

“Understanding Video Activism on Social Media” by Jens Eder, Britta Hartmann, and Chris Tedjasukmana (2025)

Sabrina Brignoli
Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo

Academic discourse on the relationship between digital media and civic engagement has evolved significantly over the past two decades. We have moved far beyond the initial waves of cyber-optimism, which considered the Internet primarily as a liberating technology capable of amplifying marginalised voices, and through the subsequent phase of cyber-pessimism, which focused on surveillance, slacktivism, and the decline of public discourse. Contemporary research now acknowledges that our digital public sphere cannot be entirely grasped without a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between platform algorithms, governance structures, visual cultures and the political agency of citizens.

In this landscape, *Understanding Video Activism on Social Media* by Jens Eder, Britta Hartmann, and Chris Tedjasukmana offers a critical and mature reflection on the constraints and potentials of activism in the digital age. The volume provides a comprehensive theoretical and empirical analysis of the phenomenon of video activism. This is defined as “the use of online video by individuals and groups in civil society who advocate for their political causes largely independently of the [...] established institutions” (p. 2) and is situated at the intersection of politics, video, and social media. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines media and film studies, digital and political communication, sociology, and social movement studies, the book explores how activist videos are created and distributed to document and denounce injustices, foster democratic participation, and propose alternative narratives to dominant discourses within our contemporary society.

A significant theoretical contribution of the book is the classification of activist videos into five main types, each characterised by distinct logics and functions that capture the hybridity of online video practices: witness videos; documentary videos; video blogs and personal political commentary; mobilisation and campaign videos; and playful subversion or guerrilla communication videos. The heterogeneity of contemporary activism is further delineated through the classification of four main actor categories: small media collectives; political influencers; large non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and hashtag protest movements. Each category is examined in depth in terms of its specific practices, resources, challenges, and empirical examples.

To situate these contemporary dimensions, the authors trace the historical roots of video activism, with a particular focus on the German context, starting from the leftist documentary film movements that sought to represent marginalised voices. The historical discussion is centred on three key questions: the collective nature of film production, in contrast to today's more individualised formats; the politics of representation and the ethical debate on how to effectively portray marginalised voices; and the political function of aesthetics. The authors further demonstrate how technological developments, from the first portable video cameras to social networks, have played a decisive role in democratising the production and distribution of activist communication.

These theoretical and historical discussions are integrated with numerous case studies and empirical materials, allowing the authors to address the practical dimensions of activist videos and how they generate political and social impact. The authors examine different areas of video practices, including creative design, aesthetics, production, as well as distribution infrastructures, and networking. They delineate four narrative structures capable of triggering different emotional and cognitive responses in viewers, illustrating how aesthetic and narrative strategies contribute to a video's reach and persuasive power.

With regard to the socio-political impact of activist videos, the authors propose a sequence of effects: beginning with the capturing of attention, then the provocation of affective and cognitive engagement, and ultimately the motivation of individual and collective action. They explain that in an overcrowded media landscape, attention constitutes a scarce and valuable resource, unevenly distributed and controlled by platform algorithms and commercial interests. Activists must therefore navigate complex dynamics of visibility, also struggling against users' defensive reactions, selective exposure, and emotional fatigue. A central concept here is spreadability, which depends on networked attention, defined as the interplay between user selectivity, social relations, and algorithms. The authors explain how activists can foster virality and generate cyber-cascades that, through the linking of numerous individual micro-narratives, give rise to collective macro-narratives that challenge dominant ideological frames. Furthermore, the text highlights that affective engagement can play a crucial role in the effectiveness of activist videos, especially through emotionally charged oppositions between "us" and "them", capturing attention and motivating participation more powerfully than rational persuasion alone.

