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The sublime of digital activism: hybrid media ecologies and the new grammar of protest

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Introduction

Research on the relationships between social movements and digital communication technologies has grown exponentially in the last few years, following episodes of increasingly intense contention around the globe. This inquiry has produced several valuable and illuminating insights, but also many superficial and flawed accounts of the role of (digital) technology within contemporary protests. In this commentary, I will tackle some of the key points raised by Lim's monograph. I start by addressing her claim that the internet has become more "local" in contemporary movements. Then, I provide a socio-economic excursus on the crisis of the middle class under financial capitalism that can integrate her reflections on the propelling role of middle classes in recent contentious episodes. Later, in order to escape the enchantment of technological novelty, I address the need to examine the historical communicative conditions of movements. I reflect on the radical media imagination, media imaginaries and the sublime of digital activism. Next, I focus on multi-dimensionality of media hybridity within contemporary movements. I conclude by offering my perspective on the emergence of a new digital grammar of protest and on the enduring role of precarious bodies in the space of appearance.

These reflections can help clarify some of the most common misconceptions around the media/movement dynamic; at the same time, they shed additional light on the most promising paths of inquiry that have unfolded within this fascinating research domain. Before starting my commentary, I briefly describe the case studies I use to sustain my arguments. The case studies that ground this commentary drawn on more than ten years of research on the interrelations between social movements and digital media technologies. They are introduced below in the order in which I researched them.

The Anomalous Wave

Launched in 2008 in order to fight the umpteenth neoliberal reform of the Italian education system, the *Onda Anomala* (Anomalous Wave) student movement was defined by the participation of Italian high school and university students, alongside young activists and precarious workers protesting economic instability and precarious job conditions. Anomalous Wave activists relied on various digital

technologies to mobilize, coordinate and spread their messages. While many commentators were quick to label the Wave as a movement driven by social media, my Ph.D. dissertation research found much more complex, multifaceted media ecology: traditional mailing lists often were their key communicative preference, and blogs, Web radios and TVs, and social media coexisted. Studying the Anomalous Wave movement led to an understanding of social movements as complex and hybrid media ecologies, in contrast to a literature that, charmed by the allure of technological novelty, tended to reduce the communicative richness of movements to one single technological manifestation.

The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity

I moved to Mexico in 2011 to investigate various Mexican movements and activist collectives. In early 2011, the son of Mexican poet Javier Sicilia was killed by people related to the narco-trafficking business. Soon after his son's death, Sicilia publicly expressed his suffering, and blamed the so-called 'war on drugs' initiated in 2006 by President Felipe Calderón for the unstoppable spiral of violence and brutality that Calderón's militarized and highly confrontational internal strategy had unleashed in Mexico. Sicilia called upon the citizenry to unite in order to end the bloodshed, and to demand peace with justice and dignity. Since that moment, thousands of people throughout Mexico and a number of national as well as international organisations responded to his call, giving birth to the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. Through a blend of traditional and digital tactics, the movement was able to counter the official discourse of the Mexican government, rendering the victims of Mexico's escalation of violence significantly more visible.

The #YoSoy132 movement

The movement #YoSoy132 emerged in 2012 during the Mexican federal elections process. On May 11, 2012, several students confronted Enrique Peña Nieto of the PRI Party – now the president of Mexico – when he arrived at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City to give a speech. The triggers that led students to organize were subsequent statements by some PRI politicians who described them as thugs, and denied their university affiliation. In addition, some Mexican television and print news stories portrayed the protest as a boycott organized by the Mexican Left led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD Party. Facing this manipulative media coverage, 131 university students published a video on YouTube showing their credentials of the University in order to

criticize the politicians and the media who had accused them of being nothing more than criminals manoeuvred by the PRD Party, and not affiliated with the Universidad Iberoamericana.

