

*Annual Review of Sociology*

# Contemporary Social Movements in a Hybrid Media Environment

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Annu. Rev. Sociol. 2020. 46:443–65

First published as a Review in Advance on April 29, 2020

The *Annual Review of Sociology* is online at [soc.annualreviews.org](http://soc.annualreviews.org)

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054627>

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## Keywords

social movements, media, social media

## Abstract

Media are central to the dynamics of protest and social movements. Contemporary social movements face a shifting environment composed of new media technologies and platforms that enable new identities, organizational forms, and practices. We review recent research focusing on the ways in which movements shape and are shaped by the media environment and the ways in which changes in the media environment have reshaped participation, mobilization, and impacts of activism. We conclude with the following recommendations for scholarship in this burgeoning area: move toward a broader conception of media in movements; expand engagement with scholarship in neighboring disciplines that study politics, media, and communication; develop new methodological and analytical skills for emerging forms of media; and investigate the ways in which media are enhancing, altering, or undermining the ability of movements to mobilize support, shape broader identities and attitudes, and secure new advantages from targets and authorities.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of print and mass literacy, movements have been intertwined with media for more than 200 years, shaping the ways in which groups mobilize as well as the broader consequences of movements (Tarrow 2011, Tilly 1982). Social movements have coevolved with media, as well as with states and markets. By employing pamphlets to circulate movement ideas to constituents and mass newspapers to chronicle demonstrations and demands, movements such as abolition, labor, suffrage, and temperance established national and transnational movements that came to shape the modern world (King & Haveman 2008). Through mass media, movements were able to knit together broad constituencies, build organizations, secure legitimacy, and advance agendas that vied for power.

Throughout the twentieth century, movements adapted and innovated using new media technologies and forms that altered the capacities of movements to mobilize and amplify their claims. The telephone, radio, photography, and, most importantly, television provided new ways for activists to communicate their claims to one another and to broader audiences (Roscigno & Danaher 2001, Seguin 2016). Here, too, movements like the Indian independence movement or the US Civil Rights movement leveraged media to build support and advance movement goals (Scalmer 2013, Torres 2003).

Of course, more often than not, news media have constrained movements by depriving activists of broader platforms and by ignoring, marginalizing, or undercutting their claims. Although movements may provide appealing stories for journalists and the broader public, movements compete with one another and many other, more powerful actors to secure attention and shape the public agenda (Ferree et al. 2002). Gamson & Wolfsfeld (1993) argued that media could facilitate movement mobilization, legitimacy, and the scope of conflict. However, they described the relationship as asymmetric because movements depend on media more than the reverse.

In recent years, the growth of the internet and new forms of digital media have dramatically reshaped the media environment for social movements and raised new questions for scholars about this key relationship (Earl 2018, Rohlinger & Corrigan-Brown 2018). The early use of networked media by the Zapatista movement to build transnational support was an important harbinger. Numerous recent movements, including Occupy Wall Street (OWS), the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, and Black Lives Matter (BLM), have been organized through digital media (Castells 2015, Freelon et al. 2016, Gaby & Caren 2016, Howard 2010, Tufekci & Wilson 2012).

Initial investigations of new technology and media forms identified important characteristics of this emerging landscape that differed from earlier periods. These include (a) the rapid speed of communication, (b) the ability to deliberate and coordinate activity without physical copresence, and (c) the capacity for many-to-many communication (Earl & Kimport 2011, Shirky 2008). These changes may allow for mobilization with greater speed and on a greater scale and may have the potential to enhance, alter, or undercut movement efficacy (Schrader 2019, Tufekci 2017). Direct communication has blurred strong boundaries between producers and consumers of media that defined earlier models of news. Taken together, these changes have altered the ways in which activists might mobilize and communicate with one another and with broader audiences. By reducing the costs associated with some earlier forms of organizing, new media may facilitate activism that is more nimble, more participatory, and less dependent on traditional media gatekeepers to reach supporters and targets.

Some of the early and most optimistic analyses imagined a fundamental disjuncture between the present and the past in terms of the relationship between media and movements. Castells (2015), for example, argues that we have moved into an “information society” as a major societal transformation. Drawing strong distinctions between online and offline activism, some scholars

have highlighted the ways in which new media technology would advantage progressive movements, enabling broader cultural and political change (Castells 2015, Shirky 2008). Others, however, increasingly worried about the potential of new media to exacerbate inequalities (Schradie 2019), generate thin forms of “clicktivism” (Shulman 2009), and enhance the capacities for surveillance and repression of movements (King et al. 2013, Tufekci 2017).

Another central development concerns the rise of right-wing media as an important component of the contemporary media environment. Although partisan media have a long history (Starr 2005), contemporary right-wing media platforms are distinct in being highly networked and insular, facilitating the circulation of propaganda (Benkler et al. 2018). Some key right-wing media platforms, including talk radio, Fox News, and conservative Christian media networks, predate the rise of the internet and social media (Jamieson & Cappella 2008). By circulating its message to a small but highly politically engaged subset of the population (Prior 2013), right-wing media infrastructure has important consequences for contemporary movements and politics more broadly.

With 20 years of sustained research and analysis, scholarship has moved beyond initial formulations. The contemporary or hybrid media environment, encompassing both new digital and traditional legacy media forms, continues to be transformed as legacy media and social movements have adapted to these new digital technologies (Chadwick 2017). Movement forms have become more diverse, deploying a wide range of strategies and tactics to build movements and pursue broader change. Some rely heavily on new media and accompanying technologies exclusively, while others blend newer forms with long-standing organizational forms and strategies (Rucht 2004).

