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Building Contention Word-by-Word: Social Media Usage in the European Stop ACTA Movement

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Introduction

An intellectual tug-of-war has for some time characterised scholarship on the purchase of networked communication in democratic politics and in particular its underpinning participatory processes. Similarly to other studies, this chapter occupies an imagined middle ground between accounts positing a transformative effect (Castells 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013) and critical insights that speak of a distortion rather than augmentation of participation in social, economic or political action (Sunstein 2007; Morozov 2011; Dencik and Leistert 2015). The aim of this chapter is to illustrate two entwined possibilities for civic action and learning that pertain to an informal and unaffiliated mode of civic participation by social movement actors that may sit particularly uneasily with the EU institutional framework. The latter has historically privileged interest-group lobbying over engagement with social movements (Guiraudon 2011:130) as a vehicle for more inclusive governance.

The reflections to follow are based on a case study of the pan-European mobilisation against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (henceforth Stop ACTA). The European stage on which the months-long protest (January-June 2012) unfolded acted as a uniquely apt testing ground on which to probe anew the relationship between networked communication

and civic or non-electoral participation (Hickerson 2013). The movement which came hot on the heels of kindred mobilisations against the SOPA (Stop Online Piracy) and PIPA (Protest IP Act) proposed bills in the US, fundamentally disputed the utility of the transnational treaty when set against its implications for freedom of speech (Losey 2014). More widely, opposition to the ACTA agreement berated the opaqueness of treaty negotiations, the closed-door proceedings and the apparent suspension of democratic principles of broad public consultations for the benefit of ever-encroaching corporate interests on institutional politics (cf. Crouch 2004). In the same way as other preceding (della Porta et al. 2006) and contemporary movements such as the Indignados or Occupy (della Porta 2013), Stop ACTA advocated robust participatory mechanisms and accountability principles to be placed firmly at the heart of contemporary transnational policy (Losey 2014).

This chapter reports on a renewed capacity for the coordination of collective action and the critical scrutiny of institutional actors by a crowd of actors assembled on social media and then in town squares on 12 June 2012, the last day of EU-wide actions called by the Stop ACTA movement. These were individuals, ad-hoc or ethereal groups, whose routine operations take place wholly within the material infrastructure of the internet that Karpf (2012: 1) suggestively termed ‘organisations without organisations’, fringe political actors such as The Pirate Party and other activist cause groups. These actors were far removed from established organisations – insider advocacy groups or political parties – whose staff are familiar faces on the corridors of power in Brussels. Their activity on Facebook and Twitter further revealed both limited access and interest in tapping organisational resources from more established but ideologically compatible peers such as the Electronic Freedom Foundation who spearheaded the drive against the ACTA agreement at the EU institutional level (Lischka 2010). Instead, a sizable proportion of the communication witnessed on both social media platforms concentrated on the crowd-sourcing of requisite resources for collective action and the articulation of a critical

and by-and-large reasoned discourse providing a cohesive justification for the protest (Mercea and Funk 2014; Mercea 2015). Accordingly, the discursiveness encountered on social media may be regarded as adding to the *eventfulness* of the 9 June demonstrations. Eventfulness amounts to ‘cognitive, affective and relational impacts [of protest events] on the very movements that carry them out’ (della Porta 2008:30). In what follows, I outline how the opposition to the ACTA agreement grew in impetus in 2012 and the opportunities this particular mobilisation provided for visiting and extending the developing field of research into *connective action* (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) and *informal civic learning* by social movements (Rogers and Haggerty 2013) transpiring in the networked communication of protest actors on social media.

The Stop ACTA mobilisation

An international agreement on a collective regime for tackling counterfeit and copyright infringements, ACTA was mooted as early as 2007. Formal negotiations on what became the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement commenced officially in June 2008 under the driving impetus to ‘help countries work together to tackle more effectively Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) infringements’ (European Commission 2012). Discussions were concluded behind closed doors in November 2010. Made public prior to ratification, the agreement was met with intense criticism on grounds that it encroached on fundamental rights and freedoms as well as extant norms on data protection (Metzger and Matulionyte 2011). Despite mounting challenges to it, the EU became a signatory to the agreement in Tokyo on 26 January 2012. Procedurally, it was envisaged that ‘once the European Parliament has given its consent, and the national ratification process in the Member States are completed, the Council of Ministers then has to adopt a final decision to conclude the agreement’ (European Commission 2012).

