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Acting on Media: Influencing, Shaping and (Re)Configuring the Fabric of Everyday Life

Editors

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Editorial

Acting on Media: Influencing, Shaping and (Re)Configuring the Fabric of Everyday Life

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Abstract
Computerization, digitalization and datafication are by far no neutral or self-dependent occurrences. They are, to a large degree, co-determined by heterogeneous actors who reflect about, construct, configure, manipulate or even control media. The contributors to this issue put the spotlight on these actors and investigate how they influence, shape and (re)configure broader social constellations. Instead of exploring what people do *with media*, the articles focus on the many ways individuals, civil society initiatives, corporations and social movements *act on media*. The notion of *acting on media* denotes the efforts of a wide range of actors to take an active part in the molding of media organizations, infrastructures and technologies that are part of the fabric of everyday life. Therefore, by conceptualizing *acting on media* as a form of political action, the issue aims to contribute to ongoing discussions on the media practice paradigm.

Keywords
acting on media; civil society organizations; media appropriation; media corporations; media practice; social movements

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Acting on Media: Influencing, Shaping and (Re)Configuring the Fabric of Everyday Life", edited by Sigrid Kannengießer and Sebastian Kubitschko (University of Bremen, Germany).

Media—understood as organizations, infrastructures and technologies—are inseparably connected with and embedded in the way social, cultural, economic and political life is experienced and practiced today. To separate "media" on the one hand and "society" on the other hand has turned into an impossible endeavor today. Looking at current processes of computerization, digitalization and datafication one has to acknowledge that these are by far no neutral or self-dependent occurrences. They are, to a large degree, co-determined by heterogeneous actors—many of them holding competing worldviews and representing conflicting interests—who reflect about, construct, configure, manipulate or even control media. Hence, (digital) transformations are not merely "technical", but deeply politically charged processes embedded in broader social constellations.

"What, quite simply, are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (Couldry, 2004, p. 119). Taking Nick Couldry's seemingly banal query as a point of departure this issue further elaborates the notion of "doing something in relation to media". Hence, instead of exploring what people *do with media*, the following articles turn the spotlight to the many ways civil society initiatives, corporations or social movements *act on media*. Acting on media denotes the efforts of a wide range of actors to take an active part in the molding of media organizations, infrastructures and technologies that are part of the fabric of everyday life. It is understood that those who *act on media* materialize in all kinds of formations—individual and collective; scattered and organized; civic, corporate and governmental; as well as hybrids thereof. Consequently, acting on media entails insider and outsider tactics, contentious and institutionalized undertakings, direct and indirect action, and many mixed forms that exist amongst these occurrences.

Using the notion of *acting on media*, we aim to contribute a valuable portion to the practice paradigm. More concretely, we argue that the term media practice is best understood in a broad sense, which includes a sorrow analysis of how and why people act on media as organizations, infrastructures and technologies (Kannengießer, 2016, in press; Kubitschko, 2017). In consideration of revealing empirical and analytical insights on the inseparable relation between media and society by scholars across various disciplines it is understood that those who act on media also influence, shape and (re)configure the fabric of everyday life. Acting on media, like other forms of political action, is best characterized as a set of practices that are embedded in and at the same time produce constellations of power (related, amongst others, to gender, class, age and education). Here it is important to note that taking an active part in the molding of media is neither exclusively linked to current processes of digitalization and datafication nor can it only be found in (post)industrialized societies. In fact, historical explorations as well as transcultural perspectives provide much-needed contextualizations of the ways media organizations, infrastructures and technologies are (re)configured across the globe.

The contributors to this issue are united by their aim to address the following key questions: Who are the (established and emerging) actors that thematize, influence and shape contemporary media? What are the concrete strategies and practices of actors who act on media? Which discourses do they counter or fuel? What political implications do their actions have and which political aims do these actors follow? Accordingly, by bringing together both empirical research and theoretical contributions, this thematic issue tackles a number of critical aspects that remain largely unresolved so far in media and communication studies: Who has the capacity, resources, expertise and interest to act on the media that are part of the fabric of everyday life? How do established and emerging forms of taking an active part in the molding of media organizations, infrastructures and technologies merge, collide or drift apart? Finding convincing answers to these (and similar) questions becomes ever more imperative for adequate recognitions of contemporary power structures and for gaining a better understanding of concrete societal transformations.

In their article "Variants of Interplay as Drivers of Media Change" Tilo Grenz and Paul Eisewicht (2017) take three qualitative case studies (Wii hacking, Circuit Bending and online poker tools) as a basis for their argumentation that we should "view acting on media as a negotiation between differently motivated and dissimilarly powerful actors and groups" (p. 7). To explicate this approach the authors investigate the relations between users, user communities and producers of digital media by focusing on people's creative practices oriented around media objects. Grenz and Eisewicht suggest that acting on media is not necessarily driven by ideology, political motivations or creative competencies, but by a "thrill of such action as unfolded within more or less anonymous spaces that drives people to open up closed systems, to interfere with official rule sets, to circumvent structures, and to modify media technology" (p. 11).

In "Fan (Fiction) Acting on Media and the Politics of Appropriation" Wolfgang Reißmann, Moritz Stock, Svenja Kaiser, Vanessa Isenberg and Jörg-Uwe Nieland (2017) take the political implications of media appropriation into account when analyzing fanfiction as practices of acting on media in the German context. The authors define fanfiction as the "creative appropriation and transformation of existing media texts by fans" (p. 19) and argue that fanfiction can be defined as acting on media in two ways. First, fans create infrastructures like communities and publics to circulate and share the content they produce; and second, fans act on the political and juridical conditions which frame these publication processes. Reißmann et al. (2017) argue that although fans are located in a rather weak position from a juridical point of view—they neither own the material they modify nor do they have a grand legal framework to navigate—fans appropriate exiting media texts and thereby take up power positions. Although fanfiction can take place individually it is often a collective endeavor based on discussing, commenting on or modifying existing media texts together.

Taking collective action into account from a different point of view, Sarah Myers West (2017) examines in "Raging Against the Machine: Network Gatekeeping and Collective Action on Social Media Platforms" how social media users (try to) redistribute power and put pressure on media companies and their policies by producing campaigns. By examining different campaigns on Facebook, Myers West manages to demonstrate a fascinating interrelationship: on the one hand she analyzes the way a corporation acts on media on the basis of its community guidelines and content moderations. On the other hand, the author shows how Facebook users act on media by trying to change these policies and the media content which can be produced within the context of the platform. Thereby, Myers West unfolds the relation between media companies like Facebook and its users as a multifaceted phenomenon whereby acting on media manifests itself as negotiating media content as well as media regulations.

Interviewing media managers, Johanna Möller and Bjørn von Rimscha (2017) analyze in "(De)Centralization of the Global Informational Ecosystem" how content-oriented media companies act on media in relation to data, infrastructures and distribution. The authors provide a three-dimensional framework of (de)centralization, which shows how content-based media companies contribute to and push centralization processes pursued by Facebook, Google, and other major players in the field who serve as role models for intra-organizational technological adaption as well as critical channels for content distribution. Ultimately, Möller and von Rimscha argue that discussing (de)centralization from a techno-

economic perspective is a worthwhile endeavor because it allows to illustrate how content-based media companies deal with infrastructural disadvantages and develop distinct strategic models to accomplish their business goals.

Reconstructing the perspective of members of the *Occuppy Wall Street* movement, Michael Daubs and Jeffrey Wimmer (2017) show in "Forgetting History: Mediated Reflections on Occupy Wall Street" how activists reflect on the role of media for "their" movement regarding the way they historize current political activism. Using this empirical example, the authors argue that a "non-mediacentric" approach to analyze social movements' media appropriation underlines the relevance of non-digital media and communication processes for social movements.

While Daubs and Wimmer show how activists reflect on media and the way they are and could be used, Hilde Stephansen (2017) argues in "Media Activism as Movement? Collective Identity Formation in the *World Forum of Free Media" that media themselves are increasingly becoming subjects of activism. Analyzing the case of the World Forum of Free Media* (FMML), a forum for media activists which is part of the *World Social Forum*, she explores the collective identity formation within FMML and asks whether it can be perceived as a new movement focusing on media and technology issues. Stephansen's analysis shows how social movements act on media as the very object of their activism. At the same time, however, the author clarifies that the term "free media" as the object and goal of this kind of activism experiences a plural definition within the movement—depending on the diversity of actors who are involved in it and the contexts within which the movement is active. Acting on media therefore strongly depends on the type of actors and their background as well as on the national and cultural contexts these actors are embedded in.

Analyzing how individuals, collectives, movements or corporations influence, shape and (re)configure the fabric of everyday life by acting on media there are several components that we should take serious: the type of actors who are involved (Who is acting?), the purpose of the actors (Why do they act and what do they act for?), the way the actors take action (What do they do?), the wider scenario within which action takes place (What is the context?), and, ideally, the outcomes of their actions (What are the consequences?). Asking these question, we always have to bear in mind existing and emerging power structures that are inscribed in the processes of acting on media: Who is able to act on media and who is not? What kind of practices remain invisible? Whose actions do not only influence media organizations, infrastructures and technologies, but affect larger social constellations?

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Variants of Interplay as Drivers of Media Change

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Abstract
This article conceptualizes acting on media in terms of different interplays between focal actors, users, and user communities. It is argued that—in times of mediated visibility, the increasing entanglement of social and technological change, and accelerated feedback loops—arenas of negotiation emerge and therewith the complexities of relations between producers and users increases. Using insights from the fields of Wii hacking, Circuit Bending, and online poker tools, three variants of interplay are presented and discussed: integration, segregation, and permanent confrontation. Whilst a process-oriented perspective on reciprocal action is developed the paper contributes (a) to a balanced perspective on what is often a one-sided discussion regarding the actions leading to media change, and (b) to the understanding of the relation between media change and reflexive modernity.

Keywords
acting on media; digital infrastructures; feedback loop; hacking; interplay; mediated construction of reality; outlaw innovation; reflexive modernity; side-effects; unmanageable consumer

Issue
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1. Introduction and Framing: Acting on Media as a Result of Interplays

Acting on media is intended to be a critique of the narrow focus in media and communication studies, on what people are doing whilst using media. It broadens the analytical focus and includes the "efforts of a wide range of actors to take an active part in the molding of the media organizations, infrastructures, and technologies" (Kannengießer & Kubitschko, 2016). Studies with such a broad perspective cover e.g. citizen's critique of media organizations, hacker movements and their influence on security infrastructures or the economic potential of pioneer communities. Since these approaches are not limited to isolated features of media but emphasize the interests of people in order to induce cultural changes, acting on media can best be described as some kind of institutional work. Institutional work describes "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). On the one hand, we follow this perspective in the socio-technical change which people intentionally and unknowingly induce. On the other hand, we draw on the recent shift towards a process-oriented analysis in media and communication studies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Grenz & Kirschner, in press). We want to join these approaches and focus on the variants of interplay between change-inducing actors. We argue that acting on media opens up the perspective on explicit forms of institutional work (as e.g. driven by "collectives of media change", Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 180). This allows us to shed some light on the subtleties which exist between opposing views which prefer political counteracting on one hand and consensual media development on the other.

In order to do so, two assumptions have to be made: First, a process-oriented approach takes into account the—often frictional—interplay between different actors, since "all social systems are sediments of a history

of voting, decree, conflict, agreement, compromise, bargaining, persuasion, coercion, and other forms of interaction, by which humans seek to achieve their interests and legitimate their perspectives" (Barley, 2008, p. 500). Second, as we will show, this perspective exceeds other approaches which tend to take an isolated and one-sided stance on action while neglecting the inter-active logic of evolving processes. Hence, an analytical vocabulary is needed that helps to understand the reciprocal actions and interactions of actors as variants of entanglements emerging over time.

Media, as socially embedded in and by communicative action (Knoblauch, 2017; Krotz, 2017), is anchored in its capacity of mediation. In a wider understanding, media has shaped and is shaping cultural objects that mediate different actor's actions—i.e. people and groups of people with culturally derived motives and expectations—and their meaningful and meaning-indicating actions (Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). Because objects can be intentionally modified and thereby can serve as a carrier of subjective expressions they can be seen as media. Hence, our focus is not just on specific objects but on people's creative practices towards *and* through media objects. However, in a more conventional understanding, these actions on media (objects) are always moderated by presentational processes that accompany these actions, enabled by distribution media. Put simply, activities and their results are—deliberately or accidentally—shared via multi-modal settings of today's media (Couldry, 2008).

By now, digital media, based on complex social and technological infrastructures, have become a materialized indication of ever growing arenas of controversies, frictions, and negotiations between different kinds and groups of actors. With this in mind, we shall continue with a recap of dominant positions, when focusing acting on media (chapter 2). Coming from that, three vignettes and related trajectories are presented (Wii hacking, Circuit Bending, online poker tools) (chapter 3). From these cases, we reconstruct three different variants of interplay between users, user communities, and producers: integration, segregation and permanent confrontation (chapter 4). We go on to connect the insights to the discussion on non-intended side-effects and reflexive modernization. Hereby, we particularly focus on permanent confrontations as being an increasingly symptomatic driver of de-stabilization in present-day societies as these are heavily based on digital ecosystems and accelerated feedback loops. However, we argue, that levels of interplay depend on specific factors, as not every action on media becomes relevant for the socio-technical and socio-economic fabric of everyday life.

2. Stories of Harmony and Conflict: Beyond Dualistic Views

With O'Reilly's (2005) introduction of the term "Web 2.0" for the field of internet economy, a shift occurred within service sciences. While product development in the last hundred years was characterized by a producer's "push", economy now shifted towards a logic of "pull" (Brown & Hagel, 2005). Basically, this meant a broadened recognition and inclusion of the manifold consumer activities. Subsequently, Vargo and Lusch (2006) proclaimed a "service dominant logic". In a service dominant logic, providers, as well as users, collaborate side-by-side in order to develop and maintain products and services. This coincides with an opening-up of innovation processes that is discussed within innovation studies (Chesbrough, 2003). Technology development should no longer be allocated solely within the narrow boundaries of companies, but should flourish within open networks of different actors outside of firms. All these studies share the implicit assumption of a frame of reference, where users and doers, customers and providers, consumers and producers are related to each other via cooperation and consensus. In other words, each party expects and gains benefits from this harmonious relationship.

Other approaches emphasize more conflictual relations between producers and users, where motives of actors and groups diverge and asymmetrical power relations are contested. Technological and media change is thereby an ongoing struggle between powerful economic organizations and creative and rebellious users and citizens. These approaches argue for a more bottom-up perspective on media, as being an object of engagement. The most prominent example is "hacker cultures", where a differentiation between "white-hat" hackers and "black-hat" hackers is made (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 118). For example, the Chaos Computer Club is "one of the world's largest (and Europe's oldest) hacker organizations (which is) countering contemporary surveillance assemblages" (Kubitschko, 2015, p. 85). Without question, notorious media movements, social movements, hacker movements, product-oriented movements as well as recently focused "media-related pioneer communities" (Hepp, 2016) differ in terms of their confrontational character, their social structures, and their audiences (Schäfer, 2009). However, the approaches of the rebellious users all share the politically-driven or interest-driven idea regarding users' core convictions (Hess, 2005; for a condensed overview: Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 180ff.). That is, that they contest common political and economic views of producers and providers.

One approach which is not limited to a perspective of congruence *or* opposition is that of Thomas P. Moran (2002). With the various failure-stories within software development in mind, Moran calls for a new understanding of development as a "negotiated social process" (Moran, 2002). His "everyday adaptive design"-approach is regarded as common sense within IT-engineering (Carroll & Fidock, 2011; Dix, 2007; Fidock & Carroll, 2006). More recently, specific interplays of appropriation, provision, and production are understood as "outlaw innovation" (Flowers, 2008). In regard to computer game modding, adware, spyware and file sharing, Stephen Flowers

illustrates the tremendous influence of bypassing and modification activities on media technological innovation and further development. He argues that most of the digital information and communication media of today cannot be traced back to research and development within firms. Therefore, the idea of the solitary, visionary and successful entrepreneur seems as outdated as the harmoniously framed co-development. Rather, Flowers focuses on user activities that modify the features of a product in a way that the former intentions of the original designers are distorted, design flaws which are used in order to circumvent security systems, as well as the creation of software-based systems or services with dubious legality (Flowers, 2008, p. 178): "These activities may violate intellectual property and pose a direct threat to established suppliers with the result that the work will often be underground in nature, operating either anonymously or with those involved seeking to obscure their links to such activities. Within this milieu, innovations will emerge from non-cooperative, non-consensual relationships in which the user may be unknown to the supplier and in which there is likely to be no free flow of information between the two parties". This more or less goes in line with Schäfer's (2009) discussion of "user activities between design and appropriation", and the resulting paradigm shift from the passive reception of users to the "participatory" activities of users.

Rather than describing media and technological change as a one-way road of cooperation or confrontation, we suggest that acting on media should be viewed as a negotiation between dissimilarly powerful actors and groups who have different motivations. Characterising the trajectories of the interplay between these actors regarding their use of media helps to understand the various ways that successful and unsuccessful, intended and accidental cultural change can occur. By doing so, we contribute to the recently emerging research on today's media change from a process-perspective (Burgess & Green, 2009; Grenz & Kirschner, in press; Parikka, 2012).

One reason to include user actions in the analysis of media change is based on the possibilities of digital media to find, create and share knowledge easily with others beyond spatial, temporal and social boundaries. We follow Thompson's (2005, p. 35) diagnosis of mediated visibility, in which "the field of vision is stretched out in space and may also be stretched out in time: one can witness events occurring in distant places 'live', that is, as they occur in real time; one can also witness distant events which occurred in the past and which, thanks to the preservative qualities of the medium, can be represented in the present". In this way, the change of the very fabric of our everyday media saturated life happens in recourse to a plurality of realities as envisioned and enacted in different social groups. The ideas of these groups get into an accelerated flow of information diffusion and attention. As Thompson notes, these processes are not just information leakage but are also explicit strategies of actors that built on mediated visibility as "a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives" (Thompson, 2005, p. 31). At the same time, pervasive visibility also puts actors under pressure, as they are observable, observed and judged in regard to actions and events that they did not intend for the public.

However, the mediated visibility does not overturn the established asymmetrical power relations. In spite of early hopes, regarding the possibility for greater democracy, transparency, and equality in the media age, certain organizations still retain their authority. Organizations such as Alphabet (the parent company of Google), Apple, Facebook and other firms within the realm of an evolving digital market order (Kirchner & Beyer, 2016) shape and provide products and services, structure communicative possibilities (Dolata, 2017), provide infrastructures and govern complex digital "ecosystems" (Tiwana, Konsynski, & Bush, 2010). With a wider change within economic strategy, which has been described as a shift from push to pull, acting on media is a result of reciprocal actions of focal actors and other groups of actors.

The presentation (to make actions visible to a broader public) of users' actions (and the critique of producers) acts as a paragon of media tinkering for users as well as producers. Others' creative use of media not only gains recognition by users but serves as an inspiration to test the limits of media technology by oneself (and to develop new commercial offers by the producers). Therefore, one has to take into account changes within the socio-technical order as rooted in the altered rulesets of the digital materiality of media (Grenz & Kirschner, in press; van den Boomen, Lammes, Lehmann, Raessens, & Schäfer, 2009). A direct interference of media capacities on social entanglements is channeled by media technological capacities itself. This line of argument is based on the "generativity" (Zittrain, 2006, p. 1980) of today's media technology since "generativity denotes a technology's overall capacity to produce unprompted change driven by large, varied, and uncoordinated audiences". Programmability, as well as the networked nature of pervasive media, indicates a wider change in societal rulemaking, as it happens on a "socio-technical" level (Lash, 2003, p. 54). A significant consequence of this transformation is the emergence of a multitude of "arenas" (Strauss, 1993, p. 225) that were not supposed to be opened for active audiences. However, these are spaces where motives of different actors, various interests, divergent resources and thereby different power-relations collide.

3. Relations and Interplays: Three Vignettes

Regarding the broad discussion on media change, it seems to be an erroneous conclusion to define the interplay between producers and users in the media age as either solely harmonious or conflict-laden. Rather than attributing conflicts or cooperation between producers and users to media effects, they are types of social relations that are moderated (but seldom caused) by the

media. Therefore, one has to differentiate between such interplays in order to contextualize the "complex processes of interaction between different groups of actors" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 219, referring to Grenz, 2014) that are at the heart of media change. In the following paragraphs, we provide insights into three cases based on our research, in order to underpin a systematization of the interplays between media firms, third companies and appropriating users. The cases were sampled due to the variation in the complexity of the social figuration between users and producers (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 421). As we will show, each case has distinct properties that affect the course of the interplay between producers and users. Identified variations between the cases then served as the starting point for our typification. The presented vignettes and "storylines" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 112) are built upon selected segments and key incidents of "fateful" trajectories (Strauss, 1993, p. 53) in each field. Trajectories are "fateful…courses of action but also…interaction of multiple actors and contingencies that may be unanticipated and not entirely manageable" (Strauss, 1993, p. 53).

3.1. Succeeding Integration: The Case of Wii Hacking

In 2006, Nintendo released the Wii, a video game console which had a remote controller with motion-sensing capabilities. People now could control the action on the screen not just by pressing buttons on a controller, but also by moving the controller in front of the consoles sensor bar. This was possible due to an accelerometer, a gyroscope and an infrared sensor built into the nunchuck-like controller. Like the child toys for the Circuit Benders, the Wii console, due to the advanced technology and the affordable pricing was not only used for the intended purpose of playing video games on a TV screen. People used the technology for hacks and developed a series of projects, using parts of the Wii and its controller. The most popular example of this were the projects by Johnny Chung Lee (johnnylee.net, see also wiimoteproject.com or wii-homebrew.com). In a series of YouTube tutorials and downloadable software, Lee, at that time a PhD student at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, presented several applications for the motion sensor technology from the Wii. This included a low-cost interactive whiteboard that supported up to four input devices ("pens") and a head tracking tool that transformed regular screens into a virtual reality display.

People like Lee experimented with reversed and modified parts of the equipment mainly to see what is possible with the commercial product but also in order to create new forms of entertainment and education. Lee's inexpensive Whiteboard—upgrading a beamer and a laptop to an interactive whiteboard costs around 50 Dollar—was used in schools long before such devices were widely distributed or affordable. Even today, an interactive whiteboard can cost up to 5,000 Dollars. Lee's hack is still used and promoted for its usage in schools on several websites and video platforms (e.g. wiki.zum.de/wiki/Wii_als_Whiteboard or autenrieths.de/links/schwabenboard.htm) and was discussed in several scientific articles (e.g. Liou & Chang, 2014, p. 97; Wittke, Ebner, & Kröll, 2013, pp. 29f.; Yucel, Orhan, Misirli, Bal, & Sahin, 2010, p. 149). Because of the enormous exposure of these projects, Lee was hired by Microsoft in order to develop their motion sensor controller ("Kinect") in 2010. He is currently working at Google's Project Tango (an augmented reality computing platform).

Lee's case is an example of the integration of user innovation (and users) into products and organizations. It raises the question, whether the integration of users and their creative use can be seen as a cooperation or more as a take-over. It raises the question which user innovations are integrated (and labeled as cooperation between producers and users) and if there are rejected, ignored or unsuccessful adaptions made by users. Though not researched at all, these cases of failing innovations (in the sense that they are not integrated by companies and not used by a wider public) may help to understand the mechanisms of the negotiated order in digital fields. One example for the missing integration of user tinkering is the case of Circuit Bending.

3.2. Stable Segregation: The Case of Circuit Bending

Circuit Bending can be defined as making sounds and music with electronic toys—normally marketed for and used by little kids—that are modified for this purpose by the benders (Eisewicht & Pfadenhauer, 2016; Ghazala, 2005). The modification focuses not just on the low voltage circuits inside the plastic toys with the aim to alter the sounds the toy makes, but also on the outer appearance in order to show that it is a so-called "bent" toy or instrument. This includes adding potentiometers, oscillators, pitches, knobs, and switches for manipulating sound and jacks to connect speakers, even to non-electrical toys (e.g. dolls). Most Circuit Benders modify the inner and outer parts of the toys but leave the outer form in such a way that the original form is still recognizable. Circuit Bending focuses on a tension between inner and outer modification, societal meaning and hacker ethos, electronic modification, sound, and music. Steven R. Hammer (2011) puts it this way: "By leaving a bent instrument in its original casing, adding switches and potentiometers, etc., we're (as Circuit Benders) acknowledging that it was a toy for children at one time, and now it is something different. It is repurposed, it is changed, it is a mutant child of techno-tinkering. It is a rhetorical act, challenging an audience to understand the instrument as both a product of past technology and of the artist's manipulation. This is particularly apparent when Barbie toys are bent and thereafter make these wonderfully dark, violent sounds; pink flowers and those sounds, when juxtaposed, communicate something powerful (however varied) to an audience".

