

“The New Information Frontier:
Toward a More Nuanced View of Social Movement Communication”

May 3, 2016

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Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the MacArthur Foundation for its support of the Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, which contributed to Jennifer Earl's work on this topic. We would also like to thank the Editor, the anonymous reviewers, and the UA Writing Group, of which Jennifer Earl is a member, for providing helpful comments on an early draft.

**The New Information Frontier:
Toward a More Nuanced View of Social Movement Communication**

Abstract: The information environment that social movements face is increasingly complex, making traditional assumptions about media, messaging, and communication used in social movement studies less relevant. Building on work begun within the study of digital protest, we argue that a greater integration of political communication research within social movement studies could offer substantial research contributions. We illustrate this claim by discussing how a greater focus on audiences and message reception, as well as message context, could advance the study of social movements. Specifically, we discuss a range of topics as applied to movement research, including information overload, selective attention, perceptions of bias, the possibilities that entertainment-related communications open up, and priming, among other topics. We suggest the risks of not adapting to this changing information environment, and incorporating insights from political communication, affect both the study of contemporary (including digital) protest, as well as potentially historical protest. The possibilities opened up by this move are immense including entirely new research programs and questions.

The New Information Frontier:

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The information environment that social movements face is increasingly complex (Gillan, Pickerill, and Webster 2008). Whether one looks at the fragmentation of media audiences (Webster and Ksiazek 2012), the rise of social media as an information source (Pew Research Center 2014), the risks of selective exposure to media (Stroud 2011), information overload (Graber 1988), or the ways in which behind-the-scenes algorithms influence what information Web surfers can find online (Pariser 2011), there is no disputing that important questions about communication practices within social movements have proliferated. Scholars interested in digital protest have been among a vanguard in sociology to examine these issues. However, progress has been incremental and ad hoc, and has not diffused to the wider study of social movements despite potentially large payoffs.

The need to make this analytical pivot can be seen as a glass half empty or a glass half full. From the half-empty perspective, social movement studies and sociology more broadly do not have a strong, recent background in theorizing or empirically studying political communication *qua* communication, save research on digital protest. This leaves the field in a lurch: there are increasingly important questions for which we have relatively little experience (Earl and Rohlinger 2012). From the half-full perspective, though, several allied fields focus precisely on questions about media and communication from which social movement scholars could draw to substantially jump-start our work. Notably, the inter-disciplinary field of political communication—which operates at the intersection of communication and political science and is concerned with how political information is created, distributed, consumed, interpreted, and acted upon—is ripe for this kind of cross-pollination. The central aim of this article is to suggest

that by focusing on the audiences for social movement communication, and on how movement messages are received, we could expand and improve social movement scholarship.¹

Specifically, we discuss two lines of potential research as illustrative examples of what an expanded connection between political communication and social movement studies could bring: (1) social movement scholars could analyze the audiences for social movement communications to understand how they access and process information, instead of more exclusively focusing on the strategic or mediated production of information; and (2) social movement scholars could examine how context affects audience consumption. We close with several important clarifications. First, we see our contribution as inviting further work on this topic, not as an exhaustive review of the ways that political communication research could be usefully appropriated by social movement scholars.² Second, we stress that we are not suggesting that

¹ We recognize that social movements may actually have multiple audiences, including potential supporters, current and past supporters, opponents, and multiple targets. Differences across these audiences are important, but our goal is to illustrate ways in which attending to message reception is useful more broadly. Fully tracing message effects for every type of recipient is beyond the scope of this article. Likewise, we recognize that movements vary widely across a range of dimensions (e.g., size, coherence, and professionalization), and that this powerfully shapes communication dynamics. Space limitations, however, prevent us from considering how different movements might be differently affected by our arguments.

² This article largely focuses on research on social movements and political communication from the U.S., although numerous European researchers have studied communication practices related to digital protest (e.g., contributions to the 2015 special issue of *Information, Communication, & Society* on digital protest). Although our focus is weighted toward American theoretical

social movement scholarship become a subset of political communication, even though some communication scholars have made such an argument (Bennett and Segerberg 2011; 2013). That would be as problematic as social movement scholars continuing to ignore political communication research.

How Has Social Movement Scholarship Approached Media and Communications?

While questions about media and communications were once at the core of sociology, American sociology began to turn away from them in the middle of the twentieth century as high profile research in the 1940s suggested minimal effects of media coverage on voting preferences (for lengthy discussions on this topic, see: Earl 2015; Jamieson forthcoming; Pooley and Katz 2008). Although the “minimal-effects paradigm” that this work spawned has been heavily criticized since then, it had an enduring influence on the field of sociology (Jamieson forthcoming). As American sociology programs were turning away from questions about media, journalism schools in the U.S. were flush with funds and eager to add academic research units, often in the form of communication departments, to drive up their academic prestige (Jamieson forthcoming). Thus, as sociology pushed away questions about communications and media, independent communication departments were being founded in the U.S. to address precisely these questions.

Social movement studies, as we know it today, was not born until well after the breach between sociology and communication developed. Although the study of collective behavior, which was the progenitor of contemporary social movement studies, emerged during a period

traditions, we view this as not a limit of the approach we recommend but rather of ourselves as authors. We invite European scholars, representing different traditions, to seek different pathways for bringing communication practices into focus within social movement studies.

when sociologists were more concerned with the media and communication processes, as a subfield collective behavior was often focused on the micro-level (Buechler 2011; e.g., Kornhauser 1959; Le Bon 1960 [1895]). Thus, when the study of social movements grew out of the older study of collective behavior (beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s), there was neither general disciplinary pressure to address media and communication in critical ways nor a legacy of doing so from collective behavior research.

