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Understanding Citizen Media as Practice
Agents, Processes, Publics

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Much recent commentary on citizen media has focused on online platforms as means through which citizens may disseminate self-produced media content that challenges dominant discourses or makes visible hidden realities. This chapter goes beyond a concern with media *content* to explore the much broader range of socially situated *practices* that develop around citizen media. Drawing on Couldry's proposal for a practice paradigm in media research, it suggests shifting the focus from 'citizen media' to 'citizen media practices' and demonstrates, through a case study of communication activism in the World Social Forum, how this framework can bring into view a broad range of citizen media practices (beyond those directly concerned with the production and circulation of media content), the different forms of agency that such practices make possible, and the social fabric they can help generate. I conclude by arguing that a practice framework necessitates a rethink of the way that the concept of (counter-) publics is used in the context of citizen media. Citizen media practices of the kind described here can be understood not only as practices of 'making public' previously unreported issues and perspectives, but as practices of *public-making*: practices that support the formation of publics.

Once a marginal topic within academic research, citizen media now occupy a central position in debates about the democratic potential of new digital technologies. Such technologies are said to give rise to new forms of 'mass self-communication', challenging the traditional one-to-many communication model of the mass media and enabling individuals, groups and social movements to introduce their own messages into global communication networks (Castells 2009). Research on citizen journalism has examined the ways in which blogs, social networking sites and other ICTs have been used in a wide variety of contexts – from spontaneous news reporting by ordinary people caught up in dramatic events, to bloggers challenging repressive regimes, to the incorporation of user-generated content in mainstream news media (Gillmor 2006, Allan and Thorsen 2009, 2014, Wall 2012, Allan 2013). Following the global wave of protest movements sparked by events in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, media and communication have become a central topic in social movement studies, with a fast-growing body of research examining the use of social media platforms for mobilization and circulation of information among protesters (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, Gerbaudo 2012, Juris 2012, Anduiza 2014). Meanwhile, a growing body of research

on digital storytelling has emphasized the potential of digital technologies to 'give voice' and enable self-representation by marginalized groups (Lundby 2008, Hartley and McWilliam 2009, Lambert 2013).

On the whole, commentary on citizen media has so far focused on the possibilities and limitations of online digital platforms as means through which citizens may disseminate self-produced media *content* that challenges dominant discourses, makes visible hidden realities, or mobilizes people to participate in public action. In other words, the promise (or otherwise) of citizen media for democratic renewal tends to be framed primarily in terms of their potential to facilitate the circulation of otherwise unreported news, stories and opinions in the mediated public sphere. This is an understanding that resonates with work that has conceptualized the significance of citizen (or alternative/radical) media with reference to the notion of the public sphere – or, more specifically, to the concept of *counter-publics* (Downing 2001, Atton 2002, Downey and Fenton 2003, Rodríguez *et al.* 2009). In Habermas's (1989) classic account – which remains a ubiquitous reference point for debates on this topic – the public sphere is understood as an openly accessible realm of communicative interaction, in which private persons come together as a public to deliberate freely about issues of common concern. It forms the cornerstone of democracy, as the mechanism by which citizens can bring issues to public attention, participate in public debates, and hold state authority to account. As developed by Nancy Fraser in response to the Habermasian notion of a *general* public sphere, the concept of counter-publics refers to "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990:67). Counter-publics function to expand the space of democratic discourse: by providing spaces where subordinate groups can formulate alternative discourses and interpretations of social reality, and by forcing issues that previously were considered private or beyond contestation into the public realm (Fraser 1990). Insofar as they provide the means through which alternative and oppositional discourses circulate, citizen media can be seen as central to these processes. In such a perspective, citizen media are understood as tools that enable the 'making public' of marginalized issues, opinions and knowledges – in other words, the circulation of media content.

In this chapter, I attempt to move beyond a focus on media content to explore the much broader range of socially situated *practices* that surround citizen media, considering their democratic potential. I use the term 'democratic' here in a broad sense, referring to the capacity of citizen media to expand the range of discourses that circulate in the public sphere and involve a broader range of actors in public deliberation. My interest is in how citizen media not only help disseminate already formed perspectives, but also how they can help create *preconditions* for marginalized actors to elaborate their own discourses and interpretations of social reality. Underpinning my approach is an understanding of citizen

media as more than just conduits for information, stories and opinions: such media can also form the focal point for practices that have the potential to transform subjectivities, reconfigure social relationships, and contribute to processes of network formation and community building (Rodríguez 2001, Stephansen and Couldry 2014, Fotopoulou and Couldry 2015). I therefore propose shifting the focus from 'citizen media' to 'citizen media practices' to take account of the wide range of agents and processes that form *around* citizen media (cf. Mattoni 2012 and Mattoni and Treré 2014 on 'activist media practices').