Circuit Benders present and promote their creations on social media and video platforms and they exchange instructions, support and feedback online. They also meet at workshops and events. Circuit Benders are mostly adults with an interest and knowledge in electronics and music. Their interest can be described as an artisanal (in the modification of said toys) and artistic one (in the use of the bent instruments for sound making). The typical activities of Circuit Benders and the exchange between them are organized around their interest and the shared understanding of Circuit Bending (as a joyful, interesting and meaningful activity). As a group of enthusiasts who share some kind of self-understanding as a community of practice, Circuit Benders are to be seen as an example of post-traditional communitarization (Hitzler, 1998; Pfadenhauer, 2005). Digital media formats enable people to find like-minded others scattered all around the globe (e.g. matrixsynth.com, circuitbenders.co.uk, Reed Ghazala's www.anti-theory.com, www.Absurdity.biz, Getlofi.com or www.chipmusic.org).

Since Circuit Benders are not building their own instruments, they use the commercial products of certain manufacturers (like Fisher-Price, Mattel etc.). Therefore we can describe the relation between Circuit Benders (as some kind of prosumers of bent instruments) and commercial producers of the products that are the basis for the bent instruments. Regarding the focus on commercial products, the exchange of knowledge on specific sites or at certain events and the microculture that is organized around the product centered activities, Circuit Bending shares some characteristics with "brand communities" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, appreciation within the culture of Circuit Benders comes from the individual work put in the bending of the product, rather than the "original" state of the product. Circuit Bending is distinct from other uses of the toys as it is an uncommon (mis-)use by unexpected users. Circuit Benders gain appreciation mostly from other benders, who recognize the artisanal and artistic skill behind the bent toys and enjoy the—more or less otherworldly and disharmonic—sounds as well as the exploration of possibilities for sound making.

Though they are unexpected users by the producers and they use the toys in a manner other than their intended or common purpose, Circuit Bending and Circuit Benders are mostly ignored. Neither do firms comment on the misuse (by encouraging or condemning it) nor do they adapt their products to these kind of users (by advertising the products for Circuit Benders, by designing products for Circuit Bending or by preventing the products from being bent). This is surprising, since producers and brands are often alert to unauthorized hacking activities by users, especially if the hack is not in line with the intended brand image (which is obviously the case e.g. with the aforementioned Barbie dolls). In the next case of Online Poker Tools, we identify an example where the relationship between users and producers is less harmonious and producers are less indifferent towards user modifications.

3.3. Permanent Confrontation: The Case of Online Poker Tools

The history of online poker is a conflict-laden one, due to the highly contested kind of data in its core: the hand histories. Hand histories basically are records of player decisions with certain cards at hand. In early days of online poker, the architecture of the poker-clients already allowed the platform owners to track games and analyze them for conspicuous behavior. Hand histories are used as an additional offer that could be requested manually via E-Mail. For advanced players, they are a resource for a so called post-mortem-analysis of one's own play. As time went by, some players with an expertise in using complex databases started to use software in order to archive, analyze and improve their own play. From the growing quantity of self-made tools, a secondary market of analysis tools emerged—alongside the official platforms, their business models, rulesets, and features. These commercial tools included an automatic hand history-request that confronted the major poker platform providers with an increasingly costly situation of having to manage the growing number of requests for hand histories. They reacted by outsourcing, and from that point on, hand histories were saved directly on the player's computer. This decision popularized the extensive collection of hand histories which could be imported into the existing tools.

Specific tracking and analysis tools benefited from the outsourcing-decision and achieved mass popularity. Now, nearly simultaneous data tracking could be combined with instantaneous analysis and graphical visualization. Analysis and tracking tools were appropriated and became an essential part of the game. A black market in other people's hand histories emerged along with this development. The offered sets of data allowed players to have detailed information about totally unknown competitors. Also, professional data miners stepped onto the stage, using enormous server capacities in order to track and sell millions of hands following the claim that "poker is no longer a game of imperfect information". Above all, users can (and do) easily import the purchased data in such game play tools. Shared database tools were appropriated by more and more players, following the assumption that better information about players and their hands increases their own winning rate. The popularity of technologically-advanced play drove a major public discourse on the privacy and fairness of online poker. In particular, recreational players (so-called "fishes") who were affected by the unfair advantages of well-informed professionals (so-called "sharks") moved away from the platforms. Economically, the poker platform business model heavily relies on the financial input of recreational players. In order to cope with this imbalance of recreational

and professional players, various providers responded with countermeasures.

A comparison of a variety provider's terms of use of that time shows a significantly growing list of prohibited tools. In the case of one of the biggest poker companies, the number of prohibited tools rose from five (in 2006) to 87 (in 2013). When users of illegitimate tools were identified, their accounts were suspended immediately and their funds seized by the provider. Linked to this strategy of exclusion, processes of observational adjustments regarding detection and scanning technologies emerged as an additional reaction of the providers. Tracking as well as analyzing software turned out to be the most crucial instrument to combat cheating, poker bots and the use of forbidden tools that had simultaneously grown in number. Faced with a continued loss of recreational players, major providers changed the structure of game play, e.g. by implementing a 30-second sitting-rule in order to fight against those players who used a shared database to identify weaker players. More substantial transformation arose with other counteractions as with introducing anonymized gameplay in order to prevent the personalized tracking of hand histories. Anonymity challenged the whole data mining economy so that a data mining company published a method that provided an option to deanonymize tables, allowing commercial data miners and trackers to work as usual.

4. Discussion: Variants of Interplay

Our starting point was to focus on the interactive processes that unfold over time along with different actors' reciprocal activities towards media and technology. We have argued that some of these actors have to be regarded as focal actors because they hold the resources and infrastructures in order to develop, market, and diffuse media. We would argue that also, and in particular, when "market concentration, control, and power struggles" are significantly interlocked with internet companies of today (Dolata, 2017), their entanglement with non-company actors and communities has to be taken into account. With regard to three cases—Wii hacking, Circuit Bending, and online poker tools—we reconstructed three variants of interplay: integration, segregation and permanent confrontation.

Wii-remote-hacks are an example of the variant we describe as *integration*. They got a lot of attention from scholars and economic enterprises alike (e.g. Lee, 2008, the conference paper by Lee describing his hacks has currently 540 citations on Google Scholar). Rather than ignoring the hacks, organizations adapted solutions made by hackers and employed some of the hackers. The recombinations of common objects function as singularized markers of individual competency. Such actors use media channels for self-presentation and to distribute instructions in order for others to replicate the hacks. In a nutshell, integration is thereby based on an interplay between firms and single—or loosely coupled—actors who can be considered "outlaws of innovation" (Flowers, 2008, p. 180).

In the case of Circuit Bending, on the other hand, the *segregation* of a community of practice and a commercial manufacturer (and their expected users and types of usage) can be observed. Circuit Bending is based on the appropriation of commercial goods. The application of specific skills constitutes a microculture of its own—with specific forms of knowledge, do's and don'ts, actions and interactions as well as a sense of a shared identity. The bent instrument becomes a medium as a marker of shared motives, recognized competencies and a sense of togetherness. The object constitutes a binding moment of togetherness. At the same time, distribution media as YouTube or bulletin boards enable Circuit Benders to find like-minded people, to present bent instruments, to discuss, to share appreciation and thereby maintain a sense of belonging. The interplay within a community of practice of the users seems to stabilize their segregation from the official toy-manufacturers. That means, their influence on the officially used products, brands, and economic organizations is almost non-existent.

The rules, features and intended roles of online-poker, along with its technological fundament, are in a state of a permanent transformation. Service providers, third party-actors as well as users are constantly engaged in acting out their interests, resulting in an incremental but also fundamental change of the rules, design and security architecture of the platforms over the years. The core driver of this dynamic are those activities that—at least potentially—undermine economic interests and business models on one hand, and the countermeasures of providers on the other. Non-official extensions such as shared database tools did not just flourish seperately from the official poker ecosystem (segregation). They actually interfered with the gameplay as well as with the providers' business interests—this is in contrast with Wii-hacking which was used in order to gain technological and economic benefits. Since actors extend the official digital environment, they directly intervene with the core medium of the collective activity and in doing so the very basis of average use for every user is altered. The modifications are communicated within official statements and non-official channels. This flow of information contributes to a panoptical constellation that is composed of reciprocal observations, of steps and follow-up steps. Because companies could not absorb the extensions into the rulesets and the technology, extensions are increasingly counteracted via exclusions, via incremental and radical changes in the media technologies. We characterize this variant of an interplay as *permanent confrontation* and would argue that it is a symptomatic consequence of the increasing complexity of "digital ecosystems" (Eaton, Elaluf-Calderwood, Sørensen, & Yoo, 2011, p. 3; Tiwana et al., 2010).

From our presented insights (ref. the summarizing Table 1) we derive the following implications for a systematic approach on acting on media: First of all, acting on

Table 1. Short summary.

characteristics \ *case*	***Wii hacking***	***Circuit Bending***	***Online poker tools***
role of objects as media	object as marker of individual expertize and paragon for firms	object as marker of shared motives, competencies and group identity	object as extended and modified medium, and as threat of economic interests
role of distribution media	self-presentation and provided instructions	exchange of knowledge, recognition, and communitization	dissemination of appropriation, reciprocal observation
social configuration	self-promoting outlaw user and appropriating firms	self-stabilizing community of outlaw users and ignoring firms	outsmarting outlaw users and counteracting firms
variant of interplay	***integration***	***segregation***	***confrontation***

media is not just about the articulation of ideas or about actors and groups of actors and their visions. It rather is about media-related *and* mediated interactions and their consequences over time. If situated in complex platforms or socio-technical ecosystems, activities of actors and groups of actors can trigger nearly instantaneous effects that "may cascade in unpredictable ways to alter the structure or health of the ecosystem, or end it entirely" (Tiwana et al., 2010). These present dynamic processes can be analytically described as "feedback loops" (Grenz & Kirschner, in press; Grenz, Möll, & Reichertz, 2014; Lash, 2003, p. 50). Such an inherent logic of instability yields parallels with characteristics of modernity as discussed by Scott Lash (2003): Within the "second modernity" the securities and certainties provided by institutionalized ways of doing, role expectations and role-systems erode and become more short-lived and fluid. As a consequence, there is a need to find and create adequate rules. Uncertainty and risk, therefore, are the core characteristics of "reflective judgement" (Lash, 2003, p. 53). Moreover, second modernity means also mediatized modernity. Uncertainties and risks are further compounded with destabilizing effects that emerge along with pervasive and interconnected technologies (e.g. platforms). They are built on the principle of a permanent input of (new) information as well as technological change: "Complex systems do not simply reproduce. They change. It is the 'chaos' or noise of the unintended consequences that lead to system disequilibrium" (Lash, 2003, p. 50). In this way, social and technological modes of institutionalization are merging, resulting in institutions that are "socio-technical" (Lash, 2003, p. 54). These insights are also backed up by more recent studies in the field of "TechnoScienceSocieties" (Maasen, Dickel, & Schneider, 2017; see also Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 129).

However, not every actor, nor every group of actors and their activities are "naturally" situated within such complex networks of interconnected technologies and people which can bring about the symptomatic feedback loop-effects. Even if nearly every exotic practice of today becomes visible via media's observational capacities (Thompson, 2005), not every unforeseen social activity becomes economically relevant and therefore able to evoke "destabilization" (Lash, 2003, p. 50). Rather, the insights which we present from the aforementioned cases help us to understand and to differentiate between the areas of negotiation that emerge with growing interdependencies. Some arenas are bound to separate communities of outlaws in terms of special interest groups (Circuit Bending) who have their specific audiences and are quite popular when it comes to their visibility via different media channels. Other arenas gather speed at high rates but get commodified and absorbed (Flowers, 2008) with time, becoming essential tools within the fabric of everyday life (Wii hacking). Still, other arenas emerge in regard to what has been called "digital infrastructures", or—within business literature—"digital ecosystems" (Eaton et al., 2011, p. 3; Tiwana et al., 2010). In such constellations, economic interests, media technology, social roles, formal and informal rule sets merge to socio-technical institutions. It is exactly here, in these coalescing areas of modern life, where economic success tends to be permanently confronted with side-effects as unforeseen activities may cause tremendous cascade phenomena (online poker tools).

Nowadays, we have to rethink the question of intention and interest in regard to media change. Within spaces where activities can cause wider effects (e.g. reactions of global companies), acting on media may not be primarily driven by ideology, political agenda or creative competencies. When actions—more or less directly—evoke effects and consequences on a public level, then resonance is a growing motive of mediatized action. Illegitimate activities are not always phenomena that have to be described in relation to costs and benefits. Rather, it is the thrill of such action (Lyng, 1990) developing within more or less anonymous spaces which drives people to open up closed systems, to interfere with official rulesets, to circumvent structures, and to modify media technology. Socio-material resonances may be at the heart of media change because they mark a coming-

together of the activities of media appropriation and the competition with the "big players".

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Article

Fan (Fiction) Acting on Media and the Politics of Appropriation

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Abstract
Fanfiction is the creative appropriation and transformation of existing popular media texts by fans who take stories, worlds and/or characters as starting points and create their own stories based on them. As a cultural field of practice, fanfiction questions prevalent concepts of individual authorship and proprietary of cultural goods. At the same time, fanfiction itself is challenged. Through processes of mediatization, fanfiction grew and became increasingly visible. Third parties, ranging from the media industry (e.g., film studios) and copyright holders to journalism and academia, are interested in fanfiction and are following its development. We regard fanfiction communities and fan acting as fields for experimentation and as discursive arenas which can help understand what appropriating, writing and publishing in a digital culture and the future of writing might look like. In this paper, we outline important debates on the legitimacy and nature of fanfiction and present preliminary results of current research within Germany.

Keywords
appropriation; collective and distributed authorship; commercialization; copyright; fanfiction; gift culture

Issue
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1. Fans, Fanfiction and Acting on Media

Fanfiction is the creative appropriation and transformation of existing popular media texts by fans who take stories, worlds and/or characters as starting points and create their own stories based on it. As a cultural field of practice, it is supposed to have existed since the 20th century with *Jane Austen* and *Sherlock Holmes* societies in the 1920s as well as Star Trek fanzines in the late 1960s (Derecho, 2006, p. 62). Looking to regional differences, e.g. in Germany, also transformative writings based on *Karl May* novels in the late 19th century can be seen as a starting point (Cuntz-Leng & Meintzinger, 2015). And when arguing that fanfiction may be as old as myth stories several millennia ago (one of three argumentations outlined by Derecho, 2006, p. 62; see also Jamison, 2013, pp. 26ff.), we are in the middle of the debate; this article deals with the politics of appropriation.

The paper applies the concept of "acting on media" to fanfiction and contested understandings and ways of derivative respectively transformative writing, publishing and work-related interacting. Historically, fanzines and devices such as mimeographs and later photocopiers were the most important means for publishing and exchange. Today, digital platforms and repositories such as *Fanfiction.net*, *Archive of Our Own (Ao3)*, *Animexx*, and services such as personalized *Tumblr* blogs and social media (social network sites, instant messengers) are crucial for establishing and maintaining fanfiction communities. Much of what is discussed today and partly seen as digital phenomena, is anything but new. For instance, fan actors used fanzines not only to circulate fan written stories in the analog era but also to develop complex, multi-authored stories (Lichtenberg, as cited in Jamison, 2013, pp. 91ff.). However, in former times, the activities of writing and publishing occurred in relatively separate

ecological provinces. What changed through processes of media convergence and mediatization is the emergence of low-threshold access and opportunities to (partial) public articulation on the one side, and increased visibility of fan activities on the other side. Contradictions intensify when ever-present fans' will "to meaningfully quote from their culture" (Jenkins, 2009, online) and practices of sharing, publishing and spreading contents come together with observation and evaluation by third parties such as the media industry, copyright holders, and academics.

If we understand *acting on media* (Kannengießer & Kubitschko, 2017) as a focus on how special interest groups or social movements not only use media and infrastructure but also shape media ecologies and/or take an active part in the molding of everyday life practices—to a large extent, fanfiction is acting on media. First, in a literal sense, fan (fiction) acting on media is *infrastructuring* communities and publics. Authors, fan activists, bloggers, and platform runners invest time, effort and work to set up and maintain fanfiction communities by creating the material architecture, by producing texts and other contents, by sorting and archiving stories and other more. Secondly, fan (fiction) acting on media is acting on the *political-juridical conditions* which frame derivative working and publishing of derivative material. As a cultural field of practice, fanfiction is challenging insofar as it questions prevalent concepts of authorship and proprietary of cultural goods.

With regard to the political character of fan (fiction) acting on media, we distinguish between an individual and a collective view, and between explicit and implicit political groundings of acting. From the point of view of individual fanfiction authors or platform staff members, they can, but do not necessarily regard themselves as part of a bigger project or movement, whereas others do. Changing the perspective, collectively, intended or not, every contribution to fanfiction is part of practices and cultures larger than the individual. People may act very consciously as fans, intending to preserve, celebrate, improve or change existing media culture. By contrast, others may just love their fandom, just act, and not think about (fan) politics at all. We do well not to use notions such as "collective" and "implicit" as blackboxes for totalitarian academic fantasy on the political character of everyday action. Yet, with de Certeau (1984, pp. xix, 34–39) we regard fanfiction practices as *tactical* in the sense that authors act on others' territories. This is neither to say that we like to repeat and affirm prevalent social and cultural orders pushing fanfiction into a sphere without its own space, nor do we deny *that* fans create their own semiotic and (quasi-)material spaces, or occupy official and production-based spaces.[1] On the contrary, fanfiction infrastructures often emerge independently from cultural industries' big players and their media. Nevertheless, fanfiction is still culturally subordinated and so, fanfiction as collective action opposes dominant patterns and it questions "owned spaces".

Fanfiction communities and their acting on media are fields for experimentation and discursive arenas which can help understand how appropriating, writing, publishing and infrastructuring communicative spaces and publics work in a digital culture. At the same time, fanfiction is seismographic for existing contradictories and the "messy" blurring and entanglement of justification orders and doings. We like to show both and discuss contested issues theoretical as well as on the basis of own data.

2. Fan Studies and Empirical Legal Studies

In the following three chapters, we introduce ongoing debates regarding fanfiction and present preliminary results from a research project, currently being conducted within the Collaborative Research Center "Media of Cooperation", at the University of Siegen, Germany.

Focusing on derivative writing and publishing, the project is a joint venture of media sociology and copyright law scholarship. It contributes to fan studies, insofar as it seeks to map different ways of how fanfiction actors cooperate, how fan texts develop, how fan works are published and (re-)negotiated, and how mediating infrastructures keep fanfiction publics running. A subsequent objective is to elaborate field-specific proposals to enhance copyright law in order to better match the reality of transformative working and publishing in digitized/mediatized social worlds. Against the background of our research, we reflect on the assumptions built into existing law regarding the understanding of fan/art works' originality, ideas of authorship, and economical contexts. In this respect, the project is a contribution to Empirical Legal Studies (ELS) (Reißmann, Klass, & Hoffmann, 2017).

Of course, we are not the first to tie together research on fan practices and copyright law issues. Benkler (2006), Jenkins (2006), Lessig (2008), or Tushnet (1997), to name just a few academics with very different backgrounds have, for a long time, revealed tensions between fannish creativity and protective legislation. They have argued for the need to reconsider legal frameworks in the era of remix and convergence culture. The particular contribution of an ELS perspective and the point of departure of our project is the conviction that those responsible for political-juridical conditions benefit from more empirical data and results concerning law acceptance and providing a realistic view of actual practice. ELS complements existing "black letter analysis" (of laws and cases as primary sources) and culture–historic, philosophical works on the groundings of legal norms (in our field, e.g., underlying notions of creativity).

[1] For a critical discussion on de Certeau and his reception within fan studies see Hills (2002, pp. 14–15) and also Parrish (2013) who prefers Penley's metaphor of Brownian motion with a focus on processes of world building/world changing over the figure of the nomadic textual poacher.

In Germany, ELS are still in their infancy.[2] With regard to our field, ELS means to turn attention to the practice of transformative working. This includes the self-assessment and motivations of actors, as well as in the course of everyday life usually non-reflected patterns of justifications, as well as practices of writing, publishing, and technological mediation. While most ELS research follows quantitative, deductive-nomological designs (Chambliss, 2008), our approach is qualitative, oriented towards everyday life action. Our research design combines semi-structured interviews with authors, platform and document analyses (e.g., of platforms' TOS, selected forum discussions/threads, commentary), offline observation (e.g., participation in comic/manga conventions, book fairs), and online–offline ethnography (currently: with a group of women engaged in RPs[3] on *Stargate Atlantis*).

For the purpose of this paper, we focus on three distinguishable but entangled discourses. These discourses concern the nature, principles and core ethics of doing fanfiction. At the same time, each one is linked to specific legal issues. The first and overarching discourse is on fans' will and power to appropriate, and the legal limitations set by, intellectual property. The second is on the collective nature of authorship as a central self-description in the scholar fan literature and as a challenge to notions of individual and unequivocally identifiable authorship underlying copyright law. The third is on gift-culture and anti-commercialism as the pivot of community ethics, and likewise is significant for legal assessment. Altogether, the three discourses primarily affect the second meaning of fan (fiction) as acting on the political-juridical conditions, which of course, in turn, include moments of infrastructuring.

Regarding the way of presenting discourses and our own results, we attempt to bring forth a dialogue, using our empirical insights as commentary to ongoing academic and public debates.

In this paper, we—only—draw on qualitative data from the first stage of the interview study. As experts regarding their everyday lives and of fan culture, informants were invited to talk about their life, remarkable experiences and habits as fans and fanfiction authors. In semi-structured interviews, they reported how ideas and texts individually and collectively develop, what they do within fanfiction platforms and other media, as well as what they think about copyright and related questions. So far, the sample is composed of 20 fanfiction authors (19 female: 1 male) aged between 17 and 38 years (as of end of May 2017, more interviews are pending). Eight of them are students at universities in (Western) Germany, four of them are high school students, and one is a trainee. Seven interviewees work and are employed in various fields (e.g., public service, education, psychotherapy, first aid). All names are pseudonyms. Informed Consent allows us to store and analyze the transcripts in full and to publish selected quotes under the condition that anonymity of interviewees is guaranteed.

Influenced by the principles of Grounded Theory, we attempt to construct a heterogeneous sample of contrasting cases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 201ff.). Our interviewees actively participate in different fandoms (*Naruto*, *Dragon Age*, *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *One Piece*, *Star Trek*, and *Supernatural*, to mention the most prevalent), cover different genres of writing ("classic" fanfiction, RPG writing, but also "own"/non-derivative stories), and use various media and platforms (with *Ao3*, *fanfiktion.de*, and *Animexx* being the most frequently used; but also, platforms like *Tumblr* and their own sites are discussed). In order to understand them as individuals, to look for differences and similarities between certain authors, as well as to analyze reported and observed (media) practices and routines of acting beyond a case-centered perspective, we extract confirming and contradictory information through the constant comparison of data. As a means for systemizing the body of texts, we apply strategies of reductive analysis to each interview by applying a category system (worked out inductively by initial open coding as well as deductively by sensitizing concepts and prior knowledge). At first glance, this procedure is more associated with data analysis strategies such as thematic coding or qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014) than it is with Grounded Theory. However, for keeping track of the amount of data, we consider this a helpful (nonrigid, open-to-change) tool on the descriptive level and see it as a useful supplement to more contextualized, iterative, and (self-)reflective (Charmaz, 2008) methods of building up theoretical concepts, categories and their interconnections.

3. Fanfiction and the Power to Appropriate

3.1. Discourse and Perspectives

Epistemologically, appropriation of things (of all sorts) can be seen as a human condition. Using activity theory as an example, through acting with objects and artifacts people incorporate culture-historic practices (Engeström, 1987/2015). Derivative respectively transforming appropriation is not the only, but is an important mode of existing and is associated with creativity and innovation. The question is not if derivative appropriation is something special or new or in particular linked with fan cultures (see Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007, for ancestor/descent-modifications in biology and the transfer to literary adaption theory). Rather the question is, under which cultural, historical and societal circumstances, and in which ways (il)legitimacy to forms of appropriation is ascribed and negotiated.

Unquestionably, currently and the past, fans were regarded to possess the power of meaning-making and

[2] It is important to distinguish Empirical Legal Studies from the sociology of law as a discipline concerned with the analysis of lawmaking itself, with law institutions, their working etc.

[3] RP or RPG is short for "Role Play"/"Role Play Game".

follow-up-communication. Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) regarded fans as being a "powerless elite" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 89) with little direct and self-initiated influence on production processes on the one side, but with "'the power to gloss and to write the aesthetic history of the show,' (Tulloch) the power to analyze its contents and evaluate its episodes" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 89) on the other side. Fiske (1992) stated that cultural capital is the basis of the economy of fandom. Discussing and commenting critically on a fandom's "canon"[4] is one of the most important characteristic which separates passionate fans from general audiences, and which is also a major motivation to engage in fanfiction (e.g., Thomas, 2006).

