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Digital activism and the state

Media movements: civil society and media policy reform in Latin America, by María Soledad Segura and Silvio Waisbord, London, Zed, 2016, 224 pp., £70.00, (hardback), ISBN 9781783604630, £19.99, (paperback), ISBN 9781783604623, £19.99, (ebook), ISBN 9781783604654; Hybrid media activism: ecologies, imaginaries, algorithms, by Emiliano Treré, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, 222 pp., £115, (hardback), ISBN 9781138218147, £22.50, (ebook), ISBN 9781315438177; Social media and politics in Africa: democracy, censorship and security, edited by Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony, London, Zed Books, 2019, 312 pp., £70.00, (hardback), ISBN 9781786994981, £19.99, (paperback), ISBN 9781786994974, £19.99, (ebook), ISBN 9781786995001; Digital media and the politics of transformation in the Arab world and Asia, edited by Carola Richter, Anna Antonakis and Cilja Harders, Wiesbaden, Springer, 2018, 195 pp., £39.99, (pbk), ISBN 9783658206994, £31.99, (ebook), ISBN 9783658207007

Thomas O'Brien

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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1. Introduction

The flourishing of social media and digital technologies over the past decade and a half has had considerable impacts on all aspects of society, including in the area of activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2014). Increased opportunities for communicating and sharing information have been central to this shift, leading to a diversification of voices and spaces. At the same time, there has also been resistance, as the new technologies have been used to police certain voices, reinforcing existing hierarchies and power structures. The state has played a central role here through actions to restrict access to social media platforms in some cases or target those seen as challenging (see Keremoğlu and Weidmann 2020). Social movement organizations and civil society more broadly have taken advantage of these new opportunities in pressing their claims. In doing so, they have had to navigate increasingly complex and messy realities while adapting long-standing tactics and repertoires to accommodate the new opportunities provided by digital tools.

The four books in this essay consider different manifestations of activism and ways in which states attempt to establish control over technologies. What connects the books is their concern with the interaction between civil society and the state, refracted through a digital media lens. They also share a focus on countries and regions primarily outside the global North, thereby presenting perspectives that contrast with much of the existing work in this area. Richter et al. cover the broadest geographical range, focusing on how digital media has impacted social change in Asia and the Arab region. In a similar vein, Dwyer and Molony examine the range of ways social media have shaped state-society relations across the African continent. Treré adopts a tighter focus on the manifestations of digital activism, drawing close attention to the struggle between activist innovation and state control.

Finally, Segura and Waisbord shift the focus to developments in media regulation in Latin America, presenting a high-level perspective. Together, the books provide a broad canvas on which to consider the character of contemporary digital activism.

The essay begins by examining forms of digital activism covered across the cases, drawing out connections to more traditional (analog) forms of contention. In the second section, the focus shifts to the state, addressing the issue of how different governing authorities have attempted to control, regulate, and restrict the emergence of digital activism. The third section returns to the character of digital activism, considering how participants have sought to circumvent and overcome the restrictions imposed by state actors, thereby adapting existing repertoires as well as shaping new ones.

2. Varieties of digital activism

The adoption of digital technologies by civil society actors is driven by their increasing availability. As Segura and Waisbord (83) note, such movements are 'strategic omnivores' taking advantage of opportunities, rather than being wedded to particular forms of action. Digital technology enables the rapid spread of information through established networks while also reaching new participants. However, Treré notes that the effective use of new technologies relies on a process of contestation, as participants weigh the benefits and seek to counter potentially detrimental impacts. In doing so, Treré (49, emphasis in original) highlights the importance of the media ecology, which requires:

> us to assess media not as straightforward channels for transmitting information but as multifaceted ecologies of passions, fears, and desires, and as *loci* for the creation of identities, imaginaries and myths.

This points to the way digital media are entwined in the formation of contemporary movements, shaping the forms they take and the range of actions open to them. The ability to communicate rapidly and flexibly opens possibilities for the realization of shared grievances (Lim in Richter et al.). In the case of Senegal, Riley (133 in Dwyer and Molony) notes how "joking and teasing … [on social media contribute to] new kinds of kinship among newly formed cyber communities." These connections can also draw on existing relations and kinships, using digital tools to maintain ties and traditions that are under threat (NurMuhammad et al. 2016).

