WHAT IS DIGITAL ACTIVISM ANYWAY? SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE "DIGITAL" IN CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, digital activism has received a lot of scholarly and journalistic attention. Even so, there remains no firm consensus on its precise definition and scope. This paper addresses this conceptual haziness and contends that there are analytical issues and conceptual implications in the openness of the term and its description as digital, as 'digitality' is neither the sole nor the primary feature along which activism has changed. Drawing on extant practices of digital activism and conceptual approaches to its scope, the paper aims to (1) critically discuss & highlight a range of conceptual obscurities in digital activism scholarship, (2) provide a glimpse into the concept's evolution, and, through these (3) suggest that the term (incl. synonyms) suffers from myriad conceptual and epistemological fallacies: omissions of the concept's complexity (e.g. hybridity, rhizomatism, multi-mediality), implications of digital dualism and therefore potentially technological determinism, and the invitation of stigma, luddite sentiment, and other social constructions of the technologies to which the term is attached.

Keywords: digital activism; digitality; digital dualism; social construction; technological determinism; clicktivism.

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1 INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALISING DIGITAL ACTIVISM

In broad terms, digital activism (D.A.) refers to political activism on the internet or political movements relying on it (e.g. McCaughey & Ayers, 2003, p. 1; Vegh, 2003, p. 71). Examples include politically motivated actions comprising of both digital or online versions of traditional activism practices, e.g petitions and protests, and the use of internet-enabled digital technologies in support or preparation of offline activism, e.g. the organization of an offline event over social media (see Mercea, 2011). The phenomenon has received broad scholarly, journalistic, and public attention, in particular for enabling two-way or "many-to-many" mass communication (see Castells, 2007). That change has, in the last two decades, shown to enable high degrees of interaction and networking, for example through tweeting, posting, chatting, and sharing - particularly of user-generated content and through personalized action frames across national and regional boundaries. These attributes have been said to change movement dynamics through new connective action frames that include self-organizing and organizationally enabled networks (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

While these new forms of activism have been praised for their wide reach, networkedness, immediacy, directness/ disintermediation, interactive potential, and potential for empowerment (see McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Polletta, 2013; Negroponte, 1995), they have also been criticized for what has been judged low efficacy, the creation or reinforcement of political apathy, and potentially harmful consequences such as hacking and surveillance (see Murdoch, 2010; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009; overview in Karpf, 2010a). Consequently, the terms clicktivism and slacktivism have been used derogatorily to describe a phlegmatic form of digitally enabled activism that is rooted in low commitment (see Karpf, 2010a), or, in Shulman's (2009, p. 26) words, "low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public". As such, digital activism remains a contentious subject and somewhat obscure with regards to its scope and societal effects, issues that inform its conceptualization.

Following that premise, this paper will argue that digital activism is a hazy and, as such, immanently problematic, if not dysfunctional, concept. This dysfunctionality arises from it typically being defined as digitally enabled activism, suggesting that digitality is a key paradigm change in newer forms of activism. Originally, digitality (or digitalism) was defined by Negroponte (1995) as the condition of "being digital", meaning that the digital constituted a new era in which the ways of the living had culturally changed. Both Negroponte's (1995) and later Castells' work (2007, 2010) stress how the digital has become enmeshed in the physical and is therefore

inseparable from it. Even so, the idea of being digital reinforces in many ways that the 'digital' is different, 'a thing of its own', which lends itself to "digital dualism" - a distinction between physicality and digitality (Jurgenson, 2012) - or similarly dichotomous views, as well as a perception of the internet as a singular monolithic entity.

This raises questions as to what digitality conceptually assumes. In many ways, understandings of D.A. have evolved not just with technological advancement, but with changing notions of being digital. A substantial amount of literature (e.g. Jurgenson, 2012; Karatzogianni, 2015; Treré, 2019; Lupton, 2014; Breindl, 2010; Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2015; Karpf, 2010a; Sassen, 2002) already assumes that online and offline activities cannot be separated clearly and are at best blurred. Instead, several new approaches to contemporary activism have been introduced including, for example, holistic views that emphasize media hybridity (e.g. Chadwick, 2007, 2014, 2017; Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg, & Johansson, 2014; Treré, 2019) and wider communication ecologies of contemporary social movements (e.g. Mattoni, 2017; Mercea, Iannelli, & Loader, 2016). Several scholars have additionally cautioned about the technological determinism such digital dualism implies (e.g. Foust & Hoyt, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). This paper aims to discuss these approaches towards shedding some light on conceptual assumptions and fallacies in digital activism theory. It will outline issues of generalization, foci on the 'digital', and definition via practice towards highlighting conceptual ambiguities in activism that is labelled 'digital'.

Through this synthesis, the paper will argue that digitality has become not only a relatively meaningless descriptor of new activist practices, but also dysfunctional and counterproductive to its potential. More specifically, the paper will suggest that the labelling of contemporary activism with the term 'digital' implies and indeed carries with it a range of fallacies: (1) it omits the concept's complexity (e.g. hybridity, rhizomatism, multi-mediality); (2) it implies digital dualism and potentially also technological determinism; and (3) it invites stigma, luddite sentiment, and other social constructions of these technologies (e.g. clicktivism). The paper concludes by cautioning about the implicit labelling processes that accompany the usage and conceptual framing of the term.

