Social Movements and Their Technologies

Wiring Social Change

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Stealing the Fire: An Introduction to Emancipatory Communication Activism

> Prometheus is the Greek demi-god, who saw that the gods had fire and regular people did not. He saw this injustice, so he stole the flames and taught any other to make fire. "Stealing the fire": we think it is a metaphor for the democratization of technology, for technology that is the servant of the political and social process of making decisions about our future. Not technology in the hands and at the service of elites.[1]

This book tells the stories of groups and individuals who, like the mythological Prometheus, "steal the fire". "Fire" here is a metaphor for technology and communication infrastructure, such as the internet and wireless radio. Stealing means "reclaiming and reappropriating" these communication infrastructures to set up autonomous means of communication, such as non-commercial internet service providers (ISPs) and community radio stations. By "stealing the fire" these novel Prometheuses seek to breach the monopoly of states as well as media, computer, and telecoms conglomerates (media from here on, unless specified) over the use and control of communication infrastructure. They aim to enable other social groups to convey their own messages, bypassing the filters of commercial and state gatekeepers.

The question of infrastructure might sound trivial in times of abundance of "free" social media, microblogging platforms and apps allowing people to voice their opinions and share pictures and videos at will, and at virtually no cost. But we often forget that these platforms are owned and controlled by media and telecoms corporations whose agenda focuses on profit and corporate interests rather than participation, empowerment, and social justice. With this in mind, in recent decades activist groups have increasingly challenged media corporations and state-owned broadcasters on their own terrain. They have created alternatives to existing communication infrastructure by setting up community radio and television stations, and alternative websites for self-produced information. Such grassroots media have allowed broader swathes of the citizenry to access media production and secure communication channels. They have become what DeeDee Halleck calls

"infrastructures of resistance" (2002, p. 191) to the neoliberal order in the media and technology realm.

By creating independent communication infrastructure, activists seek to contribute to the efforts of contemporary progressive social movements to shape the world according to principles of justice, equality, and participation. Individuals and groups who have expertise in the field of media and technology (e.g., building radio transmitters, radio or video production, and computer programming) place their knowledge at the service of other social groups.

Far from being considered only as tools, media and communication technologies have become a site of struggle in their own right, and as such are subject to "object conflicts" (Hess, 2005, p. 516). At the same time, communication technology serves also as the digital backbone of many other social justice struggles. In this instance, technology is not an end in itself; it is a means to a political end. This is exemplified by the manifesto of a group providing internet services to activists, which reads: "tools are shaped in the digital sphere, but this does not imply they do not have a political impact. We start from the instruments, but use them to reach specific political goals, both in the digital and in the real world".[2] By the same token, the slogan of another group goes: "Get off the internet – I'll see you in the streets!"

I like to think of these "liberated technologies" as the outcome of emancipatory communication practices (ECPs). "Practice" evokes the hands-on approach of grassroots groups in promoting reform from below of the current communication system. "Emancipatory" refers to their commitment to share and redistribute technical knowledge, in order to extend also to non-experts the possibility of controlling communicative actions and bypassing commercial platforms. Broadening the picture, ECPs can be seen as a subdivision of the growing number of social mobilizations addressing media, technology, information, and culture issues.

ECPs represent a challenge to dominant powers in the communication and media field. The power at stake is, at the most basic level of all, power over access to public communication: in other words, the power of deciding who should speak and what messages should be transmitted. But at stake is also the power of participation, which refers to the possibility of making informed contributions to democratic decision-making and public life. At the macrolevel, challenging the power structure means resisting the increasing commercialization and monopolization of the mass media and communication platforms by a handful of global corporations. It implies pressuring national regulators to license non-profit media and protect freedom of expression online. It entails opposing the decisions of international bodies, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), when they appear to be too exposed to the influences of governments and business actors. At the microlevel, challenging communication power structures means creating separate spaces of communication where freedom of expression,

participation, and self-organization are practiced independently of social norms and laws. It involves defending the right of disadvantaged communities and minorities to make their voices heard. It implies protecting local content, and independent producers and voices, and fighting "the escalating cultural and mediatic censorship of imagination, and the attempts to sell us pre-digested dreams".[3] It includes finding new ways of sharing knowledge and rejecting the ever-tightening intellectual property regimes. It means resisting increasingly aggressive filters on interpersonal electronic communication imposed by governments in the name of the war on terror and cybersecurity strategies. In sum, it involves looking simultaneously at the "technological" and the "social" of communication infrastructure (cf. Bijker and Law, 1992), because all technological artifacts can embody specific forms of power and authority (Winner, 1999).

"Stealing the fire" is a way (or, better, ways) of social organizing. It is in their guise of organized collective action that I look at ECPs, using the conceptual tools of social movement research. I do not focus on the content that these liberated infrastructures broadcast, or host in their wires. Rather, I focus on the microsociological processes behind the creation of such infrastructures by social actors: why and how these practices emerge, who is behind them, how activists interact with institutions and norms, and what these liberated infrastructures mean for contemporary societies.

This chapter serves as an introduction to emancipatory communication activism. In what follows, I explore why people mobilize on media and technology issues, and I offer some theoretical grounding to the analysis. I define ECPs, and present the study and its conceptual toolbox.

