Social media as public journalism? Protest reporting in the digital era

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Abstract
This article reviews recent research on social media platforms as outlets of street protest reporting by activists, posing the question of whether such outlets constitute a cultural source for protest movements. Given the "many-to-many" dynamic that alternative journalism via social media offers in contrast to the "one-to-many" approach of traditional media, there are implications for incursions into more democratic, participatory cultures and structures. Existing literature indicates that user-generated content via social media potentially is known to supplant traditional journalism in protest situations due to advantages such as first-hand access. Further, research demonstrates that activist reporting supplements and integrates with traditional journalism, and that interdependence develops. We also review the boundary conditions that constrain the use of social-media platforms for protest reporting.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In January 2011, tens of thousands of Egyptian activists mesmerized the globe as they occupied Cairo's Tahrir Square, ultimately resulting in the resignation of Egypt's President Mubarak. This spectacle, and the accompanying domino pattern of "Arab Spring" (or "Arab Awakening") uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa exemplified the near ubiquity of global access to digital devices, the internet, and social media, allowing previously unparalleled speed and reach (Bossio, 2014, p. 22; Radi, 2017). In concert with other 21st-century movements such as #OccupyWallSt, #Blacklivesmatter, #MeToo, #hongkongprotests, #OccupyGezi, and #indignado, these activists purposed technology-assisted platforms to message organizing details, live-stream events, document police actions, disseminate protest music and art, host on-line debates, and more (Castells, 2015; Jaworsky, 2016; Shirky, 2011;
Tufekci, 2018). In fact, the Twitter hashtag is commonly incorporated into a protest movement’s name, which is often the movement’s chant.

It is the activist-steered genre dubbed “2.0 journalism” that is the subject of this review. Also labeled “citizen journalism” or “public journalism,” the genre reflects the public engineering of technological tools to operate at alternative and even cross-purposes from the intentions of the tools’ inventors. And it reflects the advent of grassroots movements galvanized by global youth who are “digital natives” (those born into an era of new media technology, versus older “digital immigrants”) (Prensky, 2001). Referencing poet Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 critique that “the revolution will not be televised” (Scott-Heron, 1970) are 21st-century activist claims that “the revolution will be streamed” (Seiner, 2020).

“Social media,” according to Dhiraj Murthy, “is mainly conceived of as a medium wherein ‘ordinary’ people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists) can publish user-generated ‘news’/‘updates’ (in a broadly defined sense)” (Murthy, 2013, p. 8). Emerging scholarship is making strides in documenting the benefits and limits of social-media instruments for social-movement organizing, resulting in a voluminous corpus to date (see Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). In fact, no single literature review can do it justice. This review narrows in on one slice of the literature: recent studies of the public-journalism potential of social-media platforms for pro-democracy, human rights, decolonization, and subaltern social movements in physical, street-protest mobilizations, rather than fully online “cyberactivism” (Radsch, 2016), also labelled “e-movements” (Earl, Kimport, Foot, & Nardi, 2011, p. 12). Notably, cyberactivism is an expanding, increasingly busy, and effective sphere that intersects with real-space protest manifestations (Jaworsky, 2016).

The research reviewed here primarily represents post-2006 nationally based social movements, commencing after the year that Facebook expanded beyond higher education. This review considers social-media platforms as tools of cultural production: creating alternative journalistic accounts of activist claims, actions, and discourses. This role is one instantiation of the new “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980): in contrast to a traditional consumer, the social-media user is also a cultural producer. This review focuses on counter-mainstream accounts that protesters document and describe during and following protest events, for broadcast to co-activists, to the target audiences of their claims, and to the larger public. Although digital tools are particularly powerful for pre-protest-event organizing and publicity, social-mediated journalism is more prevalent during and after the event, given that those tools are shrinking the time needed for activist pre-event organizing, enabling more “flash mobilization” (Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth, & García-Albacete, 2015). To illustrate, a study comparing the purposes of tweets used by protesters in the Occupy Wall Street and “indignant citizen” movements in Spain (indignados) and Greece (aganaktismenoi) found that only 7% were “calls to action” and 9% for organization, while 32% were distributing information and 37% were commentaries on the protest (Theocharis et al., 2015, p. 208).

Rather than fetishizing digital tools or viewing them as inherently deterministic, this review interrogates the literature to ask how social-movement actors are employing them journalistically, and whether platforms are enabling or constraining such use. We focus on studies with sociological relevance. In a digital era, why concentrate on the intersections between social media and physical, real-space, or “co-present” protests? Research finds that embodied activist performances remain vital for social- and political-change movements. Tilly, Castañeda, and Wood’s historical survey of modern social movements, for example, found that such movements make their claims via the vehicles of public displays of “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” (Tilly, Castañeda, & Wood, 2018). Although virtual displays are becoming increasingly common, the physical presence of those “numbers” (of activists) uniquely offers visibility, spectacle, civil disobedience, confrontation with authority, artistic performance, and collective noise, drawing major media coverage. It was the unrelenting activist street occupations that forced the resignations of Presidents Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, built on pre-existing activist networks (Ben Moussa, 2013; El-Ghobashy, 2013, p. 61), rather than tweets. Later in 2011, the Canadian-based organization Adbusters, inspired by Arab Spring and Spanish indignado protesters, called for physical activist occupation of Wall Street, although the organization’s prior modus operandi was to use graphic design to expose surveillance capitalism (Message, 2020, pp. 67–72), a strategy that it labels “culture jamming.” In a review of these 21st-century protest movements, Gerbaudo (2012) argues that these activists are reappropriating physical public space rather than performing cyberactivism, and deserve credit for their collective agency. And as the 21st century progresses, physical protests show no signs of subsiding, with a major global uptick in 2019 (Johnson, 2019), and even continuing into the COVID-19 global pandemic (Dettmer, 2020). Late spring 2020 saw a global eruption of anti-racist real-space protests,
invoking #Blacklivesmatter, across all U.S. states (Burch, Weiyi Cai, Gianordoli, Morrigan McCarthy, & Patel, 2020), with massive transnational sympathy protests (Taylor, 2020). See Figure 1.

We review research on the roles of citizen journalism in protest movements as cultural agents who produce counter-mainstream news accounts. By "citizen journalism," we adopt the definition offered by Melissa Wall as a practice "in which new citizen news collectors position themselves at the borders of the journalism field and engage in journalistic practices" (Wall, 2019, p. 2; see also Allan & Thorsen, 2014). Professional ("traditional" or "conventional") journalists, in contrast, are employed in the journalism field as a professional specialty, traditionally involving academic training, within the norms that Pierre Bourdieu described as characterizing societal "fields" (Bourdieu, 1993). Scholars, however, disagree over the definition of the term "citizen journalism" and some prefer the alternatives of "user-generated content" (UGC) or "crowd-sourced content" (ibid., p. 3; Earl et al., 2011). We use the terms "citizen journalism," UGC, and "protester-reporter" synonymously in this review. Among the difficulties in distinguishing between "citizen" and "professional" roles is that one individual may straddle both roles; examples include journalism apprentices, former professional journalists, and nonprofit representatives (ibid., p. 3). Reflecting on the protest reporting from the Arab Spring, the authors Bebawi and Bossio suggest conceptualizing journalism on a continuum, "ranging from the person who simply uploads video content onto YouTube through to the professionalized practices of investigative journalism" (Bebawi & Bossio, 2014, p. 5).

One caveat is needed to delineate the intellectual territory reviewed here: research studies do not always disaggregate the varied functions of social media in protest, given that those tools are tightly wound up in multiple, usually simultaneous, purposes: drawing crowds to the streets, warning about danger zones, documenting violence, and serving as platforms for emotive performances of chants, slogans, and songs (Pearce, 2014). Further, an over-attention to the power of social media risks ignoring the continued important role of off-line organizing by the labor movements and other actors (Robertson, 2015, p. 534).