2   DEFINING DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Following the Arab Spring, a surge of publications has discussed and advanced knowledge on digital activism. Even so, there remains little consensus on its conceptual scope. A range of factors have contributed to this obscurity, including the comparatively low number of conceptual contributions, ambiguous and changing terminology, as well as assumed

attributes and practices filed under the term. To date, many scholarly contributions do not give an extensive or sometimes any definition of the term (e.g. Adi & Miah, 2011; Breindl, 2010; Karpf, 2010a; Ng & Toupin, 2013). Among the few more comprehensive conceptual discussions and definitions are Hands' (2011) three-pronged approach to activism as dissent, resistance, and rebellion, and Karatzogianni's (2015, p.1) definition of D.A. as "political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics" and by non-state actors.

Part of the difficulty in defining the term lies in its combination of two elements that are complex concepts on their own: the internet (or digital technology) and activism. At a minimum, digital technologies have been described as devices based on a code existing of 0s and 1s (Joyce, 2010, p. IX). Even so, digital activism typically implies the use of internet-enabled digital technologies, and yet, the internet itself has been described as a new field in which conceptual confusion is not uncommon (e.g. Postill, 2011, p. 25). In fact, scholars do not necessarily separate between information and communication technology, the internet, new media, and similar terms, and therefore clearer definitions of the politics and technologies implied in D.A. are needed (Breindl, 2010, p. 56). This is perhaps best illustrated in recent debates surrounding the internet's 'birthday' in 2019 and which precise technology is celebrated by it: The Internet, the Advanced Research Projects Agency, or the World Wide Web. - The answer depends very much on how the Internet is defined in the first place (Paloque-Bergès & Schafer, 2019, drawing on Novak).

Similar difficulties arise in defining which digitally-assisted activities should even be considered activism. For instance, Adi and Miah (2011) explain that sharing a website through a tweet may be counted as activism, or may not. Digital activism has therefore sometimes been conceptualised through the term 'participation'. For example, in his work on "digital prefigurative participation", a form of digital pre-protest engagement, Mercea (2011, drawing on Flanagin et al., 2006) suggests that protest participation online is essentially a communicative act that expresses personal views on public issues, a narrative also driven by others (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). Even so, it remains questionable whether such acts do indeed constitute activism or perhaps advocacy instead, areas that often overlap. For example, according to Hands (2011, p. 3) activism includes a range of practices of resistance rather than a "general sense of opposition to prevailing power". Indeed, the use of D.A. as a concept is often *context-specific*, as socio-political acts are often defined based on the political environment or regime they take place in, as well as the particular technologies that are used, as is, for example, the case with far-right protest movements or activism against or as part of authoritarian regimes. As such,

definitions of digital activism rely on a range of attributes and sub-concepts and remain largely speculative.

This issue is reflected in (if not exacerbated by) the terminological ambiguity in the evolution of the combined term (an issue also picked up by George & Leidner, 2019; Özkula, 2021). Aside 'digital activism' (e.g. Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Hands, 2011), a range of other terms have been used to represent either the same or overlapping concepts (see Özkula, 2021) including online activism (e.g. Yang, 2018), networked activism (e.g. Tufekci, 2013), social media activism (e.g. Miller, 2017), internet activism (e.g. Kang, 2017; Tatarchevskiy, 2011), hybrid activism (Treré, 2019), hashtag activism (e.g. Briones, Janoske, & Madden, 2016), activism with prefixes commonly denoting digital connections such as "e", "net", "web", or "mobile" (e.g. Carty, 2010; Cullum, 2010; Meikle, 2010), or in diverse keyword combinations such as hashtag internet activism (Peters & Besley, 2019). A variety of scholars have also used several of those terms interchangeably (e.g. Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Meikle, 2010).

In many ways, this terminological ubiquity highlights the rapid growth and popularity of the phenomenon including its changing language discourses, where individuals and organisations sometimes quickly embrace new terms with (initially) little need for terminological refinement. For instance, the changing terminology often reflects technological developments. While 'web' and 'cyber' reflect early (mostly 1-way) forms of digital communication, the terms 'social media', 'mobile', and 'hashtag' highlight post-2005 developments. The choice of term often also signals a particular era in which a given term dominated the language discourse, such as the term cyber-activism for "futuristic, science-fiction dimensions" (Lupton, 2014, p. 13), and social media for technologies developing in the mid-2000s alongside smartphones (although social technologies have existed for longer). These choices are additionally influenced by the concept's positioning in a wide, varied, and interdisciplinary field with varying terminological preferences. Digital scholarship is in itself necessarily interdisciplinary and includes large corpuses of works in the areas of media studies, computer sciences, sociology, anthropology, political science, cultural geography, and marketing, where disciplinary preferences have affected terminology.

