The problem of history in digital activism: Ideological narratives in digital activism literature
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Abstract

The past decades have generated a wealth of literature on digital activism. Even so, the phenomenon has been little historicised. This paper engages in a deconstructionist exercise on historical references in digital activism literature towards exploring implicit meaning-making in a symbolic-interactionist tradition. It identifies four distinct narratives: 1) a technology narrative [activism as technology-driven]; 2) a communications narrative [activism on the basis of communication options]; 3) an online-off-line narrative [activism based on an online-off-line dichotomy]; and 4) an engagement narrative [activism based on its affordances for public engagement]. The paper argues that these narratives contribute to a distinct, polysemic, and paradoxical understanding of digital activism as a phenomenon that is technologically driven (technological determinism), and both distinct to and enmeshed with traditional activism. In doing so, this narrative analysis shows a range of underlying ideological assumptions in digital activism study and conceptualisation, which informs how the phenomenon is understood today.

Contents

Introduction

In October 2019, the Internet's fiftieth birth was widely celebrated, an event that received ample attention in extant media coverage. Even so, what precise ensembles of technologies are being celebrated remains somewhat contentious, an issue highlighted by Paloque-Bergès and Schafer (2019). 2019 marked the fiftieth birthday of the Advanced Research Projects Agency, specifically 29 October (ARPA/ARPAnet; Paloque-Bergès and Schafer, 2019). It was also the thirtieth birthday (12 March to be exact) of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, 2019) as a blueprint that jump-started the expansion of Internet connectivity, from the narrow world of institutions to broader publics and commercial entities in the mid-1990s. As such, which date designates the birth of the Internet very

much depends on how it is defined in the first place (Novak in Paloque-Bergès and Schafer, 2019), and that is a problem of history.

Despite this problem of history, historical perspectives on digital activism remain relatively rare [1]. History constitutes a significant way in understanding as well as defining and constructing prominent societal phenomena, particularly where historical narratives may (as per the symbolic-interactionist notion of reflexivity) be shaping the way in which the phenomenon is understood. In response to this issue, this paper questions in what ways the selection and description of digital activism history reflects social understandings and assumptions around it. It adopts a dual approach by drawing on symbolic interactionist meaning-making and engaging in a post-structuralist exercise (a confluence acknowledged by Hacking [2004] through his comparative work on Foucault and Goffman, and the complementary nature of archaeology and sociology). It questions the implicit meaning-making and labelling in the historicisation of digital activism in extant literature, suggesting that a set of meanings are accomplished through a set of differences in relation. By outlining the underlying narratives in the historicisation of digital activism (= labelling), this paper aims to deconstruct the definitional process and question the realities that are formed in indirect labelling processes (as per Foucault and Deleuze's [1977] ideas that theory is and becomes practice). It does so through a deconstruction of historical accounts and references in digital activism literature as part of a narrative reading. In doing so, this paper suggests that the historical framing of digital activism acts as a vignette for an ideological framing of the practice. It visualises these vignettes of implied understandings of digital activism through four narratives. This deconstructionist exercise is aimed to provide what Deleuze (1977, in an interview with M. Foucault) has described as theory as a "box of tools" in that it offers a set of lenses towards understanding implicit (ideological/stigmatised) labels of digital activism.

This paper is organised as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical context of the paper, first through a consideration of the social significance of history and narratives, and then narrative formation around digital activism in particular. I argue that historical references are powerful in the formation of narratives around phenomena that, like digital activism, are rapidly developing and where (despite rich scholarship) conceptual work is comparatively under-developed. Then, in the form of a methodological note, I will explain the origin and epistemological anchoring of this narrative reading. In the sections that follow, I will present and discuss two types of historical references emerging from the narrative reading: (1) digital activism on the timeline of Internet history; and (2) digital activism by prominent historic events. Within these two accounts, four narratives will be identified towards discussing existing definitional processes of the situation and deconstructing implied assertions in digital activism scholarship: (1) the technology narrative [digital activism on the basis of technological development]; (2) the online-off-line narrative [digital activism history based on its relationship to traditional activism]; (3) the communications type narrative [digital activism history based on communication type]; and (4) the engagement narrative [digital activism history based on its affordances for engagement]. This paper will argue that these labels lead to meaning-making of digital activism in terms of its distinction to traditional activism and the individual technologies the practice draws on technological determinism).

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Research context: Narrative formation & digital activism

The problem of history

Problems of history have been addressed by a range of scholars (most famously Jacques Derrida; Michel Foucault — particularly through his works on archaeology and language as discourse, *e.g.*, Foucault, 1989), for example in its capacity to create meaning, establish fact and truth through historicity, and frame narratives or assign labels through storytelling (or, in Foucauldian tradition,

discourse). The central power attributed to history here is its ability to shape contemporary reality. History does not merely depict a factual account of sequences. As such, it is never neutral, but constructs and prescribes certain realities based on how facts are chosen and organised [2]. This is, perhaps, best understood through the definitional process, also called the 'Thomas Theorem'. A key element in the twentieth century field of symbolic interactionism, it describes the notion that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (orig. Thomas and Thomas, 1928; *e.g.*, in Merton, 1995). Thus, historical storytelling constructs and consequently shapes reality, and therefore the most widely accepted birth date and age attributed to the Internet undoubtedly shape how it is viewed and understood today.