To develop this approach, I take as a starting point Clemencia Rodríguez's (2001, 2011) concept of 'citizens' media' as media through which citizenship is performed. From this perspective, the significance of citizen media lies in their potential to activate processes that empower individuals and communities, strengthen social bonds, and thus act as a catalyst for social change. In other words, the emphasis is on a broad range of communication *practices*. To elaborate this further, I turn to Nick Couldry's (2004, 2012) proposal for a new paradigm in media research that understands media "not as texts or structures of production, but as practice" (Couldry 2004:115). This approach enables a broad set of questions to be asked about the practices people engage in that are oriented towards citizen media, and the generative potential of such practices. Guided by these questions, I then move on to demonstrate the utility of a practice-based framework for understanding citizen media through a case study of a transnational network of communication activists connected to the World Social Forum (WSF). This case study illustrates how such a framework can bring into view a broad range of citizen media practices (beyond those directly concerned with the production and circulation of content), the different forms of agency that such practices make possible, and the way that certain practices can function to 'anchor' or structure other practices (Couldry 2004, citing Swidler 2001) – thus setting in motion processes that may have broader consequences for democracy and public life. I conclude by arguing that a practice framework necessitates a rethink of the way that the concept of the public is used in the context of citizen media. I suggest that citizen media practices of the kind described in this chapter can be understood not only as practices of making (news, stories or opinions) public but as practices of *public-making*: practices that support the formation of publics. Such a perspective exposes some of the limits of accounts that see publics as constituted through the circulation of discourse (Warner 2002, Barnett 2003), drawing attention to the material and social aspects of processes of public formation.

A practice-based approach to citizen media

Rodríguez (2001) developed the concept of 'citizens' media' to counter the then prominent preoccupation in the development communication literature with the potential of alternative and community-based media to challenge unequal communication flows. Questioning the framing of such

media in terms of counter-information, Rodríguez drew on radical democratic theory, particularly as developed in the work of Chantal Mouffe (1988, 1992, Laclau and Mouffe 1985), to arrive at an understanding of citizens' media as media through which individuals *become* citizens (Rodríguez 2001:20):

> Referring to 'citizens' media' implies first that a collectivity is *enacting* its citizenship by actively intervening in and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.

In such an understanding, citizen media are a crucial site for the transformation of individuals into citizens, rather than conduits for already-formed citizens to disseminate information and ideas. Emphasizing their collective dimension, Rodriguez's definition shows how citizen media can be crucial to the construction of the kind of social fabric that is needed for civic culture to thrive; that is, citizen media help create the *preconditions* for the enactment of citizenship rather than provide the means through which an already established civic culture finds expression. Rodríguez draws on theories of communication as performance to emphasize the constitutive power of citizen media: "Instead of transmitting messages about peacebuilding to audiences, Colombian citizens' media involve audiences in, and subject audiences to, the felt, embodied experience of peace" (2011:25). While Rodríguez is concerned specifically with citizen media in Colombia and their ability to counter the disruptive effects of armed conflict on local communities, the framework she develops has wider currency, not least because of the emphasis it places on communication *practices*: "Citizens' media are the media citizens use to activate communication processes that shape their local communities" (2011:25). It is through the broad range of practices oriented *towards* citizen media – from training programmes for reporters to participatory production processes to neighbourhood screenings – that such media have transformative effects.

To develop a practice-based analysis of such media and their significance, it is useful to turn to Nick Couldry's (2004, 2012) proposal for a practice framework for media research. Seeking to move beyond two dominant traditions in media and communication studies – textual analysis and political economy – a practice approach, he explains (2012:37),

> starts not with media texts or media institutions but from media-related practice in all its looseness and openness. It asks quite simply: *what are people* (individuals, groups, institutions) *doing in relation to media* across a whole range of situations and

contexts? How is people's media-related practice related, in turn, to their wider agency?