Thus, beyond the simpler issue of definition, D.A. is a complex and perhaps even problematic concept to operationalise due to its intricate terminological and conceptual evolution, as well as varying disciplinary and methodological approaches. While such discrepancies may well be expected in phenomena that are closely tied to developing technologies, the focus on the precise technology then becomes, to some extent, its fallacy. After all, this concept appears to be labelled by the technologies that seem

to differentiate it, suggesting that its practice is technology-tied if not -driven, a notion that implies at a minimum digital dualism and at a maximum technological determinism.

For pragmatic reasons, this paper uses the term 'digital activism' as an umbrella term. While the other terms are acknowledged as part of the D.A. terminology and language discourse, this term is consistent with recent trends where the term 'online' is increasingly substituted by 'digital' in recognition of widespread digitisation and digitalisation processes. From an evolutionary perspective, 'digital' describes best the *current* language discourse around the new technologies. The preference of the term is further based on some conceptual variations as explored by Joyce (2010). According to Joyce, D.A. suffers from terminological ambiguity in that some terms are not exhaustive, and others are not exclusive (2010, p. VIII). Some terms, she says, are not exhaustive in that they include only internet-enabled technologies, such as cyber-activism and online activism (ibid, p. VIII). Other terms such as 'social media' are additionally limited to more specific areas or technologies (ibid). Along similar lines to Joyce's explanation of exhaustiveness, some terms appear unsuitable in that they are defined by the primary purpose of the new technologies. Those terms include information activism (e.g. Stein, Notley, & Davis, 2012, based on Tactical Tech) and keywords in combination with ICTs such as ICT activism (e.g. Hintz, 2012). These expressions focus on digital technologies as tools for communication or as part of information management, areas that are here considered part of D.A., but again not exhaustive to its purposes.

Other terms can be deemed unsuitable in that they are (in Joyce's terms) not exclusive, meaning that they are too broad. Joyce gives the example of e-activism, which includes various electronic devices. For example, dictaphones and tape recorders are electronic, but not devices that have had major societal effects in recent years. Following the same logic, digital technologies that have not shown relevance for activism in literature have not been included as part of the spectrum here. Those technologies foremost include tools and technologies that have primarily pragmatic functions, such as storage devices (e.g. DVD and USB technologies) or internal workflow technologies. Although those tools are acknowledged as relevant within their functions, they are not of particular value for conceptualising activism practice.

Although D.A. is currently a popular term (and has therefore been chosen as a working term here), the term digital remains problematic, an issue this paper addresses. On a basic semantic level, the term can be said to not be exclusive enough in that (like the 'e-' prefix) 'digital' includes by default a wide array of devices that may not prove relevant to political activity or activism at all, such as digital household appliances, storage devices, and workflow technologies. While the term may still be more

accurate than other variations, it could also be questioned whether 'digital' highlights the complex networked potential of the web and smartphones to a fair extent. It may consequently also be challenged what particular features or distinctions the term 'digital' *actually* proposes, as well as how these propositions influence its current understandings and social construction.

3   DIGITAL ACTIVISM REPERTOIRES

Given the large variety of technologies that have been subsumed under D.A., as well as their complex evolution, a comprehensive account and lasting definition of D.A. is of course difficult to attain. Only few scholars offer a detailed description that clarifies the term or sets limits to its practice. Works that have made substantial contributions to further understanding the conceptual variations and ramifications of the phenomenon include above all [in no particular order] (1) Hands' (2011) categorisation of D.A. as dissent, resistance, and rebellion; (2) Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) seminal text on connective and collective action frames, which highlights changing social movement dynamics, (3) Karatzogianni's (2015) four waves of digital activism 1994-2014, possibly the most comprehensive historical and evolutionary work on D.A. to date, (4) work on reductionist views in hybrid media activism (e.g. Treré, 2019; Treré & Mattoni, 2016), (5) Gerbaudo's (2017) periodisation of two waves of socio-political protest, and (6) ecological views of digitally enabled activism (e.g. Mattoni, 2017; Mercea et al., 2016). While this body of work has provided substantive knowledge on what is considered D.A. as well as how the phenomenon has developed over the years, it also highlights the immense breadth and haziness of what it comprises.

A contributing factor is that, more often than not, scholars explain D.A. via its practice (e.g. Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Yang, 2009). For example, Yang describes D.A. not by way of a definition, but by listing activities that *are* D.A.:

> In some cases, the Internet serves to mobilize street protests. More often, protest takes place online. The most common forms include online petitions, the hosting of campaign websites, and large-scale verbal protests. The most radical is perhaps the hacking of websites (Yang, 2009, p. 33).

Other texts have provided more detailed categorisations. For example, Jordan (2002) distinguishes between direct action and (dis)organisation, pleasure-politics, hacktivism, and culture jamming. Later publications include newly developed activities in their groupings; for instance, George and Leidner's (2019) categories include clicktivism, metavoicing (= the

amplification of a user's voice or opinion through re-sharing), assertion (= content creation), e-funding, political consumerism, digital petitions, botivism (= robot-distributed activism), data activism, exposure, and hacktivism. By itself, such definition via practice is, however, problematic, as the resulting list of practices raises some questions as to what can justifiably be listed under the term. Here I outline the wide range of practices typically subsumed under digital activism via five categories: (1) advocacy and political commentary, (2) recruitment and movement-building, (3) organisation & coordination, (4) online direct action, hacktivism, and civil disobedience, and (5) research and documentation. These categories are used to provide an overview of the myriad practices assumed to pertain to the vast D.A. spectrum and the conceptual issues that accompany such generalisation.