The opposition to ACTA gained momentum soon after the agreement was signed. In the EU, the first protests took place in February 2012. Concerted demonstrations continued across the Union in the months to follow culminating with a final instalment on 9 June 2012 in the run-up to the vote by the European Parliament on the ratification of the agreement in early July that year. Rising against the agreement was a spectrum of formal organisations, informal groups and individuals who took their fight to various fora. Among those actors, a split was apparent along an outsider/insider strategy fault line (Maloney et al. 1994). On the one hand, there were advocacy campaigns directed at EU policy institutions and networks spearheaded by civil society organisations (Losey, 2014). Formal organisations such as Consumers International, the Electronic Frontier Foundation petitioned the European Parliament (Lischka 2010) and met with EU officials (European Commission 2012).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

On the other hand, street demonstrations were called by ad-hoc loose grassroots groupings from across the EU and beyond. The hacktivist group *Anonymous* and national *Pirate Parties* joined the ranks of the Stop-ACTA movement endorsing it through statements on their websites or directly through involvement in street demonstrations. Other platforms emerged within the movement, prominent among which was the website www.stopacta.info, run by the advocacy group ‘La Quadrature du Net’. This latter set of informal actors played a more active part in the communication on social media ahead of 9 June pan-European demonstrations (see Mercea and Funk 2014) on which this chapter reports.

The Stop-ACTA protests occurred at the intersection of national and supra-national European politics. They exposed a mode of cosmopolitan citizenship in the making for some time in the global process of neoliberal individualisation. In the dominant neoliberal global

climate, the individual has been simultaneously the central subject of both unfettered market relations and of a universalizing human rights regime (Beck 2000: 83). Cosmopolitan citizenship may embody a de-territorialised democratic political culture (Dahlgren 2006) which, as in the case of Stop ACTA, seeks to instil new accountability and legitimacy into the expansive terrain of global economic governance (Micheletti 2003). Against this background, studying the Stop ACTA movement was an opportunity to tackle the questions of whether and how collective action¹ is orchestrated, by whom and with what cultural and political imprint on the intricate institutional architecture of the European Union.

Participatory coordination and informal civic learning

Social movement protest has often been portrayed as an outward collective expression of high emotions that preclude the discursive rationality of democratic institutions and procedures (Polletta and Jasper 2001). There is, nevertheless, a stubborn proclivity for protest participation in liberal democracies (Saunders et al. 2012). Indeed, an orientation towards direct action on topical issues (environmental degradation, austerity, job security or social benefits) seems to have gained ground through a combination of greater civic knowledge – especially among the younger generations (Galston 2001) – a penchant for involvement in civil society groups intent on enacting social change and the leveraging of Internet technologies for political activism (Dalton 2008). The last of the foregoing claims has been disavowed in some quarters, digital communication being depicted as a displacement from more far-reaching engagement in either institutional politics or the act of protest (Skoric 2012). *Slacktivism* is a stock term capturing this mood predicated on a normativity of participation that remains to be systematically verified with empirical research (Halupka 2014). To this end, the chapter adds to the evidence base on the study of networked communication associated with social movement protest.

A first step in that direction was to engage with the theory of *connective action* (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Connective action networks are a modality of ground-up cooperative organisation pivoting on networked communication with social media or other bespoke Internet-based activist applications and the cultural practice of sharing user-generated content through trusted social relationships (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 753). This organisational modality may be an alternative avenue whereby requisite resources for collective action are mustered communicatively by a self-organising crowd (Aguilera et al. 2013). Illustratively, the Occupy Wall Street Movement was a hotbed for concerted peer-production through the medium of Twitter which was generative of ‘coherent organisation’ (Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014: 234). This was achieved through the production, curation and integration of information and resources accessible to those involved in the protest-related networked communication. Narrowly defined, resource mobilisation represents the cultural task of extracting ‘usable resources from a population’, the most palpable of which is money (Jasper 1997: 31).