Another important consideration when examining how digital technologies are utilized by civil society actors is the issue of localness. Lim (12, in Richter et al.) emphasizes this connection, arguing:

> the internet itself has become increasingly local … . has become an integral part of everyday life and is more reflective of the sociality, as well as the resistance, that emerges from everyday social spheres.

Civil society actors turn to digital means to address concerns and present claims that are significant to them in their context. Dwyer, Hitchen, and Molony (107 in Dwyer and Molony) reinforce this point, stating the need for a "strong understanding of the unique ways in which communities and individuals use social media differently in various environments in order to better adapt efforts to meet local needs." This diversity is demonstrated across the books considered, with actions to "embolden citizens to challenge government malfeasance" in Zimbabwe (Karewaivance and Mare, 42 in Dwyer and Molony), support alternative news sites in Nigeria (Orji in Dwyer and Molony), and "communicate, coordinate, and physically survive the protests" in Hong Kong (Lim, 25 in Richter et al.). Each of these is tied to the local, suggesting awareness and familiarity with the boundaries of norms and social practices.

Shifts in the local context can also impact the adoption of digital tools. Falisse and Nkengurutse (180 in Dwyer and Molony) note that following the failed coup in Burundi in 2015, there was a "forced 'migration' to social media" as other avenues were closed or restricted. Considering the local context, therefore, requires us to recognize the way digital technologies exist in the real world.

The connection to local realities points to the importance of the interaction between online and offline actions. Terms such as slacktivism question the credibility of online activism on the basis that it does not manifest in the real world (see Dennis 2019 for a critique). The strength of the connection between online and offline actions varies by the particular case and context. Treré (70) notes that in the case of the student movement in Italy, there were concerns that "exclusive use of autonomous networks would confine their alternative messages to 'online ghettos'." Similarly, in the case of the "Fees Must Fall" and "Zuma Must Fall" protests in South Africa, Bosch (73 in Dwyer and Molony) argues "Online activities were … complemented and supported by offline structures of institutional arrangements, planning and strategizing." Digital technologies are simply another tool to be utilized in pursuit of claims, with existing repertoires continuing to play a central role. Kopty (80 in Richter et al.), examining the case of Palestine emphazises the connection by stating "offline trust is crucial to building online trust." The potential for anonymity on social media can also lead to a "dis-inhibition effect" that may make participants and observers wary of trusting, particularly where the risks involved may be high (Karewaivance and Mare, 58 in Dwyer and Molony). These risks are clearly illustrated in the case of digital vigilantism, where those breaching social norms are exposed through the manipulation of social media, with practices such as "flagging, investigating, hounding and organised leaking" targeting individuals and groups (Loveluck 2020, 214).

Digital technologies present considerable opportunities for connecting and mobilizing support. However, there are issues that must be considered around the connection to the offline world. Kopty (61 in Richter et al.) notes that the "emergence of online communities … [isn't] necessarily entailing 'a sense of community'." The strengths of social media, anonymity, reach and rapidity, arguably limit opportunities for robust and meaningful connections to form. This is highlighted by Dwyer, Hitchen and Molony (109 in Dwyer and Molony) when they note the difficulty in "establish[ing] the source of a piece of information, and hence its validity," leading to a reliance on "localised norms to attempt to confirm" (Dwyer, Hitchen and Molony, 120 in Dwyer and Molony). The decentralized structure of social media and digital technologies makes verification and credibility a challenge. This can also present significant challenges and deeper sources of concern when dealing with socially problematic actors. Examining the use of Telegram by far-right networks online, Urman and Katz (2020) capture their adaptability and flexibility in response to attempts to restrict their actions. Reflecting on the African context, Mustvairo and Wright (279 in Dwyer and Molony) make the point that "social media is not inherently progressive." Rather, it is necessary to recognize that social media and other forms of digital technologies can be used to amplify socially harmful actors and entrench existing inequalities.

A further challenge presented by digital technologies relates to issues of access. Opening their edited collection, Dwyer and Molony (2 in Dwyer and Molony) note that "growth of social media across much of Africa should not disguise disparities concerning access." The point here is that while "social media … [can be] a tool to craft alternative narratives" (Bosch, 81 in Dwyer and Molony), those narratives will reflect who has influence or is able to generate attention. Drawing on the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico, Treré (198) notes that the "systematic generation of trending topics … [relies] on an already established network of activists profiles and accounts that can be activated at any time." As with other

forms of mobilization, success relies on access to sufficient resources to have an impact. Building a broader perspective, Antonakis (143 in Richter et al.) argues:

> studies on ICTs and their potential for emancipation can profit from an intersectional lens, taking into account intersecting structures of oppression, influence on access, and resources to manipulate technologies

Recognizing these inequalities is important in determining the ability of civil society actors to exert influence. It also has implications for how the targets of their claims choose to engage with them or otherwise.