A central theme running through the entire volume is the question of power. The authors situate video activism within the broader dynamics of the contemporary digital public sphere and the "Splinternet", a term used to describe the system of social media platforms that is understood as a fragmented, ambivalent, and unpredictable environment shaped by contradictory forces. On one hand, digital platforms facilitate the rapid and inexpensive production and dissemination of video, fostering new forms of participatory and collective expression. On the other hand, these same platforms operate through algorithmic curation, content moderation, and profit-driven logics, which impose constraints on activists and distort their communication. These dynamics are further scrutinised in the final chapter, which focuses on the current geopolitical and media landscape characterised by disinformation and the resurgence of authoritarianism. Through the case study of the

Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, the authors illustrate how activist intervention is made more complex by a context of political and media disorder, fragmented media systems, and state propaganda, exposing activists to significant risks of repression and censorship.

In contrast to this current media system characterised by fragmentation, polarisation, and attention hierarchies, activism is framed as an act of opposition and resistance to hegemonic power structures, whether governmental, corporate, or embedded in platform architectures. The primary goal of activists is the creation of counterpublics: alternative communicative spaces that challenge hegemonic narratives and give voice to marginalised groups and their concerns. To explain this, the authors use the concept of political framing, which refers to how political issues are represented in the media and in the collective consciousness. In a public sphere dominated by the unequal distribution of communicative power, activist interventions serve as a necessary counterweight to dominant discourses, providing alternative voices, narratives, and spaces for contestation.

Explicitly addressing an audience that extends beyond academia, including activists and educators in the political and media fields, the authors provide reflections also on ethical and practical principles of activist communication and democratic cooperation. The text addresses questions of representation, aesthetic function, emotional manipulation, and political responsibility, as well as directly calling upon activists to embrace solidarity, cooperation, and shared strategies. The authors observe that, despite their shared goals, collaboration among activist actors remains rare, limiting their collective political potential. To this end, the book concludes with an appeal for “diversity in solidarity”. Defined as mutual recognition and collective responsibility, solidarity is proposed as an ethical and strategic response to the inequalities of the contemporary digital public sphere. The authors therefore encourage activists to engage in collective efforts across movements, platforms, and media forms to resist anti-democratic forces and sustain democratic participation.

The declared aim of the entire book is to clarify fundamental concepts about video activism and develop a general framework that can serve as a foundation for academic research. The authors succeed in creating a comprehensive groundwork that combines an analysis of the aesthetic and narrative forms of video with a critical examination of the distribution logics and power structures of platforms, grounded in a socio-historical perspective on social movements and the public sphere. This is supported by a wide repertoire of empirical examples, ranging from historical documentaries to contemporary social media videos, although the predominance of case studies from the German and Western context suggests a potential for further comparative and transnational perspectives.

The strong emphasis on video as a distinct category of activism provides a clear conceptual framework. However, this also constitutes a potential limitation: many of the discussed dynamics, such as affective mobilisation, participatory communities, and algorithmic visibility, are equally applicable to other digital forms of activism beyond videos. While the focus on videos is justified by their visual, narrative and affective power, the notion of video activism may risk overstating its specificity within the broader landscape of digital

activism. This raises questions about whether it should be treated as a distinct analytical category or as a single expression within a wider range of digital activist practices.

Nevertheless, *Understanding Video Activism on Social Media* stands as a valuable contribution successfully combining theoretical clarity with detailed empirical analysis and ethical considerations, and providing a comprehensive overview of activist video practices and their socio-political implications. The balance between critical realism and optimism enables the authors to recognise and reflect on the structural constraints of activism imposed by platform surveillance, while also recognising the democratic potential and creative agency of activist media practices. Beyond providing a taxonomy and history of activist video practices, the volume invites scholars and practitioners to rethink what it means to act politically under platform capitalism, depicting contemporary activism as a complex process of negotiation and simultaneous resistance and adaptability to the dominant logics of platforms and media institutions.

Nota biografica

Sabrina Brignoli (sabrina.brignoli@uniurb.it) is a PhD student in the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo.