ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Anthropology

Social Movements, Power, and Mediated Visibility

Narges Bajoghli

School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC, USA; email: narges.bajoghli@jhu.edu

ANNUAL REVIEWS CONNECT

www.annualreviews.org

- Download figures
- Navigate cited references
- Keyword search
- Explore related articles
- Share via email or social media

Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2023. 52:313–27

First published as a Review in Advance on July 26, 2023

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at anthro.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-091205

Copyright © 2023 by the author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See credit lines of images or other third-party material in this article for license information.

This article is part of a special theme on Multimodality. For a list of other articles in this theme, see **https://www.annualreviews.org/toc/anthro/52/1**

Keywords

visual media, social movements, states, corporations, tech

Abstract

This article focuses on how the anthropological study of media—through an examination of its production, circulation, and consumption—elucidates issues of social organization, political economy, and alternative visions for political futures. By bringing together the studies of visual media, social movements, and hegemonic power by anthropologists and ethnographers of media since the turn of the twenty-first century, this review article provides a critical understanding of research about our current media environment, where scholarship within anthropology is heading in these domains, and what looking at these three fields together can mean for a more robust understanding of our political, social, and cultural futures.

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

OPEN ACCESS

INTRODUCTION

Smartphones and their inherent visuality have come to consume more of our daily lives since they were introduced as a mass consumer product in the late 2000s. As the underlying technology has become cheaper, their reach has become global (Geismar & Knox 2021). The subsequent popularization of social media and texting platforms has impacted the quotidian rhythms of how we live, interact, and communicate. We are inundated with media on multiple platforms, and their speedy and seemingly ubiquitous circulation impact how we organize ourselves, demand change, rebel, and are, in turn, surveilled, manipulated, and drawn into larger media wars.[1] In this article, I discuss current research in anthropology and related fields on the intersections of these topics and point to potential areas for further research for ethnographers in this fast-paced, ever-changing terrain.

This article was initially supposed to be about visual media and social movements. But using prevailing anthropological approaches to studying media, including applying a critical lens to the ways in which visuality is incorporated within larger "media worlds" of production, circulation, and consumption (Ginsburg et al. 2002), it became imperative to bring in the study of hegemonic power to understand more critically the struggles of our times and what social movements are up against in order to become visible in the crowded media environment predominated by social media. At the heart of this article is a discussion not of visual media per se, but rather of how social movements attempt to become visible in today's (screen-saturated) media environment, how those in power seek to make these movements less visible, and what this struggle portends for today's politics.

In the focus on power, for the purposes of this article, I look at the hegemonic power of states and the multinational tech corporations that build and sustain digital media worlds. The study of visuality, media, and social movements is incomplete without understanding the monopolistic tendencies of tech companies and their power, the centrality of these digital platforms to the current global economy, and the myriad ways in which states are locked in a constant cat-and-mouse game with social movements over (visual) narrative control. In screen-saturated societies, social movements respond to state and corporate control and manipulation of narratives by producing counternarratives, often in the realm of visual media. In turn, states attempt to pull the attention of their citizenry away from the visual narratives of many social movements, especially those that seek to challenge core cultural, social, political, and economic ideologies.

The first cases of massive social movements that utilized visual media in digitized spaces were the 2009 Iranian Green Movement and the 2010 Arab Spring movements. These movements showed how states were initially thrown off guard by the intersection of visual media and social movements as they played out across online and offline spaces. Yet states and military apparatuses across the Middle East quickly caught up to the social media movements of 2009–2011 using their monopoly of violence to repress uprisings and eventually stage counterrevolutions, while also utilizing visual media to offer counternarratives (Bajoghli 2019, Wedeen 2019). Since then, states and social movements around the world have been in a constant battle over narrative domains—either to effect change or to maintain the status quo. Visual media have played a central role in these battles due to the ubiquity of screens in our world and the relative ease by which activists can use digital spaces to counter prevailing narratives of power (even in highly regulated digital environments such as China; more on this below). In the contemporary "attention economy"

[1]Throughout this article, I utilize the first-person plural voice because the current social media environment collapses divisions between the ethnographer, the subject, and the public (Gray 2016, Reich 2015, Wang & Liu 2021) in important ways.

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

(Crawford 2015, Pedersen et al. 2021), political projects—state, nonstate, and antistate—must now beckon, seduce, and otherwise enthrall populations whose attention is spread across multiple competing platforms. For these reasons, I describe some ways that the domains of media, social movements, and hegemonic power—via states and corporate technology firms—are inextricably linked and call for more research that explores those linkages.

In the social movements of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the Internet and social media played a large role for numerous reasons, chief among them (*a*) they allowed for the circulation of news and conversations that broke with the traditional gatekeepers of information; and (*b*) they helped people and activists rupture pluralistic ignorance, "perhaps the greatest contribution to social movements" (Tufekci 2017, p. 25). Pluralistic ignorance is "the feeling of imagining oneself to be a lonely minority when in fact there are many people who agree with you, maybe even a majority" (Tufekci 2017, p. 25). The Internet and social media broke through the narrative monopolies of traditional media and allowed users around the world to find each other. But the early emancipatory promises of the Internet and the celebrations of the Twitter revolutions of the Middle East proved short-lived; state powers would not only react but also learn to use the same tools to reassert their power and make activists and social movements more vulnerable, from the Middle East to China, Russia, and the United States in response to the #BLM and abolition movements.