## HOW MOVEMENTS USE MEDIA AND SHAPE THEIR MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Social movements draw on and adapt to prevailing forms of media to pursue a variety of purposes. We can distinguish between the ways in which movements employ media (*a*) for internal movement building and (*b*) to advance external goals of communicating with broader audiences (Karpf 2016). Internal forms of media allow activists to coordinate action, share information about events and developments, build collective identity, and create a more robust movement culture. Externally, media can allow communication with latent supporters, bystanders, and targets, thereby helping movements expand mobilization, win legitimacy for the movement’s cause, and enlarge the scope of conflict by bringing movement claims to a wider audience (Andrews & Biggs 2006, Vliegthart et al. 2005).

Social movements create independent forms of communication to circulate ideas and information through activist organizations and networks. These include newsletters, magazines, and newspapers that chronicle the activities of movement actors and debate central ideas. Movement media also include literature, music, and documentary films that are shared among participants and convey movement ideas and frames (Isaac 2009, Roscigno & Danaher 2001, Vasi et al. 2015). In recent years, blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, podcasts, and more have been incorporated into the tool kit. In addition to distributing information, these forms of media can be used to facilitate online and offline participation and organizing (Earl et al. 2010). Undoubtedly, these media circulate well beyond the boundaries of movements, too, but the key point is that movements have long traditions of producing independent media.

Moreover, engagement with a movement’s media is one of the major ways that participants forge deep connections to a movement’s cause and help bridge connections with other participants (Rohlinger & Bunnage 2018). Social movement online communities have become an important

site of activist identity formation and recruitment (Caren et al. 2012) for many movements, including feminism (Crossley 2015), the Indignados movement (Anduiza et al. 2014), men's rights (Dignam & Rohlinger 2019), and white supremacy (Futrell & Simi 2004). Discussion forums and related settings provide a kind of digital free space where activists and movement sympathizers interact, allowing for the development of movement ideas and the recruitment of new participants (Caren et al. 2012).

Movement-generated media can also facilitate mobilization when activists use tools to plan, coordinate, and carry out actions or when protest diffuses through a movement's communication networks. Vasi & Suh (2016) find that the establishment of proximate Facebook and Twitter accounts connected to OWS preceded the onset of local encampments. Activists use a variety of online tools to mobilize. Earl & Kimport (2011) differentiate between e-mobilizations (e.g., use of online tools to coordinate participation in a march), e-tactics (e.g., online petitions), and e-movements (e.g., strategic voting). Movements employ a diverse set of strategic approaches to engage and shape media. This has always been the case but is especially salient in the hybrid media environment. Movements, organizations, and activists orient themselves to media as part of their broader strategic orientation, and we distinguish between three major forms: (a) disruptive/dramaturgical, relying on tactics such as mass demonstrations or civil disobedience; (b) authoritative/professional, as when activists build standing as experts in a domain or as visible spokespersons of a constituency; and (c) dissident/counternetworks, as when movements seek to bypass mainstream news media and to build independent channels of communication.

In the first approach, movements regularly seek media attention to reach broader audiences by organizing demonstrations that display support for a cause and amplify movement claims. Tilly (2004) introduced the concept of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) to highlight the performative qualities of protest that enhance its ability to communicate to broader audiences (Benford & Hunt 1992). The core idea is that protest constitutes a form of communication that projects through the words and symbols activists display as well as through their behavior. This approach has motivated substantial research as one of the main ways in which movements attempt to strategically engage media (Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2012, Walgrave & Vliegenthart 2012). Movements may fail to secure interest from external media (Sobieraj 2011), and leaders and organizations may become newsworthy for their notoriety, leading to media coverage that attacks movement claims or legitimates repression (Gitlin 2003, Seguin 2016).

In the second strategic approach, movement actors attempt to establish themselves as prominent organizations and leaders. Thus, movement leaders or organizations may be sought for their perspective on an issue or in the context of movement-initiated activities such as holding a press conference or issuing a report. Movement actors may establish their newsworthiness independently of protest and disruption. Prominent organizations may capture significant attention by establishing themselves as an authoritative source or representing a perspective or constituency that journalists value. Here, movements are most likely to prevail when they represent large constituencies, have formal staff, and are linked to major policy domains that are the object of routine media attention (Amenta & Elliott 2017, Andrews & Caren 2010, Elliott et al. 2016). Some movements develop media strategies focused on building relationships with reporters, hire professional media staff, and implement broader training related to media (Karpf 2012, Rohlinger 2014, Ryan et al. 2005).

Finally, dissident/counternetworks emerge when movements are excluded from or seek to bypass mainstream news media (Rohlinger 2014). Davidson & Berezin (2018) provide a case study examining how far-right social media users in the United Kingdom were able to produce an anti-Islamic shift in a major political party despite lack of visibility in the media and little elite support. Drawing on their analysis of OWS, Bennett et al. (2014) develop a broader theoretical argument

explaining the mechanisms that allow crowds to coordinate collective action during periods of heightened protest. Activists use social media technologies to support “stitching,” thereby linking distinct networks or layers of preexisting communication networks. Specifically, they argue that mobilization requires production, curation, and dynamic integration to bring coherence to the movement’s arguments and activities.

A prominent aspect of the movement–media relationship concerns the way in which mainstream media outlets cover protest. Scholarship on this relationship includes numerous efforts to gauge the sources of bias in media reporting (Earl et al. 2004, Ortiz et al. 2005). This line of research has shown that newspapers report on a small fraction of protests and have relatively consistent patterns of coverage bias. These include proximity to news agencies, news-gathering routines, event size, disruptiveness, and whether issues overlap with topics of concern to journalists (Barranco & Wisler 1999, Davenport 2009, Earl et al. 2004, Hug & Wisler 1998, Maney & Oliver 2001, McCarthy et al. 1996, Myers & Caniglia 2004, Oliver & Myers 1999). Another body of research in this vein consists of political communications studies on how mainstream news delegitimizes activists and protest grievances through the protest paradigm framework. Such studies largely find that news coverage of protest highlights the spectacle of the event itself and disparages its participants as ineffective while leaving out major details about the issues and grievances that activists want to be covered (Boyle et al. 2012, Lee 2014, McLeod 2007, McLeod & Detenber 1999).

