

Proceedings

Social Media Materialities and Political Struggle: Power, Images, and Networks [†]

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Abstract: This research investigates activists' social media tactics and how these tactics materialize at the intersection of social media materialities and protest. The argument is based on a case study of social media communication by activists involved in the Blockupy action against the opening of the new European Central Bank headquarters in March 2016 in Frankfurt am Main; Germany. We conclude by empirically and conceptually discussing the tension between activist agency and social media materialities.

Keywords: social media; materiality; protest; Blockupy; Frankfurt

1. Introduction

Social media possess their own material characteristics, which shape how activists engage, protest, resist, and struggle. Although corporate social media platforms have not been designed for bringing about a new social order grounded in the commons, they may enhance citizens' agency by enabling activists to rapidly connect in street protest, coordinate their actions, report their perspectives, and share protest slogans and visual materials to produce public visibility. Social media can also hinder protest movements, as they algorithmically privilege spectacular images over content about activists' larger societal and political cause, prioritize visual and textual content disseminated within centralized networks, censor and survey activist social media accounts and content, and disrupt community formation [1–5]. This research enhances our understanding of activists' social media tactics and how these tactics materialize at the intersection of social media materialities and protest.

2. Materials and Methods

The inquiry is pursued through a case study of social media communication by activists involved in the Blockupy action against the opening of the new European Central Bank headquarters in March 2016 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. This research explores how social media's material characteristics may foster authorities' communicative action over that of activists in protest events. The investigation combines an ethnographic inquiry into activists' social media tactics with a social network analysis of Twitter hashtags and an analysis of user-generated visual content to explore how these tactics materialize in contested corporate social media [3,6].

3. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research shows an increasing police presence in the hashtag over the course of the day of action, hindering activists' attempts to communicate their alternative perspectives through social media. Corporate social media materialities, as our research shows, may support a centralized network structure and sensational images of riots, which become part of the media spectacle, undermining calls for social change. The logics of the social media system (news and attention) shape the confrontation between state and activists in the medium of power. Conflicting narratives struggle over visibility and activists' call for social change might be undermined by the material and structural characteristics of social media. Their privileging of spectacular visuals as well as surveillance and control might lead to invisibility and self-censorship. The tension between activist agency and social media materialities opens up new trajectories for research, permitting a critical assessment of how activism can bring to the fore calls for social change. We need to extend our perspective on social media and protest and take into account social media materialities and the colonization of activists' communicative action in their struggles for visibility in contemporary media spaces.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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