In the course of digitalization, convergence and mediatization, fans' opportunities to become visible and to gain access to publics have increased (e.g., Jenkins, 2006, p. 131). To downplay or to render fan criticism invisible is not as easy as before. Fans using platforms like *Twitter* or their blogs, actually may set agendas and partially influence public debates and framings of series, games or books—such as in the case of the series *The 100*, in which a lesbian character died, and a discussion on representation of LGBTQ characters within shows emerged; or the recent Hollywood scandals involving whitewashing in movies such as *Ghost in the Shell*. Beyond that, fans develop also other forms of activism and engagement (e.g., *The Harry Potter Alliance*, Jenkins, 2014).

At the same time, with changing levels of visibility, new forms of economic absorption emerge. Using the example of Torchwood media tie-ins, Hills (2012) reveals a mode of transmedia storytelling following an industrial and disciplining logic (Hills, 2012, p. 423). According to his analysis, Torchwood's canon producers seek "to preempt fan debates, criticisms and interpretations", to take "back the power to 'gloss'" (Hills, 2012, p. 423) by adding prequels and sequels to the franchise and "symbolically transforming production contingencies into hyperdiegetic continuity" (Hills, 2012, p. 425). Hills calls this industrial absorption a "trans-transmedia storytelling", the second "trans" standing for (transmedia) management of fan discourse.

In Cultural Studies, discourse has always been conceived as being a permanent struggle for power. Whereas meaning-making and to gloss—albeit attempts of absorption—are "rights" nobody can take away, transforming, materially reifying and publicly circulating fan fantasy are highly contested. Relations between those things or elements which should be public domain and those which should be individual property have always been a point of discussion. A common argument put forward by Benkler (2006), Jenkins (2006), Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), and others, is to accept the (free) circulation and transformation of media contents and forms as a characteristic of convergence and digital culture and to foster the wealth of networks. Already the use of (everyday) notions like "derivative" or "appropriative" is contested, insofar as they can be seen to reproduce normative hierarchies of first and second order artifacts (Derecho, 2006, pp. 63–65).

The asymmetrical legal position and normative hierarchizing in first ("original") and second order ("derivative") artifacts suggests a one-way logic of appropriation: There are those who create source material, as well as those who take and build on source material created by others. But appropriation and inspiration are anything but unidirectional. Also prior to the rise of the WWW and social media, relations between canon producers and fans have been complex. New media simplified the mutual influencing of both groups upon each other. Booth (2010, p. 4) exemplarily highlights early cases of *Babylon 5*, *X-Files*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Heroes*. For each of these series, online fan input and feedback in one way or another influenced professional production. A more recent case is the integration of online fan speculation in an episode of BBC's *Sherlock*, in which the authors addressed fan-speculations and the act of speculation itself.

Academic fan studies may self-critically discuss their bias in subordination theorems (Hills, 2002, pp. 14–15; Parrish, 2013). And of course, just by making fanfiction, just by actually establishing their own infrastructures and circulating works, fans exert power. In doing so, fans cannot solely be conceived as "nomads" or "poachers". However, *legally*, fans remain in a weak position. First, due to the fact that they in most cases do not own the material they build on. Secondly, due to the fact that (national) legal windows are rather narrow and/or not outlined in a clear way. For example, in most cases fanfiction cannot be determined as "parody". Other exceptions like the often-mentioned United States (US) "fair use" (raised already by Tushnet in 1997 as a political claim) based on rather vague criteria and a lot of preconditions (e.g., Fiesler & Bruckman, 2014), leading to immensely interpretive flexibility and therefore to legal uncertainty.

Beyond that, underlying notions of "originality" in copyright law are challenging. In German "Urheberrecht" ("author's rights"), an important differentiation is that between "freie Benutzung" ("free use") and "unfreie Bearbeitung" ("non-free adaptation") (= § 23 UrhG–§ 24 UrhG). This differentiation is used to distinguish between admissible inspiration and inadmissible exploitation of other authors' rights. An indicator for or against copyright infringements is the degree of "fading" ("verblassen") of the source text's individual characteristics in the derivative work. Although discussions on remix practices as essential parts of particular ("postmodern") art forms are spurred by recent jurisdiction on sampling,[5] the existing legal framework was not built for transformative works whose punchline—as in fanfiction—is not fading and is not distant to the primary text, but is visi-

[4] Whereas "canon" in fan slang stands for the totality of officially media texts published by professional/commercial media industry within a certain universe/story (e.g., *Harry Potter*), "fanon" is short for all fan works building on the canon.

[5] "Metall auf Metall", BVerfG, 31 May 2016—1 BvR 1585/13.

bly and recognizably similar to a certain story or character's features.

Therefore, and besides informal practices of toleration, fans still are dependent on the good-will of copyright holders and their agencies, as well as having to cope with the situation of acting within a gray area.

3.2. Data-Based Commentary

While it is rather easy to proclaim whether public circulation of fanfiction should be legalized or should be prohibited, following the approach of ELS outlined above many questions arise: How do the authors look at and justify their actions? What are they actually doing with the source material and others' ideas? Do they want their own creations to be protected or not? In which relationship does self-assessment, rationalized action and practice occur? And finally, what conclusions can be drawn from that regarding the revision of copyright law?

As yet, we have no definitive answers to any of these questions. However, we can add empirical-based reflections on selected issues. Besides routinized practices of disclaiming and demonstrating respect to canon creators, our interviewees focus on the handling of the source material. In most of the cases, being involved in fanfiction is inevitably linked to the desire to extend the public domain, to being allowed to write and publicly circulate stories. This claim is often justified by the absence of commercial intentions and by making the author's sources of inspiration transparent. At the same time, this does not mean that ideas of intellectual property would vanish or not relate to acting and thinking anymore. While some argue that writing in general and fanfiction, in particular, are all about borrowing and using what someone else created and therefore present a liberal point of view, whereas others identify themselves as being the creators of unique characters, details, and story worlds, which they want to protect from exterior influences. Likewise, we notice a strong bond between authors and their work, not least due to time and effort they have had to spend on it. Interviewees speak about their creations as "my story" or "my character". Although little attention is paid to the "original" authors' attitudes, awareness of what others could do with their own creative works is rather high. While in principal, almost all of our interviewees would accept a second-level-appropriation of their own (fanfiction) works, they insist on being referred to as a creator, and on a non-commercial character of the appropriation.[6] At least, holding and defending a visible position in an imagined row regarding referencing and (re-)appropriating seems to be significant.

It is no surprise that the act of looking into appropriation practices evokes ambiguous results. Furthermore, the methods and objects of adaptations and transformations are immensely diverse. While analyzing and contrasting the material, four provisional approaches towards changing the source text become clear.

The first approach is particularly careful with the source text and refuses to implement broad shifts in the original stories. Above all, authors want to create small side stories, which complement the canon rather than change it. Regarding the willingness to change an original story one author states: "It isn't in the nature of the thing itself because the characters are how they are" (Patricia, 26). The constructed stories have to fit in the given story world created by the original authors: "I wrote stories that weren't in the book. Not that they were missing, but they weren't really there" (Talea, 17). Following this approach, the fixed nature of beloved characters is highlighted. It is important that characters and their unique traits are easily recognizable.

The second approach also highlights the importance of a consistent character development, where the source material and the fanfiction texts are complementary to each other. But in contrast to the first type, authors are more willing to allow exceptions as long as the implemented transformations serve a higher creative value:

> There is the will to portray the characters as they are. This was always important for me. But this is possible in a limited way. Because if you want to change a heterosexual character into a homosexual one you automatically change character traits. You have to deal with that. (Eva, 29)

As with the first type, the second type also cherishes the original characters but understands them more as tools to realize a unique creative vision. Here, authors have a more playful approach and are not afraid of making bigger transformations. Frequently, the characters themselves seem to push the authors to make such transformations, because "characters sometimes develop a life of their own" (Eva, 29).

The third approach is more critical in working with the source material. Authors do not see the story world and the characters as fixed entities. However, in comparison to the second type, they approach the source material more sincerely and less playfully: "I love Marvel beyond anything else, but at the same time I perceive it often as sexist" (Hannah, 17). In this case, the transformation of the source material can be seen as a way to save a beloved text and/or as a form of ideological critique. Authors feel an obligation to perform radical changes. Following this approach, work improvement is understood as taking a critical stance and increasing diversity. Authors oscillate between affection and criticism, because "the first motivation is always the love for a text" (Sonja, 38).

[6] Similarly, Busse and Farley (2013) report the case of a challenge within a *LiveJournal* community on *Stargate Atlantis* in 2006 whose initiators allowed to use work of other fanfiction authors—with or *without* their *permission*. Due to the supplement, the announcement "reached more than a hundred responses within hours, mostly complaints" (Busse & Farley, 2013, online). The opportunity of writing fiction on the basis of others' fanfiction without permission was experienced as a violation of community norms by most members.

In the fourth approach, the source text is used as a starting point to develop new stories. Alleged weaknesses are seen as opportunities: "The original story had so-called plot holes, you can do a lot of things with it" (Xara, 21). Here, the relationship towards the source material can be seen as functionalistic, without many restrictions: "While writing stories you are completely free" (Pawel, 25). The weaknesses of the source texts are seen as a stepping stone to go further from the original text to create new story worlds, which can veer far from the source material.

From the very start, looking out for weaknesses in storytelling and the will to improve and change stories because of plot holes, inconsistencies, "badly" or insufficiently drawn characters and their specific relations was stimulating fan fantasy and fannish extensions (e.g., Jamison, 2013, pp. 42ff. on early Sherlock Holmes fanfiction). Yet, the heterogeneity of transformations we find invites us to reflect on the legal status quo. According to copyright law in Germany, one important criterion of assessment would be the degree of "fading" (see above) and the distance to the source text. Probably a "4th approach"-author would be better able to argue that she or he had added sufficient creative value. However, all those different authors working on different aspects with different styles are still doing the same: fanfiction. Does the established assessment procedure for identifying copyright infringement really catch the core of creative appropriation in fanfiction and other fields of derivative works? Under certain circumstances, it may just be a detail, a single character trait, which is decisive to be able to recognize and appreciate a story as being unique or creative. There is need to sensitize law for "postmodern" modes and forms of creativity which go beyond classical understandings.

4. Fanfiction and Collective Authorship

4.1. Discourse and Perspectives

Just as appropriation, the collectivity of doings and makings can be seen as a human condition. Taking Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2005) as an example, it is an epistemological decision to regard the interaction of things and humans as inevitably collective. Following the concept of "distributed cognition", developed in science studies by Hutchins and colleagues (e.g., Hutchins & Klausen, 1996), cognition is not seen as being located at the individual level, but radically distributed, based on networked relations and processes involving various (human) actors as well as materialities and technologies. Therefore, the question is not, *if* writing or publishing are collective acts involving and assembling heterogeneous materials and humans. Rather it is to ask, in which ways writing and publishing collectives make themselves visible and accountable *as* collectives (or not), and to what extent existing law is capable and/or is societally enforced to cope with different forms of collectivity.

From its very beginnings, fan studies emphasized the collective dimension of fannish activity; of course, primarily as a matter of human interaction. Besides preconfiguring social contextualization of reading popular media texts or nonverbal forms of "enunciative productivity" like dressing (Fiske, 1992, p. 38), in-situ-sociality of watching, discussing and experiencing movies and videos, playing games, joint listening to music, going to concerts or visiting other media places such as cinemas, discotheques, clubs etc. was emphasized. It is no accident that concepts of "(media) scenes" or "youth (media) cultures" are important means for explaining fan activities in terms of social and cultural belonging and joint doing.

Entangled with utopian visions of early net culture, the collective dimension of fannish activities acquired additional connotations. When addressing the consequences of new media and communication infrastructure on fan communities, around the millennium, scholars such as Baym (1999), Jenkins (2002) and Hills (2002) reflected on a huge range of topics: e.g., changing temporalities in order to follow media fandoms in line with rhythms of publishing and broadcasting; changing socio-spatial patterns of reading and watching; changing scopes of communication and interaction flows transcending local and national borders; or emerging opportunities of (simultaneously) discussing broadcasting in online forums (later called "second screen"), as well as of the gathering and storing of fan productions in online archives.

For coping with digital media's affordances towards collectivity, Jenkins (2002) drew on Lévy's (1994/1997) "collective intelligence". Retrospectively, we may criticize accounts like this to their slight euphemistic touch and social romanticism towards digital culture as being an alternative sphere of its own. Yet, more important is that the thought of knowledge communities putting "collective" or "connected intelligence" (de Kerckhove, 1997) over the limitations of individual thinking and acting is a strong and lasting narrative. They materialize in concepts of "swarm intelligence/smart mobs" (Rheingold, 2003), and are important ideological groundings for collaborative communities such as *Wikipedia*.

In none of its meanings and readings, should collective doing be mixed up with communitarian ideals of consensus or harmony. In fact, community ethics and values of how to interact with each other are important (e.g., regarding non-intended spoilers, acknowledging and respect other authors' efforts and works). At the same time, conflicts and differing points of view, norms and ideals between communities and fandoms as well as within communities and fandoms are part of the game as well (for early recognitions of conflicts in online fan communities, see Baym, 1999; Jenkins, 2002; McDonald, 1998).

In fanfiction, utopian visions of digital culture converged with pre-existing feelings of belonging to a certain community and fandom. Fanfiction is often equated with

the idea of collective authorship. The "person we like to call the *author*, is not a single person but rather is a collective entity" (Busse & Hellekson, 2006, p. 6). Taking this statement as the point of departure, we can proceed in at least two ways:

A first reading of collective authorship extends literary tropes such as Barthes (1967/1994) "death of the author".[7] By shifting from the author to the reader and to reception processes as locus of meaning making, Barthes and others questioned and deconstructed the myth of the individual author as a genius or author-god. Although in fanfiction, readers are also frequently authors at the same time, co-creation is an inevitable disposition of text emergence. This is not necessarily associated with a decline in authorship (as a value), but underlines the collectivity of authorship: Nobody owns texts and ideas alone—nobody produces them on his or her own alone—nobody can fix meaning alone.

A second way of understanding collective authorship is much more literal. Inverting traditional ideas of individual authorship which tend to make factual collectivity invisible, fanfiction communities ostentatiously celebrate and demonstrate joint doing. This includes practices of "beta-reading", feedback and commentary, a widely-shared view of texts as never-finished "work in progress" (Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Derecho, 2006). This includes work and invested time and effort of all those, building up, maintaining and filling WiKis (such as *Fanlore* or *Wookieepedia*) or devotional fan sites and blogs, writing "metas" (narrative analysis) or participating in mailing lists, discussion boards etc. This includes collective "textual performance" (Hills, 2002, pp. 16–19; Lancaster, 2001) and playful practices of transformative reenactment, especially in role play stories.

Against that background, fanfiction scholars like Busse and Hellekson (2006, p. 7) define the "fantext" as "the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom", offering "an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of the characters"—"this multitude of stories creates a larger whole of understanding a given universe", and "every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations". Drawing on Derrida, Derecho (2006, p. 64) prefers the term "archontic" over "derivative" or "appropriative literature". The latter ones "announce property, ownership, and hierarchy", whereas "archontic" is seen as being "not laden with references to property rights or judgments about the relative merits of the antecedent and descendant works" (Derecho, 2006). First and foremost, the archontic principle is about expanding, and we might add: This expansion is a collective enterprise.

4.2. Data-Based Commentary

The capability of copyright law to grasp authorship beyond the individual is not so much a matter of quantity or abstractness of personhood. Law neither considers the number of individuals asserting a claim to authorship (this paper has 5, a physics paper may have over 20 authors), nor does law have difficulties treating groups or organizations as liable entities (corporate personhood as a legal fiction). The question is, in which ways complex participations in authorship make themselves accountable, and if and how distributed authorship, property, and liability can and should be implemented in law.

To better grasp collective moments in processes of text production, we adopt a procedural perspective on writing and publishing fanfiction stories (leaving aside role play stories):

In the initial or planning-stage, the main task our interviewees report is the search for inspiration. This can be found from the reading of others' fanfiction, by an active reception of the original (media) texts, from the collection of background information (on characters, narratives or topics provided by other fandom members, e.g., in Wikis), or through discussion with friends and community members. Individual modes differ but often have a collective component. Some need prompts from the community to get into the writing process. Others extensively read stories from their nearest friends to start a discussion about strengths and weaknesses in previous works. Hannah (17) and her friends resemble the concept of the writer's room:[8]

> We had some weird ideas and had five different characters, like Captain Jack Sparrow and Neil Patrick Harris, put them together and created a story out of this, which [name of her friend] wrote down and developed further.

Of course, not everyone is as networked or interacts to the same degree. Furthermore, some biographical notes reveal a gradual growth into more collaborative modes of mutual support and inspiration, where initial stories were more or less written solely by individuals and simply uploaded. Also, the complexity and length of stories are not to be underestimated as a factor. Where "one shots" (stories consisting of a single chapter only) may be written in a very short time, long-time projects involve people for several weeks, months, sometimes years, accompanied by dozens of discussions and modifications in the meantime.

Describing writing processes in terms of stages is no more than an analytical tool. Often works in different stages are processed at the same time, and stages blur, when circles of planning, writing, publishing and commenting (after publication) accelerate. This is especially true for the step-by-step publication of single chapters. Bearing that blurring in mind, the second stage is the writing itself. More data may change our findings in this respect. Until now, writing has been reported as

[7] See Sandvoss (2007) for a general discussion of the relation of cultural/fan studies and literature studies, including questions on aesthetic value.

[8] The concept of the writer's room is about establishing a playful atmosphere for television storytelling. New ideas are developed in collective thinking processes and put into practice by the best writer(s) in the group.

being an intimate and rather lonely experience. It has been described as a deeply personal creative act, where authors want to realize their individual ideas on their own terms. Others come into play again after finishing first drafts. This is the stage of revision, which often employs friends and acquaintances as "beta-readers" prior to publication:

> She uploaded Word-Documents on Facebook and we downloaded them and wrote our comments with red into them and corrected everything we came up with. (Talea, 17)

Drafts are exchanged via email or social media platforms such as *Facebook*. Mostly, commenting and revising refers to formal mistakes: "not really the plot of the story, but mainly stuff like spelling or grammar" (Talea, 17).

What follows, is the publishing and the implementing of the stories into online platforms. Often headers and short descriptions are used to refer to beta-readers and inspirations that influenced the work. Following the publishing of a chapter or an entire story, commenting and (online) feedback begins. Sometimes, comments and follow-up-associations lead to new ideas or influence further chapters. The handling of comments differs from author to author. While some writers appreciate constructive criticism leading to intriguing and helpful discussions about the written text, others complain about the lack of quality commentary. However, all authors express a positive attitude towards useful feedback:

> Yes, they have really dealt with the story and I prefer that over commentators, who only write "Continue your story the fastest way possible!" I am happy about this. (Xara, 21)

Constructive criticism heightens the motivation to continue stories or to develop new ones. Beyond that, interviewees often speak about a learning-curve regarding their skills. They either received feedback that helped them to grow as an author or simply became better through the quantity of writing that they had produced.

Reading, following other's work, inspiration from sundry sources, shared emotional support, commentary and feedback—put together, all these moments light up as a spiral of collective and distributed creation with various people and media involved. A closer look at writing genres like role play stories (we give greater attention to it in our ongoing data analysis) reinforces the collective dimension of making fanfiction: Role play stories are associated with collective authorship per se, are often performed together in situ, and demand a high act of collaboration because of writing in rotation and having to negotiate the rules of the game.[9]

Against that background, we may critically question the law's bias regarding "individualized" imaginations of authorship (see, e.g., Dulong de Rosnay, 2016, for thoughts on applying "peer to peer" principles to the design of law institutions). Is it not rather the distributed collective, the assemblage, who acts? While thinking along these lines, one also needs to take into account the fact that actual production processes and practices of ascribing (quasi-)legal authorship and responsibility are not the same. Not only the law but also most of our interviewees as well as the mainstream architecture of fanfiction platforms and related media services continue to be biased in concepts of individual authorship. In most of the cases it is one specific author (respectively persona) who uploads a story and is displayed as the author by personalized accounts and profiles. Paradoxically, large parts of the collectivity that exists is rendered invisible with the help of the infrastructure which was built for and by communities who value the collective over the individual. Furthermore, in many interviews collectivity of text production is highlighted and at the same time individual authorship remains an unquestioned basis of thinking about oneself as a creative actor. Our findings indicate various forms of cooperation in text emergence and several ways of making cooperation explicit. However, further efforts are needed to investigate the relations between making cooperation visible and invisible—also with regard to the shape of media infrastructures in use.

5. Fanfiction and Gift Culture

5.1. Discourse and Perspectives

Intersections of commodity culture, consumerism and fan culture are issues which have been discussed frequently. Whereas the initial, mainly structuralist accounts in Cultural Studies tended to construct "subcultural" practices (of youth) in opposition and resistance to hegemonic consumer culture, emphasizing complex and contradictory relations between fan and commodity culture is commonplace today. This goes for principal questions on the (im-)possibility of fan agency in relation to cultural industries as well as for questions on the hybridization and blurring of spaces, actors and spheres of production and consumption (for a critical reflection of academic accounts on power relations within fan studies see Hills, 2002, pp. 3–19). The question is not if fan and commodity culture are two sides of the same coin. Rather it is to ask, in which ways relations to commodity culture are part of the self-understanding and justification patterns of fan cultures and how these narratives relate to actual practice.

With respect to fanfiction, dominant ethics and motivations are often described with reference to the concept of gift culture (De Kosnik, 2009; Hellekson, 2009). Following this approach, authors write and circulate stories for joy in the first place, without any kind of re-

[9] So far, our material indicates a struggling of players between self-imposed ideals of collective (inter-)acting with having equal rights, and a "reality" of writing and planning involving colliding interests and fantasies.

ciprocal obligation. This understanding may differ from sociological and anthropological accounts of gift-giving (e.g., Bourdieu, 1994/1998; Mauss, 1950/1966). However, in our opinion, the ambivalence of gift-giving as an allegedly unconditional practice *and* a veiled claim on (time-lagged) reciprocity also goes for popular culture. On one hand, fanfiction community ethics imply giving and sharing without expecting a reward at all. In this sense, they are associated with ideas of altruistic ways of living. On other hand, stories can also be seen as a vehicle for givers to receive something in return; not necessarily immediately, not necessary in an equivalent form—but at some time and in some way, even though the "reward" may only be valuable experience.

From a more global perspective, the strong emphasis on non-commercialism in fanfiction communities, and the cultural construction of "gift and commercial models as discrete economic spheres" also serve "as a defensive front to impede encroaching industrial factions" (Scott, 2009, online).

Another rather ignored reading of gift culture reflects on the metrification of various fanfiction-related actions in digital platforms, and the ways of how displaying and interacting with data and statistics (views, likes, rates, amount of comments etc.) shape culture and community ethics. Taken literally, economic exchange is mediated by currencies. Besides classic models of monetary transaction, attempts were made to characterize the online or digital economy as "attention economy" (e.g., Davenport & Beck, 2002) or "digital reputation economy" (Hearn, 2010). Against that background, we may assume a version of gift culture within fanfiction (as in any other part of digital culture and sociality) that hinges on measurable, quantifiable and representable amounts and rankings of received attention. This is not to say that individuals are "monolithic agents", as Benkler (2006, pp. 92ff.) illustrates in his reflection on models of motivation and relations of money and social-psychological rewards in digital culture. However, a closer look at different readings of "gift culture" reveals that boundaries between an ostentatiously non-commercial habitus and "quasi-commercial" acting are fuzzy. Beyond fanfiction, Booth (2010, pp. 24ff.) coined the term "Digi-Gratis". This metaphor is helpful to grasp the blurring of commodity and gift economies. Translated to fanfiction: stories, blog entries etc. are given for free. It is not necessary that readers pay for the content, nor that they "answer" on an equivalent level with their own stories or blog entries. However, it is expected that they leave comments, likes or other signs and hints to let it be known that somebody has taken notice of what has been read, heard or watched.

From another angle, "gift culture" is problematized with regard to rewards of third parties. As in other fields of digital culture (e.g., Terranova, 2000), critical arguments reflect on the "exploitation" (a difficult horse to catch, of course, with its semantics of forced action) of fans' "free labor" (e.g., De Kosnik, 2012; Stanfill & Condis, 2014) ranging from inspiration for professional cultural industries to analysis of user content and user profiles (e.g., for enhanced definition of target groups and marketing strategies) to the revenues that archive sites are able to achieve through advertising or paid accounts. Therefore, some scholars who have foreseen attempts to monetize fanfiction (e.g., Scott, 2009) posed (self-)critical questions regarding the participation of fans in profits, and on fannish control and power of influencing emerging business models. These debates have (re-)intensified[10] more recently with the rise of new licensing models in platforms such as *Amazon Kindle Worlds* (e.g., Hellekson, 2013).