The phrase “131 Students from Ibero” quickly became a trending topic on Twitter in Mexico and worldwide. Other people began to join the protest, showing their support to the 131 students of the YouTube video, proclaiming “I’m one more of you”, “I’m student number 132.” This inspired the creation of the Twitter hashtag #YoSoy132, which later went on to define the entire movement. |

[ET1]From its emergence of the movement with the posting of the video, the central concern of #YoSoy132 has been the democratization of the Mexican media. This concern is understandable considering that two media giants (Televisa and TV Azteca) dominate 99% of Mexico’s audience and advertising market. In particular, the #YoSoy132 movement criticized the dangerous interconnections between Mexican media and politics as the central obstacle to informing the citizenry. To fight against the concentrated Mexican media system, the movement unleashed the full potential of social media. However, in contrast to a celebratory literature that enthusiastically praised the virtues of supposedly revolutionary digital platforms, my research shows the arduous communicative journey of a movement that was plagued by both multiple internal organizational conflicts and by government’s continuous efforts to control, monitor, and censor activist activities.

The 5 Star Movement

The *5 Star Movement* (5SM) emerged in 2007 around two controversial figures: the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo and digital media strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio. It is now one of the most important parties of the Italian political landscape. The huge success of the 5SM fundamentally depended on a new form of political campaigning that effectively merged the savvy use of several digital technologies with offline activities and public demonstrations. The rapid growth in the social and political influence of the 5SM cannot be understood without considering the profound technological utopianism that characterises Grillo and Casaleggio’s ideas, and their professed faith in the revolutionary potentials of new communication technologies.

The technological discourse of the 5SM re-elaborates numerous cyber-libertarian myths applied to digital media: newness, supersession, collective intelligence, transparency, spontaneity, horizontality, and leaderlessness. But the movement’s political practices stand in dramatic contrast with the ideals professed by its leaders. For instance, the frequent and unilateral decisions by Grillo and Casaleggio to evict party members who criticize some aspects of the 5SM contrast with the

supposed horizontality of the party's decision-making processes. Moreover, the opaque algorithmic functioning of many 5SM's digital tools, which have been shown to operate through systematic censorship of dissident voices online, raises serious questions regarding the dangerous relation between the sublime of digital activism and the legitimisation of authoritarian and undemocratic political actions.

In July 2015, the movement launched "Rousseau," a decision-making platform that incorporates various tools such as online voting, commenting and sharing of law proposals, fundraising, and e-learning. Scholars as Lorenzo Mosca and Marco Deseriis have underlined several technical issues, problems in relation to transparency and control, and risks of manipulation of the platform. In particular, in a recent 2017 article titled "Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau, the 'Operating System' of the Five Star Movement", Deseriis argues [ET2] that Rousseau's architecture prevents opportunities for mutually horizontal interaction of users, allowing only vertical interactions between users and their representatives. As he points out, the platform paradoxically supports a type of 'direct parliamentarianism' that blends two contradictory versions of democracy. On the one hand, it extends to the digital realm the traditional mechanisms of the Parliament within liberal democracies. On the other hand, it seems to implement procedures that are more typical of a direct democracy model.

The Spanish Indignados/15M movement

In 2015, I returned to Europe to study the media practices of anti-austerity movements in Spain, Italy and Greece. Here, I will focus on the *Indignados* movement that emerged in 2011 in Spain. This movement was able to develop extremely sophisticated forms of digital political action, appropriating a wide ecology of digital communication technologies for effective organization, mobilization, content diffusion, collective identity creation and maintenance. More importantly, it has represented an extraordinary pole of technological experimentation and innovation that has contributed to reconfigure democratic practices in the Spanish context.[ET3]

A more local internet?

