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‘Our time to act has come’: Desynchronization, social media time and protest movements

Abstract

Protest movements have successfully adopted media technologies to promote their causes and mobilize large numbers of supporters. Especially social media that are considered as low-cost and time saving alternatives have played particularly important roles in recent mobilizations (Constanza-Chock, 2014). There is, however, a growing concern about the contradictions between long-term organizing for progressive, social change on the one hand and the media technologies employed on the other (Tufekci, 2014). Hartmut Rosa (2013) has argued that the current culture of accelerated capitalism is characterized by a growing desynchronization between political practices (slow politics) and the economic system (fast capitalism). This article traces the increasing social acceleration related to (media) technologies employed by protest activists and asks whether there is an increasing desynchronization with their political practices discernible. Furthermore, the article investigates strategies of resistance to overcome the growing gap between ‘machine time’ and political time. Empirically the article builds on archival material and in-depth interviews documenting the media practices of the unemployed workers movement (1930s), the tenants’ movement (1970s) and the Occupy Wall Street Movement (2011/2012) and argues for the need to re-politicize media infrastructures as means of communication in order to tackle democratic problems that emerge from the divergent temporalities.

“Our time to act has come”: Desynchronization, social media time and political practices

Our time to act has come was the motto of the blockupy mobilization against the opening of the new headquarters of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt on 18 March 2015. It reflects the importance of timing and temporality for protest movements that is at the heart of this article. In recent years commentators and academics have emphasized the role of social media for protest movements (Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Social media have been particularly identified as major time and resource savers in mobilization and coordination of protest (Mercea, 2013) as participants and remote supporters can follow the unfolding of events in real-time. The NYPD, for example, has repeatedly expressed concerns about the spontaneity of protests in the city that increases with mobile media technologies (Messing, Schram, & Golding, 2014). Besides celebratory accounts of Facebook and Twitter revolutions, there is also a growing concern about the overemphasis of social media in facilitating protests (Tufekci, 2014). This article aims to contribute to a more nuanced analysis of social media’s role for protest movements by considering a potential gap between different temporalities of media practices on the one hand and political practices on the other. More specifically I aim to discuss a potential desynchronization between media time and political time by way of historical contextualization. The article identifies specific temporal properties of major media technologies employed by protest movements that emerged in the context of three major economic crises since the 1930s in the broader New York City area. These properties are consequently analysed vis-à-vis the temporalities of political practices identifying growing desynchronization. Theoretically the article draws mainly on Hartmut Rosa’s (2013) theory of social acceleration and particularly his diagnosis of temporal crisis of the political, while empirically it is based on archival work and in-depth interviews with activists involved in the protest activities. In conclusion the article asks for a re-politicization of media technologies considering time for the possibility to build sustainable movement organizations when needed.

Temporalities of Media Technologies

Media technologies play a central role for the experience of time. Drawing on Barbara Adam, Lash and Urry argue ‘that time is only conceptualized as a resource in societies like ours, societies which not only have created clock-time, but also relate to that creation as being time and organize their social by it. Or as Lefebvre suggests, with modernity lived time disappears, it is no longer visible and is replaced by measuring instruments, clocks, which are separate from

social space' (Lash & Urry, 1994, p. 234). In their understanding it is only possible to experience time with the help of technologies such as clocks. Frederica Frabetti argues that they constitute our very sense of time and – drawing on Bernard Stiegler (1996/2009) – she puts it even stronger 'we only gain a sense of time and memory, and therefore of who we are, through technology' (Frabetti, 2015, p. 27). Hence, media technologies are not only relevant for individual experiences of time, but also crucial in terms of the shared *structure of feeling* in a society as well as the organization of political life. Similarly John Durham Peters (1999) has pointed out that - besides clocks – calendars are central media technologies creating specific temporal regimes of modernity. Paddy Scannell has identified television's particular importance for producing 'common public time' through structuring and scheduling daily routines. At the same time, television and radio have produced a new form of simultaneity of experiences that is linked to collective memories. In that sense different, media hold different possibilities to construct and reproduce temporality, i.e. the experience of time (Keightley, 2013). The private camera, the diary and as calendars have long been of importance to document the passing of time, but also to plan the future. However, with digital media and particularly social networking sites there has been a fundamental qualitative shift in how temporality is produced and experiences.