3.1 Advocacy & political commentary

In its basic form, this category describes the expressive support of a particular position or ideology and potentially the respective distribution of information. This relatively broad category includes various forms of self-publishing or dissemination through websites, forums, or social media coverage such as tweeting, blogging, or posting, as well as responses to such content through various platform features (e.g. commenting, replying, liking, reacting, or sharing - called 'meta-voicing' by George & Leidner (2019). Such coverage may take place in textual or visual form, through personal networks or in more public domains such as through hashtag publics, and with the addition of images, videos, article links, or other forms of multimedia commentary. In recent years, popular creative forms have additionally included political memes in image, GIF, or video format (e.g. the Harlem Shake flashmobs), social media challenges (e.g. the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge), and various representations of digital solidarity. The latter may include hashtagged anecdotes for awareness-raising (e.g. #MeToo sharing of personal experiences of sexual harassment), "protest avatars" - visual symbolic representations of movement support or membership (see Gerbaudo, 2015), as well as politically motivated visual overlays for profile pictures, and affective displays of solidarity (see Reilly & Vicari, 2021).

3.2 Recruitment, movement-building, & campaigns

Recruitment and movement-building may draw on the same or similar repertoires, but are (arguably) more targeted at inclusion or mobilization than advocacy. As such, these activities tend to implement and focus on collective action frames, i.e. organisationally initiated or supported

activities and campaigns (as per Bennett & Segerberg's distinction), rather than individualised or ad-hoc cumulative efforts. While advocacy includes activities that may require both little effort (such as liking, sharing or debating) or more commitment (such as creating websites for information dissemination), recruitment and movement-building require potential activists to commit to more than an individual case by joining a particular movement in some form. This is also the case when individuals are active on various causes synonymously, which may lead to a gradual development of a collective identity or community. As such, movement-building activities aim at creating collective action, compared to advocacy and political commentary, which may comprise the entire spectrum of connective and collection action frames (differentiation as per Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) depending on scope, context, and intent.

Arguably, it may be difficult to distinguish recruitment from other actions, as digital solidarity and advocacy (cf. 3.1) or organising activities (cf. 3.3) may well contribute to movement-building. Even so, the past few years have shown various movements aimed specifically at garnering an increased membership or creating a movement through awareness-raising campaigns (rather than individualised posting efforts). This includes organisational campaigns or activities such as the infamous ASL IceBucket Challenge that asked users to either donate to the cause or to tip a bucket of ice over the heads, often achieving both (see Briones, Janoske, & Madden, 2016). In other cases, individual actions and campaigns have developed, through the creation of collective contents, into sustained movements. Such cases include #MeToo, Occupy, and #BlackLivesMatter, where the original campaigns (e.g. the Harvey Weinstein scandal in the case of #MeToo) developed into wider social movements with dedicated websites, hashtags, and profiles that unite common goals.

3.3 Organisation & coordination

The third category, protest organisation and coordination, comprises the organisation of online and/or offline activities or political opposition, coordination of activities, and mobilisation online, most prominently (in the Global North) via Twitter hashtags, Facebook groups, or organisation-led campaigns. This organisation can be done pre-protest as an incentive for online or offline protests, but also during or after. During a given action, new technologies can be used to coordinate or track activities through GPS location-tracking by using mobile phones, location-based networks such as Foursquare or Google Latitude, or instant messaging via public microblogging sites such as Twitter and their use of hashtags through what has been labelled "smart mobs" (see Cullum, 2010, p. 55-57; Rheingold, 2003). Such activities have, for example, shown to facilitate on-the-ground

protest action and the evasion of violent responses by repressive regimes (e.g. Hong Kong protests - see Ting, 2020). Some of these evasive tactics have been extended to the digital realm through the manipulation of keywords and hashtags, also called "morphs" (see Rauchfleisch & Schäfer, 2015).

As with the previous categories, these activities may be pertinent to either digital or non-digital actions, realms which are, more often than not, enmeshed – particularly in the case of digitally coordinated offline action. Even so, digital technologies have shown to carry significant weight in mobilisation due to the organising potential of tagging markers (e.g. hashtags) and similar digital enablers/mechanisms (e.g. location markers). These features have allowed for the development of social media publics, most prominently "hashtag publics" (Rambukkana, 2015) and "ad-hoc issue publics" (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). These are often "self-organising" grassroots networks (as per Bennett & Segerberg's framework) that may coordinate activities online (e.g. personalised sharing in #MeToo) or offline in the form of street protests (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter). New technologies are here used largely for digital prefigurative participation (Mercea, 2011) rather than protest or advocacy itself.

