Digital Resistance: The Case for Everyday Activism

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In the years before the new millennium the hype spread by promoters of web based digital technology seemed to reach ever higher hyperbolic peaks. This technology would cure disease, support democracy, topple dictators, and bring peace. The bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2000 did have a chilling effect, but the allure of digital technology quickly resurrected the hype. By 2012 it was hailed as a mechanism of savior and digital technology was going to end the violence of the Lord's Resistance Army with a viral video and the #Kony2012 hashtag.

In the meantime, a wide array of mobile digital devices, social media platforms, and interconnected devices were becoming the fundamental communication technologies for a growing population of the world. These systems, represented by our personal mobile devices, have become the source of production, dissemination, and consumption of most of the world's information needs. This rapid but incremental change has influenced almost every facet of human life; therefore, it is unsurprising that they are responsible for changing the face of social movements, activism, and resistance.

The goal of this special edition on digital resistance is to go beyond the hyperbole to present ways in which digital technology has become a clear addition to the tools available to the activist and how, through the use of these tools, we are experiencing a challenge to the ways in which we traditionally understand acts of resistance. However, as this collection will show, this does not mean that technology creates resistance or leads to democracy.

In his classic work on resistance, James Scott (2008) explored subaltern resistance and listed foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, and sabotage as examples of forms of resistance. Personal mobile digital devices are almost ubiquitous and have changed many of our everyday practices. It has become a mundane device, but this does not decrease its powerful reach. In their work on everyday resistance, Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) describe everyday resistance as a contextual practice entangled with power. By adding a digital reach to this, resistance is subtly shifted and the continuum on which resistance theory rests is made larger.

The Papers
In our attempt to illustrate the breadth of digital resistance we have selected four papers for inclusion in this volume. The goal is not only to present a range of scenarios where digital technology has been vital for the acts of resistance, but also to use these cases as illustrations for the wide range of ways in which technology is the tool of resistance. This volume contains cases of the issues of trust in social media use among Black Lives Matter, governmental

resistance to digitization and openness in Mexico, the use of a Facebook feature in acts of defiance and protest in the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and artists' approach to resisting facial recognition systems.

As this volume shows, digital tools have unbalanced power structures and allowed new voices to be heard. Similarly, the tools are not solely used as the 'weapons of the weak', as we see government and counterprotesters using similar tools in attempting to control the resistance narratives. Digital resistance is not about the tools we use but is about the ways in which these tools enable new modes of resistance and counter resistance.

In *RESIST: Examining Black Lives Matter in the changing landscape of social trust* Shauna A. Morimoto and Diana Cascante explore the ways in which a networked social movement is faced with new challenges and requires systems of trust to overcome concerns of unverified information within the movement. Their work explores how social trust is built through an online resistance movement. Through their study of social media usage within the Black Lives Matter network they have identified how a range of media and digital tools are used to share facts and build trust. While social media is an important tool since it offers advantages over older forms of broadcast media, it does require users to invest time in fact checking and extend trust to sources over the network.

Thus, for Black Lives Matter, the reliance on a wider horizontal communication and information sharing is in itself a form of resistance. Its communication practices address important aspects of democracy while levelling the playing field for communication and allowing groups traditionally excluded from power to make themselves heard. In this paper, Morimoto and Cascante present valuable insights into how the technology supports democratic communication, but also requires the building of networked trust in order to become a vital tool for communication within and from groups whose voices would normally struggle to be heard.

In the study of the Facebook check-in feature, Tyler DeAtley explores the ways in which the tool can be used to create hybrid protest spaces through digital interactions surrounding the protest. In his paper *Mobile Ambivalence at Standing Rock: Surveillance, antagonism, and mobility at the Dakota Access Pipeline protests*, he argues that the check-in is a site for the ambivalence of protest. While sympathizers across the globe used it to sign-in into standing rock in order to jam police surveillance, counter protesters used the same feature to harass protesters.

DeAtley argues that digital media creates a hybrid space of resistance and protest. Where the efficiency of the tool enabled a wider scope of interest in the protests, it also brought about interest and harassment from trolls whose goal was to harass and engage in forms of counter resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests. By using the Facebook check-in, the protesters and counter protesters created a messy hybrid space for resistance. The use of this tool illustrates the ways in which a local protest can be opened up for participants globally; however, the case also illustrates the downside of this increased global participation in the

form of messy surveillance, doxxing, and other antagonisms.

In *Institutional Resistance to Transparency: The quest for public sector Information in Mexico*, Guillén Torres presents an interesting juxtaposition of resistance and counterresistance. Here the government is attempting to resist the drive towards transparency through classic foot dragging techniques. In a manner of speaking the powerful are using the 'weapons of the weak' in order to not submit to the requests of the weak.

At the same time, information activists are using digital technology to demand that government not only fulfills its obligations but does so in a timeframe and manner that is useful to the population. The institutional resistance in this case is the resistance by the institution and not to the institution. Torres argues that digital technology has allowed citizens to use transparency mechanisms to make the state more legible, controllable, and accountable. This is resisted by the state in "everyday, subtle, seemingly non-political strategies implemented by the state's institutions, which reduce citizens' ability to produce and/or process data regarding governmental action." In this case we see the ways in which the technology has empowered the weak and allowed them to demand transparency. This has led the state to react with unusually soft forms of resistance in order to resist compliance without necessarily and openly denying it.

