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Published in:
New Media and Society

Publication status and date:
Published: 22/11/2022

DOI (link to publisher):
10.1177/14614448221135886

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for the published version (APA):
Balan, V., & Dumitrica, D. (2022). Technologies of last resort: The discursive construction of digital activism in Wired and Time magazine, 2010–2021. *New Media and Society*, *26*(9), 5466-5485. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221135886

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new media & society
1–20
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Technologies of last resort: The discursive construction of digital activism in *Wired* and *Time* magazine, 2010–2021

Victoria Balan and Delia Dumitrica
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract
This article approaches digital activism as an object of discourse and asks: how is the political prowess of digital technologies discursively articulated in news magazine coverage of digital activism? We take an exploratory approach that maps the representations of digital activism in two world-renowned news magazines – *Wired* and *Time*, between 2010 and 2021. We find five dominant narratives through which digital technologies gain political significance, namely: as a last resort; as a witness; as a double-edged sword; as sites of creativity; and as enablers of horizontalism. We argue that these narratives contribute to a persistent discourse casting digital technologies as powerful political tools of grassroots empowerment, which enable unprecedented levels of citizen mobilization. This discourse rehearses techno-utopian imaginaries casting digital technologies as democratizing forces while underplaying the difficulties of sustaining mobilization and of working towards political change.

Keywords
Democracy, digital activism, digital politics, discourse, social media, technology

Introduction

Digital technologies have become a staple of contemporary activism (Joyce, 2010; Kaun and Uldam, 2018). Enthusiasm about the use of digital technologies during the anti-austerity movements or the Arab Spring, for example, has reverberated across the

Corresponding author:
Victoria Balan, Department of Media & Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, M8-45, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: balan@eshcc.eur.nl

world, renewing hope in the power of citizens to hold political and economic actors accountable, but also recommending recipes for political action (Dumitrica and Bakardjieva, 2018; Jenzen et al., 2021; Theocharis et al., 2015). Activism, however, is complex, long-term and its impact depends upon opportunities created by ever-changing political and communicative circumstances. Furthermore, digital activism remains a contentious concept bundling together a diverse array of civic interventions (Joyce, 2010; Kaun and Uldam, 2018).

News media coverage of digital activism remains an important site where digital activism becomes endowed with promises and warnings for the future of democracy. This article maps contemporary discourses around digital activism as (re)produced in news magazines. In particular, we ask: *how is the political prowess of digital technologies discursively articulated in news magazine coverage of digital activism*? To answer this question, we rely on a discourse analysis of news coverage from two world-leading news magazines, *Time* and *Wired* (2010–2022). While newspapers and news broadcasts focus on daily, factual reporting of events, news magazines provide in-depth coverage of current events and place a greater emphasis on interpretation, analysis and commentary (Abrahamson, 2007; Holmes, 2007). Thanks to this interpretive/editorializing function, news magazines not only outline cultural trends but also integrate them within existing discourses and recommend future courses of action (Abrahamson, 2007; Iqani, 2012). More so than newspapers or news broadcasts, then, magazines act as ‘sites of cultural commentary and community building’ (Kitch, 2003: 188).

In the following sections, we engage with the notion of digital activism and address persistent discourses of technology and democracy, zooming in on the role of news media in the production and circulation of these discourses. The co-existing discourses identified across the two magazines remain consistent with each other, converging in their construction of technology as the driver of unprecedented levels of citizen connectivity, access and reach. This leads to a problematic framing of activism as easily achievable and inherently powerful due to the visibility afforded by technology.

Our findings respond to recent calls for more attention to how ‘digital protest media imaginaries – and perhaps media imaginaries in general – can contribute to shape protest cultures, media practices, social movement organizational structures, and the potential for a movement to define its objectives and achieve its outcomes’ (Treré et al., 2017: 417). The two news magazines examined here present technology as an actor that holds both inherent political value (facilitating citizen empowerment via unprecedented levels of connectivity, access and reach) and political power (commanding news media’s attention to citizen activism). In shifting attention away from the hard work of mobilizing for collective action, the news magazines’ coverage of digital activism reproduces a techno-utopian vision of digital technologies as powerful civic agents, turning attention away from other aspects of activism, such as the hard work entailed in collective identity formation and the ongoing political involvement required of citizens.

Digital activism: an unstable object of discourse

Digital activism broadly refers to citizen-spurred forms of contentious collective action that use either digital tools to organize or digital environments to confront their political

target. With little agreement on definitions (Joyce, 2010; Kaun and Uldam, 2018), understandings of digital activism tend to focus either on the digital as 'helping' traditional (offline) forms of activism or enabling new forms of activism (Özkula, 2021). Attempting to move away from these dichotomies, recent approaches emphasize the blurred boundaries between online/offline activist practices (Karatzogianni, 2015; Treré, 2019) and highlight the hybridity of media systems (Chadwick, 2017). This has led to the use of a wide terminology to describe closely related phenomena (e.g. Internet activism, cyber activism, e-advocacy, e-campaigning, hashtag activism, slacktivism, hacktivism, cyberconflict, clicktivism, hashtag activism, social media activism, etc.). Still, not all these terms carry the same implications: where 'Internet activism' or 'social media activism' tend to be associated with desirable social change, 'cyberconflict' or 'slacktivism' imply aggression and laziness, respectively. Moreover, terms such as 'clicktivism' describe actions that require a lower level of political engagement and tend to have a lesser impact on politics (Morozov, 2009), while 'hacktivism' is used to describe more committed and direct forms of engagement (Jordan and Taylor, 2004).