The importance of temporality for social organization and changes in the experiences of time related to media technologies is reflected in numerous influential publications. David Harvey (1990) famously speaks of the time-space compression, while Anthony Giddens discusses time-space distanciation as our experience of time is increasingly delinked from space. Giddens (1994) argues furthermore that the change of time and space constellation is not related to content but to the reproducible structure and characteristics of the medium as a carrier. Paul Virilio (1986) for example argues that politics becomes less about physical space, but about the time regimes of technologies, which is what he calls a shift from geo- to chrono - politics. Castells develops the notion of timeless time to capture the current focus on the present while the past and future are annihilated. This timeless time emerges in the context of information societies as new media transcend time and place. With the help of new media– Castells argues – time is compressed and space understood as distance loses importance as the space of flows emerges (Castells, 2000).

Updating several of these arguments, Robert Gehl (2011) analyses the modern computer as a synthesis of the immediate, i.e. processors and the archival, i.e. memory and storage of data.

However, in web 2.0, he argues, there is a focus on the immediate with the acceleration of the cycle of media production. In order to make sites more dynamic, there is a need for constant updates and new materials. Consequently, the social web is predominantly characterized by newness and is always in the making. Crucial changes in temporality are particularly based on the decrease in circulation time of information with the help of social media towards real time and immediacy in which production and consumption are collapsed. Immediacy is here understood in terms of acceleration of circulation towards direct delivery. Similarly, real time captures access to media content without perceptible delay (Weltevrede, Helmond, & Gerlitz, 2014). This acceleration, however, often obscures the peculiar process of mediation and mediated meaning production. In that context, media technologies in general and social media in particular have certain properties that allow for particular content production. This is to say that digital immediacy encompasses an acceleration in production, distribution and consumption time, but does not preclude mediation and experiences beyond the immediate (Silverstone, 2007; Thompson, 1995).

Temporalities of Protest Movements

In terms of temporalities of protest movements ethnographic and phenomenological accounts often emphasize the multi-layered character. John Postill (2013), for example, develops a theory of multiple timelines of protest, which goes in hand with the very diverse media technologies used in this process. Based on William Sewell's conceptualization of historical sequences as temporally multi-layered social processes, Postill considers events, trends and routines to develop an understanding of the heterogeneity of protest time. While events refer to concentrated sequences of action that transform social structures; trends are less concentrated, but rather directional changes in social relations. Lastly routines are more or less stable schemata that reproduce social structures. Postill concludes in his analysis of the Indignados movement in Spain along those lines that protests are made up of countless timelines.

Similarly, Veronica Barassi (2015) based on Emily Keightley's discussion of temporal experiences considers the multiplicity of protest time. In contrast to Postill, Barassi however concludes that even if protests are temporally multi-layered, activists always have to relate to a hegemonic perception of time. In information based, communicative capitalism this hegemonic perception of time is connected with speed, presentness and immediacy.

The temporality of media practices that activists are navigating is essential not only for the possibility of protest, but also for the possibility of critique that is put forward by the protesters.

Protest marks an accelerated temporality that is preceded by tedious preparations and organization for the activists. Protest in form of marches or protest camps establishes a new kind of temporality for those directly involved and those affected in their daily routines and flows. Hence protesters are acting within a protest time that is related to a more general regime of temporality, or as Veronica Barassi (2015) calls it, hegemonic perception of time.

Desynchronization

Linked to the role of media technologies for the experience of time, others have diagnosed a general acceleration of the social. Hartmut Rosa (2003, 2013) for example theorizes social acceleration by distinguishing between technological acceleration, acceleration of social change and acceleration of the pace of life. Societies are – according to him – speeding up not only in terms of individual experiences, but also social change itself is happening quicker and ever more often. Both developments are linked to technological developments, Rosa argues. Hence, Rosa ascribes media technologies specific properties that have consequences for social acceleration. He argues for example that digital media have contributed particularly to social acceleration making real-time experiences possible and connecting over vast distances. This is not to argue in a deterministic way that social acceleration is merely based on media technologies and their temporalities. The regimes of time that media technologies suggest are embedded in and consequences of specific social settings. They are ‘form(s) of social organization’ (Williams, 1977, p. 159) that have technical properties, but are deeply shaped by the cultural and societal context within which they are developed and used. In that sense, media technologies as machines might possess a temporal agency or specific machine time as Wolfgang Ernst (2011) argues, but this agency is informed by the societal context within which machines are imagined.

