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Editorial

# Contentious Politics in a Digital World: Studies on Social Activism, Protest, and Polarization

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## Abstract

In a world of polarized societies and radical voices hogging the public digital sphere, this thematic issue aims at identifying the different strategies of old and new social movements in the extremes of the political debates by focusing on the interplay between polarization, uses of the internet, and social activism. In order to disentangle these interactions, this thematic issue covers a wide range of political settings across the globe. It does so by studying: (a) how opposing activists discuss politics online and its implications for democratic theory; (b) how social media uses and online discussions foster offline protests; (c) how the media and state-led-propaganda frame disruptive and anti-government offline protests and how this situation contributes to polarization in both democratic and non-democratic regimes; and finally (d) how civil society uses digital tools to organize and mobilize around sensitive issues in non-democratic regimes.

## Keywords

digital activism; digital mobilization; political polarization; political protest; social media

## Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Protesting While Polarized: Digital Activism in Contentious Times” edited by Homero Gil de Zúñiga (University of Salamanca/Pennsylvania State University/Universidad Diego Portales), Isabel Inguanzo (University of Salamanca), and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu (Universidad de La Laguna).

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## 1. Introduction

Social movements use the internet mainly for three purposes: mobilizing social support, managing their network, and creating public spaces for deliberation (Mosca & Della Porta, 2009). Indeed, today, a great deal of activism takes place online. In terms of digital protest, there is an extensive variety of repertoires both individuals and collective actors can follow: from very conventional forms of activism, such as signing an online petition, to a whole new way of disruptive online politics, including *jamming* or *hacktivism*. All of these repertoires differ on the threshold imposed to engage in polit-

ical action, with certain behaviors entailing more cost than others. They also vary in the way the internet is used: whether they are virtual in essence—like email bombing—or they are facilitated through the internet—such as donating money to a campaign or political group donation (Bachmann & de Zúñiga, 2013; van Laer & van Aelst, 2010). Moreover, the internet has also allowed for the transnationalization of advocacy campaigns through the connection of epistemic communities (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). These advocacy networks aim at creating broad consensus over certain issues by using cognitive frames that could easily and widely resonate around the globe (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005).

## 2. Social Movements, Cultural Backlash, and the Internet

As a product of these advocacy campaigns, various concerns, such as human and civil rights, environmental protection, gender equality, economic redistribution, public health, individual freedoms, or migration, have all entered the public and political agenda through the action and persuasion of social movements and certain political parties. These concerns have nonetheless been challenged by other radically opposed individuals, parties, and groups, as a result of cultural backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2018).

The result of these competing processes is an increased polarization both between parties and among the electorate (Layman et al., 2006). Regarding civil society, we are increasingly seeing the mutual challenge of movements and counter-movements along ideological lines (Hager et al., 2021; Vüllers & Hellmeier, 2022). The reasons behind this increasing polarization are multiple and go beyond the scope of this thematic issue. However, the literature has stressed one that is of particular relevance for this issue: the role of citizen interest groups and activists throughout the digital sphere (Williamson et al., 2011).

Recent studies show that radical activists on both sides of a divisive issue are more frequently engaging in internet political discussions, and creating their own online content (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2019; Inguanzo et al., 2021). However, the fact that radical activists are more present in online political discussions does not mean they are talking to one another. In fact, filter bubbles and echo chambers are also common, as they increase polarization and jeopardize democratic deliberation (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019).

## 3. Main Contribution to the Literature With this Thematic Issue

In light of these dynamics, where a polarized political scenario and radical voices hog the public digital sphere, this thematic issue aims at identifying the different strategies of old and new social movements in the extremes of the political debates. More specifically, this thematic issue focuses on the interplay between polarization, uses of the internet, and social activism. So far, previous literature has explored the relationships between either: (a) polarization and activism, (b) social media and protest, or (c) polarization and uses of the internet. However, more empirical studies on diverse political settings are needed to understand the interactions between these three interconnected processes. This thematic issue is tasked with eliminating this gap in the literature.

In that regard, we contribute to the literature by providing answers to the following fundamental questions: How do polarized discussions influence online

and offline protest? How radicals from different ideological extremes, on a wide variety of issues, are using digital means to support offline protest? Can digital resources/infrastructure lower thresholds for collective action in a polarized era?

In order to answer these questions, this thematic issue covers various political settings including North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, and South East Asia. It does so by studying four main dimensions of the topic of interest: (a) how opposing activists discuss politics online and its implications for democratic theory; (b) how social media uses and online discussions foster offline protests; (c) how the media and state-led-propaganda frame disruptive and anti-government offline protests and how this contributes to polarization both in both democratic and non-democratic regimes; and finally (d) how civil society uses digital tools to organize and mobilize around sensitive issues in non-democratic regimes.