Although various nuances and contextual articulations should be taken into account, Lim is right that current movements have become somewhat more local since the 1980s and the 1990s. The Mexican movements I have studied have addressed related to Mexican social and political concerns and issues,

such as extreme violence and corruption in relation to drug trafficking on one side (The Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity), and media concentration, propaganda and lack of pluralism on the other (The #YoSoy132 Movement). Obviously, these issues are far from being unique to Mexican politics and society. Nevertheless, the movements and collectives addressing them, and their concomitant use of digital media technologies have been especially grounded at the local level. Of course, international connections and global articulations existed, but at least compared to the Zapatistas, after two decades, uses of the internet have somehow become more local.

The Zapatistas' power lay precisely in their ability to maintain a sophisticated, powerful balance between the local and the global levels, a capacity to act locally and nationally yet at the same time always to resonate globally, transnationally. They managed to speak simultaneously a double language. In contrast, for instance, the recent #YoSoy132 student movement was not able to make its claims and grievances resonate beyond Mexico, or to grow beyond the electoral momentum. This was due to various factors: the inability to create a strong narrative that could mobilize different sectors of the Mexican population; the Mexican state's violence and repression; the enormous and fragmented Mexican territory, where inefficient transport infrastructures generate difficulties in establishing physical connections among diverse social movement organizations. Hence, activists developed a "digital media grammar" that dealt with grievances and issues that resonated particularly at the national context, but only tangentially at the global level.

While deeply rooted in their local and national culture, history and struggles, however, social movements in Mexico are still profoundly global insofar as their challenges and successes are full of lessons for those who, in Mexico and around the world, build innovative emancipatory paths in their own countries and communities. This is particularly true for movements that fight against *extractivism* (the process of extracting natural resources from the Earth to sell on the world market) and whose struggles are related to the protection of the environment, natural resources, and cultural traditions against the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism.

The crisis of the middle class under financial capitalism

Responding to Lim's analysis of the role of the middle class in recent uprisings requires a brief socio-economic excursus. As various economists have underlined, financial capitalism has mutated the bases of work on a global scale. Multinationals have decentralized in search for the cheapest labor to produce products to sell, preferably in northern countries where purchasing power is still high. This

has blunted the “dream” of Western welfare states of full employment. Indeed, some authors consider it more meaningful to speak of “employability” as sporadic and unstable jobs, rather than “employment” in itself. This has generated new industrialization processes in the Global South, occupying millions of people at very low wages. In addition there is the economic growth of diverse emerging countries, and the concomitant economic collapse of western countries. While in the former a growing middle class has been consolidated, in the second group of countries the middle class has entered an enormous crisis. However, the realities of both the emerging and descending middle class largely involve a dynamic of indebtedness to large financial institutions that is encouraged by the banks themselves and even by the political class. This mirage of the middle class is already a nightmare in Spain, Italy, and elsewhere in Southern Europe, where the process of impoverishment and dispossession is accelerated; but it has also hit Brazil and Turkey, where purchasing power is based on credit, with all the volatility and uncertainty that this fact entails.

This explanatory framework regarding the basis of work in the context of capitalist globalization, and the construction or collapse of middle classes is essential for understanding participants in many of the recent protests. All of them share certain aspects: They are young, suffering from very precarious working conditions, facing a vital situation of great uncertainty, and generally living in urban spaces. Of course, the debate about the middle class as essential to social change is not new. Rather, this is a recurrent question in the analysis of social movements; middle class people are more likely to mobilize in new conflicts. The difference in this case is the severely precarious conditions of that middle class, which in some contexts is under construction and in others in decay. It involves the combination of demand for post-material values (traditionally attributed to the middle class, like the improvement of democracy) with strictly material values, such as lack of opportunities, job insecurity, poverty and growing socio-economic inequalities. Notably, some protests involved more than middle-class citizens. In Arab countries, numerous social strata participate, while in Brazil, for example, the presence of people of the favelas has been significant. Nevertheless, the middle class has clearly been essential in the elaboration of the narratives of many recent movements.