5.2. Data-Based Commentary

Looking at discourses and assessment procedures regarding copyright infringements, the presence or absence of economic damage for copyright holders and agencies, and the commercial or non-commercial motivation of actors, are not the only, but are important criteria. With the growth of the field, more than ever consisting of heterogeneous groups with very different intents and habits, with the emergence of new role models such as the commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and with the appearance of commerce-driven platforms, we ask whether the boundaries of "gift culture" become permeable, and how different economic styles and forms of capital are interconnected in digital fan cultures.

It is very clear that our interviewees do not see themselves as commercial actors. In this respect, we can confirm what many studies have found: People keep saying that writing fanfiction is a hobby in the first place. They expect neither money nor any physical rewards. They offer their fanfiction for the group of people they feel part of. What they get back is attention and recognition in form of comments or Likes (e.g., *Kudos* in *Ao3*). Comment regarding commercial platforms such as *Amazon Kindle Worlds* (if interviewees know of it) is critical. Earning money is seen as threatening the beloved culture rather than being a helpful innovation or giving added value.

Beyond commercialization in the narrower sense, two findings are worth reporting, however. First, writing fanfiction (as a hobby) and writing "non-derivative" stories (possibly as profession) are distinct *and* related social worlds. Most of the interviewees are doubtful with respect to the skills gained, thinking that the quality of their stories is not fit for professional writing. Yet, this does not mean that some of them would not toy with the idea of becoming a "real" author or would not make the first steps to establish themselves as such. Patricia (26), for instance, published three edited books with friends, mixing manga drawings and stories. Fanfiction is both a playground and a training camp. While fanfiction itself should remain l'art pour l'art gift culture, it is also perceived as

[10] A first wave of discussion hinged on the rise and fall of the platform *Fanlib* around 2007.

a ticket to other areas of writing culture associated with different rules and norms. While fanfiction and payment seem to rule one another out, none of our interviewees think fundamentally bad about earning money with professional writings for official (online/print) book markets. Instead, money-making—here—is taken-for-granted and remains unquestioned:

> There are a lot of artists on *Animexx* who publish their stories parallel [online], but also let them be printed…and offer them for sale. And uh if they are really good I would buy it, or rather wait until it is made into a bundle and then I would get that if I wanted to re-read it a lot. So, I definitively think a market should open so that people have the opportunity to print their work, especially since the quality, here in Germany, became better over time. (Patricia, 26)

Introducing these findings here is not to say that fanfiction is a preliminary stage of economical acting and therefore is to be regarded as economic-driven itself. On the contrary, our data indicate separated social worlds with different rules. However, if the objective of our research is to untangle a complex picture of transformative writing and publishing, and to better understand subsequent economic chains, these interconnections are part of the picture. This is also true the other way round, as some publishers screen online markets and platforms in order to explore existing or potentially successful stories and authors.

Secondly, we find evidence that platforms' quantifying feedback logics influence the acting of certain authors. As previously mentioned, feedback is the most important means of regifting and showing respect for authors' efforts and labor. Accordingly, so-called "Schwarzleser" (an often-used German expression for "lurker" who only read and do not give feedback) are anything else than welcome. Conversely, even though this is (on the reflexive level of semi-structured interviews) more of an exception, authors and readers do have a sense of quantity. They look at and know about how many comments or Likes fanfiction gets. In few instances, a motivation is to reach a certain quantity of reads and feedback in what can be interpreted as a form of quasi-commercial acting.

More efforts are needed to grasp the commercial complexities. In which ways (or not) is media capital (in form of attention or quantity of followers) part of fanfiction's digital economy? Can this kind of capital be exchanged or transferred? If at all, who profits? What are the future business models of publishers and platforms towards fanfiction? Will they be game-changers? Until now, it has been difficult to find answers to these questions. However, the discursive demarcation of non-commerciality as a form of collective self-protection and an informal/latent agreement between industry, law, and fans, may turn out as being too narrow in future. With increasing attempts to commercialize fanfiction and other fan works, with heterogeneity of mediating platforms, infrastructures and commercial logics—fan actors, as well as proponents of fair legal regulations, should ask why of all things should anti-commerciality be the life insurance for transformative working.

6. Conclusion

Fanfiction is acting on media in at least two ways. By infrastructuring communities and publics, authors, readers and platform runners build up (own) communicative and (quasi-)material spaces for circulating, sharing and archiving the stories they want to write and read, for the stories they cannot find in official canon productions. By doing fanfiction, whether it is their intention or not, they also question the existing political-juridical conditions which frame transformative working and publishing of derivative material. Fanfiction challenges prevalent concepts of individual authorship and proprietary of cultural goods.

Discursive demarcations in debates on copyright law (e.g., Lessig, 2008) range somewhere between protectionism of individual authorship and right holders, and the proclamation of free culture and public domain. The attempt of our project is ultimately to back normative legal positions and underpinnings by empirical research on the "reality" of derivative/transformative working. On the basis of our preliminary findings we—so far—can state that authors' explicit and tacit practice is as least as complicated as the political-juridical struggle of interest groups on the political stage. This goes for all of the three debates discussed and empirically commented on in this paper. Our findings indicate a desire to legalize fanfiction (or better: to engage in it without fear, and with legal certainty) and to get the legal field ready for complex participations and distributed authorship. At the same time, we identify the practical reproduction of traditional ideas. Self-understandings, justification patterns and doings seem to both partially oppose and to partially reproduce the logic of first and second order artifacts; they seem to partially celebrate the visibility of both collective and distributed authorship, to partially reproduce the myth of the individual creator; to partially oppose economic thinking as well as to partially reveal related forms and connected social worlds.

Contradictory practices, narratives, and justifications can be found within fanfiction. Informed by practice, ELS have to cope with those ambivalences and balance out recommendations thoroughly.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Raging Against the Machine: Network Gatekeeping and Collective Action on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract
Social media platforms act as networked gatekeepers—by ranking, channeling, promoting, censoring, and deleting content they hold power to facilitate or hinder information flows. One of the mechanisms they use is content moderation, or the enforcement of which content is allowed or disallowed on the platform. Though content moderation relies on users' labor to identify content to delete, users have little capacity to influence content policies or enforcement. Despite this, some social media users are turning to collective action campaigns, redirecting information flows by subverting the activities of moderators, raising the visibility of otherwise hidden moderation practices, and organizing constituencies in opposition to content policies. Drawing on the example of the campaign to change Facebook's nudity policy, this paper examines the strategies and tactics of users turning to collective action, considering which factors are most influential in determining the success or failure of a campaign. It finds that network gatekeeping salience is a good model for assessing which collective action efforts are most likely to be effective in achieving individual user goals. This indicates that the users who are already most able to harness the attention economy of social media platforms are more likely to successfully navigate the content moderation process. The analysis concludes by attending to what users might learn from the dynamics of network gatekeeping as they seek to resist the asymmetrical power relations of platforms.

Keywords
collective action; content moderation; network gatekeeping; platforms; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Social media platforms act as networked gatekeepers in the contemporary information space. As users provide streams of posts, photos and videos, platforms rank, channel, promote, censor, and delete content, facilitating or hindering information flows (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). This power to shape content is a form of information control enacted at multiple levels and through differing mechanisms, including platform design, algorithmic curation, and active moderation of posted content.

Researchers have already begun to explore how power flows on and through platforms: at the level of design, platform affordances, such as Twitter's 140-character length limit, shape which user behaviors are encouraged or discouraged on the platform (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Neff, Jordan, McVeigh-Schultz, & Gillespie, 2012). The workings of these affordances are often made most visible when they change: the elimination of the character limit for direct messages, for example, had an effect on the kinds of discourse—and therefore the broader culture—of the community of Twitter users.

The power to shape content is also enacted through algorithmic curation of which content is made visible or invisible (Gillespie, 2012, McKelvey, 2014). Facebook's newsfeed algorithms subtly shape which content users are exposed to, without explicitly making users aware

of how the algorithm defines the information they are seeing—a form of network gatekeeping that has come under considerable critique for its potential influence on political discussion (Tufekci, 2015) and discriminatory effects (Crawford, 2015; Noble, 2013).

This paper focuses primarily on a third, and perhaps most explicit, form through which social media companies act as networked gatekeepers: active moderation of the content users post on platforms. Most major social media companies have developed complex systems to moderate content at scale, which require immense human resources—from salaried and freelance moderators, as well as users—and largely operate in obscurity (Gillespie, 2017). These systems seek explicitly to accomplish the three main objectives of network gatekeeping: protecting norms within communities from unwanted entry from outside, "locking in" users to the gatekeeper's network, and maintaining ongoing activities within the network without disturbances (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Like the other two forms of network gatekeeping on social media, the influence of companies over information flows through content moderation is largely asymmetric: though social media companies rely heavily on the labor of users to generate content, users have little recourse to petition the companies when their content is taken down, or to make demands of companies when they would like to see changes to the content policies set by the companies.

This paper examines the conflicted relationship between companies and their users when users contest the policies set by companies. I attend particularly to users' adoption of techniques of collective action that explicitly protest, subvert, and raise the visibility of moderation practices, as well as companies' response to these tactics. I aimed to understand more clearly two aspects in particular: first, how are users engaging in collective action efforts? Where do these interest networks come from, and what kinds of tactics do they adopt? Secondly, which factors are most influential in determining the success or failure of a collective action effort?

I adopted a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005), examining the series of campaigns enacted by Facebook users around its policies on female nudity under the hashtag #FreetheNipple. I find a striking range of strategies and tactics were adopted by Facebook users, resulting in a diverse coalition of different interest groups that converged around the goal of changing Facebook's content policies. Though they ultimately achieved only partial success in changing the policy, I was able to find that certain factors did influence the likelihood of an individual member of a campaign finding redress when their content is removed. In particular, Barzilai-Nahon's (2008) typology of networking gatekeeping salience is a good model for assessing which collective action efforts are most likely to be effective in achieving individual user goals. This indicates that the users who are already most able to harness the attention economy of social media platforms are more likely to successfully navigate the content moderation process. I conclude my analysis by attending to what users might learn from the dynamics of network gatekeeping revealed in this case study as they seek to resist the asymmetrical power relations of platforms.

2. Methods

Given that there are relatively few successful examples of collective action efforts driving a change in social media content policies, I decided to adopt a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005) that examines one long-standing campaign in depth.

The #FreetheNipple case is illuminating in a number of respects: it is the longest ongoing example of a collective action campaign targeting a social media platform. It also joined together a coalition of users with different interests, and involved techniques that bridged online and offline practices. These factors combined make it a useful instrumental example: though it is not broadly generalizable, it is nevertheless suggestive of a number of underlying dynamics that can further our understanding of how user practices engage and respond to network gatekeeping power. Moreover, this case is important on its own merits, as a persistent example drawn upon in subsequent collective action campaigns by users. In his study of the campaign, Tarleton Gillespie notes that the disagreement "powerfully shaped not only Facebook's policies, which did change in response, but also how Facebook came to understand the job of moderation, and how users slowly came to understand how Facebook moderates" (Gillespie, in press, p. 154).[1]

I selected a relatively well-known and well-documented case that enabled me to consider an assortment of broadly comparable collective action efforts by different groups. However, there are many others at smaller levels of scale that I excluded, a drawback to this study worth making note of given the salience of visibility in this example. As I find, groups that already have visibility through other platforms are those most likely to succeed in garnering a company response, even if the response of the company only relates to the circumstances of individuals. Those that lack visibility, do not have connections to existing advocacy organizations that can capture the company's attention, or are unable to attain visibility through other media platforms, are less successful in their efforts. Understanding this dynamic in further detail would require additional research examining cases of collective action at smaller scale. Though this was beyond the scope of this article, it is worth future study.

To examine the case study, I systematically collected documents produced by the users engaged in the campaign, by searching for texts posted on Facebook by the groups and searching news databases for blog posts and

[1] Gillespie's chronicle of this case, in the book *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions that Shape Social Media*, provides an insightful extended examination of the campaign over breastfeeding photos on social media platforms.

commentary. I also collected and analyzed public statements issued by Facebook. Wherever I encountered a new campaign, I ran additional searches for texts produced by that campaign. I complemented my analysis with contextual information provided in media reports describing events related to the campaign, both to situate my findings as well as to triangulate interpretations of how the campaign was received by the company and broader public. In my analysis of the texts, I used thematic content analysis, identifying patterns within and among the various groups that made up the campaign, attending particularly to the types of tactics adopted by users and when and where new tactics were introduced. In addition, I identified when and where statements were made, repeated and circulated by the companies to understand better how the companies conceptualized their relationships to users. Finally, I looked for moments of policy change or inaction in order to understand at which points during the campaign collective action resulted in substantive policy change.

3. Companies Acting on Social Media: Content Moderation

Content moderation is a central part of the way social media companies exert their influence over information flows. As Tarleton Gillespie puts it, what unites US-based social media platforms "is their central offer: to host and organize user content for public circulation, without having produced or commissioned it. They don't make the content, but they make important choices about that content: what they will distribute and to whom, how they will connect users and broker their interactions, and what they will refuse" (Gillespie, 2017). As a general rule, any intervention a company makes into what content is hosted on their platforms is executed at their own behest: most of the major global social networks are headquartered in the US and thus are not liable under US law for the content posted by users as they are protected by the intermediary liability provisions of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. However, most do actively monitor and take down some of the content posted by users. Even though they are not compelled to do so by law, they have economic incentives to take on this curatorial role by moderating material likely to make users feel uncomfortable, such as content that is obscene or violent (Klonick, 2017).

Many social media platforms outline a set of community guidelines that specify the types of content they prohibit on the platform in order to encourage users to police themselves. These community guidelines generally include, at a minimum, provisions against violent, graphic or threatening content, obscenity and nudity, content that violates trademarks or copyright, and fraudulent content or spam. Community guidelines tend to articulate these provisions to users at a relatively high level in order to allow a broad scope for interpretation by the company—particularly given differing cultural norms and expectations of users around content, as well as differences in legal obligations from country to country. However, content moderators enforce the community guidelines using a much more detailed and concrete set of internal rules, which operationalize and make explicit exactly how much blood, skin, or obscene language constitutes a violation. These operationalized guidelines are not made public, though at times versions of them have been leaked to the public by anonymous moderators (Roberts, 2014).

Community guidelines are not fixed documents; they change and evolve over time as the company's self-perception and the demands of users evolve. For example, while an early version of Facebook's Community Standards emphasized the company's protection of users' expression, in 2015 the company announced a substantive redraft of the Standards foregrounding users' safety and security—a move that was likely a response to growing criticism by users that social media platforms failed to protect them from harassment (Gillespie, 2015). Changes to the community guidelines thus can manifest the tensions a company is facing at any point in time over its content policies, and indicate how they navigate competing imperatives to keep as much content as possible online while removing offensive material.

The tension between these two imperatives is an ever-present reflection of social media companies' network gatekeeping power. Global social media companies increasingly face a challenge of scale: for instance, Facebook's content moderation system must now police the 300 million photos uploaded every day by Facebook's 1.86 billion monthly active users (Zephoria, 2017). Though the legal and policy teams—those who set the policies but do not directly enforce them—of many major US social media companies are heavily influenced by First Amendment norms that favor free expression (Ammori, 2014; Klonick, 2017), companies increasingly must seek out efficiencies in order to manage the flood of offensive and pornographic content posted by a fraction of its growing user base.

Historically, major platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have done so by relying heavily on user reporting of posts that violate content policies, rather than actively policing the content themselves—what James Grimmelmann (2015) has termed *reactive* as opposed to *proactive* moderation. Content that is flagged by a user is sent on to a team of content moderators, who are often freelancers working on contract with the company, who check the flagged material against a detailed set of internal guidelines designed to operationalize the broader content policies established by the company. Though information about content moderation processes is generally not made public, researchers such as Roberts (2014) point to a number of challenges with this approach: moderators are required to assess content quickly and without context, face burnout from watching the most graphic and violent of the Internet's content, and may have differing cultural interpretations

of what content violates the guidelines. These factors combined are likely to introduce a high degree of error in to the system, but because companies do not include figures on content moderation in their transparency reports, this is hard to validate.

Through content moderation policies, companies act on the user-generated media submitted to them: by setting policies, hiring teams of moderators, and, increasingly by introducing new technologies to automatically filter content. Users are demonstrably absent in this system, other than as laborers flagging content they deem objectionable. They also have relatively little recourse to seek accountability from the company within existing channels. Many social media platforms do offer some form of appeal to users when their content is taken down, but users often report they are unaware of this or are unsuccessful in seeing the content restored after appealing (Onlinecensorship.org, 2016). Moreover, users have few venues to influence the policies themselves. In a rare exception, Facebook engaged in a short-term experiment in 2009 during which users could collectively "vote" on potential policy changes, but scrapped the initiative when it failed to achieve sufficient engagement for the vote to move ahead (Stein, 2013).

Thus, many users have turned to collective action as a means to push back on the network gatekeeping power wielded by companies. Taking these efforts by users into account, a more complex picture of platforms emerges: one in which users respond creatively to these power discrepancies, seeking to subvert and resist them in order to reshape information flows in the directions they find more desirable.

4. Users Acting on Social Media: Collective Action

Collective action campaigns take as their starting point the notion that "groups of individuals with common interests usually attempt to further those common interests" (Olson, 1965), an idea that has been explored and challenged thoroughly by social scientists. Adopting a collective action approach to resist content moderation intuitively makes sense given the power dynamics described above. As individuals, social media users have relatively little capacity to push back on the content moderation policies and enforcement of companies. But they do share a common interest in doing so, both as a means to respond to the rate of error in enforcing policies and to the terms set by the policies themselves. Given companies' reliance on advertising to their user base, it further seems likely that acting collectively would be more likely to result in success in influencing companies than acting alone.

In this section, I examine one such effort in detail: the extended campaign to encourage Facebook to change its gendered policies on images of female nudity. For nearly a decade, collectives of Facebook users have engaged in various forms of demonstration around the company's community guidelines on nudity, which allow male toplessness but not female toplessness. These campaigns have taken up a variety of tactics, including petitions, use of hashtags, humorous memes, virtual sit-ins and in-person protests at Facebook's headquarters. It is characterized by a series of surges: phases in which content produced by the protesters went viral, spreading rapidly and joining together interested users, and phases in which the campaign loses attention. The most visible of these campaigns uses the hashtag #FreeTheNipple, which has become an umbrella term encapsulating a variety of efforts by different actors to encourage Facebook to change its policies. Though the Free the Nipple campaign was launched several years after the initial outcry by users, it became a powerful symbol under which many disparate groups of Facebook users united, and a means through which the collective history of the campaign can be preserved and accessed over time.

The first large-scale protest that I was able to identify began in 2007, and centered on the removal of images of mothers breastfeeding from their profile pages. This first initiative was led by Kelli Roman, who, after noticing a photo she posted to her profile of herself breastfeeding her new daughter had been deleted, wrote Facebook asking why the photo had been taken down. When she did not receive a response from the company, she started the Facebook group "Hey Facebook, Breastfeeding is Not Obscene", which became a place for other mothers to congregate who had experienced the same issue (Belkin, 2008). The Facebook group became an important node in the emergent network around the issue, linking together interested users and mobilizing them to spread and share information about the removal of content.

As the group grew in size, an offshoot, calling itself the Mothers International Lactation Campaign, decided to hold an online "nurse-in" protest on December 27, 2008, which garnered attention from mainstream media including the "Parenting" section of the *New York Times*. In what could be qualified as the campaign's first viral information event,[2] over 11,000 Facebook users changed their profile photos in protest to the image of a mother nursing a child. The success of the protest translated in to additional momentum for the campaign, including an online petition that over 82,000 users signed in support of (Sweney, 2008), as well as a real-life demonstration by a smaller group outside of Facebook's headquarters, at which members of the group sang, chanted and breastfed (Noguchi, 2008).

Despite the substantial public attention the campaign received, Facebook refused to budge. In statements to the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, and other media outlets, Facebook spokesman Barry Schnitt gave a statement saying "Breastfeeding is a natural and beautiful act and we're very glad to know that it is so important to some mothers to share this experience with oth-

[2] In Nahon & Hemsley's (2013) description, a *viral information* event "creates a temporally bound, self-organized interest network in which membership is based on an interest in the information content or in belonging to the interest network of others" (p. 34).

ers on Facebook" (Belkin, 2008), but that "photos containing a fully exposed breast, as defined by showing the nipple or areola, do violate those terms (on obscene, pornographic or sexually explicit material) and may be removed. The photos we act upon are almost exclusively brought to our attention by other users who complain" (Sweney, 2008). Schnitt's statement reflects both Facebook's values: "breastfeeding is a natural and beautiful act", and "we are glad to know it is important to some mothers to share it", as well as its operationalized principles: "fully exposed breasts, defined by showing the nipple, violate the terms of service". Moreover, he is drawing implicit boundaries around the "some" mothers who want to share their experiences on Facebook and the "other users" who complain about these images. By suggesting there is a tension between two constituencies, Facebook is placing itself in the position of a neutral arbiter, enforcing the operationalized rules that will not change. Thus, while the first round of the campaign was successful in achieving visibility for the issue, it did not result in a substantive change to policy.

The Facebook group steadily grew, as did offshoot groups oriented around short-term campaigns and expressions of solidarity with members whose content had been taken down. A few years later, it began to forge ties with other communities and their campaigns, such as one oriented around Facebook's removal of images of young breast cancer survivors that prominently featured their mastectomy scars from the page of the breast cancer awareness group, SCAR Project. After the photos were taken down, cancer survivor Scorchy Barrington began a Change.org petition cataloguing the experiences of a number of survivors whose photos were taken down. Citing Facebook's statement on breastfeeding, she asked "So, why is breast cancer considered a violation? Women fighting breast cancer are also beautiful, and I can't think of a more important experience to share with others than one that raises awareness of the disease and helps other women who are facing treatment" (Barrington, 2013).

After receiving over 21,000 signatures, Facebook responded with a statement similar to the one on breastfeeding: "We agree that undergoing a mastectomy is a life-changing experience and that sharing photos can help raise awareness about breast cancer and support the men and women facing a diagnosis, undergoing treatment, or living with the scars of cancer. The vast majority of these kinds of photos are compliant with our policies" (Goldhill, 2013). Here, Facebook signaled rhetorically that there was not a problem with the *category* of images—in the "vast majority" of instances these photos do not violate the policies, there were problems with *individual photos*, which were exceptions to this general rule. They again emphasized the underlying value of sharing, while leaving the underlying policy intact.

During roughly the same period, a new group of protesters joined the campaign under the moniker #FreeTheNipple. Lina Esco first started the campaign in 2012 as part of an effort to combat public toplessness laws in New York City that enact different standards for men and women (Esco, 2013). Esco filmed a documentary in which she runs topless through Times Square, and posted a teaser trailer on Facebook. The social media platform suspended Esco's profile in December 2013 for violating Facebook's community guidelines, sparking Esco's outrage—and activating her network.

Several well-known celebrities, including Miley Cyrus, Lena Dunham, Chelsea Handler, Rihanna, and Chrissy Teigen, rallied behind Esco's cause, posting photos of themselves exposing their bare chests or wearing t-shirts in support of the documentary (Esco, 2014). Others posted humorous memes critical of the policy, such as Cyrus photoshopping her head on to the image of a naked Barbie doll (Tejada, 2014), or Handler posting a photo of herself parodying the famous image of Russian President Vladimir Putin riding horseback without a shirt on (Marcotte, 2014). The involvement of celebrities boosted attention to the cause, again leading to a surge in user protests and leading to coverage from media outlets, several of which published articles explicitly condemning Facebook's policy.

The campaign also found an intersection with similar efforts by Women, Action and the Media, the Everyday Sexism Project, and author/activist Soraya Chemaly, who were already working on a campaign against gender-based violence on social media. As Chemaly put it later, "of equal importance to gender-based hate was the issue of the *context* in which content passes moderation. As a reflection of the world's culture, Facebook continues to be a place in which depictions of women as sexually objectified…or debased is broadly allowable, but others, in which women represent their own bodies…is largely not" (Chemaly, 2014). They collected 60,000 tweets and 5,000 emails from users about the issue, during which 15 advertisers said they would leave the platform (Women, Action & the Media, 2013). Again, despite attaining greater visibility for the cause, the campaign was unsuccessful in forcing a change to the policy.

The issue remained in the public eye, though sporadically, in the following weeks and months, receiving media coverage from time to time when a celebrity or public figure had their image taken down for violating the policy. Typical of this phase was an incident caused when Facebook's subsidiary company, Instagram, briefly disabled the singer Rihanna's account several times for posting images that featured nudity from a cover shoot with the French magazine *Lui*. Given Rihanna's popularity, there was an immediate outcry over the suspension and a representative from Instagram quickly responded, restoring the account and saying that its deletion was due to a technical glitch: "This account was mistakenly caught in one of our automated systems and very briefly disabled. We apologize for any inconvenience" (Smith, 2014). Rihanna responded by posting a fan drawing of her topless cover, mocking Instagram for the takedown (Muhammad, 2014).