However, if media technologies establish specific temporal logics, there might be considerable consequences for other social spheres. In that context, Rosa argues it has traditionally been assumed that

Institutionalized temporal structures of political will-formation, decision-making and decision-implementation in representative-democratic systems are compatible with the rhythm, tempo, duration and sequence of social developments: in other words, that they are essentially synchronized with the path of social development such that the political

system has time to make fundamental decisions and to organize the deliberative, democratic process for this purpose (252).

This synchronized temporal structure of the democratic system based on collective interests, is characterized by ‘sensitive temporal interdependency between political structures of decision and implementation and intrinsic temporalities of other social spheres’ (Rosa, 2013, p. 253). In the context of increasing social acceleration, however, there emerges a desynchronization. The political system of democracy that is based on the aggregation and articulation of collective interests, remains time intensive and can only be accelerated to a certain degree. Other societal spheres such as the economy are however increasingly sped up with the help of technologies. Consequently, Rosa identifies an increasing desynchronization between politics and the time structures of other social fields, especially economics and technology as well as between forms of political organization and the cultural context. Similarly Bernard Stiegler considers disorientation as a consequence of social acceleration since the industrial revolution, which has led to ‘dramatically widening the distance between technical systems and social organizations as if, negotiation between them appearing to be impossible, their final divorce seems inevitable’ (Stiegler, 1996/2009, p. 3).

Speeding up the political process has meant in the past mainly to limit the process of deliberation and participation in order to overcome particularly the desynchronization between politics and the economic system. Consequently power has moved from the ‘slow’ deliberative process of the legislative to the faster and more flexible executive and from government to governance. Furthermore, Rosa insists that politics has lost its outstanding role to set the pace for social developments more generally. Current social acceleration remains hence without political or collective goals and unfolds as a *frenetic standstill*.

Although the main focus here is concerned with the desynchronization between the political system and technological development, it is important to consider the diverse temporalities of both the political sphere and technology. The political system is asynchronous and characterized by a multiplicity of temporal layers as is technology. Sheldon Wolin (2005) argues for example that politics encompasses both time of slow developments, such as the formal legislative process, but also includes agitated times of protest and revolution that are much faster in pace. Similarly, media technologies possess different temporalities as Weltevre and co-authors (2014) show. The authors propose a more complex understanding of real-time

in the context of different internet platforms. Even though there is a multiplicity of ‘machine times’ and times of politics, there seems to be an increasing gap or disconnect between both lines of temporalities.

An historical-sociological approach

The analysis builds on three case studies that consider the – according to the appearance in mainstream news media and secondary sources (Castells, 1977, 1980; Gitlin, 2012; Gould-Wartofsky, 2015; Piven & Cloward, 1977) - most relevant protest movements that emerged in the context of major economic crises. In order to contextualize changing regimes of time historically (author removed, 2015), I draw on materials related to a) the Great Depression 1929 and the unemployed workers movement, b) the oil and fiscal crisis in early 1970s and new urban movements here particularly the rent strike and squatters’ movement and c) the Great Recession 2007/2008 and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. The selected movements are organizational and ideological diverse. It is however not the aim to reconstruct their genealogy in detail. Instead their media practices figure as an empirical entry points to analyse changes in media technologies over time. Furthermore, considering the role of social media vis-à-vis previous mobilizations allows to historically contextualize the role of media technologies for protest movements.

Unemployed workers movement in the 1930s

The unemployed workers movements emerged in the context of the 1930s Great Depression in the United States. Following the crash of the stock exchange in 1929, the number of unemployed exploded, increasing from half a million in October 1929 to more than 4 million in January 1930 (1932: 24 %) and the numbers kept growing to 9 Million in October 1931 (1933: 25%) (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Unemployment and shrinking salaries of those still in employment had devastating effects on the daily lives of the people going hand in hand with growing malnutrition and diseases such as tuberculosis. There were numerous organizations and political groups that aimed to organize the unemployed and mobilize them for direct actions such as marches, demonstrations, occupations of relief offices. The main aims and approaches of the organizations were very diverse. While the Labor Research Association, for example, focused mainly on gathering information on unemployment and its conditions, the Socialist and Communist Parties aimed to establish organizational structures and advocated for improved

