Chapter 3
Social Media Activism:
A Contested Field

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ABSTRACT
This chapter critically evaluates the role of social networking platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr) in contemporary protest movements (Arab Spring, European Movements and Occupy Movement), pointing out continuities and discontinuities of the new wave of contention. From this perspective, it evaluates the societal conditions of different contexts, the interplay between different media formats during the relevant episodes of contention, and the diversity of social actors engaged in these practices that have accordingly influenced the emergence and the prospects of the protests.

INTRODUCTION
The chapter draws on the wave of protests that emerged in 2011 across different parts of the world – in the Middle East, North Africa, the United States, and Europe – and reflects on theoretical approaches that have been developed in reference to the interplay between social and media activism. The uprisings of 2011 have shifted the focus of research agenda towards the relation between media and social change. In this context, there is a growing interest in analyzing new media practices generated within social movements and the implications of this synergy. For media sociologists, and not only, this has been a particular challenge. It is not the first time that ‘new’ media uses and experiences convey participatory, democratic imageries. The attempt to interpret recent, various mobilizations and protest movements requires comparison and contrast. There are several similarities among these practices, on the grounds of which the emergence of a new, mediated, global wave of protest movements has been acknowledged by many studies. However, the present study questions this perspective, pointing out the differences among the 2011 movements and their practices across the different sociopolitical contexts.

The use of social media in the last decade’s wave of contention has rejuvenated the rhetoric on the emancipatory potentials of technology and new media. Several scholars and analysts have welcomed a new era of social media revolution, while skeptical ones have raised critical voices questioning the role

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of social media in triggering social changes. Techno-optimistic accounts of new technologies evaluate the power of social networking sites as liberating (Shirky, 2008; 2011), labeling recent mobilizations Twitter/Facebook/wiki/2.0 revolutions (Tapscott, 2011; Ghonin, 2012), while techno-pessimistic approaches point out the shortcomings of the use of new technologies, in terms of accommodating “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Morozov, 2011), and building weak, instead of strong, social ties (Gladwell, 2010). What both approaches have in common though is that they adopt a determinist perspective, understanding social media as adequate or inadequate agents of social change. Less deterministic approaches emphasize more complex practices developed in the interplay between social movements and media, from different perspectives – in relation to the emergence either of “multitude” (Hardt & Negri, 2012), or “networked social movements” (Castells, 2012), or the “choreography of the assembly” (Gerbaudo, 2012) or “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). These approaches are critically reviewed here, pointing out the strengths and shortcomings of their analyses.

Subsequently, the chapter addresses and compares recent protest movements in the contexts of their implementation, taking into account their simultaneous upsurge as well as the development of social struggles over the long haul. On this basis, it argues the following theses: a) the consideration of protest movements as part of the same cycle of contention is rather simplistic since it underestimates the specific societal conditions (antagonisms in economic, political and ideological structures of each society); b) most approaches overestimate the role of social media in the development of protests, neglecting the contribution of other media formats (mainstream and alternative ones) and their overall interactions. On these grounds, the chapter casts light on a range of contradictions that are identified when it comes to address structural parameters and the wider mediascape. In view of that, it proposes the employment of research frameworks that advance broad and in-depth comparison of the movements’ repertoire of actions. In this regard, it also discusses emerging trends and research opportunities for the study of social media activism.

BACKGROUND: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND NEW MEDIA

The discussion about the interaction between social movements and media practices has been mostly addressed in fragmented terms, either on the lens of social movement studies or media studies. Early social movement theories focused on the instrumental role of communications/media, as a tool to mobilize resources – ‘resource mobilization theory’. The constructivist approach of ‘new social movements’ theory perceives the formation of collective identity as a dynamic and reflexive process – “identiza-
tion” (Melluci, 1996); nevertheless, it only addresses indirectly the importance of communication in the interactions between social actors and their environment. Despite their limitations in researching how social movements intertwine with media, social movement media studies have contributed significantly to the investigation of the organizational structures of social movements, their “repertoires of contention” (Tilly, 1978), and the routines and values of collective social actors (della Porta & Diani, 2006). Moreover, these studies have evaluated the development of social movements in time, in terms of “cycles of contention” (Tarrow, 1994), or “cultural epochs of contention” (McAdam & Sewell, 2001). These aspects are still relevant when researching contemporary mobilizations in a systematic way, in relation to the political, economic and social context of their materialization and the complex relations between social movements and media.
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