Enchanted by novelty? The significance of historical communicative conditions

I have often seen the dynamic between short-term and long-term causes that Lim outlines in her monograph. That said, I would emphasize paying more attention to the history of the communicative

conditions that help shape the uses and practices around media technologies when protest erupts and subsequently evolves. Charmed by the technological fascination with the new, scholars tend to forget that protest tactics that thrive around digital platforms are always the result of multiple pre-existing factors, including struggles and continuous negotiations and adjustments between institutions, governments, media corporations and civil society actors. Therefore, for example, when the #YoSoy132 emerged, its digital media practices and imaginaries had been already moulded by years of struggle for media justice and media reform, by the lessons of the Zapatistas, by the Twitter protest of *Internet Necesario*,¹ and by the victories and defeats of journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, academics, etc. In sum, by the complex and vibrant Mexican history of communicative resistance.

Another clear illustration of this is the Spanish 15M/*Indignados* movement that emerged in 2011 in Spain. This movement has prompted a radical change of political culture in contemporary Spain, paving the way for the electoral “revolution” of Podemos and for the creation of other political manifestations in relevant Spanish cities, such as Madrid and Barcelona. Yet for many digital activism researchers like me, the 15M will always represent one of the most innovative movements in its use of digital communication technologies for protest, mobilization, and social change. A powerful synonym of digital protest and online activism, this movement managed to develop extremely sophisticated forms of digital political action, appropriating digital communication technologies for effective organization, mobilization and content diffusion. Moreover, it has represented an unprecedented pole of technological experimentation, embodying a powerful laboratory for innovation in practices of political communication that is reconfiguring democracy itself and leading to socio-cultural transformation. The *Indignados* were able to develop complex practices of hybrid synchronization between online and offline activism, and appropriated a wide ecology of digital media platforms to create and spread content, organize, mobilize, and document protest. The digital activism of the 15M has been described by some scholars and activists themselves as *technopolitics*, a multifaceted form of

¹ *Internet Necesario* (Necessary Internet) was a protest based in micro-blogging. Launched in late 2009, its purpose was to inform people about the government’s proposal to impose new taxes on telecoms services such as internet and cell-phone subscriptions, and pay-TV. Alejandro Pisanty, who represented the Internet Society in Mexico (an international NGO, promoting internet deployment) used Twitter to criticize the government initiative and creating the hashtag #Internetnecesario. The first message was sent in the morning of 19 October 2009 and by midnight a total of 100,000 tweets had been generated. About 12,000 people spread the news and within a few hours, an unprecedented online protest took shape. Two days later, mainstream media picked up the story, publishing interviews and reports about the campaign. The protest forced the Mexican Congress to organize a hearing with NGOs and academics to discuss the situation; in the end, the government’s proposal was not approved.

communicative action that is a complex blend of technological knowledge and digital expertise used for radical political purposes with the technology itself envisaged as a site of struggle.

To understand fully technopolitics requires considering the recent history of protests, social movement processes, and repertoire of contention/communication of which the 15M movement represented the culmination and the refinement. Taking advantage of the structural opportunities of the 2008 financial crisis, the *Indignados* assimilated and perfected the “communicative inheritance” of its predecessors: the *Never Again* mobilization in Galicia, the *13M* connected multitudes, the *Movement for the Right to Housing*, etc. And finally, the Spanish digital freedom scene and the *Indignados* movement have several connections and synergies. As the scholarship of John Postill, Arnau Monterde and Mayo Fuster Morell highlights, free and open culture activists played a significant role during all the phases of the 15M (in its conception, gestation, emergence and evolution) and contributed to its genealogy in various ways: in relation to its composition, demands, frame and its organizational logic.

These communicative histories of resistance shape dynamically and dialectically the media practices that social movements develop. So even if we cannot foresee the exact structure these will undertake - because the array of contributing factors is always, to some extent, unpredictable and contingent - we can appreciate the ways through which they relate to this historic lineage of challenges, constraints and opportunities. This aspect represents an essential antidote to the fascination with technological novelty that still characterizes our field.