relief programs. Smaller local organizations such as the Greenwich House in New York City focused specifically on the local conditions, housed meetings of unemployed from Greenwich Village as well as the National Unemployment League. The League for Industrial Democracy (out of which the SDS – Students for a Democratic Society emerged in the 1960s) organized nationwide lectures, lecture circuits and chapter meetings. In order to organize and mobilize the unemployed workers these organizations used a sophisticated set of different media ranging from shop papers written by unemployed workers and distributed in the factories to radio talks as Harold Lasswell and Dorothy Blumenstock (1939) show in their comprehensive study of communist media in Chicago that was published in 1939. Although the radio gained importance, the main way to inform members and non-members remained however printed outlets. From 1932, for example, clip sheets containing major news were introduced. They had the major purpose to be reprinted by approximately 500 farmers and workers papers.

Tenants' Movement 1970s

The early 1970s were marked by economic crisis specifically the oil crisis as well. New York in particular was also faced with a fiscal crisis that resulted in austerity measures and strict budget cuts that left many unemployed. Manuel Castells discusses in his book *Economic crisis and the American society* why there were no mass protests comparably to the 1930s although the economic situation was similarly severe. Castells argues that growing police violence with new special units, an ideological delegitimization of political protest post 1968/69 radicalization and the absence of an immediate political alternative led to a shift from mass mobilization to individual violence visible in increasing crime rates. However, he had hopes for what he called new urban movements. One of which is the tenants movement in New York that aimed to advocate for tenants' rights against increasingly hostile housing conditions. The scarcity of low-cost housing resulted from a combination of austerity measures and deregulation of the housing market. A paradox housing situation emerged with empty units that were abandoned by the owners while large numbers of people were desperately in search of affordable housing. After considerable decay of housing facilities, owners often turned the vacant units instead into high-end housing or office spaces (Gold, 2014).

Since 1959 the Metropolitan Council on Housing was the central organization for tenants in New York. Over the years the Met Council continuously professionalized their work and support of local tenants' organizations particularly in terms of media practices. They arranged workshops on publicity, press releases and television trainings, held lists of press and television

contacts as well as documented the appearance of tenants' related questions in mainstream media. Especially after 1973 numerous new activists and organization aimed to organize aggrieved tenants, which led to the emergence of multiple federations that constituted an increasing diversification of strategies mirroring the diversifying socio-economic backgrounds of participants in the tenants' movement.

Occupy Wall Street in 2011/2012

The third movement considered here - the Occupy Wall Street movement - emerged in the aftermath of the so-called Great Recession (Foster & McChesney, 2012). Although OWS has been explicitly multi-voiced and there exists a variety of narratives concerning the movement, I will try to briefly provide an overview of the major formative events of the movement and in that way partly reconstruct the dominant narrative told about OWS. In July 2011, Adbusters, the notorious facilitator of anti-consumerism campaigns, launched a call to occupy Wall Street by introducing the hashtag #occupywallstreet on Twitter. After online mobilization, a few dozen people followed the call on 17 September 2011. Since the Wall Street was strongly secured by police force, the occupiers turned to the close by Zuccotti Park. The small privately owned square became the place for camping, campaigning and deliberating for the up-coming weeks until the first eviction in November 2011 (Graeber, 2013). The number of activists in the camp grew surprisingly quickly and developed into a diverse group of occupiers being based on what has been characterized as leaderlessness and non-violence (Bolton, Welty, Nayak, & Malone, 2013), but even these two notions were contested. Hence, the movement was and is characterized by a non-consensus about ethics and advocated for a diversity of tactics, while particularly stressing the importance of space through linking the movement to the long tradition of occupation and reclaiming of public spaces¹.

Material and Analysis

The material analysed was gathered within the framework of a larger project concerning historical forms of media participation by protest movements of the dispossessed that emerged in the context of large-scale economic crises. Rather than tracing the history of one specific movement, the project aims to uncover connections between crisis and critique that find expression in protest movements and their media practices promoting social change over time.

¹ Michael Gould-Wartofsky (2015) links the occupation of Zuccotti park for example to the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil that emerged in the 1980s and the squatters' movement of the 1970s reclaiming affordable housing through occupation.