In the context of this paper, this notion will be used to explore narratives in the historicisation of digital activism, a phenomenon that can loosely be described as "political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics" (Karatzogianni, 2015) and by non-state actors [3]. A quick Web search on the history of digital activism reveals that, while its start is generally seen to have happened around the beginnings of the commercial Web in the early nineties, the exact date and activity that is acknowledged as the first instance of digital activism varies. For example, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Fuentes, 2019) mentions 'early experiments' in the 1980s, while according to Mashable Community Manager Meghan Peters (2011) the first incident of digital activism were consumer protests in response to privacy violations by Lotus Marketplace in 1990.

In comparison, several scholars state that it was the 1994 Zapatista movement's online activities (*e.g.*, Earl, *et al.*, 2010; Hands, 2011), although early works on online communities suggest that instances of digitally enabled activism may have occurred even earlier — most prominently Rheingold's works (2000; 1995) on virtual communities, subcultures, and (political) organisation on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL). Early hacker activities have also been seen as the start of digital activism by Karatzogianni (2015) who sets the start of what she describes as the first wave of digital activism later (1994), however. Indeed, Berners-Lee's (2019) description of the Web for the common good suggests that political uses of the Web were one of the earliest intended consequences of the technology (see, for example, the newsgroup example in the original proposal, Berners-Lee [1989]). Thus, the various ways in which the practice has been historically anchored suggests different notions of what it encompasses. Its history is, in essence, subject to the definition and scope of the phenomenon and the technologies implied in its use.

To some extent, this uncertainty arises from the relative youth of the concept and practice. Mainstream references to date suggest that digital activism is roughly a quarter of a century old. The earliest digital activism paper in the Scopus literature database out of a total of 4.500 articles was published in 1995 (from a systematic review conducted at the University of Sheffield by Suay Özkula, Paul Reilly and Jennifer Hayes), with the earliest paper classed by the researchers as relevant for digital activism study published in 1997, and the vast majority of papers post-2011 (post-Arab Spring) [note: the weighting does, however, undoubtedly influence their overall relevance]. In that sense, digital activism is a relatively young concept, though not necessarily a young phenomenon, for which most of the highly cited work has been generated post-2010. Even so, considering that (depending on definition) the Internet is about half a century old and digital activism is only about quarter of a century old, a wealth of literature has been generated in that time. In several ways, this makes the concept's historicisation and narration (a) significant, as digital activism is a literature-rich but comparatively conceptualisation-poor phenomenon, and (b) problematic, as its conceptualisation has developed alongside its definitional process.

The social & political role of narratives

In the study of social movements, narratives carry noteworthy potential. While, historically, narrative formation has been attributed great significance in the humanities, above all in language sciences (see Barthes, 1977; Davis, 2002), this interest has, in recent decades, expanded to various social science disciplines including politics, sociology, and history (Barthes, 1977) through what has

been called the "narrative turn" (*e.g.*, Czarniawska, 2004). In sociological study, for example, narratives are increasingly explored as "a social act and form of explanation, on storytelling as a social process, on life histories and 'accounts' as social objects for investigation, and on the narrative constitution of identity" [4]. Among these, historical narratives on political actions provide, above all, forms of explanation as they decide and archive how an event, movement, or phenomenon began, developed, concluded, and how it was perceived and judged over the course of its life. Political narratives (meaning narratives on politically oriented issues) in particular present "sociopolitical reality" as they act as a form of learning about the political world [5]. In fact, narratives have been seen as particularly relevant in social movements, as collective action frames depend highly on storytelling and narration (*e.g.*, Davis, 2002; Polletta, 1998; Olsen, 2014).

Stories themselves have an important role in society, as they do critical social work, often by reinforcing mainstream ideas, but also, at times, by challenging existing social notions (Selbin, 2010). They mirror the cultural views values and contests of specific places, times, and authors, and, as such, are socially meaningful in how society is understood and constructed. In fact, people rely on stories as a way of making sense of their surroundings, the world overall, and their own place in it (Selbin, 2010). Thus, historical storytelling about digital activism (particularly when scientific) has a significant impact on its existing understandings. Narrative, a significant subset of stories, is more than how a given issue is articulated, as it operates on two levels [6]: it is a communication phenomenon (which in itself is worth studying) and it also constitutes a specific orientation towards how social phenomena are understood and studied. As such, narratives are complex and dynamic as they reflect how social meanings shift [7].

Additionally, as formations that can be studied, narratives constitute data and, as approaches of reading data, also methods (Selbin, 2010). Thus, beyond their hermeneutic application, narratives carry significance for ontological and epistemological readings of social phenomena (see, for example, Czarniawska, 2004). In that sense, what the history of digital activism contains and how it is told not only depicts but also impacts how the phenomenon is understood, made sense of, and potentially applied and integrated into people's lives.

