PUSHING BACK: DIGITAL RESISTANCE AS A SENSITIZING CONCEPT

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Thirty years ago, Howard Rheingold's book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* was published (1993), inaugurating the utopian era of social discourse on the Internet and digital media, and the rhetoric of the "digital revolution" marked by technological solutionism. While this perspective lasted until the 2010s, it is now rather time for a dystopia: surveillance capitalism, data colonialism, polarization and radicalization of opinions and discourses, disinformation, propaganda, addiction… Digital technology has become the problem of society rather than the solution to its problems, and the anticipated positive revolution is far less present today. In this context, other notions might be more fruitful today to characterize some of the initiatives, discourses and sociotechnical practices that we observe today in relation to the Internet. One of these is the notion of "digital resistance" that we propose to explore in this paper, through preliminary conceptualizations and empirical analysis. How can we define digital resistance? What kinds of practices, discourses, and initiatives can be analyzed with this concept? What dimensions of digital resistance could be the subject of inquiries?

While the notion of resistance in relation to technology is often connoted negatively and associated with the rejection of innovation or change (we can think of the trope of "late adopters" in diffusionist theory, Rogers, 2003), our approach to digital resistance takes here a new meaning: political and critical. Indeed, the notion of digital resistance is often used in academia and public discourse to describe practices of using, subverting, and creating technologies, usually in a progressive and anti-oppressive perspective (Russell, 2005). The term digital resistance (and its equivalent in other languages) is mostly used today in reference to tactical uses, for example in solidarity with freelance journalists (Salamon, 2018), support for the Palestinian struggle (Skare, 2016), or

democracy in Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2009). For Ziccardi (2013), digital resistance activities often also have very strong ties to hacker culture, or at least to what he calls its "noble" tradition, known for its ethos of curiosity, freedom, and using technology to do good (Coleman, 2012; Levy, 1985), and often associated with the world of open-source software and peer production (Couture, 2021; Toupin, 2014). Bailay (2021) discusses "black women's digital resistance" through the use of digital media, in opposition to racist and misogynistic representations.

The phenomenon, as we can see, is very real and the questions it raises are far from being exhausted. However, the term is still relatively undefined, and many practices could be categorized as digital resistance if the term was better defined. We propose in this paper a preliminary but formal conceptualization of digital resistance. Our theorization takes place in the context of a research project on the cartography of digital resistance. Different data collection and analysis activities will be implemented to have a wide and panoramic empirical view of the phenomenon of digital resistance. The approach is in line with Hine's (2007) calls to establish a mid-range theory that bridges the gap between in-depth but difficult to generalize case analysis and overarching theories often detached from the field. In this project, the cartographic approach takes on a dual meaning, namely a broad and systematic description of a phenomenon, and the implementation of an original digital device allowing its visualization and potentially participatory enrichment.

Theoretically, we adopt a "sociotechnical" approach to digital resistance by crossing media and communication studies with Science & Technology Studies (STS). This approach seeks to go beyond technical and social determinisms by considering the co-production of technical objects and social order. Contemporary works have highlighted the capacity of technologies to act on societies as well as the opposite capacity of societies on technologies. Some works have emphasized that technological artifacts and infrastructures are vehicles of power and authority (DeNardis, 2014; Gillespie, 2010; Law, 1991; Musiani et al., 2015; Winner, 1980), but can also be reconfigured (Suchman, 2007) or misappropriated. Studies have thus documented opportunities for users to hijack or "misuse" technologies (Akrich, 1992; Latzko-Toth et al., 2019). Other studies have focused on how sexism, racism, and colonialism are embedded in technical design and propose different ways to oppose them. In the discourse analysis, the concept of sociotechnical imaginary will be used to understand digital resistance as such and to analyze how these discourses are reflected in the design of digital technologies.

Our preliminary empirical mapping identified six dimensions to analyze digital resistance that we will present in this paper:

- **Technical affordances**. Digital resistance is often related to the technical affordances of digital devices, be it algorithms, interfaces, or network architectures. Several of them have an objective of detour or "gaming", while others aim at proposing another way of making, sometimes in opposition to colonial standards.
- **The collective or the individual**. Digital resistance is often of a collective nature and is articulated—or could potentially be articulated—around solidarity.

- **Tools or objects of resistance.** A distinction already discussed elsewhere (Landry, 2013) is whether one resists *through* the digital or *about* the digital infrastructure and in favor of an alternative technology.
- **Strategies or tactics.** This distinction refers to the work of de Certeau (1984) between tactics and strategies, where strategy refers to an action that can be carried out from a specific place, outside the power environment of the opponent while tactics refer to actions that can only be taken within the adversary's power environment.
- **The discursive and the practical**. Some forms of resistance are discursive. This is particularly the case of some manifestos or slogans aiming, for instance, at reclaiming "our" data or technologies. Other forms of resistance are practical, such as cryptographic communication networks to support cooperation between activists.
- **The hidden and the public.** Many initiatives of digital resistance are often clandestine, hidden, or private. Conversely, the more 'discursive' resistance initiatives are inherently public since their impact can only be effective if the initiative is publicized.

We argue in particular for the need to apprehend digital resistance as a "sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006) that can offer a new perspective (and an analytical tool) for Internet Studies. Following Blumer (1954, p. 7), "while a definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks. […] [A sensitizing concept] gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances". This paper thus aims to contribute to media, communication, and digital technology studies by proposing a more systematic conceptualization of digital resistance.

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