## 4. Summaries of Studies Included in this Thematic Issue

Josephine Lukito, Zhe Cui, An Hu, Taeyoung Lee, and João V. S. Ozawa (2022) open this thematic issue by exploring whether some states use and aggravate political polarization to their advantage. Using a combination of quantitative data from different sources, the authors study governments' responses to pro-democracy and pro-independence protesters in young and non-democracies in East and Southeast Asia. They find a temporal relationship between domestically targeted propaganda and state violence: (Some) states tend to first discredit protesters before eventually moving to violence to put down the protests. In serving their propaganda efforts, governments often articulate an "us versus them" polarizing discourse, where the government is framed as good (democratic) and the protesters as unacceptable (rioters, insurgents, or terrorists).

The delegitimization of political protest is not a phenomenon exclusive to non-democracies or Asian countries. Valentina Proust and Magdalena Saldaña (2022) describe the media framing of Chile's *Estallido Social*, a massive "protest process" that sparked throughout the country in October 2019 and lasted over two months. While the movement was predominantly peaceful and called for social justice, the news stories framed protesters as "deviant" and "violent" without paying much attention to their motivations and demands. More relevant to communication theory, the study also addresses the call for more integration of framing typologies (Kozman, 2017) by examining the pattern of associations between generic (e.g., "attribution of responsibility" or "conflict") and specific frames (e.g., "riot," "confrontation," or "spectacle").

Shelley Boulianne and Sangwon Lee (2022) sign the third article in this monograph, which offers valuable insight into the reasons why people of different

ideologies engage in protest participation. Building on the theory of emerging technology, Boulianne and Lee use survey data from four established democracies—the US, the UK, France, and Canada—to observe the role of social media use, exposure to misinformation, and conspiracy beliefs in explaining protest. The study does not only align with previous research indicating a strong association between social media use and protest, but it also provides a more granular understanding of the differential effects of emerging (e.g., Twitch) and legacy social media (e.g., Facebook) on left-wing and right-wing protest. Thus, the analysis suggests that exposure to misinformation fuels protest activity among those on the ideological left, while conspiracy beliefs increase protest participation among those on the right.

The monograph delves deeper into the dynamics of right-wing activism with a piece by Viktor Chagas, Rodrigo Carreiro, Nina Santos, and Guilherme Popolin (2022). The study focuses on the Brazilian case and the “hashtag wars” that took place on Twitter between supporters and opponents of the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro. Worryingly enough, their data suggest that far-right digital activists (Bolsonarists) have better leveraged the affordances of Twitter to promote their message and persuade audiences. Compared to anti-Bolsonarist hashtags, Bolsonaroist ones grow faster, reach higher circulation, remain in evidence for a longer time, and engage more influential users. Pro-Bolsonaro Twitter activists seem to be more coordinated and “true to the cause,” which may help normalize an anti-democratic agenda in the country.

Azi Lev-On (2022) brings us a qualitative, netnographic study of online activism in support of Roman Zadorov, a maintenance man accused of a violent crime in Israel and perceived as innocent by the public. Lev-On uses this case study to illustrate how online activist groups are easy to establish, but also naturally unstable and prone to polarization and clustering. Group managers seem to have a major role in the formation of *deliberative* and *participative* clusters of activists and groups: deliberative managers privilege quality (of the content and debate), while participative administrators focus on quantity (number of group members and diffusion of the message). These different conceptions induce important strategic and practical differences between the two clusters of activists.

Zixue Tai (2022) also adopts a netnographic approach to study the role of QQ instant messaging groups in catalyzing mass protests in China. While traditional media and formal organizations in that country tend to align with government interests, technology-enabled spaces such as QQ groups have created new opportunities for collective action. QQ-based “activist brokered networks” provide a relatively safe space to disseminate contentious information, organize conventional and unconventional participation tactics, and even mobilize collective support and increase group morale. Despite their semi-controlled (enclosed) character, these QQ

groups seem to be commonly infiltrated by informants or surveilled by the authorities and, consequently, most participants are cautious in their interactions and stay away from taboo regions (e.g., anti-government rhetoric or subversive speech).

The mobilization potential of mobile instant messaging and social media is not always beneficial for democratic development, especially in highly polarized contexts. Online-based interactions that privilege homogeneous social ties (i.e., people like oneself) may be a source of political polarization and mobilization of the kind that considers the positions of the opponents as inherently wrong and illegitimate. Such an environment could hamper attempts to find negotiated solutions and compromise. This is what Andrés Scherman, Nicolle Etchegaray, Magdalena Browne, Diego Mazonra, and Hernando Rojas (2022) argue in the penultimate piece of this thematic issue. Their survey-based analysis uses data from two South American countries—Chile and Colombia—which experienced parallel episodes of widespread social discontent that translated into massive street protests and the weakening of their national governments in 2019.

Bingbing Zhang, Isabel Inguanzo, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga (2022) close this thematic issue with an exhaustive examination of the drivers of illegal protest participation (e.g., seizing buildings, confronting the police, etc.). Using two waves of US survey data, Zhang et al. found that online uncivil discussion has a core role in predicting unlawful protest, while other forms of online and face-to-face discussion are less important. Interestingly and somewhat counterintuitively, ideological extremity does not seem to impact illegal protest over time. The authors of this last piece draw attention to the potentially detrimental or “democratic backsliding” effects of online incivility on democracy.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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