Historical narratives of digital activism

Existing terms and narratives around digital activism already reflect some assumptions, developments, and ambiguities in the field. Alone the breadth of descriptions and synonyms that have been used to describe digital activism highlight some of the ambiguities around it. The terms include cyberactivism (Carty and Onyett, 2006), online activism (Uldam, 2013), Internet activism (Tatarchevskiy, 2011), Web activism (Dartnell, 2006), net activism (Meikle, 2010), networked activism (Tufekci, 2013), analytic activism (Karpf, 2018), e-activism (Carty, 2010), mobile activism (Cullum, 2010), social media activism (Miller 2017), hashtag activism (Briones, *et al.*, 2016), interchangeable uses (*e.g.*, Earl, *et al.*, 2010), and, as applied here (as an umbrella term for pragmatic purposes), digital activism (Hands, 2011). While some (though not all) of these terms demarcate specific features or types of digitally enabled activism, they are often used synonymously. A similar trend can be observed in the different typologies of contemporary activism, groupings that are mostly based on tactics rather than conceptual distinctions (*e.g.*, Vegh, 2003; Earl, *et al.*, 2010). These ambiguities highlight the phenomenon's volatile evolution and openness to different frames and perspectives.

While synonyms are not unusual in themselves, in newer phenomena like digital activism, they can reflect existing ambiguities, conceptual obscurities, as well as the continuing development of the field — in essence, the polysemic nature of the phenomenon. For example, the term 'cyber' constitutes one of the earlier terms and has been attributed fantasy/sci-fi connotations (Lupton,

2014), while the terms social media and hashtag activism reflect post-2005 developments as they are tied to chronologically later technological innovations. Similarly, different phases of writing and the terminology used in them reflect distinct perspectives on the phenomenon. For instance, early praises of digital activism have later been labelled early utopian cyber-libertarianism (Columbus, 2010), whereas later texts that use increasingly more critical terms such as slacktivism, clicktivism, surveillance, and authoritarianism reflect more sceptical stances. Thus, wording and narrative descriptions reflect the development of and attitudes towards a given phenomenon, in particular in their early or rapid development phases (such as is the case with digital activism). In doing so, they inform and potentially shape how it is understood as narratives provide powerful and often little visible forms of explanation.

Nevertheless (or possibly because of pre-existing ambiguities), histories and historicisations of digital activism remain scarce [8]. Some histories exist for geographically limited areas or particular types/waves of the new activism (for an overview, see Kaun and Uldam, 2018). These include, for example, Gerbaudo's (2017) periodisation of two waves of socio-political protest (= selected waves of activism), Postill's (2014) historicisation of Internet activism in Malaysia (= a geographically boundaried history of activism), Schrock's (2016) history of civic hacking (= a subset or type of digital activism), and Karatzogianni's (2015) four waves of digital activism 1994–2014 (= the most comprehensive historical work). This paper adopts a different approach. Rather than recounting digital protest history or reviewing historical narratives in certain areas or of specific types, this paper deconstructs historical narratives embedded across a range of scholarly contributions. In doing so, this paper joins Gerbaudo (2017) and Kaun and Uldam (2018) in their critical explorations of how digital activism has been described and constructed over the years, and follows post-structuralist tradition in deconstructing structure and myth.

The next section will outline how these historical references of digital activism have been collected and analysed.

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Methodological note

This paper has evolved from a literature collection conducted for a doctoral thesis (2012–2016). As such, it is not the result of extensive empirically designed literature study, as is the case in systematic reviews or meta-analyses. Instead, the paper results from the collection of 50 articles and book chapters containing brief historical references that were found in a collection of more than 300 texts on digital activism that were consulted for the dissertation. While initially the aim was to review literature on the definitions, conceptualisations and perspectives on digital activism, the historical references showed relevance due to the apparent ambiguities and selectiveness (= underlying narratives). These references were therefore isolated and coded using Nvivo towards a deconstructive process and narrative reading. The codes were based on the start and length of the timelines, prominent events and distinctions in the development of the phenomenon, as well as technological and conceptual differentiations. The guiding question for this enquiry was in what ways the selection and description of digital activism history reflects social understandings and assumptions around the phenomenon.

While the selection of papers covered a wide array of arguments and ideological assumptions on digital activism, the papers were not coded as a whole. Instead, the historical references were isolated based on the notion that narratives constitute forms of knowing in themselves (see Czarniawska, 2004; Hardy and Bryman, 2004). As such, it was the underlying assumptions and views in the phenomenons's historicisation (second order readings), rather than the directly articulated views that were of interest here. This choice was made based on the value of narratives, as explained by Czarniawska [9]:

> What is considered a vice in science — openness to
> competing interpretations — is a virtue in narrative. This
> openness means that the same set of events can be
> organized around different plots.

It is, in that sense, the "reality of the speech" (*i.e.*, the plot that is driven) rather than the truthfulness or accuracy of the events that is analysed in narratives [10]. Narratives, even in scientific literature, are, in that regard, not merely factual, but normative as they order events or data from a particular perspective [11]. This idea is most famously incorporated in Hayden White's (1973) claim that there is no such thing as history (in the sense of realist depictions of social reality), but only historiography, as histories are not 'found' but put together in selected narratives (also see Hardy and Bryman, 2004). In symbolic-interactionist tradition, this means that there is not (necessarily) a single definition of a situation, but several competing definitions. As such, it was the ordering and selection of historical references and the assertions made in them that were of interest in this study.