3.4   Online direct action, hacktivism & civil disobedience

Online direct action consists of direct actions of dissent or protest in digital space. This may include creative forms of protest online such as the creation of political parody, e.g. memes, parodic banner ads or software for ideological or political points (see Gurak & Logie, 2003; Tang, 2013), and elements of culture jamming – the critical subversive use or manipulation of mainstream media or cultural artefacts (see Lievrouw, 2011). Unlike many activities in recruitment, organisation and cooperation, many of these activities are not necessarily intended to create action outside (e.g. street protests) but only within digital space (see Carty & Onyett, 2006; Yang, 2009). Some of those actions can be filed under "politically motivated hacking" (Jordan, 2002, p. 119) or hacktivism, which has been defined as a form of D.A. that draws strongly on computational skills (Jordan & Taylor, 2004). Hacktivism has often been accompanied by negative connotations; in fact, hacking itself is often associated with aggression or disturbance (e.g. Murdoch, 2010). At times, these acts are classed as online civil disobedience, a term that encompasses a range of minor acts of societal rebellion as well as larger acts that may be seen as cyberattacks or in accumulation even cyberwar (see Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Jordan & Taylor, 2004).

Minor activities may include different types of spamming such as email spamming or "e-mail bombs" – the flooding users with (typically disapproving) emails (see Kavada, 2005, p. 210; Vegh, 2003, p. 78 & 85) or

"twitterbombs" – the flooding of users with public tweets via Twitter (see Karpf, 2010b, p.156) and similarly the automatic tracking or following of specific accounts (Hwang, 2010, p. 133). "Google-bombing" (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 91-92) equally falls into this category, although here users apply particular keyword combinations in their search engine optimisation to link organisations or groups to spoof or critique. Other such acts include spoof websites for the purpose of making political points such as the fake WTO website www.gatt.org during the Seattle WTO protests, and browser or page hijacking – the redirection of users via their browser, website, or a web page (see Vegh, 2003, p. 76-80).

While their connotations differ, online direct action, hacktivism, and online civil disobedience are largely analogous in that they are groups of actions that are considered a direct form of action that takes place online or is indeed *designed* for digital space. In comparison, many activities filed under the previous categories may draw on digital technologies for their pragmatic value or simply as the new way of 'being' in increased digitalised societies, where any activity may realistically incorporate digital elements (as argued by Nielsen, 2010; Negroponte, 1995).

3.5   Research & documentation

Other areas that have at times been included as part of the D.A. spectrum include research and documentation activities. These may be used by activists as a precursor to information dissemination and may consist of any type of human rights abuse documentation or citizen reporting, directly (for instance via mobile phones), via an outlet such as Indymedia, or an organisation such as Witness (see Cullum, 2010, pp. 59-60). It may include the leakage of information as done by the Zapatista movement in the mid-1990s or later by Wikileaks, but also election monitoring, countering rumours, and fighting voting fraud, as well as forms of "sousveillance" - bottom-up, reverse or grassroots surveillance whereby individuals monitor institutions such as government, police or other law enforcement through documenting and distributing evidence of police brutality (see e.g. Reilly, 2015).

Research and documentation may arguably also stretch to include other elements of information management such the dissemination of research (as with advocacy), e.g. through the use of listservs, website development specifically dedicated to informing and raising awareness or links to traditional organisations, and via alternative news outlets such as Indymedia (see Karpf, 2010b). While it is debatable whether research for activism should be considered activism in itself, some of these activities are conducted either in support of it or specifically with the intent of dissent (e.g. in the case of Wikileaks). As such, it remains difficult to determine not

only which activities are digitised or digitally enabled, but also which of them constitute activism in the larger sense.

3.6 Other

There are various other activities that can be and have been subsumed under the umbrella of digital activism, albeit somewhat less commonly so. They include diverse forms of online discussion along with their various rhetorics, narratives, and visually creative features. For example, the WWF's Virtual Spotlight in 2021 was a dedicated action that fused video dissemination, social media coverage across platforms, and a physical element in the form of switching off lights. They may further comprise the use of smartphone apps in support of movement activities or protecting individuals at risk (such as Amnesty International's app 'Panic Button' that alerts family members in cases of abduction/attack), bot activity/ "botivism" (George & Leidner, 2019), creative forms of data activism such as obfuscation on social media platforms (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2011, 2015), funding or donation activity (see George & Leidner, 2019; Briones, Janoske, & Madden, 2016), as well as crowdsourcing in which individuals participate in activities through open calls. Not all of these could be reflected here in their entirety, although this can, in part, be attributed to the popularity of some actions over others in use or in extant literature, as well as their positioning at the edges of what is conventionally understood as core activist activity.

