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Voice and Listening in Social Media Facilitated Activist Collectives

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Abstract

This paper examines the articulation of Canadian civic culture from below. Focusing on digitally mediated grassroots mobilizations, it asks how citizens construct and discursively deploy voice and listening as civic values. The paper draws from three empirical cases: the 2014 mobilization of parents during the teachers' strike in British Columbia; the 2015 citizen mobilizations in support of Syrian refugees; and the 2016 sit-in protest outside the Toronto Police headquarters. Citizens participating in these initiatives were keen to "speak up," establishing voice as a civic value. Yet, this is not accompanied by equal attention to the role of listening. This invites simplistic takes to citizen participation, leaving it vulnerable to populist hijackings.

Résumé

Cet article a pour objet l'articulation de la culture civique canadienne par la base politique. En se concentrant sur les mobilisations des citoyennes médiatisées par les réseaux sociaux, il examine comment les citoyens construisent et utilisent la voix et l'écoute comme valeurs civiques. L'analyse utilise trois cas empiriques: la mobilisation des parents en 2014 lors de la grève des enseignants en Colombie-Britannique; les mobilisations citoyennes de 2015 en faveur des réfugiés syriens; et les manifestations de 2016 devant le quartier général de la police de Toronto. Les citoyens participant à ces initiatives tenaient à "s'exprimer", faisant de la voix une valeur civique. Pourtant, cela ne s'accompagne pas d'une attention égale au rôle de l'écoute. Cela

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invite à un traitement simpliste de la participation citoyenne, la laissant vulnérable aux détournements populistes.

THIS PAPER FOCUSES ON THE construction of citizen voice as a political value in grassroots collective action. Participatory democracy models place citizen input at the heart of the decision-making process. Yet, accommodating the multiplicity of citizen voices in politics remains a difficult process. Hailed as laboratories for participatory decision-making and horizontal democracy (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2012; Juris 2012), digitally mediated forms of grassroots collective action are constantly confronted with the need to engage with a multiplicity of citizen voices. Such cases may bring insight into how different citizen voices can be brought together in the political realm, but also into how understandings and practices of “doing politics” are articulated from the bottom-up. In the Canadian context, where diversity lies at the heart of official nationalism, such mundane understandings and practices of “doing politics” can reveal tacit assumptions of diversity in politics and everyday life.

Grassroots collective action refers to a concerted, citizen-led effort to influence political decision-making by means of oppositional politics such as protest, sit-ins, boycotts, etc. The term is used here for citizen-led contentious political action ranging from episodic issue and place-bound interpellations of power structures to social movements. Such forms of bottom-up political action are premised on individuals claiming a public voice, while also forging the plurality of these accounts into a politically compelling set of shared demands. Yet, the formation of such demands necessarily entails an oppositional stance. The collective voice of these initiatives remains one among many within the larger political realm. Consequently, grassroots collective action necessitates engagement with competing positions and interests.

A central element of grassroots collective action, *voice* is used here as an analytical lens referring to the process of giving an account of one’s positioned self and “of the world within which they act” (Couldry 2010:7). The understandings and practices of dealing with voice developed through participation in grassroots collective action are, on the one hand, an expression of the mundane civic culture of a political space. Since civic culture “can promote or impede engagement (and by extension, participation)” (Dahlgren 2018:2055), scrutinizing it can elucidate how people come to conceptualize politics and what they come to expect of it. On the other hand, these practices are actively constructing the very “civic prerequisites” (Dahlgren 2018) through which participation in political life becomes construed as feasible, and legitimate.

This paper thus addresses the following research question: How do digitally mediated grassroots collective actions in Canada articulate the political value of voice? While voice as a theoretical lens has been

discussed in political philosophy (Bickford 1996; Norval 2009) and taken up in media and communication studies (Couldry 2010), it has remained underexplored in the sociology of social movements. In the *Canadian Review of Sociology*, voice has been recently used as a framework for discussing the reconciliation process in Canada (Matsunaga et al. 2016). Social movements and other political forms of collective action have been widely covered in the journal, with attention devoted to topics such as media coverage of protest (Corrigall-Brown 2016; Wilkes, Corrigall-Brown, and Myers 2010), online activism (Ollivier et al. 2006), and movement organization (Amenta 2016; Kowalchuk 2003; Tyyskä 1998; Veltmeyer and Petras 2002). This paper contributes to the body of work published in the journal by exploring the different ways in which voice is used across three different cases of grassroots collective mobilization. While voice is widely celebrated as a central mechanism of participation and grassroots mobilization in Canadian politics, it remains conceptualized as an individual act of speaking in public. The absence of a strong normative connection between voice and the act of listening to others undermines the potential of turning voice into a political value, making it susceptible to easy co-optation by the rising populist tide.

VOICE/LISTENING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although the term “collective action” comes with its own limitations and legacies that go beyond the scope of this paper (Oliver 1993), here it refers to contentious political action organized by citizens. This usage of the term comes close to Miller’s (2017) definition of social movements as “a contentious form of social and political resistance” (p. 1). However, where social movements entail coalitions of social actors that pursue a common agenda over longer periods of time, grassroots collective action also includes episodic bottom-up efforts of tackling localized issue-based grievances. This is the case of the empirical material used here, consisting of citizen-led efforts to pressure local decision-making structures on locally relevant issues such as resolving a teachers’ strike, taking in more refugees, and acknowledging and transforming systemic police racism. Such forms of bottom-up contentious politics express the multiple—and galvanize the conflicting—citizen voices making up the political body, as people have to “work together in a cooperative fashion at the same time that they express opposition to other groups and forces” (Miller 2017:1).

