# Digital activism and participation Affect, feelings, and politics

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## Introduction
# Digital activism and participation
### Affect, feelings, and politics

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### Digital activism and making the personal political

Since the rise of social media, activism has come to be fundamentally associated with digital platforms and the technical affordances of these. Rather than standing alone, digital activism is in a dynamic relation to offline protest, shaping demonstrations, sit-ins, and other activities involving bodily participation, confrontation, and occupation (Neumayer, 2020). Whatever form it takes, activism seeks to bring public attention to matters that affect our social, political, economic, and natural environments with the hope of generating change. The term "activism" dates back to the suffragette movement in the beginning of the 1900s, and the scholarship of social movements speaks in great volume of the many forms of action and modes of organization among activists throughout history (e.g., Coy, 2018; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Often, activists point to issues that directly affect the everyday life or future of all of us, such as the erosion of natural resources. At other times, as with the suffragettes, minority rights and injustices towards parts of the population are at the center of activist movements and practices.

Civic engagement, politics, and social change have always been intertwined with media and media practices (Johansen & Givskov, 2014, p. 1). Activism has, long before social media, played a central role in how activist movements have been understood and circulated. For example, seminal acts of civil obedience, such as when Rosa Parks in 1955 refused to give up her seat for a white passenger in the "colored section" of a bus

in Montgomery, Alabama, relied on the media dynamics of the time for their success. Although Parks was, in fact, not the first person to violate the segregation law of Alabama by refusing to give up her bus seat, the way in which Parks embodied norms of female respectability has been argued as a key element in the media's framing of her (ahead of other activists) as an icon for the American civil rights movement (Fackler, 2016). Indeed, mainstream media's framing and narrative is understood as having played an important part in turning this single act of civil obedience into a media event and in turning Parks into an icon of the movement (Letort, 2012).

What is new, then, about digital activism is not the link between the "personal" or embodied protest against injustice, media, and activism, but rather the role digital media now play in terms of organizing, practicing, and defining activism (see, e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2014; Highfield, 2016; Nørgaard Kristensen et al., 2018, p. 6). Nick Couldry has argued that "online connection changes the space of social action, since it is interactive […] the internet creates an effectively infinite reserve for human action whose existence changes the possibilities of social organization in space everywhere" (Couldry, 2012, p. 2). That is, the digital is not simply a medium for social change; rather, the fabric of our social world is altered through the ubiquitous reach of social media, just as social media are a product of our technological, political, and social history. So, while social media do offer new tools, as well as actors and audiences for activist causes, our interest in this special issue is particularly to explore the new socialities associated with social media activism, which call for ongoing scrutiny and exploration if we want to understand the landscape and infrastructures of collective identity and societal change.

## Affect and digital political participation

In this special issue, we are particularly interested in the question of affect in relation to activism. The need to explore the social and political ramifications of the relationship between affect, the personal, and social media activism and the social changes that it engenders in society. As Stefania Milan argues, social media subvert established dichotomies between the individual and collective as well as between the intimate and the public (2015, p. 888). Digital and social media allow for personal stories and affect to travel from individual to collective, and to gain political power along the way: #metoo and Black Lives Matter are examples of major social movements that center affect and "the personal" and which to a great extent have been defined, practiced, and organized by social media in particular. With this, social media has the ability to connect and create communities of spatially and socially dispersed individuals, offering a space with potential for affective and "private" connections to become public and political. This potential is rooted both in specific affordances of platforms as well as in the stories that are told on them. Zizi Papacharissi, for example, argues that on social media, "affective publics" may be "mobilized and

connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (2014, p. 311).

In this issue, the contributors present a plurality of ways in which affect materializes as a theme in digital activism, as well as in how we might analyze, conceptualize, and understand the significance of affect here. While there is an ongoing and often heated debate within affect theory about the nature, definition, and characteristics of affect (see Knudsen & Stage, 2015), this special issue does not center one understanding or framework for affect. Rather, the purpose of the special issue is to allow space for an exploration of the many things affect might be in relation to digital activism, as well as how thinking with a plurality of understandings of affect might pose questions as to what can be considered activism in the first place. A particular contribution of the special issue as a whole is that it showcases an array of methodological approaches to affect, including some that are novel or more rarely utilized in media studies, such as autoethnography, digital ethnography, and cultural studies-inspired comparative case studies. Across all the issue's contributions, questions are raised about what the particular relationship between the digital and the affective might be in relation to how activism is enacted, participated in, and experienced in contemporary societies. While thematically diverse, several of the articles relate affect to embodiment in order to consider the circulation of affect as it relates to activism. In particular, the articles consider how the nexus of activism, affect, and social media reconfigures the question of embodiment in, and as the object of, activism.

Accordingly, this special issue consists of five individual articles that in very different ways touch upon the relationship between activism, affect, and social media. The first article, Joachim Friis's "Mellem underholdende kedsomhed og bedøvende overstimulering. Affektive rytmer i oplevelsen af hashtag-fænomenet #Proudboys på Twitter", investigates the potential of autoethnography and Sianne Ngai's aesthetic categories of "stuplimity", "irritation", and "the zany" in studying hashtag activism. The article centers affect both in terms of the case studied, namely negotiations around the hashtag #proudboys, as well as in the methodological approach to the object of study. Here, Friis uses affect-driven autoethnography to explore the relationship between affective publics and "minor feelings" in the experience of the negotiation of the hashtag.

Ethnography is also employed as a means to analyze affect in the second article, Lene Bull Christensen and Maj Hedegaard Heiselberg's "When we shine, we shine together: A carnivalesque reading of affective solidarity among Danish fat-accepting Instagrammers". Christiansen and Heiselberg combine traditional and digital ethnography to examine how affective solidarity is created and circulates in fat activism. The article argues that social media enables specific events of fat activism to be extended in time and space, which then also allows fat activists to envision and make claims to alternative futures for fat bodies.

Picking up on questions of affect in relation to embodiment, Bolette Blaagaard and Mette Marie Roslyng's "Rethinking digital activism: The deconstruction, inclusion, and

expansion of the activist body" explores how political activism is expressed in connective, affective, and embodied ways. Arguing that questions of the discursive construction of the activist body has been underexplored, the article conducts a discursive analysis of three different cases of digital activism: Black Lives Matter, #metoo, and Extension Rebellion.

Finally, in "Personalising climate change on Instagram: Self-presentation, authenticity, and emotion", Helle Kannik Haastrup explores three cases of climate activism on Instagram: the activist, the influencer, and the politician. In a comparative analysis, Hastrup outlines a typology of online climate activism in which she demonstrates how self-representation, authenticity, and emotions are key elements in personalizing climate change on Instagram. Hastrup's article highlights the centrality of the personal element in social media activism by depicting how personal storytelling functions across the three cases.

This issue also includes one open section article: "Managing sharing is *caring*: mothers' Social Media Dilemmas and informal reflective practices on the governance of children's digital footprints". In this contribution, Davide Cino discusses how "sharenting" has become a very common practice in our digital everyday lives. Cino investigates mothers' use of an online parenting forum to discuss and reflect on the dilemmas related to "sharenting". The analysis is based on a large amount of social media posts and threads, and the findings establish that "sharenting" is indeed a reflective practice.

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