Shortly afterward, Heather Bays, a maternity photographer, had her Instagram account shut down after receiving a negative comment on a photo of her breastfeeding her daughter. Unlike Rihanna, Bays initially lacked the public platform to attract attention from the company to her case. Her account was only reinstated after she used other social media accounts to draw attention to the issue (Corregan, 2014). Scout Willis also had her account deleted over what Instagram called "instances of abuse", for posting a photo of herself in a sheer top and a photo of a jacket that featured an image of two of her close friends topless. In protest, Willis walked topless in public through New York City and wrote a blog about her protest on the website XOJane (Willis, 2014).

In June 2014, Soraya Chemaly reported that Facebook had quietly made a change to its community guidelines, allowing exceptions for breastfeeding mothers (Chemaly, 2014), as well as for mastectomy scarring. In the new guidelines the company responded to the criticism, "our policies can sometimes be more blunt than we would like and restrict content shared for legitimate purposes. We are always working to get better at evaluating this content and enforcing our standards" (Facebook, 2014).

This only partially addressed the protesters' grievances, leading to a new wave of creative responses by social media users that sought to push the boundaries of the policy. Electronic Frontier Foundation Director of International Freedom of Expression Jillian York called the policy "the new fig leaf, a new standard on the corporate Internet" (Pizzi, 2015), a theme users picked up on as they turned to humor and subversion of the process of content moderation in additional more traditional protest tactics. For example, after an image in which she appeared topless at a breast cancer fundraising art event was taken down from Instagram, the artist Micol Hebron circulated a template she designed for users to cover images of female nipples with a man's (see Figure 1). The artists Our Lady J and La Sera shared her post, which

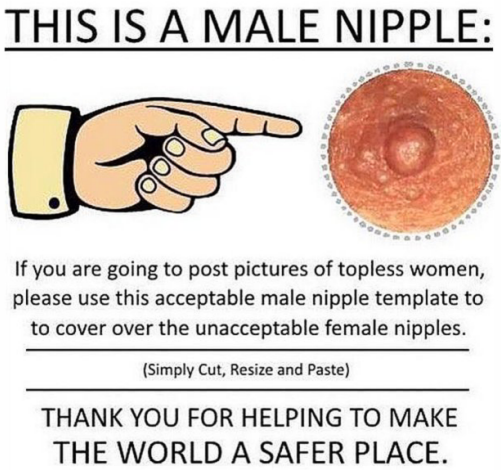

Figure 1. Image created by the artist Micol Hebron to critique Instagram's nudity policy. Source: MicolHebron.com

quickly went viral after it was shared by the comedian Sarah Silverman and celebrity writer Perez Hilton. Others put the template to creative use and shared it over Facebook and Instagram, subverting the moderation process by taking the parts of the image that would violate the policy out of their context (Ferrier, 2015).

As Hebron described it, "With the digital pasty, I was offering a satirical response to the double standards of Instagram's sexist and senseless "community guidelines". I was taking their guidelines VERY literally in an effort to point out how absurd their restrictions were (not to mention the fact that in censoring female nipples but not male nipples, Instagram was also inadvertently presuming to know people's gender simply by looking at a picture of them—which is also offensive, and absurd). I advocate for all bodies to be treated equally, and for all people to have autonomy over their bodies, their gender, the image of their bodies, and how their bodies are treated in public space" (M. Hebron, personal communication, August 21, 2017).

Celebrities also played a role in subverting the policy: when a photo of the model Chrissy Teigen was taken down, she played humorously on the company's exception for nudity in art, reposting a previously banned image of herself with a filter on it that made it appear like an oil painting, and again as a pencil sketch (Noman, 2015). Male actor Matt McGorry turned the protest on its head, photoshopping a topless image of himself with cut and pasted images of Miley Cyrus' and Teigen's nipples from the photos they had taken down (Plank, 2015). Despite continued attention, Facebook has not made any further changes to its rules on toplessness.

4.1. Discussion

The extended campaign over Facebook's policies provides a number of lessons in how users engage in collective action on social media platforms. First, it demonstrates the remarkable creativity of online protesters. They adopted a wide range of tactics, from virtual sit-ins, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, protests in physical space, media coverage, hashtagging and satirical art to sustain attention to the cause. It illustrates how a diverse coalition of campaigners can form around a single issue: mothers, breast cancer survivors, celebrities, activists for gender equality and artists all joined together over the course of campaign in protest. They did so not because of prior institutional structures, but as a result of a groundswell of protests arising from multiple corners of the internet, which found common cause in several viral information events and channeled around the hashtag #FreeTheNipple. The broad-based coalition may have been one reason why the campaign has been able to sustain itself over such a long period of time, and is something that subsequent collective action campaigns such as the Nameless Coalition have sought to recreate.

The ultimate change to the policy came quietly after years of protest, making it difficult to ascertain which,

if any, of these tactics influenced the campaign's partial success. In general, Facebook tended to emphasize continuity over change in its discussion of its policies; emphasizing how the protestors' objections worked within the broad framework of its nudity policy rather than presenting them as a radically different approach. The creative approaches of protesters worked at cross-purposes with this, using virality to leverage the attention economy of social media platforms and rally newcomers behind the protest. These efforts were most successful when they leveraged humor and novelty, or when they successfully reached someone with broad influence, such as celebrities like Silverman and Cyrus or activists like Esco. Though viral information events would have a short-term impact on the visibility of the campaign, their long-term impact contributed to the persistence of the interest network around the issue.

Despite this, the change to the policy ultimately had narrow benefits for only two of the coalitions involved (breastfeeding mothers and breast cancer survivors), even though all the campaigners based their arguments on the issue of gender discrimination, which remained unaddressed in the new guidelines. Thus, while the campaign was successful in building a network, it was unsuccessful in translating its network capacity in to the kind of pressure needed to force a company policy change.

The case did, however, provide insight in to how Facebook responds to user complaints, suggesting that network gatekeeping salience (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) is a relatively good model for assessing which kinds of collective action efforts are most likely to move the needle with the company in addressing individual complaints. The network gatekeeping salience typology suggests that if users have any of four key attributes (political power, information production ability, relationship with the gatekeeper, or alternative choices), they are more likely to have greater salience in the network.

In this example, salience appeared to take the form of visibility: users who were highly visible, such as Rihanna, held a greater amount of political power relative to the platform and were able to get their accounts restored (despite a clear violation) without even asking for it. Celebrities who were less visible, like Willis, were punished for violating the policy in an explicit act of protest. Some non-celebrity users were able to get their accounts restored by leveraging alternative attributes of network gatekeeping salience to increase their visibility, as did Bays when she engaged in a concentrated campaign of information production, leveraging her accounts on other social media platforms to raise attention to her cause. This demonstrates the value to users of leveraging the principles of virality in order to seek redress: even where the underlying policy has not changed, its application to users may be inconsistently applied depending on the amount of attention they are able to garner behind their cause.

This also suggests that collective action is particularly important to users who do not, on their own, have much visibility—the very same users who benefit most from the additional channel that social media platforms like Facebook provide them. So even if a campaign is unsuccessful in pressuring a company to change its content policies, there may be ancillary benefits to users who take part in coalitions, work to garner media attention and draw visibility to an issue.

5. Conclusion

The network gatekeeping power of companies is conventionally thought of as the ability to facilitate information flows and bridge networks. This is a power that companies like Facebook have substantively amassed through ranking, channeling, promoting content, and, at times, censoring and deleting it (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). At the other side of Nahon and Hemsley's equation is the formation of user-driven interest networks that form around particular issues, which can drive attention to content from the bottom-up.

Often, we think of these networks using terms of *connectivity*—their capacity to make connections with one another and circulate content through networks. As Jose van Dijck (2013) notes, connectivity is a valuable resource to companies—thus situating the power of individual users in their ability to forge networks that can be monetized by companies risks staking the organization of social exchange on neoliberal economic principles. But for the users examined in this study, the operating principle for acting on social media companies' network gatekeeping power may have been *visibility*, not connectivity. The mere fact of writing letters, spreading images, signing petitions and engaging in protests did not result in a change to company policies. And in fact, some of the women involved in the protests were already part of communities and networks on related issues before taking part in the campaign against Facebook (Gillespie, in press). Instead, influencing the visibility of an issue was a key operating force that shaped how the company responded to the demands of users.

This dynamic is problematic in different ways, most notably in that it inherently benefits those who already have a platform. But it also is suggestive of the kinds of tactics users seeking to influence social media content policies might adopt: self-publishing, building coalitions, and working across media platforms to create viral information events as a means to raise the visibility of a cause. In so doing, they push back directly on the power of platforms to define the content we see.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Article

(De)Centralization of the Global Informational Ecosystem

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Abstract
Centralization and decentralization are key concepts in debates that focus on the (anti)democratic character of digital societies. Centralization is understood as the control over communication and data flows, and decentralization as giving it (back) to users. Communication and media research focuses on centralization put forward by dominant digital media platforms, such as Facebook and Google, and governments. Decentralization is investigated regarding its potential in civil society, i.e., hacktivism, (encryption) technologies, and grass-root technology movements. As content-based media companies increasingly engage with technology, they move into the focus of critical media studies. Moreover, as formerly nationally oriented companies now compete with global media platforms, they share several interests with civil society decentralization agents. Based on 26 qualitative interviews with leading media managers, we investigate (de)centralization strategies applied by content-oriented media companies. Theoretically, this perspective on media companies as agents of (de)centralization expands (de)centralization research beyond traditional democratic stakeholders by considering economic actors within the "global informational ecosystem" (Birkinbine, Gómez, & Wasko, 2017). We provide a three-dimensional framework to empirically investigate (de)centralization. From critical media studies, we borrow the (de)centralization of data and infrastructures, from media business research, the (de)centralization of content distribution.

Keywords
business models; centralization; content-oriented media companies; decentralization; digital media platforms; distribution; Facebook; Google; technology infrastructures

Issue
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1. Introduction

The digital era is having painful consequences for media companies such as publishers or broadcasters whose core business is providing content. "It hurts", says one of the contributors to the study presented in this paper [3]. The interviewee, CEO of an Austrian newspaper-publishing house, refers to the radical, transformative process to which content-oriented media companies are exposed. Their traditional subscription- and advertising-based business models, oriented toward national media systems, are expiring. An important reason is that media companies such as Facebook or Google, whose business models focus on technologies and technology infrastructure and whose platforms cut across national regulations, are winning market shares, especially in advertising. Media business and journalism studies have identified the various stages in trial-and-error attempts by content-based media companies to adapt or reinvent content monetization in a digital age. The initial idea to provide free content on websites and sell advertising space has failed (Bakker, 2008). Paid content, a then-emerging model, was accepted by users only in exceptional cases (Herbert & Thurman, 2007).

At the present time, we can identify three major strategies for dealing with the dominance of digital plat-

forms in media markets. One is to regard content as the carrier of product promotion with, for instance, native advertising playing a major role (Matteo & Dal Zotto, 2015). This strategy aims to solve, for instance, the problem of increased ad blocker usage. In a second strategy, research observes a qualitative shift toward using and designing infrastructures. Companies increasingly engage in building their own databases and technological interfaces, e.g. The Intercept (Mullin, 2015). Finally, media companies increasingly engage in national and transnational lobbyism in order to support political efforts to regain control of data and distribution (e.g. Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Contemporary strategies, thus, clearly do reach beyond the level of content creation, as they refer equally to the design, shape, and development of (media) technologies and technology infrastructures.

Content-based media companies, therefore, qualify as a subject of research when regarding agents that act on media (Kubitschko, 2017). Acting *on* media denotes actively aiming at shaping technology (infrastructures) that is crucial for everyday communication by contributing to technology design or discourse. Thus far, critical media research as well as research in the area of media practice has placed a focus on agents that belong to the citizenry, such as civic hacking as lobbyism (Coleman, 2011; Kubitschko, 2015) or grass-root technology movements (Milan & Hintz, 2013), or on "digital media giants" (Birkinbine et al., 2017), on the other hand. With its focus on content-based media companies, this article ventures into another thus far overlooked group of agents. That is, our investigation departs from the insight that these companies, challenged by considerable technological change as well as the increasing market power of influential digital platforms such as Facebook and Google, have every interest in engaging in shaping technology and technology infrastructures. Yet though, they dispose of considerable influence and eventually the potential and pressure to shape technology and infrastructures. Moreover, as their economic survival might depend on it, it is worth to consider their efforts to act on media.

Our argumentative starting point is that content-based media companies are in a competitive struggle with large digital platforms and that it is worth investigating their business strategies in relation to technology and technology infrastructures. A helpful distinction for grasping this relationship is that of centralization and decentralization, both used in critical media research. Centralization refers to the concentration of control over technology and technology infrastructures in the hands of dominant media platforms or governments (Dencik, Hintz, & Carey, 2017; Helmond, 2015; Mathew, 2016), while decentralization denotes giving control of data (back) to citizens. In the following, we will explore this analytical perspective and aim to describe content-based media companies as agents of decentralization or centralization. To this end, we combine perspectives from critical media studies with insights from media business and management. Both contribute to the development of a three-dimensional framework for assessing (de)centralization patterns in media-company business strategies, which is applied to data from a research project on the cross-border activities of media companies. In particular, we refer to qualitative interviews with 26 leading managers from Europe- and US-based media companies whose core business is content in contrast to technology.

2. (De)Centralization: A Techno-Economic Framework

In communication and media studies, the issue of decentralization has gained increasing importance against the backdrop of contemporary "surveillance societies" (Lyon, 2011), a term coined by sociologist David Lyon for societies characterized as monitoring any kind of everyday communicative activity. The concept is a key anchor for a body of communication and media research that critically discusses control over data and data flows in digital societies (Hintz, 2014). Herein, control over data is a key resource for political and economic power. While centralization refers to the control over data by governments or digital media platforms like Google or Facebook, decentralization denotes giving that control to users, or rather citizens. Thus, centralization by commercialized digital platforms, in cooperation with governments, is described as the status quo, whereas decentralization refers to civic stakeholders' attempts to acquire control over data.

Both concepts scrutinize the commodification of everyday communication. Researchers critically assess individual user control of data (e.g., via encryption) in contrast to more democratic and citizen-based models of data sharing (Fuchs, 2017, p. 437; Gürses, 2014). Following Agre, centrality is given when digital infrastructures are "administered by a centralized authority…and if…global coordination is required to change them" (Agre, 2003, p. 40). Digital media platforms are unanimously criticized for their practice of centralizing communication and data flows and their lack of respect regarding privacy (Helmond, 2015; Hintz, 2014, p. 360; Kubitschko, 2015, p. 78; Milan, 2015, p. 3) while, at the same time, creating a discourse of decentralized empowering of platform technologies (Gillespie, 2010). Facebook, for instance, is described as "the most subtle, cheapest, and best surveillance technology available" (Nadir, 2012). From a political economy perspective, yet pointing to a similar argument, Christian Fuchs (2017) critically analyses Facebook's practices of turning user access into a commodity by centralizing data analysis. Rieder and Sire (2014, p. 208) stress how Google has overcome "the limits which physical space imposes on the centralization of information services".

Decentralization, in contrast, is tied to the idea of a more democratic Internet. This is the case when its applications "arise in a locality and propagate throughout the population" (Agre, 2003, p. 40). Decentralization is defined as giving control of data and technology to citi-

zens. In the literature we find only minor disagreement on its value, if at all it concerns the necessary degree of decentralization. While some regard decentrality as a key feature of the early Internet representing an ideal digital-infrastructure design (Hintz, 2014, p. 352), others contend that the decentralized Internet is a "myth" (Mathew, 2016). Based on a review of the history of the Internet, Mathew elucidates that it was and always will be hierarchically organized. His argument is that a certain degree of centralization is necessary to ensure political control over digital infrastructures. Agre's earlier considerations sound similar. He highlights that the Internet has "a reputation as a model of decentralization", although "its institutions and architecture nonetheless have many centralized aspects" (Agre, 2003, p. 40).

Three groups of stakeholders are studied as agents of decentralization. The first group comprises civil society lobbyists who inform the public, as well as governments, regarding the dominant role of digital media players by means of hacking and informing (Coleman, 2011). A prominent example is the Chaos Computer Club (Kubitschko, 2015). A second group comprises encryption-technology activists, implying the structural analysis of encryption technology. Here, the focus is on providing secure, i.e., anonymous, spaces of communication to technology users (Gürses, 2014). A third group can be characterized as system-opposing civil society actors, creating alternative digital infrastructures and "adopting a tactical repertoire of circumvention" (Hintz, 2014, p. 353), who bypass generally applied systems by developing alternative communication platforms that are not linked to the dominant digital infrastructure (Milan & Hintz, 2013). This, by and large, demonstrates that (de)centralization in critical media studies is either focusing on increasing control of data flows by (commodified) surveillance organizations or by empowered, technology-savvy citizens. While the former exert control over massive sets of data, the latter represent an elite with limited influence on a large scale.

As these agents engage in shaping and debating technologies and technology infrastructures, they act *on* media. We argue that it is worth investigating content-based media companies by applying the same perspective. Acting on media "entails the direct engagement with technical systems and devices as well as the articulation of viewpoints, interests, experiences and viewpoints" (Kubitschko, 2017, p. 5) that are related. In contrast, acting *with* media denotes the use or impact of media. Content-based media companies are defined as companies whose business model is based on the production and trade of text or audio-visual content. We have in mind newspaper, book, and special-interest outlet publishers as well as TV and movie content producers and traders. Within these companies, technology plays a subordinate yet growing role in supporting the provision of content and increasing added value. In contrast, technology-based companies regard platforms, data collection and analysis, and the development of technological solutions as their core business. Content is predominantly provided by users, which might as well be content-based media companies.

The distinction between content- and technology-based media companies provides a useful analytical map for characterizing media companies' business strategies whose core business is content and who engage increasingly with technologies and technological infrastructures. Following critical media research, we regard Facebook and Google as technology-based companies that clearly centralize media markets (Helmond, 2015; Mathew, 2016). That is not to say that technology-based companies generally centralize the global informational ecosystem. Yet Facebook and Google represent key reference platforms for the identification of centralization among content-based media companies. While, for a long time, media companies seemed to merely lag behind digital development, bemoaning the increasing market power of digital platforms, they are now continually developing new business models. With reference to centralization, we want to know whether these adapt to or copy Facebook's and Google's business models and thus tend to support their influential market position. The following quote illustrates that there is an inevitable and subordinate dependence on digital platforms:

> News organizations are increasingly dependent on Google and a handful of other powerful tech firms for the tools and platforms needed to reach their audience. They also are increasingly vulnerable to the changes the tech firms are introducing. The shift to mobile, for example, is making news an ever-more expensive arena in which to operate, but it is not yet producing the kind of new revenues to back up news organizations that will allow them to support those expenses. (Sasseen, Olmstead, & Mitchell, 2013)

Despite these tendencies to centralize, business relations between content-based media companies and digital platforms are more complex. By the same token, the above quote could be read in the sense that content-based media companies are likely to be agents of decentralization. Media business researchers point out that digital media platforms dominate and control the advertising market by increasing user access and scope. While digitization forces them to provide their content online, they struggle for new ways to monetize it. Earlier business models based on subscription and advertising that flanks coverage or subscription, are increasingly called into question, not least by these digital platforms. From a decentralization perspective, one could argue that content-based media companies share a critical perspective on digital media platforms. Their joint intent must be to limit Facebook's, Google's, and other platforms' rigorous access to users and data in order to regain control of their core businesses.

Taking into account that content-based media companies most likely perform as both centralization

and decentralization agents, we suggest considering (de)centralization with regard to three dimensions; that is, the normative implications of both notions are pushed to the background. A *first dimension* concerns *control over data and data gathering*. Critical media studies demonstrate that understanding who controls data flows is paramount for investigating centralization and decentralization in critical digital society and technology studies (see also Fuchs, 2017). As content-based media companies will hardly intend to give control of data to users, we must rather imply that the question arises of who can exert control over user access and data in order to commodify them. This perspective regards both technology- and content-based media companies as competitors within a global informational ecosphere (Birkinbine et al., 2017), with the former in a central position and the latter, to a greater or lesser extent, located at the periphery. It also pays tribute to the fact that digital media platforms can increasingly be regarded as "content workers", as they exert a gatekeeper function by filtering content published on their platform. Recently, we have seen many examples showing that Facebook and Google edit and filter content provided on their platforms (Hintz, 2014).

Critical media researchers might argue that capitalist agents will not contribute to sustainable democratic solutions to surveillance (Fuchs, 2017, p. 442). Equally, scholars investigating media diversity contend that highly competitive deregulated media markets will not result in a diversified media market (Jakubowicz, 2013). For instance, Just (2009, p. 111) holds that this might lead to an increase of niche market products but not cover all societal groups that would be considered in a politically regulated context. We do share these critical concerns but not their radical implications. Mathew argues that the idea of a decentralized Internet is a myth, as even at the beginning there were centralized structures to control communication flow (Mathew, 2016). Similarly, current models of Internet governance design multi-stakeholder processes, including both civil and economic actors (Hofmann, Katzenbach, & Gollatz, 2014), "a complex ecology of interdependent structures" with "a vast array of formal and informal mechanisms working across a multiplicity of sites" (Hintz, 2014, p. 351). Within these centralized and decentralized structures, Facebook and Google indeed play a "central" role. As media environments are constantly deregulated and digital media platforms by and large circumvent political regulation, we thus investigate the potential of media companies to counterbalance centralized digital media platforms' data collection regarding regional or local data centres by as many different agents as possible.

Building on this perspective, we introduce additional dimensions of (de)centralization. With reference to the research of McKelvey (2011) or, more recently, Helmond (2015), which deepens our perspective on data collection, we introduce a *second dimension of (de)centralization*. These authors place a focus on data accumulation by global digital-technology companies while also considering their *business models regarding technological infrastructures* as a moment of centralization. Helmond, in particular, has underlined the close relationship between building "decentralizing platform features" and "recentralizing platform-ready data" (Helmond, 2015, p. 8). That is, business models are related to technological infrastructures. Digital media companies build platforms that decentralize in the web in order to realize accessibility for as many users as possible. Following Gillespie (2010, p. 352), using the platform notion allows digital media platforms to create a discourse of equal access while exercising extensive economies of scale. Platform is defined as "a 'raised level surface' designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 350).

The technological infrastructure is the companies' key resource. This infrastructure is "programmable", which describes the potential for customization by external developers and its reuse by various business models and applications (Andreessen, 2007). The platform's key technologies are application-programming interfaces (APIs), which are structures on which to build software applications. At the same time, they allow for the exchange of content and data created across these applications. The platform, on the one hand, provides applications for users that can look very different and can vary across economic and cultural contexts; yet on the other hand, its technological foundation is a single software infrastructure built with the aim of creating a large database.

Translated to a market perspective, Facebook, for instance, is "an example of a multi-sided platform that connects users, advertisers, and third-party developers and experiences network effects where value increases for all parties as more people use it" (Helmond, 2015, p. 2). Facebook is an outstanding example of this specific interplay of "decentralizing platform features and recentralizing platform-ready data" (Helmond, 2015, p. 8) for commodification. Facebook offers an interface that invites new software applications and integrates existing ones. Not least, it increases benefits for users (i.e. networking), the more they use it for everyday communication. This, altogether, allows us to consider (de)centralization with regard to its infrastructural foundation. Hence, we will ask whether content-based media companies build applications that align with digital-media platform interfaces, eventually to profit from the platform's visibility among users, or concentrate on building their own or alternative technological frameworks.

Finally, we refer to a *third dimension* of (de)centralization that is rooted in the media-business literature and centres on *content distribution*. Traditionally, media production has been much less concentrated than media distribution. Depending on the media technology in question, concentration on the distribution level is higher (fewer film distributors than film producers) or even reaches a natural monopoly, for instance, in the case of

cable television or, in some countries, magazine distribution to news stalls (May, 2012).[1] Disadvantages of this centralization are regularly addressed by imposing must-carry rules or indiscriminate access to distribution (see Bernstein, 1986; Woldt, 2002). Furthermore, concentration or centralization in one media-distribution technology can be counterbalanced with and within other media technologies.

The digitization of media distribution changes the situation. The Internet is content- and format-agnostic and thus can more or less replace and incorporate all other media distribution technologies. Therefore, a digital platform that centralizes content and communication is much more all encompassing on an overall scale than centralized platforms in other media distribution technologies have been. In some sense, the discussion about net neutrality (Economides, 2008) mirrors access regulation in traditional media-distribution technologies. However, centralization does not happen only on the level of the broadband connection but also on the level of digital-media platforms such as Facebook or Google. Thus, even a non-discriminatory network does not hamper centralization. Strong network effects on such platforms create winner-take-all markets (Noe & Parker, 2005), but they do not justify a natural monopoly. Media companies as producers would still benefit from a multitude of distribution options.