Why people mobilize on media and technology issues

We live in the so-called information age, an era in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become the very foundation of political, economic, and social development (Castells, 1996 and 2000). The internet is changing the way we understand power (Nye, 2011). Access to and control over symbols, norms, and interpretations of current events play a critical role in contemporary societies. Think, for example, of *WikiLeaks* and the reaction of national governments at the online publication of thousands of classified documents: actors who produce, distribute, and rank information hold an increasingly important position in the contemporary social order (Castells, 2009). Notwithstanding the proliferation of social networking and microblogging platforms that "can expand political, social and economic freedom" (Diamond, 2010, p. 70), traditional mass media, government-led political communication campaigns, and commercial search engines are still the actual "gatekeepers of the public sphere" (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p. 1).

Yet, the official discourses on the evolution of the information society privilege economic and technical aspects, dismissing other essential

attributes, such as people's participation, the protection of human rights, and human development. Market-driven media and communication policies seem to be too specialized and technical for citizens to be involved. As a result, people are usually left out of policy-making processes that take place over their heads, leaving room for a "symbiotic relationship" between dominant institutions and media industries in the development of norms, goals, and policies for the sector (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p. 9).

Telecommunication infrastructure, such as the World Wide Web, has changed the perception of national boundaries. Transnational media corporations and communication empires control the markets for media content, devices, and infrastructure. However, these sectors are still largely regulated at the national or regional level, and there is no integrated global policy arena for media and communication governance. Beyond national borders, regulation takes place at multiple sites, including supranational summits and United Nations (UN) agencies, and corporate forums like ICANN. Non-state actors, in particular the industry, play an important role through lobbying and mechanisms of self-regulation.

Neoliberal deregulation and privatization processes prompted the ever-expanding concentration of media and telecommunication infrastructure in a few multinational firms (Flew, 2007; McChesney, 2013).[4] Global regimes like the WTO agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) and bills like the proposed Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) contribute to tightening intellectual property rights globally (Sell, 2003; Haunss and Shadlen, 2009). At the national level, knowledge sharing through peer-to-peer networks continues to be sanctioned, and, in many countries, autonomous communication projects are targeted by repression. In Brazil, for example, regulators regularly shut down "free" unlicensed radio stations for illegal broadcasting (Milan, 2004a). Servers of activist projects, such as Indymedia, Autistici/Inventati, and Riseup, have been seized repeatedly (Milan, 2004b; Riseup, 2012). Supranational organizations such as ICANN, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) have become powerful players in the management of communication-related goods and processes, but their operations remain largely outside any form of democratic control (Ó Siochrú and Girard, 2002). Intelligence agencies such as the National Security Agency in the US increasingly invest in pervasive surveillance systems (Bamford, 2009 and 2012), such as PRISM, the mass electronic surveillance program revealed by whistle-blower Edward Snowden in 2013; autocratic regimes like China, Russia, and Iran back a vast cybercriminal underworld. Meanwhile, "in liberal democratic countries we are lowering the standards around basic rights to privacy just as the center of cyberspace gravity is shifting to less democratic parts of the world" (Deibert, 2013, p. 131). New technologies have become tools of political control (Curran *et al.*, 2012).

Yet there is a growing public awareness of what media and communication mean to society, and collective action on media and culture issues

has emerged at both the national and the transnational level. Over the past 40 years, with a significant acceleration towards the end of the 1990s, initiatives to democratize public communication have mushroomed in both Western democracies and postcolonial societies. Either through advocacy campaigns or protest, or by creating alternatives to existing communication flows, activists have tried to change the factors shaping media systems and the power relations embedded within them. Examples include national and transnational advocacy campaigns such as the German campaign against the European Union (EU) directive on data retention in electronic communication (Löblich and Wendelin, 2012), and the transnational Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign, which emerged around a UN summit (Thomas, 2006; Mueller *et al.*, 2007). Major policy advocacy activities have appeared. For example, media reformers in the US lobbied the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in support of net neutrality (Kidd, 2009), for a community radio bill (President Barack Obama eventually signed the Local Community Radio Act in January 2011), and against SOPA and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA). There is also a vast range of do-it-yourself (DIY) media projects, committed to providing alternative content, infrastructure, software, and hardware. These include independent information platforms on the web, such as the global Indymedia network (Brooten, 2004; Kidd, 2010), community radio and television stations (Jankowski and Prehn, 2002; Rennie, 2006; Howley, 2009), self-organized wireless networks (Powell, 2008a and 2008b), open-source software development projects (Coleman, 2013a), and non-profit ISPs such as GreenNet in England (Hintz and Milan, 2009b). Occasionally, activists seek to disrupt computer networks and websites through jamming, net-strikes, defacement of websites, and distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS) such as those launched by the online community known as the Anonymous (Coleman, 2013c; Frediani, 2013). These actions, also known as hacktivism, aim to make computer resources temporarily unavailable to users in order to protest against companies or policies, or bring under the spotlight issues like freedom of speech or digital rights.