Not all types of action that fall under the umbrella of digital activism are oriented towards social justice, nor are they seen as equally legitimate. Freelon et al. (2020: 1197) argue that 'hashtag activism' is commonly associated with movements identifying with left-wing ideology, while 'online advocacy spearheaded by the right-wing media ecosystem' is typical of the right side of the political spectrum. While conservative and right-wing communities re-appropriate social justice activist frames and tactics, their modus operandi can be different (van Haperen et al., 2022). Furthermore, digital alternatives to civil disobedience also fall under the purview of digital activism. 'Destructive activism', for instance, includes an array of actions such as: 'blocking access; destroying and defacing virtual property; organizing malicious activity; misusing information; and attacking critical infrastructure' (Murdoch, 2010: 138).

The proliferation of this terminology also suggests that digital activism remains a shifting discursive terrain. With this in mind, the present study approached digital activism as encompassing *contentious forms of political action by citizens engaging with political structures and using some element(s) of digital technology.* We use the term 'digital activism' as not just an umbrella concept providing parameters for the data collection process but also as a discursive object that is constituted through the collective and repetitive news coverage analysed here.

Discourses of technology and democracy

Discourse plays an important role in the construction of social reality. It produces 'concepts, objects and subject positions' that aid individuals in meaning-making processes (Hardy et al., 2000). Discourse is inevitably tied to power: dominant discourses reproduce and legitimize prevailing structures that align with 'common sense' ways of interpreting the world (Foucault, 1972), while 'interventionist' counter-discourses aim at challenging established norms and create new alternative articulations (Laclau et al., 2021).

In this article, discourse functions as a conceptual lens through which we approach news magazines' construction of digital activism. We build on the Foucauldian

framework to understand discourse as 'a set of possible statements about a given area' that simultaneously 'organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about' (Kress, 1985, cited in Cheek, 2004: 1142). Thus, we approached news magazines as both drawing from wider discourses about technology and politics, and (re)producing particular ways of understanding the role of digital technologies within activism. Echoing Wetherell and Potter (1988), we see news magazines as providing 'interpretive repertoires' through which citizens approach their own political use of digital technologies (Lev-On, 2020; Treré et al., 2017).

The relationship between technology and democracy has been historically marked by several influential discursive tropes. First, the deterministic trope constructs technological innovation as independent of social forces and relationships and views technology itself as a driver of progressive social change (Wyatt, 2008). *Technological determinism* assigns agency for socio-technical change to technology itself while simultaneously inscribing change with the connotations of both inevitability and progress. Technological determinism represents a spectrum of positions from 'hard' (emphasizing technology's alleged ability to drive and enact change) to 'soft' variants (rescuing technological agency while recognizing the intertwinement technology/society) (Marx and Smith, 1994). Despite criticisms, the hegemonic status of technological determinism in news and popular culture (Dumitrica and Gaden Jones, 2020; Modugno and Krijnen, 2020; Post and Crone, 2015) is difficult to challenge, making thinking about technology from a political standpoint particularly difficult – a phenomenon that Winner (1986) describes as 'technological somnambulism' (p. 10).

Another strand of literature addresses the *technological sublime* (Marx, 1956; Nye, 1996), or the overwhelming sense of wonder experienced in connection to technological progress (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2021). Central to US culture, this trope articulates a vision of the limitless technological potential as a path to the country's progress (Marx, 1956). The technological sublime persists in the age of digitization, alternatively articulated as 'digital sublime' (Mosco, 2005) or 'computational sublime' (McCormack and Dorin, 2001). For instance, the metaphor of 'cyberspace' connotes new and boundless spaces leading to radical social transformation, including the allegedly transformative effect of the Internet on politics. The latter is often understood as a timely provision of information and an opportunity for the formation of interest-based digital communities, that will both democratize access to resources and empower citizens – in short, a promise of true democracy (Mosco, 2005).

Technological mysticism, on the other hand, approaches technology from a quasi- and post-religious discourse defined as 'faith in the universal efficacy of technology' (Stahl, 1999: 13). This trope constructs the image of technology as a magical, flawless, supernatural force that drives the course of humanity (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2021). From meditation apps to 'pharmahuasca' (laboratory-engineered ayahuasca), to technology-assisted group rituals (e.g. HeartSync), the interplay between technology and magic/spirituality persists in contemporary society (Wildman and Stockly, 2021). Views of technology as 'magic' construct scientists, designers and engineers as 'wizards' whose actions can neither be fully understood nor challenged (Stahl, 1999). Furthermore, techno-mysticism discounts the values, politics and power structures that are imbued in

technological developments, leaving little room for human agency or social change and, consequently, reinforcing the political status-quo (Stahl, 1999).