For all of these pathways, media mentions of an event’s, organization’s, or movement’s focal issue does not mean, however, that their treatment will be substantive or that they will adopt the frame of the movement (Sobieraj 2011). A paradox is that while radical tactics, especially those that result in arrests, are more likely to achieve coverage (Amenta et al. 2009), the news stories themselves are often framed as law-and-order issues, rather than the movement’s claims or focal issues (Gitlin 2003). Issue coverage after the movement can also turn negative, as when, for example, English-language newspapers increasingly referred to immigrants as a cultural threat after immigration-rights marches (López-Sanders & Brown 2019).

There are only a few pathways to plentiful, favorable social movement coverage, with results contingent on movement organizational characteristics, tactics, and the media and political environment (Amenta et al. 2019). Movements may have the greatest impact on the shape of coverage when the target is otherwise marginal, as they have less competition in claims making. Amnesty International press releases had the most success in framing human rights abuses in less-noticed countries (Ramos et al. 2007). In contrast, OWS had little direct influence over the inequality discourse after the occupations, as more central political actors, such as politicians and think tanks, were active claims makers (Gaby & Caren 2016).

Recent research has looked at the interactions between the practices of news organizations, political context, and social movement characteristics to explain variation in the volume and types of coverage (Amenta et al. 2019, Elliott et al. 2016). Like political mediation models, this line of research sees media coverage not as the result of specific organizational properties but rather as resulting from configurations of movement, media, and political environment. While organizations with resources may be able to routinely secure coverage through the disruptive or authoritative path, resource-poor organizations must rely on disruption, and even then they succeed only during periods of crisis (Elliott et al. 2016).

There is some evidence that media attention to a movement’s activity and claims can shift the political agenda, although this relationship has been examined in only a few studies. The best evidence comes from two studies (De Bruycker 2019, Walgrave & Vliegthart 2012) that compared protest impact across different issues; both found that coverage is a clear route to increasing issue prominence among elected officials, although that may be contingent on movement frames.

De Bruycker (2019) found that across multiple policy domains, media attention allowed main-stream advocacy groups to expand their audience, but the groups had an influence on policy only when the frames being promoted were broad (e.g., “citizen”) rather than narrow (e.g., “transport worker”).

Taken together, movements employ media in a variety of ways that are consequential for their internal dynamics and oriented toward external audiences of bystanders, authorities, and targets. Moreover, engagement with media is connected fundamentally to broader strategic orientations and practices of activists and movement organizations (Rohlinger & Corrigan-Brown 2018).

## CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Contemporary movements have adapted in varying ways to social media as part of the hybrid media environment. In this section, we review emerging research on how social movements engage with new technologies and platforms. We find that social media platforms have become an increasingly routine part of the tool kit for contemporary social movements alongside broader public adoption of underlying technologies (Earl 2018). We highlight key findings based on four movements central to recent scholarship: the Arab Spring, OWS, BLM, and far-right movements. We focus on these movements because of their broad reach across national settings, diverse political stances, and racial/ethnic lines, as well as extensive scholarship that emerged from each. The vast majority of research on these movements and social media has focused on Twitter, Facebook, and to a lesser degree YouTube.

Research on all four of these movements reveals three main ways movements have used social media: mobilizing offline protests or online actions through weak ties, sustaining online communities and collective identities to be used for political mobilization, and proliferating sympathetic movement frames and messaging to counter mainstream narratives about movement issues. Selected studies illustrating these themes are summarized in **Table 1** and expanded on below.

We identify a vast variety of uses of social media. For Arab Spring protests, social media served as important communicative channels to build transnational networks between local activists and Western journalists and audiences (Hermida et al. 2014, Robertson 2015). OWS activists employed social media through promovement messaging and mobilizing on-the-ground protests in conjunction with occupations around the United States (Juris 2012, Vasi & Suh 2016). #BlackLivesMatter established online spaces of hashtag activism that spilled over into intersectional forms of hashtag activism such as #SayHerName (Brown et al. 2017). Research on far-right

**Table 1** Examples of research of contemporary movements on social media

	Online and offline mobilization	Online communities and identities	Online discourse
Arab Spring	Lim (2012), Tufekci & Wilson (2012)	Abul-Fottouh & Fetner (2018)	Harlow & Johnson (2011)
Occupy Wall Street	Bastos et al. (2015), Vasi & Suh (2016)	Barberá et al. (2015), Gaby & Caren (2016), Juris (2012), Thorson et al. (2013)	Bayerl & Stoyanov (2016), Gaby & Caren (2016), Mausolf (2017)
Black Lives Matter	De Choudhury et al. (2016), Freelon et al. (2018)	Jackson & Foucault Welles (2016)	Bonilla & Rosa (2015), Brown et al. (2017), Gallagher et al. (2018)
Far-right movements	Davidson & Berezin (2018)	Caren et al. (2012), Dignam & Rohlinger (2019), Lyons (2017), Massanari (2017)	Bail (2012)

movements identifies ways in which far-right activists strategically deploy covert and overt racist and sexist narratives to politicize preexisting online communities, such as men's rights subreddits and online gaming forums (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016, Dignam & Rohlinger 2019), and to sustain explicitly white supremacist forums, such as Stormfront (Caren et al. 2012).