2 | PROTESTER REPORTING AS CULTURE

In this review, we ask: What has research found regarding social media as a cultural resource for social movements engaged in physical street protests: in particular, serving a public journalism role with cultural functions such as presenting counter-hegemonic ideas, providing a forum for debate, representing the concerns of collective voices,
capturing protest images, honoring and acknowledging martyrs, and collectively remembering past movements? For the purpose of this review, we are sidestepping the critical question of the power of social media as tactical, instrumental strategy, such as that of a tool of logistics organization. By foregrounding cultural production, this review converses with schools of social movement scholarship that argue for the significance of culture (ideas, arts, values, symbols, identities) in protest mobilization, as sources (Alexander, 2011; Castells, 2015; Cohen, 1985; Jasper, 1997; Jaworsky, 2016) and as outcomes, such as changing the civic culture (Alexander, 2006). Although it is the New Social Movements school that most prominently makes this argument, activist use of digital tools can be also analyzed on other dimensions, through the lenses of Resource Mobilization (Edwards & Kane, 2014) and Political Opportunity theories, for instance, as a Sociology Compass review by Sandra Rodriguez (2013) has proposed. We organize the review into three areas: (a) how does social-mediated content supplant conventional journalism in protest reporting? (b) how does social-mediated content supplement/enhance conventional journalism? and (c) what are the boundary conditions that limit these roles?

3 | SOCIAL MEDIA AS SUPPLANTER

How are protester-reporters supplanting professional/mainstream journalism? Poell and Borra (2011) consider the rise of alternative journalism to represent a “sea change” as activists take on “prosumer” roles (Evans, 2019, p. 40). In fact, Jay Rosen speaks of the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2012) and Manuel Castells hails the rise of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2015, p. 27). Poell and Borra do insist that activist use of social media closely resembles the decades-long phenomenon of underground and alternative newspapers, weeklies, and broadcasts that contested hegemonic narratives in mainstream journalism (Poell & Borra, 2011). And as Nummi, Jennings, and Feagin write (Nummi, Jennings, & Feagin, 2019), the counter-framing of Black experiences that the Black Lives Matter movement offers is the latest manifestation in a long history of Black journalism that counters mainstream media accounts. Research into social-mediated protest reporting has identified several key roles that such media potentially play in supplanting traditional journalism in protest situations. Among these are (a) access and image capture; (b) re-control of the narrative, ensuring that the “spin” is activist-generated and activist supportive; (c) speed and reach; and (d) ensuring continuity of public attention (and potential support), by keeping the story in the public eye beyond the ever-revolving news cycle.

First, protesters often have the advantage of physical access. Alternative reporting arises in response to police attempts to surveil and control protests, including controlling the message. Protesters then broadcast their own versions of the events to the press. In extreme cases, as documented by Gillham, Edwards, and Noakes (2013), police will involuntarily relocate members of the press to a “free press zone” to prevent direct coverage of pending police actions, distancing them from the center of the action. However, directly eye-witnessed images are important for telling a story: activists are highly equipped to serve as front-line eyewitnesses via their digital devices (Mortensen, 2015; Richardson, 2020). Mattoni and Teune (2014) have argued that “[s]ocial movements and the messages they wish to spread are essentially visual phenomena” (2014, p. 876) in their review of research on the dissemination of images by protest actors across history. Through these devices and platforms, these authors observe, “activists could not only find their own voice but also their own gaze” (ibid., p. 881), uploading photos and videos that captured the movements’ emotions and created a memory record for future generations. Particularly potent are images captured of violence against protesters, which could serve to further public legitimization of the activism (della Porta, 2013; Richardson, 2020). Such are examples of what Olesen terms “injustice symbols” (Olesen, 2015).

Neumayer and Rossi (2018) studied the citizen-journalist use of images during by “Blockupy” protesters in Frankfurt am Main, Germany in 2015. This coalition of civil-society groups opposed the opening of the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarters due to the bank’s austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis. Combining a quantitative analysis of 137,865 Twitter messages—most of which were retweets—with qualitative content analysis, Neumayer and Rossi found that activists shared many more nonviolent images than either latent (implied) or
physical violent images. In contrast, the major media and the police primarily shared violent images, such as riots and burning cars, and from particular angles, creating a "spectacle of violence" (Neumayer & Rossi, 2018, p. 4296). Activists countered this spectacle by broadcasting musical performances and peaceful marches, which the police re-credited with alternative images. However, the research found that police tweets were more likely to be retweeted than activist tweets, recirculating the spectacle.