News media and the discursive construction of digital technologies

Discourses are crucial to the integration of digital technologies in everyday life. They invest technologies with values and integrate them within prior systems of meaning (Bazerman, 1990; Dumitrica and Gaden Jones, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2018). In doing so, discourses advance a range of possible avenues for political change and provide us with recipes of action (Steinberg, 1998). The process, however, is not without tensions, as individuals often negotiate, re-appropriate and break with dominant discourses (Steinberg, 1998).

As an important (re)producer of discourse, news media provide citizens with information, scrutinize how power is exercised, facilitate public debate and the emergence of public opinion, represent the social aims, views and norms commonly shared by the citizens, facilitate the creation of social communities built around shared concerns or ideas and aid in the development of a 'shared sense of identity' (Curran, 2005: 123). Importantly, news media are both producers of new meanings and associations (which we understand as prompting constant transformations of discourses) and reproducers of dominant views (Terdiman, 1985). Thus, we take news media as sites where different discourses intersect. Here, we refer to not only the ideological leanings of the news institution itself or of journalists themselves but also to the different perspectives that news texts voice. Furthermore, we consider not only the repertoire of discourses and counter-discourses but also their contextual variation over time.

To capture this complexity, we compare the discursive construction of digital activism between 2010 and 2021 in two world-renowned news magazines in terms of circulation and brand name recognition – *Wired* and *Time*. *Wired's* focus on technology and *Time* magazine's focus on current affairs enables us to capture both the 'technological' (digital) and 'social' (activist) dimensions of digital citizen-led activism. These magazines have carved out a place for themselves in the digitally mediated news consumption ecosystem and claim a global readership. *Time*, a 'landmark cultural producer' (Dumitrica and Gaden Jones, 2020: 2520) and 'flagship of US magazines' foregrounds the intersection between democracy, capitalism and neoliberalism (Grainge, 2002) and embraces an ideology that can be summed up as 'free minds, free markets, free speech and free choice' (Isaacson, 1998: 103). *Wired*, 'the monthly bible of the 'virtual class'' (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996: 7), places technology at the centre of society and culture, debating social issues and opportunity brought by technological developments and championing for a utopian, techno-democratic approach (Ferrari, 2020; Frau-Meigs, 2000). Both magazines are thus characterized by an overall technological optimism, libertarianism and faith in capitalism (Dumitrica and Gaden Jones, 2020; Ferrari, 2020; Tutton, 2020). We approach these news magazines as leading producers and circulators of techno-utopianism, legitimizing hegemonic framings of technology that intertwine promises of democratic empowerment with techno-capitalist and neoliberal values (Andrejevic, 2008; Dean, 1999). Closer scrutiny of these media discourses contributes to a richer understanding of 'how tech ideology rises to the status of common sense'

(Creech and Maddox, 2022: 5), creating openings for the production and circulation of alternative imaginations of the future (Markham, 2021).

Methodology

To map the discursive articulation of the political prowess of digital technologies, we undertake a comparative discourse analysis of 112 articles from two news magazines. The timeframe 2010–2021 corresponds to the wide employment of social media for activist purposes during the civil unrest marking the beginning of the decade (e.g. the anti-austerity movements; Arab Spring), a trend that continues today (e.g. #BLM; #MeToo). We take an exploratory approach that allows us to engage critically with digital activism as socially and discursively constructed. Qualitative description allows researchers to stay close to the data and provide a rich and systematic account of how the actors involved, actions and events are linked to the phenomenon of interest (Caelli et al., 2003; Stebbins, 2001). At the same time, this approach is still interpretive in nature, requiring researchers to make sense of data in relation to the object of study (Sandelowski, 2010).

Data collection began with a search for relevant articles in the relevant news databases (ProQuest for *Wired*; EBSCOhost for *Time*) using different keyword combinations: activis*; protest*; social movement; civic movement; civic action; cyber activis*; hashtag activis*; hacktivis*; slacktivis*; clicktivis*. To capture the complexity of activism and account for diverse terminologies, we included both positive and negative terms (e.g. civic action vs slacktivis*). Since not all relevant articles were archived in the news databases, we supplemented them with in-site searches on Google (site:wired.com; site:time.com) using the same combinations of keywords. Criteria of inclusion/exclusion from this initial corpus were developed in a purposive manner (Appendix 1), resulting in 366 articles for *Wired* and 308 for *Time*. To narrow our sample, we ranked all articles by relevance, including only the highly relevant articles in our sample. Relevance was measured on a scale from 1 to 3 and assessed by looking at the extent to which the article provided an in-depth discussion of digital activism, had a strong focus on digital elements and included a specific discussion of activism case(s). This purposive sampling process resulted in 69 articles for *Wired* and 43 for *Time* ($N_{total} = 112$).

A discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012) of the sample focused on how the lexical choices within a text come to signify broader discourses, values and identities that might not be explicitly articulated. We coded (manually and in Atlas.ti) the main descriptors of digital technology, the role assigned to technology within activism (e.g. organization, mobilization, amplification, action tactic, etc.), the ascription of agency (i.e. who was the actor and what type of actions were they engaged in) and references to reactions to/impact of the case of activism. We also paid attention to meanings that were taken for granted, or 'presuppositions' (Van Dijk, 2013), as well as meanings that were obscured or absent from the text (Machin and Mayr, 2012). During the coding process, similarities and differences gradually coalesced into five dominant narratives about the political power of technology across both magazines. Within an article, several narratives could be co-present. Next, we describe each of these narratives in detail and provide insights on the shifts they indicate.

Results

Technologies of last resort

An important narrative across both magazines frames digital technology *as a last resort* that citizens employ in a context where all else had failed. When caught up in desperate circumstances with no other course of action available, people turn to social media to broadcast a (final) message to the world. In *Wired*, this discourse emerged as dominant (23.95%), emphasizing digital technologies as the only option left through phrasings such as 'the only 911 / hope / recourse' or 'nothing else worked'. By contrast, it has a weak presence in *Time* (3.62%), often characterized by a more emotive language describing the social issue or the activists (e.g. 'desperate', 'tragedy', or 'angry'). An illustrative example is provided in the context of the #SaveAleppo movement, as the residents of the besieged city of Aleppo were posting farewell messages on social networks amid the bombings. The Wired article concludes that 'civilians turn to social media when they have nothing else' (Dreyfuss, 2016), suggesting that when all other forms of political resistance fail, tweeting or posting on social media remains the only available avenue for political intervention to garner further international support and draw global attention to the issue.

This articulation parallels the techno-mystical myth of redemption, framing technology as a pathway to salvation from the unjust and limited realities of everyday life (Campbell and La Pastina, 2010; Noble, 1999). Moreover, digital technologies are constructed here as crucial to awareness raising under extreme circumstances (e.g. war, death or imprisonment), often linked to far-away and/or authoritarian contexts (e.g. Uyghur detainees in China). However, this narrative is also significant in the United States, in the context of police brutality, anti-immigration policies and the infamous Guantanamo Bay. What brings together both geopolitical contexts is the underlying antagonism between a powerful institutional actor and vulnerable populations with no recourse to political visibility.

Digital technologies are also framed here as crucial to spurring immediate and global reactions to local events. This invests technology with more power to tackle urgent issues in contexts where traditional tactics have proven inefficient or there is no opportunity/time left to employ them:

> Victims of police shootings have no authorities to call, no higher-ups to summon [. . .] Throughout history, that fact has left victims with little recourse In recent years, social media has changed that dynamic, giving bystanders a way to document these all-too-frequent acts of violence (Lapowsky, 2016).

In this example, we see that everyone can potentially become an activist and contribute to social justice issues by engaging with social media, while technologies promise the ability to transform the bystander into a participant in collective action. Overall, as *technologies of last resort*, digital technologies emerge as central to pressuring political actors to act by capitalizing on awareness raising and thus mobilizing the civic body to demand change.

The digital witness

A second dominant narrative constructs digital technologies *as a witness*, bringing the distant Other closer by acting as a voice to the voiceless or as a window into other peoples' lives. With a similar distribution across both magazines (20.72% in *Time* and 26.04% in *Wired*), this narrative positively frames digital activism by investing technologies with the ability to bring forth the authentic and otherwise invisible stories of struggles and injustices.

First, in both magazines, technologies are often constructed *as a voice*, empowering (nearly) anyone to broadcast their message to the world. The promise that social media platforms can provide, on their own, a voice for activists to raise awareness about issues that otherwise would remain obscured and broadcast them to a global audience is articulated through idioms such as 'a voice to the voiceless' or the metaphor of the 'megaphone', conveying the ability of technology to both enable people to speak up and amplify citizens' complaints. This suggests that alleged technological abilities can amount collective pressure on political structures, enabling citizen voice to gain political significance. This narrative foregrounds the voicing of individual accounts, often depicted in relation to historically marginalized voices: 'women [. . .] had their voices amplified by the megaphone of the Internet' (Wattercutter, 2021).

While this discourse co-opts the notion of individual voice as a politically compelling act of 'speaking truth to power', it remains disconnected from related discussions of digital technologies as weakening the political value of voice (Dumitrica, 2020). Some articles bring up the role of listening, explaining that 'officials have drifted so far from the people they represent, that it's too hard for the average person to be heard' (Finley, 2014) and that digital platforms are 'a place to be heard' (Wattercutter, 2021). However, this form of listening centres upon fellow citizens who identify with the circumstances of that voice and recognize similar injustices in their daily lives, as in this story that enthusiastically articulated social media platforms as spaces where people can 'find solidarity and make their opinions seen and heard' (Bruner, 2020). Thus, while the articles in our sample brought up 'listening', it was primarily associated with recognition from similar Others and building a wider community of shared experiences, rather than specific institutional structures. This was also highlighted through lexical choices such as 'the Internet was listening' (Wattercutter, 2021) or 'people started to listen' (Langone, 2018).