The successful use of social media may be moderated by political opportunities, racial and ethnic contexts, and socioeconomic status. Arab Spring activists encountered higher levels of online surveillance and political repression by their authoritarian governments (Tufekci 2017, Youmans & York 2012). In the United States, minority leaders of racial justice movements, including those of BLM, encountered hostile online resistance similar to a white backlash in social media. Scholars have found that tweets with #BlackLivesMatter hashtags also witnessed major counterhashtags such as #AllLivesMatter, which aimed to deracialize police brutality, and #TCOT (Top Conservatives on Twitter), which aimed to justify police killings of Black people and cast #BlackLivesMatter activists as terrorists (Ray et al. 2017). Schradie (2018) demonstrates that digital activism privileges middle-class-led movement organizations over working-class organizations. We find that social media mobilizations, like those of the traditional protest tactics, are subject to similar constraints and opportunities identified by major social movements theories.

While social media and movements scholarship reveals a wide variety of ways in which activists and movements make use of social media, it has also documented backlash effects. Freelon et al. (2016) find that #BlackLivesMatter hashtag activism quickly generated counteractivism in oppositional hashtags. For Arab Spring activists in repressive states, attention can draw online surveillance and targeted online bans by state agents (Youmans & York 2012). Furthermore, scholarship highlights the fragility of such online networks. Abul-Fottouh & Fetner (2018) found that, following otherwise successful movement outcomes, online networks in Twitter among Egyptian revolutionaries fragmented along ideological lines postrevolution, and in a study of the Britain First movement on Facebook, Davidson & Berezin (2018) found that the far-right movement split with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Finally, scholars diverge in their assessments of the significance attributed to social media.

## Arab Spring

The Arab Spring emerged as prodemocracy protests that spread across the Middle East following the Tunisian revolution in 2010 that toppled Tunisia's dictator. Western journalists emphasized the role of social media in toppling authoritarian regimes, particularly in Egypt (Hounshell 2011). Social media platforms served as important information sources for foreign journalists (Hermida et al. 2014), but they also helped activists connect online to global media sources (Robertson 2015).

The centrality of social media to the Arab Spring has been largely corroborated by scholars who have found that protesters used social media networks to mobilize on-the-ground protests (Lim 2012, Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Nonetheless, social media did not uniformly benefit the movement throughout the Egyptian revolution. Social network analyses between 2011 and 2014 found greater solidarity among activists during the January 2011 Tahrir Square demonstrations and greater ideological fragmentation among leftists, liberals, and Islamists in 2014, following President Mohamed Morsi's overthrow by the Egyptian military (Abul-Fottouh & Fetner 2018). The findings also caution the overemphasis of social media as the critical tool for spreading revolutions. Youmans & York (2012) document cases in which social media platforms took down activist content, whether by violating terms of service (such as posting violent repression by Arab state regimes) or by enabling proregime and state agents to spy on and target specific activists. Furthermore, Holmes (2012) argues that the political weakening of the regime through a coalition between lower and middle classes; refusal of revolutionaries to be cowed by state violence;

creation of nonstate zones of goods, services, and security; and widespread economic strikes, rather than just the savvy use of social media platforms, all converged to help topple the regime.

### Occupy Wall Street

The OWS movement emerged in September 2011, when protesters occupied New York City's Zuccotti Park to protest income inequality and corporate greed in the wake of the 2008 recession. In the weeks that followed, OWS occupations spread across the country and the world (Juris 2012). OWS activists used social media platforms in two main ways, employing media cultures and activist expertise to (a) spread promovement messaging and information and (b) mobilize on-the-ground protests. OWS's nonhierarchical structure enabled activists, some of whom had expertise in media platforms (Costanza-Chock 2012), to participate in content creation, curation, and proliferation (Bennett et al. 2014). OWS's Facebook group enabled and encouraged contributions from any Facebook user as part of its community-generated content (Gaby & Caren 2012). Such material was extremely diverse, ranging from digital images in the form of memes (Bayerl & Stoyanov 2016) to videos of protests (Thorson et al. 2013).

Social network analyses of online platforms reveal the importance of Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in maximizing the reach of movement communication (Barberá et al. 2015, Thorson et al. 2013). Further analyses suggest a core-periphery dynamic in networks, with high participation of a small number of highly interconnected activists interested in domestic politics and foreign social movements (Conover et al. 2013) whose reach ultimately depended on the activation of a low-interest, high number of peripheral Twitter users (Barberá et al. 2015). Such activism can also have a discursive impact on broader political and civil society actors; for example, think tanks, media institutions, and politicians became more likely to talk about economic equality even after OWS subsided (Gaby & Caren 2016, Mausolf 2017).

Quantitative analyses have found a high association between online OWS activity on Facebook and Twitter and mobilization of on-the-ground protests (Bastos et al. 2015, Vasi & Suh 2016), and ethnographic accounts corroborate this use of social media (Juris 2012). Juris (2012) finds that social media platforms under a logic of aggregation served as tools of social networking, enabling microbroadcasting of bits of information to reach and mobilize large numbers of geographically dispersed people. Scholars have recently identified an interactive relationship between social media and state repression, suggesting that the effects of repression can be moderated by the presence of supportive social media accounts (Suh et al. 2017).

### Black Lives Matter

The BLM movement emerged most prominently in the wake of the August 2014 Ferguson uprisings after US police officer Darren Wilson shot to death Black teenager Michael Brown, sparking online backlash and street protests against racism and police brutality. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was created by three Black women in 2013 following the nonindictment of George Zimmerman, who killed Black teenager Trayvon Martin, but the hashtag itself became prominent in 2014 when a grand jury did not indict Wilson (Freelon et al. 2016). Since then, activists have employed #BlackLivesMatter not only to call attention to the disproportionate killings of Black men by law enforcement but also as a broader, "ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise" (Garza 2014). As in other previous movements in the social media age, journalists and scholars emphasized the role of new technologies like cell phone videos and hashtag activism in mobilizing protests and challenging police accounts of events (Antony & Thomas 2010).



