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The banality of WhatsApp: On the everyday backstage activism in Mexico and Spain

by **Emiliano Treré**

Abstract

Drawing on interviews with social movements and organizations in Mexico and Spain, this paper sheds light on the dynamics of 'backstage activism' with a focus on WhatsApp. It illustrates how activists have integrated this app into their media ecologies to reinforce collective identity, cement internal solidarity and lower the pressure of protest. It shows that within WhatsApp groups, campaigners have countered the paranoia experienced in the frontstage of social media exchanging ironical material and intimate messages. It demonstrates that WhatsApp has been used as a robust organizational device and it is now firmly integrated into the mechanisms of organizations and movements. Its communicative affordances (speed, reliability, mobility, multimediality) in conjunction with the omnipresent smartphone are often emphasized. Nuancing characterizations that tend to either disregard its role or stress its negative side, this qualitative exploration foregrounds the banality of WhatsApp. This article unpacks the multiple roles of this app within the submerged practices of movements and organizations.

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Introduction and outline

Drawing on three case studies from Mexico and Spain, this paper contributes to the burgeoning reflections on the relevance of WhatsApp for social movements and political organizations. It advances two critical points. First, it reflects on the mismatch between the use of WhatsApp by activists and organizations and the interest of academia in the political role of WhatsApp. The overreliance on quantitative methodologies and analytics that overtly focus on data from the 'frontstage' of digital media platforms has somehow prevented researchers from fully appreciating the relevance of 'backstage' activist practices, including the role of WhatsApp within the dynamics of social movements. This relevance predates academic attention to the political role of WhatsApp that we have witnessed in recent years, with activists from the 15M in Spain and the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico effectively incorporating this platform into their protest media ecologies since 2011 and 2012, respectively. The second point that this article advances is that, beyond characterizations of this app that predominantly frame it as a malicious incubator and spreader of fake news and misinformation, WhatsApp has already been integrated into the everyday dynamics of social movements and organizations. Within these environments, WhatsApp functions as a powerful 'backstage' communicative tool that reinforces internal solidarity, facilitates organizational processes and fulfills several activities. Hence, this paper illustrates the mundanity and banality of WhatsApp and unpack its

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multiple roles within the media ecologies of social movements and political organizations.



Literature review

The rise of WhatsApp

WhatsApp defines itself as a “fast, simple, secure messaging and calling” app, and a “reliable way to talk to anyone in the world”. Its remarkable growth in the decade since its January 2009 release has earned it one of the largest user bases in the world, with more than 1.5 billion users in over 180 countries [1]. Its simplicity, reliability and accessibility are some of its core selling points, especially for people in the Global South where online services are accessed mainly through cellphones and several connectivity and bandwidth issues are often thwarting a rapid and fluid digital experience. The app considers every phone number as a user and automatically adds the phone’s contact list as a WhatsApp contact. The platform enables voice and video calls, video and voice messages, sharing of images, PDF documents and location to both individual contacts and groups. WhatsApp groups function allows personal communications between groups of up to 256 users and represent one of the most popular features of the app. This specific affordance renders the app more similar to a social media (see for instance Facebook groups), rather than just a basic text-messaging service. In 2014, Facebook’s acquisition of WhatsApp was one of the company’s largest investments to date. In 2016, end-to-end encryption was introduced. Research shows that WhatsApp’s encryption is performative rather than being a core value of the company (Santos and Faure, 2018) and that this does not mean that Facebook is not in a position to gather WhatsApp data (Zanon, 2018). This move to encryption has also generated controversies from governments, digital rights groups and law enforcement authorities. For instance, although praised by some privacy advocates, the implementation of encryption has been criticized by government agencies as a barrier to fighting crime. It is clear that WhatsApp is much more than an advanced text-messaging service, but can we describe it as a platform? This point is controversial. In his recent book about content moderation, Gillespie [2] argues that messaging services like WhatsApp that “are generally person-to-person or group-to-group, and overwhelmingly between known contacts (...) sidestep many of the problems that plague platforms that offer public visibility and contact with strangers”. Further, Gillespie sees moderation as one of the essential requirements for being considered a platform, but since WhatsApp’s end-to-end encryption makes it impossible for it to be effectively moderated, this service would not qualify as a platform. For other researchers, “WhatsApp does operate as a media platform where communication happens and where information is constructed, shared, and discussed” (Pereira and Bojczuk, 2018). In this article, I will indiscriminately use the words service, app and platform to refer to WhatsApp, keeping in mind that moderation is still a contested issue within this app, but also considering that WhatsApp shares many of the characteristics and complex affordances (as well as social and political influence) of other mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube.