Second, digital technologies are also constructed *as a window into Others' lives.* Here, the emphasis is on showing the otherwise inaccessible daily struggles in the lives of Others to a global community: 'His Twitter account, with 144,000 followers, is like a diary – a window into the life of a Palestinian living under occupation' (Mansoor, 2021) or '#SaveSheikhJarrah hashtag cast a light on the neighbourhood's situation' (Hatuqa, 2021). Here, visual affordances of digital technologies are emphasized as means of rendering the invisible visible by documenting and broadcasting a reality that might otherwise be misrepresented or unaddressed by traditional media channels. Technology, thus, facilitates not only voicing but also visualizing the lives of the Other, witnessing it 'as it happens' (Peters, 2009: 36). At

the same time, these images reinforce an image of activism as a 'spectacle of violence' (Neumayer and Rossi, 2018: 4296) by employing vocabularies such as 'surge of violence', 'suffering' or 'people being brutalized' (Mansoor, 2021). Where *Wired* prefers the articulation of technology as voice, *Time* represents technology as able to make daily injustice visible, evoking emotional identification with distant Others. Digital technologies promise to make everyday grievances and injustices known, so they can no longer be ignored.

The double-edged sword

Where the previous two clusters celebrate the political affordances digital technologies offer citizen-activists, this one balances advantages with pitfalls. This discourse qualifies some of the advantages already captured in the other clusters by introducing select risks of technological misuse (e.g. in cases of disinformation or government surveillance of activists). More significant in *Time* (29.53%) than in *Wired* (17.7%), this narrative also operates a distinction between 'genuine' or 'well-intended' citizens and the opportunists 'commandeer[ing]' digital technologies for their own purposes (or on behalf of 'government agents'). Among these opportunists, we further distinguish between ill-intentioned actors and well-intended actors. The first category includes government agents and surveillance structures aiming to 'identify and pursue protesters' (Worland, 2016); but also, trolls, bots and fake accounts that can be deployed for counter-democratic purposes – to spread misinformation and/or 'infiltrate and dismantle' social movements (Parham, 2017). The second category pertains to well-intentioned actors such as slacktivists or clicktivists who invertedly pose a risk to the activist cause by engaging with it rather superficially. An illustrative example is the #BlackOutTuesday campaign, when pictures of black squares posted on Instagram by users ended up crowding out relevant #BLM resources and information (Pardes, 2020).

In bringing misuse up, this narrative also showcases the risks activists face: sharing content online puts them in danger of identification, tracking, or surveillance from governments and official structures. Moreover, by sharing personal, intimate details of their experiences online, activists are in danger of becoming the target of trolling, cyberbullying or online harassment campaigns (e.g. Gamergate). In *Wired*, there seems to be a greater focus on individual safety being threatened by digital activist practices: '[livestreaming] can endanger the safety and security of the people on camera by exposing individuals' identities' (Kayyali, 2017), while in *Time*, there is more emphasis on censorship from the digital platforms or governments: 'Twitter users also saw their accounts suspended for 'violating community standards'' (Hatuqa, 2021).

The discourse of technologies as *a double-edged sword* frames the political dangers of digital activism as a consequence of human misuse. This 'soft' form of technological determinism does not question the neoliberal enrolment of these technologies (subsuming political usage under profit-generation goals), but rather frames technology-related dangers as a matter of human (mis)use. In this way, counter-democratic appropriations of technological development can be acknowledged while technology remains conceptualized as 'value neutral' (Murdoch, 2010: 137).

The vernacular creativity of digital activism

Another dominant narrative (10.36% in *Time* and 16.66% in *Wired*) focuses on the *creative* development or re-appropriation of technology in activism. We build here on the notion of 'vernacular creativity' as a mundane remixing of existing cultural resources that generates 'affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination' (Burgess, 2006: 206). The magazines evoked the vernacular creativity of digital activism in two ways. First, they featured new software, applications and other digital tools such as Democracy OS (Finley, 2014) or Facts on the Ground (Ackerman, 2010), that allow activists to organize, mobilize, keep their communities informed and bypass censorship. Second, they showcased examples of re-appropriation of existing technological resources. In some cases, this re-appropriation was humorous or satirical in nature: in Saudi Arabia, for example, male comedians showed support for the Women2Drive campaign by timing the release of a viral parody video entitled 'No Woman, No Drive' to coincide with the launch of the campaign (Bager, 2015). Re-appropriation can also entail giving existing practices of technology use a novel activist purpose. When the social media platform Weibo blocked the original #MeToo, women in China '[. . .] found a way around it – they began using #RiceBunny in its place along with the rice bowl and bunny face emoji When spoken aloud the words for 'rice bunny' are pronounced 'mi tu', a homophone that cleverly evades detection' (Andersen, 2018).