While some scholarship has analyzed the mobilizing effects of online political participation in offline protest in the movement (De Choudhury et al. 2016, Freelon et al. 2018), most scholars have researched #BlackLivesMatter in terms of its digital activism, both as an online space for promovement framing that generates public discussion and challenges mainstream discourse on police brutality (Bonilla & Rosa 2015) and for the impact of online activism's effects on media narratives and politicians (Stout et al. 2017). For BLM activists, social media platforms served as spaces for promovement messaging, expressions of solidarity, and reactions to grievances around police brutality (Ince et al. 2017, Jackson & Foucault Welles 2015, LeFebvre & Armstrong 2016, Yang 2015). Once established, other activists sought to expand or challenge the #BlackLivesMatter frame. Brown et al. (2017) note how the intersectional activism around #SayHerName drew attention to police and nonpolice violence against Black women. Many scholars have also compared the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter (Carney 2016, Gallagher et al. 2018). Whereas initial tweets of #AllLivesMatter sought to deracialize police brutality, scholars found that many #BlackLivesMatter users intentionally co-opted #AllLivesMatter to shift social media conversation toward mobilizing for collective calls to action or criticizing attempts to deracialize police brutality (Carney 2016, Freelon et al. 2016, Gallagher et al. 2018).

## Far-Right Movements

Although the far right has a long history in the margins of online and offline spaces, the late 2010s saw a new wave of electoral and movement activism, spurred by the reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama and the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Bobo 2017, Muis & Immerzeel 2017). A precursor of the far-right movement is the eruption of the 2010 Tea Party protests in the United States, which saw immense electoral mobilization from middle-class conservatives against the Obama presidency (Skocpol & Williamson 2016). Tea Party organizations widely employed online media in their activism (Agarwal et al. 2014). Moreover, scholars have provided some evidence to suggest that the social media environment helped some Tea Party activists cultivate online political communities to support the Republican Party in subsequent elections (Rohlinger & Bunnage 2017). The unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election brought public attention to the modern alt-right—an ideology that consolidated strands of traditional conservatives and online communities of white nationalists, antifeminists, and libertarians (Lyons 2017). Scholarship on the far right's use of social media focuses on two topics: (a) the online communities, mostly on Reddit, that have sustained online antifeminist and white nationalist communities that became vital for the far right's resurgence and (b) the influence of the far-right movement on media and political parties.

Although far-right communities became influential across a variety of platforms, different platforms' affordances incentivize overt and covert forms of mobilizing online. Tufekci (2017) notes that platforms like 4chan and Reddit, with easy user creation and anonymity, encourage behaviors that would otherwise be socially ostracizing. This technological-structure pattern of engagement may partly explain, as Owens et al. (2018) point out, the strategic deployment of a "softer side" of narratives that cast the far right as an oppressed minority against a pluralistic, multicultural majority, while within more anonymous platforms they employ offensively vitriolic racist and sexist rhetoric. Such communities include the white nationalist website Stormfront, one of the first major white nationalist websites (Caren et al. 2012), which saw increased activity since the 2008 US election of Barack Obama, the first Black president. Others have studied how social media sites reflect digitally enabled versions of broader patterns of racism and misogyny and present unique opportunities to harass women online (Sobieraj 2018). Communities formed out of the 2014 #Gamergate activism on Reddit and other platforms actively harassed and threatened

female and racial/ethnic minority video game developers (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016, Buyukozturk et al. 2018, Massanari 2017). Dignam & Rohlinger (2019) documented how leaders of the Red Pill subreddit, a men's rights community that purports to expose feminism as oppressive to men, generated political support for Trump during the 2016 presidential election.

Despite the prominent social media presence of these online far-right movements, it is difficult to judge their influence on street protest and electoral political mobilization. Research suggests that these far-right online movements can make their way into mainstream politics and media. Davidson & Berezin (2018) demonstrates substantial rank-and-file member connections between the xenophobic Britain First movement and the Euroskeptic UKIP, even if UKIP leaders publicly rejected Britain First activists. Ultimately, scholarship on far-right activism on social media emphasizes that social media platforms do not themselves support oppressed communities and enhance democracy but rather can be used to further oppress underrepresented communities and support existing structures of power.

## SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Scholars of social movements and social media have focused mostly on activism on Twitter and Facebook and have largely overlooked other platforms, likely due to easier access to data on certain platforms through their application programming interfaces (APIs). This focus becomes increasingly problematic because of selection effects of who participates in these platforms and the ways in which movements use these platforms relative to others forms of social media (Tufekci 2014). Twitter users, for instance, are disproportionately younger, are more educated, and report greater levels of income (Blank 2017). The Pew Research Center's social media use survey (Smith & Anderson 2018) demonstrates that, in 2018, only 24% of Americans used Twitter whereas nearly three-fourths used YouTube and two-thirds used Facebook. There are large generational divides in social media usage, with users between the ages of 18 and 24 reporting significantly greater use of YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter than other age groups. In the following section, we examine scholarship on three major platforms that have been the focus of sustained research—Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—followed by other platforms of interest.

### Twitter

Twitter is the most-studied social media platform for social movements and political communication scholarship. The platform enables users to tweet short messages and share video or photo images with others and embed their tweets with hashtags that group specific posts together. Users can interact with one another by following other users and by liking or retweeting posts. In recent years, social movements have used Twitter to mobilize offline and online political activities. Across a wide variety of social movements, Twitter serves as a public space for promovement messaging and political communication across activists, media figures, journalists, and the public.