Recent openings in national and transnational policy arenas, offering citizens (partial and often unequal) access to policy-making processes, have provided lots of diverse groups with visibility and a chance to make their voice heard. These represent what students of social movements call "political opportunities": novel opportunities for contention interpreted by some groups as an open policy window for active participation and lobbying (Kingdon, 1995), and by others as "carriers of threats" (Tarrow, 2005, p. 25). In particular, the 2003–2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and its offspring the annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF), offered an extraordinary chance for many grassroots groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with an interest in communication and social change to connect, recognize each other as part of the same struggle, and plan joint interventions. The Council of Europe (CoE), the EU,

and national regulators such as the US FCC and the UK's equivalent (Ofcom) have also provided windows of opportunity for civil society to organize on media and internet governance issues.

The emergence of these mobilizations can be seen as a reaction to the escalation of media concentration and to the "media's democratic deficit" (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, pp. 2–14), both of which have increased public awareness of media influence, and nurtured demands for democratization and public access to the media. It is also linked to the diffusion of cheap broadband connections and mobile devices, the availability of inexpensive tools (e.g., digital cameras, tablets, and smartphones), and the growing technological expertise, especially among the youngest generations. However, the creation of independent media and internet infrastructure is not a new phenomenon, nor is it linked solely to the availability of ICTs and the internet. Counterinformation projects are as old as social movements; waves of creation of "movement media" include, for instance, the 19th-century labor press in the UK, the US, and elsewhere, and the free radio season in Italy and other European countries in the 1970s (Downing, 2001; Granjon, 2010; Padovani, 2010; Purkarthofer *et al.*, 2010). What is new in contemporary ECPs is the scale, as well as the autonomy and self-sufficiency, of the phenomenon. These communication projects are not solely serving other political issues or movements such as the environmental movement or the unions. Rather, they are the signals of a growing awareness of the relevance of technology and media issues as such to contemporary democracies. For the first time in history, these issues mobilize a broad and diverse public that also includes non-specialists.

Two perspectives on communication as a site of struggle

Activism in this field has been called many names: media reform movement (Vincent *et al.*, 1999; Mueller *et al.*, 2004b; Napoli, 2007), media justice movement (Rubin, 2002; Dichter, 2005), movement for communication rights (Calabrese, 2004; Padovani and Pavan, 2009; Padovani and Calabrese, 2014), media democracy movement (McChesney and Nichols, 2005; Uzelman, 2005), and democratic media activism (Hackett and Carroll, 2006). But while the role and use of media and digital technologies in social movements have received substantial attention (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Kavada, 2005 and 2009; Juris, 2005 and 2012; della Porta and Mosca, 2009; McCurdy, 2010 and 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011 and 2012; Mattoni, 2012; Treré, 2012; Cammaerts *et al.*, 2013), as have alternative media (Downing, 2001 and 2010; Rodriguez, 2001 and 2011; Atton, 2002 and 2004; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Langlois and Dubois, 2005; Coyer *et al.*, 2007), mobilizations on media and technology have entered the scholarly agenda only recently. The literature emerged mainly within the fields of international communication and public policy. It is episodic and case-oriented,

and segmented by means of communication (Napoli, 2007). Curiously, scholars of social movements do not seem to consider " 'communications-information' to be a single policy domain capable of mobilizing the public" (Mueller *et al.*, 2004b, p. 11).[5]

If we focus on recent policy-oriented research in English-speaking academia, we can identify two main streams of scholarship. The first developed around the WSIS and earlier institutional processes, such as the debate known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which emerged within the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970s with the ambition of tackling the existing imbalances in international communication flows. In particular, the WSIS emphasized the degree and intensity of activism in the field, prompting scholars of media policy, international communication, international relations, and global governance to address the phenomenon. The second stream concentrates on the media reform movement in the Anglo-Saxon world, where such mobilizations have a longer tradition compared with other Western countries. It is grounded in critical media studies, normative theories of democracy, and only partially social movement research. In this section, I provide a critical overview of the existing literature on this activism and derive valuable insights to be used as points of entry for this study.

The first coalitions of civil society organizations, individual media activists, scholars, and professionals active on media and communication issues emerged during the 1990s. They promoted events like the MacBride Roundtables, documents like the *People's Communication Charter*, and networks such as the Platform for Communication Rights (see Chapter 2). At the dawn of the 21st century, civil society initiatives gained momentum in response to the diffusion of multistakeholder governance. It was during the four-year course of the WSIS (which saw the proactive participation of a progressive academic community mainly aligned with the CRIS campaign) that the appearance of communication activism began to be gradually addressed. According to Calabrese, civil society participation in the WSIS was an "inspiration for global struggles over the right to communicate" (2004, p. 324). In his view, this rising movement for communication rights "operates on multiple fronts, engaging in official forums run by government bureaucrats, while also taking causes to the streets, practicing civil disobedience and using the politics of shame to pressure governments and global corporations alike" (ibid., p. 322). The common theme of social justice unifies the diverse issues at stake. Along the same lines, Padovani and Pavan argued that civil society activism at the WSIS should be understood as "a partial yet meaningful instance of a wider mobilization 'out there' " as the summit process offered "the occasion for a collective exercise in framing a communication rights discourse" (2009, pp. 224–236). This emerging global communication rights movement would be characterized by internal diversity, a plural agenda, transnational networks, and a multilevel *modus operandi* connecting global,

regional, and local struggles. Acting in the same political space (i.e., the summit), social actors developed a sense of being part of the same constituency, leading to the emergence of a collective identity (see also Padovani and Calabrese, 2014).