Two research areas that are important to the topics at hand but go beyond the scope of this article are (*a*) the backdrop of neoliberalism and (*b*) the ongoing importance of nonvisual media to social movements and power. Although I focus mainly on research that covers our media environment since the ubiquitous use of social media in the age of smartphones (post-2009), we must place this era within the broader context to which media theorist Wendy Chun points us: the ways in which the computer and Internet technology are the technologies of the neoliberal era. Overarching nearly all research on the topics reviewed for this article are the myriad ways in which our digitized spheres create and reinforce neoliberalism as an everyday practice (Besteman & Gusterson 2019; Crawford 2021; Chun 2013, 2017, 2021; Fernandes 2017; Srnicek 2016). Chun's work demonstrates how the computer and the Internet are the technologies of neoliberalism, much like how counting and statistics were the technologies of industrial capitalism and colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century (Merry 2019). As I note throughout this article, whether it is social movements that challenge neoliberal governmentality or technologies that reinscribe neoliberal subject formation, anthropologists and ethnographers of media and social movements contend with neoliberalism as sociopolitical and sociocultural practices with far-reaching implications for human societies.

Second, it is imperative to state at the outset of this article the ongoing importance of nonvisual media as critical tools for social movements in the digital age. Not only are podcasts fast becoming a leading form of media, but radio remains the most widespread electronic medium in the world today (Bessire & Fisher 2012). Anthropologists continue to conduct important research on these media as it relates to social movements, broadly construed. Srinivasan (2017, 2019) writes on the ways that indigenous communities throughout the Americas use short-wave radio for communication; Stephen (2012) explores the ways indigenous and community radio in Oaxaca produce politics; and Clubhouse, the participatory audio social media platform, has proved important for discussions of politics and movements (among many other topics) throughout the world (Boyko & Horbyk 2022, Radcliffe 2021). Disability activists and scholars also utilize nonvisual forms of media to articulate their experiences, create communities, and make demands (Ginsburg 2021), pointing to "how society, consciously and unconsciously, has built in disability into digital technologies" (Goggin & Newell 2003, p. 147). Yet, nonetheless, even nonvisual modes of media today must contend with ways of becoming visible to possible audience members in the oversaturated

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

media environment, which remain predominated by screens. Screen culture necessitates, in the very least, some visual elements for all forms of media.

VISUAL MEDIA

In today's world, there is no clear-cut division between the online and offline worlds (Boellstorff 2016), making attention to the fluid boundaries between the two an area of continued inquiry for anthropologists. What may start offline finds its way online (and thus visual in some aspect) and vice versa. In this "digitally networked public sphere," which Tufekci (2017) defines as a "complex interaction of publics, online and offline, all intertwined, multiple, connected, and complex, but also transnational and global" (p. 6), the increasing boundarilessness of "offline" and "online" remains an important area of study and neither must be treated as a separate domain.

As anthropologists of media and media theoreticians have long taught us, visual media are slippery objects that are interpreted in multiple—and often contradictory—ways. The thought that the right photograph could change society is a seductive one that documentary photographers have debated, and have attempted to create, for decades (Ritchin 2013). With the advent of consumer cameras and eventually smartphones with high-end built-in cameras, everyone became a photographer and a videographer (Feliciano-Santos 2021). Instagram, with its filters and aesthetics, and the boom in citizen journalism in the first two decades of the twenty-first century brought into sharp relief the question of what photographic images mean and do in societies now inundated with images. Questions of photoshopping and producing deepfakes further muddied the waters of "truth" and "truth-telling" with which these technologies were often imbued (Ritchin 2009).

Much like researchers of analog photography and video in the twentieth century, researchers of twenty-first-century social movements have investigated how activists and advocates have hoped to use visual media not only to draw attention to their causes, but also to provide proof of wrongdoing with the hopes of bringing about some kind of justice (Allen 2020, Azoulay 2019, Der Derian 2009, Ritchin 2013). Scholars of photography in the first two decades of the twenty-first century grapple with the complex and often slippery lives of digital photographs. With the advent of more advanced cameras on each generation of smartphones, the proliferation of calls for the citizen journalists only furthered hopes that images captured in-the-moment would make ostensibly unseen-before-injustices undeniable. The discourse of digital photographs and citizen journalism in the 2010s relied on ideas that images allowed for witnessing and thus action and justice. These logics, of course, were not new and came to digital photography from the analog world of documentary and journalistic photography. A time existed where there was still the belief that a documentary or journalistic photograph could be enough proof that something terrible had happened and that it would instigate change in society. The photograph, many wanted to believe, could persuade action for good, with the photographs of the Vietnam war massacres often cited as an example that did induce such action. But as Ritchin and others have shown, the reality was far more complex (Azoulay 2012, 2019; Ritchin 2009, 2013) and always refracted through power, as continues to happen in news wire services (Gürsel 2012). As the analog video of Rodney King's brutal beating at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991 demonstrated, even video footage that clearly showed police brutality was not enough to overcome centuries of racism and structural violence (Goodwin 1994). The police officers involved were eventually not convicted, not for lack of visual proof, but because what was captured on camera was refracted through broader political structures of racism and white supremacy. Visuality does not exist in a vacuum of power.