The importance of a collective message that forges together different citizen voices has already been discussed in studies of social movements. Such a message is essential to mobilizing wider constituencies and being recognized in the political realm. Theoretically, this was discussed in terms of collective action frames (Benford and Snow 2000) and claim-making processes (Tilly 2006), focused on how organizers contribute to the “production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists,

and bystanders or observers” (Benford and Snow 2000:613). In the process of message production, such movement organizers have to deal with the different positions and stakes that various supporters bring along. Externally, movement organizers also have to engage with oppositional stances.

This paper focuses on these practices of accommodating diverse stories, while dismissing others. To capture this dynamic in grass-roots collective action, I use the analytical lens of voice as political value (Couldry 2010). In addition to this, I draw from Bickford’s (1996) argument on the necessary relationship between voice and listening (Bickford 1996). Where the framing approach focuses on the construction of shared meanings (Benford and Snow 2000), the lens of voice as a political value orients attention to both the act of giving an account of the self and the process of assigning value to this act. Given that the cases used here as empirical material rely widely upon social media for organization and mobilization purposes, the literature on digitally mediated collective action adds insight into how the communicative features and practices of social media platforms may affect the act of speaking out but also the recognition of voice.

Voice as Political Value

In the context of politics, voice refers to an individual’s account of both their own circumstances and the world in which they live (Couldry 2010). In that sense, the analytical lens of voice does not refer to merely stating something (whether an opinion, a claim, etc.). Rather, voice is regarded as a proxy for the positionality of one’s sense of self and experience of the world. The act of “speaking up” or “voicing one’s concerns” becomes politically significant in a democratic setting as an expression of the effects of power structure upon individual lives. Inclusive and participatory-based visions of politics make room for the expression of multiple voices (Norval 2009). The absence of the opportunity of voice—particularly but not exclusively for marginalized groups—is, on the other hand, associated with an oppressive and unjust system (Dreher 2009; Macnamara 2013). The second dimension of voice has to do precisely with its recognition as a worthy political value (Couldry 2010)—a recognition that manifests itself in making room for the expression of voice, and developing avenues through which positioned accounts of self and the world can be heard and considered in the management of common life.

While collective action represents a form of voice in the political sphere, this does not automatically translate into recognizing voice as political value in its daily workings. For that to happen, those involved in a form of collective action should explicitly recognize voice as a guiding principle, meaning “valuing individuals’ ability to give an account of themselves and the conditions under which they live” (Couldry 2010:18).

This, however, implies an understanding of the ethics of listening, which suggests that to speak in public matters only to the extent that there is also a possibility of being listened to (Bickford 1996). Listening implies the willingness to recognize not just the speaker as legitimate, but also the fact that each account is positioned. Yet, listening is intrinsically tied to voice: in seeking to be heard, the speaking subject must also be willing to listen to other voices. For Bickford (1996), only this type of voice—one that is committed to democracy—is politically legitimate, as such a voice is necessarily oriented toward finding a common ground with others in the polity, and is thus intertwined with listening. Listening entails an “active willingness to construct certain relations of attention” (1996:24) but also a recognition that we can only hear “as ourselves against the background of who we are” (1996: 24). In addition to these two elements, listening also requires an openness to change one’s own perspective and to be surprised by others; and to take conflict as productive in itself, without the expectation of consensus or resolution (Bickford 1996).

Where Bickford clarifies what listening in democracy entails, Norval (2009) draws attention to the conditions under which some individuals and groups are deprived of the possibility of voice. In democratic politics, not everyone is recognized as a legitimate “speaker,” nor are the skills required for argumentative speaking—which often informs normative visions of participatory democracy—equally available across the social body. This suggests that the dynamics of exclusion at play in grassroots collective action merit attention: whose voices are present (or, perhaps, louder) in collective action? Whose voices remain (or become) silent in the process?

This framework also leaves some questions unanswered. To a large extent, the practical aspects of voice/listening remain elusive (Edwards 2013), although it is quite clear that their application as guiding principles in politics requires a sustained investment (Bond 2011; Goi 2005). This investment entails “thinking differently about the contexts in which decisions are made” (Bond 2011:179) but also about the resources required to enact such values (Goi 2005). This paper’s approach to voice as value focuses attention on both the expression of citizen activists’ voice and on the way in which they recognize the other accounts of the issue at hand. This offers a framework for assessing when and how voice is acknowledged as valuable, and when its legitimacy is denied.

Voice, Social Media, and Grassroots Collective Action

The extent to which grassroots initiatives remain committed to the idea that “voice matters” needs further examination, although recent forms of collective action—particularly digitally mediated forms—have been hailed as horizontal and participatory (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2012; Juris 2012). Since the empirical material used here comes from three cases of digitally mediated grassroots initiatives, it is important to

briefly examine the intersection between the communication technologies of collective actions and their participatory practices (Della Porta and Mattoni 2012). These initiatives relied upon social media such as Facebook to organize, mobilize supporters, and amplify their message. Occasionally, these platforms have also enabled new contentious forms of action, such as hashtag campaigns.

