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Media, Participation, and Social Change: Introduction to the Special Section

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The articles in this special section strengthen our understanding of the relationship between media, collective action, and participation in social change by exposing how knowledge about it is produced. They add to a body of literature that has scrutinized the social organization of public communication—through broadcasting media, the press, or social media—in the attempt to explain why some visions for social change enter into our collective consciousness while others fall short of the mark (Gitlin, 2003; Papacharissi, 2016; Polletta, 2006).

The articles have two key characteristics in common. First, they embrace a dialectical perspective on what, we would argue, is the production of knowledge, namely about collective action and participation in social change. Second, as they call into question the process of knowledge production, the articles point to trust as being its main currency. Each of the articles then exposes a struggle over definitional power, that is, of what constitutes valid knowledge. To take these in turn, by dialectic, we refer to a method of enquiry that is grounded in history and is critical of it, that unpicks relations between subject (e.g., the protestor) and object (e.g., information and communications technologies or ICTs) by identifying the contradictions and interdependencies between them (e.g., that technologies are not, inherently, a tool for the political liberation of the protesting crowds, who in turn may seek to transform precisely those technologies that mediate their existence, as was the case of the human mic at Occupy Wall Street).

This dialectic is present to different degrees in the papers. They all stress that accounts of participation in social change (including the current preoccupation with its mediation with proprietary ICTs) are deeply embedded in power relations. In particular, we see the three articles as dwelling on definitional power. Definitional power is the capacity to paint social reality in colors that reflect the worldview, values, beliefs, perceptions, or interests of dominant groups while obscuring and delegitimizing those of subordinate groups (Chafetz, 1990). Querying the locus of definitional power—typically the province of cognitive elites such as academics, journalists, policy-makers—while exposing the struggle over it, the papers raise the topical question of trust. The rise to prominence of the amateur (Keen, 2007), epitomized by the anonymous Wikipedia contributor, has added to the complexity of power relations but has not resolved the struggle over definitions. That is one important reason why the authors of the three papers are

justified in their invitation to follow their example and continue to question the trust that we put in accounts of participation in social change by academics, journalists, or policy-makers.

First, in their article, Neumayer and Rossi retrace the intellectual statements that have marked the scholarship on participation in non-institutional protest politics (see Mosca and Quaranta, 2016 for a definition) and political engagement more widely. They stress that their diachronic perspective lays bare the struggle over definitional power. While pursuing the entrenched goal in the academe, to advance explanatory models for how participation comes to pass or what impresses on it as a lived experience, researchers have defined participation as a social, political, cultural, or communication practice; or a phenomenon with its own regularities. In that way, they have actively contributed to shaping perceptions of that field of practice and likely the field itself if one views academics as writing from a position of (definitional) power as the authors do. An illustration to this effect may reinforce the claim. In his recent article on *clicktivism* (or, alternatively, slacktivism), Halupka (2014) contends that the term pertains to "simplified forms of engagement and solidary . . . [seen to] encourage apathy and normalise easy (read: ineffective) political participation" (p. 117). He shows that while we are well-advised to be concerned about the actual substance of participation that is mediated by digital technologies, we should continue to systematically probe their utilization by various political constituencies before we can grapple with the consequences of the dialectic between technology and users. Neumayer and Rossi impress a similar point while seeking to firmly debunk the myth of (digital and now also social) media centrality (Couldry, 2012) to social change.

The two authors have written a soul-searching paper that reminds academics of their involvement in the co-production of political protest as a field of action and the imaginary of participation in it. The attendant responsibility,

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the paper cautions, is to unpick ICTs and embed them firmly in the nexus of relations with other media technologies, their political economy, or the history of their design. This, Neumayer and Rossi submit, is necessary because, as their research shows, the most visible scholarship on protest participation evinces a selective affinity for mobilizations where specific technologies—commercial social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube—figure prominently. In recent years, as this approach has ballooned, the systematic treatment of the wider media ecology appears to have been neglected (see also Treré and Mattoni, 2016) while a new academic silo has been erected. The authors advocate an offsetting reflexive ontology be nurtured within the scientific community that should remain alert to the ideological imperative to deliver impactful—primarily quantitative—research at the expense of theoretical and methodological pluralism.

Academia is only one arena where the power struggle over knowledge production transpires. In their article on the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and its opposition to electoral reforms endorsed by the Chinese government, Veneti, Karadimitrou, and Poulakidakos spotlight the mainstream news coverage of those protests. The authors contrasted the reporting on the movement by the *Guardian* and *China Daily*, a publicly funded English-language Chinese newspaper. While there has historically been a documented emphasis in the portrayal of political protest by the news media as multiply disruptive of political, economic, and social relations, the authors point to foregoing comparative studies that have uncovered variations in coverage attributed to the specificities of media systems.

The article proves that conflict was the primary news value underpinning the coverage by both newspapers. There were, however, contrasts in how the parties to the conflict— pitying student protestors against the police and the Chinese administration—were represented. The *Guardian* was more sympathetic to the protestors than *China Daily*. The finding was attributed to the discrepancy in the level of political control of the media system in China and the United Kingdom which the authors argue would need to further be read in cognizance of the historical significance of the region to both countries and their contemporary national interests. Consequently, *China Daily* stressed the idea that the protests were abetted by foreign governments thereby branding the movement a proxy for a geo-political confrontation between China and its external enemies. Equally, the *Guardian* interpreted the official response to the protests in a historical light. The paper evoked the commitment by both China and the United Kingdom to preserving the democratic institutions of the region and, at the same time, the Chinese government's distaste for dissident movements exemplified by the violent crack-down of the Tiananmen Square protests. These discrepancies, the three authors propose, are an invitation to reflect on the geopolitics of the media reportage of protest and other varieties of political conflict.

The third paper in this section looked into participation in local governance through a case study of a civic collaboration policy promoted by the Municipality of Bologna, Italy. Bartoletti and Faccioli introduce the notion of civic collaboration to designate a partnership elicited by the local government with the intention to involve citizens in the management of public goods and services. In a deliberate attempt to kindle citizen input, the Municipality invited local districts to generate public governance initiatives and put them up for discussion and further development on a bespoke digital civic networking platform called *Comunità* (*Community*). The two authors show that the policy boosted the ability of existing civic networks to put forward and circulate their ideas more efficiently through the medium of the digital platform. Those civic networks stood out for nurturing an almost equal number of proposals by informal groups and individuals as by established civic associations in the first year following the adoption of the policy. In its turn, the local authority was able to present civic collaboration as an immediate, fruitful, and affective mode of participation that can strengthen bonds among local actors who, for instance, join hands to regenerate the public amenities of a neighborhood.

The authors nevertheless are cautiously apprehensive of the move by public authorities to open the production of knowledge on the management of public goods and services. First, this is because the civic collaboration policy invited regimented forms of participation designed as much to attract citizen stakeholders as to boost the legitimacy of the local government. Second, the policy did not address the issue of self-selection of vested and technologically literate citizens which may well compound disengagement and exclusion among constituencies already removed from the policy-making process. Finally, although leveling and opening up the field of collaboration to various configurations involving individual citizens, informal groups, civic associations, and the local administration, the policy summoned the participation of the networked individual on the bespoke digital platform. Thereby, Bartoletti and Faccioli submit, it may have inadvertently exacerbated the dissolution of associational life that has been so vigorously lauded for nurturing civic and political participation (Putnam, 2000).

In sum, all three papers invite the reader to uncover facets of a struggle over definitional power. It valorizes what forms of participation and what variety of social change are socially and politically desirable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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