As such, viral visual media of the citizen journalism variety can often become the scene of intense contestation. This is especially true when the subjects at hand are implicated in state violence

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

and struggles of resistance (Allen 2009, Stein 2021a,b). Stein (2021a) methodically analyzes state violence that is caught on camera and spread via social media in Israel and Palestine. In March 2016, an Israeli soldier lethally shot a Palestinian in occupied Hebron. The murder was caught on video taken by a Palestinian neighbor. The footage clearly showed the Israeli soldier methodically cocking his weapon as he approached the Palestinian man, who was already lying immobilized on the ground. The soldier shot and killed the Palestinian man with one bullet at close range. The footage quickly went viral; "the three-minute video would be committed to Israeli national memory" (Stein 2021b, p. 1). Instead of being widely condemned for the murder, the soldier became a national hero for many Jewish Israelis, thousands of whom demonstrated in solidarity to demand his exoneration. For Palestinians, this incident became another example of military violence with legal impunity, while Stein argues that, for Israeli Jews, the case became "a parable of the Jewish state, an illustration of their existential battle against enemies that sought their demise. Through the viral frame, all told their own story of Israeli military rule" (p. 3). What unfolded on camera became a proxy for anxieties over power.

The dreams of what cameras and their images could mean for state projects and those resisting them have both materialized and broken down in many ways. These breakdowns in the interpretations of what media technologies might be able to do are important sites of inquiry for studying power and what "remains": potential future politics (Chun 2017, Stein 2021b). And as Bishara (2022) importantly forefronts in her study of political expression grounded in place, "where nationalist projects have failed or faltered, or major collective ideological projects have fallen short, looking for other models of political expression and communication is an urgent task," one often found on the margins of collective organizing and in spaces where visual media bleed across ruptured locales.

And yet the "online image is often just one of many shuffled elements vying for attention, the ensemble easily and quickly displaced with a single click. In this consumer-oriented, rapid-fire media, what issues come to the surface as societal priorities?" (Ritchin 2013, p. 146). Vying with photographs and videos in the rapid-fire visual media environment are memes (as GIFs, hashtags, videos, etc.). Memes, as "the street art of the social web" (Mina 2019), became one of the most potent visual tools to create the cracks in narrative control that hegemonic power structures attempt to maintain. From the formation of image memes to hashtags as textual memes to video and selfie memes that allowed users in places such as China to skirt censorship laws in creative ways to memes that traveled from online spaces to offline, such as the physicalized meme of the red "Make America Great Again" hats, memes "contain the kernels of narratives and the ability to challenge narratives" (Mina 2019, p. 74). In a context of social change, hashtags and memes often serve as micronarratives. Memes have the ability to puncture holes in the narrative control that states and those in power attempt to maintain (Flamenbaum 2022).

Major hashtag movements since 2009 have created new understandings of power for members of the global millennial and Gen Z cohorts. From the Arab Spring movements to #BLM to #15M and #OWS to #metoo to #NiUnaMenos to #StandingRock to #SaveSheikhJarrah to #MahsaAmini, these movements and their attendant memes online and offline not only displayed large demands for change, but also ushered in with them new language, art, and visual media to more fully understand the power dynamics that uphold economic inequality, racism, patriarchy, and settler colonialism in our present time.

Yet in tandem with this emergence of radical language and images from social movements are the ways that "attention merchants" (Wu 2016), as well as interest groups, states, corporations, and large Global North nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), proliferate in this environment. The #Kony2012 and #StopKony campaign remains a classic case. Created by Invisible Children, an NGO based in California, the *KONY 2012* 30-min video was accompanied by an extensive

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

social media campaign that became touted as the most viral video of all time. The goal of the campaign, according to the video's creator, Jason Russell, was to lead to Joseph Kony's capture by the end of 2012. The premise of the made-for–social media video was that Kony, the military leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), was free because he was not famous. The viral campaign focused on getting Hollywood celebrities involved in order to stop Kony. As quickly as it went viral, it also died down—going from the most watched video of all time to its demise took one month (Chun 2017, Mina 2019). Never mind that at the time of the video Kony was actually no longer in Uganda and that despite the massive attention, he remains the leader of the LRA today. As Sujatha Fernandes (2017) argues, we must contend with the "emergent culture of storytelling that presents carefully curated narratives with predetermined storylines as a tool of philanthropy, statecraft, and advocacy" (p. 2). This boom in (visual) storytelling for advocacy has "involved a shift in emphasis away from the collective and political modes of narration toward the personal mode. Those relating their stories are individuals rather than members of a class or community, and they enter into conflict with individual employers or spouses instead of dominant classes or patriarchal structures" (Fernandes 2017, p. 6). The mainstreaming of curated stories by professional advocacy groups, the supposed importance of influencer culture, and the neoliberal demands for every social media user to become a "brand" are replete with power dynamics that have important ramifications for our politics. These are important areas for further research by anthropologists, especially the more recent phenomenon of a perceived need for social media influencers to supposedly elevate social movements.

As anthropologists have rightly pointed out, although digital media have saturated many of our societies, this saturation is not uniform and many communities around the world—including in the so-called Global North—have issues of accessibility to the online world due to communities either lacking infrastructure or being priced out of coverage (Ginsburg et al. 2002, Srinivasan 2017). Media ethnographer Wazhmah Osman's work on the wide world of television in post-2001 Afghanistan is a recent example of research on social movements and power with predominantly offline media. Osman offers us the first in-depth ethnography of the Afghan mediascape. In a society where 70% of the population is illiterate and issues of Internet accessibility are paramount due to decades of war, television and radio remain of utmost importance as terrains of cultural contestations, especially for social movements led by women (Osman 2020). Anthropologists of media have also long looked at the innovative and boundary-pushing work of indigenous media practitioners and producers of television and art among indigenous communities in Canada, Australia, and South America (Córdova 2014, Kisin 2013, Potts 2019).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Much of the earlier scholarship on the Internet pointed to the possibility that it might allow cracks in the hegemonic media environment of the offline world, gated by state and corporate control. Of note, the early use of online media by Zapatista activists in Oaxaca, Mexico, became a model for many activists in the 1990s and early 2000s (Tufekci 2017), as were the ways anticorporate globalization movements utilized the Internet in the first decade of the current millennium (Castells 2015, Juris 2008).