3. Control and regulation

Alongside the potential for digital technologies to enable civil society actors to organize and mobilize, it is necessary to consider the role of the state. As Segura and Waisbord (10) note, the challenges faced "are not identical across political regimes and media systems." This means that civil society actors must navigate a complex and shifting environment as states act and react. It also points to the significance of the wider media environment, as digital technologies integrate with, and in some cases, conflict with what exists. The reality of this situation means that as Patel (236 in Dwyer and Molony; see also Pospieszna and Galus 2019) argues:

> No longer universally perceived as "liberation technology," the relationship between information and communication technology (ICT) and democracy has become increasingly complex and contested.

Treré (97) echoes this point in his examination of the Mexican context, where "control and surveillance … [transformed] initial technological enthusiasm into social media paranoia." Faced with new tools and forms of organizing, states have mobilized their resources to counter and exert control, as well as to exploit opportunities. Examining the use of social media by populist politicians, Jacobs, Sandberg, and Spierings (2020) consider variations in social media use, suggesting Twitter is used for naming and shaming, while Facebook is used to activate anger amongst followers. These features point to the complicated dance between state and civil society actors, as each attempt to make use of the new opportunities offered by new platforms to advance their position.

An important part of the arsenal of the state continues to be legal, regulatory control over the actions of its citizens and the spaces they operate within. This can involve legislation that "criminalises aspects of social media use" (Dwyer and Molony, 10 in Dwyer and Molony). In doing so, the state attempts to set out boundaries of what is possible as new technologies and platforms emerge, responding in a more reactive manner. Alternatively, the state can make use of and repurpose existing laws to police new spaces, as in the case of Tanzania, where Cross (201 in Dwyer and Molony) notes that "legislation that outlaws sedition and sharing 'false' information has been applied to social media communication." The ambiguity surrounding what is defined as "false," coupled with the adaptive nature of such moves means that the boundaries will be blurred. In a space where information flows are rapid and potentially difficult to verify, the risks of running afoul of the law will be heightened. Comparing internet regulation in Iran, Turkey, and France, Ververis, Marguel, and Fabian (2020) suggest that the level of control exercised varies in line with the political regime and its interests. They also point to the limited attention paid to internet censorship in democracies, with much of the existing focus being on practices in authoritarian states. In most cases, the aim of the state is to control rather than block, as it seeks to continue to derive the economic and political benefits associated with a connected society.

Surveillance plays an important role in attempts to control or manage the use of digital technologies, often presented on the basis of protection from harm. However, as Galava (261 in Dwyer and Molony) argues:

> lurking in the shadows of those morally justifiable reasons for surveillance are the traditional claws and fangs of state power, of domination, and of an insatiable desire to extract compliance from the citizenry.

Seeing digital technology as creating another space for citizens to interact demonstrates why the state may want to establish control. The ability of the state to effectively infiltrate such spaces will vary from case to case, but as Falisse and Nkengurutse (in Dwyer and Molony) note in the case of Burundi, even occasional infiltration may render spaces unsafe. This may be amplified by one of the supposed advantages of digital technology, anonymity. The inability to determine identities or true motives may lead participants to self-censor, thereby undermining or mitigating the advantages, to protect against both surveillance and "'online naming and shaming' practices by online actors or followers" (Kopty, 62 in Richter et al.). Examining the increased attention on cybersecurity, van den Berg and Keymolen (2017) note that the focus on techno-regulation may be misplaced and that building trust may be a more effective approach. Digital technologies exist in the real world and are therefore shaped by the same norms that govern society more broadly, so in low-trust environments digital spaces will be similarly problematic.