Other observers do not agree with this optimistic vision. Napoli (2007) argues that although the movement is primarily oriented towards policy issues, it lacks a single unifying frame and is characterized by a subservient nature. According to Mueller (2005), WSIS-mobilized actors did not (yet) constitute a social movement: the summit brought pre-existing advocacy coalitions together and "established stronger interpersonal relationships among the 'cosmopolitan elite' of civil society actors", but convergence "did not extend deeply down into mass domestic politics in multiple polities" (ibid., pp. 10–11).

However, it was common knowledge long before the WSIS that institutional events might work as political opportunities in fostering mobilization of civil society actors. Back in the 1990s, Vincent, Nordenstreng, and Traber linked the emerging of communication-related contention to the NWICO (Nordenstreng, 1992; Nordenstreng and Traber, 1992; Vincent *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, Ó Siochrú (2004) dates the roots of the contemporary media reform movement back to the early 1980s, specifically to the MacBride Report, commissioned by UNESCO in the framework of the NWICO debate (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, the WSIS is believed to have fostered a substantial change. While the NWICO debates involved mainly state actors, the WSIS invited civil society groups to participate on an equal footing with governments and the industry. Raboy (2004) noted how the summit nurtured connections between diverse groups, and served as a turning point for civil society engagement in communication governance.

The second relevant stream of literature focuses on the movement for media democracy in the US, which started in the 1960s, had its peak in the 1970s, and experienced a second substantial acceleration in the second half of the 1990s (Uzelman, 2000 and 2005; Mueller *et al.*, 2004a/b; McChesney and Nichols, 2005; Hackett and Carroll, 2006).

Hackett and Carroll studied what they termed "democratic media activism" (DMA) in Canada, the US, and the UK. This is an "emergent movement praxis" composed of "organized 'grassroots' efforts directed to creating or influencing media practices and strategies whether as a primary objective, or as a by-product of other campaigns" (2006, p. 84). From a social movement perspective, DMA is unique to the extent that it treats communication simultaneously as the tool and the end of struggle. It emerges from diverse social sources: media professionals whose specialization may stimulate awareness; subordinate social groups that might need access to media to advance their demands; and groups for whom communication issues are not a central concern but that can mobilize around perceived threats. Experts and organization leaders play a crucial role in democratic media activism.[6] Repertoires of action comprise culture jamming, internet activism, media

monitoring, autonomous media projects and ISPs, and policy-oriented initiatives and advocacy campaigns. They can be divided into reformist (or offensive) and Counterhegemonic (or defensive) tactics. Reformist tactics challenge existing hegemonic structures and powers in the communication field, by influencing the contents of mainstream media, and advocating media policy reform. Counterhegemonic tactics seek to create independent media outside state and corporate control, and to change the relationship between citizens and media by empowering audiences to be more critical (Hackett, 2000). There are organizational and cultural differences between the two approaches, and there is a division of labor within the field (Hackett and Carroll, 2004).

Although DMA lacks a distinctive collective identity and a niche within movement ecology, it has a "boundary-spanning capacity" as it is "more about constructing a 'politics of connections' than it is about constructing its own composite action system" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 93). Media democratization activists are "spread across the field of movement politics, thriving in the empty spaces 'in between', to connect movements communicatively, and thereby strengthen counterhegemonic capacity" (Hackett and Carroll, 2006, p. 189). In the same vein, Uzelman argues that media activists act as "crucial catalysts" in social movements, and "facilitate the spread of social movement rhizomes" – that is to say, the horizontal and network-like form of contemporary social movements (2005, p. 17). He sees contemporary movements as imagined communities of resistance depending upon communication for their survival and growth. In this context, media activists tend to get involved in other struggles as well. Further, he distinguishes between alternative and autonomous media activists. The former are committed to reforming mainstream media, while the latter attempt to bypass the mainstream by promoting new forms of media that foster participation and dialogue and are independent from corporate outlets. The two strategies are not mutually exclusive but represent different logics at the base of distinct facets of media activism.

This overview of the literature on mobilizations on communication issues identifies two major gaps. First, with the exception of Uzelman (2005) and Hintz (2009), scholarly attention has focused almost exclusively on advocacy organizations, overlooking those forms of activism at the grassroots level that are largely informal and thus remain out of the spotlight. Second, there is a need for systematic sociological studies on the emergence of media and technology activism, its features, mobilizing frames, identity building, and action repertoires. This book aims to fill these gaps by addressing ECPs through the lens of social movement research.

What are emancipatory communication practices?

I define ECPs as ways of social organizing seeking to create alternatives to existing media and communication infrastructure. By engaging in these

practices, activists aim to bypass the politics of enclosure and control enacted by states and corporations. Rather than engaging (exclusively) in advocacy work and policy reform, their primary strategy is structural reform at the grassroots level through the creation of autonomous spaces of communication.[7] By emancipating other social actors from commercial communication services, they aim to empower them to articulate, voice, and convey their own messages without filters.

Examples of ECPs include independent information platforms such as the Indymedia and the Global Voices networks, but also alternative press, radio and video production, and the operation of communication infrastructure for civil society and social movements. The latter comprise grassroots non-profit ISPs offering secure e-mail accounts and web hosting to anyone concerned with the security of their personal communication. Furthermore, the ECP field encompasses social practices of horizontal knowledge production, such as free/*libre* and open-source software (F/LOSS) and hacker communities, and the occupation of enclosed communication spaces by, for example, pirate radio stations, microtelevision channels, and hacktivist projects. Artistic forms of direct action, such as billboard liberation, cultural jamming, street theater, and flashmobs, too, belong to the realm of ECPs, to the extent that they expose the contradictions of the system by encouraging public participation and critical thinking, and opposing the frantic media consumption promoted by commercial broadcasters. Here I focus exclusively on groups adopting the operation of autonomous infrastructures as their primary strategy (hence the focus on praxis). This rules out any group focusing exclusively (or primarily) on the transformation of existing mainstream infrastructure. However, I do not claim that reform *per se* is not emancipatory. When looking at the action repertoires, I expect different emancipatory communication groups to adopt a variety of approaches that imply interaction with policy arenas and institutions, including advocacy and lobbying. I therefore introduce a distinction between the primary focus of activists (i.e., the creation of autonomous forms and spaces of communication) and the level (and form) of their interaction with institutions.

Emancipation here indicates the efforts of disempowered groups and individuals to obtain equality and/or freedom in the communication and media sphere, both for themselves and for other social groups and individuals. Emancipation is intended as "freedom from" the commercial media logic and its constraints. To free people to communicate in their own terms means providing the infrastructure and skills necessary to this end. It entails teaching people how analogue and digital technology works in order to demystify that very same technology.

The idea of emancipation resonates with the notion of self-determination, as the free choice of individuals and groups with regard to their cultural and communicative future. Curiously, the notion of emancipation is often invoked but rather underspecified in media studies (with a few exceptions – e.g., Enzensberger, 1974; McQuail, 1994; Servaes, 1998; Gumucio Dagron

and Tufte, 2006). The concept of emancipatory journalism (Shah, 1996) may provide a historical and cultural grounding to the notion of ECPs. Emancipatory journalism is a radical philosophy of journalism seeking to promote and contribute to human development by encouraging practitioners to engage in movements for social change. It denies the centrality of objectivity and neutrality in reporting. Similarly, emancipatory communication activists believe that there is scarce freedom in contemporary mediascapes; they preach involvement in social movements, and they openly reject objectivity in reporting.

The concept of empowerment, too, is useful in understanding ECPs. Within the communication sphere, empowerment is the process through which individuals and groups take control over their media technologies and messages by participating in the actions that reshape their communicative processes. It is this exercise of active control over technology that empowers people, including non-experts. To put it differently, empowerment can be seen as "freedom to" communicate in one's own terms. Rodriguez (2001 and 2011) observed a similar process at play in her analyses of "citizens' media" as a space for people to enact their democratic agency.[8]

Scholars have long acknowledged the existence and relevance of alternative communication infrastructure for contemporary social movements. Several labels have been used to describe the phenomenon: radical media (Downing, 2001), citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001), alternative media (Atton, 2002), tactical media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997 and 1999), autonomous media (Langlois and Dubois, 2005), civil society media (Hintz, 2009; Hadl and Hintz, 2009), and social movement media (Downing, 2010). Langlois and Dubois argued that autonomous media are the "vehicles of social movements" (2005, p. 9). Hackett and Carroll (2006) referred to oppositional communication practices seeking to cultivate alternative public spheres. Downing defined radical media as "media, generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic politics, priorities, and perspectives". By nature, these media "break somebody's rules, although rarely all of them in every aspect" (Downing, 2001, p. v–ix). Rodriguez argued that "these practices and strategies of resistance constitute the politics of the quotidian" (2001, p. 21). They expand and multiply spaces for political action, which is not confined to institutional spaces but embedded in social life. While acknowledging the breadth of these analyses, I highlight the emancipatory and empowering nature of communication practices rather than their oppositional or counterhegemonic character, and I focus on technology and infrastructure development rather than content production.[9]

The study

This study uses the concepts and tools of social movement research in order to explore the nature of collective action in the field of ECPs. In particular,

it explores four areas: identity building and movement formation; organizational forms; action repertoires and interactions with authorities, norms, and policy arenas; and networking strategies. I explore activism emerging around two means of communication in order to identify technology-specific mobilization patterns: airwaves and community and low-power radio practitioners, and the internet and radical techies, as examples respectively of traditional and new media, and the respective ways of social organizing around them. Radio and internet are different technologies and provide different platforms for expression. Setting up and running a radio station is typically a collective enterprise, while on the internet individuals with varying degrees of expertise play an important role in building (i.e., coding) and operating the infrastructure. Moreover, the distinction between "old" and "new" technologies points to generational differences, variations in know-how, and distinct identity building and organizational processes.