With the advent of Web 2.0 and the widespread use of social media in 2009, there was an explosion of social movements that utilized this technology as central components to movement building, starting with the 2009 Green Movement in Iran, followed by the 2010 Arab Spring uprisings, the 2011 antiausterity and anticapitalist global uprisings of the indignados of Spain and Occupy Wall Street, the 2013 Gezi Park protests of Turkey, and the 2014 Ferguson uprisings. Much scholarship at the time focused on the potentially emancipatory impacts of a decentralized

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

media sphere. The ease with which social media allows users to connect on an issue and organize a protest was unprecedented. Whereas in predominantly offline movements of the past, activists had to spend years organizing, persuading, honing demands and messaging, and building a critical mass before mass street actions or occupations of spaces could take place, social media allowed for the large gathering of people quickly in ways that broke pluralistic ignorance. Today's technologies allow for the massive outpouring of people on the streets and the creation of hashtags that can spawn global solidarity in a short period of time. These movements from 2009 to 2014 changed the visual and linguistic landscape of social movements. The mass refusal to comply any longer became a global possibility, from the birth of the #iranelection hashtag in 2009 as an online organizing and aggregation tool in service of social movements (Mottahedeh 2015), to the exchange of activist tactics against police violence in "From Ferguson to Palestine" (Davis 2016), to the normalization of "99%" in US political discourse and the various uprisings against austerity measures (Castells 2015, Postill 2014), and the endless creative insurgencies (Kraidy 2016) of the Arab Spring uprisings.

The co-creation of social media movements can cause significant narrative change and swift shifts in political discourse to support offline social movements, such as the role of #BLM and its global manifestations (Bonilla & Rosa 2015), the ways Palestinian activists and their allies around the world have challenged Israeli state narratives, or the ways young indigenous leaders are attempting to prevent the cooptation of their frontline activism for water rights and against environmental degradation by more mainstream environmental activism. Newer digital platforms, such as TikTok, have incorporated the activism of Gen Z effectively, with K-Pop fans helping US teens to "sell out" Trump rallies in 2020, leading to visuals of empty seats and a duped strongman, or young computer programmers creating codes to jam lines for reporting "violators" of the new Texas abortion laws. At the same time, far-right movements utilize the same mediums to usurp power and destabilize existing democratic institutions (McIntosh 2022), as recent examples in Brazil, India, the United States, Italy, and Hungary show. More research is needed by anthropologists to examine how digitally native generations utilize their understanding of visual media framing to exploit states, militaries, militarized police, and right-wing movements.

Yet, as became apparent with these movements, although they initially caught states by surprise, social media also proved to be a highly effective surveillance tool to target activists and protesters and create counternarratives of the need for stability and "law and order," while making a spectacle of state violence (Bajoghli 2014, Parikh & Kwon 2020). Social media allows activist networks to mobilize, but it also makes those networks visible to surveillance and infiltration. At the same time, states also make themselves visible through their online activities, disinformation campaigns, and targeting of networks.

The current media environment may allow for spontaneous outpouring of rage onto the streets, but it has also thus far foreclosed the longer-term spaces needed to create sustainable movements for change against current power structures, precisely because the very tools of connection are also incredibly powerful tools of surveillance and are engineered to take our attention from one post to the next in rapid speed. Furthermore, the logic of "participation" of social media and Web 2.0 lends an aura of transparency and democratic decision-making, turning likes, retweets, and follower counts into evidence of the popularity of an idea or social media influencer. Yet, as researchers of the Arab Spring pointed out, following these movements only online meant that the social media story of the uprisings did not always correspond with the realities on the ground (Srinivasan 2017). While celebrations of Egypt's youth who wanted progressive change were forefronted in English-language coverage at the time, the postrevolutionary election brought to power a candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood, which had decades of offline organizing and infrastructure behind them. Once the military staged its violent counterrevolutionary coup in 2013,

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 18.218.219.216
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

they utilized social media to double down on their decades-long propaganda against the Muslim Brotherhood and to reinscribe nationalism and national security in order to quell all dissent.

In more recent years, the battle over whether the seemingly participatory core of social media was authentic or skewed came to a head in the 2016 US presidential elections and during the Trump administration. Not only did the issue of bots and severe manipulation online become a more widely appreciated problem (discussed more below), but the election of Trump himself was another pointer toward the ways in which conservative movements were also on the rise and using social media creatively to do so, a phenomena Chakravartty & Roy (2015) termed "mediated populism." These online sentiments mixed with the phenomena of networked "entertaining news" (Dahlgren 2009) to give strength to right-wing populist movements. This practice further complicated the idea of "emancipation" via Twitter and Facebook revolutions and has led to attempts to understand the myriad ways in which these tools further sociocultural contestations, often in violent ways as the cases in India, the United States, Brazil, Italy, and Hungary demonstrate (Postill 2018). As wealth inequality continues to increase in wealthy nations at astronomical rates since the advent of neoliberalism in the late 1970s, with parallel austerity measures and the fraying of existing social safety nets, the fact that anger and frustration exist throughout societies is not surprising. But given that profit-driven social media platforms ensure our increased screen time through managing and promoting anger (Orlowski 2018), it is important to continue to study and interrogate these platforms ethnographically, from the perspectives of users, those who create these technologies, and communities of investors. As earlier research on hackers and Anonymous complicated our understandings of those communities (Coleman 2013, 2014), today more research is needed on the confluence of tech platforms, bot armies, populist politicians, and capital.