The computational turn and the eclipse of the backstage of digital activism

WhatsApp was released in 2009, and, together with many other digital technologies and applications, it has been an integral part of the protest ecologies of the many social movements that have emerged since 2010 all over the world. It is now one of the most powerful digital services for political campaigning, especially in the Global South, in countries as diverse as Brazil, Colombia, Kenya, Mexico and Malaysia [3]. Yet, in the several studies that have flourished around digital protest and activism since 2009 the role of this app has been generally overlooked, with the academic gaze firmly oriented towards social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Indeed, a critical appraisal of the role of WhatsApp within activists’ practices is absent in some of the most representative and cited texts on contemporary digital media/social media and protest, including Bennett and Segerberg (2013), Gerbaudo (2012), Barassi (2015), Wolfson (2014), Kaun (2016), Fuchs (2014), Russell (2016), Dencik and Leistert (2015), Castells (2012), Mortensen, *et al.* (2019), Cammaerts (2018) and Margetts, *et al.* (2016).

Recently however, there have been some attempts to explore the role of WhatsApp (along with other digital technologies like Facebook or mobile messages) as a platform for workers’ unionization (Lazar, *et al.*, 2018), in Malaysia’s regime change (Tapsell, 2019), in the empowerment of Nigerian women (Abubakar and Dasuki, 2018), in the Occupy Nigeria protest of 2012 (Uwalaka, 2018) and in Sierra Leone’s 2018 elections (Dwyer, *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, new studies in political communication are now engaging with the role of mobile instant messaging platforms together with more ‘traditional’ social media (see, in particular, Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2019; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2018; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2018).

Still, a pressing question remains: how do we explain the absence of WhatsApp in most of the literature of the last decade that deals with digital protest and activism? I argue that this is mostly related with the digital activism scholarship's progressive disregard for internal communication dynamics within social movements, what I have called elsewhere the backstage of digital activism (Treré, 2015). With regard to the concepts of front- and backstage activism, I am naturally indebted to the work on the self-presentation of the self of Goffman (1959), where the Canadian sociologist provides a 'dramaturgical' account of social interaction as a theatrical performance. When individuals perform a role in relation to an audience in public settings, we can think of this as frontstage, similar to an actor on stage who is presenting a performance. The backstage is instead a space where actors can express aspects of themselves in ways that their audience would find unacceptable and where performers can relax and step out of character. The literature that has applied Goffman's dramaturgical approach to digital and social media is extensive and engaging with it is far from my intentions here. However, my application of the Goffman metaphor to digital platforms is slightly different from that of most scholars (see, for example, Murthy, 2012). Most literature examines how the frontstage/backstage dynamic unfolds on Twitter and Facebook's public posts and streams, while private, internal messages and closed groups interactions are usually neglected.

My research instead illustrates that activists consider social media and instant messaging platforms as already articulated into frontstage (Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, etc.) and backstage spaces (Facebook groups and Messenger, Twitter direct messages, WhatsApp communications, etc.) that hold different implications, appropriations and affordances. The frontstage is seen and seized as an open, visible, public, shopfront space for publicity and information diffusion about protest and mobilization activities of the movements. The backstage instead is where more banal, mundane, submerged, informal, emotionally driven daily interactions are performed. The concept is thus used as an entry point into the complexity and hybridity of activist practices that continuously navigate, merge and differently use both front- and backstage spaces.