Initially, these references were coded through a narrative reading of "explication", meaning a naïve or semantic reading in an effort to understand what a text says (Hardy and Bryman, 2004, based on Hernadi, Eco), in this case about the history of digital activism. Based on the selection and description of events, the narrative reading was then, however, extended to include "explanation", meaning a critical reading of events as a way of understanding not only what was said, but how it was said (Hardy and Bryman, 2004, based on Eco, and Silverman and Torode) towards extracting what in semiotic analyses has been described as second order readings. This interpretive reading was not derived from a linguistic analysis here, but, instead, from a critical reading of the contextual descriptions and implied assertions, and the overall, often unstated meta-frame or worldview shaping specific claims and narratives. One example is the selection and description of successful digital actions. Here, the descriptions were coded around which events were selected (*i.e.*, what was said) as well as how success was described, for instance the migration of protest coverage into non-digital spheres and formats (*i.e.*, how it was said). Thus, in a broader Barthesque (1977) tradition, this paper offers a narrative reading of not only what historical examples denote about digital activism, but also what they connote, and consequently the myths they create (= secondary signification).

While efforts were made to produce a consistently coded narrative analysis, the arguments presented here did not emerge from a dataset specifically collected for the purpose of this narrative reading. This paper is, in that regard, not claimed as an empirical contribution, but a post-structuralist endeavour and, as such, a critical theoretical reflection on extant literatures and an attempt to construct a heuristic typology through a smaller scale (in data size due to brief references, rather than number of papers) qualitative narrative reading of elements that through bricolage form narratives. While historical references and brief historical overviews do not constitute what is traditionally understood as a story, they engage in storytelling through bricolage. Bricolage has been defined in different ways, but I am using it here as per Selbin's (2010) description as the creation of a new whole (*i.e.*, a new story/narrative) by re-using existing pieces or materials — in this case selective historical references. Selbin [12] describes this process as follows:

> People, then, are likely to construct a revolutionary
> bricolage, a vocabulary of words and concepts from a
> variety of sources forged by people into some sort of
> practical ideology with which they confront the inequities
> and exigencies of their time and place, crafting new
> stories, new visions out of old, while retaining important
> contextual links to the past. (...) [They] provide a picture of
> the world as it was, as it is, and as it could and should be.

Narratives constitute a significant aspect in how such bricolage stories manifest, as they embed and/or challenge social norms, attitudes, certain logics, as well as socio-political perspectives. Thus, through the practice of bricolage, collections of smaller scale materials become relevant factors through which stories on phenomena such as digital activism are told and therefore become socio-political reality. These underlying realities will be outlined in the next section.

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Historicising digital activism

In a first order reading, the narrative analysis showed that, within the selection of consulted papers, historical references to digital activism were typically made in one of two types of accounts: (1) on the timeline of Internet history; and (2) by prominent historic examples or events explored in scholarly literature.

A history of digital activism on the timeline of Internet history

The first account type starts with what is often considered the 'birth' of the Internet in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and takes digital activism through the different stages of technological innovation. In doing so, this history illustrates how new technological developments have allowed digital activism to develop and change. Many scholars refer to the first event in this Internet history as the development of the ARPA by the U.S. government's Department of Defence (*e.g.*, Lindgren, 2013; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). The government-funded project was created for military technology purposes and developed over time to become the ARPAnet, a decentralised communications system, deployed almost exclusively between governmental and academic institutions, and the forerunner of the contemporary Internet (Kidd, 2003). APRAnet became the first network, and with the ground-breaking Mosaic browser it became accessible to wider audiences in the early 1990s (Nielsen, 2010; Scholz, 2010).

Several scholars describe that change in access in the 1990s as a new chapter of Web history (Brodock, 2010; Nielsen, 2010), which turned the Internet into a global and publicly accessible network. Aside from the widening access to the Web, several scholars have described this Web of the 1990s as the commercial or privatised Web (*e.g.*, Kidd, 2003), according to Scholz (2010) a phase of information that was followed by a phase of interaction. He represents this early Internet as a "utopian place" [13] for activists in that it allowed for alternative politics, citizen journalism, and thereby gave users more autonomy [14]. In retrospective, the Web of the 1990s has been called Web 1.0, a reference to an early stage of the Internet that was predominantly marked by static Web sites and one-way communication. The term followed as a precursor for Web 2.0, which was used to describe a phase of the Web that offered more dynamic Web applications and interactive features, most famously what is known as social media today. Scholz describes this later phase as the "social media, customisation, and the participatory turn" [15], a new phase offering more interaction and participation [16]. This phase continues today.

