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## Introduction

# Activism, communication and social change in the digital age

The concept of “activism” has always had a markedly polysemic character, as it can be applied to a huge variety of movements and situations. However, in recent times we have witnessed the proliferation of new forms and repertoires of collective action that can be included, or that require to be integrated, within the denomination of activism.

The development of digital communication has allowed activists to spread and disseminate their messages more effectively and quickly, thereby facilitating their interaction with a variety of actors, such as potential supporters; the general public; political actors who play the role of either potential allies or antagonists; and, of course, with the news media, which are often listed as one of the most important targets of activists’ efforts. Indeed, a good deal of actions deployed by activists are conceived to attract the news media attention and to ultimately arouse a positive media coverage. Activism, like politics, it is inseparable from its representation in the news media, because to a certain extent it is produced for and through the media.

Under the label of activism, we include mobilizations of great social or political impact (Castells, 2012), but also actions of smaller impact, such as signing a petition on the Internet or supporting or liking specific content on social media platforms (*clicktivism*), which are often aimed at reassuring the consciences of users (Morozov, 2013). We also include well

organized social movements, where there is a clear structure that facilitates coordination, and also more spontaneous forms of activism that lack a real organization.

How do different forms of social and political activism use communication strategies in advancing their struggles in the public sphere? How do they adapt to the digital context? Are the news media promoting social change through their representations of different social movements and political protests? These are some of the questions that are discussed in the current *Communication & Society* special issue, which intends to explore the role of digital communication for activism from a double perspective: analyzing the role of communication in the internal processes within different protest movements, and exploring the news media’s role in making social and political struggles visible and (de)legitimizing them.

The public sphere has recently undergone a deep transformation due to the consolidation of the so called “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick, 2013), where old and new media logics coexist in shaping social actors’ and audiences’ communication practices. In this sense, digital platforms have opened up a new arena and provided activists with a wide repertoire of tools to self-organize and reach their preferred targets, especially through social media like Facebook or Twitter. However, the symbolic efforts of activist groups to construct narratives that can have a wider impact on society still need the support of the traditional news media to gain public visibility and, ultimately, produce social or political change.

In this volume, we present twelve contributions that try to gauge this complex relationship between activism, communication and social change in different geographic and political contexts, including case-studies from four different countries (Spain, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico), and one that focuses on the European Union institutional arena. The

mobilizations under study include a variety of movements related to gender equality, environmental issues, European trade policy, urban space design and student protests.

The special issue is opened by an original piece of research by Sabaté, Micó and Díez that contends that some publications belonging to the so called new digital journalism promote a form of journalistic activism by offering slow and narrative communication products which confront hegemonic digital communication. Rodríguez, Ruiz and Paíno analyze the different functions played by the Twitter profiles of national and international news media during the 2018 Mexican Elections.

The following article, by Larrondo, Morales and Orbegozo, discusses the representation of the feminist movement in Spain through social media, while Denise Cogo analyzes the activism outside its usual environment, that is, developed from another country (specifically the case of Brazilian activists based in Spain).

We continue the special issue with a work by Carolina Pérez-Arredondo focused on the media representation of the Chilean student movement, traditionally very active in a country where the presence of public education is scarce and precarious. In the following article, Bouza, Oleari and Tuñón perform a singularly interesting analysis of the activism deployed through Twitter to oppose the TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), the free trade agreement between the European Union and the United States.

Environmental activism has been particularly visible in the Spanish news media agenda in recent months. The analysis of its media coverage is here represented with solvency through three pieces of research focused on eastern Spain: the work of Mateu and Domínguez on the news media frames of opinion genres in relation to the environment in the 80s and today; Castelló and Montagut's analysis focusing on the case of forest fires and comparing the perspective of the press with that of the activists themselves; and finally the article by Mercado-Sáez, Sahuquillo and Chávez, who analyze the discourse on the risks and benefits of oil exploration in the Gulf of Valencia in recent years, as reflected in the local press.

On another note, López-Rico and González-Esteban discuss the historical citizen movement in the city of Murcia, which rejects to build the passage of the high-speed train through the city surface and which seeks to trace underground tracks. In the following article, Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez approaches the relationship between activism and communication from a very different point of view and explores how commercial brands appropriate the discourse of political and social activism for advertising purposes, trying to use all this symbolic capital for commercial goals.

Finally, Prof. Carragee provides a final bright theoretical discussion which offers relevant suggestions for researchers using the framing scholarship to explore the interactions between social movements and the news media: pay more attention to power inequalities when examining social actors' online and offline communication efforts, take into account the transformation of political and news media environments, remain sensitive to historical and contextual influences on activists struggles, and take distance from idealized conceptions of the emancipatory potential of digital activism.