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IMAGES OF PROTEST IN CONTESTED SOCIAL MEDIA: PRODUCTION, PROPAGATION AND NARRATIVES

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Images play a central role in activists' social media communication from protest events (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Mortensen 2013; Poell and van Dijck 2015). The documentation of protest events through images and their propagation on social media has been conceptualized as eye-witnessing, counter-surveillance practices, or producing a visual alternative to the mainstream framing of protest events. Activists' production and propagation of images through social media, nevertheless, also raises critical questions about the inherent logics of corporate social media shaping activist communication and privileging violent narratives to produce visibility over other collective action frames (Dijck 2013; Fuchs 2012; Milan 2015; Poell and van Dijck 2015). Despite the widely recognized centrality of images in activists' communication empirical studies based on actual social media data are rare. This article addresses this challenge by analyzing images (photos and videos) produced and propagated in the Blockupy Frankfurt protests against the opening of the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarters in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, on March 18, 2015.

This research is the second phase of an analysis of Twitter data collected during the Blockupy Frankfurt action using event-specific hashtags (#Blockupy, #Destroika, #NoTroika) (Authors, 2016). Through a social network analysis of Twitter communication, the first phase focused on the main actors involved in the communication processes and the identification of groups of users behind the production and dissemination of Twitter messages. This research produced two major results: it confirmed the relevance of visual content in Twitter propagation dynamics (Suh et al. 2010) and it observed the central role of the official Frankfurt am Main police account.

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The centrality of the police account shows that police and other law enforcement agencies have adopted social media logics to communicate their perspective on protest events. Social media appears to be contested spaces where multiple actors (in this research activists, police, and mass media) propose diverse conflictual narratives. In these narratives violence plays a central role (Cammaerts 2012; Juris 2005) as a radicalized tactic to produce visibility and to antagonize the opponent, a central aspect of newsworthiness, as well as (preventing it) constitutes the *raison d'être* for police's physical and digital presence.

This article explores how different conflictual narratives produced by different actors emerge during the Blockupy Frankfurt protests in visual communication on Twitter: Which different actors produce and propagate different visual representations of the events? What are the visual narratives emerging on Twitter during the #Blockupy actions against the opening of the ECB?

Methodology

To answer these questions this research followed a mixed methods approach based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the visual content shared through Twitter messages during the event. We first ranked the tweets containing images and manually coded the most retweeted 1% (N=119) of the data-set. The manual coding aimed at identifying the type of users (activists, media/journalists, politicians, police, others) who produced the tweet and the presence of violence in the visual content. We further differentiate between two types of violence: Explicit violence, the direct execution of physical violence; and latent violence, not directly executed but latent expressions of authority and/or destruction (Fishman and Marvin 2006). The data have then been analyzed through cross tabulation (table 1) to verify the relationships between the type of user and the type of violence. In parallel we performed a narrative analysis of the images. Combining these two approaches we were able to observe how different actors produce specific types of visual content and to identify the conflicting narratives produced by police, activists, and journalists/media.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the relations between the types of users and the types of violence present in the images shared by those users. Activists mainly shared non-violent images (46.5% versus 18.6% of images containing explicit violence and 14% containing latent violence). Media, on the opposite, largely used images containing explicit violence (56.8%), but only sharing a minor number for images with no violence (18.2%) or latent violence (11.4%). Police shared mainly images containing latent violence (53.8%) and explicit violence (30.8%). These values, supported by a strong statistical association (Cramer's V .309), show how the major actors behind the Twitter communication had very diverse strategies influencing which images were shared. In the shared communicative space of Twitter hashtags these diverse strategies produced different emerging visual narratives.

Table 1: Crosstabulation of user types and represented violence (χ^2 45.5, DF 20, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V .309)

	No Violence	Latent violence	Explicit violence	Mixed	N.A.
Activist	46.5%	18.6%	14%	11.6%	9.3%
Media	18.2%	56.8%	11.4%	6.8%	6.8%
Police	15.4%	30.8%	53.8%	0%	0%
Politicians	66.7%	33.3%	0%	0%	0%
Others	8.3%	41,7%	16.7%	0%	33.3%
N.A.	0%	50%	25%	0%	25%

The emerging narratives show further nuances based on the users who originally posted the photos or videos. The most visible images and videos produced and propagated by police all include either explicit or latent violence such as images of riots initiated by activists by setting police cars on fire. The narratives created by activists are more diverse: Colorful and artistic protests, eye-witnessing of physical and symbolic police violence as well as glorification of violent action initiated by rioting activists. Despite this diversity of visual narratives, mass media and journalists mainly construct a purely violent or at most a mixed narrative of the events that also includes images of mass protest.

Based on these results and a continued analysis of images of the Blockupy Frankfurt actions, we can preliminarily conclude that on social media, images of riots, peaceful protests, artistic action, as well as police and news media struggle for public visibility. Different actors create parallel narratives representing a positive image of themselves by antagonizing the other through visual narratives of physical and latent violence but also (in the case of the activists) by a non-violent representation of their own actions. Despite these non-violent narratives we can nevertheless observe a dominance of physical and latent violence in reporting about protest events through visual content on Twitter.

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