In that sense, I follow what Sewell (2005) has termed an eventful history that considers specific events that transformed or have the potential to transform social structures significantly. In my understanding, large scale economic crises and their consequences have this potential for structural changes. The protest movements become in that sense entry points to trace these structural changes. This diachronic comparative approach allows me disentangle connections between media-related conditions to express critique and large-scale economic crises for social change.

The project draws on a variety of methods and materials ranging from in-depth archival work investigating documents of central organizations that aimed to organize the dispossessed, but also to personal papers' collections of political organizers such as Carl Winter (Chair of the Communist Party of Michigan), Sam Winn (activist and an organizer in District Council 9 of the International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades), Sam Adams Darcy (organizer and leading official in the Communist Party USA) and Jacob Benjamin Salutsky (director of education and cultural activities of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America) and autobiographies of other central figures such as William Z Foster (General Secretary of the Communist Party USA), Sadie van Veen Amter and Israel Amter (founding members of the Communist Party USA) in the 1930s and extensive records of the Metropolitan Housing Council from the 1970s. The materials for the analysis of the rent strike movement also include project materials of a large scale study on the tenants' movement led by Ronald Lawson including interview and observation protocols as well as student essays and master theses. In order to investigate the Occupy movement I conducted six in-depth interviews with activists being involved in the OWS encampment and more particularly with the work of the media group. The interviews lasted between one to two and a half hours and were transcribed verbatim. Beyond the in-depth interviews in the case of Occupy Wall Street, I also analysed central publications and outlets of the OWS media group, including their websites and the collectively written book *Occupy Wall Street. The inside story of an action that changed America*. Furthermore, I have accessed a hard drive of born digital materials that were archived by the Occupy Wall Street Archive Working Group. The materials were gathered to identify central media practices and their role for the respective movement organization in general to investigate the purpose of the employed practices and to identify the media technologies had a prominent place in their media work. Besides this, the minutes of the Media Working Group, the TweetBoat and the Public Relations Working Group. Through a theme-based analysis I identified references to media in the broadest sense were identified and included for close

reading. In a hermeneutical tradition of going back and forth between the material and theoretical categories, the analysis evolved further.

Protest Movements' Desynchronization: From Mechanical Speed and Perpetual Flow to Digital Immediacy

Based on the analysis, three temporal regimes related to media technologies that were mainly used by activists in the three eras emerged. Although the media ecology comprised several different media, for example besides printed outlets the radio in the 1930s, the notion of regime emphasizes the hegemonic character of a temporality in relation to a dominant media technology. Hence, even if the radio was playing an increasingly important role in the 1930s, it were still leaflets and brochures that were of major importance for mobilizing the unemployed workers. At the same time, I suggest a dialectic approach to media technology. While media technologies have very specific technical properties and are – in Raymond Williams' (1977) terms – a form of social organization, they emerge out of and are embedded in specific cultural and societal settings. In that sense they are empirical entry points in order to discern more general, structural phenomena, such as the culture of speed and immediacy.

Mechanical Speed

In the 1930s organizers of the unemployed workers movement predominantly relied on printed outlets that were reproduced with the help of low cost printing presses – so called mimeographs. The employment of machines to reproduce brochures, pamphlets and shop papers help to speed up the process and consequently it was possible to reach out to more people. For Walter Benjamin reproducibility encompassed that media images no longer had a unique place in time, which coincided with its increased mobility. He suggests '(...) technical reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, (...)' (Benjamin, 1936/2008, p. 21). This argument suggests a democratization of the image through its reproduction, but also political potential to spread it to the masses for resistance against fascism. Benjamin's arguments resonate with the experience of acceleration of speed with the possibilities of mechanical reproduction in the 1930s. Although Benjamin points out the dangers of immature usage of technology and the increasing alienation of recipients, he remains hopeful of the potential that comes with reproducibility for political mobilization of the masses in the age of *mechanical speed*.

Perpetual Flow

In contrast organizers of the tenants' movement in the 1970s navigated an increasingly complex media ecology ranging from mainstream newspapers to community radio and papers and television news. Hence, in the 1970s there is a further acceleration of speed in the (re)production process of media content that intersects with the increased commercialization and globalization of the media technologies employed. Analysing television as the dominant media technology of the 1970s, Raymond Williams (1974) is especially concerned with a change of sequence as programming to sequence as flow. Referring to flow, he aims to capture the integration of previously separate segments, e.g. a theatre play or musical piece, through commercial breaks and trailers. Commercial breaks and trailers for future programs create a constant flow of parallel narratives capturing the viewer for the whole evening. Writing at the threshold to the 24 hours news cycle, Raymond Williams already captures the experience of a constant stream of new experiences that television offered, while diminishing real beginnings and endings of the presented program elements. Organizers in the 1970s had to apply tactics to insert their messages in this perpetual flow of commercial television and other formats. The tenants' movement and the met council on housing chose an events based approach to intercept this *perpetual flow*.