On the one hand, the widespread use of social media in contentious collective action positions these platforms as quintessential spaces for the expression of individual voice (Dumitrica and Bakardjieva 2018). This builds upon a long-standing framing of the proliferation of self-expression on the Internet as a form of political participation (Keren 2010). The story-telling possibilities afforded by social media have also been credited with enabling new logics of collective action. For Bennett and Sergerber (2012), social media strengthen the already existing trend in the personalization of politics by facilitating the organizing and mobilizing of collective action without the need for traditional organizing actors such as nongovernmental organizations. Instead, networked individuals can engage in contentious action without sharing the ties of a collective identity or action frame.

In turn, this is seen as resulting in leaderless and horizontal collective action, where social media connect individuals with a similar plea and aggregate individual acts of participation (e.g., cultural content production as in creating a political meme; or, self-expression as in sharing such a meme or using a political message as one's Facebook profile picture), thereby creating the power in numbers that could potentially lead to political impact. Conceptually, these affordances of social media echo the idea of participatory democracy. As such, digitally mediated collective action can easily appear to be an inclusive space, at once accommodating the multiplicity of personal voices and amplifying them in the political arena. Indeed, movements such as Occupy Wall Street have been praised for providing a model for "reorganizing society based on horizontal collaboration, participatory democracy, and coordination through autonomy and diversity" (Juris 2008 quoted in Couldry 2010: 102).

Yet, not all forms of self-expression on social media entail voice or the recognition of voice as a political value. A Facebook status update or an Instagram photo may well be an expression of the (civic) self; yet, this form of speaking up does not necessarily entail listening rooted in respect for "the inherent differences between voices" (Couldry 2010:8) and for the other as "a person whose capabilities are of constructive value to a concrete community" (Honneth quoted in Couldry 2010:67). This is the case with forms of online self-expression oriented toward self-branding or toward the disruption of social interaction (e.g., "shouting," flaming, trolling, etc.). Such practices undercut the recognition of the positionality of voice and deny recognition of other people's voices, revealing "the limits of one's willingness to listen" (Bickford 1996:157). This is an important distinction

informing this paper's attention to how voice is brought up in grassroots collective action.

Clearly, the affordances of social media platforms are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to enable participatory forms of democratic decision-making. In her study of the Occupy movement, Kavada (2015) highlights the tension between the movement's commitment to inclusiveness and horizontality, and the pressure to speak in a unitary, collective voice. Social media use, she argues, led to "many negotiations and conflicts around who has access to the [...] accounts and what this collective voice should sound like. The privilege of speaking as Occupy on social media was reserved to a few, an understandable choice but still one that challenged some of the movement's core values" (Kavada 2015:883). Interestingly, "activists' reluctance to openly exclude people from the movement" (Kavada 2015:884) shapes the movement's participatory practices, pointing toward the crucial role of prevailing values—rather than the use of social media—in creating inclusive spaces.

Indeed, while social media lower the barriers of participation and amplify citizens' voice (Crawford 2009), they also shutter the possibility of recognizing oppositional voices—a central feature of the ethics of listening discussed earlier (Bickford 1996). The propensity toward the formation and maintenance of quite robust echo chambers on social media encourages "people to just live in their little worlds" (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006:968). In a study of digital protest communication, for instance, González-Bailón and Wang (2016) found that online networks are not that fluid and most communication "remains enclosed within clusters of redundant connections" (p. 102). The problem with the formation of such echo chambers in collective action is not polarization per se, but rather the removal of oppositional others, operated by the social media's algorithmic selection of like-minded content. The ensuing homogenization of voices within the echo chamber leads to the normalization of more extreme positions (Sunstein 2006), eroding the willingness to recognize voice as a political value.

The increased appropriation of social media for propagandistic purposes further contributes to this. Powerful political and economic actors quickly become caught up with citizens' use of social media for contentious politics, investing in manipulating and undermining these platforms' participatory and deliberative potentials. Surveillance of digital activist groups, well-funded campaigns directed at changing the narrative on contentious issues, the production and distribution of fake news, and trolling are all strategies that have been deployed against collective action in various geopolitical contexts (Aro 2016; Bradshaw and Howard 2017; Uldam 2018; Youmans and York 2012). Add to this the toxicity and online abuse accompanying polarizing topics such as feminism (Mendes, Ringose, and Keller 2018) and social media no longer appear as safe spaces for speaking up in public.

In many ways, then, the recognition of voice as a political value in digitally mediated collective action is increasingly curtailed by algorithmic politics and strategic appropriations of social media for propaganda and manipulation. The result of such dynamics is an emerging feeling that voices are fundamentally irreconcilable. Worryingly, an increased anxiety that the Internet is enabling a “culture of hate” (Brodner 2016) chips away at the possibility that adversarial voices can still be productive. In a study of how users dealt with hate speech online, Johnson (2018) found that apathy was a prevailing strategy, as participants felt “people who post extreme content are unwilling to change their behavior/beliefs, or that responding to them will make them more extreme” (p. 1285). In the context of collective action, the personal cost of dealing with aggression and attacks in online spaces can lead to exhaustion and eventual retreat from public spaces (Dumitrica and Felt 2019).