In *Recognizing Everyday Activism: Understanding Resistance to Facial Recognition*, we explore the uses and abuses of facial recognition systems. These systems are being increasingly implemented and used as a form of severe population surveillance. In our paper, we describe the ways in which these facial recognition systems operate, and in particular, how they differ from earlier forms of camera surveillance. As an increasingly pervasive and harmful form of privacy invading technology it is not surprising that these systems evoke resistance.

Attempts to resist camera surveillance are refreshingly low tech. Individuals quickly understand that masks or clothing can be used to render cameras useless without causing property damage. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the state reacts to their surveillance being so easily thwarted and the paper explores the ways in which several jurisdictions have created laws prohibiting individuals from covering their faces in order to prevent identification.

The desire to resist facial recognition systems has not disappeared and methods for resisting this surveillance are being shared online. Some examples of this resistance take the form of art projects, some are technologists, and others are created by hobbyists. They are all illustrative of the desire for privacy and the will to resist. This paper explores this desire to resist pervasive surveillance and attempt to maintain privacy in the face of increasing surveillance in everyday life.

Conclusion
Our special edition focuses on platforms and practices. The smartphone is probably the most ubiquitous and iconic artefact of the digital age, but the breadth of the digital in digital resistance must be understood as wider than this. There is an increasing growth in creative uses

of new technologies (such as mesh networks and deep fakes) as well as innovative uses of established practices. In order to provide the reader with an illustrative array of useful examples, we have chosen to focus on average, mundane everyday uses of widely available technologies and platforms. This volume is, after all, not about the technology - but about the resistance practices that arise from it. It is also important to state that this contribution is not intended to be (and cannot be) exhaustive but is an important illustration of the uses of technology in resistance.

The Digital: An everyday activism within everyday resistance

Vinthagen and Johansson's (2013) critical work outlining everyday resistance provide us with a framework for understanding the development of resistance studies as well as its theoretical contributions. They succinctly write:

> "Everyday resistance is about how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power... As such, everyday resistance is "typically hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated" (p. 2)... and is "*quiet, dispersed, disguised or otherwise seemingly invisible*" (p.4; italics original).

How then should we understand digital everyday resistance? While the technology is powerful and has a global reach, our uses of it are most definitely mundane and everyday. Vinthagen and Johansson (2013) propose a definition of everyday resistance as "such resistance that is done routinely, but which is not politically articulated or formally organized (yet or in that situation). It is a form of activity that often avoids being detected as resistance. But it might also be made invisible by society, by not being recognized as resistance" (p. 10).

Resistance when mediated through digital platforms faces a wide array of challenges (Klang & Madison, 2016; Gillespie, 2018); however, it has become an everyday practice. As such certain digital resistance practices need to be analyzed and understood as the acts of everyday activism which they are. Through digital technology acts of resistance can be carried out from safer spaces, with little effort, and without a deeper understanding of the complexity of the political realities on the ground. Through this, digital activism has been criticized for being of no or little value (Dennis, 2018). The act of dismissing new technology practices may be a knee-jerk reaction. But in doing so we are failing to see the value of digital resistance. As the authors have illustrated, digital resistance is a varied and established practice.

This volume presents the ways in which digital resistance challenges our notions of everyday resistance. Where everyday resistance is invisible, digital resistance is often intended to be visible, and when it is not the technology often makes it traceable. Technologies of anonymity and pseudonymity can, given enough time and effort, be penetrated. The check-ins in the DeAtley paper and the artists in Madison and Klang show individual acts whose aim it is to become visible. Indeed, one could argue that in these cases it is less about resisting and more about the act of being seen to be resisting. In Morimoto and Cascante the acts of resisting

consist of building information networks, to be seen as being political. Arguably the state, as described in Torres work, is working in a mode of everyday resistance while the resistance of the Mexican information activists is highly visible to the state.

We offer, therefore, a distinction between digital everyday resistance and digital everyday activism. While both are dispersed and mundane, everyday resistance is quiet, disguised or seemingly invisible, and not politically articulated, whereas everyday activism aims to be political, heard, seen, and strives to be recognized. Within these digital practices some lean more towards notions of resistance (cf Torres) and some lean more towards active, seen, political practices but done in mundane, everyday ways (cf deAtley).

Digital everyday activism is mundane, politically-motivated, public, online acts, with the aim of frustrating power strategies or marking one's resistance to them. It is made up of individual acts, often fitting a schema or model, that may be seemingly invisible yet speak volumes to the intended audience. It may be undertaken anonymously, under a pseudonym, or publicly and, when successful, may need little or no formal coordination or organization beyond a hashtag. Each of these choices depend on the culture of the hybrid spaces where the resistance is being carried out. These acts may entail the risk of online censor, attack, offline legal responses, or may pose no risk at all. Digital everyday activism is neither spectacular nor hidden. This distinction contributes to the continuum of resistance studies.

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