Digital Immediacy

Aiming for visibility of the movement and its discussions, the occupiers contributed to the production of digital media content being partly constitutive of current capitalism, which Jodi Dean (2008, 2012) has called communicative capitalism. Communicative capitalism predominantly builds on the circulation of messages and the logic that the 'exchange value of the messages' dominates, rather than the 'use value'. Dean suggests that network communication technologies, which are based on ideals of discussion and participation intertwine capitalism and democracy. Communicative capitalism expanding with the growth of global telecommunications becomes hence the single ideological formation (Dean, 2012). Content or the use value of the exchanged messages becomes secondary or even irrelevant. Hence, any response to them becomes irrelevant as well, and any political potential disperses into the perpetual flow of communication (Dean, 2009, 2010). One of the major principles of communicative capitalism is furthermore to accelerate the speed of circulation in order to minimize turn-over time and increase the production of surplus value (Manzerolle & Kjösen,

2012). As digital media enhance personalization, they enable new trajectories and pathways between production, exchange and consumer. In that sense, personalization as an organizational principle of digital media enhances the already accelerated speed of exchanges, which is taken to its extreme, namely the suspension of circulation in the age of *digital immediacy*. For the case of OWS the focus on exchange value rather than use value becomes particularly apparent when considering the overemphasis of quantifications of social media visibility in terms of uploads, clicks, likes and followers both by academics and commentators. DeLuca and co-authors suggest, for example, that social media were quickly filling up with Occupy Wall Street: On the first day of occupation more than 4,300 mentions of OWS on Twitter were counted exploding to 25,148 until 2 October 2011. After three months there were 91,400 OWS-related videos uploaded on YouTube (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). Similarly OWS reflected about the immediate and professional reactions of the Media Working Group to for example police violence, which mobilized even more people to support the movement while mainstream media and the elite ignored the activists. Sasha reflected:

And because they [mainstream media] ignored it, it exploded. Because they were saying something negative about it, we were blogging a lot, using social media, Facebook, YouTube, live stream all the demos and police brutality and getting all the stuff online and it was going viral, because people had Anonymous tweeting for them as well and they had all their friends tweeting stuff out as well and they were talking about it a lot. And then it grew, because everybody was hearing about it (Sasha, Media Working Group, OWS).

Political projects such as OWS - that was mainly about participatory practices of collective will formation (Bray, 2013; Graeber, 2013) - need time. The need for time is reflected in the numerous stories of endless meetings of the General Assembly or the Spokes Council despite of skilled facilitators. Accelerated capitalism however does not allow for these time consuming procedures, which is reflected in the constant request for clear demands and goals of the movement in public discourse. In that sense, the dominant logic of current accelerated capitalism and the time consuming practices of participatory democracy came to stand in stark contrast to each other, they were desynchronized.

The desynchronization of social media time that has become a dominant media regime in nowadays resulted in a perceived ephemerality and inconsequentiality of Occupy Wall Street. Commentators lamented about the lacking demands already during the occupation and extended

their criticism describing OWS as a failure shortly after the eviction (Roberts, 2012). Part of this perception is linked to the expectation of perpetual production of content and output mirroring the principles of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that are built on principles such as immediacy and newness (author removed, 2014).