4   DIGITAL ACTIVISM FALLACIES

The five areas of D.A. outlined here represent what is typically subsumed under the term in existing scholarship. In accumulation, they portray D.A. as a fairly broad, if not almost all-encompassing, concept, primarily based on a distinction between activism that is conducted offline and activism that is conducted either entirely or partially online. Even so, some activities have become more synonymous with the term than others, despite the 'digital' occupying a different place or meaning across these activities. Certain activities may not even necessarily be counted as D.A. as they are strongly reliant on physical or offline actions, which makes it questionable whether those actions are indeed immanently or at all digital. For example, it is debatable whether the organisation of a protest on Facebook could be counted as D.A. if the only digital element of a given activity is an event page that invites users, when all the other material preparation and the protest itself take place offline. It is then doubtful that some email communication for an otherwise entirely offline movement is an act of digital activism rather than, simply, activism. Another example is the

distribution of protest videos on Youtube as mentioned by Kavada (2010). Unless the video is specifically used for further mobilisation, it may not have been an act of digital activism, but the digital archival of an event that is in itself not digital. Hence, interpretations of D.A. tend to be fairly broad and general in that they include online as well as offline activities, traditional activism activities, digital media in support functions, and mere communications. In that sense, what is often called digital activism is partly neither 'digital' nor 'activism'.

Thus, beyond the social media culture that D.A. has been said to be part of (e.g. decentralised, flexible, networked, and hierarchically flatter), the primary distinguishing factor of the new activism is assumed to be a degree of digitality. This, however, poses conceptual and epistemological problems.

4.1   Digital duality and the omissions of conceptual complexity

A lot of literature (e.g. Foust & Hoyt, 2018; Jurgenson, 2012; Karatzogianni, 2015; Treré, 2019; Treré & Mattoni, 2016; Lupton, 2014; Breindl, 2010; Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2015; Karpf, 2010a; Sassen, 2002) already assumes that online and offline activities cannot be separated clearly and are at best blurred. Jurgenson (2012) calls this digital dualism conceptually unsound and explains that we already know that the digital does not exist outside or separate from the physical. Instead, the relationship between the digital and physical is much more complex or enmeshed (Jurgenson, 2012; Negroponte, 1995), a view that has become increasingly adopted in the scholarly community within the past decade. Less rigid or reductionist views have, for example, focused on hybridity in complex media ecologies (an argument also driven by Treré & Mattoni, 2016; examples: above all Chadwick, 2017; Lindgren, Dahlberg-Grundberg, & Johansson, 2014; Mattoni, 2017; Mercea et al., 2016; Treré, 2019), changing movement dynamics and structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), contextual factors in contemporary activism (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013), diverse media practices (Mattoni, 2017), and wider discussions of media effects in new social movements beyond technological determinism and media centrism (see Foust & Hoyt, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017; Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

These approaches better capture the rhizomatic nature of protest communication, wider action repertoires and dynamics, media diversity/ ecologies or what Madianou (2015) calls "poly-media", as well as multi-actor spheres. They further imply that (multi-)media uses are not entirely new features of newer information and communication technologies. As such, they do not ignore the historical multi-mediality of social movements. For instance, early 20th century campaigns by Amnesty International already included global network activity and combined letter-writing

marathons with petitions and poster campaigns. Thus, calling the new activism 'digital' does not necessarily make conceptual sense, nor does it convey (if anything, it reduces) the complexity of the term.

Admittedly, extant uses of the term suggest that the term may at times be kept deliberately open as a way of allowing for some ambiguity or, indeed, flexibility. While this offers a potentially *desirable* broad and all-encompassing definition, it also lends itself to conceptual obscurity, ambiguity and value-driven/ stigmatised approaches. It further makes the operationalisation of the phenomenon for research – both for methodological choices and for the comparison of scholarly work – rather challenging. D.A. ultimately merely assumes that the described activism is either completely or to some undefined extent digital (natively digital *or* digitised). As such, it is barely (and sometimes not at all) distinguishable from any other (i.e. non-digital) contemporary activism.

This is not to say that digitally-enabled activism should be separated from more traditional forms of activism (another digital dualist fallacy, no doubt); they are intricately intertwined as recent literature has confirmed (above all, Chadwick's work on hybrid media systems, 2007, 2014, 2017). However, if contemporary activism which is often spurred by digital technologies is labelled as 'being digital' when it is not necessarily so and when the 'digital' may purely be a pragmatic choice or representation of increasingly digitalised societies rather than the place of protest, it becomes debatable whether there is any meaning in the term D.A. beyond a signifier for contemporary activism. The term then merely reduces the phenomenon's scope to a somewhat arbitrary and digital dualist distinction that potentially carries little operational value beyond identifying research areas.

4.2   Labelling processes & social construction in digital activism

The previous section established that an immensely broad view of D.A. may be problematic in that it gives way to an assumed or implied concept, which generalises it and renders it vague. Along with other literature, I further maintained that the implied digital dualism is unfounded, if not fairly meaningless. In itself, the 'discovery' that the digital descriptor is superfluous may hold little value for researchers. After all, the distinction may be a pragmatic choice for discipline or method tagging. However, if the term 'digital' is relatively meaningless, then D.A. is subject to the connotations of this descriptor, and the label 'digital' implies a range of attributes that have been attached to social media culture: decentralisation, networkedness, flexibility, flatter hierarchies, as well as more critical views of these platforms as trivial, apathetic, vain/ shallow/ narcissistic, or ephemeral. As such, D.A. as a term is not only somewhat futile, but

influenced by how the digital and in particular social media platforms are constructed.

