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AMBIVALENCE IN THE (PRIVATE) PUBLIC SPHERE: HOW GLOBAL DIGITAL ACTIVISTS NAVIGATE RISK

Sarah Myers West

Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California

Digital technologies are increasingly central to the conduct of activism. Through these platforms, activists are able to reach broader publics, respond quickly and nimbly to environmental change, and take on distributed, networked forms. Information technologies have become indispensable venues for the expression of dissent, dissemination of information and collective action (Youmans & York, 2012).

The transformative effect of these technologies in facilitating events such as the Arab Spring also introduces a risk of boiling down social movements to “Twitter” or “Facebook revolutions” by removing them from their context. However, perhaps the greatest impact of these technologies has not taken place in cyberspace but on the ground, enabling the forging of rhizomatic, networked protest movements (Castells, 2012). These changes have had a profound impact on power relations. This study seeks to explore one aspect of this transformation: the relationships between digital activists and the companies that run the platforms on which they protest.

Recent research suggests that while information technologies *in general* are critical for activism, a limited number of commercial platforms *in specific* are used for a high concentration of online activist work. According to one study, roughly half of digital activism campaigns use microblogs and social networking platforms, 97% of which used Twitter and 99% Facebook, respectively. The numbers suggest a tremendous concentration of digital protest movements on a limited number of platforms (Edwards, Howard & Joyce, 2013).

While activists are innovatively using these platforms to create new spaces for speech and dissent, they are also spaces of ambiguity and ambivalence, and may be as dangerous as they are generative. The concentration of users on these platforms has made the companies that run them a target of authoritarian and democratic governments alike. Increasingly, social media companies are facing pressure from governments around the world to provide data on users, take down sensitive content, and alter their processes to make them more responsive to law enforcement requests. When they do not comply, they face lawsuits, the use of invasive hacking procedures, surveillance, and short-term (and occasionally long-term) interruptions in their service.

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While companies' business interests generally align with their users in facilitating free speech and open access, the needs of users do not necessarily outweigh the threat of being closed out of lucrative markets for failing to comply with government demands.

Prior research has explored these questions from the perspectives of the companies through policy analysis (York, 2010), case study research (MacKinnon, 2011) and law (Gasser and Schulz, 2015). In addition, transparency reports published by the companies themselves provide quantitative data specifically on copyright takedown requests, government takedown requests and requests for user data.

However, there is little published academic work from the perspective of activists themselves, or work that provides a qualitative sense of the experiences of activists online in negotiating the ambiguities of the policies of Internet companies. Moreover, there is a strong US-bias in research on online activism, with little comparative work examining digital environments across regions. This study aims to make an initial contribution to expanding this body of research by examining the accounts of a global network of digital activists, focusing on providing more textural detail and nuance through their narratives.

Through semi-structured interviews with a geographically diverse group of activists, all of whom write for the citizen media platform Global Voices, the paper considers how the activists negotiate an ambiguous and shifting landscape of online threats in the conduct of their work. It uncovers a deep vein of ambivalence around digital practices, particularly with regard to the role of social media companies.

It also contributes to a comparative understanding of risk across a number of digital environments. The risks confronted by activists look quite different depending on whether they are in Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, or Turkey: though surveillance and censorship are pervasive, they may take different forms and be experienced in different ways. Though for most of the activists, governments present a primary threat, they also confront harassment from non-governmental or quasi-governmental actors, including trolls and bots, primarily mediated through social media platforms. At times, this has led to physical threats, violence, and in one activist's case, even death.

Despite these threats, the activists remain persistent in conducting their work. They take up practices such as moderating their speech in reaction to political events, and using social steganography in order to communicate selectively to those who will understand their coded speech (boyd, 2014, Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015). My findings suggest that the adoption of this approach is contingent on a variety of factors, including the existence of a cohesive discursive context through which speech can be decoded and broad agreement among activists regarding their media ideologies toward platforms. Where these factors are not present, self-censorship becomes the default option.

An important finding is that the awareness of digital risk among the activists matters little if the peers they communicate with are unaware and expose them to threats. This evidence supports Marwick's (2011) concept of networked privacy, which understands privacy as the ability to control a social situation rather than particular properties of information. The effectiveness of networked privacy is further impacted by common

understandings of which platforms or platform features are private: often, the activists acknowledged that the perceptions of their peers about 'safe' spaces for communication inaccurately represented both the technical architecture and policy positions of social media companies. As a result, the activists often played the role of security expert, trying to encourage their peers to embrace more privacy protective strategies. When their efforts fail (as they say they often do), they are forced to communicate in the clear.

These examples show the use of Internet technologies by digital activists reflects a deep ambivalence. While they emphasize the importance of technologies to their work, this enthusiasm is marked by the need to continually balance their advocacy goals against evolving risks. The paper concludes with a series of considerations for social media companies in taking into account the nuances of the risk environments faced by their users.

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