

Public Lectures:
Critical perspectives on civic agency and social media

Thomas Poell, University of Amsterdam
Julie Uldam, Roskilde University

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IT University of Copenhagen, room 4A14

These public lectures bring together scholars who apply a critical perspective to social media, which has become integral to contemporary activism and civic agency. Far from being neutral platforms on which people can freely and openly interact in order to create civic agency, social media have their own inherent materiality, shaping how we engage, protest, resist, and struggle. This materiality may entail the wires and silicon of technology, the codes and algorithms of digital platforms, and the commerciality of social media. Although scholarship engages with either algorithms or with the political aspects of social media, the topic of citizen or activist media -- understood from within the perspective of media materialities -- has not yet been fully developed. The agency created using media technologies (such as camera-witnessing used to contest potentially hostile and oppositional authorities and to create alternative perspectives to mainstream media reporting) is challenged and restricted by corporate social media and their inherent architecture. Moreover, control and surveillance go hand in hand with a corporate social media logic that privileges mainstream reporting over alternative narratives (see van Dijck and Poell, 2013). We seek to address the mediation and mediatization of protest at the intersection of civic agency and algorithmic control to address questions such as: What are the challenges and potentials of social media for civic agency and activism within a contested space of media corporations and logics? How do commercial social media platforms shape contemporary forms of protest? And what are the implications for grassroots action?

The public lectures are organised by the **DECIDIS (Democracy and Citizenship in Digital Society)** initiative at the IT University of Copenhagen.



Thomas Poell: The Platformization of Activism

This talk examines the techno-commercial mediation of contemporary protest. It does so in critical dialogue with the idea that online platforms facilitate a democratization of activism. The analysis explores how protests are mobilized and communicated through prominent social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as through major online advocacy and petition sites, such as Avaaz, MoveOn, and Change.org. The new forms of activist organization and leadership that emerge on these platforms are geared towards inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating user participation, rather than leading by commanding, directing and proclaiming, as social movement leaders and organizations have historically done. By establishing user-driven processes of protest mobilization and communication, platform-enabled organizations bring about a formal democratization of activism. Yet, simultaneously, they undermine substantive democratic processes of collective debate and consensus making. Shaped by the techno-commercial infrastructure of platforms, the new forms of activist organization primarily revolve around individual interests and signals, steered by mechanisms of personalization and virality. While these mechanisms can generate mass enthusiasm and powerful moments of 'togetherness', they do not support the stabilization of communities and publics, nor do they facilitate the long-term politicization of protest issues. Platforms are focused on constantly connecting users to the next set of trending topics.



Bio: Thomas Poell is Assistant Professor of New Media & Digital Culture and Program Director of the Research Master Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His research is focused on social media and the transformation of public communication around the globe. He has published on social media and popular protest in Canada, Egypt, Tunisia, India, and China, as well as on the role of these media in the development of new forms of journalism. Together with professor José van Dijck, Poell leads the KNAW-'Over Grenzen' research program on Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space. He is one of the programme leaders of the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies, and part of the core team Audiovisual Data and Media

Studies of the national infrastructural project CLARIAH (NWO). He sits on the editorial board of *Social Media & Society* and of the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. During the Spring semester of 2015, Poell was Research Associate at UC Santa Cruz, and visiting lecturer at the University of Helsinki. Website: <http://home.medewerker.uva.nl/t.poell/>

Julie Uldam: Studying activism, civic agency and social media: challenges and opportunities

In this talk I address key challenges and opportunities related to research on activism and social media. Starting from the premise that studying activism and social media can play an important role in facilitating activist agency, I examine some of the challenges that it also involves. I particularly focus on challenges related to visibility and surveillance, as scholars disseminate their insights on activist uses of social media. In this way, this talk looks beyond our possibilities as scholars for being political to how we can be political responsibly. This is central to researching activism and social media whether we focus on technological affordances, media practices, discourses, or power relations. In probing these challenges, I draw on examples from the climate justice movement.



Bio: Julie Uldam is Associate Professor at Roskilde University. In 2010 she completed her PhD as part of a collaborative set-up between London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Copenhagen Business School (CBS). She conducted her postdoctoral research at LSE, CBS and VUB. Her current research explores the interrelations between political participation and the media, particularly social media. Julie's work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including *New Media & Society*, *Policy & Internet*, *International Journal of Electronic Governance* and *International Journal of Communication*. Her book *Civic Engagement & Social Media* (co-edited with Anne Vestergaard) was published in 2015. Julie is chair of ECREA's

Communication & Democracy section and chair of the network on Social Innovation and Civic Engagement. <http://forskning.ruc.dk/site/person/uldam>