Secondly, the motivation or ‘desire to achieve a goal, combined with the energy to work toward that goal’ (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2010: 179) is an upshot of the interplay between an individual’s cognitions and emotions pertaining to involvement in collective action and a sense of identification with an aggrieved reference group. Structurally, motivation may arise through networked communication as social information about the readiness of peers to undertake collective action is retrieved on social media (Margetts et al. 2012; Hallam 2015). Personal action frames have been described as a key vehicle for instilling the motivation to partake in collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). They encompass ‘different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 744). Personal action frames are unlike stable group identities and ideologies, which are organisational paraphernalia one embraces whenever joining organisationally orchestrated

collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 746). This distributed modality for instilling the motivation and raising resources for collective action we termed *participatory coordination* (Mercea and Funk 2014). The empirical study stemming from this proposition sought to ascertain the scope for participatory coordination encountered in the networked communication of the Stop ACTA mobilisation, thereby performing an empirical verification of the theory of connective action.

Thirdly, the study of informal civic learning – the development of civic competences, knowledge, beliefs and values – outside the formal confines of the classroom or the non-formal setting of workshops (cf. Rogers and Haggerty 2013) – has been largely peripheral to social movement research (Hall et al. 2006). Social movements are, nonetheless, sites of knowledge production of particular import. They stand in contrast to the prevailing modality of learning directed at individual betterment due to the emphasis they place on the collective (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003) and on notions of public good.

Networked communication exchanges on social media may act as a conduit to informal civic learning. The suggestion flows from the insight that canonical civic education directed at the instrumental reproduction of democratic norms and values in formal settings such as classrooms has been progressively shadowed by practice-based learning about democratic participation in extra-curricular activities for which a primary medium is networked communication (Bennett et al. 2009; Wells 2014). The interest in the communicative settings conducive to informal civic learning stems from a deeper-seated preoccupation with the public sphere. Illustratively, in their analysis, Schugurensky and Myers (2008:74) wrote about ‘mediation spaces’ or ad-hoc meeting places for public authority and civil society actors to convene and deliberate issues of shared concern. The range of mediation spaces has grown with the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) prompting authors such as Lindgren (2011) to pay attention, not just to the interaction between formal institutions

and the citizenry but also to informal ‘knowledge communities’. The latter form organically from conversations, for instance among sports enthusiasts. Parkour aficionados congregating on a Youtube vlog (video blog), Lindgren observed, created knowledge about the sport, learning more about it from each other and ultimately expanding their literacy of it. Similar informal conversations, albeit about public issues and democratic governance, may feed into interpretations of democratic politics and civic engagement for the participants in them (Dewey 1916 [1957]; Biesta 2007).

Informal learning has chiefly been examined as a reflexive, conscious process of individual cognition (Livingstone 2000) using surveys and interviews. A shift in focus from the individual to the group has recently been prompted by the study of online conversations (Ziegler et al. 2014). Talk amongst individuals united by common concerns stimulates learning *between* rather than solely *within* individuals (Ziegler et al. 2014: 62). Digital communication may thus be a dialogical *literacy event* conducive to meaning-making. A literacy event is the product of individuals acting socially through text – verbal, visual or written (Heath 1982; Barton and Lee 2013:12). Ideas and orientations toward various aspects of democracy and its operation can be hashed out through social interaction in the course of a civic literacy event. Facebook and Twitter exchanges may amount to civic literacy events so long as participants circulate action-oriented knowledge whilst reflecting on political institutions, media organisations and their own actions in the run-up to social movement protests (Mercea 2015). Below, I discuss these suppositions in light of findings from the Stop ACTA research project.

Findings

The research on participatory coordination and informal civic learning was conducted by means of a quantitative content analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts and comments² and a discourse analysis. The tweets in the dataset were in 14 different languages; the Facebook posts

in 15. On Facebook, French (36 percent), Dutch (18 percent) and the German (17 percent) were the most widely used languages. On Twitter, English was dominant (41 percent) followed by German (26 percent).