Radical media imagination and the sublime of digital activism

Below, I first tackle the issues of spontaneity and leaderlessness, and then address issues of the sublime of digital activism and the “places of imagination.”

I argue that spontaneity has become an ideology that is attached to recent mobilizations with particular reference to communication technologies and social media. As with horizontality and leaderlessness, these labels often gain traction because they are easily referable to diverse contexts without doing the hard work of investigating which kind of practices are actually at play. You automatically attach horizontality or spontaneity to a movement and your research is complete. There is no nuance, no need to elaborate. The hard work consists instead in investigating the challenges that activists must face to organize and practice horizontality in their decision-making processes, to scrutinize what is genuinely spontaneous and what has been prepared for months and is the result of complex submerged networks interacting together. The issue, however, is that to examine this slow,

submerged work of preparation and gestation, we must overcome what the Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci, already in 1988, called “the myopia of the visible,” the tendency to look only at the more visible manifestations of protest movements’ political action, but neglecting their everyday practices.

Paolo Gerbaudo demonstrated in a 2017 article the existence of social media teams in the Occupy and *Indignados* movements. The hierarchical dynamics of these teams strongly contrast with the dominant assertions about the leaderless, spontaneous character of contemporary digital movements. I found something similar with the Anomalous Wave, the #YoSoy132 movement, and the *Indignados*: as the role of digital communication within these movements becomes increasingly important for their organization and identity, so does the discrepancy between the growing power exerted by media activists, and the dogmatic adherence to techno-libertarian values of horizontality, inclusiveness and leaderlessness that activists profess.

I appreciate how Lim has applied the concept of the radical imagination from Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven’s 2012 article “Convoking the Radical Imagination.” Social movement and communication researchers should indeed study the material and symbolic dimension of media technologies and their imbrications, in order to explore movements as sites where the radical imagination can originate, thrive and spread. Although media imaginaries are largely disregarded in research on media activism, these are worth studying because they reveal how digital protest media platforms operate as sites for the realization of multiple political potentialities, values, desires, and ideals. These media imaginaries are not separate or ephemeral realities, but have material consequences for political practice. The ways in which digital technologies are imagined, including how specific perceived meanings, values, capabilities, and ideologies are ascribed to them, shape the practices developed to engage with them, and can therefore configure different typologies of activist practices. Conceiving social movements as convocations of the radical imagination, as Khasnabish and Haiven do, allows us to look at them as privileged *loci* for the exploration of what Vincent Mosco, in 2004, called the “digital sublime,” providing a window into the crucial myths of contemporary communication technologies. Thus, contemporary political movements represent fascinating environments for the study of the social and political consequences of media imaginaries, and their democratic or authoritarian implications.

But radical imagination can also be overtly manipulated. Italy’s 5 Star Movement is particularly illustrative of the dangerous cleavage and clash between a digital utopian imagination and poor political practices. The digital rhetoric of leaderlessness, horizontality, and participation has been

frequently translated into political practices that ultimately legitimized authoritarianism and populism and reinforced its leaders' power. The movement has relied on a plethora of digital myths, ingeniously combining digital fetishism with cyber-libertarianism in order to conceal their authoritarian practices, especially with reference to: the construction of Beppe Grillo as a political leader, the ambiguous management practices of the blog, and hence the political culture of the movement in general. The contradictory and perilous relationship between techno-utopian discourse and political practice within the 5SM is testament to the problematic effects of techno-utopianism on social organisation and democracy. Technological rhetorics - and especially digital utopian discourses - have real consequences. They can be effectively deployed at the political level in order to legitimize centralized and authoritarian practices.

In 2008, the Anomalous Wave movement predated other global protest movements in exposing the deleterious consequences of the financial crisis. Yet in 2011 a significant and unified movement did not emerge in Italy. The 5 Star Movement was able to catalyse the energies of (digital) activism in Italy, colonizing its technological imagination and defusing the digital power of social movements precisely in a period where grassroots rebellions were flourishing around the world. This factor also explains (together with other historical, social, political, and cultural specificities) the striking difference between, for instance, the developments of digital activism in Spain and in Italy. Furthermore, this clearly shows the potential implications of investigating the radical imagination in relation to media technologies. We should be aware of the inherent risks of deploying digital utopian imaginaries given their connection to the development of anti-democratic practices.