Twitter has typically served as a space for hashtag-driven activism in expressions of support for different social causes. Hashtag-driven activism functions not as a site not only for discovery and deliberation of grievances but also for constructing counternarratives to mainstream ones on social issues (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). Examples include forms of consciousness raising in hashtags like #WhyIStayed and #MeToo, by feminist activists and women who shared personal experiences of harassment to counter victim-blaming narratives (Clark 2016, Mendes et al. 2019), and #BlackLivesMatter, which expressed outrage at police brutality against Black Americans (Ince et al. 2017, LeFebvre & Armstrong 2016). Text, videos, and images were created and shared in support of such activism (Casas & Williams 2019, Thorson et al. 2013). Twitter itself is well suited to mobilizing weak ties to circulate movement ideas across the Twittersphere (Bennett et al. 2014,

Theocharis 2013, Valenzuela et al. 2018). Hashtags used in combination can also be employed to create ties between different online networks (Tremayne 2014).

Specific hashtags that are shared, however, are vastly subject to change in meaning depending on how users retweet them. Competing hashtags, even if co-occurring in the same tweets, can take on different cultural meanings and discourse, as hashtag definitions are in flux (Pond & Lewis 2017, Yang 2015). Countermovement hashtags like #TCOT emerged to challenge BLM discourse (Ray et al. 2017). Jackson & Foucault Welles (2016) and Horeck (2014) identify examples of hashtag hijacking for activist purposes around police brutality (#myNYPD) and sexual harassment (#AskThicke).

Twitter is also used to sustain social movement online communities (Caren et al. 2012), particularly those from marginalized groups (Williams 2015). Lim (2012) documents that hashtag activism in Egypt helped sustain and expand networks of disaffected Egyptians in the years leading up to the Tahrir Square uprising. Other scholars identify Black Twitter as a counterpublic for mobilizing against racism (Graham & Smith 2016). Other counterpublics include feminist communities organizing against harassment and rape culture (Keller et al. 2018) and around intersectional spaces, for example, Black women around #SayHerName (Brown et al. 2017) and Muslim women around #MuslimWomensDay (Pennington 2018). However, social media activism also lends itself to far-right and conservative movements, like #Gamergate and the alt-right (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016, Lyons 2017, Schradie 2019).

Research also demonstrates that hashtag activism and public discourse on Twitter can affect mainstream forms of media. Graeff et al.'s (2014) study on broadcast and newspaper coverage of Trayvon Martin's death suggests that social media and nonprofessional activists can influence news story framing. Tweets by social movement actors are used as data sources for journalists to shed light on alternative sources of opinion (Hermida et al. 2014). Activists can use Twitter to share news with the public directly, thereby challenging mainstream media's gatekeeping role (Poell & Borra 2012).

Scholarship has demonstrated that Twitter can be used to organize and amplify messages about offline protests, although proving a causal relationship remains elusive. Theocharis et al.'s (2015) study on three antiausterity movements in the United States, Spain, and Greece finds that while most Twitter discourse was used for protest information diffusion and political discussions, social movement actors were more likely than other users to make explicit calls for mobilization. Further studies find significant statistical effects; for example, online activity on Twitter is highly associated with the spread of offline protests in a wide variety of movements, including OWS, BLM, and antifracking (Bastos et al. 2015, De Choudhury et al. 2016, Segerberg & Bennett 2011, Vasi & Suh 2016, Vasi et al. 2015). Valenzuela's (2013) survey of Chilean youth activists amid massive demonstrations in 2011 finds that activists on Twitter expressed political opinions and responded to direct calls for mobilization.

## Facebook

Facebook is the second-most-studied platform for researchers of social movements. Overall, research on how movements use Facebook focuses on how Facebook pages and groups engage audiences, demonstrates strong associations of online and offline protest activities across individuals and movements, and highlights different ways Facebook can sustain social movement online communities.

Much online activism on Facebook is governed by the use of public or private Facebook pages and groups, which allows individual users to like or follow them to stay updated on the news and information that these organizations proliferate. Advocacy organizations can not

only strategically encourage more participation through targeted messages that resonate with their audiences (Bail 2016, 2017) but also encourage audience members to involve themselves in content creation through submissions of promovement expressions, event information, and political and cultural memes (Gaby & Caren 2012). Such posts generate and promote solidarity among communities, but they can also leave less room for ideological flexibility and debates with nonmovement perspectives (Hendriks et al. 2016). The governance of such groups and pages can also differ throughout the protest cycle of a movement, as earlier periods of massive mobilization through different and public networks can eventually make way for secretive and private Facebook groups of committed activists (Hensby 2017). The effects of activism, while receiving spikes of short-term attention on such pages, do not always translate to sustained activities that help the movement organization's cause (Lewis et al. 2014).

Many other scholars demonstrate positive associations between online activity on Facebook and offline protests across both movements and individuals. Vasi & Suh (2016) find similar associations of offline protests and Facebook activism through OWS. Harlow (2012) finds that online organizing on Facebook played a major role in a surge in antigovernment protests in Guatemala in 2009, but it did not guarantee sustained activism, as the protests quickly subsided. These associations, however, do not persist across all movements. Bastos et al. (2015) finds bidirectional Granger causality between online and offline movements for OWS, online-to-offline directionality for the Spanish Indignados protests, and no online-to-offline directionality for the Brazilian vinegar protests. Surveys of individual activists largely corroborate these findings. Tufekci & Wilson (2012) find that interpersonal connections through Facebook served as crucial sources of information during the 2011 Egyptian revolution that helped shape individual participation at Tahrir Square. Valenzuela et al.'s (2018) survey of Chilean youth in 2010 finds that individuals who use Facebook for news and socializing also were more likely to engage in offline political protests. Lee & Chan's (2016) survey of activists in the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella movement also finds that online involvement is associated with participation in offline activities.