Results revealed an important share of the communication on both services – more than half of the posts examined – pertained to participatory coordination in both its motivational and resource-pooling varieties. Participatory coordination was by-and-large not spearheaded by activist organisations thus corroborating the theory of connective action and evidencing the personalised character of the communication involving chiefly individual contributors. Resource coordination was the more prevalent form of coordination. The finding testified to the instrumentality of new and social media usage in the orchestration of collective action (see Diani 2000; Stein 2009; Juris 2012; Theocharis 2012). Equally relevant was the evidence that the ‘coherent organisation’ that Bennett, Segerberg and Walker (2014) identified on Twitter would likewise ensue on Facebook. The individuals who congregated on the Facebook outlets of the Stop ACTA protests made minute contributions to their organisation (Rosen et al. 2010). In the last instance, as a control variable testing the prospect of EU-wide diffusion of collective practices such as participatory coordination, language revealed a lop-sided distribution of participatory coordination. The practice appeared more prevalent among some language groups (e.g. Austrian, Danish and Polish on Facebook, German on Twitter) than others (e.g. the Spanish groups). Aside from the above exceptions, however, language remained largely immaterial to participatory coordination.

The Stop ACTA discourse encountered on the two social media displayed not only a long attested concern with the enactment of collective action and participation therein (Juris 2012; Theocharis et al. 2015) but also an ingrained preoccupation with institutional politics – both national and of the European Union – and their reform through the instigation of concrete changes, namely to accountability rules within the EU. This discourse was marked by an

interconnection of several topical discursive objects. Firstly, there was a large proportion of both emotional outbursts and reasoned appraisals of mainstream politics and the media which were often accompanied by thoughts about hands-on modalities of remedying their perceived shortcomings. Thus, resonant personal action frames could be distinguished across individual comments. Such frames exhibited, for instance, a preoccupation with action and participation that was closely associated with exchanges of civic knowledge about the institutional context of collective action that informed the critique of the latter critique and ultimately its challenge. There was, nonetheless, a conspicuous absence of references to mainstream parties or interest groups (mentioned only a handful of times on Twitter, and there largely as an object of criticism). The fact was interpreted as a post-structural dissolution of participant ties with traditional representative organisations (see Dalton 2008).

The protestors' relationship with mainstream media was largely perceived as fraught. Such assessments were twinned with calls for the self-generation of activist media to maximise the public impact of the collective action. Illustratively, civic knowledge and a critique of the media were co-articulated in a post bemoaning the manner in which the German public broadcaster ARD covered the Stop ACTA campaign. The author averred the TV channel's prejudiced portrayal of the extra-parliamentarian opposition to the agreement as uninformed, maintaining that a publically-funded media organisation ought to engage impartially with the substantive political issues at stake (i.e. copyright protection). Ultimately, in their drive to give the activist side of the story, the Stop ACTA campaigners were continuing a long-standing tradition of alternative media production (Segerberg and Bennett 2011; Poell 2014: 721).

Lastly, comments pertaining to civic participation featured in posts calling for renewed reflexivity on the fundamental principles of democratic governance seemingly eroded by mainstream politics. As a redress, *inter alia*, one author invited fellow citizens to take collective action as a way to reassert the primacy of popular referenda as a participatory institution of

contemporary democracy. Notably, throughout the analysis, no posts were found on either Facebook or Twitter proposing the abandonment of extant democratic politics and an exit from its institutional framework (Hirschman 1970). Notwithstanding, some of the postees urged for a retrenchment within the boundaries of the democratic nation state as a counterweight to ACTA and similar encroachments of international neoliberal regimes best epitomised by the EU. The observed disaffection with institutional politics thereby evoked a long-standing perception among the EU citizenry that member states were no longer ‘governed by the will of the people’ (Castells 2007: 244). In this respect, the Stop ACTA mobilisation aligned with movements in the wave of anti-austerity uprisings since the start of the decade such as the *Indignados* or the Occupy Movement. These demanded a more participatory settlement in contemporary liberal democracy which would put the populace firmly at the heart of deliberative processes whilst opening up more avenues for participation over and above elections (see della Porta 2013).

Conclusions

The participatory coordination and the civic discourse of the Stop ACTA protests on social media seemed to strike a similar note to that of the earlier 15-M movement in Spain. The dissatisfaction of the *Indignados* with Spanish mainstream politics was encapsulated in demands for greater accountability and transparency in institutional politics (Flesher Fominaya 2011: 304), a call that reverberated in the Stop ACTA protests. The Spanish movement was deeply sceptical of the political establishment whilst bearing the seeds of new political forces, namely the *Podemos* Party that would join the democratic contest and win a sizeable share of the vote in the general elections of November 2015. The trademark message of the *Podemos* Party has been that electoral gain may and will of necessity be used to enact a shake-up of democratic politics, to render them more open to a more direct mode of citizen participation

(Borge and Santamarina 2015). The ultimate demise of the ACTA agreement perhaps made more removed the appeal of a foray into mainstream politics. The Pirate Party, one of the few political actors who got favourable mentions in social media exchanges of Stop ACTA, did however make it into the European Parliament in the 2014 elections.