The first wave of studies on digital activism in the early 2000s frequently centered on the internal communicative dynamics of social movements, exploring activists' practices performed on forums, e-mail messages and mailing lists (Ayers, 2003; Hara and Estrada, 2005; Kavada, 2009). But as social media like Twitter and Facebook were gaining center stage within academic analyses — and a prominent role within activists' actions too — the internal communicative processes and practices carried out by activists started to lose relevance for researchers. In part, this is due to the nature of social media platforms, where huge amounts of personal data are constantly made visible and shared with others on threads, streams and groups, raising serious issues of privacy, exploitation and sociality. This massive quantity of data produced by activists through their online protest activities has contributed to a 'computational turn' (Tufekci, 2014) in social movements and media studies, that is, a significant growth in the application of quantitative methods in the examination of enormous protest-related data sets available on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This computational turn has brought a disproportionate focus on what is measurable and quantifiable on the front-stage of digital platforms (e.g., Twitter streams, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, etc.), at the expense of the submerged negotiations and everyday activities that mostly unfold in the backstage spaces of digital activism (Facebook chats and groups, Twitter direct messages, WhatsApp and Telegram groups, etc.). Notwithstanding new critical developments in computational studies (Puschmann, 2019), most of the current literature is characterized by an excessive attention to dynamics of public, external communication, at the expense of internal dynamics and daily communicative exchanges through which activists organize, create, and nurture collective identities (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). In order to better grasp the limitations of this contemporary computational obsession for the frontstage of digital activism, we can turn to Alberto Melucci who, few decades ago, was already criticizing the political reductionism of many approaches of the new social movements where the social and cultural dimensions of collective action were underestimated resulting in a "myopia of the visible", that focuses all the attention on the measurable aspects of collective action and ignores the production of new cultural codes that constitute the "submerged activity of the contemporary movement networks and the condition for their visible action" [4].

However, researching social movements entails precisely carrying out what Lim (2018) calls 'an inquiry of the invisible,' that is, focusing our analytical gaze on hidden, submerged, and peripheral places and practices, including the dynamics of communication carried out within the backstage spaces of contemporary activism.

Beyond a dystopian vision of WhatsApp

In the past few years, and especially after the 2016 presidential elections in the U.S., attention from journalists, governments and academics to the role of WhatsApp within politics has grown exponentially. WhatsApp has attracted harsh criticism for the way it has been used in a variety of political scenarios to spread false information, hoaxes, hate speech, propaganda and fake news. In 2017, together with Facebook, the platform was connected to the spreading of fake news stories during the contested

general election in Kenya (Dahir, 2017) [5]. In 2018, WhatsApp was associated with the diffusion of rumors and disinformation, as well as incitements to mob violence and lynching in India (Arun, 2019). In the 2019 Indian election (Narayanan, *et al.*, 2019), a recent study illustrates that “the proportion of polarizing political news and information in circulation over social media (...) is worse than all of the other country case studies (...), except the U.S. Presidential election in 2016”, with misinformation on WhatsApp primarily taking the form of visual content. Others have pointed out how Israeli’s tech companies are hacking human rights activists’ WhatsApp accounts and creating fake social media profiles to undermine democracy (Silverstein, 2019). One of the most underlined cases of deployment of WhatsApp for the spread of fake news and propaganda is Brazil’s 2018 presidential elections. Brazil is a country where WhatsApp has wide diffusion and adoption, but more importantly it possesses a powerful cultural relevance that makes it much more than just a text-messaging app (Saboia, 2016). It has turned into an omnipresent and irreplaceable digital service for Brazilians who have appropriated it to manage both professional and private activities: from business transactions to interactions with family, colleagues and friends (Pereira and Bojczuk, 2018). Within this context, studies show that a significant strategy of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro’s political campaign — now president elect of Brazil — consisted in the massive use of fabricated, orchestrated and largely automated fake stories and junk news that circulated across different social media, with WhatsApp being one of the key communicative platforms [6] (Avelar, 2019; Machado, 2018). The role of WhatsApp in the spread of false information has prompted scholars and civil society organizations to demand changes in the app’s sharing functionalities, implementation of fact checking, limitations of forwarding and sharing features, and other macro- and micro-level changes. The recent WhatsApp’s Research Awards for Social Science and Misinformation [7] represent a clear attempt by the company to address issues of safety, misinformation, problematic content and behavior within encrypted settings. These areas of inquiry are of course of high importance, but while we cannot deny that WhatsApp represents a space that often lends itself to propagate a ‘dark version of democracy’ (Gapper, 2019), we also have to be careful to characterize this platform in a one-dimensional way. Across history, digital technologies have always attracted both utopian and dystopian visions, and we tend to evaluate them through the recursive patterns of optimism and pessimism. Whilst in the aftermath of the 2011 global insurrections, technologies were heralded with the power to subvert regimes and change the world for better, after the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum, we have entered a new dystopian phase. Inside this new techno-pessimistic scenario, there is a tendency in academia and the press to frame WhatsApp as a malicious spreader of fake news and propaganda, an enemy of democracy, a weapon in the hands of the status quo. My research will instead cast a more nuanced and ambivalent picture, showing how this app has been integrated into the protest media ecologies and everyday activities of movements and organizations. Activists incessantly navigate and make sense of the affordances of the frontstage and the backstage of social media, and WhatsApp (along with similar apps) has become a key ordinary digital ally, not only a tool that is ‘weaponized’ during electoral times.