As Neumayer’s and Rossi’s study exemplifies, activists are motivated to take control of the narrative through social-media reporting not only due to potential bias against their causes, but in contrast to journalistic routines: framing angles that are common in mainstream coverage. Poell and Borra have also documented that major media reporting generally gives primary coverage to spectacle and violence (Poell & Borra, 2011). Considering social-mediated journalism as a form of alternative journalism, Poell and Borra explain that such outlets concentrate more on "the social, economic, and political issues underlying particular protests" (Poell & Borra, 2011, p. 705). Further, as Baum and Zhukov (2015) indicate, mainstream media in democratic societies prefer to cover events leading to political change and revolution. The thousands of protesters who gathered in North Dakota during 2016 and 2017 to oppose the planned oil pipeline through Native land strategically live-streamed the protests on Facebook due to major-media inattention, capturing scenes such as violent attacks on the protesters (Wall, 2019, p. 12). Mainstream media, in fact, may be a key target of the protest claimants, as was the case with the Greek aganaktismenoi movement, which charged the media with serving as the mouthpiece of the government (Theocharis et al., 2015, p. 216).

Scholars documenting the potential for UGC to supplant conventional journalism include Zeynep Tufekci, who detailed, with co-author Christopher Wilson, how user-generated reporting affected the views of local individuals in Tahrir Square (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012:363). Surveying activists, they found that content uploaded to social media outlets “provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success” (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012:363). Activist videos of abuse of authority, mistreatment of protesters, and other evidence of misdeeds by the government reportedly influenced individuals’ decisions to participate in the protests (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Tufekci’s subsequent book, Twitter and Tear Gas (2018), is a first-hand ethnography of anti-government protests in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey. Tufekci documented how digital tools have made reporting easier for the average person while allowing groups to organize in a more horizontal and egalitarian manner (Tufekci, 2018, p. 53), and to expose state violence that mainstream news outlets censor, such as the assassination of an anti-regime activist in Turkey in 2011 (Tufekci, 2018, p. 66).

Activist journalism emerged in many of these protest situations as the only source of news when governments constrained and controlled the major news outlets (Youmans & York, 2012). As Istanbul activists first occupied Gezi Park in 2013 in what would mushroom into a nationwide anti-government uprising, for example, CNN Turkey broadcast a documentary about penguins rather than cover the protest, resulting in activist adoption of the penguin as a symbolic icon, a visual joke that was also a provocative comment on the silence of mainstream journalism (Pearce, 2014). Further, such journalism is increasingly serving a role as counter surveillance of the police (Walsh & O’Connor, 2019, p. 7). In the edited collection, Social Media and the Politics of Reportage: The “Arab Spring,” editors Saba Bebawi and Diana Bossio suggest that the Arab Spring protests shifted the balance of power in journalism routines as competition arose between mainstream and alternative journalists, since each camp “wanted the upper hand in conveying the events of the crisis” (Bebawi & Bossio, 2014, p. 124). Corroborating this finding, Courtney C. Radsch observed that “[t]hese communicative spaces were places in which identities were socially negotiated, collectives created and articulated, free speech practiced, and symbolic power generated, forming an alternative public sphere and new fields of power” (Radsch, 2016, p. 3).

In addition to exposing erased content by mainstream reporting, activists have used social-media platforms to counter major-media narratives. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) studied the social media output of Black Lives Matter activists following the 2014 Ferguson, Missouri unrest, documenting activist use of Twitter to “talk back” to a negative New York Times portrayal of murdered teen Michael Brown. Thus, social media offered a particular power of amplification of voice for those with histories of distrust in media (mis)representation of their communities. Bonilla and
Rosa found distinctions between platforms, however: Twitter enabled “multivocality” via multiple simultaneous live streams of events, helped build community in real time, and offered a speed that Facebook could not. The networked capacity of social media is among its advantages that led many young people to prefer these sites to mainstream news outlets, moving journalism out of the “one-to-many” into the “many-to-many,” or “multicast” mode of horizontal communication (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). In general, these studies documented how activist creation of UGC, particularly for ongoing protests making major political demands, poses several advantages over major media, in that these users are motivated to continue telling the story beyond the ongoing news cycle.