These aspects of social media weaken the political value of voice. However, Mouffe’s model of adversarial—even irreconcilable—voices in democratic politics is useful here in distinguishing between adversarial and inimical voices. Mouffe urges us to see the multiplicity of competing visions and agendas as a productive force in politics. Yet, this happens only when “opponents are adversaries, not enemies: they know that they disagree and that they will never find a rational solution to their disagreement, but they nevertheless accept the legitimacy of the claims of their opponents” (Hansen and Sonnischsen 2014:268). This distinction between adversarial and inimical voices provides a useful lens for investigating the various voices involved in digitally mediated collective action.

METHODOLOGY

Informed by the lens of voice and discussions about the intersection between voice and social media, I investigate the ways in which voice is understood and dealt with in three cases of digitally mediated grassroots collective action. The empirical research used here was undertaken during 2014–2017 as part of a wider research project examining the role of social media in grassroots mobilizations across Canada. The project relied upon a case study design, where data were collected via in-depth interviews (online and offline), participant observations, media coverage, and social media traces. While the selection of cases was done with an eye to heterogeneity (geographical scope, issue, length, and size of mobilization), they all had a grassroots nature (i.e., spurred by citizens with minimal prior activist experience) and relied on social media for organization and mobilization purposes.

While mapping individual expression in the online channels used for organization and mobilization may give an insight into the diversity of voices discussing the political issue, it does not say much about the political value of voice within the collective action itself. This paper thus

focuses on how organizers and participants articulated the role of voice in the initiatives they engaged with. The paper relies on 32 interviews with 34 citizens involved in the following three cases (see Table 1):

- The mobilization of parents during the 2014 teachers' strike in British Columbia. Against the background of a protracted labor conflict, parents sought to pressure the provincial government to engage in meaningful negotiations with the teachers' union.
- Citizen mobilizations in support of Syrian refugees in 2015, including cross-country awareness-raising rallies organized by No One is Illegal meant to pressure the Canadian Government into accepting more Syrian refugees, and citizen-led efforts to help these families integrate upon arrival (i.e., the Syrian Refugee Support Group in Calgary).
- The March–April 2016 sit-in protest outside the Toronto Police headquarters (known as “BLMTO Tent City”) to raise awareness on police violence against blacks. The event was organized by Black Lives Matter—Toronto as a result of the decision to not press criminal charges against the police officer who shot and killed Andrew Loku, as well as the decision to reduce Afrofest to one day.

The in-depth, semistructured interviews lasted one hour on average and were held both face-to-face and via Skype. The following topics were covered: participant's involvement in the case; social media use (personal and case-related); and opinions on effectiveness and limitations of social media use in the case.

The activists' own stories produced during the research interview are not merely a retelling of why and how someone became compelled to engage, but an active construction of the self as a political actor. They are also accounts of the citizens' relation to the (imagined) political environment. As such, they provide insight into the civic values constructed and promoted via involvement in the grassroots collective action. The analysis consisted of a focused reading of the transcripts loosely informed by critical discourse analysis methodology. This focused reading was guided by a set of questions informed by the theoretical framework of voice as political value. The first two questions elicit participants' own understanding of the value of their and other people's voices, the third explores how listening is conceptualized, and the last taps into the ways in which social media and voice become articulated together:

- The voice of the activist: What enables/constrains the activists' own voice?
- Accounts of voice as value: Which voices are recognized as valuable and when?

Table 1

List of Interview Participants**BC Parents Mobilization during Teachers' Strike—Interviews Held: September 2014 to August 2015**

Respondent 1	Female	Participant, MLA Playdate
Respondent 2	Female	Participant, Blogger
Respondent 3	Male	Co-organizer, MLA Playdate
Respondent 4	Male	Co-organizer, MLA Playdate
Respondent 5	Male	Co-organizer, MLA Playdate
Respondent 6	Female	Organizer of three walks
Respondent 7	Female	Participant, MLA Playdate
Respondent 8	Female	Blogger
Respondent 9	Female	Participant, MLA Playdate
Respondent 10	Female	Organizer of families funding teachers
Respondent 11	Female	Organizer of protect public education now
Respondent 12	Female	Moderator, FB page
Respondent 13	Female	Moderator, FB page
Respondent 14	Male	Rally organizer and FB page admin
Respondent 15	Male	Union rep, participant

Refugees Welcome – interviews held: March – September 2016

Respondent 1	Female	Co-organizer, Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 2	Male	Co-organizer, Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 3	Female	Involved with Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 4	Female	Involved with Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 5	Male	Involved with Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 6	Male	Involved with Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 7	Female	Involved with Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 8	Male	Participant and beneficiary of Syrian Refugees Support Group, Calgary
Respondent 9	Male	Co-organizer, Refugees Welcome, Ottawa
Respondent 10	Male	Co-organizer of local Refugees Welcome Rally, St. John's
Respondent 11	Female	Involved with Refugees Welcome, Ottawa
Respondent 12	Male	Organizer of a Refugees Welcome group, Halifax

Continued

Table 1

Continues

Tent City (Toronto)—Interviews held: May–July 2016		
Respondent 1	Female	Participant
Respondent 2	Female	Participant
Respondent 3	Female	Participant
Respondent 4	Female	Participant
Respondent 5	Male	Participant
Respondent 6	Male	Co-founder of ABRN
Respondent 7	Female	Participant

- Accounts of the relation between self/others: When and how are other voices recognized?
- The role of social media: When and how are social media seen as amplifiers or barriers to voice?