Conceptual framework, case studies and methods

A media ecology approach to WhatsApp-related practices

The conceptual framework within which this article is inscribed is the media ecological lens applied to the exploration of the relations between social movements and media technologies. The application of this approach has grown exponentially in the last years (Treré, 2019, 2012; Feigenbaum, *et al.*, 2013; Foust and Hoyt, 2018). The media ecological lens aims to disentangle the communicative complexity of social movements by focusing on how activists engage holistically and critically with a wide ecology of media technologies to organize, mobilize, influence public opinion and pursue radical change (Treré, 2019). Inspired by the media ecology tradition that conceives media as complex environments, the strength of this approach lies in its holistic gaze that does not privilege any specific media technology, but instead investigate how activists, in their movement-related practices, make sense of, navigate and merge newer and older media formats, physical and digital spaces, internal and external forms of communication, as well as alternative and corporate social media. In the context of this paper, the application of this lens entails that we can only assess the role played by WhatsApp within movements and political organizations if we evaluate WhatsApp-related practices in conjunction with other media technologies, platforms and their related communicative dynamics. This implies paying attention to the continuous exchanges between the backstage and the frontstage of contemporary digital activism, foregrounding the meanings of the submerged, mundane, everyday media practices that animate the backstage of movements and organizations.

Case studies and methods

The first case study I rely on is the Mexican social movement for media democratization #YoSoy132, emerged in 2012 during the Mexican federal

elections process. Since the Zapatista uprisings, Mexico has always been at the forefront of technological innovation in global struggles. It is the second Latin American country in terms of numbers of social media users (after Brazil) and WhatsApp is the second mostly used platform with a 93 percent social network penetration [8]. The movement #YoSoy132 emerged in 2012 during the Mexican federal elections process. From its emergence, 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 percent of Mexico's audience and advertising market. 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 unbridled the full potential of social media. To investigate #YoSoy132, I carried out a multimodal ethnography comprised of 75 individual semi-structured interviews with activists from diverse collectives across various areas of Mexico, as well as four group interviews with activists from Mexico City, Guadalajara and Querétaro. My research specifically addressed key informants who created and managed digital platforms, had a prominent role in handling relations with the press, or were active participants in the 'Media Taskforce' for the democratization of the Mexican media. The ethnography also comprised several short periods of participant observation (during 2012, 2013, and 2014) in demonstrations, meetings and assemblies, both at the local and at the national levels, along with participation to informal encounters, and academic venues with dialogue between scholars and activists. A qualitative content analysis was performed on digital media and online platforms, including the official Web site of the movement, Facebook pages, chats, and groups, Twitter accounts, WhatsApp messages of local committees and collectives, documents, posters, leaflets and manifestos produced by protesters in diverse Mexican cities.

The second case study I draw on is the 15M movement emerged in 2011 in Spain. This movement was able to develop 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. The Spanish movement has represented an extraordinary pole of technological experimentation and innovation that has contributed to reconfigure democratic practices in the Spanish context. Spain is a particularly fertile ground for the use of mobile devices, with the smartphone being the most popular digital communication device, used by 61 percent of the population aged 15 and over (ONTSI, 2016). Data from 2018 display an overall smartphone penetration of 72.5 percent (making it the eight country in the world according to the Global Mobile Market Report by Newzoo) [9]. Since mobile data are mostly commercialized through flat rates that exclude traditional SMS, Spanish have enthusiastically adopted WhatsApp. Young people have implemented this platform as a meaningful app since 2011 (Rubio Romero and Perlado Lamo de Espinosa, 2015), but new research show that old people have integrated it as well in their everyday practices (Fernández-Ardévol and Rosales, 2017). My findings rely on 20 in-depth interviews with social movement and media activists, in particular people who played key roles in organizing and producing media about the anti-austerity protests, including journalists, Web managers and developers, social media curators, graphic designers, media activists and precarious media researchers.