For legacy media organizations, these universal digital-distribution platforms are a boon and a bane at the same time. Using the APIs offered by the platforms, they can reach large audiences without creating their own infrastructure. However, their grip on this enlarged reach is rather limited. The platforms will not share all the information they have on users, while they will secure a large part of the potential advertising revenue. With Facebook's instant articles or Google's accelerated mobile pages, the two companies offer to host content and allow for superior digital distribution. This renders media companies dependent and creates new barriers to market entry. Economies of scale in the analogue world meant that the price of a printing press posed a market-entry barrier in the newspaper business (Picard, 2015). Economies of scale in the digital world mean centralization on digital media distribution platforms poses barriers to entry into the digital media market.

Having said this, we understand that an ongoing centralization of the global informational ecosphere occurs if the content-based media companies arrange their business models with a view toward the dominant digital-media platforms. Decentralization, in contrast, refers to alternative or owned databases, infrastructures, and distribution channels. Regarding these three dimensions, we will investigate business strategies as pursued by content-oriented media companies with regard to the three dimensions described earlier (data, platforms, and distribution). Overall, the contribution of this approach is to investigate whether content-oriented media companies must be regarded as agents of centralization or decentralization of the global informational ecosphere.

3. Research Questions and Methods

The above-introduced framework suggests a way to approach media companies as agents of (de)centralization. Each of the three dimensions in the framework addresses a specific research question. With respect to data, we ask whether and to what extent media companies adapt to platform types of data collection to design their products. Then, we are interested in adaption to digital platform interfaces or, in contrast, the creation of alternative or independent infrastructures. Finally, we want to find out more about the uses of distribution channels. Herein, decentralization refers to independence from centralization for arranging business models with a view toward Facebook, Google, and the like.

These research questions will be explored based on a study of the cross-border activities of media companies (additional information about the research project can be found in the acknowledgements). The issue of centralization or decentralization is, thus, not addressed directly. This is related to limitation and surplus at the same time. Many questions that could have been asked to further elucidate a company's relationships with technology (infrastructures) remained unasked. Thus, while the empirical study presented in this article is an academic side product, it points out that questions regarding the relationship with digital platforms and technology infrastructures are highly relevant to top-tier media managers, as they emerge without being asked directly.

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Patton, 2015) with 26 leading media managers, responsible mostly for their respective company's engagement across borders, from content-based media companies based in Austria, Belgium, Germany, the UK, the US, the Netherlands, and Switzerland to address these (project-related) questions (for a list of all interviewees, please see the Annex). The interviews were conducted predominantly in face-to-face situations, seven via Skype, and one by telephone. The sampled companies represent a large variety in terms of content (newspaper publishing, news agencies, book publishing, TV/movie). Despite this diversity, all of the interviewees reflected on their companies' relationships with global digital platforms. We did not aim to cover the companies in terms of trade volume but rather aimed for a variety of cross-border activities.

4. Content-Based Media Companies as Agents of (De)Centralization

Above, we have demonstrated that the rise of Facebook, Google, and the like poses a considerable challenge for content-based media companies, as the former dominate advertising markets, push technological inno-

[1] For a critic on the theory of natural monopolies in media distribution, see DiLorenzo (1996).

vation, and control data and, to some extent, distribution. The interviews underline how technology companies have shaped the media market considerably since the 2000s. In a typical statement, Piet Vroman, CFO of the Belgian newspaper company DePersgroep, highlights how Google and Facebook have pushed the economies of scale: "Google entered, and Facebook entered, and advertising revenues dropped heavily. And we learned more and more, which was not that important in the 1990s, until by 2005, that scale became ever more important" [23]. Other interviewees put it similarly. In the words of Axel Springer International's then-president Ralph Büchi, "in this new digital allocations battle with the big…platforms…we will have no chance if there is no prevention against their market power being used to our clear disadvantage" [5]. These two quotes illustrate that leading content-based company managers see the clear need to act. They express concerns regarding nothing less than their economic survival. In this difficult situation, the interviewees consider their engagement with technology (infrastructures) as well as their relationships with centralized digital platforms. Approaches to data, formats, and distribution that will be discussed in greater detail in the following, must be understood against this background.

4.1. Data

Access to data is a key resource for content-based media companies in order to able to control the alignment between products and consumers' needs. Yet control over data remains largely with the digital media platforms. In the interviews, we identify three general strategies to deal with this problem; none aims at sharing data with global media platforms, yet all three clearly follow comparable patterns. The *first strategy* refers to *digital platforms as a role model*. That is, media companies contend the need to adapt their business models to data-collection strategies applied by Facebook, Google, and the like. This is illustrated in the following quote by Time Warner's senior vice president:

> We need to develop our data capabilities to better understand consumer needs…moving away from ratings, which is really an outdated model, in a data-centric world, so that we can…show advertisers not only that they're reaching eight million women in the ages of 18 to 34, but also that you're reaching car buyers who went to the concessionary the following day. So we really have to evolve the model because that's what our competition is doing. [19]

Heading in the same direction, the chief financial officer of the Belgium newspaper-publishing house DePersgroep states that digital media companies are "miles ahead of us in terms of knowing your customer" [23]. DePersgroep initiated a project to generate valuable data access. Based on a cooperative venture with other Belgium-based media companies, the newspaper publisher tried to establish a central media ID that would provide a single access to a broad media portfolio. The intent of this platform was clearly to collect user data, yet it failed, not because of the politician responsible but, as the CFO underlines, because of one of the media companies.

A *second strategy* is to *create global databases in niche markets*. Often, this strategy builds on already-existing data or networks in traditional businesses. Managers considering this option explore issue-specific data that they retrieve from their particular areas of expertise. An illustrative example is Elsevier; the scientific publisher uses journal and expertise databases to provide analytical services to scientists (career and collaboration planning), universities (strengthening profile) or governments (funding). Mark Siebert, Director of Engagement Programs and Strategy, explicates that, very similar to the role-model strategies, Elsevier wishes to "learn from the people and their needs" [14], with a focus on cosmopolitan groups of scientists and universities. Then, learning from these customers means creating a platform that will play a key role in this field, at least for those who can afford it. A similar example is that of specialist magazine publisher Vogel. The media company uses contact networks and expertise from formerly printed advertisement-based newsletters to build issue-specific expert platforms and networks in very specific areas such as trading old-fashioned spare parts or specific machines for ceiling construction.

A *third strategy* for gaining control over data, finally, is to *create local data-product communities*. This strategy is applied by Tamedia, a Swiss publisher and commuter newspaper specialist. The Swiss paper *20 Minutes* combines a strategy of community creation, data collection, and newspaper production. Content is published throughout the day and favorite topics will appear in the printed evening edition. Tamedia's "strongest digital competitors are Facebook and Google….It is not realistic to compete with them" [9], says Managing Director Marcel Kohler. Yet equally, Tamedia belongs to the category of "social media" [9], as it provides a brand to engage people within the *20 Minutes* community, where readers communicate with the editors and with each other and provide content and pictures. And, as Marcel Kohler contends, "the vessel that keeps everything together is our app" [9]. Even though *20 Minutes* is a successful brand in Luxembourg, Denmark, and other countries, it is a national concept, as the respective *20 Minute* communities relate to national or local surroundings yet merge into one database via the media company Tamedia.

With the limited number of media-company representatives interviewed, these three strategies certainly represent only a small fraction of content-based media companies' strategies for retrieving control of data. Yet they illustrate that media companies have no access to data collected by Facebook and Google, nor do they explicitly contribute to digital platform data collection.

Rather, content-based media companies seek avenues of independent data gathering. For citizens, this is not necessarily good news, as they can expect a multiplicity of databases where their individual data is stored. Similarly, taking a global, informational-ecosphere perspective, we can contend that these and similar business strategies would generate a multiplicity of data centers. This would, from the perspective of the interviewees, at best include some European data compactions.

4.2. Infrastructure

We have argued that technology-based media companies provide programmable platforms. That is, they provide an interface to which external developers can link. Alternatively, digital media companies can acquire external applications and add them to their interface. Helmond has demonstrated that this programmability refers to platforms with centralized data collection and decentralized applications. While data centralization has already been discussed, in this section, we want to offer an idea of whether or not content-based media companies link to digital media platforms and, if so, how. In particular, we are interested in whether, in their everyday workflows, media companies adapt to dominant platforms or aim to establish other technological structures. The following illustrates that both apply. Media companies profit from applying existing technological solutions but equally consider the advantages of remaining independent.

Numerous content-based media companies clearly favor the application of technology-provided dominant media platforms. ITV Studios Managing Director Ella Umansky, for instance, contends that secure data transfer is crucial for selling TV content across the world: "If you have problems with delivery, the file is the wrong format or gets corrupted whilst it's being transferred, that kills the deal, and that could then kill the relationship" with the customer [15]. ITV studio, the biggest commercial television network in the UK, depends on technological solutions provided by an internationally applicable system for secure and direct transmission of content. Based on this secure transmission, the company makes money. CEO and Austrian newspaper publisher Kralinger reports that his company works with Google editing technology, as it offers tailored solutions for editing-specific requirements: "Alphabet (Google's parent company) by now offers very, very much technology, and during the last 12 to 18 months also their will to work with publishers in a constructive way has considerably increased" [2]. Beyond secure and well-aligned technologies, digital media platforms offer solutions for reducing costs within everyday business. Book publisher Diogenes managing director, for instance, refers to the fact that using digital technology solutions provided by dominant platforms can bring about financial savings yet calls for additional financial investment in the beginning [4].

At the same time, the interviewees provide numerous examples of *not* linking to programmable large digital platforms and express aspirations to do so in the near future. Kralinger, the Austrian newspaper publisher, while using Google technology in its everyday editing business, contends the need for European media companies to cooperate in order to advance Europe-based editing system technology networks. From his point of view, there is a clear increase in "consciousness that we need to build an independent market in Europe, which appeals against the big American companies" [2]. He reports supporting experiments with an open-source content-management system called Drupal. Similarly, news agency APA's CEO Clemens Pig puts forward that "technology is a protective shield against competitors" [3] and underlines the need to cooperate on a European scale.

Beyond that, we find two other compelling ways of not linking to dominant media platforms. One is to equally provide a platform that is a programmable interface. This is especially the case with companies that use their traditional content-based business to turn it into databases. Herein, the above-introduced example of Elsevier may be illustrative. Elsevier is part of the UK RELX group that, besides the scientific publisher, owns businesses such as financial services or an event agency. Elsevier is part of the RELX Group, a global provider of information and analytics for professionals and business customers across industries. Mark Siebert, leading Elsevier manager, explains that information and analytics help public administrations and scientists, among others, to build strategies or support career decisions [14]. In contrast, other larger media companies with a diverse product portfolio, such as Axel Springer or Thomson Reuters, tend to opt for a second opportunity. Interviewees from both companies contend that the investment in a coherent company-wide technological framework represents a high financial risk. Gonzalo Lissarrague, Thomson Reuter's president, Global Growth Organization, says that what is global is the professional network and the knowledge, but "we don't want to replicate or duplicate the technology in every country" [17].

Therefore, in regard to infrastructure, we find that content-based media companies' links with digital media platforms are highly diverse. While some companies measure the financial benefits of applying global platform technology, many others attempt to link to alternative infrastructures; that is, they do not follow a coherent technology development strategy. In this sense, we can hardly speak of content-driven media companies as agents of centralization. Only some express a "structural pressure" to adapt to centralized infrastructures. In contrast, we find numerous approaches for building their own platforms or comments on conscious decisions to not build a coherent technological infrastructure. Decentralization references are remarkably present on a discourse level.

4.3. Distribution

Finally, we are interested in the strategies media companies intend to apply regarding distribution. Drawing on media business literature, we have argued that centralized distribution as provided by Facebook and Google are a boon and a bane at the same time. Content-based media companies face the dilemma of choosing between reaching large audiences and losing control over data (and, thereby, advertising revenue). It is, therefore, no surprise that the business relationships of content-based media companies with digital media platforms are complex from a distribution perspective. In fact, as the following quote by Bernhard Burgener, CEO of the Highlight Communications Group exemplifies, the interviewees clearly regard Facebook and Google as exerting control over distribution: "For them [Silicon Valley elites], it was always the platform, the distribution, and the client….Once you have the customers and you have the distribution, you have the business. This is fundamental" [8].

The following illustrates that a majority of content-based media companies have accepted Facebook, Google, and the like as key distributors of media content. However, not only do media companies depend on the digital platforms; the platforms also depend on the content provided by the media companies. Motor Presse representative Volker Breid, for example, a special-interest publisher with a focus on cars and mobility, underlines how crucial it is to be present via Facebook, stating, "this is important to maintain relevance" [13]. He further explains that preparing content for distribution on Facebook has become an integral part of the everyday production process. Also Swiss book publisher Diogenes, who has taken more time to digitalize its product portfolio, is now available throughout the platforms, "because this is what the authors want" [4]. Also another large German multimedia company's strategy, preferring to stay anonymous regarding this aspect, aims at an adaptation to digital platform distribution, stating that the company maintains a stable business relationship with Google, Amazon, Facebook and the likes.

In this context, however, it is important to stress that the content-based media companies are fully aware of the advantage of "having the content" [4]. While visibility and reaching a large audience is not always profitable for a newspaper business, book publishers and TV producers can be in a far more comfortable position, which is even more comfortable in the event that the respective media company disposes of alternative distribution channels and can negotiate with digital media platforms. Movie and TV content producer Story House, for example, has just recently initiated a promising collaboration with YouTube. Still, there are many other ways to produce and sell content. The same holds true in the case of Bertelsmann. Amazon is an interesting partner from an economic point of view, but it is not the only option.

Overall, our take on distribution reveals, once again, a mixed picture. Many content-based media companies reconsider their business models by trying to benefit from collaboration with digital media platforms. The revenue appears more attractive when there are alternative distribution channels. At the same time, media companies are aware that digital media platforms cannot live on user-generated content alone, but that they must depend on professionally produced content as well. This insight increasingly strengthens the media companies' market power, yet always based on a relationship with digital media platforms.

5. Conclusion

This study contends that content-based media companies act on media. They engage with and define business strategies regarding technology (infrastructures). However, content-based media companies can neither be regarded as agents of decentralization nor centralization, especially when applying a critical and citizen-oriented perspective. The above insights have shown that content-based media companies contribute to and push centralization processes pursued by Facebook, Google, and the like. The above illustrates that, at first sight, content-based media companies tend not to directly contribute to the platforms' data collection. Simultaneously the centrality of digital technology and the analysis of big data for the development of further media content-related business is clearly underlined. Companies pursue centralization in two regards. Digital platform companies serve as role models for intra-organizational technological adaption processes as well as important channels for content distribution. Criticism regarding surveillance does not emerge. Even among those interviewees who feel committed to the idea of traditional journalism, such as Axel Springer's top-tier manager Ralph Büchi or Belgian Publisher DePersgroep's representative Piet Vroman, concepts as citizen (in contrast to consumer or user) are not mentioned. Yet, the criticism that the interviewed media managers direct toward the digital media platforms is rather that the latter have exclusive access to valuable data, resulting in a competitive advantage for content-based media companies.

Following this, discourse on decentralization is an issue for the interviewees. The widespread demand is that control over user data was distributed more equally across the media market. On a discursive level, technology-related business strategies as presented by the interviewees correspond to critical stands towards centralized digital media platforms. Not throughout the sample, yet quite visibly, interviewees suggest a cooperation of European media in order to build alternative technology infrastructure centers—both in terms of geographies of data collection and distribution. The content-based media companies' joining in decentralization discourse is particularly interesting because it expands an old debate in a global direction. It was not long ago that they themselves were the objects of criticism. Within national media systems, large content-driven media com-

panies were regularly criticized for their growth and impact on media markets. Another interesting aspect that sheds light on decentralization processes is the interdependency of both company types as the former deliver content to be used or traded on digital platforms.

Thus, this study shows that it is worth discussing (de)centralization from within a techno-economic perspective by looking at economic agents. It illustrates that, even though content-based media companies suffer from infrastructural disadvantages, they are not likely to be "swallowed" by digital media platforms. The analysis provides two arguments for that. First, we have shown that content-based media companies' links with digital platform interfaces are diverse, some niche market companies tend even to be independent. Especially in the TV business, some refer to the pressure to be visible on global platforms, while still relying on a variety of alternative networks that support their business models. Second, both companies and platforms depend on each other regarding distribution and content. While Facebook, Google or even Amazon, depend, to some extent, on the provision of contribution by media professionals, content-based media companies, can, especially when not relying exclusively on relationships with digital platforms, increase their revenue considerably.

Altogether, content-based media companies are both agents of decentralization discourses and agents of techno-economic regional centralization within the (Western) informational ecosphere. Yet this study could give only preliminary insights into media companies as agents of (de)centralization as the issue emerged in the course of the study (information on the research project provided after peer review). A further promising avenue of investigation might be media company lobbyism in national, transnational, or global political institutions. Not least, the interdependency of technology- and content-based media companies is a promising field of research as further insights might shift our perspective on legacy media companies.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Annex

Table 1. Interview Sample

No.	Country	Company		Media type	Interviewee(s)	Position
1	AT	ORF-Enterprise	International content sales for Austrian TV market leader ORF	Broadcasting (audiovisual)	Beatrix Cox-Riesenfelder	CFO
2	AT	Mediaprint	One of the biggest publishers of newspapers in Austria	Publisher (print)	Thomas Kralinger	CEO
3	AT	Austria Presse Agentur (APA)	Leading news agency in Austria	News Agency	Clemens Pig	CEO
4	CH	Diogenes Verlag	Publisher of fiction books from German-language and international authors	Book Publisher (print)	Stephan Fritsch	Managing Director
5	DE	Axel Springer	Brands itself as "Europe's leading digital publisher" dealing in newspapers and platforms	Publisher (print)	Ralph Büchi	President Inter-national
6	DE	Vogel Business Media	Publisher of trade publications	Publisher (print)	Gunther Schunk & Dieter Wendel	CCO M&A Manager
7	DE	ZDF Enterprises	International TV-rights trading and co-production, most important customer: German Public Service Media	TV content (audiovisual)	Fred Burcksen & Stephan Adrian	Managing Directors
8	CH	Highlight Communications	Holding with subsidiaries in film and sports licensing	Rights trader	Bernhard Burgener	President
9	CH	Tamedia	Leading Swiss media group, publishing and digital platforms	Publisher (print & digital)	Marcel Kohler	Managing Director
10	DE	DPA	Leading German news agency	News Agency	Michael Segbers	CEO
11	DE	Studio Hamburg Group	One of the German leading production and service centers for film and television	TV content (audiovisual)	Johannes Züll	Senior Managing Director
12	DE	Bertelsmann SE & Co. KGaA	Diversified media, services and education company including, inter alia, RTL Group and magazine publisher Gruner + Jahr	Multimedia company	Shobhna Mohn	Executive Vice President Growth Regions
13	DE	Motor Presse Stuttgart GmbH & Co. KG	Publisher of special interest (especially automotive)	Publisher (print)	Dr. Volker Breid CEO	

Table 1. Interview Sample (cont.)

No.	Country	Company		Media type	Interviewee(s)	Position
14	UK	Elsevier (RELX group)	Publisher of scientific journals and services	Scientific publishing	Dr. Mark Siebert	Director Engagement Programs, Strategy
15	UK	ITV Studios Limited	UK's biggest TV production company	TV production	Ella Umansky	Managing Director
16	European	European Broadcasting Union	Alliance of PSM in Europe and beyond providing technical services and sports licenses	Broadcasting (audiovisual)	Ingrid Deltenre	General Secretary
17	USA	Thomson Reuters	Provides expert information in finance, economics and law, owns the Reuters news agency	Information broker	Gonzalo Lissarague	President Global Growth Organization
18	USA	Story House Media Group	Produces primarily non-fictional TV content in the US and Germany	TV production company (audiovisual)	Andreas Gutzeit	Chief Creative Officer
19	USA	Time Warner Inc.	Company focusing on TV, TV networks, film and TV entertainment	TV and Film content (audiovisual)	Manuel Urrutia	Senior Vice President, International and Corporate Strategy
20	USA	Tribune Content Agency (TCA; Teil von tronc)	Distributes the print content provided by tronc newspapers and others	News agency	Wayne Lown	International Sales Director
21	USA	Time Inc.	Multi-platform media company coming sourcing from its magazine brands	From Publisher to multi-platform company	Steve Marcopoto	President, Time Inc. International
22	USA	Discovery Networks International	Distributing cable networks as wells as pay and free TV channels worldwide and providing TV content	TV networks and TV content	Jennifer Marburg	Vice President of Consumer Program Publicity
23	BE	DePersgroep	Multimedia company, focus on newspapers and magazines	Newspaper, magazines, TV, Radio, Digital	Piet Vroman	CFO
24	DE	Hubert Burda Media	International multi-media company	Magazines, platforms, events	Eckart Bollmann	CEO Burda International
25	UK	Time Inc. UK	Content-Trader, Multi-Platform Media and Related Business Corporation	From publisher to Multi-Platform	Marcus Rich	CEO
26	ES	Grupo Secuoya	Largest independent audiovisual group in the Spanish media market	TV Content (Audiovisual)	José Miguel Barrera	Head of international

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Article

Forgetting History: Mediated Reflections on Occupy Wall Street

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Abstract
This study examines how Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protestors' practices and stated understanding of media act on social perceptions of networked media. It stems from a discursive content analysis of online commentary from OWS protestors and supporters, using different sources from the first Adbusters blog in July 2011 until May 2012. We demonstrate how the belief in the myth of an egalitarian Internet was incorporated into the offline structure of OWS and led OWS participants to adopt rhetoric that distances the movement from past protest actions by stating the movement was "like the Internet".

Keywords
discursive content analysis; media logic; mediatisation; Occupy Wall Street; protest movement

Issue
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1. Introduction

This past September marked the fifth anniversary of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Since that time, several facets of the movement—including its success, failures, and even its very nature—have been subject to debate in both the popular and academic press. One common thread in these debates, however, has been the movement's important relationship with various forms of media. This paper attempts to reconsider the role media play in the development of recent protest movements in ways that go beyond misguided terms such as "Twitter"-, "Facebook"- and/or "Tumblr-Revolutions" or more useful examinations of the use of media to mobilise, organise, or "choreograph"—to borrow Paolo Gerbaudo's (2012, p. 4) term—protest actions.

In the introduction to their edited volume *Mediation and Protest Movements*, Bart Cammaerts, Alice Mattoni and Patrick McCurdy (2013, p. 11) argue that media are important to social movements because "without (self-) mediation, insurrectionary performances and acts of resistance become meaningless". They assert that social movements should organise staged events that lead to visibility in a mass mediated public sphere (Cammaerts et al., 2013, p. 11). Protest actions even in the so-called "Internet age", such as the anti-WTO [World Trade Organization] demonstrations in Seattle, followed this media logic. Dubbed the "Battle in Seattle", these protests attracted between forty and fifty thousand protesters in Seattle, inspired simultaneous protest actions in cities around the globe, and garnered a significant amount of media attention from news organizations in multiple countries. Technologies such as the Internet and mobile communication—particularly text messaging—certainly played a role in the organisation of these protests (see, for example, Eagleton-Pierce, 2001; Mudhai, 2006; Rheingold, 2002; Smith, 2006).

As we outline in detail below, the concept of mediatisation provides a different framework for understanding OWS, particularly because it helps examine "processes through which the possession and use of certain media are constructed as central" (Hepp, 2009, pp. 43–44).

While staging events in order to win the attention of mass media was occasionally mentioned in early communications about OWS, the role that digital, networked media played in OWS and other "New Social Movements" or NSMs (see Lievrouw, 2011)—which combine an emphasis upon collective, long-term actions supported by social media—eventually became a primary focus. James Compton and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2014, p. 1203) argue that, while "the preconditions for Occupy Wall Street (OWS) lay in material conditions…the spark was virtual", while Manuel Castells (2012, p. 229) simply claims that Occupy is specifically a unique product of an Internet age by saying it was "born digital". In doing so, Castells exhibits a "technological-fascination bias", i.e., "the tendency of treating the latest technological platform as a fetish when considering social movements" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 255).

In this paper, we problematise the notion that OWS was 'born digital' while acknowledging the central role that digital, networked media played in the self-mediation of OWS. Following Alice Mattoni and Emiliano Treré (2014, p. 258), who suggest that a "focus on social practices might be a useful starting point to further discuss how media intertwine with social movements", we argue that the early OWS movement both incorporated long-standing protest practices while simultaneously adopting self-mediating rhetoric distancing OWS from past protest actions, positioning the movement as representative of a new era of social movements. Our primary research question is: How did those who participated in the early OWS movement (either in person or online) understand and historically contextualise the movement in public (self-) representations, both in terms of connections to sociocultural and economic developments and to previous social movements?