Couldry builds on conceptualizations of practice in social theory (Bourdieu 1977, Schatzki 1999, Reckwitz 2002). Without digressing into the details of such conceptualizations, what concerns us here is its relevance to media research, which lies in the emphasis it places on the centrality of practice to the ordering of social life. Particularly as developed in the work of Schatzki, practice theory sees practice itself as the site where social order is produced and reproduced: "it is from the *organizing* properties of distinct practices … that a wider 'social order' is made up" (Couldry 2012:39–40, citing Schatzki 1999). Practice theory thus understands patterns of practice as socially achieved; the outcome of practical co-ordination (and the mutual intelligibility that results from such co-ordination) rather than a product of abstract systems of meaning. For Couldry, such a perspective allows us to grasp the distinctive types of social processes that are enacted through media-related practices. Understanding media as practice means adopting an anti-functionalist perspective, focusing on what people do, say and think in relation to media rather than the media's supposed contribution to the functioning of 'society'; it means being open to the wide variety of media-related practices that people engage in and the ways in which they categorize their activities; and it involves paying attention to the role that media-related practices may have in ordering other practices (Couldry 2004). Drawing on Swidler's (2001) idea that certain practices may function to 'anchor' others, by enacting new patterns of action that in turn prompt changes in other practices, Couldry suggests that media-related practices may have a privileged role in anchoring other types of practice – and thereby structuring wider social relations – "through the 'authoritative' representations and enactments of key terms and categories that they provide" (2004:122).

Couldry is not specifically concerned with citizen media, but the value of a practice-based approach for research in this area is clear. Understanding citizen media as practice means moving beyond a concern with the capacity of such media to make visible alternative perspectives and experiences to ask three broader sets of questions:

1) What do people do, say and think in relation to citizen media? How do citizen media practitioners understand their role? How are practices of citizen media production organized?
2) What *kinds* of practices do people engage in that are oriented towards citizen media? A practice approach involves broadening our perspective to include a much wider range of practices beyond those directly related to the production and circulation of media content.
3) What might the role of citizen media practices be in structuring other practices? By focusing attention on how such practices may contribute to reconfiguring the social contexts in which citizenship is

enacted, this question enables us to get at the potential of citizen media practices to contribute to the strengthening of civic culture – and perhaps even broader processes of social change (Dahlgren 2009, Couldry *et al.* 2014).

Guided by these questions, I turn next to a case study to illustrate the utility of a practice-oriented approach to citizen media.

Citizen media practices in the World Social Forum

My empirical case study focuses on the practices of communication involved in the World Social Forum (WSF) process and draws on interviews and participant observation carried out at social forums between 2008 and 2013.[1] Since its inception, a network of (predominantly, but not exclusively, Brazilian and Latin American) citizen journalists and social movement communicators have used the WSF as a space for network building and experimentation with new communication practices. They have developed a particular concept of communication – *comunicação compartilhada* in the original Portuguese, which can be translated as *shared communication* – characterized by an explicit focus on creating collaborative production processes that bring activists together to exchange knowledge and debate communication politics. The idea of shared communication emerged on the eve of the first WSF in 2001, from a concern that the event would not receive adequate coverage in mainstream media. As a solution, organizers created a copyleft-based web publication system, named Ciranda, which enabled citizen journalists and movement communicators to share content – thus providing a much-needed outlet for independent media at a time when Web 2.0 technologies were not widely available.[2] Though it initially emerged out of a need to facilitate sharing of media content, the idea of shared communication soon acquired broader significance. As well as offering a platform for independent media coverage of the WSF, Ciranda also provided the occasion for communicators from around the world to come together – thus creating a space of sociality that encouraged dialogue and a sense of common purpose. In this way, the notion emerged that shared communication was as much about the experience of sharing a physical space and working collaboratively as it was about sharing content. At many subsequent social forums, activists set up dedicated spaces for shared communication 'projects', involving audio-visual, radio and written

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[1] The case study presented here forms part of a larger ethnographic study of media and communication practices in the WSF process. I participated in the European Social Forum in Malmö, Sweden (2008); the Social Forum of the Americas in Guatemala (2008); the WSF 2009 in Belém, Brazil; the 'WSF Ten Years' event in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2010); the Extended Social Forum of the Peripheries in Pelotas, Brazil (2010); the World Education Forum in Palestine (2010); the WSF 2011 in Dakar, Senegal; and the WSF 2013 in Tunisia. During these forums I conducted a total of 86 in-depth interviews with communication activists and forum organizers. The case study presented here is based on a smaller subset of 21 interviews conducted with activists specifically involved in the 'shared communication' projects described in this chapter.
[2] See www.ciranda.net (accessed 28 August 2015).

journalism, with the explicit aim of bringing together citizen journalists and social movement communicators to facilitate mutual learning and cross-fertilization.