The third data set is comprised by interviews conducted in 2017 with a range of different actors interested in fighting corruption and around the issue of job precarity in the Spanish context. Eleven interviews were carried out with journalists, politicians, activists, trade unions leaders and civil society organizations. The first data set was uploaded, organized and analyzed with the NVivo software, the second with Atlas.ti and the third one with MaxQDA. For this article, the most relevant interviews from each data set that mentioned the use of WhatsApp (and others apps like Telegram, Signal and XMPP) were brought together in a new data set comprising 30 interviews. These were re-coded using NVivo and re-analyzed with a focus on the role of WhatsApp and other backstage apps.



Findings and discussion

WhatsApp and the politics of backstage activism in the #YoSoy132 movement

During 2012 and 2013, while the gaze of Mexican scholars was almost obsessively centered on scrutinizing the frontstage of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (harnessing data from newsfeeds, streams, posts and videos), #YoSoy132 activists were already intensively engaging in practices of backstage activism on both Facebook chats and WhatsApp groups. These online spaces represented environments where activists 'carried out multiple activities' (Interview 1), where 'discussions and information upgrades were constant and very intense' (Interview 2). Within these digital backstage realms, WhatsApp in particular played a fundamental role. Mexican activists started to use it weeks after the emergence of the movement in 2012, when they realized it provided them with 'quicker', 'faster', 'simpler', 'more immediate' communicative

possibilities. At first, they experimented with one-to-one messages, but they almost immediately switched to group conversations to better 'tackle organizational issues' (Interview 3) and 'make collective decisions simpler' (Interview 4). While the use of WhatsApp to support and ease the organizational and decision-making process of the movement was an important aspect, the continuous flow of messages also generated a propitious environment where more intimate messages were exchanged. This was often the result of the immense pressure Mexican activists were under during the electoral process, with journalists continuously pushing for interviews, members of the PRI party trying to sabotage their digital tactics and police forces supported by the government sifting through social media profiles to identify and target key protesters (Treré, 2019). In contrast to a celebratory literature that praised the virtues of allegedly revolutionary digital platforms, my research shows the hard journey of a movement that was plagued by both multiple internal organizational conflicts and by governments' continuous efforts to control, monitor and censor protest activities.

Within a situation that activists described as 'social media paranoia', a generic sense of anxiety regarding the negative consequences that their social media protest-related activities could generate (especially on the public and exposed social media frontstage), activists often turned to backstage forms of activism on WhatsApp. Group conversations were perceived as 'safer' and 'more comfortable' digital areas where activists could 'open up to comrades about personal feelings and the stress experienced within the mobilizations' (Interview 5); 'comfort each other and blow off some steam' (Interview 6); 'find the strength and the motivation not to give up' (Interview 7); 'share thoughts, videos, laughs and pictures with like-minded people without the fear of being harshly criticized or attacked' (Interview 8). Hence, WhatsApp messages shared across multiple groups established 'sheltered' areas where activists could express themselves far from the pressures and anxieties of the social media frontstage, the 'official lights of Facebook walls and pages' (Interview 9). Backstage practices on WhatsApp contributed to reinforce the internal solidarity and nurture the collective identity of the movement. Here, we can appreciate the power of the 'emotion work' (Jasper, 2011) in relation to collective identity, as #YoSoy132 activists experienced joy, relief and empowerment during their encounter and sharing with others through WhatsApp.