Media hybridity within contemporary movements

The need to overcome a reductionist, single-medium approach has infused various strands of recent research at the intersection of media and political participation. The resulting multifaceted multidisciplinary approach explores the combinations and the competition between older and newer media, in order to better explain contemporary dynamics of political participation. Political communication scholarship has somehow converged with media scholarship in aiming to overcome a reductive focus on single media logics or technologies. This hybrid research considers the implications of the dynamic interrelations among actors, practices and manifold media platforms. The field is thus gradually moving beyond traditional concepts such as David Altheide and Robert Snow's "media logic"; their 1979 book argued that a single dominant media logic influenced political news-making. In

her 2016 book, for instance, Adrienne Russell advocates moving from logics to sensibilities and sidestepping the media logic concept in favor of hybridity, openness and unexpectedness.

One highly influential theory within this “hybrid turn” comes from Andrew Chadwick’s book *The Hybrid Media System* (revised in 2017). Advocating a holistic approach to the role of communication and information in politics, Chadwick urges us to examine the interactions between older and newer media logics, and to pay attention to flux, in-betweenness, and the liminal. Chadwick deploys an “ontology of hybridity” that convincingly illustrates that media history has always involved the selective recombination of the antecedent media’s characteristics. In his approach, older, newer and renewed media are articulated as systems of competition and interdependence among individuals and collective actors who mobilise different logics to exercise power. Unlike Altheide and Snow, Chadwick does not conceive media logic in terms of a hegemonic force, but as a force that different media, political actors, and publics co-create.

Meanwhile, some scholars have started to rely on the ecological trope to study the dynamic between movements and communication technology. As I explained in a 2012 article in the *International Journal of Communication* and a 2016 article in *Information, Communication & Society*, this line of research is still scattered and lacks systematization. Nevertheless, it is animated by the same dissatisfaction with monocausal communicative explanations, and the same urge to provide holistic explorations that drive the hybrid research agenda. Lim’s reflections on Tunisia perfectly reflect the intersection between these two emerging approaches, and align with my application of an ecological vision of the relations between online and offline actions, the multiple combination of media, older and newer, and their diachronic unfolding over time. Social movements and media practices are socio-cultural processes, so their coevolution at different stages of protest deserves attention.

A hybrid/ecological approach tends to discover unexpected findings. Among the unexpected findings of my research, for example, is the enduring importance of email and its reconfiguration within a complex media ecology characterized by communicative abundance. For most organizations and collectives, email is still the most powerful communicative resource: versatile, dynamic, easy to use, popular and already – well before the emergence of social media platforms - profoundly “social.” Furthermore, especially in some contexts, instant messaging platforms as WhatsApp, and Telegram are much more used and important than Facebook and Twitter. Yet, perhaps because it’s harder to appreciate practices of internal communication, their relevance is not sufficiently elaborated. Many studies harness thousands, millions of social media posts, without attending to the complex inner

dynamics of movements that greatly exceed social media. What is fascinating is figuring out the reasons and the negotiations behind the media choices, and the new role that specific media technologies acquire or lose due to the increasing complexity of the media ecology. Exploring the various economic, cultural, social factors that drive and constrain their media choices for protest and mobilization is key.