Largely celebratory, the narrative of the *vernacular creativity* of digital activism draws from the wider discourse of technological sublime, where access to new tools and resources is credited with social transformation and change (Mosco, 2005). However, *Time* magazine also discusses a few instances where these digital expressions of creativity can take on more negative or ethically problematic meanings, for example, in cases of trolling, doxing or virtual pranking. One illustrative case is the Twitter account @YesYoureRacist, which was initially started for the purpose of making fun of individuals who justify their racist beliefs by writing 'I'm not racist but . . .' statements, and later shifted focus onto doxing the identities of people who participated in white supremacist rallies in Charlottesville, VA – at times, misidentifying individuals and subjecting them to undue backlash. This case highlights that while technologies enable the incorporation of new ideas and ludic elements in digital activist practices (which usually add great value to mobilization and awareness-raising strategies), thinking outside the box may also involve stretching the ethical boundaries of privacy, safety and what is considered appropriate in a digital environment - echoing the double-edged sword discourse discussed above.

The enablers of horizontalism

Finally, digital media are also framed *as an alternative to top-down structures*, a decentralized network that facilitates grassroots political engagement. This narrative is more significant in *Time* (35.75%), but it is also present in *Wired* (15.62%). For example, an article discussing the #BLM movement repeatedly emphasizes the bottom-up structure enabled by the digital environment, describing it as 'decentralized but coordinated',

'diffused and protean', with 'no top-down mandates' (Bijan, 2015), suggesting that social media democratize political participation in that digital social movements have no clear hierarchies or structures, enabling wider participation. At the same time, news coverage also identifies protest leaders, organizers and associated celebrities: 'The anti-Putin movement [. . .] held Navalny up as its leader' (Shuster, 2012) or the 'main organizers [of the We Are All Khalid Said Facebook page] were the central location for organization, instruction, sharing information and sharing materials' (Ackerman, 2011). These examples highlight a tension between the promise of horizontalism and the special attention paid to select individuals, echoing Treré's (2019) argument that the lens of digitally-enabled spontaneity, leaderless structure and horizontality obscures the (less visible) everyday political work of activists and the ways in which this horizontality is actually enacted in the organization, mobilization and decision-making processes of digital social movements.

This narrative is most visible at the stage of mobilization, highlighting the ability of digital technologies to activate citizens and bring them together for a common cause. This mobilization is typically articulated with reference to either the speed at which a movement gains attention, or to the geographical boundaries it transcends. Metaphors of 'floods' and 'fires' emerge as significant across magazines, with an emphasis on the amount of information that can be made available online and the speed at which it can reach a global community: 'Social media sparked, accelerated Egypt's revolutionary fire' (Gustin, 2011). This articulation points towards to the unparalleled scope of mobilization made possible by digital technologies, celebrating it as the mark of successful activism. In doing so, the coverage overlooks the value of other complex political processes required beyond mobilization to achieve meaningful political change.

An additional dimension emerging in *Time* but largely absent from the *Wired* sample is the interconnectedness of movements. Here, attention is drawn to how one movement's digital tactics can serve as inspiration for new mobilizations, but also to how different social justice communities mutually reinforce each other. These links, however, do not imply a uniformity of digital activist practices – on the contrary, this discourse also emphasizes the diversity of voices and expressions that activists employ in different contexts: 'In Asia, #MeToo isn't just synonymous with sexual harassment and assault [. . .] In Japan, #WithYou has been used to express solidarity with survivors of workplace harassment; in Thailand, women voiced their frustration at being slut-shamed with #DontTellMeHowToDress [. . .]' (Haynes and Chen, 2018). Still, by emphasizing the global connectivity between movements, the coverage reinforces the promise of horizontality in the digital ecosystem, allowing individuals to bypass traditional organizational mechanisms and participate in democratic politics without necessitating a collective identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Discussion

This study focussed on digital activism as an object of discourse, investigating the discursive articulation of the political power of digital technologies. While scholarship calls attention to the prevailing technological deterministic framing of digital technologies in news media (Dumitrica and Bakardjieva, 2018; Dumitrica and Gaden Jones, 2020;

Wyatt, 2004), news discourses around digital activism have not been specifically explored yet. Our analysis has uncovered five narratives constructing the role of digital technologies within activism across the two news magazines: technology as a last political resort, as a witness to grievances and inequalities, as a double-edged sword for activism, as an enabler of vernacular creativity and as a promoter of horizontal political arrangements. The persistence of these narratives throughout the decade, their presence across both magazines and their narrative consistency with each other suggest they coalesce into a wider discourse of digital activism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this discourse remains techno-utopian and deterministic towards technology, although this is more pronounced in *Wired* than in *Time. Wired*'s technologically deterministic orientation has already been noted – the magazine celebrates digital environments, often framing technologies as agents of change. The discourse of technology as witness emerges as most dominant, closely followed by technology as last resort – highlighting technologies as a faithful witness to experiences of injustices and/or the only available option for political action when all other tactics have failed. *Time*'s interest on current affairs results in more attention to the events of the day. While the articles in our sample also foreground the social issues/inequalities underpinning activism, technologies remain highlighted. This is illustrated by the distinct prominence of the horizontalism discourse in our *Time* sample: where horizontalism could be alternatively framed as a political value structuring decision-making processes (within the activist communities or between such communities and political elites), the articles in our sample construct it as mostly logistical, connected to the mobilization, organization and coordination of activist communities. Still, it is technology that enables this alternative structure. This is also supported by the frequent co-occurrence of horizontalism and the discourse of technology as witness, entrenching digital technology as quintessential to raising awareness of social injustices and bringing the distant Other closer.