The final challenge involving the use of digital media concerns their commercial character. Social media platforms are driven by the need to ensure profitability and economic viability. Gowra (2019) has argued for the need to give greater attention to platform governance, examining the relationships between states, corporations, users, and other actors in managing the online space. Examining the Chinese case, Lim et al. (87 in Richter et al.) argue "The state and Sina are two agents embedded in a tensed social field, in which each agent desires to reach its either economic or regulatory goals." This tension can provide space for civil society actors to operate, calling on technology corporations to resist attempts at control and improve their governance practices. This was clearly on show in the 2018 #DeleteFacebook campaign, reacting against problematic practices undertaken by the corporation (Mills 2021). Recognizing the competing and potentially conflicting interests of the stakeholders involved is necessary when considering the potential of digital activism and its limitations.

4. Breaking free

Digital media can be significant in facilitating activism, even considering the limitations noted above. Their contribution lies in the way they create a new space where participants are able to interact and engage in contestation. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, 389) argued, "The space that we perceive and construct, the space that provides cues for our behavior, varies with the individual and cultural group." Digital spaces harbour the potential for individuals and groups to operate, creating free spaces where communication is possible, even under constrained conditions (see Ruijgrok 2021). This can involve the construction of independent media, as Treré (155) argues, the "creation of independent platforms has been associated with an imaginary of 'technological sovereignty' (TS) that places particular attention on the development of alternatives to commercial and/or military technologies." It can also entail the use of hashtags and other mechanisms to draw together individuals with shared concerns. Ray et al. (2017) demonstrate this potential by considering the way #BlackLivesMatter supported the development of a sense of collective identity. Something that was refined and amplified as #BLM following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020.

The creation of such spaces relies on the ability of activists to manipulate the tools available to them. Central to this is the algorithm, serving as a mechanism for increasing the visibility and popularity of certain voices. In doing so, it reinforces hierarchies, as Patel (252 in Dwyer and Molony) notes, "The majority of Twitter users get little or no traction on Twitter." Examining the trending of the #Ferguson hashtag in the first wave of Black Lives Matter protests, LeFebvre and Armstrong (2018) find that a small number of influential actors were instrumental in driving the Twitter storm that resulted. Treré (198) highlights these challenges, arguing that "sophisticated digital action presupposes a profound knowledge of how algorithms work, obtained through incessant sequences of try and error." The dynamic character of the online space means that although it is not a level playing field, it is sufficiently open to enable unexpected outcomes. This was clearly seen in attempts by far-right groups to hijack the #MeToo hashtag in 2018, to shift the focus from assaults on women to an anti-immigrant agenda (Knüpfer, Hoffman, and Vokresenskii 2020). As in the offline world, appropriation of space to present claims is an important goal of activists. Hijacking or piggybacking on successful campaigns represents a viable means to do so.

Ultimately, digital technologies can provide an opening for activists to press claims and challenge existing orders. The ability of actors to do so still rests on comprehensive and systematic organizing. It also involves the need to build trust (Kopty in Richter et al.) and organize around "long-term conditions as well as short-term causes" (Lim, 15 in Richter et al.). Failure to do the work will lead to failure, as Segura and Waisbord (65) argue, "without basic agreements about principles, structures, and procedures, coalitions are not viable." Viewing digital technologies as tools, rather than as a form of "liberation technology" can enable more effective use of their opportunities, while also avoiding or mitigating the potential pitfalls. The space provided is valuable, but caution is needed, since there are important questions to be asked about "whether social media should be conceptualised as a public or private space" (Mutsvairo and Wright, 280 in Dwyer and Molony). How these questions are answered will do much to shape the actions, and possibly success, of those utilizing these tools.

5. Conclusion

The books considered in this review essay point to the complicated relationship between civil society and the state, and how this is shaped by technology. Efforts by the state to regulate and control are often faced with resistance and attempts to circumvent restrictions. Segura and Waisbord's focus on media regulation is informative in this regard, possibly pointing towards ways in which coalitions of digital actors may seek to influence policy in this area. As a collection, the books primarily focus on peripheral states and cases, examining the situations facing civil society actors outside the European and North American core that makes up much existing work. In doing so, they highlight the varied ways in which digital technologies have been utilized to enable activism under conditions that are not amenable to such behaviours. They also shed light on a comprehensive selection of control measures and the connection these have to local social and political contexts. These books arguably hold up a mirror and require us to consider how control of digital technologies is increasingly exercised in democratically stable, core states and the fact that this may not be as enlightened as it appears on the surface.

ORCID

Thomas O'Brien http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5031-736X

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Thomas O'Brien
Department of Sociology, University of York, York, UK
t.obrien@york.ac.uk
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5031-736X

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