DIGITAL FREEDOM AND POLITICAL CHANGE:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE STRUGGLE OVER WATER CHARGES IN IRELAND

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Social media platforms have captured the attention of millions of people around the globe. The rise of the internet in everyday life is often associated with two aspects. On the one hand, many media scholars argue that social networking sites and blogs enhance civil society and reinforce democratization processes. On the other hand, the automatized collection and storage of personal data prompted portrayals of the internet as an uncontrollable surveillance system tracking private information. In the political field, social media are widely considered as tools for democratization from below. The politicization of digital platforms created new layers of the public sphere. This paper explores how grassroots activists made use of social media during the political struggle over water charges in the Republic of Ireland between 2014 and 2016. The role social media play in the organization of political protests was explored through various lenses in the last decades. For example, the "movement for social justice" used Listserv and websites to promote their political campaigns (e.g. Mertes 2004; Reitan 2007). A few years later, social media facilitated the emergence of the occupy movement (e.g. Juris 2012). Social media revolutionized the circulation of information and took the participation in digital environments to a new level. The series of events which is widely known as Arab Spring was intensively researched with regard to the use of Twitter during political uprisings (e.g. Bruns, Highfield & Burgess 2013). Further scholars described the social media strategies pursued by anti-austerity movements in various parts of the world (e.g. Cristancho 2015). In contrast to previous research into the politicization of social media, this paper sheds light on how vernacular discourses evolved on social media.

In 2013, the Irish government envisaged introducing water charges for private households. In the same year, social media were used for the first time by social movements in Ireland to disseminate their motion to a national audience. News about

the protests quickly went viral on social media, which put the Irish government under prolonged pressure. The protests in the streets of Dublin and other Irish cities were accompanied by digital activism on various social media platforms. Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat were primarily used to mobilize supporters for the campaign against water charges for private households. The main purpose of the investigation is to gain a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations of digital sociability by examining the use of social media among members of grassroots organizations. Based on a comprehensive discourse analysis of social media content and a series of in-depth interviews with leaders of the social movement, this case study provides crucial insights into how digital devices facilitate political protests in Irish civil society. The social media data was retrieved from the Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) of popular social media platforms (Rogers 2013). Discourse analysis was chosen as the main methodology of the study. Any instance of language can be analyzed at three different levels. A post on a social media platform is at the same time a discursive practice, a text, and a social practice (Fairclough 2003). The paper discusses some of the recent challenges for social science research on digital platforms as well as ethical issues of online research, such as the negotiation of informed consent (e.g. Williams, Terras, and Warwick 2013; Zimmer and Proferes 2014). The study makes a case for examining the digital dimensions of political leadership through the lens of the vernacular. Following the widespread implementation of web 2.0 technologies, online users increasingly engaged in participatory websites that can be conceived as hybrid entities conflating the vernacular discourse and the institutional structure (Howard 2008). The vernacular web encompasses participatory forms of digital communication, ranging from wikis and blogs to social networking sites and chat rooms. Members of such platforms can generate web content and quickly acquire various digital literacies.

The analysis of the data collected revealed how the extensive use of social media during the Irish water protests transformed the political field of Irish society. Firstly, social media carry the potential to empower their users to express their own discourses, shape public debates, and influence the political decision making. For example, the grassroots activists influenced the choice of topics within the political agenda of the Irish Republic. Secondly, the study indicates that social media enable new digital representations of events from below, challenging existing power relations between "old" and "new" media. The digital engagement that was explored in this study primarily emerged in grassroots circles and can be interpreted as an interaction between the vernacular and the institutional. By using the institutional structures of the internet, the activists of the social movement empowered themselves in the field of Irish politics and their vernacular discourses reached large audiences across Ireland. The digital activism altered the order of discourses and extended existing structures of civil society. Using social media platforms to disseminate an online petition, the social movement changed the parameters of political struggles and managed to shape the perception of water charges at a national level. In addition to traditional protest practices on streets, digital activism strongly influenced public opinion. Circulating a petition adjusted the balance of power and initiated changes to the political agenda prior to the national election in February 2016. Based on these initial findings, I suggest that political practices are increasingly mediated by digital devices, blurring boundaries between different elements of the public sphere, such as the street, print media, and virtual environments in Irish society. The growth of digital data in everyday life requires new social science

methodologies to examine the social dynamics of present-day societies. For this reason, the paper also explores avenues for combining data collections in physical spaces and digital environments.

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