Protest Movements' Re-synchronization: Adaptation, Abstention, Attack and Alternatives

The analysis above identified a change in temporal regimes from mechanical speed and perpetual flow to digital immediacy – a landscape within which the respective protest activists are navigating. However, in all three movements there also have been attempts to “re-synchronize” media practices with political practices and in that way resist the dominant temporal regime of media technologies. Hence, specific media practices could be considered as forms of resistance and protest practices in their own right as suggested by Bart Cammaerts (Cammaerts, 2012, 2013). These media practices of resistance by the activists could be described in terms of Dieter Rucht's *Quadruple A-model*, namely in terms of adaptation, abstention, attack or alternatives in relation to the dominant temporal regime (Rucht, 2004). Adaptation refers to the acceptance and exploitation of the logic of mass media, while the focus is on influencing the coverage of activities and organizations in a positive way. This includes professionalization of practices and might include hiring of media professionals or the development of separate public relations units. Abstention refers to the neglect of mass media often as a sign of resignation based on negative experiences. Consequently, communication efforts and media practices are rather focused inwardly on internal communication. Attack includes an explicit critique of mass media and their reporting about for example direct actions, specific aims or organizational structures. Alternative practices include the setting up of own publication channels for example own newspapers or blogs. According to Rucht, these practices are not mutually exclusive and can exist parallel to each other within one and the same group or mobilization. In terms of the resistance against dominant temporal regimes the Quadruple A-model helps to systematize strategies to overcome desynchronization.

Adaptation

All three groups – the unemployed workers movement, the tenants' movement and the Occupy Wall Street Movement – employed media practices that showed signs of adaptation here mainly as professionalization of their media practices. Besides developing targeted strategies for

different media formats and outlets, the groups adopted the temporality of major outlets such as newspapers and social media and timed their media practices according to for example editorial meetings and internal newsroom deadlines.

The Metropolitan Council on Housing for example organized publicity workshops for local tenants' organization on a regular basis. These workshops included instructions on how and when to target journalists in order to get the word out about specific causes and mobilizations. A transcript from one of the workshops that was compiled as part of a larger research project directed by Robert Lawson documents the urgency of professionalization of the media work. During the meeting Bill Price - former reporter for the City Star and an underground newspaper - spoke about the importance of the press release (Metropolitan Council on Housing, 1974). Furthermore the leaflet *Techniques and Devices to Get Your Press Release into Print* advised

One basic rule: Assume nothing. Without follow-up phone calls don't assume that U.S. Post Office has delivered your releases. Don't assume that the desk person is aware of such issues as hospital expansion etc. (Some are amazingly uninformed). Watch your calendar carefully, and don't assume that a particular Sunday is just like any other when you're planning an event or press conference. Sunday morning, April it, can turn out to be Easter, and all the TV crews may be covering the parade on Fifth Avenue (Metropolitan Council on Housing, ca. 1970).

In the case of Occupy Wall Street, the media work strongly adopted to the temporality of social media including live streaming: Occupiers were constantly updating their feeds with new materials² and streamed live from direct actions registering police brutality and misconduct that brought even more supporters to the encampment and mobilized donations. For high-speed and real-time live streaming most activists relied on Global.Revolution.tv. The group around the co-founder Vlad Teichberg recruited and trained streamers in the encampment and continued their work after the eviction. They also build the technical infrastructure for live streaming from the park. In that sense, a potential desynchronization between political and media practices was countered with professionalization and adaptation to the temporality of immediacy.

Alternatives

Besides adaptation, the three protest movements developed alternatives to the dominant media-related time regime in their own productions. Own media outlets, for example, were of major

² The dictum "If you tweet, I buy you lunch" was circulating in the park (Gould-Wartofsky 2015).

importance for organizing the tenants' in countering the dominant temporal regime of the perpetual flow established by the television. The Met Council published the members paper *The Tenant* and aired a weekly radio show entitled *Rent and Housing in the City*. Both outlets informed about latest rent struggles, protests and marches as well as contained crucial information for newly established tenants' organizations.

An important activity in the OWS camp was for example the drawing of placards and posters as well as developing chants together that were later on partly preserved by the Occupy Wall Street Archive Working Group (Erde, 2014). These media practices could be considered as slow media productions (Rauch, 2011). Marc, one of the occupiers in New York described their zine production in the following way:

We would make our own zines of different political issues and a lot of political prisoners' zines. And tried to get the information out. And it worked great cause everybody, all the communists, would come to the park and get something that they can actually take home with them (Marc, OWS).

The materiality and slowness of the zines was an important aspect that Marc stressed throughout the interview with me. The eviction was therefore particularly painful as his group lost all the zines that they had produced shortly before. The practices of making the zines and reproducing older zines structured their days that were otherwise dedicated to finding food for the kitchen tent and themselves.