Further, within backstage spaces, activists were able to connect their struggle to the Mexican rebellious tradition, thus reaffirming the legitimacy of the #YoSoy132 movement as heir of a long history of Mexican resistance. Activists exchanged pictures, videos, audio files and memes of important Mexican revolutionary figures such as Emiliano Zapata and Subcomandante Marcos. These files were often accompanied by 'incitement texts' that explicitly linked the present situation to the injustices of the past. In so doing, activists reminded themselves of the historical role they were playing in the Mexican political context, strengthening their reciprocal ties and reinforcing their identity as a coherent collective entity fighting against injustice. Pictures and memes were also shared widely on the frontstage of social media, but the meaning they acquired within WhatsApp groups was rather different. While on the frontstage the aim was to 'make a message go viral reaching as many people as possible' (Interview 10), in the backstage messages were targeted to smaller collectives with a higher degree of intimacy resembling the functioning of small mailing lists (Kavada, 2009). Their aim was to 'have a laugh with friends and comrades' (Interview 11), 'to wink at someone online with whom you have shared so many adventures' (Interview 12). Through these multimedia exchanges, activists nurtured reciprocal ties of solidarity and commitment, a necessary component in the management of collective identities (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Within these more informal, relaxed and personal settings, protesters reaffirmed daily their 'sense of being together, of being YoSoy132, and of what this belonging meant' (Interview 13). In contrast to a more 'official' and 'serious' frontstage presence, backstage environments were often pervaded by humor, irony and mockery. Mexican activists perceived WhatsApp groups as spaces in which they could 'interact less seriously, cracking jokes at our friends' (Interview 13). Frequently, they would circulate parodies and photomontages directed at the same members of the groups, engaging in acts of 'self-mockery' (Interview 13). These humorous practices reinforced activists' belonging to the movement, displaying that protesters shared a 'common code' (Interview 14), 'a similar understanding' (Interview 15), but served also to 'lower the intensity of the protest' (Interview 16) and 'find some peace within the relentless pace of resistance' (Interview 17).

The implications of social media paranoia were often mitigated in the backstage. At the end of 2012, when the repressive strategies of the government impelled activists to erase protest-related pictures, posts and sometimes their whole public profiles from Facebook and YouTube, WhatsApp groups witnessed instead an intensification of exchanges. They were filled with self-mockery, satire and puns that contributed to ease the tension and the inner conflicts of the movement, while strengthening its internal solidarity and cohesion. Additionally, WhatsApp groups acted as key spaces to coordinate mobilizations and street protests, with activists on the ground and from home 'informing comrades of the dangers, threats and repression from the police in real time' (Interview 18). These findings illuminate the everyday ambivalences in activists' uses of social media.

Protesters constantly navigate and cope with the polarity between the paranoia evoked by the frontstage and the sheltered space incarnated by the backstage.

The role of WhatsApp in the backstage tactics of the 15M movement

Through the tactical appropriation of social media and the savvy hijacking of their algorithms, the 15M movement that emerged in 2011 in Spain — the so-called *Indignados* — was capable not only of launching calls for action and organizing massive mobilizations but also of systematically influencing journalistic coverage and situating its claims in the media agenda. For instance, through effective tactics of social media appropriation, Spanish activists were able to achieve that their 15 May call for action was mentioned 37 times by the printed press (Candón Mena, 2013), and in many other occasions they obtained international press coverage in newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, making it impossible for Spanish mainstream media to ignore and silence their demands. One of the most effective tactics adopted by 15M activists consisted in the 'systematic creation of trending topics on Twitter' (Interview 19) that relied on a profound understanding and exploitation of the platform's algorithm. However, adopting an ecological gaze, we can appreciate that the Twitter trending topics were just the frontstage result of a complex ecology of practices that were orchestrated in the backstage, with WhatsApp playing a key role. Indeed, these tactics were carefully planned relying on a combination of internal communication technologies and social media platforms, at the interstice between the communicative backstage and the frontstage. Internal communication tools, such as pads (online notepads for collective writing, such as Titanpad) were used to 'collectively select possibly successful hashtags and then build the narrative of the protest' (Interview 20), while the frontstage of social media platforms like Twitter was employed to massively spread the information and attain the desired outcome. Inside the pads, activists first suggested diverse potential hashtags to reach an agreement over the most effective ones for the specific political campaign that was arranged. Once a hashtag was picked, an array of potential tweets was created accordingly and then sent to other activist collectives through backstage tools as direct messages on Twitter, e-mail messages and WhatsApp. 15M activists could rely on a 'very powerful network of multiple WhatsApp groups that were activated when we needed them with a very fast turnaround and extensive diffusion' (Interview 21). Behind the successful invention of Twitter hashtags, a submerged network of backstage activists was working incessantly to make sure that specific tweets were used simultaneously in different part of Spain and of the world to achieve the desired outcome. This effective coordination mainly relied on the communicative affordances of WhatsApp groups.

In subsequent ramifications of the *Indignados* in 2013, the Russian mobile Telegram app was introduced along with WhatsApp, in part because of the superior level of encryption that it provided, together with its 'powerful capabilities for multimedia and managing groups when used in its desktop version' (Interview 22) (see also Martínez Martínez, 2017).