By no means is the creation of alternative user-generated content ubiquitous across protest sites. Poell and Borra analyzed the use of Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as instruments of citizen journalism in the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto, and found only a limited amount of crowd-sourced alternative reporting, and only on Twitter (Poell & Borra, 2011, p. 695). In fact, echoing Bonilla and Rosa’s (2015) findings, Murthy argues that Twitter is the platform more conducive to “news” multicasts, performing a micro-blogging function, in contrast to Facebook (Murthy, 2013, pp. 9–12).

4 | SOCIAL MEDIA AS AUGMENTING TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM

A number of research studies reveal that the 21st-century media landscape is more complex than one of traditional-journalism supplanter. In fact, modern social movements have depended on journalism writ large for documentation and publicity. In a pre-social media era, scholars examined the critical role that the “news” played in such displays, by documenting, sometimes legitimizing, and potentially galvanizing, social movements (Chomsky, 2002; Gitlin, 1980). Recent scholars have expressed skepticism that social media can (or should) fully supplant traditional media for protest reporting. Further, across protest events, citizen journalists and professional journalists are often mutually sceptical of one another. Despite the privileged position of being on the front lines (and offering the “first draft”) of an event, mainstream reporters occasionally counter or dismiss social-mediated reports from protesters/eyewitnesses due to lack of verification (Singer, 2014).

Researchers have found, however, a growing pattern of professional and citizen-journalist interdependence during protest events. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour (2013) studied the reciprocity between the BBC and amateur citizen journalists across the 2009 Iran Green Movement “Where’s my Vote?” protests and 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Mirroring Tufekci and Wilson’s analysis, the authors describe how “complex and fast evolving media ecologies” led to mainstream journalists’ increasing reliance on UGC to cover the events. This was particularly necessary as it was dangerous to send crews to some protest sites due to violence. Hänska-Ahy and Shapour also documented how UGC effectively bridged the language gap that existed between some Persian and Arabic broadcasts, therefore making coverage more accessible. Both the studies by Hänska-Ahy and Shapour and by Tufekci found that during the Arab Spring, the relationship between newsrooms and citizen journalists changed, with the impact of UGC transforming the practices of many mainstream reporting procedures, developing more integration of UGC into their stories (2012). Youmans’s (2014) content analysis of Al Jazeera coverage of the Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt found that 40% of the sampled news videos had drawn on networked journalism (p. 68). He observed that “[d]isplaying Twitter and Facebook messages, as well as activists and others’ videos, made the rolling coverage richer and brought in some diverse views” (Youmans, 2014, p. 74).

Kperogi (2016) studied the rise of alternative journalism in Nigeria, which the public preferred over the discredited major news media from the authoritarian era. Kperogi laments that “social media chatter” is often picked up by mainstream outlets as credible news, sometimes without verification (Kperogi, 2016, p. 25) and stories are rushed to press by reporters in the corporate media industry. However, he also suggests that traditional media can complement or contain the “luxuriance and exuberance” of the social media scene, by keeping track of journalists who report accurate news and implementing a rating system (Kperogi, 2016, p. 22).
Jane B. Singer has documented this same tendency; surveying the sources that journalists tend to consult, she argues that social media platforms have become integral to mainstream newsroom routines. Meanwhile, she notes, journalists defend society's need for their profession as gatekeepers of information (see also Eldridge, 2017). And yet audiences, via social-media access, have also emerged as "secondary gatekeepers" as they re-disseminate the news to larger audiences (Singer, 2014). Carlson and Lewis have also documented how fluid and nondemarcated the boundaries between journalism and nonjournalism have become (Carlson & Lewis, 2015).

Research has found that secondary gatekeepers potentially keep the stories in the public eye beyond the regular news cycle—an advantage we earlier attributed to citizen journalism. Hellmeier et al. (2018) conducted a statistical analysis of protest reporting by major media in uprisings in non-democratic countries, and found that widely reported protests in authoritarian regimes can therefore "spur more interest in subsequent events because news consumers want to see how protest evolves and how it impacts the political landscape in a given country," stimulating coverage of other news (Hellmeier et al., 2018, p. 592).