While reporting on the events that take place at social forums is important for these activists, gaining publicity for the WSF is not their only concern. As is often the case with alternative and citizen media (Atton 2002), *process* is held to be as important as outcome, with activists emphasizing the importance of creating communication practices that are in keeping with the broader principles of horizontality, openness and participation associated with the WSF itself. A key aspect of shared communication is therefore its prefigurative character, as one activist explained (Rafael, Brazilian activist, interview with author, January 2009, Belém):[3]

> One of the objectives [of shared communication] is to test different models and dynamics connected to the concepts that we defend, of sharing, of free knowledge, of working collectively. These are important because they … demonstrate concretely that another world is possible.

Social forums provide important occasions for communication activists to construct links with the various social movements that participate in these events and try not only to convince them through discourse of the importance of democratic communication but to demonstrate it in practice. By demonstrating how – concretely – 'another communication' can be done, and involving WSF participants in this practice, shared communication activists hope to spread their particular concept of communication to new actors in new locations (Ana, Brazilian activist, interview with author, January 2009, Belém):

> The practice of shared communication … is something that is important not just for us to disseminate news about the Forum but … to strengthen, globally, a counter-hegemonic communication, which gives space and voice to other groups, to other news, to other voices, that are excluded from the mass media. And we believe that from the moment a group comes to the Forum and enters into contact with this kind of process of knowledge production, they can take this idea with them beyond the Forum. Return home, and put into practice this exercise of collective knowledge production in the place where they do this on a daily basis.

By using social forums to engage in a prefigurative politics that demonstrates their model of communication in practice, shared communication activists envisage the gradual proliferation around the world of their practices. An important objective therefore has been to establish links with movements and grassroots groups in the locations

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[3] All translations are my own, from Portuguese. All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

where the WSF is held. Not wanting simply to report *on behalf of* social movements, shared communication activists have worked actively to encourage grassroots groups to do their own communication and in this way strengthen local and regional movement networks: a key aspect of shared communication has been a concern with training and capacity building. For example, in preparation for the WSF 2009 in Belém, Brazil, activists set up a Shared Communication Laboratory, which was in operation for a few weeks prior to the forum itself. Hosted by a local NGO that worked with audiovisual media as a tool for popular education, the Laboratory organized a series of workshops that brought together citizen journalists, community radio organizers, representatives from social movements and university students. During these workshops, participants received training in principles of journalistic practice and use of equipment, discussed the significance of communication for social movements, began to produce media content relating to the WSF, and made plans for how to organize the coverage of the event itself.[4]

At the heart of these activists' practices is a movement-building approach to communication. While the media's mobilizing function is usually understood in terms of social movements' ability to disseminate convincing media messages that mobilize people to join or support them, the emphasis here is as much on mobilizing people to participate in shared communication practices and building networks of solidarity among citizen journalists and social movement communicators. As one activist explained, the physical co-presence afforded by participation in shared communication practices is fundamental to processes of network-building (Tobias, German activist, December 2008, Belém):

> I'm here and I do my coverage, but the fact of me being here has other effects, I speak to people, people speak to me ... this is a bit ... this process of articulation and network-building ... I think this is very important, our participation in the coverage always has as a consequence that we are a living network.

Shared communication, in brief, involves mobilization, movement-building, and the proliferation of alternative communication practices as well as the circulation of media content. It involves a laborious process of constructing social relationships, involving new actors in the production of media content, and setting in motion dynamics in the places where the WSF is held. As captured by a slogan frequently used by shared communication activists – 'communicate to mobilize to communicate...' – communication is seen as an integral part of movement dynamics.