The foundation for this influence lies in labelling theory (e.g. Becker, 1963), which suggests that wording matters in terms of implicit label making. In essence, it proposes that a negative label informs perspectives and conceptualisations of a given object or phenomenon (see Becker, 1963). To illustrate: in his infamous example of the 'deviant' label, Becker (ibid) argues that deviants only become true deviants when the stigmatized subjects internalise the degraded identity. While the 'digital' is not in itself a negative label, extant uses of the term suggest it does carry a range of derogatory connotations for contemporary activism. This means that when labelled as 'digital', contemporary activism is socially constructed on the basis of what the term assumes and connotes (based on social constructivism, which assumes that what is considered reality is socially constructed, see Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This social construction is perhaps best illustrated through the concept of clicktivism, also called clickstream activism or slacktivism. Clicktivism is a form, type, or synonym for digitally-supported activism that relies strongly or solely on brief engagements through clicks, for example the liking, re-sharing, following, or (up)voting on posts (George & Leidner, 2019) or quick distribution of mass media (e.g. Karpf, 2010a). Although the definition in itself is not critical of D.A., the term is largely seen as pejorative (see, for example, Halupka, 2014, 2018; Karpf, 2010a; Madison & Klang, 2020). It typically connotes a type of activism that is futile, trivial, inconsequential, ephemeral, low-risk, loose-/ weak-tie, low-commitment/ uncommitted/ apathetic, low-quality, and resulting in little change or success (ibid; examples of these constructions: Miller, 2017; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2009; in journalism: White, 2010). This is despite growing evidence to the contrary. A range of online campaigns have shown exceptional success rates in terms of reach and participation, donations, and achieving the desired social changes, even though they relied largely on the virality produced through frequent liking and sharing. They include the ALS Icebucket Challenge with its high participation and accumulation of immense funds (see Briones, Janoske, & Madden, 2016), and the #MeToo campaign, which resulted in the conviction of sexual predator Harvey Weinstein and a series of penalties and shunning practices. Thus, movements strongly relying on the Internet have at times shown significant success over the past decades.

Beyond success, clicktivism has also been criticised for producing a phlegmatic activism culture, which is rooted in low commitment. Clicktivism ultimately assumes that traditional forms of activism are more dedicated. For example, in his ode to 'offline activism', Gladwell (2009) writes that digital actions are not as invested due to the lack of physical risk

and strong ties. This is mirrored by McCafferty who describes the tie difference as follows:

> Traditionally, (…) movements evolved from (…) "strong tie" personal connections, such as those among classmates and church members. Activism associated with social media, however, is dependent upon "weak tie" relationships, (…) Twitter followers they have never met or Facebook friends with whom they would never otherwise stay in touch (McCafferty, 2011, p. 18).

Even so, such loose ties have shown to lend themselves strongly to a viral effect as they are about 'gaining attention' (Tufekci, 2013). Thus, while certain social media platforms (e.g. Twitter) have indeed shown to rely on weak ties, this has also shown to benefit movements in terms of visibility. It is also questionable whether weak ties are necessarily a social media phenomenon as organisational campaigns do not necessarily assume strong ties (e.g. Amnesty International's global letter-writing to prisoners of conscience). While investment or commitment to a given action remains difficult to measure (regardless of whether activities take place online or offline), these views of digitally forged connections as less valuable suggests that the physical or traditional is at least to an extent romanticised.

The same can be said for the issue of risk. While it may ring true that an online post does not in itself carry significant risks, activists have been persecuted based on their online activities, as was observed under more authoritarian regimes (e.g. Arab Spring, Hong Kong protests, Gezi Park protests). As such, the consequences of clicking do carry physical risks, although these may appear somewhat later than is the case with live street protests. This is perhaps best illustrated in Karpf's (2010a) argument that these new forms of participation often show a "difference-in-degree" rather than a "difference-in-kind". Thus, despite some evidence that certain protest actions require high degrees of commitment and elements of bodily risks, D.A. is constructed as being low-risk and low-commitment.

A range of scholars have since defended clicktivism (e.g. Halupka, 2014, 2018; Karpf, 2010a; Madison & Klang, 2020) as a valid or valuable contribution to more traditional action repertoires. Although many of these texts suggest that clicktivism is a form or tactic of digital activism, its broad definition and understanding through a set of derogatory connotations suggest that it is not necessarily a type of digital activism, but a pejorative synonym of the concept, and as such a social construct. Such constructionist processes are further informed by wider critiques of social media and the generation they pertain to. Social media platforms have, above all, been associated with entertainment, trivia, vanity/ narcissism (in part already shown by Madison & Klang, 2020), as well as short-lived fashion/ fads, idealised and therefore disingenuous lifestyles, disinterest/ apathy,

mis/disinformation, and fake news - above all in the fields of media and childhood, fandom literature, online identity construction, and news consumption. This has led to a range of recommendations by different figures of authority (e.g. members of parliament or health organisations) to limit social media consumption (see Guardian articles: Hern, 2018; Waterson, 2019). Basing new activist practices on the specific technologies that are more commonly used is therefore potentially linked to social constructions of digital activism based on preconceptions or prejudices towards those social media platforms (e.g. Insta culture), practices (e.g. selfie-taking), derogatory phenomena (e.g. fake news), or general luddite sentiment, issues that inform how the concept is viewed and understood.

