifacts but also consist of social beings structured by cultural norms – sometimes very large numbers of people who might not even have a personal relationship, but who share a common interest that brings them together. In these cases, trust is not so much a matter of trust in technical systems, trust in authorities, trust in information or trust in particular people, but trust in shared values and practices. For example, it may be about belonging to an idea, or a shared experience, which is sufficiently strong or revolutionary to motivate the individual to, for example, take the risk of trusting strangers in publics (Wang & Emurian, 2005).

Against this background, the question is how we can understand and conceptualize these media ecologies, while also contributing to the development of useful tools for activism.

Suggested topics and inquiries for the workshop

In this workshop we are inviting 10–15 researchers in the area net activism and online participation, to discuss their epistemologies and methodologies. The purpose is to explore the large-scale collaborations that take place in social activism.

- How do we make sense of the complex network of systems, information, people, values, theories, histories, ideologies and aesthetics underlying various types of activism?
- What happens when social media becomes central for how a social movement operates? What are the unintended consequences?
- How do we conceptualize the mutual constitution of a movement or network of activists and their technological strategies?
- How can certain media ecologies hinder organizational developments?
- How can we understand coordination without formalized leadership when the participants are situated in different countries and time zones?
- How is *scientization* transforming the way social movements operate?

- How is participation constructed and enacted in bottom-up data practices?
- How is participation constrained, for example, by infrastructural arrangements, technological affordances and social norms?
- What are the tactics, structures and normative foundations necessary for supporting liquid organization and value-based leadership, while supporting a strong democracy?

We are especially interested in research that mixes qualitative and quantitative studies of activism and presentations focusing on research methodology.

Description of the workshop activities

This one-day workshop will explore the topics through prototyping and brainstorming sessions. The workshop is divided into two sessions. The first half includes the participants' presentation of their research on the topics. The second half consists of a brainstorming session where the topics of the workshop are further explored through collaborative prototyping.

In human-computer interaction (HCI) design we are used to co-design methods such as sketches, prototypes, cases and scenarios to achieve a more informed design, grounded in the reality of potential users. Also, more artistic techniques are used to involve participants as informants and co-designers such as probes, scenarios and role-playing. However, unlike most problem-focused design research, the aim with this workshop is not to use these methods to achieve a more informed design. Instead, we use the design process as a method to collaboratively materialize our own understanding of our research.

The workshop will be communicated through our website (<https://materializingactivism.blogs.dsv.su.se>) as well as via emailing lists relevant for the ECSCW community, but also more broadly to attract an interdisciplinary research community. Accepted papers will be circulated beforehand to prepare attendees for discussions at the workshop. Beyond the themes highlighted here by the workshop organizers, other themes for the workshop emerging from the position papers will be posted on the website. A key discussant, identified among the workshop attendees, will be assigned to each position paper to facilitate interaction and engagement in the workshop. The participants will prepare a 5-minute presentation to be delivered in the introduction of the workshop, but focus in the workshop will be on developing our ideas through collaborative prototyping.

We will take the workshop as an opportunity to explore future collaboration (e.g., a mailing list and/or collaborative research projects). The results from the workshop will possibly be developed further for a special issue or anthology.

Organization

The workshop is organized by an interdisciplinary group of researchers covering topics such as computer and systems sciences, gender studies, media and communication studies, and social psychology.

Karin Hansson, Associate Professor in Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University, has written extensively about technology-based participation from a design perspective. She is currently part of a research project on the development of #MeToo activism in Sweden, and part of the “Metadata culture” research group at Stockholm University that investigates and develops methods for obtaining qualified and extensive metadata in digitalized cultural heritage collections. She has previously organized workshops on CSCW themes such as: The Morphing Organization – Rethinking Groupwork Systems in the Era of Crowdsourcing at ACM GROUP 2014, Sanibel Island, USA; Examining the Essence of the Crowds: Motivations, Roles and Identities at ECSCW 2015, Oslo, Norway; Toward a Typology of Participation in Crowdsourcing at ACM CSCW 2016, San Francisco, USA; Crowd Dynamics: Exploring Conflicts and Contradictions in Crowdsourcing at ACM CHI 2016, San Jose, CA, USA; Ting: Making Publics Through Provocation, Conflict and Appropriation, The 14th Participatory Design Conference 2016, Aarhus, Denmark.

Together with Teresa Cerratto Pargman and Shaowen Bardzell she recently edited the *Design Issues* special issue, “Provocation, Conflict and Appropriation,” focusing on participatory design methodologies.

Teresa Cerratto Pargman, Associate Professor in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) at the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University. Her research interests include educational and collaborative learning technologies, sustainable HCI and Digital Civics.

Shaowen Bardzell is Professor of Human-Computer Interaction Design in the School of Informatics and Computing at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research areas include feminist HCI, domestic computing, intimate interaction, affective computing and virtual worlds for collaboration.

Hillevi Ganetz, Professor in Gender Studies at Stockholm University, is a media researcher with a cultural studies perspective, focusing on gender and popular culture. Currently she is leading an interdisciplinary research project on feminist net activism at Stockholm University.

Malin Sveningsson, professor in Media and Communication Studies at the University of Gothenburg, is the author of several books and research articles in

areas such as digital media, computer-mediated communication, virtual worlds, social interaction, popular culture, youth culture, gender and identity. She takes part in the interdisciplinary research project on feminist net activism at Stockholm University.

Maria Sandgren, PhD in psychology and registered psychologist, is a researcher in political psychology at Södertörn University. Her field of knowledge is primarily social psychology with a focus on political psychology. She is one of the researchers in the interdisciplinary research project on feminist net activism at Stockholm University.

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