Given the dependence of major news outlets on a consumer-audience, this study suggests that activists' protest reporting may function to deliver audiences, contributing to a story's staying power. Despite their mutual skepticism regarding issues such as authentication, the growing interdependence between mainstream and UGC via social media platforms is growing more pronounced as the traditional newsroom shrinks (Bossio, 2014).

Through interview fieldwork in London, Andrew Chadwick has documented this new reality, which he names a "hybrid media system," stating that "political communication now occurs in complex, hybrid assemblages of older and newer media" (Chadwick, 2017, pp. 184–185). He studied the media strategies that the British activist group "38 Degrees" used, partly built on prototypes such as the U.S. organization Move On. This group integrated cyberactivism with real-space demonstrations, and engaged across new and old media. Chadwick found that the organization viewed the former as "better for tight feedback loops, coordination, more active engagement, and representing the movement to itself" (Chadwick, 2017, p. 224) and the latter "helps target policy elites, validate the movement, and create highly visible signs of its efficacy for wider publics" (ibid.).

5 | BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

While advancements in information transmission are potentially empowering for civil-society prosumer activists, new communications media are subject to boundary conditions that are in tension with emancipatory / empowering movement goals. First, broadly speaking, the mobilization potential of ICTs may be overstated. Margetts, Hale, and John comparatively analyzed on-line campaigns and found that very few eventually scale up to protests as large as the Arab Spring or the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement (Margetts, Hale, & John, 2019). Warning against fetishizing social media, the authors Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal have stated that “[p]latforms, in our view, do not cause a revolution; instead, they are gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized" (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, p. 2; see also Segerberg & Bennett, 2011, p. 199). Malcolm Gladwell (2010) argues that “the revolution will not be tweeted” because social-change movements require commitment and strong ties between activists, in contrast to the weak ties that characterize digital networks. Dhiraj Murthy also warns against such techno-determinism, but critiques Gladwell's binary between strong and weak ties, concluding that "Twitter didn't topple dictators, but it rattled them" (Murthy, 2018, p. 125) and that citizen-journalist tweeting brought the movements international attention.

Evgeny Morozov is even more guarded, critiquing the hype over the power of digital tools as "internetcentrism and solutionism" (Morozov, 2012) charging that citizens are joining social-change causes preselected for them by Google and Facebook, who control the range of choices through "digital tricks" (Morozov, 2013, p. 295). Nieborg and Poell concur with this characterization of corporate dominance, arguing that online platforms have altered the media landscape, resulting in a platformization, or "the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally
affecting the operations of the cultural industries” that platform corporations control (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276; see also Van Dijck et al., 2018). Nieborg and Poell are writing in the spirit of the mid-twentieth-century critiques by Frankfurt School theorists of the manipulations of the capitalist “culture industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944 [2002]). Leighton Evans argues that prosumers are “double objects of commodification”: Facebook, for example, exploits/commodifies the users themselves, who are simultaneously subject to the onslaught of Facebook advertisements (Evans, 2019, p. 40).

Platform-corporate control of these tools has resulted in limitations and censorship of public journalist content and reach. Youmans and York (2012), p. 320 cite examples of YouTube censorship of UGC videos and images from protests that were considered violent—including those that exposed abuses by public authorities such as the police. Thus, one of the key advantages of user content from protests—to serve as a vehicle for evidence to forward a counter-narrative—is conditioned on policies and powers beyond their reach. Activists are also beholden to the platforms available in their respective countries, and to the industries’ unknown future directions regarding format and such matters as user confidentiality.

