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In the age of Trump, resistance movements must bring people together beyond the digital realm

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The temporality of corporate social media is based on a business model of dispossessing data. Platforms like Facebook are no substitute for the work of sustainable, long-term organizing.

Lauren Hurley/PA Archive/PA Images. All rights reserved. When I reached over to switch off my alarm on the morning of 9 November, I wished I had stayed asleep. In the few seconds that I searched for the snooze button, my phone’s notifications had revealed that Trump would almost certainly be the president-elect of the US. I was paralysed.

Today, I still feel helpless and unable to respond to this threat to the values I believe in. I should have known better, I shouldn’t be depressed, but agitated, ready to protest and mobilize. But I am not. I am still trying to hope that Žižek and other pundits turn out to be right and that this is a deeply disruptive moment that shakes the grounds of representative democracy and helps change it for the better. Trump’s victory feels like a threat to the idea of democracy, but we need to realize that, as Gary Young has put it, Trump is but one “product of democracy already in crisis”.

Earlier, Brexit had similarly exposed a deep political crisis in Europe that made the frictions within the Union visible. On an ideological level, it exposed the increasing fear of ‘the other’ and the erection of identificational fences between classes, races and political camps. At the same time, hundreds of thousands are still envisioning Europe as their destination to flee war, poverty and devastation, but are faced with a social crisis that is not just the preserve of the southern European countries. Austerity measures in many European member states, particularly in Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Italy are a manifestation of the continued economic crisis of the Eurozone.

Trump, Brexit and the financial crisis could be seen as individual severe political, social, and economic problems, but – as Brecht and Benjamin argued in the 1930s – they should also be understood as part of a larger, all-encompassing crisis of (post-) modern societies. Envisioning a journal called Krise und Kritik, Brecht and Benjamin considered crisis as a crucial point of transition in which critique (here mainly from intellectuals and artists) could speed up and guide the process. Planning a journal in the crisis-context of the 1930s, Brecht and Benjamin’s
contribution lies not only in the fact that they saw the worrying connections between crises on different societal levels, but first and foremost in their attempt to identify the potentials of crisis and critical interventions against the emerging fascism.

And here lies my hope that the “not my president” protests that emerged directly after the elections bring people together against blatantly misogynist and racist politics beyond the digital realm. Relying on organizational infrastructures developed by Occupy and Black Lives Matter activists, the protest in different form and shape has to continue for a long time beyond the immediate moment of the post-election shock. The Trump administration will mark a seismic change in the political landscape of Washington and beyond for years. Over this period the work of activists has to continue, constantly challenging a political agenda that is endorsed by the KKK and the like.

In that context, the celebratory stories of Twitter and Facebook revolutions that have dominated earlier reporting about protest movements are not only wrong but outright dangerous. Media technologies crucially impact the time, space and speed of protest, but not always with the desired effects. Platforms like Facebook accelerate the exchange of messages and allow for rapid mobilization of large numbers of supporters. At the same time, they preclude sustainable, long-term organizing and stand in stark contrast to the inner logics of political decision-making and planning within the movements. For example, political practices of participatory democracy that are based on an expansive meeting culture and that are still dominant within progressive movements often do not fit the tight framework of social media’s immediacy.

There is a problematic disconnect between regimes of time established by Facebook and the like, and the time of political practices. The temporality of corporate social media is based on their business model of dispossessing data. Hence, the platforms strive to generate ever new data, which implies a temporal logic that runs counter to activism that is slow in making decisions, formulating political messages and is built on broad coalitions that require time-intensive work. Besides issues of surveillance and data security, the divergent temporalities of social media and political activism are a crucial problem that deserves more concern from activists and commentators.

Establishing true alternatives to Trump’s claims of radical change, need – as Cinzia Arruzza argues – large social movements bridging a broad political spectrum. Coalitions like this need enduring communicative infrastructures that allow for long-term organizing and mobilization both online and offline. I am hopeful that seeing people in the streets, reading their articulations of fear, disgust and disappointment, will wake us up to counter the populist nightmare.

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