While Mattoni and Treré (2014, p. 253) suggest that their framework, "in contrast to short-term, instrumental, and enthusiastic accounts on the role of media within mobilizations, is able to support further empirical analysis on how past and present social movements interact with the media at large", we believe a focus on (offline) practices and organisation can also be useful in examining the full influence of media in developing social movements. In essence, we are considering the ways OWS protestors acted on media in two different ways. First, we are examining the ways in which those involved in OWS reflected upon media, their affordances, and their characteristics, and how these reflections both represented and fuelled social (mis)understandings of media, particularly the conceptualisation of digital, networked media as egalitarian and democratising. Second, we examine how the protestors used these conceptions of media to describe and contextualise OWS. We are thus modifying Mattoni's and Treré's approach of focusing on media practices "to see media at work in a number of contexts and situations, and—more importantly—to understand how media practices arrange, combine, and more generally intersect with other social practices" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 259) to instead examine what the protestors' own self-mediation and their social practices reveal about the relationship between the two.

2. Research Objects and Methodology

Our study stems from a discursive content analysis of online commentary from OWS protestors and supporters (in the popular press and user-generated media) during the first few months of the movement, from the first announcement on the *Adbusters* blog in July 2011 through May 2012, when some OWS protestors proclaimed that "Occupy Wall Street is now dead" (Adbusters, 2012c). The selected sources include online publications written and maintained by OWS participants including occupywallstreet.org (which is simply a domain name that redirects to the Adbusters blog), occupy.com, The *Occupied Wall Street Journal* at occupiedmedia.us, and groundswellcollective.com. These sources represent some of the most visible and popular sources of information for those participating in or curious about OWS at the time. In addition, we also surveyed the *Occupy Gazette*, a community newspaper produced by members of OWS that was available both online and in print and distributed throughout the encampment and the surrounding area.

Reflecting the varied backgrounds of the participants themselves, these texts were written by a wide variety of people including participants writing under pseudonyms (e.g., womyn), local and national professionals-turned-activists including programmers (Gupta, Burch), writers and journalists (e.g., Sacks, Schneider, McNeil), artists (e.g., Knodel, Nocenti, Gueraseva), and academics (e.g., Graeber). Fifteen posts were written by an unnamed staff member at *Adbusters*, while two posts featured on the blog *The Occupied Wall Street Journal* were written by the relatively well-known activist writers Naomi Klein and Chris Hedges. Any quotation that specifically mentioned the structure or organisation of OWS, the horizontal, deliberative process used in the OWS encampments, or digital or social media was selected for inclusion.

Common themes identified in these comments were then used to search for and identify both supportive and critical editorials featured on a variety of sites such as CNN, Fox News, *The Guardian*, Salon, and even the pop culture website Bleeding Cool. These latter sources, as will be discussed below, demonstrate how the rhetoric used by OWS protestors was echoed in other discussions of the movement. In total, our sample is comprised of 163 quotations pulled from 65 different articles and posts found in fourteen online sources.

3. Results

3.1. OWS Processes—An Overview

The Occupy movement arose as a reaction to aggressive globalisation that was exacerbating a global finan-

cial crisis, at the same time as the social use of digital tools was becoming naturalised. The simultaneity of these developments is perhaps what contributes to the framings of OWS as arising from digital media. The original economic focus of OWS, however, suggests the movement has its roots in protest movements extending back several decades if not centuries. The earliest social and protest movements focused on economic issues such as labour, capital and class divisions (della Porta & Diani, 2006, pp. 6–9). As a result, Marxist approaches to studying social movements were dominant throughout the 1960s, particularly in Europe and the United States, when a wave of protests led to increased academic interest in social movement theory (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 1; Jasper, 2010, p. 965). Both protestor and academic interest in these large-scale, society-wide issues related to capitalism and class-based issues waned in comparison to "smaller-scale movements more focused on wide-ranging issues or concerns (e.g., green/environmentalism, animal rights, anti-nuclear, anti-globalization, consumer rights), or group identity or lifestyle (e.g., the women's movement, gay rights, national/ethnic/language cultural/religious identity movements" in the late 1960s through the 1980s (Lievrouw, 2011, pp. 41–42). However, as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2006, p. 2) note:

> At the start of the new millennium, possibly for the first time since 1968, the wave of mobilizations for a globalization from below (often identified as the global justice movement), seems to have the potential for a global, generalized challenge, combining themes typical of class movements with themes typical of new social movements, like ecology or gender equality.

A number of social movement scholars describe OWS as an outgrowth of the global justice or anti-globalisation movement that "came to world attention with the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization" (Hayduk, 2012, p. 43). Sasha Costanza-Chock (2012, p. 376) notes that the first call to occupy Wall Street was "circulated by *Adbusters* magazine, a publication that gained visibility during the height of the Global Justice Movement as an important home for high production value ad-hacking, brand contamination and *détournement*"—thus situating OWS squarely within the genealogy of the anti-globalisation movement. Ron Hayduck (2012, p. 46) also explicitly links OWS to the anti-WTO protests in Seattle and the global justice movement that emerged around the start of the millennium, noting their similar economic precursors:

> The economic change wrought by neoliberal globalization during the decades preceding Seattle and during the decade leading up to OWS—particularly the Great Recession—elevated and exposed key targets (WTO, banks) in new ways, and also galvanized progressive groups in the struggle for global justice.

Furthermore, he traces the origins of the global justice movement itself to previous protest actions in South Africa (the Anti-Apartheid movement) and Mexico (the Zapatista uprising). While he does not elaborate on why he sees the Anti-Apartheid movement as an important precursor, he again focusses on the role of globalisation and neoliberalism in positioning the Zapatistas as an antecedent to the global justice movement. Noting how the group formed on the day the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, he argues the group "explicitly" challenged neoliberalism and "articulated a sharp critique of the impact these policies had on indigenous peoples in Mexico" (Hayduk, 2012, p. 45).

Hayduk (2012, p. 46) also notes that "OWS activists repeatedly make explicit connections to Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Greece, and so on". Costanza-Chock (2012, p. 376) similarly argues that OWS was inspired by protests in Tunisia, the Middle East and North Africa as well as "Spanish 'Indignados' mobilizations and Greek anti-austerity uprisings". The protests in Spain and Greece in particular were direct inspirations for OWS. As della Porta (2012) and Castañeda (2012) note, the Indignados movement in Spain was a response to the global economic crisis, which was causing a severe economic downturn in that country, and the response of the European Union and the Spanish government to that crisis. On May 15, 2011, organisers asked people to "to take the square, 'Toma la Plaza', and called for an *acampada*" (Castañeda, 2012, p. 311). Protestors responded in strength, occupying hundreds of squares across the country.

Theses protests in Spain not only directly inspired similar protests in an equally economically-stressed Greece (della Porta, 2012, p. 274), but the economic conditions and the tactic of occupying public squares firmly establish the Indignados movement as a direct predecessor to OWS. As Amalia Cardenas (as cited in Castañeda, 2012, p. 318) succinctly summarises, "The Occupy Wall Street is the same movement as the Indignados".

Much like the Indignados occupations, the encampments in Zuccotti Park (later renamed to Liberty Square) in New York incorporated a complex, leaderless, and horizontal organisational model. Small working groups generated ideas for presentation to the general assembly and actions to be taken were then determined by consensus, determined using hand signals, in a method that resembles the debate, deliberation and consensus formation (or contestation) process in online spaces such as message boards, Facebook groups, Twitter, wikis, and blogs (see, for example, Dahlberg, 2001, 2007, 2011; Dahlgren, 2001; Fenton & Downey, 2003). OWS even avoided designating official spokespeople to represent the group (Bennett & Segerberg, 2016, p. 92). Furthermore, OWS exhibited a philosophy of integration through diversification, i.e., the acceptance of all perspectives, issues, and opinions discussed openly in the collective, long-running protests (Daubs, 2017). The emphasis on fluid, open exchanges is exemplified by popular slogans such "We are the 99" which emphasise the diversity of opin-

ion within the movement while simultaneously asserting its inclusiveness.

3.2. The (Self-)Mediation of OWS

This horizontalism would become a key characteristic of the movement, as comments from OWS participants below demonstrate. However, those participating in and writing about OWS in blog posts and op-eds that contributed to the public face of the movement seemingly prioritise the influence of digital media in conceptualisations of the movement. The sections below discuss three of the major themes identified in our content analysis, including ways protestors historically situated the movement, the emphasis they put on the deliberative processes of the movement, and how protestors described the movement in relation to media—especially digital, networked media such as the Internet.

3.2.1. Historical Contextualisation of OWS

The content analysis of the OWS materials reveals that those involved in the Occupy movement did see some loose historical connections between OWS and previous social movements. Commentators drew parallels between OWS and the American Revolution (Adbusters, 2011a), the Perestroika movement and Glasnost in Russia in the mid-to-late-1980s, (Gueraseva, 2012), the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 (Klein, 2011), and Gandhi's protests in India in the early 20th century, if only for OWS's "commitment to absolute nonviolence in the Gandhian tradition" (Adbusters, 2011g). By far, however, the most common historical mentions in these texts were of the American Civil Rights movement and the "May Uprising" and wildcat general strike of 1968 (Adbusters, 2011c, 2011f, 2011h, 2012b, 2012c, 2012e; Elliott, 2011; Graeber, 2011a; Gupta, 2011; Rushkoff, 2011). These connections are shallow at best. While David Graeber (2011a) notes that the deliberative process adopted by OWS "has deep roots in American radical history" and was "widely employed in the civil rights movement and by the Students for a Democratic Society", Arun Gupta (2011) simply notes that OWS represented "a unique opportunity to peacefully shift the tides of history like the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the democratic uprisings across the Arab world and Europe today". In other words, Gupta is simply acknowledging that all social movements, including OWS, can be "levers of social change" (Castells, 2012, p. 218) rather than noting, as Graeber does, that the movement extends from and adopts practices of earlier movements.

In fact, of the 18 collected comments that referenced protests and social movements from before the turn of the century, there were almost as many dedicated to describing how OWS different from those movements (Elliott, 2011; Klein, 2011) or simply hoping they would not fail like previous movements (Adbusters, 2012b, 2012e) as there were those that acknowledge the role played by historical antecedents (Adbusters, 2011f; Graeber, 2011a, 2011b; Gueraseva, 2012; Schneider, 2011a). Adbusters (2012b) simply asked, for example, "May 1968 was the first wildcat general strike in history…it lasted two weeks and was a grand gesture of refusal still remembered, but then it fizzled…maybe this May we won't?". Adbusters co-founder and editor in chief Kalle Lasn argued in an interview with Salon.com that "1968 was more of a cultural kind of revolution. This time I think it's much more serious" (Elliott, 2011). Finally, one April 2012 Adbusters post made the division between OWS and previous movements explicit, stating the movement was facing "a fight to the finish between the impotent old left and the new vibrant, horizontal left who launched Occupy Wall Street from the bottom-up" (Adbusters, 2012b).

3.2.2. A Focus on Process over Past

In short, despite gestures to history, it appears historical antecedents played only a minor role in OWS protestors' conceptualisation of the movement. Instead, the collected comments suggest participants were originally far more interested (at first) in process, in-person actions, deliberation, and horizontalism and these ways these were inspired by other, *contemporary* movements such as the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados movement rather than earlier movements. A post in early October 2011 to the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* explains that the General Assembly, the central decision-making body of OWS in which anyone could participate, was "a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified-consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought, and it's akin to the assemblies that have been driving recent social movements around the world in places like Argentina, Egypt's Tahrir Square, Madrid's Puerta del Sol and so on" (Schneider, 2011b).

A large number of posts (22) from a variety of sources (9) emphasised the importance of this leaderless, consensus-based direct democracy, some including descriptors such as "wonderful" (Klein, 2011), "rewarding" (Burtch, 2011; Chelliah, 2012), and "the purest form of democracy" (Schneider, 2011a).[1] When the New York City General Assembly (NYCGA, 2011), the leaderless group of OWS protestors that debated issues and made decisions via consensus, posted their "Principles of Solidarity", for example, they noted: "Through a direct democratic process, we have come together as individuals and crafted these principles of solidarity, which are points of unity"; furthermore, they labelled these principles a "living document" that could be further amended, but only

[1] See Adbusters (2011a, 2011b, 2011d, 2011i, 2012a, 2012b, 2012d), Bleeding Cool (2011), Burtch (2011), Chelliah (2012), Elliott (2011), Graeber (2011a), Harris (2011), Hedges (2011), Klein (2011), Noveck (2011), Occupy the SEC Working Group (2012), Rushkoff (2011), Schneider (2011a, 2011b), and womyn (2011).

"through the democratic process". Another OWS participant posting under the name "grim womyn" (2011) stated that "many are feeling the hope that real change can emerge from this leaderless movement in which people are leaving their homes to occupy their communities". Furthermore, while the original *Adbusters* (2011e) post called for protesters to "incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices", the "occupation itself—and the direct democracy taking place there" (Schneider, 2011b) became the goal of OWS.

While some, such as Graeber (2011a), did acknowledge a horizontal structure had been used before by other groups, there was a sense that the scale and scope of this model OWS was attempting was something new. As Graber (2011a) himself notes:

> It was, in the least, a wild gamble, because as far as any of us knew, no one had ever managed to pull off something like this before. Consensus process had been successfully used in spokes-councils—groups of activists organized into separate affinity groups, each represented by a single "spoke"—but never in mass assemblies like the one anticipated in New York City. Even the General Assemblies in Greece and Spain had not attempted it.

Similarly, artist Ann Nocenti claimed "Many people have trouble understanding the Occupy movement, because it is something quite new" (Bleeding Cool, 2011).

3.2.3. A Mediated/Mediatized Understanding of OWS

Scholars such as Costanza-Chock (2012, p. 381) point out, however, that many of the so-called innovations of the Occupy movement actually have a long history that pre-dates the Internet by decades if not centuries. Hayduk (2012, p. 47), for example, notes that "OWS has drawn from several methods popularized in the Anti-Globalization movement, such as the general assembly and 'spokes-council' models, which were pioneered in Porto Alegre, Argentina, Chiapas, and Seattle". In addition, many of the practices and philosophies demonstrated by the Occupy protestors are not dependent upon digital media. As Sean Scalmer (2013, pp. 118–119) notes, "Gandhian" types of non-violent protests were "successfully dispersed through the use of print technology, the telegraph, relatively slow forms of international transport, and steady, organizational labour". Gerbaudo (2012, p. 134) asserts that horizontal political and social structures are not the providence of digital media alone; rather, social movements often depend upon "soft leadership", a fact which can be masked by analyses that privilege digital and social media. Similarly, Mattoni and Treré (2014, p. 257) observe that social movements "usually lack formal hierarchies, adopt decision-making processes based on participation, and value the first-person commitment of activists, often because they frequently lack material resources such as money". In short, a non-violent, horizontal organisation based upon participation and deliberation is not particular to protest movements in a digital era. And yet, comments from OWS participants routinely position OWS processes as new.

One possible explanation for this view of OWS as a "new" model is the perceived importance of digital and networked media to the protest. Texts by OWS participants rarely mention digital media in direct relationship to the direct democracy championed by the movement. Only one post, in fact, noted that "Soon, the formal discussions about demands will be happening online as well as in the plaza" (Schneider, 2011b). A total of 28 comments in 19 different documents do make specific mention of digital media forms including blog posts, websites, mobile apps, social networking sites, online petitions, and livestreams. For the most part, these comments note the use of these digital media tools to disseminate information, raise awareness, and build solidarity. This quote from Schneider (2011a) is prototypical:

> From day one, they had a (theoretically) twenty-four-hour lifestream [sic], allowing thousands of people around the world to watch what was going on in the plaza and on marches in real time. The plaza's generator-powered media center blasted out tweets, YouTube videos, blog posts and more, keeping savvy supporters informed and giving Anonymous lots of material to disseminate.

Other articles note how digital tools were used to organise resources within the encampment in Liberty Square such as library books (Sacks, 2011) or secure food (Adbusters, 2011j). One post pointed to both the potential advantages and disadvantages of social media, noting both that ability to use social media to "call out" more protestors, but also warning against allowing OWS to "fizzle out into another lefty whine and clicktivist campaign like has happened so many times in the past" (Adbusters, 2012b).

There are around a dozen posts, however, that indicate the online experiences of OWS participants influenced their understanding and organisation of the movement. Nearly half of these comments (5) compared the structure of the movement, specifically the leaderless, horizontal structure, directly to the Internet (Bleeding Cool, 2011; Elliott, 2011; Friedersdorf, 2011; Noveck, 2011; Rushkoff, 2011) with comments such as "it's a lot like the Internet—leaderless, spaceless" (Livecchia, as cited in Noveck, 2011). Protestors were not alone in this trait, however; contemporary critiques of the movement drew similar parallels. Charles C. W. Cooke (2011), for example, argues: "The Internet is not a bad comparison, actually. The Internet has a lot about it that is admirable, but it is also a completely open book which is mostly filled with mindless, narcissistic drivel, pornography, bigotry, self-delusion, paranoia, redundant nonsense, and spam".

Other OWS participants note how specific actions and services within the encampment replicated online

experiences. Mallory Knodel (2011), for example, notes that Occuprint, an on-site t-shirt, poster, and placard printing facility, allowed materials to be "reproduced and disseminated immediately, just like on the Internet". Joanne McNeil (2011) similarly asserts that the "human mic"—the process introduced after loudspeakers were prohibited by a city ordinance in which participants in the crowd loudly echoed a speaker in order to deliver messages to those out of earshot—is "acting like a retweet—a filter of redundancy". Even though the origins of the "human mic" have been traced to sources as varied as Quaker Churches and tribes in Madagascar (Ruby, as cited in Kelp-Stebbins & Schifani, 2015, p. 5), comments such as McNeil's suggest participants understood OWS through a mediated lens in a way that minimises the historical origins of these tactics.

A number of comments link OWS directly to a digital, Internet culture and it is these comments that expressly work to separate OWS from history. Two comments in particular demonstrate this view. Ann Nocenti (as cited in Bleeding Cool, 2011) argues that OWS is "not a 'protest' movement; it is amorphous, like the Internet. It is, in some ways, a lifestyle". Here Nocenti seemingly claims that OWS was a product of that specific time, not because of the material conditions mentioned by Compton and Dyer-Witheford (2014), but because of an Internet-influenced "lifestyle". Justin Elliott (2011) make this claim even more explicit, stating:

> I have a feeling that because of the Internet and a different kind of mentality that young people have, a horizontal way of thinking about things, this movement may not just come up with some really good demands and put incredible people pressure on our politicians, but a more beautiful thing may come out of this movement: a new model of democracy, a new model of how activism can work, of how the people can have a radical democracy and have some of their demands met. This new model may well be a new kind of a horizontal thing that in some strange way works like the Internet works.

Elliott not only traces the emergence of OWS, and characteristics such as its horizontal structure, directly to the Internet, but also any possible (positive) outcomes of the movement. His comment suggests, perhaps, that activists' experiences with online tools and their commonly held attitudes and beliefs about networked media influenced the organisation of OWS. This direct linkage between media form and movement structure minimises historical antecedents and positions Occupy and other similar NSMs as unique. Thus, OWS is *mediated* in terms of using different digital technologies to communicate; communication is both "a means—activists use the media to communicate a message through which they achieve something—but also an end—activists use the media and in doing so they constitute flows of media production, circulation, interpretation, and recirculation" (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p. 260). At the same time, OWS is *mediatised* because the meaning/understanding of OWS cannot be understood separate from the media, and it is this last context in which OWS's relationship with history becomes problematised.

3.2.4. Privileging the Network in OWS

The views expressed by the OWS participants in the quotations mentioned above are seemingly influenced by articles in the popular press and academia attribute the emergence of OWS's immediate forebearers, e.g., the Arab Spring, directly to services such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media in particular are described as a central component of social movements because they reinforce beliefs in the Internet as a democratising space, where everyone is free to debate issues as equals—an idea rooted in the (mistaken) association of the Web with 1960s counterculture (for a good summary, see Turner, 2006). As Fred Turner (2006, p. 1) describes: "Ubiquitous networked computing had arrived, and in its shiny array of interlinked devices, pundits, scholars and investors alike saw the image of an ideal society: decentralized, egalitarian, harmonious, and free". The decentralized structure of the Internet, coupled with the kinds of personalization, interactivity and participation possible there, fuel these utopian views (see, for example, Enzensberger, 2000). A belief in the democratising potential of networked, digital media is intrinsic to participatory culture, and references to the democratising and radical potential of digital media can be seen in references to civic protests in Iran in 2009 and demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 as a "Twitter Revolution" (Afshari, 2009, p. 854).

Whereas Mattoni and Treré (2014, p. 265) assert that, in the past, protestors would "adapt their political actions to the logic of mainstream media", with OWS, the myth of the egalitarian Internet became a central component of the "culture" many OWS participants claim is the source of the movement. The idea of a "digital culture" likely has its roots in Castells' (2000, p. 370) conceptualisation of the "network society", which he defines as being "made up of networks of production, power and experience, which construct a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space". Felix Stalder (2005, p. 15) directly connects the concept of digital culture to the network society but also notes the importance of exchange and deliberation:

> An open, digital, networked culture is profoundly exchange-oriented. It is much less like a book, and much more like a conversation. That is, it is built upon a two-way relationship between the fixed and the fluid enabled by new technologies. No longer all that is sold melts into the air, as Marx famously put it, but now, digital air can be turned into solids any time.

Stadler's definition provides the foundation for the culture referred to by OWS participants—one that is, in their view, dependent upon and stems from the use of digital, networked technologies. Stalder (2005, p. 16) saw "fluid cultural exchanges" on digital media as "undermining a core aspect of contemporary capitalism", which mirrors one of the primary goals of OWS itself, but his focus on how the digital could be turned into "solids" also suggests his belief that this "open, digital, networked culture" is impacting offline culture as well.

Stalder (2005, p. 16) positions open exchange via networked technologies as central to an alternative culture "of collaborative media production, of free and open source software, of reference works such as the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, of open access scientific journals and music that is being made and remixed by the most talented of artists". Elsewhere, Stalder connects solidarity in protest movements to the ideas of collaboration, stating that a "culture of solidarity can be described as one rooted in a lived practice of sharing" (Stalder, 2013, p. 14). These are exactly the ideals that OWS tried to incorporate, at least as communicative construction, into their offline structure—the physical embodiment of a digital culture supposedly specific to networked technologies.

4. Conclusion: Problematising Digital Cultures

The purpose of this paper is not to debate whether a digital culture exists or not, but rather to illuminate how discourse about this culture, which stems from a mythologised version of the Internet, explicitly ignores that (media) culture and its processes have a long history and evolve over time. The above commentary from OWS protestors and scholars such as Castells privilege the role of digital, networked media. In doing so, they are, in essence, acting on media by both reflecting and further fuelling discourse that frames these media as democratising, egalitarian prerequisites for the emergence of modern protest movements such as OWS. This rhetoric in turn obfuscates the long history of social movements that also informed OWS and oversimplifies a complex set of material conditions that also ignited the movement including "an official US unemployment rate officially at 9%, in reality close to 16%, grotesque income polarization; evictions; bankruptcies" (see Compton & Dyer-Witheford, 2014, p. 1203).

A kind of fetishisation of digital media persisted in academic texts published after the encampment in Liberty Square dissolved, as exemplified by Castells' (2012, p. 229) claims that Occupy was "born digital" and that the Internet "creates the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand". This view, however, vastly oversimplifies what is, in reality, a complex culture and organisation borne out of and influenced by a variety of factors. Mattoni and Treré (2014, p. 256) remind us:

> Social movements are neither concrete objects, such as a poster calling for a demonstration, nor palpable subjects, such as an association composed of members, and located in offices. They are, instead, ongoing and evolving processes…that interface with societies at the political, cultural, economic, and, of course, social level.

By reducing OWS to an Internet-specific phenomenon, the minutiae of the movement, its historical antecedents, and the socioeconomic developments that led to its emergence, even the fact that the occupation of Wall Street was an idea originally conceived and propagated by *Adbusters*, are minimised. Instead, the movement is simply understood as just being, like the Internet'. In doing so, Castells and those that make similar claims risk marginalising both the movement and the social conditions that led to its development.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Media Activism as Movement? Collective Identity Formation in the World Forum of Free Media

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Abstract
More than simply tools used by social movements to reach other substantive aims, media are increasingly becoming *subjects* of activism. This article contributes to advancing understanding of such media-focused activism through a case study of the World Forum of Free Media, a thematic forum for media activists and media advocacy organisations linked to the World Social Forum. Based on qualitative research conducted between 2008 and 2016—including participant observation, in-depth interviews and textual analysis—the article critically explores the extent to which the World Forum of Free Media can be considered a 'free media' movement in the making, and examines some of the challenges and contradictions that such a movement-building project entails. Drawing on social movement theory, specifically the concept of collective identity, it analyses efforts by forum organisers to mobilise a very diverse range of actors—from alternative media activists to policy- and advocacy NGOs—around a plural and inclusive 'free media' identity. While the World Forum of Free Media has to some extent succeeded in facilitating convergence around a set of core principles and ideas, it has so far struggled to develop a clear outwards-facing identity and mobilise a broad grassroots base.