The talk about institutional politics ultimately informed the planned Stop ACTA actions. It formed an abstract groundwork on which protestors would be able to construct their motivation, the civic knowledge and skills to oppose the international agreement. The noted critical stance towards government, comprehending the EU institutions, laid bare complex institutional workings for activists to be able to take informed action against them. The case of Stop ACTA, nevertheless, does not completely discount the possibility of slacktivism. Indeed, there is evidence that the use of social media will not expand the knowledge of government and political organisations among the general public (Dimitrova et al. 2014). One may, however, cast one's analysis back to the study of the cultural work done by social movements in the attempt to sensitise the public at large to their causes (see Eyerman and Jamison 1991). Under that light, the discourse weaved together by the opposition to the ACTA agreement on social media may be viewed as a key means whereby in a cognitive field marked by entrenched power asymmetries between social movement and institutional actors, Stop ACTA staked its counter-claim against the global trade regime envisaged in the international agreement.

Cutting across the cognitive field encompassing the ACTA agreement was a tension between the cosmopolitanism of the opposition and the hegemonic trade regime regarded as a threat to democracy. Some voices on social media designated parliamentary sovereignty as a counterbalance to that regime. Indeed, the refusal by the Dutch Parliament to ratify ACTA which led to the rescindment of the agreement verified the effectiveness of political subsidiarity – the principle that decisions are to be taken closest to the citizen – in the EU (European

Parliament 2015). A question for further research is whether collective practices such as the ones reported here substantiate the idea that social movements animated by an EU-wide ethos contribute to the Europeanisation of contention (cf. Guiraudon 2011). The case of the Stop ACTA mobilisation corroborates the claim by Guiraudon (2011: 135) that all levels of governance including the European one are part of an opportunity structure that non-governmental organisations will differentially try to seize upon to advance their causes.

The opposition to ACTA on social media threw into relief the vital link that exists between digital media and embodied collective action, to wit street demonstrations (see Bastos et al. 2015). In addition, it further illustrated the practices whereby networked communication feeds into vital social movement processes such as coordination, mobilisation or identity-building that culminate with street demonstrations and other material forms of protest. Apprehension remains as to whether the potential for timely aggregation of sizeable bodies of protestors through the medium of networked communication can amount to more than momentary effervescence. Mindful observers (Juris 2012: 274) have stressed that the rapid scalability of demonstrations with social media is far from a definitive nostrum for effecting political and cultural change. Conversely, the Stop ACTA case can be read as a literacy event whereby exchanges on social media were the building blocks of an action repertoire and knowledge resources that fed into a critique of mainstream political institutions and the media. Thereby, beyond the immediate goal to forestall the ratification of the ACTA agreement, the Stop ACTA protest carried the seeds of a slower-burning and elusive but nevertheless significant process of reaffirming democratic values³. Lastly, the activist talk encountered on social media helped compound the eventfulness (della Porta 2008) of the 9 June mobilisation by making visible cardinal ideas and sentiments that underpinned the opposition that took to the streets on that day of action.

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¹ Collective action is understood here as a concerted effort to secure a common good that is driven by mutual interest (Marwell and Oliver 2010: 2; Baldassarri 2009: 324).

² The Facebook posts were collected manually from 28 public Stop-ACTA event pages, 16 Stop ACTA groups and 6 Facebook pages. All the tweets in the dataset were retrieved by querying the Twitter Search API for the hashtag #ACTA. The dataset comprised 19k tweets and 7,000 Facebook posts. The analysis was run on probabilistic samples extracted from the dataset without replacement (see Mercea and Funk, 2014 and Mercea, 2015 for details).

³ For further cognate insights see della Porta (2013) and Castells (2012) for his pertinent analysis of the Indignados and Occupy movements that he labels 'networked social movements'.