Three articulations of voice emerged from the interviews: the voice of the citizen activist as a means of “speaking truth to power”; the voice of supportive others as a means of constructing the collective; and the oppositional voice. These articulations elucidated how organizers and participants in collective action recognize the political value of voice.

VOICE/LISTENING IN GRASSROOTS COLLECTIVE ACTION

Citizen Voice: An Authentic Way of Speaking Truth to Power

Many of the participants in our project described the act of sharing their story on social media (often equated with “speaking in public”) as a genuine, raw, and unaltered reflection of the unjust conditions of their lived reality. In so doing, participants *enacted* voice as a political value: they not only reclaimed the right to give an account of the conditions of their lives (Couldry 2010:18), but also signaled that the experience of the world was necessarily mediated by one’s position in it.

Citizens’ accounts emerged from a state of anger and frustration with a problematic state of affairs—the lack of resources in public education, or the lack of awareness of police abuse against blacks—compelling the citizen to shed light on injustices that might not be visible or properly understood by those not directly affected. In turn, social media transformed individual voices into public and potentially viral accounts. Their raw, emotional appeal signaled authenticity. Thus, the personal story was seen as able to reveal the “truth” about the conditions of lived life. One of the

parents involved in the BC mobilization talked about her daughter's first day in school, when she had to "sit down at a table with few craft supplies and the teacher told me that there was no money in the budget for anything else. I was really mad and thought that was absolutely appalling." This encounter became a post on Facebook. Similarly, citizens involved with the Tent City in Toronto spoke of the emotional toll of the injustices encountered in everyday life. These emotions were the first step toward action, and action (at least initially) happened on social media, by sharing one's story with others: "I am directly impacted by it, so are my friends and my family...if you personally experience [police abuse] or you know people that personally experience that, I think that they're kind of compelled to do something."

The affective nature of voice also made personal hardships and the injustices encountered in everyday life audible and persuasive. Because it grew out of direct experience of everyday life, voice became the carrier of unmediated "truth." Individual voice thus turned into an act of "speaking truth to power," making the experience of everyday life and its injustices visible in the public sphere. Among our participants, "truth" was a common descriptor for their stories, as well as for the stories of those sharing the same affinities and visions. One of the parents in the BC case explained: "it became our goal to keep telling the truth about what was going on, to encourage people to bring their stories forward so other people, who might be experiencing the same thing, could say: 'hey, it's not just me, there are a lot of people who are experiencing this and don't like this'." A Tent City participant echoed the same idea: "I wanted people to know the truth from the ground. I was writing personal things that were happening as they were happening... I was just trying to get as many people to actually realize... what's happening." Importantly, the process of "speaking truth to power" was not just an individual (potentially subjective) view on things: being recognized—shared, commented upon—by similar others turned it into a collective, and therefore valid, truth.

In this articulation, the political value of this (individual) voice derives from its ability to trigger recognition. Yet, this is not the recognition Bickford (1996) discusses as a precondition of voice as political value, but rather one mediated by identifying with the feelings of injustice experienced by the speaker. Here, listening becomes nodding in agreement and feeling equally wronged. Interestingly, for many of the participants, telling a personal story is an act of educating others, particularly those who may not have direct experience with the issue. The implied expectation here is that if others engage in respectful listening, they will see the "truth."

Importantly, not all participants related to the process of voicing one's story in the same way. Citizens with prior grassroots mobilization experience or those with symbolic capital and professional know-how appeared more concerned with organizing collective action than speaking up. However, for those lacking previous activist experience and describing

themselves as not particularly active in politics, political participation seemed understood as an act of “speaking truth to power.”

Voice as a Bridge between Self and Community

Activists’ accounts also construct voice as the mechanism through which the individual and the community are brought into harmony. This articulation echoes Bickford’s (1996) argument that voice is intrinsically linked to listening and, in this way, the individual orients themselves toward others in the polity.

In some cases, voice strengthened the solidarity between the individual and their preexistent community. The speaking citizen shed light (usually from a position of relative privilege) on the experiences of less fortunate members of the same community. In others, individual voice led to renewed appreciation for the solidarity provided by a community. Thus, speaking out on social media prompted recognition from supportive others. These were people who, as one Tent City participant explained, “identify, who we know would share at least the broad framework we are working with.” They were part of a community of allies, ready to amplify the message and lend their support to the cause. Another Tent City participant discussed social media as enabling solidarity across different communities: “through social media, the black community could tell other communities what’s happening...so for Tent City, we had solidarity with the Aboriginal community...I think we had solidarity with the LGBTQ community...we can tap into other communities that have similar... issues...they understand what we’re going through.” For these participants, the help of supportive others was crucial to gaining visibility and reaching individuals beyond their personal networks.