Community radio practitioners operate or participate in a community radio station, a small-scale media project usually owned and operated by the community. Community is to be understood as a social setting, and not strictly a matter of size or geography. Moreover, a community need not be without its internal divisions, indeed is rarely without them. Community broadcasters aim to offer the community at large a non-filtered channel of expression and voice, and content that is locally oriented and produced, and/or relevant to the community. Community radio has a long history and wide diffusion across continents. Typically it involves large constituencies, including non-experts; it is easy to operate after basic training and is relatively cheap to set up. By radical techies I refer to the groups and networks of individuals who provide alternative communication channels on the internet to activists and citizens, on a voluntary basis and through collective organizing principles. They offer e-mail accounts, web hosting, mailing lists, and privacy-protection tools, such as encryption systems. In doing so, they seek to counteract the commodification of digital infrastructure, and to offset the threats to individual privacy that come with commercialization and tightening state control. The two groups share a focus on praxis (as distinct from advocacy) as their main strategy of promoting change in the contemporary mediascape. They also share a culture of emancipation and empowerment insofar as they provide alternatives to commercial and state-owned communication infrastructure, and allow people to take control of their own communicative acts. They tend to share some core features, such as non-profit status, an orientation towards social change and social justice, and the prevalence of volunteer and non-professional staff. They represent a good portion of the growing number of mobilizations on information, technology, and media issues mushrooming all over the world.

This is a qualitative study combining participant observation of activist meetings and events with in-depth face-to-face and online asynchronous

interviews, both individual and collective. I interviewed about 40 tech activists from 16 countries, and more than 40 community radio practitioners from 24 countries, and I performed participant observation in about ten activist meetings. In order to protect the anonymity of the informants, interviews are referred to using a combination of a label ("Radio Interviewee", "Tech Interviewee", and "Tech Collective") and a progressive number. When quotes are retrieved from publicly available documents such as websites, texts are paraphrased to protect the identity and activities of the groups. The methods and the epistemological considerations that guided the fieldwork are illustrated in Appendix I.

The research covers a timeframe of about six years (2006–2012). During this period I explored a range of groups from Western democracies and the global South. Community radio practitioners are equally distributed across Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South-East Asia, while radical techies are mostly located in Europe and North America. The research is intentionally transnational in scope: although the local, national, and world-regional environments are still significant contexts in which people mobilize, the boundary-less nature of the internet, the multinational ownership of media outlets, and the increasing transnationalization of governance institutions and episodes of repression suggest that ECPs are best observed at the transnational level.[10] By adopting a transnational lens, I intend to capture the technology-specific patterns that are located above national cultures and traditions.

The study has been extensively informed by my continuous exposure, as both a journalist and an activist, to media activism issues and practices. To protect their personal privacy and their activities, I did not collect any biographical data on the activists. However, to understand the research sample, some demographic details need to be presented. The community radio practitioners mentioned in this book were between 18 and 65 years old at time of the interview, and they have very diverse levels of education and employment status (teachers, NGO workers, unemployed, etc.). They are men and women from various ethnic groups, including minorities, with a slight prevalence of males. Typically, they are community activists and do not have any formal education in radio production. They live in large urban areas or remote villages in rural regions. Usually they volunteer at a community station; a few started out as volunteers and now work at the station. Radical techies, within my largely Western sample of their number, are a more homogeneous group: typically young white activists, in the age range 20–45, predominantly middle-class, highly educated men. Raised in the age of computers, most have a university degree, or have had some experience of higher education. Typically they live in urban areas and have access to broadband internet and state-of-the-art technology. Their employment status ranges from skilled technology-related jobs (software developer, webmaster, and designer) to temporary contracts in various other fields.

The toolbox

I adopt the theoretical approach of social movement research in order to analyze emancipatory communication activism. Yet the latter challenges many of the assumptions on which social movement research is grounded: it is informal to the point that it might seem amorphous, and sometimes so secretive as to verge on underground activities. It is so technical that it may seem to alienate people rather than spur mobilization. In this section, I illustrate the main conceptual tools used in the study, accounting respectively for resources, structures, and meanings, and present the model of movement formation that will guide the empirical research.

Collective action as a socially constructed field of shared action. Following Melucci (1996), I adopt an interactionist approach to collective action by which collective action, as a goal-directed joint activity, is a social construct. I focus on the "processes which enable actors to define a 'situation' as a field of shared action" (Melucci, 1996, p. 16) – in other words, I seek to understand how actors make sense of what they do. Community stations and internet activist projects are socially constructed fields of shared action, and the realm of ECPs is a "movement field" – that is to say, a "site[s] of cooperation, competitions and creative transformation" where shared meanings and collective identities are negotiated and developed (Clemens and Minkoff, 2004, p. 167). Radio and internet activism are thus distinct sectors of the same movement field.

Drawing from Tilly (1983), Melucci (1996), Diani (2003), and Touraine (2008), I define a social movement as an instance of collective action characterized by conflict towards clearly identified targets. Social actors are bound by solidarity ties and share a variably strong collective identity. They are linked in more or less dense networks. Their acting together breaches some rules of the system: more specifically, they struggle for "*the social control of the main cultural patterns*, that is, of the patterns through which our relationships with the environment are normatively organized" (Touraine, 2008, p. 213, original emphasis).

