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Hybrid Media Activism: Ecologies, Imaginaries, Algorithms

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Review of
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Emiliano Treré begins his new book with a story. More than ten years ago, at the start of his Ph.D. research, he participated in an interdisciplinary seminar online. It was led by a professor of social movement theories who quickly dismissed the media's role in collective action as merely instrumental, as tools or resources 'to fulfill specific political objectives.' Spurred by this experience, Treré set about to challenge the communicative reductionism within academic research and instead prove that communications in the hands of social movements play a significant role in politics, and as importantly, that social movements are key research loci for understanding the role of communications technologies in digital societies. In the decade since, Treré has collaborated with colleagues in centres around the world to produce a number of empirically rich, and theoretically astute interdisciplinary studies, and as importantly, reinvigorated discussions of social movements and contemporary communications through thoughtful interventions in many different academic and popular forums.

This volume represents Treré's own synthesis. It is based on extensive research in Italy, Spain and Mexico about the global cycle of mass protests of 2008-2012 against the failures of neo-liberal political systems. He begins with a critique of three spectres, *technological instrumentalism*, *technological determinism*, and *functionalism*, that still haunt many studies; and five reductionist research fallacies that arise from them, which include singular focuses on: the digital/virtual/cyberspace (*spatial dualism*), one medium, the newest technology (*technological presentism*), and what is measurable and quantifiable (*technological visibility*); and finally, an uncritical characterization of corporate platform uses (*fallacy of alternativeness*). Working in conversation with practice theory, he then constructs an argument for a new analytical approach and conceptual vocabulary. Three key terms, "Ecologies," "Imaginaries" and "Algorithms," structure the book's three sections, all of which begin with a consideration and synthesis of previous theories. Treré then applies the theories and addresses the research fallacies within each case study. In conclusion, he argues that researchers consider five new sets of research optics based on the hybrid communications practices of contemporary social movements that he observed.

Treré's volume will be valuable for scholars across a number of different disciplines interested in the media-movement dynamic. He provides an all-too-rare cross-country comparison of three national contexts (the Italian Anomalous student Wave of 2008, the Spanish 15M anti-austerity movement of 2011, and the Mexican #YoSoy132 mobilizations of 2012 for democratization of the media and electoral processes), none of which have received sufficient attention in the dominant English-language academic journals. The studies include both counterhegemonic contenders and two cases of political actors working to maintain dominant control of the media-politics nexus (the Italian Five Star movement and a PRI-government spy operation in Mexico).

Treré findings challenge all five reductive fallacies, as in each social movement protest, activists employed a complex, and often unpredictable hybrid of old and new, physical and digital, human and non-human, and corporate and alternative technologies to determine, develop and diffuse proposals to allies, multiple publics, dominant media and state actors; and at the same time, to cultivate, articulate and reproduce collective visions and identities. Technological presentism and technological visibility, which only examine what's publicly visible and quantifiable on the front stage of contention, are especially prevalent in current studies of social media and movements. Addressing these two fallacies is thus particularly

important as they only examine and not within the longer simmering processes of change within and between movement participants and associated social actors on the back stages. I return to the importance of this latter dimension below.

In addition, the cautionary studies of de-compositional forces are particularly salient given the rising visibility of state and corporate surveillance practices, and of social media mobilizations of right-wing populist movements. In Italy, the Five Star movement is now part of the governing right-wing coalition. Their rapid success, Treré reports, is partly due to their appropriation of the lessons, energies and imaginations of the Anomalous student movement, from which they effectively co-opted practices of citizens' digital participation, but under a highly centralized and authoritarian leadership. In Mexico, a government spy operation of the long-ruling PRI used bots and fake videos for propaganda purposes and for the undermining of dissent. Since then a number of Mexican bloggers, journalists, and tech collectives have had to develop tactics of algorithmic resistance. In Spain, Treré argues, the 15M/Indignados movement avoided these fates, for a time, by getting out ahead of state and rightwing populist forces with a sophisticated techno-politics which combined online and offline dimensions, pragmatic and tactical use of corporate social media, the creation of a multiplicity of producer-controlled information and media groups, and extensive training of participants.

These last two cases provide a necessary bridge between the 2008 - 2012 protest cycle and contemporary concerns. In the third section called "Algorithms" Treré first reviews the literatures about the increasing use of algorithms in political practice. Countering the reductionist spectres that have re-emerged in studies of big data and social media, in which the agency of social actors is disregarded, he underscores the response of community groups, activists and media-makers, who, like the Spanish Indignados, are not only resisting the worst abuses of algorithms, but creatively adapting within the digital terrain for their own collective imaginaries and media power. He then calls for a new frame that combines political economy and critical data studies with attention to the different practices and imaginaries invested in algorithms.

It's been more than ten years since that disappointing on-line seminar about social movements that starts the book. In the interim, the two problems Treré set out to address have been partially remedied; there is far more academic recognition of the value of researching social movement practice, and more studies that examine their significant, complex media-movement dynamics. Nevertheless, many lines of enquiry still remain. If we were to convene another on-line seminar on movement-media mobilization perhaps guided by Professor Trere, I would suggest two.

The first builds on a lacuna highlighted by Treré and Paolo Gerbaudo in the special issue they edited for this journal -- the neglect of research about "collective identity building in social media activism" (2015, 865). As they point out, "far from having disappeared from the horizon of contemporary activism, collective identity still constitutes a pivotal question for activists and scholars alike" (866). Although many scholars, including Trere and Gerbaudo, have pointed out how digital media facilitate the "proliferation of "numerous collective "we's" and allow them to make claims for recognition in the political process" (870), very few academic studies in communications or politics have carefully examined the

negotiation of difference within the 2008-2012 cycle of protest movements (Postill et al, 2013, Wittkower, 2012, Kilibarda, 2012, Gilio-Whitaker, 2015), or since. This neglect is becoming ever more critical as data and algorithms, designed to deliver individual consumers to advertisers are instead being weaponized by right wing populist movements to reinforce division and fragmentation, along many of the vectors of natural and imposed identities systematized within capitalist society, such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and immigration status (Costanza-Chock, 2018a).

However, a growing number of contemporary social and political movements are utilizing social media and other communications practices to address the oppression and exploitation targeting their own subject positions, to construct bridges for creating new forums of critique and solidarity across movements (Barker, 2015, Wood, 2015, Duarte, 2017, Friedman, 2017, Black Lives Matter, 2017, Lewis et al, 2018, Costanza-Chock et al, 2018, Kuo 2018). What can we learn from the communications practices of social movement about the construction of collective identities, and especially those communications processes that bridge systemic differences of power in what African American feminist scholars call the “matrix of domination” (Costanza Chock, 2018a).

The second line of enquiry concerns the relationships between scholarly research and social movements. How can researchers construct and circulate knowledges from research about these practices and especially, as della Porta and Pavan (2017) have asked: how can scholars make the research more participatory, “dialogical,” and “multi-voiced.” How can research best be built into the everyday organizing of social movements (Choudry, 2015, Dyer-Witheford, 2008)?

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Dorothy Kidd is a professor of media studies at the University of San Francisco, California. A long-time practitioner and advocate for social movement communications, her current research examines contentious communications practices among front-line communities in the extractive zone.