Authoritarian regimes in particular are known to ban social networking sites altogether or censor content, as in China’s “great internet firewall.” Chinese citizens also face social ostracization if their social media posts and political discourse do not align with state-sponsored views, and citizens are encouraged to report and shame friends or co-workers who dare post content critical of the government (Earl et al., 2011). Bamman, O’Connor, and Smith, for instance, analyzed 56 million social-media messages on platforms such as Sina Weibo and Twitter in China, revealing that the regime censored posts with politically sensitive terms to decrease protesters’ visibility and effectiveness. These efforts particularly targeted activism such as the Tibetan independence movement (Bamman, O’Connor, & Smith, 2012). Under such conditions, Chinese activists attempt to subvert control creatively. For example, when Chinese feminists embraced the “Me Too” movement and named a prominent university professor as a sexual harasser, censors prohibited the use of the Mandarin translation of the words “Me Too.” Activists responded by naming their movement “#RiceBunny” (in Mandarin), transliterating the words “Mi” (Mandarin for “rice”) and “Tu” (Mandarin in for “bunny”) (Sun, 2019)—although the government eventually blocked this homonym as well. And in a case study of a Syrian diaspora activist in Russia, Pantti and Boklage found that the activist’s attempts to influence sympathetic coverage of the uprisings via networked social-media coverage became increasingly challenging over time, as Russian control of the news media expanded (Pantti & Boklage, 2014).

Democratic nation-states are not immune to such techniques, however—particularly in a post-9/11 security environment. Morozov warns of the machinations of a surveillance state in concert with surveillance capitalism (Morozov, 2013; see also Trottier, 2012). Illustration of these realities is present in interview research that Dencik, Hintz, and Carey conducted with U.K. police. They learned that since 2012, the police have broadened social-media monitoring technology that had been developed to investigate terrorism via big-data algorithm analyses to surveil protesters more generally (Dencik, Hintz, & Carey, 2018). Such surveillance has led to arrests and other dangers (Richardson, 2020; Tufekci, 2018). And across regime types, mainstream news organizations resist surrendering their domination of the journalism field. Eldridge (2017) has reviewed professional journalism’s responses to “interlopers” into the field, as bloggers, new online newspapers and magazines, and hactivism such as Wikileaks appear. These interlopers are meeting resistance from the journalistic profession, as it shores up gatekeeping and boundary maintenance (Eldridge, 2017; see also Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, and Singer, 2014).

Neumayer and Rossi’s research on the Blokupy movement documented the limits to protest reporting for influencing public beliefs and meanings. Research found that activist production of visuals on online platforms forged few inroads into hegemonic representations, finding that such production “reproduces existing visualities and hierarchies rather than challenges them” (2018, p. 4293). Despite their best efforts, “the social movements’ bearing witness to police violence mainly remains within the activist clusters of the network” (2018, p. 4306). Further, as Uscinski (2014) observed, “[t]he incentives of the market do not care whether the news meets democratic ideals” (p. 109). Controlling economic interests continue to bind the production of cultural products, including citizen journalism, to the overall manufacturing and market universe. After all, those same platforms are available to civil-society
actors without cost solely due to advertiser revenue. Clearly, publicly underwritten journalism is partially buffered—
though not fully immune—from such market mechanisms.

Citizen journalism is up against constraints that are endemic to both the state of the technology and actor
intent—particularly regarding trustworthiness and authentication. For example, there were Arab Spring bloggers who
claimed to be present at the protest scenes, but actually were not (Blas, 2018). Youmans and York (2012, p. 321)
found evidence of “community policing” groups, made up of social media denizens who pressure media owners to
take down sites for violating policy, although the primary reason was that these community poliers identified a cer-
tain user as an atheist.

While mainstream journalism in market economies is hampered by its allegiance to corporate interests and the
progressing news cycles, it continues to be advantaged by its employment of professionally trained journalists and
access to resources to underwrite deeper and longer-ranging investigative reporting and do fact-checking (Bebawi &
Bossio, 2014). Wall’s edited volume, Citizen Journalism: Valuable, Useless or Dangerous? (2012) drew a similar conclu-
sion across political regime types, which include Taiwan, Iran, and Kenya. Chapter authors found that citizen journal-
ism resulted in weak reporting without such professional journalistic assets. Nikki Usher has applied a political
economy approach to this question, arguing that citizen journalism will continue to depend on professional news
outlets for amplification due to the vast disparities in access to resources (Usher, 2016). Usher has described the
emerging threats to the professional newsroom, however, which are in part due to competition with prosumer con-
tent, given the loss of advertising revenue as news reading consumption goes online (Usher, 2016). Returning to the
critiques of fetishization, internetcentrism, and solutionism, new technological media appear to be only relatively
autonomous in their efficacy. Based upon her review of the literature and her own investigation of on-line mobiliza-
tion by immigration rights movements, Nadya Jaworsky concludes that “[i]t is thus the coordination with other types
of media and offline actions that seems to be most effective” (Jaworsky, 2016, p. 246).