Finally, the act of speaking up can also create the community. In this case, the recognition of voice forms the bonds of trust bringing strangers together. One of the parents in the BC case spoke of how her personal story attracted not only other people’s support but their similar stories. Voice was akin to a magnet attracting other voices, thus creating an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) and the feeling of being responsible for it. The similarity of voices provided the impetus for the speaking citizen to continue to act, as she was no longer speaking solely about herself, but also on behalf of a community. One parent in the BC case explained that the reaction to her story on social media only made her want to “share more and more and more.” For another parent, her efforts to change the status quo became a “voice for parents who felt that public education was being eroded...we wanted to really stress that public education should be public and should be accessible to everyone. And that kids’ opportunities shouldn’t be dictated by their parents’ ability to lobby or fundraise.”

Voice can thus be a path to “finding” (or perhaps constructing) a community based on shared experiences and views. Alternatively, voice can

reassert the value of community and the form of solidarity that it elicits. In this articulation, voice, and listening are mutually reinforcing—yet, as already alluded to, listening remains premised on identification with the speaker. The form of listening that the expression of voice thus brings along is not one in which we are confronted with disagreement or opposition. While voice is recognized as a political value here, it does not entail the recognition of adversarial voices as productive. Instead, the listening that accompanies voice is oriented toward consensus and the formation of in-group solidarity.

Voices of Dissent

Our participants also brought up dissent in discussing their cause. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the voice of the opposition was often depicted as either ideological (lies, propaganda, manipulation) or ill-intended (trolling, flaming, or incivility). Listening to such voices did not seem to entail an opening to change one's own perspective; nor was conflict seen as productive here. Yet, these oppositional voices were not all the same; analytically, they can be classified into institutions associated with formal politics and fellow citizens. Echoing the debates on the limitations of social media for collective action discussed earlier, the overall strategy of dealing with dissent seemed characterized by a refusal to engage.

Politicians, the government, and the mainstream media garnered the most contempt. In line with growing trends of re-appropriation of social media as surveillance and manipulation instruments mentioned above, these actors were often described as “lying,” “spinning the truth,” or as “PR/propaganda machines.” In the BC case, parents organizing sit-ins in front of their MLA's offices found these offices closed. Online, “speaking to” politicians via tagging or posting did not lead to any meaningful responses. And, even when the local municipal administration did respond to Tent City protesters, the latter felt this was a promotional technique (as only minor demands were addressed). As one participant explained, “they just won't listen, and no one is around to hold them accountable when they just don't listen.” Mainstream media fared no better: respondents recounted journalists “cherry picking” the facts or enforcing a complete “black out” of their cause. The institutions of political life were thus depicted as untrustworthy, working against civic interest, and dismissive of citizens' voices. This only reinforced the participants' sense that they were “speaking truth to power,” for in the absence of feeling listened to, they felt more driven in their duty to “reveal the truth” and to “unravel the lies” of the political and media elites.

Not all citizens subscribed to this vision. For some, access to journalists and even politicians was possible. It is not that such citizens thought their voice would make a difference. Rather, they had the know-how of using the avenues of formal politics and the media logic to compel

decision-making elites to respond. Furthermore, they did not expect immediate change, but rather saw their own intervention as a long-term, agenda-setting, or awareness-raising/attitude-changing one. For example, one of the parents in the BC case drew from her social and professional capital to organize and submit a petition to the BC legislature. She turned the delivery of the petition into a media event with photo ops and human interest elements (her school-aged daughter had consented to delivering the petition to the legislature). Soon, a few opposition politicians wanted to associate themselves with the petition. In such cases, engagement with journalists, politicians, and governments was a different experience. These citizens focused on aggregating multiple voices and channeling them in a formal manner, while their expectations on who and how they will listen were not premised on radical or immediate change.

The second type of dissent stems from voices of other citizens. Here, a distinction was made between the ignorant and the ill-intended. In the words of one participant, there are “the vicious, horrible, ugly people [who] show their faces quite clearly” and “the other people...[who] might not know, but they’re curious, and they’re trying to understand.” The ignorant is a voice that should be recognized and could be engaged with. Listening to the ignorant, for example, could be useful in giving activists an insight into the “understanding the other side.” The ignorant could be educated by exposing them to “the truth.” In the BC case, some participants were moderating a public Facebook group devoted to public education in the province. Their self-assumed mission was that of maintaining a civil and safe space of discussion in the group and, as such, they often tried to engage with those expressing different views:

I tried to get her to explain what [her comments] meant.... I think she said [that the teachers’ union] was raging at her. And so I said: ‘what does this mean? Does it look like this?’... I was trying to get her to talk about it. And so other people joined in, other parents joined, and then teachers joined in and were outraged. And I said to them, on the side: ‘Back off, I want to know what she said. Please don’t say anything. I’m trying to find out what she means. We need to know how parents perceive us.’ There were a few of us trying to keep the conversation going, but every now and then, I would summarize the thread: ‘this is what we have so far’... And then someone else would say: ‘yes, I agree but...’. And then they would add something more. And then I would go back and I’d be: ‘okay, so does it mean this and this and this?’. And they’d say: ‘yes, yes, but it was this too’. And this went on the whole day. I think the length of the comment was something like 800 comments.