4.3 Monolithic social constructions of digital media

Digital dualism carries the potential to exacerbate this trend due to its distinction between the 'real' and 'virtual', which assumes that different aspects of the new activism are essentially the same. Scholars presenting digital activism this way thus run the risk of presenting the web as a single entity that is "monolithic and static" rather than diverse and complex (Silver, 2003, p. 281). This allows for a reductionist view of the internet or activist tools, eradicating the complexity of the phenomenon (similar conclusions in Foust & Hoyt, 2018; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). Kaun and Uldam (2018) call this a "myth of universality", a view that lends itself to media determinism as it (falsely) assumes that contemporary activism is informed and even determined by the use of an all-encompassing Internet. Nielsen describes this issue as follows: "[p]eople don't use 'the Internet' for activism, rather they employ particular Internet tools for particular tasks" (2010, p. 187).

This issue is reflected in the use of other paradigms that have been used to explain contemporary activism including hybridity, network features, types of participation, and levels of integration. These paradigms better highlight new opportunities and developments in activism. While D.A. as activism that is primarily distinguished by its digitality is fairly non-descript, there are more quantifiable, measurable, and scalable – and therefore conceptually more meaningful paradigms for understanding new forms of activism, particularly given the different strengths of individual platforms. For example, Twitter caters more to reach and distribution (network features) through hashtag publics based on its platform-internal technological enablers such as hashtags, while Facebook activism is based more on community spaces that often facilitate comparatively smaller-scale (in terms of connections) but potentially deeper engagement. Along similar lines, scholars have shown the diverse ways in which different actors and

groups participate and engage across different platforms, spaces, and digital mechanisms (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012).

Thus, views of digitally-enabled/-assisted activism are subject to social constructions of *specific* digital technologies, i.e. a set of particular platforms and practices that are often assumed to represent the 'digital' as a whole. Labelling new activist tactics 'digital' therefore invites a range of distinctions and sentiments that are based on social constructions of digital technologies (including dualist logics and luddite sentiment), rather than evidence from the field. In their reductionist form they also portray digital media as static, monolithic, and all-encompassing, a view that lends itself to media centrism and technologically determinist views. Some work has already alluded to this trend in digital activism theory, such as Foust and Hoyt (2018), Gerbaudo (2017), Kaun and Uldam (2018), and Özkula (2021), as they argue that the focus on specific technologies in contemporary activism emphasises the 'digital' and therefore suggests media determinism. As such, the 'digital' carries little meaning for operationalising the phenomenon for social research – the distinctions are, after all, fairly arbitrary. Instead, it lends itself to the social construction of contemporary activism along common perceptions of social media platforms.

5   CONCLUSION

At the start of this paper I presented a range of issues relating to the conceptualisation of digital activism. Those issues included conceptual ambiguities and obscurities in digital activism study, the blurred boundaries between digital and traditional activism, and controversies concerning the efficacy and consequences of digital activism. Some of the conceptual issues derive from the digital dualist logic embedded in the phenomenon's naming and framing. The paper consequently problematized this logic as follows: (1) a lot of activism activity that includes digitalised activity today is integrated/ enmeshed/ hybrid, (2) digitality as the distinguishing factor for current activism is fairly non-descript as it merely suggests the use of some tools as part of a range of activities that are not further defined, and (3) digital activism is a very broad concept as it is based on the use of a very broad set of technologies. Thus, it was argued that digital activism as a concept is both obscure and problematic for its operationalisation. Through a discussion of derogatory views of digitally enabled activism (the clicktivist example) and universalist views of the 'digital', it was further argued that the 'digital' label is attached to a range of processes of social construction. It was therefore suggested that D.A. as a label is dysfunctional to how contemporary activism is theorised.

It is hoped that this paper has laid some foundations for further study on D.A. by highlighting and discussing a range of conceptual obscurities in

digital activism research. It is further hoped that future studies will dedicate themselves to further conceptualising the term outside of digital dualism, and in doing so, reconsider the use of the 'digital' label for demarcating contemporary activism. Arguably, activism described as 'digital' would realistically comprise at its core solely online direct action, hacktivism, and civil disobedience – actions that not only rely on, but are inherently based on technological knowledge, skill, and application. Even so, these categories would likely not escape the processes of social construction that accompany the 'digital'. As such, it may be wise to drop the digital prefix altogether in favour of less all-encompassing descriptions of activism towards destigmatising contemporary activism in both theory and practice. Above all, it is hoped that such a change in terminology would give credit to contemporary activist practices as well as the activists that take part in and drive these. After all, how likely is it that the general public people would continuously engage in an activity that is considered (in Shulman's words) merely "low-quality, redundant, and generally insubstantial commenting by the public" (Shulman, 2009, p. 26)?

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