Types of media hybridity

The movements I have studied suggest five types of media hybridity:

- Online/offline: Many recent movements' actions are able to make a difference precisely because they effectively use digital technologies to organize protest actions offline. For instance, the so-called *technopolitics* of the *Indignados* posits a deep, symbiotic relationship between the digital and the physical, to the point where online actions that lack a direct offline counterpart are considered merely irrelevant vestiges of old types of cyber-activism.
- Old/new: Practices of current protest movements incessantly blend old and new media, including older digital technologies such as online forums and emails, but also more traditional media such as radios and televisions. Unless, for some specific reasons, we want to restrict our analytical gaze to the latest available technology, our analyses should focus precisely on the various interactions within this important protest media ecology.
- Internal/external: The boundaries between technologies used for external or internal communication are often porous, but the media practices of current social movements often incorporate continuous interaction between internal communication dynamics (eg., through Messenger or WhatsApp) and external communication dynamics (eg., through the Twitter and Facebook feeds). Missing this point means losing important insights into the communicative power of today's protest movements.
- Corporate/alternative: Contemporary activism is mostly carried out on corporate social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, but movements have not given up on building their own autonomous infrastructures and radical/alternative platforms. Studying the coexistence of the appropriation of corporate social media and the concomitant adoption of alternative digital technologies is thus imperative.
- Human/non-human: This type of hybridity is not new, but its importance has intensified because of sophisticated computational tactics that rely on the control of algorithms and social

bots for either repression or resistance. These new strategies have reignited the debate on the agency and the relevance of non-human actors within contemporary protest.

A new digital grammar of protest, precarious bodies, and the space of appearance

As Lim points out, activists simplify complex narrative of injustice into soundbites, images and memes all the time. A few years ago, the Autonomous University of Mexico City organized an incredible exhibition of activists' posters of the #YoSoy132 movement. This exhibit showed how many of the movement's fantastic visual production condensed and communicated a complex narrative in just a few iconic traits. For example, one displayed the Twitter bird on top of a barbed wire. The caption read: "Hope will always be more powerful than fear." This widely-shared image fueled an imaginary of freedom associated with social networks. But, in building on the neat opposition between fear and hope it also communicated the message about bypassing the propaganda of mainstream bias and fighting repression and constraints on freedom.

Many of icons and memes are also shared in internal social movement communication in order to reinforce group belonging, showing a shared common code. Furthermore, self-mockery with comrades through puns, jokes and satire exchanged across Facebook groups and mailing lists often help to relieve stress among activists, and lower the intensity of protest. Hence, memes, digital icons, soundbites, etc. are important within both the external and internal communication spaces of protest movements, especially in connection to the nurturing, maintenance and reinforcement of their collective identities overtime.

Again, for many contemporary movements the power of digital media is precisely its ability to get people offline. Activists use digital media to help coordinate demonstrations and rallies. They deploy apps to avoid dangerous areas, safely communicate with comrades and so on. Interestingly, I have often found a continuous interconnection between activists on the streets and activists at home: Both actively use media and communication technologies, but with the different affordances that their diverse situations allow. Activists in the streets favor rapid on-the-go, mobile technologies. Activists at home can enjoy a safer, calmer environment by relying on home computers and laptops with more powerful bandwidth and a better bird's eye view of the situation. Notably, the purpose of many online activities is simply to generate other online activities, not to spur offline interventions, not to get people in the streets. Hence, the online/offline interplay that lies at the centre of many contemporary mobilizations does not account for all the new practices of activism. This does not mean that the ones

that are not aimed at getting people in the streets are useless forms of slacktivism. Rather, a wide and varied repertoire of communication should be recognized.

Sometimes activists try to insert the media tactics of one social movement into another context, but this does not always work. Contagion attempts sometimes fail. For instance, attempts during the Italian protests in 2011 to apply the *Indignados* frame failed due to Italy's extreme fragmentation and parochialism. This illustrates the pivotal role of social movement protest cultures: Some resist innovation, reject practices that lie outside their traditional *modus operandi* or that shake too much the organizational foundations or the activists' ideological underpinnings. Growing scepticism in Italy regarding the political effectiveness of new media technologies - especially social media – has frequently produced a fragmented activist sphere online that reflects the organizational divisions of these collectives on the ground.