Alongside these practices, which are oriented towards the creation of more inclusive and collaborative media forms *within* social movements, shared communication activists also engage in practices aimed at constructing more democratic media environments (at national and global

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[4] For a detailed account of how communication activists in Belém engaged with the WSF, see Stephansen (2013).

scales) that provide space for a greater diversity of actors and voices. A key concern has therefore been to put issues such as concentration of media ownership, censorship, access to information technologies and media literacy on the global civil society agenda. Social forums have provided important occasions for seminars during which activists have discussed communication policy in different contexts, debated strategies for media democratization, shared experiences of repression and censorship – and in the process developed a sense of shared identity and common purpose. Such practices have been consolidated with the establishment of the World Forum of Free Media (WFFM) – or *Fórum Mundial de Mídia Livre* in Portuguese – a forum that aims to support the development of a global grassroots movement specifically focused on media and communication. Linked to, but organizationally separate from, the World Social Forum, the WFFM was first held in conjunction with the 2009 WSF in Belém and has since gone through a number of iterations, the most recent being the fourth WFFM held in Tunisia in March 2015 in connection with the WSF.

Still at a formative stage, a key aim of the WFFM has been to develop a sense of collective identity around the concept of 'free media'. This has involved the creation of collectively agreed documents, including declarations issued at the WSF 2011 in Dakar and the WSF 2013 in Tunisia, as well as a World Charter of Free Media adopted at the fourth WFFM in March 2015. These documents set out key issues and challenges for media democratization and aim to establish a set of core principles that free media adhere to. The WFFM has also involved significant efforts to develop a comprehensive definition of free media that includes the widest possible variety of actors and media forms. Through these practices, the WFFM has enabled a consolidation of the sense of collective identity formation that first emerged with the development of shared communication practices in the WSF. As one organizer explained, the increased focus among activists on media and communication as a political issue has facilitated a shift in collective identity (Ana, Brazilian activist, March 2013, Tunis):

> At the beginning of the WSF in 2001 we couldn't talk about a communication movement. We were alternative media, people that produced. Now we can talk about a movement.

As the discussion so far demonstrates, then, an approach to media research that focuses on what people 'do, say and think' in relation to media can reveal a broad range of practices beyond those directly related to media production and consumption. Shared communication activists engage in a distinct set of *organizational practices* oriented towards the creation of collaborative production processes that stimulate exchange of ideas, skills and experiences. As part of their commitment to strengthening movement-based communication processes, activists also engage in *capacity-building practices* aimed at equipping grassroots activists with the skills they need to produce their own media. Both of

these sets of practices underpin broader *practices of network formation*: by creating spaces of sociality and involving new actors in collaborative processes of media production, activists aim to strengthen links among communicators and build networks of solidarity. Such practices, in turn, have been consolidated through a range of *movement-building practices* aimed at strengthening struggles for media democratization and developing a sense of collective identity among communication activists.

This case study illustrates how a practice framework can bring into view distinct forms of agency enabled by citizen media practices. It demonstrates how the shared communication practices developed at social forums gradually facilitated an understanding among activists of themselves as organizers, pedagogues and participants in a 'free media' movement as well as producers of counter-information. Through their prefigurative character, shared communication practices offer activists lived experience of 'another communication', providing a powerful impetus for engaging in communication activism. The sense of solidarity and collective identity developed through collaborative media production and exchange of experiences in turn may provide a source of strength for citizen journalists and social movement communicators who often operate in very difficult circumstances. A practice approach, in brief, enables a consideration of how citizen media practices can create the *preconditions* for distinct forms of agency to emerge. It is through participation in these practices that citizen journalists and social movement communicators develop a sense of their own individual and collective agency; their identities as communication activists are constituted through the enactment of citizen media practices.

The processes described above also provide one example of how a particular set of citizen media practices can function to 'anchor' or structure other practices, in a process whereby changes in one set of practices (or the introduction of new practices) prompt changes in others (or generate further new practices); see Couldry (2004), Swidler (2001). An initial set of practices aimed at facilitating the sharing of independent media content (creation of a web publication system and shared physical spaces with access to computers, editing equipment and technical assistance) soon generated a further set of practices oriented towards experimentation with new organizational forms. By providing activists with alternative experiences and definitions of 'communication', these, in turn, prompted the development of practices of capacity building and network formation aimed at spreading 'shared communication' to new actors. The emerging sense of shared purpose and collective identity generated by these practices provided the foundation for a further set of practices aimed at building a social movement focused on media and communication. This process emerged in an iterative manner, through experimentation with new practices and collective reflection on these practices.