When asked what this interaction achieved, the participant replied:

The mainstream media distorts everything about us. They distort what the union is, they distort what we were standing for, what we were trying to do.

So what the conversation did was to clarify, in a non-threatening way, this is what it is, that's not true, this is what we've done.

The respondent describes the online interaction of different voices as a public sphere, where people can engage with each other to explain their perspectives, get more information, and listen to more arguments. However, in our sample, very few people talked about purposefully engaging in such lateral listening of fellow citizens. Lateral listening required tremendous investment and, subsequently, these citizens experienced burnout and had to withdraw from their self-ascribed moderating roles on the Facebook page (Dumitrica and Felt 2019).

The ill-intended, on the other hand, was to be shut down. One of the participants involved with the Refugees Welcome mobilization recounted the following story: during an event supporting refugees, "a guy...stood up and...was like 'I'm from this region, I'm from the area, you don't know what you're doing. You're bringing all of these Muslims in...they treat us badly where I'm from...you're importing terror'." This voice was quickly shut down by the organizers of the event who told the man in question: "I understand how you feel, but you are wrong." Later on in the interview, the same participant drew a distinction between constructive and destructive opposition. With the latter, he explained, there can be no dialogue; the solution was deletion or blocking (on social media). Yet, he was also quick in pointing out that this does not happen often and it is only a rarely used strategy. Another participant explained:

If people start getting offensive, then we would delete the post. I mean, that's a no-no. If it gets personal and offensive, there's no room for that. We delete it immediately. If it was a healthy discussion then, for sure, you can have that...You quickly recognize if someone is not there to contribute to what we stood for...if you're not helping people, then you're there to voice your opinion about how bad the world is and how we shouldn't allow people to come here...yeah, that's not what we were for, sorry, you're in the wrong group.

When voice is ill-intended, it is not genuine or authentic. To use Mouffe's distinction, these voices were inimical, rather than adversarial (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014). This was the case of people writing nasty comments, engaging in flame wars or trolling. Such inimical voice were seen as making fake accusations (e.g., accusing parents of being on the payroll of the teachers' union) and were generally perceived as unwilling to engage in meaningful discussions. As a Tent City participant explained, "there is such [negativity] made by people who do not understand or people who do not want to listen." Of course, the question of just what marks a dissenting voice as 'ignorant' (rather than 'ill-intended') remains difficult, as it rests upon citizens' own assumptions of other people's intentions and worth as speakers.

In Kavada's (2015) study, the commitment to inclusion was an important value within the social movement. Similarly, the cases examined here suggest that the recognition of the opposing other as a legitimate speaker hinges upon the citizen activists' own take on voice as political value. Overall, dissenting discourse was delegitimized, particularly when juxtaposed with the "voicing of the truth" by those directly affected by the contentious issue. This was clearly illustrated in the BC case: While the researchers had sought out and interviewed citizens mobilizing in support of teachers, it soon became obvious that there were multiple positions on this issue across the social body. Some saw teachers as greedy, lazy, cheap, and trying to get better benefits from the government. One group, in particular, had taken steps to organizing a protest against the teachers' strike. The participants in our study saw this group as "hijacking" their efforts to mobilize support for public education. Furthermore, the group in question was already marked by some type of difference: the "Chinese parents" were described as "rich" and only concerned with their children going to school to get their education. These parents, then, had arrived at a different interpretation of the strike than the participants: they expected the government to force the teachers to return to work and did not seem concerned with the impact of the ongoing budget cuts on the quality of public education (by contrast, the participants in our sample saw this as the core issue of the teachers' strike). The group's view was dismissed by our interviewees as "wrong"—and this essentially closed down the openness to recognize them as a legitimate voice.

Dealing with dissent remained a major silence across the interviews conducted. While, on occasion, dialogue does happen, it remains exceptional. Furthermore, when it happens, it becomes a highly charged experience that eventually leads to disengagement with dissent. One parent in the BC case captured this feeling in her discussion of her own online initiative to fundraising in support of the teachers:

It wasn't meant to be a democratic forum for public expression. It had a purpose, and I also saw a lot of the really, ugly negative comments... I wasn't going to provide a platform for people to do that. It is not my obligation, there's lots of spaces for them to do that and it would distract from what we were doing, which was strictly raising money and if you don't want to donate, then don't. That's fine.

This is not to deny that disengagement with dissent might not rest on valid reasons; such decisions are not taken lightly by the citizens involved in collective action. Yet, it is undeniably easier to listen to the voice of similar others. Indeed, research suggests that discussions among those sharing similar views are often more constructive and deliberative, but the homogeneity of the participants also heightens the polarization and radicalizes those who feel they know the "truth" (Sunstein 2006). For

example, one participant in the Tent City concluded that speaking up about the cause in an honest way rendered dissent more visible. This was not a pleasant experience and it led her to conclude: “you learn to...associate yourself with people who are...more like-minded in the end.” Dissent avoidance or silencing as an imagined avenue for political engagement requires further attention. Which voices are being dismissed? How can they still be taken into account without leading to disengagement or further polarization?