Resources: Organizational capacity, technology and expertise. Emancipatory communication activists rely upon as many as three types of resources that, however, might not be available at all times: symbolic, imagined, and material resources. Symbolic resources, such as the ability to frame technology issues to encourage action, speak to the activists' normative production. Imagined resources concern the way in which material and symbolic resources are perceived by activists and actively used for mobilization. Material resources include funding, infrastructure, organizing capacity (e.g., voluntary work), and expertise. Funding is needed to set up working communication infrastructure, although it is typically scarce among small groups with virtually no paid staff and limited access to donors.

The emphasis on independent infrastructure often results in activists rejecting funding that might come with strings attached, and most projects rely exclusively on user donations. Further, activists need communication technology such as radio transmitters: technology, however, is not necessarily a precondition for collective action to emerge as groups might come together with the aim of obtaining transmitters and servers.

Structure: Perceived political opportunities. Political opportunities are formal or informal dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics. According to Tarrow, opportunities disclose critical information for movement formation by exposing the weakness of power-holders, and "affecting people's expectations for success or failure" (1998, p. 77). In a similar fashion, threats to the activists' interests and values may also foster mobilization. However, changes in the political space become an opportunity only if and when defined as such by a group of social actors ready to act on a shared definition of the situation (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; McAdam *et al.,* 1996).[11]

Political opportunities allow us to explore the interactions between social actors and the world around them, and to understand the emergence and the course of mobilizations, embedding internal processes such as identity-building and issue-framing in the context in which they occur. In particular, the activists' interpretation of political opportunities may help to explain how they interact with conventional politics as well as their tactical preferences.

I define perceived political opportunities as institutional initiatives taking the shape of either a shift in governance configurations, towards more openness or closure of institutions and policy arenas, or a shift in governance discourse and culture (i.e., a change in the perception of what is a legitimate social practice in a certain sociopolitical context at a certain point in time). Furthermore, I distinguish between political opportunities as "potential gains" and opportunities as "threats" to activists' values and projects (see Chapter 5). Finally, in this study, political opportunities are for the most part transnational, whereby a transnational political opportunity is an event or process that has a transnational scope, echo, or impact, such as a UN summit or EU legislation.

"Meaning work" between structure and action. Social actors play an active role in constructing their cognitive frames and relations, at both the micro- and the group level (Snow *et al.*, 1986). By "meaning work" I indicate the "interactive process of constructing meaning" (Gamson, 1992, p. xii) enacted by activists in building and reproducing a field of shared action. In other words, meaning work refers to the interpretive processes through which people (groups, individuals and potential activists, both in isolation and in interaction with one another) make sense of their universe and their

actions. Objects of meaning work include the social and political context in which activists are embedded (e.g., political opportunities, institutions, and norms), available resources, grievances and claims, and also collective identity and emotions.

My understanding of meaning work is informed by the writings of social movement scholars Gamson (1992), Melucci (1996), Polletta (2006), Jasper (1997), and Snow and his collaborators (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Benford, 1987; Snow and Benford, 1988). Several ingredients play a role in meaning work, among which are emotions and moral principles (Jasper, 1997), perceived injustice (Gamson, 1992), ideology (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Zald, 2000), and narratives (Polletta, 2002 and 2006). These can be seen as the raw materials of meaning work, but they can also affect the articulation of other objects of cognitive interpretation, such as collective identity.

The most common unit of analysis of meaning work is the "collective action frame". A frame is an "interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action" (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 137). It performs the role of "thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible" (Ryan and Gamson, 2009, p. 167). A collective action frame offers "strategic interpretations of issues with the intention of mobilizing people to act", and involves a "strategic dialogue intended to shape a particular group into a coherent movement" (ibid.). Typically, it is built from a pre-existing cultural fabric by movement "entrepreneurs", activists who guide the construction and promotion of frames (Noakes and Johnston, 2005).

Analytically, meaning work can be split into two distinct but connected stages: sense-making (or understanding, in other words the process of interpretation), and meaning attribution (or labeling, that is to say the process of attribution of shared meanings and the creation of shared beliefs). The former designates a stage of perception and interpretation, whereas the latter indicates the active use of the newly created meanings. Because it is nearly impossible to empirically isolate these two stages, in this book they will be treated as simultaneous.

Meaning work is normative, evolving, and interactive, and it is embedded in the sociopolitical context in which it occurs. First, it embodies normative power, as the way in which activists frame issues for mobilization performs a diagnostic and prognostic function (accounting, respectively, for problem identification and strategy identification). Second, it is an ongoing constructive process whose outcomes, namely shared meanings, are incessantly evolving. "New" packages of meaning are assigned in a sort of spiral process by which people rely on existing worldviews and previous experiences; "old" meanings are constantly renegotiated. At the same time, shared meanings require continuous reinforcement, as groups look for normative stability as a precondition to action. Third, meaning work is an interactive and relational process, and it is individual and collective at the same time. Individuals

mobilize on the basis of their own perceived grievances, but they are also encouraged to do so by the groups best voicing their demands. There is a cultural process of mutual recognition at work at different levels, among individuals and between groups. However, meaning work is inherently conflictual in nature, both because movements' interpretations aim to challenge existing ones (Benford and Snow, 2000) and because different sectors of a movement may attribute different meanings to the same reality (Gamson and Meyer, 1996). Finally, meaning work does not occur in a vacuum but in interaction with its strategic context, such as potential audiences, the presence and the chances of success of opponents and countermovements, and institutional configurations. It is linked to strategy, which is also culturally constructed (Jasper, 2007).