Citizen media practices as practices of public-making

What are the implications of adopting a practice approach for how we understand the democratic potential of citizen media? As highlighted in the introduction to this chapter, work that has sought to conceptualize citizen media with reference to the notion of (counter-)publics has tended to emphasize the capacity of such media to support the circulation of alternative and oppositional discourses – in other words, the focus has been on the ability of citizen media to make marginalized actors and issues visible in the public sphere and in this way expand the space of democratic discourse. A practice approach, however, necessitates a rethink of the way the concept of the public is used in relation to citizen media. The case study of communication activism in the WSF demonstrates how such an approach can bring into view a much broader range of practices oriented towards citizen media, beyond those directly related to the production and circulation of media content. This means the significance of citizen media cannot be understood purely in terms of their ability to 'make public' previously unreported issues and perspectives. Focusing on citizen media practices means treating citizen media as more than just the technical infrastructure that supports counter-publics; it requires us to consider the diverse constellation of practices that contribute to the *making* of publics.

The understanding of publics as *made* that I propose here draws on recent literature that has sought to theorize publics as emergent (Barnett 2003, 2014, Mahony *et al.* 2010). Such 'emergence-oriented' accounts emphasize the mediated, reflexive and indeterminate qualities of publics, and focus attention on how publics are constituted, resourced or called into existence.[5] In such a perspective, the public is "not best thought of as a pre-existing collective subject that straightforwardly expresses itself or offers itself up to be represented" (Mahony *et al.* 2010:2–3); rather, the interest is in how publics are *made*. One way of thinking about publics as emergent is to see them as constituted through the circulation of discourse, as does Michael Warner (2002:67):

> A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed.

This kind of 'chicken-and-egg' circularity is, according to Warner, essential to the phenomenon of publics. Thus, he argues, "[a] public may be real and efficacious, but its reality lies in just this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence" (2002:67). Barnett similarly draws on a deconstructionist critique of representation to develop an understanding

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[5] For a fuller discussion of the notion of 'emergence-oriented' perspectives on the public and how these differ from other perspectives, see Mahony and Stephansen (forthcoming a, forthcoming b).

of the public as "a figure *par excellence*, only ever spoken for, instantiated in different guises in different contexts" (2003:23). Publics, in this account, are conceived as "more or less durable networks of communication" (2003:9), brought into existence by the acts of representation that constitute them.

Seen through this lens, citizen media are not simply the means through which pre-existing social actors and issues are brought into the public sphere. Warner's and Barnett's accounts draw attention to the constitutive role of citizen media in the *making of publics*. However, they operate with a somewhat disembodied perspective, suggesting that it is purely through the circulation of discourse – in the form of newspaper articles, TV programmes, blog posts, etc. – that publics form. A practice framework enriches such accounts by highlighting the material and social aspects of processes of public formation. As shown above, paying attention to what people do, say and think in relation to citizen media can reveal a diverse range of practices that form *around* the circulation of media content. When considering how citizen media contribute to processes of public-making, it is important to consider the full range of these practices.

Returning to my case study, the circulation of citizen media content is certainly one important aspect of the making of a public (or publics) around the WSF. By producing and disseminating media coverage of social forum events, shared communication activists contribute to the circulation of discourse relating to the WSF – and, in doing so, help constitute a 'WSF public'. More specifically, the online circulation of citizen media coverage of the WSF might contribute to the formation of a transnational counter-public, by expanding the reach of WSF participants' oppositional discourses across national borders and thus connecting movements in different places and contexts. A practice framework, however, highlights the much broader range of citizen media practices that can contribute to the making of publics. The practices of collaboration, capacity-building, networking and movement-building discussed above constitute important *preconditions* for the production and circulation of counter-discourses by the movements and groups that participate in the WSF. Capacity-building practices, such as those enacted in the context of the Shared Communication Laboratory, enable grassroots groups with little or no previous experience to begin producing their own media content. Collaborative organizational practices make it possible for activists to share skills and experience, and for novice journalists, video-makers and community radio activists to learn from their more experienced counterparts. Attention to these forms of practice captures processes of informal pedagogy and learning that can empower marginalized groups to elaborate and disseminate their own interpretations of social reality. This is not just a matter of acquiring technical skills; citizen media practices – at their best – can also enable people, collectively and individually, to voice and elaborate new discourses that challenge established truths (Rodríguez 2001).