Through these online activities by individuals and these Facebook pages and groups, movements can sustain online communities that can be mobilized for further protest. Facebook enables easy formation of loosely connected online groups around specific causes (Mercea 2013). Crossley (2015) documents that feminist university students extensively used Facebook to sustain online feminist communities, connect with other feminist users, spread awareness and information, and share offline events and news. Scholars also suggest that such communities are not usually platform centric but rather proliferate across various platforms. Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández (2016) and Massanari (2017) find #Gamergate activism across a wide variety of platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr. Online movement communities can also intersect with political parties. Davidson & Berezin (2018) find substantial rank-and-file overlap on Facebook between the far-right Britain First movement and UKIP. Hofstra et al. (2017) also find that social networks can be segregated by ethnicity, similar to offline communities.

## YouTube

While the video-sharing platform YouTube is widely used, its relationship to social movements is immensely underresearched. For scholars of social movements, YouTube is important not only because it is popular among Americans and activists use it as a key tool to communicate information and spread messaging through videos, but also because it serves as a major space for political education, extreme polarization, and cultural conflict.

The nascent literature on this subject suggests that YouTube's specific affordances, namely producing and archiving videos, can serve as tools for activists to reach larger audiences. Activists

uploaded cell phone footage to YouTube showing police officers shooting African American Oscar Grant III, which sparked widespread protests around police brutality (Antony & Thomas 2010), while Greek adolescents shared their lived experiences and daily struggles amid the Greek financial crisis (Triliva et al. 2015). OWS protesters used YouTube as an archival medium to document, edit, and share footage of issues of economic inequality and messages favorable to the movement (Thorson et al. 2013). Some movements livestream meetings, while others release only professionally produced videos (Vraga et al. 2013). Such video footage is made interactive through user comments, ratings, and sharing, enabling some additional participatory elements (Porter & Hellsten 2014). However, not all movements use YouTube in the same way, as movement resources and characteristics can influence the types of content that circulate.

YouTube (owned by Google), much like other platforms, is a profit-driven platform that encourages users to continue watching videos. Such tools can often be detrimental to activists invested in social change (Youmans & York 2012). Tufekci (2018) argues that YouTube's algorithm recommends extreme content, where video watchers of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign are often just a few autoplay recommendations away from white supremacist video rants. While YouTube represents an important tool for social movement actors, much like other platforms, scholars should be wary about how the technological affordances of such platforms enable and constrain social movements.

### **Other Platforms: Reddit, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat**

Most scholarship on Reddit focuses on specific online far-right and misogynistic communities, particularly the Red Pill subreddit and #Gamergate (Buyukozturk et al. 2018, Dignam & Rohlinger 2019, Massanari 2017). Instagram, an image-sharing platform, while also widely used by younger audiences, is rarely studied, with Towner & Muñoz (2018) investigating the agenda-setting function of 2016 presidential primary Instagram accounts on US newspapers. Two other instant messaging software platforms are significant because they are used disproportionately by racial and ethnic groups in the United States: WhatsApp and WeChat. Nearly half of Latinos in the United States report using WhatsApp, compared with 14% of White Americans and 21% of Black Americans, and the software is widely used abroad in Latin American countries (Smith & Anderson 2018). Treré (2015) finds that Mexican students communicated internally through WhatsApp to help maintain a student activist-oriented collective identity despite negative portrayals by the Mexican government, while Resende et al. (2019) find that WhatsApp was prominently used to spread disinformation during the 2018 elections in Brazil, in which Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right and populist candidate, declared victory in the presidential election. WeChat, by contrast, is a Chinese instant messaging and social media application with more than one billion monthly active users (Jao 2018). It is widely used in mainland China and by Chinese-descended peoples around the globe. In the United States, WeChat served as a site for pro-Trump sentiments and mobilization by first-generation Chinese immigrants, contributing to the spread of political misinformation (Zhang 2017). Scholars have also noted the use of WeChat, among other social media, in political organizing in China (DeLuca et al. 2016, Qiu 2016).

### **MEDIA AS DATA**

The development of social movements scholarship over the last 50 years is closely linked with the use of media accounts of collective action events to make sense of the origins, workings, and consequences of social movements. Early and influential projects include Tilly's (2004) research on contentious politics in Europe, from which he and his colleagues developed larger theoretical

arguments about the connection between social movements, democratization, and the nation-state. Efforts to explain the onset and significance of the 1960s urban riots in the United States also spurred the early development of these methods (Spilerman 1970). In the 1970s, Jenkins & Perrow (1977) launched comparative projects on the movements of the 1960s that would help consolidate the resource mobilization approaches to social movements, while McAdam's (1982) synthesizing research on political process theory relied on *New York Times* event data on the Civil Rights movement. The largest and most influential of these data sets is the Dynamics of Collective Action, a hand-coded catalog of more than 23,000 collective action events as reported in the *New York Times* from 1960 to 1995, which has been used to study issues ranging from movement claims (Wang et al. 2019) to police repression (Earl & Soule 2010). Other notable efforts have used newspaper data to collect other traces of social movements; for example, the Political Organizations in the News project documents social movement mentions in multiple newspapers throughout the twentieth century (Amenta et al. 2009).

Several major studies have demonstrated methodological biases associated with newspaper event data, as factors such as tactics, event size, and proximity to media sources influence the likelihood and type of coverage (Earl et al. 2004, Oliver & Myers 1999). Additionally, most protest event databases use only one source, usually the *New York Times*, placing additional constraints on coverage and generalizability (Fisher et al. 2019). Two recent efforts, however, have sought to overcome many of these limitations to produce near-real-time protest counts for the United States on the basis of media and other sources since 2017 (Fisher et al. 2019). Both Count Love (see <https://countlove.org/faq.html>) and the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC) (see <https://sites.google.com/view/crowdcountingconsortium/home>) combined automated and hand-coded events from numerous media sources; the Count Love project relied more heavily on machine learning techniques, while the CCC leveraged crowdsourcing and reports from social media. These new data sources have been particularly prominent in analyses of the protest wave associated with the election of Donald Trump (Fisher et al. 2019).