Overall, digital activism scholars agreed in their descriptions on these two (non-commercial and commercial Web) or three (non-commercial Web, Web 1.0, Web 2.0) phases of Web history, although there were some notable differences in the perception of their boundaries. Some scholars did not include the military technology ARPA phase. Those who did, generally saw the start of the Web (and therefore the origin of digital activism) in the late 1950s (*e.g.*, Kidd, 2003) or the 1960s (*e.g.*, McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Scholz, 2010) and its end or transformation into a new phase, a phase where activists could use the Web for the first time, in the early 1990s (*e.g.*, Brodock, 2010). The switch from the second to the third phase is somewhat less clear. In general, the switch indicates a transition from the more one-way communication Web 1.0 into the more interactive Web 2.0. However, while interactive digital technologies had existed already for some time, they became

a part of the mass market only around 2006 (Hands, 2011). Thus, the participatory turn is typically seen to have happened around the mid-2000s. Web 3.0, a semantic Web that is based on streaming and influence, but whose definition and start are contentious, has rarely been picked up among digital activism scholars as yet, (exception: Barassi and Treré, 2012), at least within the timeline of this study; thus the digital activism history on the spectrum of Web history has been limited to the pre-Web history, Web 1.0, and Web 2.0. Those differences demonstrate the complex but also chaotic and distributed ways in which the Internet has developed [17] and the difficulties in historicising complex and ambiguous technologies as well as phenomena based on these, such as digital activism, as they are developing. They also display the application of a technological lens for understanding the broader development of a type of activism for which no discernible practices have existed in the first few decades of what has been framed to be its history.

As such (in a second order reading), these types of accounts construct digital activism as a practice following technological invention, a form of technological determinism. The phases of digital activism here are distinguished by the changes in technology or technological opportunities for activism rather than digital activism activity or practice. In doing so, they depict digital activism as a primarily technological phenomenon, rooted in and emergent from technologies. This stands in contrast with understandings of digital activism as a social practice that spans online as well as off-line activities (*e.g.*, Karatzogianni, 2015; Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2013; Karpf, 2010), as well as early forms of digitally-enabled activism that did not rely on new social technologies (*e.g.*, Rheingold's work).

Other issues lie in the use of the term "digital" for activism. Digital technologies already existed much earlier than digital activism, and the Internet itself has been around since the 1960s. What is typically referred to as digital activism here is based on the commercial Web or Web 1.0, which started in the 1990s. This means that *digital* activism as a term is a fairly (if not too) broad notion, considering that a lot of literature has been concerned with the more recent activism that is based on its interactive features (Web 2.0). So, what is called digital activism typically relates to activism since Web 1.0 or, if not more so, Web 2.0. These ambiguities raise questions about the alleged phases and boundaries of digital activism. They also highlight that digital activism has often been conceptualised alongside technological development (regardless of its application in practice), an expression of technological determinism.

A history of digital activism on the timeline of events

The second narrative of digital activism history considers events and examples that have frequently been covered in scholarly literature and have therefore become markers of digital activism history. This can be described as an event-based scholarly history. These milestones of the digital activism calendar typically include (in a first order reading) the Zapatista movement's Internet use in the early 1990s (*e.g.*, Earl, *et al.*, 2010; Hands, 2011; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Van Laer, 2010; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010), the World Trade Organisation protests in the late 1990s (*e.g.*, Bennett, 2004; Meikle, 2010; Polletta, 2013; Uldam, 2013), the anti-war protests around the Iraq war (*e.g.*, Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Scholz, 2010; Van Laer, 2010) including what has been called Iran's "Twitter revolution" [18], and more recently the Arab Spring (*e.g.*, Castells, 2012; Mason, 2013). This history starts considerably later with the emergence of the commercial Web in the 1990s omitting earlier uses of the Web for research and academia.

The earliest of those markers — as well as one of the most popular ones in early digital activism literature — was the movement activity of the Zapatista in the early 1990s. Many early digital activism scholars mention the Zapatistas' early activity as the first relevant movement using the Web (*e.g.*, Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). In 2003, Garrido and Halavais dedicated an entire chapter to the Zapatistas' digital activism and called them "[t]he most widely cited example of the way the new dynamics of social networks interplay" [19] at the time [20]. Reasons for their popularity have been their extensive Web uses at a very early stage of the Internet for mobilisation (Garrido and Halavais, 2003) and hacktivism (Vegh, 2003), their use of global networks (Hands,

2011), as well their perceived great effects on off-line activity such as the wide online circulation of a contentious report on mainstream media. Thus, the Zapatistas' activity was the earliest use of digital activism that became popularised to the extent that it was picked up off-line and by traditional media outlets.

The chronologically next event that received wide scholarly coverage are the Seattle WTO (short for World Trade Organisation) protests in 1999 (*e.g.*, Bennett, 2004; Cullum, 2010; Kavada, 2010; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Nielsen, 2010; Polletta, 2013; Uldam, 2013), also known as the "Battle of Seattle" [21]. The Seattle protests were initially a reaction to the WTO ministerial conference but soon also targeted other bodies representing economic globalisation such as the International Monetary Fund, and World Bank [22]. They have also been used as examples as part of the anti-globalisation movement or Global Justice Movement (*e.g.*, Kavada, 2010; Vegh, 2003). Alongside the street protests, protesters used the Web extensively for mobilisation and online direct action. For instance, protesters conducted online attacks against the WTO by highjacking and faking WTO Web sites, and, as a response to the WTO shutting down fake WTO Web sites such as www.gatt.org, the release of a parody software called Reamweaver [23].