Yet, as Lukács (2021) notes in her study of social movements and media in Hungary, "In a context in which analog media institutions are controlled by the government, the political opposition has no choice but to turn to social media to create new activist spaces" (p. 55). Activists and social movements today, unfolding in the era of neoliberalism, face the fact that there are diminishing public goods, public platforms, and public squares. Although social media platforms—despite what companies such as Meta and Twitter proclaim—are highly privatized spaces, they have come to stand in for a common, if not truly public, space.

While the Internet and social media have helped people and activists break pluralistic ignorance, they have also met stiff resistance from state powers and have themselves become more efficient technologies for surveillance as well as monopolies with massive power themselves.

POWER

The infrastructures needed to create our current media worlds rely on massive capital investment. The major platforms of our current age (Google, Amazon, Meta, etc.) are "all building large infrastructures and spending significant amounts of money to purchase other companies and to invest in their own capacities. Far from being mere owners of information, these companies are becoming owners of the infrastructures of society" (Srnicek 2016, p. 92). Because data are now among the fastest-growing extractive resources of our time—monetized for profit—the intersection of these digital platforms can create monopolistic tendencies. We must seek to understand and attempt to untangle the myriad ways in which state power, platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016), policing, and data extraction are tied together in all locales where ethnographers study. It is impossible to research social movements in the online sphere today without contending with the reality that the platforms we use for our everyday communications, from hardware to software to cloud-computing storage, rely on heavy capital investments that tend toward the monopolization of corporate power and the further consolidation of state power over ever-increasing terrains of sociocultural life.

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

Central to these monopolistic tendencies of tech companies is an underlying discourse of colonialism that centers capture, domination, and extraction of data for profit at the expense of the social (Byrd 2014; Chun 2013, 2017, 2021; Crawford 2021; Srinivasan 2017). A welcomed turn from the earlier celebratory research of Internet-as-liberation is a plethora of new work that probes the structures of power at the intersection of technology, capital, and governance (Benjamin 2019, Crawford 2021, Noble 2018, O'Neil 2016, Kantayya 2020). As algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI), and big data consume more of our world, researchers are pointing to the immense capital required to build these systems to scale and to "optimize" them, whereby they "are ultimately designed to serve existing dominant interests" (Crawford 2021, p. 8). These technological systems, in effect, are registries of power: "This is a digital revolution affecting billions of people around the world but one that has no master plan except the corporate pursuit of monopolistic profits and the state's pursuit of 'security' in an age of counterterror" (Masco 2019, p. 129). Big data, algorithms, and AI are intimately tied to national security in nations around the world, with crucial repercussions for social movements and the communities to which they belong, an arena where anthropologists can offer more insights.

These technologies are built with the logics of capital, policing, and militarization, which particularly ensnare marginalized and racialized communities (Benjamin 2019, Byrd 2014, Crawford 2021, Chun 2021, Noble 2018, O'Neil 2016, Tawil-Souri 2012). Within the context of the United States and US-based tech companies (the largest in the world), these technologies are always imbricated in anti-Blackness, leading to "algorithms of oppression" (Noble 2018) and a "new Jim Code" (Benjamin 2019), with far-reaching consequences for Black communities throughout the world, which further reinforce global racial capitalism and the systems of incarceration that it necessitates.

As Nelson et al. (2001) note, "Contests around technology are always linked to larger struggles for economic mobility, political maneuvering, and community building." Given that the technologies we use every day (whether actively or passively) require so much money to create, sustain, update, optimize, and scale, "the infrastructures and forms of power that enable and are enabled. . .skew strongly toward the centralization of control" (Crawford 2021, p. 223). Masco (2019) argues, "A striking aspect of our age is that radical (even world historical) infrastructural changes in everyday life are now achieved with a remarkable quietude in the social, political, and legal arenas, raising fundamental questions about the interactions of statecraft, commerce, technology, and citizenship" (p. 126). As such, our research needs to take seriously not only how people in communities use these technologies in their everyday lives, but also the larger fields of power in which they are embedded.

Surveillance has become a major issue for social movements today as many of us carry surveillance machines (smartphones) with us on a daily basis and live in societies that increasingly use biodata and artificial intelligence to surveil and categorize people (Nair 2021). States and corporations use the logics of visuality, particularly photography and video, for the surveillance of citizens broadly, and social movements specifically. When the Iranian state security services began to use Facebook to uncover activist networks and imprison protestors in their repression of the 2009 Green Movement, social movement participants began to use message-to-message apps such as Viber, Telegram, and eventually WhatsApp and Signal in increasing frequency (Bajoghli 2014). This issue has only gotten worse over the ensuing decade. With "networks" as the prevailing logic of both social movements and social media (Chun 2017, Juris 2012), state security forces now seek to confiscate as many smartphones as possible during social movement uprisings to better target activists and their networks.