Beyond charting the different narratives converging into a dominant discourse of digital activism, our findings are important in several ways. First, the prevailing positive framing of digital activism across the two magazines contrasts with the rather negative news coverage of protests, which often delegitimizes collective action by favouring official voices and highlighting the violent or spectacular aspects of protest (Boyle et al., 2012; Lee, 2014). Both *Time* and *Wired* are supportive in their portrayal of digital activism – at least in the context of our sample. The narrative of vernacular creativity can provide a glimpse into why that happens: the focus on the re-appropriation of popular digital platforms for political purposes has been largely celebrated, particularly in connection to citizen activism. In *Time* and *Wired*, the articulation of the relationship between technology and citizen remains overwhelmingly positive – even when questions about misuses of digital platforms for counter-democratic purposes are raised. While this can be attributed to the combination of news media's fascination with novelty and numbers in the context of citizens' involvement in politics, it also remains tributary to the techno-capitalist ethos of the two magazines. Given the stability of the protest paradigm in US news coverage of protest (Gil-Lopez, 2021), our study suggests news coverage of digital activism circulates an alternative framing that legitimizes collective action as a democratic practice.

However, echoing Foust and Hoyt (2018), we draw attention to the vulnerability of techno-optimism regarding the digital in digital activism: ‘the cycle of heightened expectations followed by jaded cynicism illustrates how techno-utopia and techno-dystopia are two sides of the same coin’ (p. 50). It would be interesting for further research to inquire into whether leftist news magazines circulate alternative discourses of digital activism. In addition, future research could take a closer look at how technology is constructed in the context of counter-democratic mobilizations.

Second, our findings suggest that most excitement in the news discourse of digital activism centres upon the mobilization (and initial organization) stage of collective action. Across the discourse identified here, technology appears sufficient, in and of itself, to enable anyone to become an activist at any time, merely by providing ‘democratic access to a giant, shiny new megaphone’ (Grey Ellis, 2019). Where scholarship has drawn attention to the difficulties of expanding and maintaining collective action (Dumitrica and Felt, 2020; Lev-On, 2020; Tufekci, 2014), the news magazines examined here convey a simplistic vision that minimizes the barriers and inequalities of digital activism. Thus, when all else fails, or when grassroots grievances are not acknowledged, digital technologies promise to amplify citizen voice. However, the democratic value of voice is intertwined with the act of listening; those who want to be heard must also be open to listen and, in the process, stay willing to change their views and find ways of dealing with conflicting voices without necessarily reaching a consensus (Bickford, 1996). The discursive articulation of digital activism outlined here foregrounds technology’s ability to aggregate and amplify voice, without much attention to who listens to these voices and to what consequences. By emphasizing the viral and aggregative affordances of digital technologies, mass mobilization and grievance crystallization appear sufficient to warrant political change. In turn, this discourse stays silent on the complexity of political decision-making processes (with all its good and bad parts).

Endowing technology with political agency in activism thus produces problematic articulations of digital activism as easy, universally accessible and always within reach if circumstances demand it. We speculate that in positioning digital activism as the solution to dysfunctional/unresponsive governance structures, this discourse legitimizes direct forms of democracy as more efficient than deliberative/representational ones. In turn, citizens’ role becomes that of voicing their story and joining others online in this act of ‘voicing’ the unjust effects of power upon regular people. In so doing, this discourse echoes populist tropes of distrust in representative/ deliberative politics, ‘including institutionalism, moderation, formality and the liberal pretence of rationality’ (Gerbaudo, 2018: 752).

Conclusion

This article has brought forth five related and persistent narratives through which US news magazines articulate digital activism as an object of discourse. Digital technologies are enshrined as a quintessentially positive feature of contemporary politics, improving democracy by enabling citizens to recreate a horizontal political space and seemingly returning power and agency to them. Our sample presents an image of digital technologies

as prerequisites of successful activism, often at the expense of other forms of engagement (such as the creation of collective identities, or the work entailed in managing conflicting voices).

Given the (global) reach of the two news magazines examine here, as well as their symbolic power among middle-class audiences, their articulation of technology as a democratizing agent, empowering regular citizens to intervene in the political realm is significant in several ways. In emphasizing the connection between digital technologies and regular citizens, this articulation normalizes the ''elective affinity' between social media and populism' (Gerbaudo, 2018: 746). Furthermore, this articulation decouples the (alleged) political prowess of technology from its profit-generation function – and particularly from the way design shapes digital platforms to maximize profit rather than enhance democratic mechanisms or citizen participation. While stories on the political effects of the platform economy are also present in *Time* and *Wired* (though not in our sample), the commercial intent behind the design of digital technologies remains discursively decoupled from digital activism. Last, but not least, the participation of these exciting promises of technologically enabled activism in the new dynamics of media imperialism also deserves attention. For example, Aouragh and Chakravartty (2016) call attention to the ways in which techno-utopian discourses of digital activism displace attention to how digital infrastructures become enmeshed in forms of 'domestic resistance, regional geopolitics and global imperialism' (p. 567).