As part of the WTO protests, a further onus has been placed on Indymedia. The Independent Media Center (IMC), also known as Indymedia, was founded as a response the imbalanced media coverage during the protests, and offered alternative perspectives [24] via the portal www.indymedia.org. During the protests, the Web site had 1.5 million hits, and within less than a year more than 30 Indymedia centres were created [25]. Indymedia have been used as an example of citizen journalism, open source production, and alternative online politics by a variety of authors (*e.g.*, Bennett, 2004; Carty and Onyett, 2006; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Meikle, 2010; Scholz, 2010; Uldam, 2013). The popularity of the networked platform has been seen in its provision of new real-time news with multimedia, user-generated content, resource links and options of interaction, as well as for being an alternative due to its non-hierarchical production independently from the state and traditional media (Kidd, 2003). As with the Zapatista case, this event of digital activism was typically depicted as an example for the scale, wide spread, and effect of the protest actions, in which digital technologies played a significant role, but where off-line results were deemed either desirable or particularly powerful. Unlike the Zapatista case, this example of digitally enabled protest showed a more complex protest landscape, in which actions were distributed across online and off-line spaces.

Following the Zapatista movement and the Seattle protests, a few other events have shown popularity in scholarly literature based on their extensive or innovative uses of new media, such as the Word Social Forum in 2002 (Kidd, 2003; Vegh, 2003), citizen journalism and blogging and the mobilisation of street protests during the Iraq war in response to the Bush regime in 2003 (Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Scholz, 2010; Van Laer, 2010), the development of new movements surrounding the Iraq war protests such as MoveOn (Earl, *et al.*, 2010; Kahn and Kellner, 2004), and activism surrounding U.S. President Obama's election campaign in 2008 (Cullum, 2010). In 2009, digital activism gained renewed attention through arguably some of the biggest events in digital activism history: Iran's Twitter revolution in 2009 [26], the Egypt uprisings (Columbus, 2010), the Occupy movement (*e.g.*, Juris, 2012), and the subsequent Arab Spring and global revolts from 2010 (Castells, 2012; Mason, 2013; and others).

These prominent examples can be broadly split into three streams or generations of digital activism: The millennium phase (circa 1998–2004), the mid-years (circa 2005–2008) and the recent digital revolutions (circa 2009–2014) [similar to Karatzogianni's phases, 2015]. The millennium years are demarcated by a dominant coverage of the potential and use of Web sites or e-mail and therefore mostly one-way communication (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002). In comparison, the mid-years increasingly include the then-new social media platforms and respectively analyse two-way communication and particularly their potential for collaborative digital activism that draws more on user-generated contents (as per Bennett and Segerberg's [2012] description of collective and

connective action). More recent literature goes a step further and includes the new digital revolutions that primarily started with the Arab Spring and have displayed a wider use of smart phones and video technologies but also a much stronger effect on *off-line* politics through street protests that have been mobilised with digital means (*e.g.*, Karatzogianni, 2015; Castells, 2012; Hill, 2013; Mason, 2013).

Most of those events and examples have attracted attention because of their then innovative uses of new technologies, which is often related to the new possibilities afforded by emerging technologies. While the technological history of digital activism has shown *what can be done* with digital activism in terms of technical possibilities, prominent examples and events have shown *what has been done* to a notable scale. Thus, this history focuses less on technological development (technological determinism), but instead on successes of digital activism — a normative view with a particular focus on media ecologies. These successes are often determined by how digital activities are combined with or culminate in *off-line* actions as part of a hybrid media system, a media ecology that combines traditional and new media engagements and their logics (see Chadwick, 2013). This notion both contradicts the first account (which is more technologically driven) and suggests a normative view of digital activism in relation to traditional social movement activity, suggesting that digitally enabled or supported activism can only be understood in relation to pre-existing forms of activism.

Narratives in the historicisation of digital activism

The two histories demonstrate that digital activism is as yet a fairly young phenomenon whose definition and placement is not quite cast. They do, however, suggest certain approaches and underlying assumptions towards digital activism in their implicit labelling. In particular, they represent polysemic understandings of the phenomenon's development through four narratives: as part of the Internet history accounts (1) the technology narrative; and (2) the communications type narrative, and as part of the milestones account; (3) the online-off-line narrative; and (4) the engagement narrative.

Four narratives

The technology narrative presents the history of digital activism on the basis of technological development. In doing so, it suggests that digital activism is essentially a technological practice in that it is both derived from and driven by digital innovation. As such, it represents the increasingly less popular view that digital activism is a distinctly technological phenomenon, and, in doing so, implies technological determinism. The communications type narrative is equally based on technological advancements. However, instead of incorporating early Internet history as part of the digital activism history, this narrative focusses on the changes in digital communication. Here, digital activism is understood through changes in the type and direction of communicative potential in protest activity, *i.e.*, the one-way potential of Web 1.0 and the two-way model of Web 2.0, also known as the return to communicative conventions and knowledge creation before the invention of print publishing (the "Gutenberg hypothesis", see Starkman, 2013).

The milestones narratives partially conflict with these assertions. The online-off-line narrative presents the history of digital activism as based on its relationship to traditional activism, meaning as part of the wider hybrid media system. As such, it assumes a much stronger tie of digital activism to off-line activity. However, it also implies that digital activism is either a precursor to or a lesser/smaller form of traditional activism as its success is presented in its off-line coverage. The relevance of digital activism activities is strongly tied to its coverage (and therefore success) a) online; and b) off-line (*e.g.*, through traditional media channels). The engagement narrative, while

also tied to the affordances and success of digitally enabled action, is somewhat different as it recounts digital activism history based on its affordances for engagement specifically. As with the communications type narrative, it is grounded in the opportunities afforded by digital activism, but success here is tied to its use by individuals, their participation, engagement, and therefore their opportunities for user-generated contents. As such, this narrative is embedded more with literatures on the libertarian and empowering potential of digitally enabled protest activities.