Keywords
alternative media; collective identity; communication rights; FMML; media activism; media democracy movement; social movements; World Forum of Free Media; World Social Forum

Issue
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1. Introduction

Much attention has been paid recently to the relationship between social movements and media, with research focusing on the implications of new media technologies for movement formation and protest trajectories. An important strand of this research has focused on the implications of new media technologies for processes of collective identity formation. A key argument has been that such technologies—social media in particular—have led to a reconfiguration of collective identity as conventionally understood within social movement studies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Milan, 2015a, 2015b). Less attention has been paid to the possibility of collective identity forming around media and technology as *subjects* of political contention. However, given the ubiquity and importance of media in contemporary society, and the rising prominence of media activism—understood here not just as activists' use of media to further other aims, but activism focused specifically on media and technology issues—it is important to examine processes of collective identity formation among media activists, and ask whether such activism might constitute a social movement in its own right. This is what this article sets out to do through a case study of the World Forum of Free Media (FMML, for the *Portuguese Fórum Mundial de Mídia Livre*), a thematic forum linked to the World Social Forum (WSF) that gathers civil society actors working on media and technology issues. What forms of collective identity are emerg-

ing among activists involved in the FMML, and to what extent might it be considered an emergent 'free media' movement? Specifically, the article explores the tension between, on the one hand, efforts to develop a plural and inclusive definition of 'free media' that can enable convergence among a broad range of media activists, and, on the other, the need for a clear outwards-facing collective identity to facilitate external mobilisation.

The article begins with a brief outline of literature on the implications of new media technologies for collective identity formation, before moving on to discuss work that has conceptualised media activism as an emergent social movement, and outlining the understanding of collective identity adopted in this study. This is followed by an analysis of collective identity in the FMML, which considers the implications of the plural and inclusive definition of 'free media' that organisers and participants have developed. The findings presented here are based on qualitative research conducted between 2008 and 2016, which included participant observation at the FMML and WSF in 2009, 2011 and 2013; online ethnography of the 2016 FMML; eleven in-depth interviews with FMML participants conducted face-to-face and via Skype, in 2013 and 2016 respectively; and an analysis of the World Charter of Free Media (World Forum of Free Media, 2015). The analysis presented here draws on a larger research project on media activism in the WSF (see Stephansen, 2013a, 2013b, 2016).

2. Movements, Media and Collective Identity

A key concept in social movement studies, collective identity has been understood as central to the 'emergence, trajectories, and impacts' of movements (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 281). In very basic terms, it may be defined as a shared sense of 'we-ness' and collective agency (Snow, 2001); however, there is no single consensual definition (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). While some define collective identity in terms of individuals' 'cognitive, moral and emotional connection' to a broader collective (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285), others have emphasised its interactive and shared character as a group's definition of its place within a wider social context (Melucci, 1995, 1996; Snow, 2001; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Scholars interested in the relationship between social movements and media have explored the consequences of new communications technologies for collective identity formation in contemporary movements. In its early days, the internet was associated with networked forms of collective action based on ideals of openness, fluidity and the co-existence of multiple identities (della Porta, 2005; Juris, 2008). While many celebrated the ability of this networked politics to bring together a 'movement of movements' against neoliberal globalisation, others expressed concerns about the capacity of networks based on 'thin' ideological ties to support a coherent collective identity (Bennett, 2004). Similar concerns have been mooted in relation to the rise of web 2.0 technologies. Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) concept of 'connective action' highlights a shift, driven by the rise of social media, towards more individualised and personalised forms of activism that raise questions about the feasibility and necessity of collective identity as traditionally defined. Similarly, Milan's notion of 'cloud protesting' highlights how a politics of visibility, in which subjective experience is central, has 'partially replaced the politics of identity typical of social movements' (2015a, p. 887). Others, meanwhile, have explored empirical instances of social media use to show how collective identity is produced interactively through activists' communication practices (e.g. Kavada, 2015; Treré, 2015).

Less attention has been paid to the possibility of collective identities forming around media and communication as issues in their own right. However, the growing ubiquity of media technologies, combined with increasing awareness among activists of their significance and of 'media-related injustice' (Milan, 2013), make it important to pay attention the imaginaries that form around such technologies (cf. Fotopoulou, 2017; Juris, 2008). Specifically, it is important to explore the potential for collective identity formation—and the emergence of a social movement—around media-related issues. A growing literature on mobilisations around media and technology issues has used the language of movement to describe such activism (e.g. Calabrese, 2004; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Milan, 2013; Padovani & Calabrese, 2014; Stein, Kidd, & Rodríguez, 2009). Two studies (Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Milan, 2013) are notable for their in-depth examination of media activism from a social movement studies perspective, and include discussions of collective identity. Hackett and Carroll examine activism aimed at democratising existing media systems in the US, Canada and UK, and find that such activism is better understood as a *nexus*—'a point of articulation *between* movements' (2006, p. 199)—than itself a movement. They emphasise the social embeddedness of media activism within multiple other struggles, and suggest that this undercuts the basis for collective identity, as media activists tend to identify first and foremost with other movements. Milan, meanwhile, examines 'emancipatory communication practices'—'ways of social organizing seeking to create alternatives to existing media and communication infrastructure' (2013, p. 9)—and arrives at a similar conclusion: media activism does not (yet) exhibit the characteristics of a fully-fledged social movement. She suggests that part of the reason for this is the absence of a shared collective identity among the diverse actors working on media and communications issues.

In brief, the formation of a shared collective identity—and by extension a social movement—around media and technology issues is hampered by media activism's embeddedness in other social struggles and the diversity of the actors involved. The diffuseness of the media field and the ubiquity of media technologies mean that media activists operate on multiple fronts. One schism exists between activists focused on reforming ex-

isting media systems and activists concerned with the creation of alternatives. But there are also important differences within each of these sectors. Milan finds considerable differences between two groups of emancipatory communication activists—community radio producers and radical tech activists—in terms of collective identity and ideological orientation. Hackett and Carroll identify several competing framings of the media's democratic deficit among media reform activists: a liberal 'free press, freedom of speech' frame; a 'media democratisation' frame that offers a more radical democratic vision of public communication; a 'right to communicate' frame grounded in human rights and development discourse; a 'mental and cultural environment' frame that emphasises the damaging effects of media commercialism; and a more radical 'media justice' frame, which positions media activism as part of broader social justice struggles against capitalism, racism and patriarchy (2006, pp. 78–79). All of this means that actors in the media democracy field tend to operate in isolation from each other, with only periodic and short-term collaborations (Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Milan, 2013).

The formation of a social movement focused on media and technology issues seems to depend, then, on the diverse range of actors who operate in this field being brought together on a more permanent basis—and on the ability of these actors to develop a shared collective identity capable of bridging different frames and ideological orientations. The FMML is an interesting test case in this respect, because one of its aims has been precisely to provide a forum in which a diverse range of media activists can come together around a shared definition of 'free media'. In what follows, I explore collective identity formation in the FMML and some of the difficulties this involves. In doing so, I draw on an understanding of collective identity as both a *process* and a *product*, the former focusing on the 'shared meanings, experiences and reciprocal emotional ties as experienced by movement actors themselves through their interaction with each other' and the latter referring to 'a perception of shared attributes, goals and interests' that is accessible to movement insiders and outsiders alike (Flesher Fominaya, 2010, p. 397). My focus on the process aspect is guided by Melucci's definition of collective identity as 'an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the orientations of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place' (1996, p. 70). This enables an understanding of collective identity as an ongoing internal process of knowledge production, involving a diversity of actors, about a movement's aims and the broader context in which it operates. My analysis of the product dimension draws on the framing perspective in social movement theory (e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000; Johnston & Noakes, 2005) to explore how 'free media' are framed by the FMML. As 'snapshots' that evoke shared principles and goals, define opponents, and outline strategies, frames are key to a movement's collective identity in the product sense. I draw here on this dual process/product definition to explore tensions arising from the plural and open-ended nature of internal processes of collective identity formation within the FMML and the difficulties this poses for the creation of a clearly defined outwards-facing collective identity.

3. The FMML

The FMML was first held in conjunction with the WSF 2009 in Belém, Brazil, having emerged out of a longer history of media activism within the WSF. Since its inception in 2001, the WSF has provided a space for media activists from around the world to come together, exchange knowledge and experiences, and produce alternative media coverage of the forum. At each WSF, activists have set up dedicated spaces for alternative media. Although their main purpose was initially to facilitate the production of alternative media content, these spaces also encouraged political debate, and activists soon began working to put media and communication issues on the agenda of the WSF. Media and communication first appeared as a thematic axis at the WSF 2003 (Milan, 2013, p. 36) and since then media activists have organised seminars and workshops at every WSF to discuss issues ranging from censorship and repression to community media, internet governance and public service broadcasting. The FMML has emerged out of this process. Following the first FMML in 2009, activists organised a series of seminars at the WSF 2011 in Dakar, which culminated in an Assembly on the Right to Communication. A second FMML was held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, in conjunction with the Rio +20 People's Summit, followed by the third and fourth FMML in 2013 and 2015, both held in Tunis alongside the WSF. The fifth FMML was held in August 2016 in Montreal, again as part of the WSF.

As it has travelled to different locations, the FMML has brought together a range of organisations and groups from different parts of the world, and enabled participants to begin building transnational networks based on a sense of solidarity and shared struggle. For media activists who have been involved in the WSF process since its early days, the development of the FMML has been accompanied by a shift in their sense of identity from alternative media producers to participants in a movement focused on media and communication. As Bia Barbosa, who represents the Brazilian advocacy group Intervozes on the FMML's international organising committee, explained:

> Since the beginning of the World Social Forum…we 've been trying to show communication rights and freedom of expression as a subject…, not only as a way to cover the WSF but as a thing itself….At the beginning of the WSF in 2001 we couldn't talk about a communication movement. We were alternative media, people that produced. Now we can talk about a movement. (interview with author, 2013)

This narrative and language of 'movement' is also present in the documents of the FMML. The World Charter of Free Media states: 'Our network of activists…has evolved into an organized movement for freedom of expression and the fight for another form of communication' (World Forum of Free Media, 2015).

There is a certain performative quality to this statement—declaring the existence of a movement arguably also helps bring it into being. But such a claim needs to be problematised rather than taken at face value. While not the only defining feature of a social movement, the concept of collective identity provides a useful lens for exploring the extent to which it is possible to talk of a 'free media' movement. For Melucci and others in the social constructivist tradition, the process of collective identity formation is precisely what makes a social movement. For scholars in the resource mobilisation tradition, a clear outwards-facing collective identity is essential to a movement's ability to mobilise. In what follows, I explore these internal and external aspects of collective identity, and the tension between them, in the context of the FMML.

4. Collective Identity Formation in the FMML

Alongside face-to-face gatherings, which have enabled FMML participants to begin to recognise each other as part of a collective, the creation of documents expressing shared positions has been an important driver in the development of collective identity. Each FMML has culminated in an assembly that has issued a joint declaration, and the World Charter of Free Media was adopted in 2015, following a two-year process of consultation and debate through online forums and face-to-face meetings. Negotiating and agreeing the Charter was conceived explicitly by organisers as a process of collective identity formation. As Bia Barbosa suggested at the beginning of the process:

> I think this charter is going to help us because…it's the same as the World Social Forum charter. Do you agree with that? Ok, so you can be with us. So I think this is going to help us to define and identify ourselves. (interview with author, 2013)

Modelling the FMML on the idea of the WSF as an 'open space' (Whitaker, 2008), accessible to anyone who agrees with its basic principles of opposition to neoliberalism and all forms of discrimination, organisers have sought to attract a broad range of organisations and groups working on media and technology issues. The Charter's definition of 'free media' incorporates a strikingly diverse range of actors:

> We are communicators, activists, journalists, hackers, community media associations and free media, social movements and popular organizations. We are bloggers, audiovisual producers, free and open technology developers, associations, networks, unions, journalism schools, research centres on information and communication, and NGOs supporting access to information and communication. (World Forum of Free Media, 2015)

In certain respects, this definition of 'free media' is one that has emerged through the kind of interactive process of collective identity formation described by Melucci. It has depended on a process of mutual recognition among forum participants involving knowledge production about the shared characteristics, principles and aims of 'free media'. However, the development of this definition has also involved a deliberate effort by organisers to attract as wide a range of actors as possible. This drive for inclusivity has been informed by a recognition of the complexity of the contemporary media landscapes and the multiple forms of domination that arise from the growing power of states and corporations over communications media. As Erika Campelo, who until December 2016 represented the French NGO Ritimo on the FMML's international organising committee, explained: 'There are many fronts of struggle, many challenges. They can only be resolved if within the FMML we have organisations that work on different fronts' (interview with author, 2016, translated from Portuguese).

'Free media', then, has been adopted as an umbrella term to incorporate the broad range of actors that are in some way 'acting on media' (Kubitschko, 2017) today. However, the use of this term has not been unproblematic and there has been much discussion among organisers about its appropriateness. As Campelo reflected:

> Why 'free media'? I think that there is already a question of definition in one language, regardless of which one. All the movements, we have our own particularities, we are not all exactly in agreement with a single definition….I think there are two obstacles: there's the obstacle of diversity of organisations that are involved in the process of free media, and the difficulty of language. (interview with author, 2013, translated from Portuguese)

Alongside the diversity of actors involved in the forum, linguistic differences complicate matters further. While 'free media' (*médias libres*) has resonance in French due to its connotations to the *radios libres* (free radio) movement of the 1970s, it does not resonate equally in all Francophone contexts. 'Free media' has little purchase among Anglophone activists, who are more familiar with terms like 'alternative' or 'independent' media, and while *mídia livre*/*medios libres* are more common in Portuguese and Spanish, they compete with similar terms. Such linguistic differences add another layer of complexity to a field of activism in which issues of terminology are already contentious (Couldry, 2009), and illustrate some of the specific challenges involved in building collective identity at a supranational scale.

'Free media' is, in brief, an ambiguous term. In some respects, this ambiguity is useful. An empty signifier, 'free media' can absorb multiple meanings and thus has potential to generate identification among diverse actors. As one FMML participant, Mallory Knodel of the Association for Progressive Communication, argued, the ambiguity of the term 'free media' has been productive in the sense that it has facilitated conversations among diverse actors and enabled participants to recognise commonalities:

> The definition gets stretched in interesting ways but I don't see a big pushback against that, people saying this isn't really free media, I think everybody kind of sees the connections and the definition just grows a bit to incorporate that analysis. (interview with author, 2016)

An inclusive and rather vague definition of 'free media', in other words, can facilitate conversation and knowledge production among forum participants, helping to generate chains of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) among diverse actors. According to several organisers and participants, the FMML has enabled convergences between previously separate domains of media democracy activism, for example between policy advocacy groups and alternative media activists. However, while the vagueness of 'free media' has proved useful for enabling FMML participants to find commonalities between their struggles—in other words, for facilitating an internal process of collective identity formation—it has been less helpful in terms of developing a clear collective identity (in the product sense) that is accessible to outsiders. As Stéphane Couture, one of the local organisers of the 2016 FMML and at the time a researcher at McGill University, explained:

> The people we meet they see commonalities, they want to work together and continue discussing, but the people we don't meet they have difficulty understanding what is the goal of this….It's difficult to find a discourse that will be able to join different communities that are not in our circles. (interview with author, 2016)

For example, as Couture explained, many hackers and radical tech activists who were invited to Montreal declined the invitation, believing the forum to be a conference about alternative media. At the same time, the forum has, according to organisers, struggled to attract alternative media producers, and most of the members of the FMML's international organising committee are advocacy and policy-oriented organisations.

This difficulty of 'finding a discourse' resonates with Hackett and Carroll's (2006) argument that media democracy activism faces specific challenges in terms of framing. In the context of the hegemony of free market liberalism, where a commercial media system has been naturalised, media and communication issues arguably have low 'issue salience'—even as media become ever more ubiquitous (Hackett & Carroll, 2006). It is thus difficult to frame media-related injustice for a wider public. And, as discussed above, for activists working at a global scale, this lack of an effective frame through which to communicate with external publics is compounded by cultural, political, historical and linguistic differences.

A closer analysis of the World Charter of Free Media reveals some of the difficulties involved in developing a clear frame, and by extension a clear and coherent outwards-facing identity, covering the multiple issues and actors designated by the term 'free media'. The Charter can be read as a composite of the different understandings of 'free media' that exist among forum participants—the product of a process aimed at developing a relatively clear statement of shared principles while remaining inclusive. The result is a document that brings together several framings of 'free media', which can be traced to different historical and political trajectories. The most prominent of these is a *right to communicate* frame (cf. Hackett & Carroll, 2006): the Charter references article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on freedom of expression, and principle 1 reads 'We affirm that freedom of expression for everyone, the right to information and communication, and free access to knowledge are fundamental human rights'. Also prominent is a *democracy* frame, which emphasises the fundamental importance of free media for the proper functioning of democracy: principle 2 affirms that 'democratic information and communication is a fundamental condition in exercising democracy'. Included within this frame is also the notion that media should support pluralism and serve the general, public interest, as opposed to the narrow interests of commercial or state actors. As Hackett and Carroll (2006) also found, these are frames that circulate widely in the field of democratic media activism. The right to communicate frame has figured prominently in previous international mobilisations around media and communications issues, such as the Communication Rights in the Information Society campaign in the early 2000s and the New World Information and Communication Order debates in the 1970s and 1980s. Given the composition of the FMML organising committee, which strongly features policy-, development- and international solidarity NGOs, the prominence of these frames is not surprising.

Also present in the Charter, however, is what might be referred to as a *cultural diversity* frame. The Charter emphasises the importance of respecting the 'cultures, memories, histories and identities of the peoples of the world', stating that free media acknowledge the 'diversity of imaginations, identities and cultural expressions' and highlight 'other ways of living, other representations of the world'. This emphasis on respect for diversity is closely linked to a *transformative communication* frame, which emphasises the pedagogical role that free media

play in supporting intercultural dialogue, co-operation and mutual understanding: 'We practice new forms of human communication that are intercultural, horizontal, non-violent, open, decentralized, transparent, inclusive and shared'. The presence of these frames is testament to the FMML's close links to the WSF, within which ideals of horizontality, intercultural dialogue and respect for epistemic plurality have featured strongly. Finally, it is also possible to detect a *social justice* frame: a paragraph in the Charter affirms that 'our struggles are an essential part of the fight for human rights and the struggle against colonialism, occupation, patriarchy, sexism, racism, neoliberalism and all forms of oppression and fundamentalism'.

The presence of these different frames within the Charter is a consequence of efforts to develop a comprehensive statement that is inclusive of the numerous perspectives on free media that circulate within the FMML. While it may be true, as Bia Barbosa affirmed, that 'we were able to write a definition that everybody feels comfortable with' (interview with author, 2016), the Charter also reflects broader political differences within the FMML. Although multiple frames are present within the Charter, they do not occupy an equal position: the focus on communication rights is more prominent than the social justice frame. While the embeddedness of media activism within broader social justice struggles is acknowledged in the passage quoted above, this more radical language of struggle against oppression does not feature prominently in the rest of the Charter. Notable for its absence is any reference to capitalism or anti-capitalist struggles. While the Charter does discuss questions of political economy, it does so primarily in terms of cultural and linguistic commodification and homogenisation by the mainstream media, and counterposes the 'commercial values' of the mainstream media system to 'general interests and social values'. Beyond highlighting media activism's embeddedness in other struggles, the Charter does not really develop an analysis of the media's role in sustaining structures of oppression.

The dominance of a rights frame and relative marginalisation of a more radical social justice frame may have implications in terms of mobilisation. An outwards-facing collective identity focused on communication rights and democracy may be useful for mobilising institutional actors such as NGOs working on policy- and governance issues, and for some organisers this is a key aim. At the same time, the forum's difficulties in attracting alternative media producers and radical tech activists may be linked to the relative absence of a more radical social justice discourse. A key challenge is therefore to develop an outwards-facing collective identity that resonates with these constituencies. This, however, might run the risk of distancing more institutionalised actors such as development- and policy-oriented NGOs. As Stéphane Couture put it, 'we have a lot of discussion about communication rights and freedom of expression and it would be good to be more political in our discourse, but at the same time we might lose people' (interview with author, 2016). The dilemma that the FMML faces in terms of whether to develop a clearer and more political outwards-facing identity, which might help mobilise grassroots support among radical media activists, or to retain a more inclusive and moderate identity that arguably has wider appeal, is one that it shares with other activist networks. As in the case of the WSF, as well as more recent mobilisations like Occupy, openness and inclusivity facilitates connections and knowledge production among diverse actors, but the absence of a clear outwards-facing collective identity raises questions about the effectiveness of such activist formations.

5. Discussion

This article has been informed by the underlying question of whether the FMML can be considered an emergent social movement focused on media and technology issues. While it is possible to identify convergence around a plural definition of 'free media' and agreement about some core principles, it is unclear, given the diversity of actors involved and the very different contexts in which they operate, whether it is possible to construct a movement with a strong collective identity and unified strategy. Another question is whether this would be desirable. It is difficult to envisage a global-scale movement in any area of activism, let alone 'free media', that would not inevitably exclude certain actors and perspectives due to the impossibility of constructing a single collective identity that would resonate equally in different geographical, cultural and political contexts. Media activists in different parts of the world operate in very different conditions and face very different challenges, and it is important to acknowledge and respect these differences. The openness of the 'free media' identity arguably allows media activists in different contexts to adapt it to their local realities while maintaining a sense of connectedness to global struggles.

The question of whether 'free media' should become a unified movement based on a clearly delineated collective identity is further complicated by the embeddedness of media activism within broader social struggles (cf. Hackett & Carroll, 2006). A challenge that is quite peculiar to the field of media activism is that it does not have an identity-based constituency or *base* in the same way as other social movements do. Media activists are rarely *only* media activists—they often come from a background in other movements and have multiple identifications (Hackett & Carroll, 2006). Unsurprisingly, there is therefore no clear consensus among FMML participants on the question of 'are we part of social movements or are we ourselves a social movement?' (Mallory Knodel, interview with author, 2016). The two orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and many activists operate on both fronts without experiencing this as a contradiction. However, there can be instances where principles associated with 'free media' come into conflict with

other commitments. For example, as Mallory Knodel suggested, a commitment to non-corporate communication tools may come into conflict with a commitment to 'giving voice' to marginalised groups who lack the technical skills to use such tools (interview with author, 2016). At the FMML in Montreal, there was a controversy about whether the FMML, as a collective, should sign up to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. A key question here—which was not resolved in Montreal—was whether the FMML's stated opposition to colonialism and occupation extended to support for the Palestinian struggle. These brief examples underline how an analysis of media and technology-related issues cannot be separated from an analysis of broader structures of domination. Questions such as that of whether to support BDS cannot be resolved through an analysis of media and technology issues in isolation—it requires an analysis of the intersections of media activism with other social justice struggles. An understanding of media activism as a movement in its own right arguably risks losing sight of these intersections.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored collective identity formation within the FMML, considering the extent to which it can be conceptualised as an emergent 'free media' movement. Operating with an understanding of collective identity as both process and product (Flesher Fominaya, 2010), it has found that the plural and inclusive definition of 'free media' developed by the FMML has been useful for facilitating internal processes of collective identity formation but less effective when it comes to external mobilisation. This is both due to the varying meanings associated with 'free media' in different linguistic and cultural contexts, and the co-existence of multiple contending frames within the FMML. It is therefore unclear whether the FMML can develop into a global-scale 'free media' movement. However, given the diversity of actors involved, the complexity of the issues they address, and the embeddedness of media activism within broader struggles, such a movement would not necessarily be desirable. The FMML is still at an early stage and at this conjuncture its most important function is arguably to facilitate ongoing processes of collective identity formation among participants. This, importantly, involves not simply processes by which individuals come to identify with a broader collective, but complex processes of knowledge production concerning shared aims, principles and the broader social, economic and political contexts in which 'free media' operate. This article has identified a possible tension within the FMML between a right to communicate frame and a more radical social justice frame, and argued that while the former resonates with policy- and advocacy NGOs, the relative marginalisation of the latter might be an obstacle to mobilising grassroots support among radical tech activists, alternative media producers and social movement communicators. Although it may not be desirable for the FMML to abandon one of these frames in favour of the other, a more explicitly political analysis of the links between 'free media' and other social justice struggles would be helpful in terms of establishing a clearer sense of shared principles. Given the centrality of media technologies to the functioning of contemporary capitalism (Dean, 2009) and the media's role in maintaining other structures of oppression, such an analysis is both urgent and important.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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