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the articulation of voice as political value in three cases of grassroots collective action in Canada, providing a refreshing counterpoint to worries of voter apathy in Canada. Not only do citizens seem keen to “speak up,” but social media appear as *the* means for doing so. Many of the citizens in our study praised social media for enabling their “voices” to become public in an increasingly personalized political sphere, creating communities of shared interest able to mount collective demands on political structures. Yet, while digitally mediated grassroots collective action becomes an “authentic” expression of the conditions of lived reality, it does not necessarily entrench voice as a political value in the Canadian civic culture.

Making one’s account of self and world public on social media can shed light on the experience of everyday inequalities and hardships. Echoing wider articulations of social media as sites of authenticity (Dumitrica and Felt 2019), the vision of a communication technology revealing and amplifying the individual’s lived experience symbolically places the individual at the heart of the politics. Yet, this does not shed much light on precisely how politics can or should deal with the multiplicity of bottom-up voices. The ability to speak up can encourage more citizens to participate, but the celebration of social media facilitated voice as empowering lacks the strong normative imperative of listening (Bickford 1996). For the participants in this study, voice was celebrated as the power of one individual story to illuminate the inequalities and injustices produced by formal politics in everyday life. Listening, on the other hand, remains articulated primarily as the responsibility of political and journalistic elites who largely failed to care about and listen to their citizens. This marked elites as fundamentally undemocratic. Lateral listening—or recognizing the accounts of other fellow citizens—was acknowledged only when it entailed support for the speaking citizen’s own voice. Dissenting voices, on the other hand, appeared primarily as destructive, even though there were indeed marked differences between the ill-intended and those insufficiently informed about the issue. Overall, dissent to the expression of citizen voice on social media was not to be engaged with, but rather excluded from the conversation.

There are two worrying implications here. First, our participants felt formal political actors were not listening to them. When voice conveys the raw and genuine experience of the conditions of everyday life, failure to listen to it becomes immoral. This failure delegitimizes—and leads to disillusionment with—formal politics. Furthermore, thanks to the aggregation that social media afford, the visibility of citizen voices can easily be reappropriated by populist agendas as “the people’s voice” (Gerbaudo 2018:746). Importantly, however, participants’ social and symbolic capital mediate their perception of the failure of listening of political elites. Participants who were well connected across social arenas such as arts and culture, business, education, mass media, unions, etc. and who used the formal avenues for citizen input into politics (e.g., petitions presented to local Parliament, meetings with local government, etc.) were able to bring the message to political and journalistic elites. They acted as translators, merging the raw voices of the many into politically impactful messages or messages that decision makers found difficult to ignore. For them, however, speaking up on social media was merely the first step in political participation and grassroots collective action. They also tended to regard voice as capable of producing long-term and, perhaps, more gradual changes. Those lacking such capital, however, tended to see voice as the main avenue for their political engagement—and also felt most affected by not being acknowledged, veering into disillusionment.

Second, the articulation of voice as both individual and authentic did not necessarily entail a recognition of the necessity of listening. Other voices seemed recognized only when supportive of the speaker. Yet, for voice to become a political value, it is necessary that speaking up is accompanied by a willingness to accept that other voices might be equally revealing of the “truth” (Bickford 1996). Decoupling voice from “Truth” (in the singular and with capital “T”) and acknowledging it as a genuine yet situated perspective recovers lateral forms of listening. Lateral listening entails recognizing the multiplicity of perspectives within and outside the collective mobilization. Indeed, the construction of a “collective identity” is a central mechanism of collective action, often taking an oppositional (us/them) form. Recovering lateral listening as an important principle of collective action can counterbalance the creation of rigid boundaries between “us” and “them,” reminding citizens and other political actors alike that, ultimately, the goal should remain that of “living in the world together” (Bickford 1996:138).

For digital activist collectives in particular, the difficult task of lateral listening is more pertinent than ever. While such collectives are, in and of themselves, expressions of voice, not all explicitly embrace voice as political value. Doing so is a difficult task requiring long-term and conscious investment from those taking on leadership roles in the mobilization process. It rests upon a dialectical construction and destruction of the “we” of a collective identity in order to establish “working together” with

oppositional voices as a normative value of democratic participatory politics. Digital activist collectives face the challenge of remaining committed to recognizing dissenting voices and engaging with them in a productive way. This requires an active cultivation of a reflexive view of adversarial conflict as healthy for social transformation, but also of the skills required for blending the construction of a common ground with the commitment to listening to the diversity of voices (Bickford 1996).

Furthermore, this also entails a shift from conceptualizing voice as “truth” to a conscious adoption of “dialogue” as a core value in the process of mobilizing others. Achieving this, however, cannot be an individual effort alone, but a concerted and institutional gesture. Institutional support—including financial—for “listening” is needed to foster a healthy civic culture. Civic education must equip citizens with the “listening skills,” Bickford (1996) suggests: attentiveness to differences; willingness to acknowledge that everyone’s perspective is situated; staying open to changing one’s own perspective and to being surprised by others; and taking conflict as productive in itself, without the expectation of consensus or resolution. Importantly, the costs entailed in such forms of listening need to be recognized: without an adequate framework, citizen activists who engage in listening experience burnout and eventually take a step back from dialogue. Future research could explore in more depth what civic education focused on developing “listening skills” entails and how it can be mobilized to mitigate echo chamber effects and to prevent the co-optation of voice for populist purposes.

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