Table 1: Four narratives in digital activism histories.	
Internet history accounts	***the technology narrative*** = history of digital activism on the basis of technological development (incl. early Web history).
	the communications narrative = history of digital activism on the basis of communication options.
Milestones accounts	***The online-off-line narrative*** = history of digital activism in relation to traditional (off-line) activism.
	the engagement narrative = history of digital activism in relation to its affordances.

Four narratives

The two histories highlight a few underlying assertions and controversies in digital activism research. The first type of historical accounts shows that digital activism scholarship is strongly tied to and based on technological development. This suggests that digital activism as a concept and practice is dependent on the state of digital innovation. On the other hand, many of the listed examples have been praised for their integrated uses of digital and traditional activism, which raises questions as to whether digital activism indeed is or even should be explored as an immanently digital practice. While both historical timelines of digital activism place a strong focus on technological affordances, there is a relevant difference here. That difference relates to an understanding of digital activism as either a purely or predominantly technological phenomenon. That offers two potential avenues for the exploration of digital activism. If digital activism should be explored as a primarily technological phenomenon, then the question remains as to which technology it represents (*i.e.*, Web 1.0 or Web 2.0) as the historical milestones of digital activism such as the Battle of Seattle in 1999 or the Arab Spring from 2010 do not necessarily align with the major technological changes in 1995 (commercial Web) and 2005 (the interactive Web). If digital activism is not primarily about the use of digital technologies, then this suggests that digital activism as a term and concept is problematic. In that case, it remains to be explored what is meant by what is commonly called digital activism.

On an analytical level, historical references largely suggest that newer, Internet-enabled forms of activism are distinctly, but not solely, technological. This paradox poses a conceptual problem. Extant literature on digital activism includes both entirely and (to different degrees) partially digitalised activities, suggesting that the boundaries between online and off-line, digital and non-

digital are blurring, if not merging (in line with recent literature that confirms this). This raises questions about what features primarily distinguish digital from traditional activism. It therefore remains to be questioned whether the digital prefix constitutes a valid differentiation (beyond being an added descriptor for the rhizomatic nature of communication and therefore allowing for increased virality). This paradox further suggests that the distinction between digital and traditional activism is not necessarily analytical but (as also suggested in Gerbaudo, 2017) ideological, a label rather than analytical distinction.

This is demonstrated in the online-off-line narrative. Here, digital activism activities are presented as relevant when they have exceeded their digital potential and produced substantive off-line activities or changes in social or institutional policies. This perspective suggests that digital activism is not merely different, but also inferior to traditional activism, defined by both the presences and absences of traditional forms of activism. Thus, the analytical distinction of digital and non-digital activism is to an extent based on an ideological claim around their comparative value (perhaps even a stigmatic view).

An alternative view is presented in the communications and engagement narratives. Here, relevant cases of digital activism are drawn based on either the type of communication (narrative 3) or the opportunities for engagement (narrative 4) they offer. In doing so, they also depend on technological distinction, however. In a first level reading, these narratives denote technological developments and successful instances of activism. However, in a second level reading they connote specific albeit implicit distinctions and hierarchies in understandings of digital activism. In combination, these narratives therefore show some problematic, polysemic, and also competing understandings of digital activism as it has developed over the past decades.

Table 2: Understandings of digital activism across four narratives.		
	Narrative	**Understanding of digital activism**
Internet history accounts	*technology narrative*	• D.A. as technology-driven; • D.A. as a distinctly technological phenomenon & practice. → **Implies technological determinism**
	communications narrative	• D.A. based on options for protest communication; • D.A. rooted in changes in the type and direction of communicative

		potential in protest activity (*e.g.*, Web 1.0 & Web 2.0; excludes early Internet history) → **Implies *a degree* of technological determinism based on the effects of certain technological changes**
Milestones accounts	*online-off-line narrative*	• D.A. as distinct from traditional (off-line) forms of activism; • D.A. as inferior to traditional forms of activism. → **Implies an online-off-line dichotomy & applies a normative approach**
	engagement narrative	• D.A. based on its affordances for public engagement → **Applies a normative approach**

Conclusion

This paper discussed ideological views of digital activism via four narratives identified in a narrative analysis of historical descriptions of the phenomenon (see Table 2). The combination of the two types of accounts and the four identified narratives altogether suggests a range of underlying assertions about digital activism: digital activism is a distinctly technological phenomenon; the relevance of digital activism activities is strongly tied to its coverage (and therefore success) online and on traditional media channels; digital activism is understood through its communicative potential, *i.e.*, the one-way potential of Web 1.0 and the two-way model of Web 2.0, and based on that, digital activism is understood in relation to the potential it offers for individuals. It was argued that these narratives contribute to a distinct and polysemic but also paradoxical and ideological

understanding of digital activism as a phenomenon that is technology-based and driven, and different from, if not inferior, to traditional activism, but whose differentiation from traditional activism is blurred and analytically questionable given new trends and conflicting narratives in scholarship (a contrast to technological determinism). As such, these narratives display competing (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) labels.