For techno-pessimists such as Morozov, such boundary conditions may undercut the potential for activist citizen
journalism via online platforms to forward democratic, emancipatory goals. Yet for the techno-ambivalent such as
Murthy, these conditions impose limits but do not fully undermine more emancipatory possibilities. Examples that
would support Murthy’s outlook are such efforts as activist creativity to subvert censorship (Sun, 2019) and the
agency of “digital natives” (in particular) to move to newly emerging platforms, in order to remain in front of the pub-
lic narrative and escape constraints of other technologies.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the world of digitized citizen journalism is rapidly evolving terrain. As elaborated here, research studies have
found that the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2012) are attempting to claim subjectivity in a range
of global uprisings, as they confront formidable boundary conditions such as platformization, resource constraints,
and resistance from the journalistic profession—not to mention potential physical danger. Protester-reporter
attempts to counter and reframe hegemonic narratives and impact structural change show no signs of retreating,
despite mixed results. Further research is needed to identify how much staying power public journalism potentially
has beyond the protest event(s), as a continued cultural source for ongoing civil-society mobilization and influence of
larger civic narratives. If outcomes from pre-2006 movements are telling, UGC from the Battle of Seattle protests
against World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, Washington (U.S.) resulted in the birth of the alternative news
organ, the Independent Media Center, or IndyMedia (Giraud, 2014), which remains in operation today.

Notably, it is a relatively privileged fraction of the population that will create UGC with broadcast capability.
Within that relative privilege, nevertheless, given the expanding accessibility of digital devices and the “many-to-
many” networks among those with subaltemn status, protest movements are seizing available platforms, including
more recent options such as Instagram and Tiktok. Activists are finding new inroads to audiences, building networks
across strong and weak ties of those with common grievances. These include the “single-issue” new social movement
cohorts such as women, LGBTQ people, and oppressed ethnic and religious minority groups globally. As mentioned above, these groups are also targets of extremist groups on the other side of the culture-war divide.

Research presented here has identified a transnational upsurge in movements making pro-democracy demands consistent with a cultural medium with instrumentally democratic potential: both message and medium have horizontal orientations. As scholarship reviewed here has noted, these developments are often accompanied by strategic and cultural tensions: between the motives of corporate-owned platforms and those of the dissidents engaging the technologies, and between the dissident narratives and those of major media.

A number of other interweaving threads of cultural practices and meanings are visible in the studies reviewed here. Activists, for example, are producing a novel communicative form (prosumer journalism). Protest prosumers are using this form to disseminate symbolic elements such as visuals, chants, humor, irony, and iconography, as well as counter-discourses regarding values, rights, and interpretation of the protest events. Among other cultural manifestations are tensions between citizen and professional journalism over the accepted cultural definition of the field (Bourdieu, 1993) and accompanying norms. This includes contentions over the construction of boundaries between producer and audience, and between professional (specialist) and lay (nonspecialist) producers. Which producer assumes the societal role of “mediators of meaning” (Zelizer, 2008)?

While awaiting the outcomes of new waves of protest movements and novel social-media platforms, more research is warranted on the emergence of social-mediated journalism from protest reporting. In particular, comparative studies across protest sites, cultures, and regime types are needed, among both “open” and “closed” societies, across the Global South and North. Reception studies of audiences would also prove useful. What will evolving movements and publicly accessible social media reveal about cultural contingencies, including potentially multidirectional relationships between movements and new media? And how much potency will such tools eventually be able to wield in the longue durée of social change?

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ENDNOTES

1 A Google Scholar search of “social media protest” yields 399,000 hits, and “social media social movements” yields 4,930,000 results—only in the English language.

2 Another limitation to the term “citizen journalism” is that not all protester-reporters are citizens of the nation-states in which they reside.

3 For a review of the research literature on attention deficits of major news media, see Hellmeier, Weidmann, and Rød (2018).

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