The banality of WhatsApp within contemporary Spanish organizations


The interviews carried out with multiple Spanish organizations and activists in 2017 make it abundantly clear that the smartphone is one of the most used digital devices within the everyday dynamics of collectives and groups. People underlined that they are 'constantly using their phone' (Interview 23) and that 'the supremacy of mobile phones is rather clear' (Interview 24). Smartphones are seen as an all-in-one portable activist toolkit, an indispensable companion offering on-the-go connectivity and multimedia affordances through mobile instant messaging apps as WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal and XMPP. Smartphones also allow checking e-mail messages, news, recording sound and video, making calls and taking high definition pictures. More specifically, the powerful ensemble of smartphones and WhatsApp is seen to constitute the communicative core of Spanish organizations. 'WhatsApp groups are essential, our most important organizational resource' (Interview 25), and the possibility to create specific WhatsApp groups to 'mirror each sub-commission or internal division' (Interview 26) renders this platform a very dynamic and malleable choice for organizations. WhatsApp is perceived as 'rapid', 'effective', 'simple' and for many interviewees its strength lies in allowing quicker responses and actions to everyday urgent matters that require immediate actions. Mailing lists are still used, but they seem to have reconfigured their role within the media ecology. They constitute more official communicative channels where messages that require to be recorded and processed at a slower pace are circulated. There also seems to be a hierarchy in the ecology of mobile apps. WhatsApp is the 'most used, popular and widespread' (Interview 27), while Telegram is especially used by communication professionals and politicians but not so popular and spread as WhatsApp' (Interview 28). Other apps as Signal and XMPP are only used by activists and professionals who require 'a high level of encryption' (Interview 29) and 'adhere to very strict security protocols' (Interview 30). These latter apps are used to safeguard the identity of journalistic sources or communicate with people who have leaked classified documents. I clearly perceived the widespread, intensive and daily use of WhatsApp and Telegram in the Spanish context when I

compared the media technologies that I have deployed to contact interviewees in my different fieldworks around Europe. While in Italy, Greece and the U.K., traditional e-mail messages and telephone calls would still play a fundamental role, in Spain is a rather common practice to approach politicians, journalists and heads of organizations through a WhatsApp or Telegram message. In some cases, after trying to reach them through multiple communicative channels, I found that these mobile apps were the only channels through which I would receive a feedback within a reasonable time limit. All these aspects contribute to paint a picture where diverse mobile messaging apps are now firmly situated as irreplaceable backstage tools within the everyday organizational dynamics of Spanish organizations.



Concluding remarks

In this article, relying on 30 interviews carried out in Mexico and Spain with a range of different actors (activists, journalists, civil society organizations, unions, etc.), I have shed light on the dynamics of backstage activism, with a specific focus on WhatsApp. Adding to a literature that has only very recently appraised the political use of WhatsApp — mainly stressing its damaging effects during elections — I have painted a multi-dimensional picture of this app. I have shown that WhatsApp have been integrated effectively in the protest media ecologies of social movements since 2011, and that the backstage environments constituted by WhatsApp groups have provided activists with spaces to reinforce their collective belonging to a common cause, cementing their internal solidarity and lowering the pressure and stress of protest-related activities. Within these spaces, activists have been often able to balance the consequences of the social media paranoia experienced in the frontstage of Facebook and Twitter through the continuous exchange of ironical material and intimate messages. Moreover, WhatsApp has been used as a potent organizational device, and it is now firmly integrated into the everyday practices of organizations and movements. In particular, social actors stress its crucial communicative affordances (speed, reliability, mobility, multimediality), in conjunction with the omnipresent smartphone. While recognizing the negative implications that its use has engendered during electoral times around the world, my qualitative ecological exploration also illustrates the ordinariness of WhatsApp and showcases its multiple roles within the submerged practices of movements and political organizations.

Given the growing social, economic and political relevance of WhatsApp and other similar messaging platforms as Telegram and Signal, it is essential for scholars to develop more fine-grained analyses of the practices unfolding in the backstage of digital activism. This has conceptual and methodological implications. At the conceptual level, it means privileging a media ecological lens, able to explore holistically and critically the communicative complexity of social movements and organizations, foregrounding the dynamics of the frontstage, the backstage and their interplay. At the methodological level, it implies favoring multi-method studies that capitalize on the integration between large-scale quantitative explorations of the social media frontstage and nuanced qualitative inquiries into digital backstage worlds. 

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Notes

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