These paradoxes represent not necessarily analytical nuances, but underlying ideological and perhaps even stigmatised views in digital activism in a definitional process, and therefore influence and shape how the phenomenon is understood today. In particular, these narratives depict two distinct ideological views towards digital activism: (1) an underlying technological determinism (an argument also recently driven by Gerbaudo, 2017; and Kaun and Uldam [2018] in their considerations of the prevalence of media or technological determinism); and (2) a normative perspective on media hybridity in which new digital technologies carry a comparatively lower value. Thus, the paper reaffirms assertions made by literature on narration and storytelling in that the historical references have shown not to be neutral, but, instead, selective and driven by a range of underlying perspectives on the phenomenon, meaning that they are ideological. They endorse certain values and depict assumptions and struggles of a given time, but in doing so, they also shape the phenomenon through implicit labelling processes.

As a way forward, scholars may wish to approach the history of digital activism on the basis of wider activism history rather than rooted in technology (but omitting normative approaches). After all, digital communications are not the first change in how activism has been communicated. In fact, early Internet history (such as the 1950–1980 period) has had little influence on activist practice. In doing so, historical storytelling in the field would be rooted in the history of the practice rather than technology, and, consequently, abstain from implied technological determinism as well as more rigid differentiations between traditional and digitally enabled forms of activism — by now contested labels.

Beyond historical storytelling, scholars will hopefully try to further explore digital activism as a concept and a set of practices in its own right, not as a phenomenon originating from its sets of relations to either a specified technology (technological determinism) or traditional activism (= an 'ideal' or romanticised form of activism). They need to move away from dominant definitions of situations in which the potential of digital activist practice is entangled with its positioning or even 'power' relative to pre-existing forms of activism, and extricate the phenomenon from early labelling processes that may be both explicit (*e.g.*, clicktivism) and implicit (*e.g.*, underlying narratives in historical references). Thus, they need omit implicit technologically determinist perspectives and implicit promotions and constructions of traditional activist practices as an unachieved ideal, and explore newly developing meanings (as underlying structures are not secure and subject to development).

While this paper is not based on a full empirical study and is (due to the period of the literature collection) limited to a timeline that does not cover post-2014 writings extensively, the findings of this review exercise suggest extant scholarship has operated on a range of normative assumptions. Thus, future research would benefit from a wider scale review of such references for generating an understanding of how scholarly narratives have depicted and shaped notions of digital activism over time. This includes above all more recent works on far right and populist activism (prominent works include Gerbaudo, 2017, 2014; Postill, 2018; Schradie, 2019) as well as substantial feminist activist work spanning post-#MeToo views of digital activism. While these kinds of activism were partially already present at the time, they were not as prevalent, as supported through populist governments, featuring as strongly in scholarly writing, or making the historical references that were sought here.

Above all, it remains for future research to further determine what is conceptually implied in the term digital activism and what assertions are made with regards to its practice. In particular, the narratives presented here call for a wider discussion and clarification on several digital activism controversies, including (1) the scope of digital activism as an immanently, predominantly, or

necessarily digitally oriented phenomenon; and (2) the variety of factors or measures that determine its successes (*e.g.*, virality, off-line protest, or the coverage of digital activist practices in traditional media logics). 🅵🅼

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Notes

1. See Kaun and Uldam, 2018, p. 2,100.

2. Foucault, 1989, p. 237.

3. Karatzogianni, 2015, p. 1.

4. Davis, 2002, pp. 3–4.

5. McLaughlin, *et al.*, 2019, p. 157.

6. See Mumby, 1993, p. 3.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Kaun and Uldam, 2018, p. 2,100; exception: Karatzogianni, 2015.

9. Czarniawska, 2004, p. 7.

10. Czarniawska, 2004, p. 8.

11. Curtis, 1994, pp. 424–425, partially based on Hayden White; also mirrored in the field of sociology of scientific knowledge, *e.g.* Thomas Kuhn or Michel Foucault's works.

12. Selbin, 2010, p. 41.

13. Trebor Scholz, 2010. "Infrastructure: Its transformations and effect on digital activism," In: Mary Joyce (editor). *Digital activism decoded — The new mechanics of change*. New York: International Debate Education Association, pp. 17–32.

14. Scholz, 2010, p. 21.

15. Scholz, 2010, pp. 17–32.

16. Scholz, 2010, p. 21.

17. Lupton, 2014, p. 10.

18. Evgeny Morozov, 2009. "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter revolution'," *Dissent*, volume 56, number 4, pp. 10–14.

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20. Garrido and Halavais, 2003, p. 165.

21. Jennifer Earl, Katrina Kimport, Greg Prieto, Carly Rush and Kimberly Reynoso, 2010. "Changing the world one Web page at a time: Conceptualising and explaining Internet activism," *Mobilization*, volume 15, number 4, p. 425.

22. *E.g.*, McCaughey and Ayers, 2003, p. 5.

23. Vegh, 2003, pp. 67–77.

24. See Scholz, 2010, p. 23.

25. Meikle, 2010, p. 371.

26. Morozov, 2009; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011, p. 197.

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Editorial history