Because user data are among the most sought-after resources of our day, social media users—especially those of the younger digital native generations—have become accustomed to, as well

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

as seduced by, the deliberately built-in logics of habituation and addiction of the platforms themselves, to share more of their lives online. Even when people opt out of these platforms, more of our lives become digitized every year, and social media apps and websites collect far more data on us today than in the past. As Srinivasan (2017) writes, "Ninety-nine percent of the world's population remains excluded from most decisions made around the future of the Internet and digital technology. Billions of people are therefore treated as passive users" (p. 1).

This finding has raised alarm bells from privacy advocates and has led to crucial scholarship on surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and the plethora of ways that our data are used to harm us (Benjamin 2019, O'Neil 2016). Today, even message-to-message encrypted apps are no longer safe, as the controversy surrounding the commercialization of the Israeli NSO reveals. Israel, the "start-up nation," has commercialized its "digital occupation" (Tawil-Souri 2012) of Palestinians and exports it on an international scale. Today, this technology is for sale and available to state and nonstate actors. Drones and ubiquitous facial recognition technology now regularly not only monitor protests but also are used to identify where protestors live. As Chun (2017) argues, "[S]urveillance is now coproduced transnationally by states and private corporations" (p. x).

A growing body of research in anthropology and adjacent fields explores how states use visual media to brand "the nation" and induce loyalty (Wong et al. 2021). Militaries use visual advertising and marketing logics in spaces such as Instagram to promote sanitized violence and keep "open secrets," seducing citizens to partake in "digital militarism" (Kuntsman & Stein 2015). Digital militarism is "the process by which digital communication platforms and consumer practices have, over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, become militarized tools at the hands of state and nonstate actors, both in the field of military operations and in civilian frameworks" (Kuntsman & Stein 2015, p. 6). The turn toward the creation of nationalist messages of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, from films to music videos, to seemingly independent Internet channels, is meant to make claims about "internal enemies," draw clear "us versus them" lines, and sow distrust toward activists and their social movements (Bajoghli 2019). The production of these media is intimately tied up with questions of state power and the intentions to break down formations of solidarity against the status quo. In Latin America, the Colombian military's use of advertising agencies to target guerrilla fighters, in the hopes of demobilizing them, makes branding a mode of governance in the twenty-first century, that is "propaganda was no longer an ancillary dimension to the armed conflict, but rather a central axis" (Fattal 2018, p. 68). In the United States, the Pentagon has had a years-long close relationship with platforms such as Twitter, which aided the US Department of Defense in its covert online propaganda campaigns (Fang 2022).

As more of the social movements of the twenty-first century utilize the Internet in some capacity, governments, political parties, and opposition groups have created virtual troll armies that inundate online spaces to either counter narratives or advance their own narratives and silence others (Honari & Alinejad 2022). In such an environment, some voices are targeted severely by bots and trolls, and the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories has led to deep polarization in societies around the world. As Chakravartty & Roy (2015) argue, "The successful exercise in rebranding Modi demonstrates that the limitlessness of the Internet can also be leveraged for its unique technological properties of *silence and erasure*" (p. 318, emphasis in original), that is the invisibility and invisibilization of communities and movements suppressed by power (Hampton et al. 2017). The censorship of social movements today is increasingly enacted by spreading disinformation and flooding platforms with too much information, thus creating an overall sense of confusion and exhaustion. As Masco (2019) asks, "What is an informed voter in a world where news has been flattened into competing digital propaganda campaigns?" (p. 128). The ultimate goal is to diffuse attention, thereby making a sustained movement for change—or

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

even engagement in a democratic politics—that much more difficult to achieve, especially when activists are either spread out geographically or their in-person organizing is too dangerous in certain repressive environments (Bishara 2022).

A growing field of study is the proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories in the current media environment and how they contend with the "WhatsApp-ification" and "YouTube extremism" of sociopolitical life in places such as Brazil, Sri Lanka, and the Mexico-US border and within the United States (Mould 2018). Because contestations over truth and facts are always shaped by power and politics (Arendt 1967), the battles over truth today are as much about silencing as they are about amplifying (Greenhouse 2019, Ho & Cavanaugh 2019). In this environment,

> One of meme culture's greatest strengths—its ability to shape and remake images and imbue them with powerful symbology—is also one of its greatest weaknesses: so easily co-opted and transformed into something new, or so many new things that people become fatigued trying to learn the truth. And in the end, the very idea of truth is called into question. (Mina 2019, p. 118)

This interplay between states and social movements, or among states that seek to manipulate social movements, is not new, but how it manifests itself in today's media worlds deserves attention and further research. In the arena of international relations and foreign policy, online worlds becoming a main part of the terrain of destabilization of societies and targeting of communities is now being called hybrid war. Anthropologists must examine the ways in which digitized visual media are weaponized to further polarize adversary societies through psyops. Digitally networked public spheres have a very low bar of entry and can be easily manipulated by bot armies, trolls, and special interest groups/money. It is much easier and cheaper today to utilize media to sow discord and manipulate people. How are the confluence of online trolls and bot armies, the muddying of truth, the spread of mis- and disinformation, and the increased polarization of society impacting the communities that anthropologists study?

As we have witnessed with the stolen election claims and ensuing violence in the United States and Brazil, this phenomenon circulates on and is reinforced by television networks, their entertainment news, and their online worlds. In those cases, unfounded claims of voter fraud circulated online and offline at rapid speed. The violence targeted at state institutions, with narratives of "us versus them," drives vitriol and hate. These movements are driven by dark money, and they employ right-wing vigilantes and garner police compliance. Similar dynamics are at play in other locales, and the confluence of these factors deserves close study by anthropologists who can help illuminate how and why these processes unfold, in both right-wing movements and the movements resisting them.