In this book I explore meaning construction as a holistic, embodied, and pervasive process occurring at the microinteractional level. I analyze motivations and mobilizing beliefs, identity-building, perception of norms, and networking strategies. I search for "perceived embodiments" of meanings, such as words, slogans, and events, but also rituals and lifestyle choices that work as carriers of meanings (Jasper, 2007). These embodiments can be addressed as manifestations of meaning work.

Movement formation. Resources, political opportunities, and meanings intervene in the complex process that leads social actors to organize and act collectively. They do not act in isolation but influence each other. Figure 1.1 illustrates how these elements interact. It all starts with social actors: potential activists, individuals and groups, and pre-existing networks, which embody and share some grievances. On the right-hand side of the picture, we find the outcomes of movement formation – namely, collective action and the respective action repertoires. The arrows represent three possible movement formation dynamics, which might work jointly or in
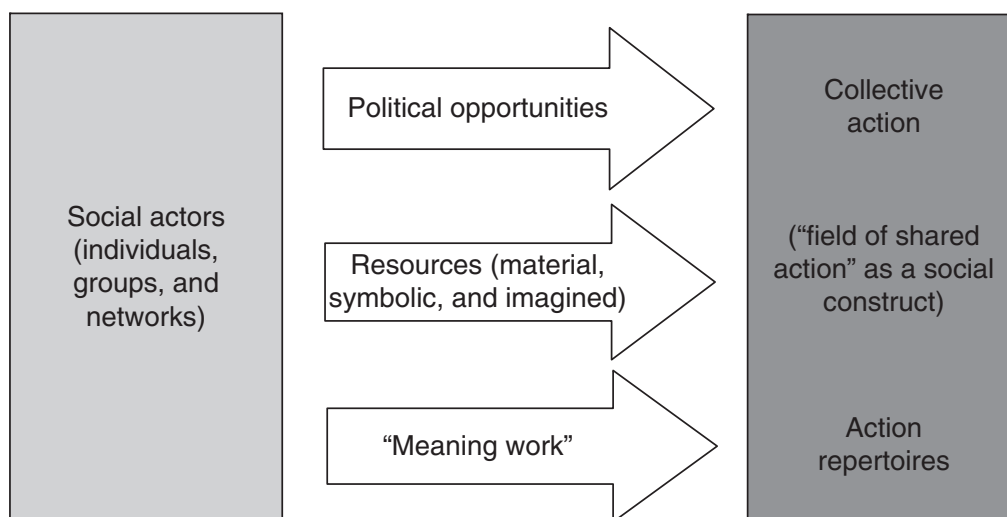
Figure 1.1 Dynamics of movement formation

isolation. In the first, social actors may interact with political opportunities, which may influence tactical choices and thus either foster or discourage collective action. In the second, material, symbolic, or imagined resources may have an impact on whether and how people mobilize. In the third scenario, people actively make sense of their universe and agency role, filtering opportunities and resources, framing issues and motivations, and selecting appropriate tactics.

This model, however, does not fully account for the complex processes at play. Neither social actors nor collective action are homogenous categories, nor are the dynamics between them linear, synchronous, and even. Resources, structure, and meanings operate at different and multiple stages of movement formation.

The book ahead

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a historical analysis of the emergence of mobilizations on media and technology issues, and it explores the context in which current mobilizations occur. For analytical purposes, I have identified three decades (1975–1985, 1985–1995, and 1995–2005), each characterized by distinct political opportunities, a certain level of technological innovation, and a specific social context. I trace the combination of the three contextual elements over time in order to map the scenario in which the empirical cases are situated. The following chapters are structured around research questions. Chapter 3 addresses the origins of collective action in the field, exploring the activists' motivations, and their ideological and cultural backgrounds and identity-building. In Chapter 4, I analyze how activists organize, and how organizational forms reflect collective identities. I also examine internal democracy and decision-making, the relation between technology activists and users, and gender dynamics within the groups. Chapter 5 explores tactics and tactical preferences in relation to political opportunities. I propose a typology of repertoires of action that considers cooperative and confrontational actors but incorporates also the groups who act regardless of institutions and norms. In Chapter 6, I turn to the networking strategies of emancipatory communication actors and consider them in interaction with transnational political opportunities. I examine the role of selected core events in fostering alliances, and derive implications for the current status of mobilizations, questioning the existence of a social movement in the field. Finally, in the Epilogue, I bring my observations about emancipatory communication activism to bear on theoretical matters in the fields of media studies, critical internet studies, and social movement research, summarizing the contributions of this study to theory building.