Practices of networking and movement-building, meanwhile, are crucial to the development of a social infrastructure for the circulation of citizen media coverage of the WSF. Although online citizen media platforms are potentially global in reach, in the sense that anyone in the world can in theory connect to them, this is in no way guaranteed. Inequalities of access aside (a far from trivial issue), the dispersed character of the internet means that in order to come across citizen media content people need to know where to look. Practices of networking and movement-building, such as those described above, help connect dispersed citizen media initiatives, making activists aware of each other's existence and creating opportunities for linking and sharing content. The face-to-face encounters facilitated by social forums are crucial to the creation of bonds of solidarity that motivate activists to support and promote each other's work. The emphasis that activists place on the construction of networks founded on 'thick' social relationships also provides a clue to how discourses may travel beyond the circulation of media content. Because shared communication activists tend also to be connected to particular social movements, they become important conduits of knowledge, bringing what they have learnt at the WSF back to their own constituencies. This may contribute in more subterranean ways to the making of publics, as discourses circulate through the interpersonal relationships that activists engage in on an everyday basis.

A practice framework, in brief, highlights the *social* foundations of publics, by bringing into view the broad range of socially situated practices that form around – and are necessary for – the production and circulation of media content. In the particular example used here, the range of practices developed by shared communication activists suggest that the making of publics depends on networking, movement-building, and the proliferation of citizen media practices as much as on the circulation of citizen media content. It involves a laborious process of constructing networks of solidarity across geographical and political borders, setting in motion dynamics in new places, and empowering marginalized actors to elaborate their own discourses and produce their own media.

Returning to the broader questions of citizenship and democracy with which this chapter began: how might we conceptualize the democratic potential of citizen media practices, beyond their capacity to make previously unreported perspectives public? One possible answer lies in conceptualizing publics as spaces of political and pedagogic practice, rather than as disembodied spaces of discourse. As Henry Giroux has argued (2001:236, emphasis added), the public sphere might be understood as a

> specific form of political *practice* that takes as its central concern the organizing of human experience so as to enable individuals to formulate interpretations of social reality in a critical and emancipatory fashion.

In such a perspective, a key question when considering the democratic potential of citizen media practices concerns their capacity to contribute to the emergence of publics that can support democratic knowledge production of the kind proposed by Giroux. This involves paying attention to the forms of agency that such practices make possible and the social fabric that they can generate, as well as the messages that are circulated through citizen media.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illustrate the utility of applying a practice-oriented framework to the study of citizen media. I have suggested shifting the focus from 'citizen media' to 'citizen media practices' to bring into view the broad range of socially situated practices that surround citizen media, and argued that it is necessary to take this broad range of practices into account when considering the democratic potential of such media. At their best, citizen media become the focal point for practices that can help create bonds of solidarity, contribute to processes of network-formation, enable individuals and groups to develop new capabilities, and – importantly – develop a sense of their own agency and voice. Citizen media practices can thus contribute to the emergence of a civic culture that supports critical, emancipatory processes of knowledge production.

Adopting a practice-oriented perspective involves rethinking the concept of (counter-) publics, focusing on how citizen media practices can contribute not only to *making public* previously unreported issues and perspectives, but to the *making of publics*. A practice framework – by highlighting the material, embodied and social aspects of processes of public-formation – exposes the limitations of perspectives that see publics as constituted purely through the circulation of discourse. As this chapter has shown, the wide range of practices that often develop around citizen media (such as practices of collaboration, capacity building and networking) constitute important preconditions for the production and circulation of (counter-) discourses. Focusing attention on citizen media practices, therefore, highlights the social foundations of publics. It leads to a conceptualization of publics as spaces of political and pedagogic *practice*, not simply as networks for the circulation of discourse.

Though the exact nature of practices oriented towards citizen media will of course vary from context to context, the case study of communication activism in the WSF presented in this chapter illustrates the *range* of practices that a practice framework can bring into view. For others wishing to apply this framework to their own examples of citizen media, the three sets of questions outlined earlier offer a guide for producing a contextually specific and socially grounded analysis of such media and their democratic potential. At the heart of this approach is an emphasis on

the social and collective dimensions of citizen media, and their embeddedness in wider cultural fabrics.

Acknowledgement

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