More research is needed to complicate the binary of free Internet in democracy and closed Internet in authoritarian states. Platforms such as Twitter and Meta are de-emphasizing certain social movements in their algorithms; these platforms are also increasingly deplatforming independent journalists who are critical of US national security interests and blocking news and cultural sites from nations that are considered adversaries of the United States. As the Internet becomes the prime battleground in hybrid wars, states of all kinds are restricting access and drawing redlines on what (and who) is permissible. Other research that needs further consideration by ethnographers includes the role of state and private funding for the creation and circulation of opposition media outlets. States such as the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, the United Kingdom, and Qatar, as well as private investors and individuals, invest significant amounts of money every year for the creation and maintenance of expensive media companies aimed at states they seek to weaken. These outlets also become an important avenue for exiled social movement activists/organizers and journalists to continue to be in touch with their home

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

communities, thus occupying fraught spaces that can help us more critically understand not only the relationship between online and offline media but also the blurring of lines between what constitutes media employed by states and media employed by social movements.

CONCLUSION

Although the confluence of visual media, social movements, and hegemonic power has often resulted in corporations and states amassing power exponentially at the expense of movements, there are crucial (and more frequent) uprisings that spill forth a "creative insurgency" (Kraidy 2016), while the technologies themselves often fail, break down, and leak, pointing to glimpses of visions for a politics-as-otherwise from the status quo. Despite the discourses of tech and computers as "all knowing" and AI as developing at such rapid speeds that robots will one day outpace humans, the reality is that technology is actually embodied and material, and it requires legions of "ghost workers" (Gray & Suri 2019) around the world to make it come across as seemingly flawless. In these dynamics, the production, circulation, and consumption of visual (and other) media by social movements and those in positions of power are always fraught and unstable, and no outcome is guaranteed.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Bambi Schieffelin, Faye Ginsburg, Amahl Bishara, Cheryl Furjanic, and Susan Frekko for their various forms of support throughout the different stages of writing this article.

LITERATURE CITED

Allen L. 2020. *A History of False Hope: Investigative Commissions in Palestine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press

Allen LA. 2009. Martyred bodies in the media: human rights, aesthetics, and the politics of immediation in the Palestinian Intifada. *Am. Ethnol.* 36(1):161–80

Arendt H. 1967. *Truth and Politics*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press

Azoulay A. 2012. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. New York: Verso Books

Azoulay AA. 2019. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. New York: Verso Books

Bajoghli N. 2014. Digital technology as surveillance: the Green Movement in Iran. In *Wired Citizenship: Youth Learning and Activism in the Middle East*, ed. L Herrera, pp. 180–94. New York: Routledge

Bajoghli N. 2019. *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press

Benjamin R. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Books

Bessire L, Fisher D, eds. 2012. *Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sound in the 21st Century*. New York: NYU Press

Besteman C, Gusterson H, eds. 2019. *Life by Algorithms: How Roboprocesses Are Remaking Our World*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press

Bishara AA. 2022. *Crossing a Line: Laws, Violence, and Roadblocks to Palestinian Political Expression*. Stanford University Press

Boellstorff T. 2016. For whom the ontology turns: theorizing the digital real. *Curr. Anthropol.* 57(4):387–407

Bonilla Y, Rosa J. 2015. #Ferguson: digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *Am. Ethnol.* 42(1):4–17

Boyko K, Horbyk R. 2022. A medium is born: participatory media and the rise of Clubhouse in Russia and Ukraine during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Baltic Screen Media Rev.* 10(1):8–28

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

Byrd JA. 2014. Tribal 2.0: digital natives, political players, and the power of stories. *Stud. Am. Indian Lit.* 26(2):55–64

Castells M. 2015. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley

Chakravartty P, Roy S. 2015. Mr. Modi goes to Delhi: mediated populism and the 2014 Indian elections. *Telev. New Media* 16(4):311–22

Chun WHK. 2013. *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Chun WHK. 2017. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Chun WHK. 2021. *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Coleman EG. 2013. *Coding Freedom: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Hacking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press

Coleman G. 2014. *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*. London: Verso Books

Córdova A. 2014. Reenact, reimagine: performative indigenous documentaries of Bolivia and Brazil. In *New Documentaries in Latin America*, ed. V Navarro, JC Rodríguez, pp. 123–44. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Crawford K. 2021. *Atlas of AI*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press

Crawford MB. 2015. Introduction: attention as a cultural problem. In *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, pp. 3–29. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1st ed.

Dahlgren P. 2009. *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press

Davis A. 2016. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Chicago: Haymarket Books

Der Derian J. 2009. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*. Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis

Fang L. 2022. Twitter aided the Pentagon in its covert online propaganda campaign. *Intercept*, Dec. 20. **https://theintercept.com/2022/12/20/twitter-dod-us-military-accounts/**

Fattal AL. 2018. *Guerrilla Marketing: Counterinsurgency and Capitalism in Colombia*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press

Feliciano-Santos S. 2021. Of cops and "Karens": language and the bureaucratic arm of policing. *J. Linguist. Anthropol.* 31(2):261–66

Fernandes S. 2017. *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press

Flamenbaum RN. 2022. "Am I your coequal?!": memes and changing meanings in the digital subversion of Ghanaian hierarchies. *Signs Soc.* 10(2):215–38

Geismar H, Knox H, eds. 2021. *Digital Anthropology*. New York: Routledge. 2nd ed.