As noted above, scholars have used social media data to measure online activity in a variety of ways and platforms. Researchers have also begun using digital trace data from social media to estimate offline protest activity, although this technique is still in its infancy. For example, the locations of images tagged as "protest" related on Flickr were strongly correlated with the locations of media reports of protests (Alanyali et al. 2016). Going beyond event counting, Won et al. (2017) employed machine learning techniques on Twitter photos to compare the tactical and emotional repertoires of various protests. Below, we discuss new challenges and opportunities for studying movements and media of contemporary social movements.

## CHALLENGES AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Clearly, social media platforms are now a regular part of the activist tool kit and are central to the hybrid media environment. As such, scholars need to look beyond the novelty of social media, whether through a techno-optimist or techno-pessimist lens. We propose that a more productive inquiry would be to conceptualize communicative technology's broader role in social movements. This research program should seek to encompass many diverse empirically led studies and cut across disciplinary boundaries (Fominaya & Gillan 2017). Such an inquiry should begin with comparing the affordances of different technological innovations—whether through old media like newspapers or new media like social network sites—and identifying the impacts on the political communication and mobilization of social movements. Moving forward, scholars should put social movements research in direct conversation with political communication scholarship, which has been quicker to examine the uses of digital technologies (Earl 2018, Rohlinger 2019, Sobieraj

2019). We might ask such questions as how and to what extent activists employ some technologies and not others; how the specific affordances of each technology might provide constraints or opportunities for the mobilization and effects of social movements; and how differential, unequal access to some platforms over others might affect the trajectory of social movement mobilization among some collective groups and not others. We believe that a more contextualized approach to media and movements will lead to more fruitful insights into how social media platforms matter for contemporary movements and activists.

Data access is a critical issue. In a post-Cambridge Analytica world, social media sites have increasingly restricted researchers' access to user-posted materials (Freelon 2018). We may look back on the 2010s as the golden age of digital data as providers narrow the types of data that can be collected and the speed at which they can be collected. This should, perhaps, not be surprising, as few other corporations give away their products in such research-digestible formats as Twitter does with its API, which conveniently enables hashtag and network data collection. Next comes the harder data collection, which is also more likely to pay off theoretically in advancing our knowledge of social movement processes.

Just as our theories need to move away from media platforms toward media environments, so too do our methods (Bode & Vraga 2018). While social media platforms provide new forms of data, scholars have grappled with methodological difficulties of interpreting the veracity and generalizability of these data. We highlight a number of key empirical concerns and suggestions about ongoing research on social media and movements.

One promising area of exploration features the role of algorithms in promoting political radicalization and the possible unintended consequences for movement recruitment. The literature on algorithms has documented their social and political harms in perpetuating inequalities and curtailing social movements (Noble 2018, Tufekci 2015, Youmans & York 2012). Furthermore, scholars who have studied the YouTube algorithm and far-right radicalization have found that large numbers of users who consume milder political content tend to also consume extreme content (Ribeiro et al. 2019). While it is unclear that such political radicalization inherently leads to mobilization, the finding that algorithms tend to nudge users to more extreme political content may indicate the increased importance of ideologies in movement recruitment and political mobilization.

Scholarship needs multimethod studies that cut across platform boundaries and consider social media alongside legacy media. Much of social media and movements scholarship examines single platforms. It is thus difficult to decouple findings that are universal to all platforms from those that are specific to certain media platforms or types. Doing so is crucial because online social movement activities often are not platform-specific activities but rather occur on a wide variety of platforms (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016) with a reciprocal relationship with other forms of media (Chadwick 2017). Following Bode & Vraga (2018), we propose that the study of digital affordances across social media platforms would enable scholars to more adequately compare the implications of different social media platforms on social movement trajectory, mobilization, and outcomes. For example, in a comparative study of Facebook and Twitter, Valenzuela et al. (2018) found that new information from weak ties on Twitter led to protest participation, while on Facebook interactions with strong ties resulted in activism. Campaign advisors viewed email as a way to reach supporters, while Twitter and television were viewed as similarly engaging broader audiences of nonsupporters (Kang et al. 2018).

Relatedly, scholars should expand our media horizons beyond Twitter, Facebook, and the *New York Times* toward other, underresearched media platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, Instagram, local newspapers, and talk radio. Focusing on a few platforms privileges research on certain kinds of social movements, social groups, and audiences over others. For example, on Twitter, the most



widely studied platform, users are more likely to be young, affluent, and well educated (Blank 2017). By contrast, we find disproportionate use of other platforms, like WhatsApp and WeChat, across racial and ethnic groups. We would also like to highlight research that finds racial and ethnic segregation of social networks on mainstream platforms like Facebook (Hofstra et al. 2017). Further research in this vein may focus on racial and ethnic communities within these mainstream platforms, such as the counterpublic potential of Black Twitter (Graham & Smith 2016).

Finally, scholars should continue to investigate the role of media in the cultural and political consequences of movements. Movements have helped reshape noninstitutional outcomes ranging from public opinion to language and lifestyles (Amenta & Polletta 2019). We know that movements are most impactful in raising the salience of issues in the media. In some cases, this attention, amplified through legacy media and/or social media, can have an influence on politics. Future research should focus on how movements sometimes translate the cultural influence of attention into broader political change.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Edwin Amenta, Jennifer Earl, Daniel Kreiss, Deana Rohlinger, and Jen Schradie for very helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript.

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