We conclude that the discourses of digital activism identified in this study re-legitimize a technological deterministic approach to democratic politics, positioning digital technology as a holy grail of citizen empowerment. Our study, however, remains limited to US news magazines. Although these magazines claim a global audience, further studies could explore how this discourse of digital activism is articulated in other geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, given our article's explicit focus on digital activism, some articulations of technology in the context of counter-democratic mobilizations may not have been captured with the current search keywords combinations. Further research could investigate the coverage of counter-democratic mobilizations in more depth. Finally, research could explore how this discourse is (re)produced and challenged within other social arenas, from entertainment to citizen-activist practices.

Authors' Note

All authors have agreed to the submission and that the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Susanne Janssen for her input in the conceptual stages of this project and valuable feedback that helped further strengthen this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Mrs. Balan's research is supported through an NRO Aspasia grant (no. 015.013.044) awarded to Dr. Delia Dumitrica.

ORCID iDs

Victoria Balan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9496-2515

Delia Dumitrica https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6944-6092

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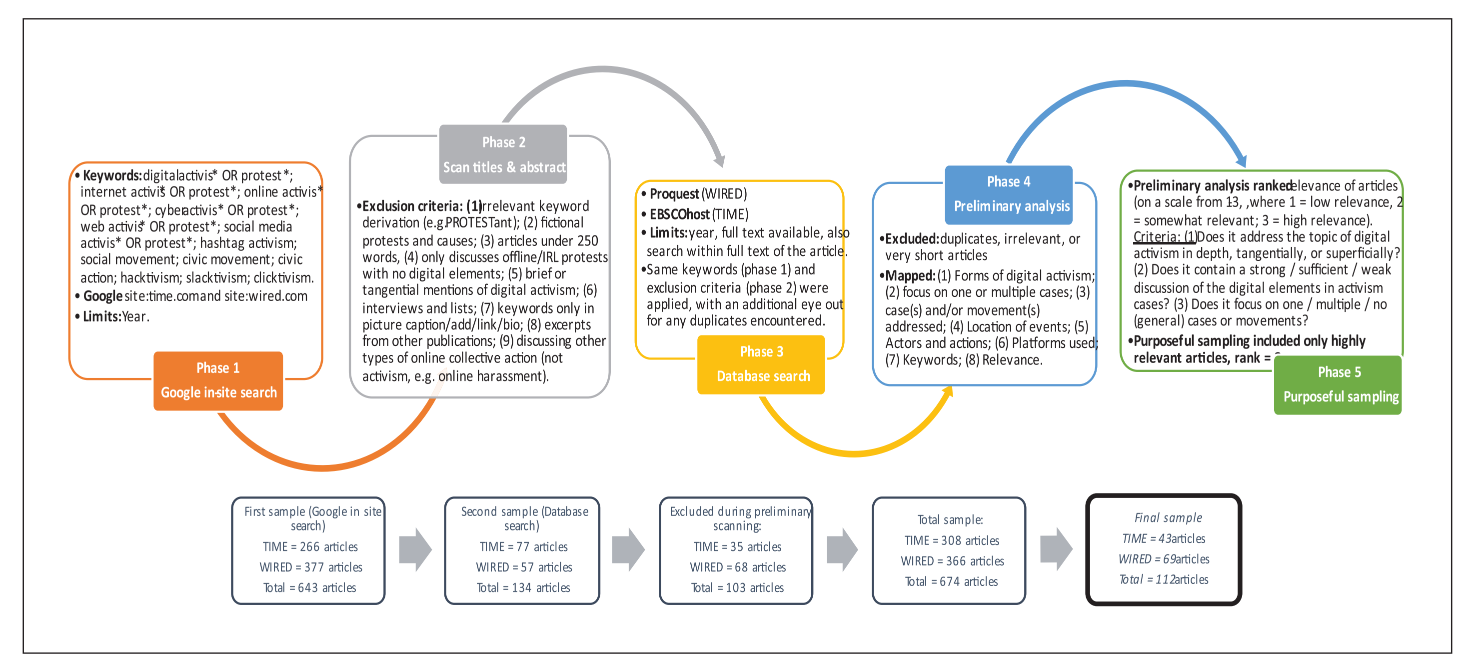
Author biographies

Victoria Balan is a PhD candidate and lecturer in the Media and Communication Department in Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research explores how digital activism is constructed across different sites of public discourse and how technology, democracy and citizenship intersect with the digital world.

Delia Dumitrica is Associate Professor in the Media and Communication Programme at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She has researched the use of digital technologies in citizen-led activism in Canada and Europe. In addition to that, she is also interested in the representation of new media in popular culture, as well as everyday nationalism. She has published in venues such as *Information, Communication & Society*, the *International Journal of Communication*, and *Convergence*, to name a few.



Appendix 1. Data collection process. *TIME* and *WIRED* magazines (2010–2021).