Ginsburg F. 2021. Disability in the digital age. See Geismar & Knox 2021, pp. 101–36

Ginsburg FD, Lughod LA, Larkin B, eds. 2002. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press

Goggin G, Newell C. 2003. *Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

Goodwin C. 1994. Professional vision. *Am. Anthropol.* 96:606–33

Gray ML, Suri S. 2019. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Gray PA. 2016. Memory, body, and the online researcher: following Russian street demonstrations via social media. *Am. Ethnol.* 43(3):500–10

Greenhouse CJ. 2019. "This is not normal": Are social facts finished? *Am. Anthropol.* 121:167–70

Gürsel ZD. 2012. The politics of wire service photography: infrastructures of representation in a digital newsroom. *Am. Ethnol.* 39(1):71–89

Hampton KN, Shin I, Lu W. 2017. Social media and political discussion: when online presence silences offline conversation. *Inf. Commun. Soc.* 20:1090–107

Ho K, Cavanaugh JR. 2019. What happened to social facts? *Am. Anthropol.* 121:160–67

Honari A, Alinejad D. 2022. Online performance of civic participation: what bot-like activity in the Persian language Twittersphere reveals about political manipulation mechanisms. *Telev. New Media* 23(8):917–38

Juris JS. 2008. *Networking Futures: The Movements Against Corporate Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

Juris JS. 2012. Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *Am. Ethnol.* 39(2):259–79

Kantayya S, dir. 2020. *Coded Bias*. Film, 85 min. **https://www.codedbias.com/about**

Kisin E. 2013. Unsettling the contemporary: critical indigeneity and resources in art. *Settl. Colon. Stud.* 3(2):141–56

Kraidy MM. 2016. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press

Kuntsman A, Stein RL. 2015. Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press

Lukács G. 2021. Internet memes as protest media in populist Hungary. *Vis. Anthropol. Rev.* 37:52–76

Masco J. 2019. Ubiquitous surveillance. See Besteman & Gusterson 2019, pp. 125–44

McIntosh J. 2022. The sinister signs of QAnon: interpretive agency and paranoid truths in alt-right oracles. *Anthropol. Today* 38(1):8–12

Merry S. 2019. Controlling numbers: how quantification shapes the world. See Besteman & Gusterson 2019, pp. 145–64

Mina AX. 2019. *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power*. Boston: Beacon Books

Mottahedeh N. 2015. *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press

Mould T. 2018. Introduction to the special issue on fake news: definitions and approaches. *J. Am. Folk.* 131(522):371–78

Nair V. 2021. Becoming data: biometric IDs and the individual in 'digital India.' *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.* 27(S1):26–42

Nelson A, Tu T, Hines AH. 2001. *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*. New York: NYU Press

Noble SU. 2018. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press

O'Neil C. 2016. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. New York: Crown

Orlowski J, dir. 2018. *The Social Dilemma*. Film, 94 min, Exposure Labs, Boulder, CO. **https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/**

Osman W. 2020. *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*. Urbana: Univ. Ill. Press

Parikh S, Kwon JB. 2020. Crime seen. *Am. Ethnol.* 47:128–38

Pedersen M, Albris K, Seaver N. 2021. The political economy of attention. *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 50:309–25

Postill J. 2014. Democracy in an age of viral reality: a media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement. *Ethnography* 15(1):51–69

Postill J. 2018. Populism and social media: a global perspective. *Media Cult. Soc.* 40(5):754–65

Potts R. 2019. *Black box: televisual sovereignty and the politics of value at National Indigenous Television (NITV)*. PhD Diss., New York Univ.

Radcliffe D. 2021. Audio chatrooms like Clubhouse have become the hot new media by tapping into the age-old appeal of the human voice. *Conversation*, Feb. 25. **https://theconversation.com/audio-chatrooms-like-clubhouse-have-become-the-hot-new-media-by-tapping-into-the-age-old-appeal-of-the-human-voice-155444**

Reich JA. 2015. Old methods and new technologies: social media and shifts in power in qualitative research. *Ethnography* 16(4):394–415

Ritchin F. 2009. *After Photography*. New York: Norton

Ritchin F. 2013. *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen*. New York: Aperture

Srinivasan R. 2017. *Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World*. New York: NYU Press

Srinivasan R. 2019. *Beyond the Valley: How Innovators Around the World are Overcoming Inequality and Creating the Technologies of Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Srnicek N. 2016. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity

Stein RL. 2021a. "The boy who wasn't really killed": Israeli state violence in the age of the smartphone witness. *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* 53(4):620–38

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)
IP: 3.22.248.208
On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35

Stein RL. 2021b. *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press
Stephen L. 2012. Community and Indigenous radio in Oaxaca: testimony and participatory democracy. See Bessire & Fisher 2012, pp. 124–41
Tawil-Souri H. 2012. Digital occupation: Gaza's high-tech enclosure. *J. Palest. Stud.* 41(2):27–43
Tufekci Z. 2017. *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press
Wang D, Liu S. 2021. Doing ethnography on social media: a methodological reflection on the study of online groups in China. *Qual. Inq.* 27(8–9):977–87
Wedeen L. 2019. *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
Wong J, Lee C, Long VK, Wu D, Jones GM. 2021. "Let's go, baby forklift!": fandom governance and the political power of cuteness in China. *Soc. Media + Soc.* 7(2). **https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211024960**
Wu T. 2016. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. New York: Knopf Press
Zuboff S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs

Downloaded from www.annualreviews.org.
Guest (guest)

On: Sat, 27 Apr 2024 21:55:35