Attack

The general organizing work and particularly the media practices of activists within the unemployed workers movement took place in the aftermath of red-baiting that was particularly strong in the 1920s. The US government persecuted workers' organizers, anarchists, labour movement supporters and especially communists. Only with the New Deal these tactics slowly softened. In that context, it is no wonder that the relation with mainstream news media was particularly difficult for the activist. Hence, *abstention* and *attack* were the most common strategies in dealing with mainstream media. However the critique was mainly attacking mainstream media on an ideological level and not explicitly criticized their temporality or the time regime they establish. In that sense, they neither attacked nor abstained from the temporal

logic of dominant media particularly printed news. Rather, the movement activists *adapted* the temporality by capitalizing on the speeding up of production process through mimeographs.

The activists of OWS also, in a certain sense, attacked the time regime of dominant media technologies. One important attacking practice is the archiving and preservation of stories of OWS activists beyond the immediate purpose of mobilization, organization and information as described by three archivist activists:

While collecting can be done with and by institutions, we have an OWS working group for archives because we want to represent what is going on with Occupy from inside the movement. There are a lot of other people recording the movement and telling its story, but we want to empower occupiers to help preserve what is being made while their story is unfolding. While some archivists aim to be dispassionate and “objective,” our intent was to be more involved in the movement and open about the inherent influence of our actions (Evans, Perrici, & Roberts, 2014).

Archiving practices that are directed by activists themselves could be in that context considered as forms of resistance against dominant ways of history writing and established archiving institutions. At the same time, they are forms of resistance against the dominant time regime of perpetual flow in the 1970s and particularly digital immediacy in nowadays as they stretch beyond the present (Erde, 2014; Thorson et al., 2013). Community archives that appeared especially with the civil rights movement in the 1960s apply political practices of for example horizontalism and participatory democracy to the preservation of materials produced by the movements.

Abstention

In none of the movements there was a clear abstention from the temporal regimes of dominant media technologies. The unemployed workers movement in the 1930s relied heavily on mimeographs to reproduce their leaflets and pamphlets. The tenants' movement in the 1970s aimed at television coverage of their events and the OWS in 2011/2012 was vividly using social media to spread information. At the same time, one could question if abstention from a hegemonic and dominant time regime that characterizes society is possible in the first place. The savvy usage of social media by OWS activists is an expression of the regime of social media and the fact that they are acting within the system of (communicative) capitalism.

Although some activists and commentators are pointing towards problematic consequences of exclusive usage of social media for the organizing work, the dominant perception is that there is no alternative (Terranova & Donovan, 2013). Joan Donovan for example stresses that in the case of the Occupy movement the usage of corporate social media substituted the tedious work of member and supporter lists including contact details. She argues

One of the significant effects of social media is the capacity to broadcast and amplify numerous voices across many platforms. But, a less-often-considered consequence is that activists have become less willing to do the messy work of collecting members' information and maintaining a durable infrastructure (Donovan, 2013).

In that context a complete abstention from the temporal regime of a society seems impossible for social movements and as Todd Wolfson points out '(...) a particular logic of resistance emerges in response to the social systems and social world of which it is a part' (Wolfson, 2014, p. 3).

Conclusion

The article analyses the current culture of immediacy that is fostered by social media critically in the context of protest movements. Furthermore, the temporal regime of immediacy is historically contextualized carving out changes from mechanical speed and perpetual flow to digital immediacy that have crucial implications for democratic practices. It is argued that media practices and time consuming political practices are increasingly desynchronized.

Hence I argue that there is a need for re-politicizing media technologies and infrastructures as an integral part of a critical approach to current communicative and information-based capitalism (see also Gehl, 2011). Media technologies are not neutral platforms, but expression, manifestations but also drivers of the economic and social system in which they emerge. Hence the media technologies employed by the activists that were analysed here, reflect the logics of capitalism in the US-American context. One of the main aims here is to overcome the often depoliticized analysis of technology by highlighting temporality and the consequences of desynchronization between media technologies and political decision making processes. In the analysis I highlighted that activists and movements that are critical of the current societal organization are navigating in a contested space of resistance and adaptation as they are always also part of the societies they aim to change. This is especially apparent when it comes to the

employment of dominant media technologies as Frederica Frabetti argues ‘technology is always both (...) an instrument and a threat, a risk and a promise. The unexpected is always implicit in technology, and the potential of technology for generating the unexpected needs to be unleashed in order for technology to function as technology’ (Frabetti, 2015, p. 169).

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