Research on framing, which developed in the 1980s, is a notable exception, but most of this research focused on strategic communication practices and the production, not the reception, of frames. For instance, scholars investigating how movements frame beliefs to motivate participation and support (Snow 2004; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986) tended to place more emphasis on how these frames are produced internally than on how they are received (e.g., Gamson and Meyer 1996; Klandermans 1996; McCammon, Hewitt, and Smith 2002). When research did analyze the effects of frames, it tended to be at the macro-level (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Snow and Benford 1992), examining questions such as when news outlets would rebroadcast specific frames (Bail 2012) and whether movements that adjusted their frames improved their futures (McCammon 2014).

The concept within framing most closely related to audience reception is frame resonance (Snow and Benford 1988), which speaks to how compelling frames are to audience members. But, in practice, research on resonance often serves as a post hoc explanation for the success of particular frames (e.g., frames diffused because they resonated) without enough empirical

attention to whether resonance is the best explanation for frame diffusion, how a frame creates resonance, or how frames influence individuals' issue perceptions.³

Likewise, a substantial amount of research has gone into understanding what movements can do to gain media coverage of their ideas and actions (Amenta, Caren, Olasky, and Stobaugh 2009; Earl, Martin, McCarthy, and Soule 2004; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht 2002; Rohlinger 2002); the role of media such as radio (Roscigno and Danaher 2001) or books (but see Meyer and Rohlinger 2012 for a critique of this view) in generating support for movements; and/or the unintended consequences of coverage for social movements (e.g., Gitlin 1980). Again, the majority of this work either considers the organizer's point of view (e.g., how can movements generate media coverage while avoiding being pushed to more radical ends as they vie for it?) or focuses on aggregate relationships between media availability and movement effects (e.g., proximity to radio stations increased mobilization, see Roscigno and Danaher 2001).

European scholarship has tended to view meaning and movements as more co-constituted (and less strategic) than Americans, but even here there has not been a large focus on explicitly communicative processes within movements. For instance, while Melucci (1996) and other new social movement theorists are concerned broadly with meaning and collective identity, the focus of this work is on competing meaning systems, which reveal the ways in which the idea of a singular movement is a reification. Likewise, while Eyerman and Jamison (1991) are focused on knowledge interests and cognitive praxis, the focus is largely on knowledge-making within

³ It is also worth noting that resonance-based framing research has been criticized by political communication scholars for being imprecise, and insufficiently distinct from priming (Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2015).

movements, not on communicative processes like the ones we explore below. As is true for American work, research on digital protest tends to be the major exception.

Thus, until the rise of digital protest, few social movement researchers examined how audiences access, consume, or understand these communications (Earl and Rohlinger 2012; save notable exceptions such as: Gamson 2004; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), and this research was rare even though these are standard topics of concern in political communication. Earl (2015) argues that digital protest did to social movements research what research on new media was doing to a many areas within sociology: it forced a fledgling rapprochement between sociology and communication, and this has been true in both American and European research (Castells 2012; For a pre-Internet treatment of the information age: Melucci 1996). As classically trained social movement scholars, largely drawn from sociology but to a lesser extent from political science, began to study online protest, they were publishing alongside communication and political communication scholars interested in digital protest, with each group of scholars bringing very different questions, theories, and approaches to research to bear on the topic. In fact, much of the early work on digital protest was (and continues to be) published in interdisciplinary journals, such as *Information, Communication, & Society*, *Social Science Computer Review*, and *New Media & Society*. The interdisciplinary reviewing pool for these journals forced communication and political communication scholars to become more familiar with and concerned with social movement theory (e.g., work on the free rider dilemma by Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005; Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber 2006) and social movement scholars to become more familiar with relevant work from communication and political communication (e.g., Earl and Kimport 2011; Gillan 2009; Gillan, Pickerill, and Webster 2008). The result has been the development of an

interdisciplinary research area on digital protest which features leading figures associated with political communication and communication more broadly (e.g., Bennett, Bimber, Chadwick, Karpf), and sociology (e.g., Earl, Gillan, Yang).

However, this fledgling rapprochement is limited in two respects. First, even within the study of digital protest, scholars have tended to import singular concepts from communication without building a more systematic connection between the areas. For instance, Earl and Kimport (2011) import a critique of technological determinism from communication and technology studies, as do Gillan, Pickerill, and Webster (2008). But, Earl and Kimport (2011) don't have much to say about the wider information environment or how participants perceive digital protest. Gillan and collaborators (Gillan 2009; Gillan, Pickerill, and Webster 2008) acknowledge risks identified within political communication, such as information overload and selection effects, and Bennett and Segerberg (2011; 2013) discuss the personalization of politics as part of the rise of "connected" versus collective action, but we argue that a more systematic integration of social movement studies with political communication is important.

Second, the rapprochement between social movement studies and communication has been limited by its segregation within the study of digital protest. While the rapidly changing information environment affects all forms of protest, including street activism (Gillan, Pickerill, and Webster 2008), social movement scholarship—as observed in social movement-specific journals, such as *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies*, or in social movement-specific imprints, such as the Minnesota series—has not taken up communication-related questions around protest dynamics writ large. Instead, research on more traditional questions (e.g., on framing and media coverage in American research and on collective identity and knowledge work in European research) continues without significant adjustment.

Political Communication and New Horizons for Social Movement Research

As mentioned earlier, political communication is an interdisciplinary field that primarily draws on the disciplines of communication and political science, though it is also informed by sociology, psychology, and other fields. The fundamental question of the subfield is: How do political messages—whatever their source and mode of delivery—shape audiences’ political attitudes and behaviors? This question naturally fits within the wider concerns of communication as a field, which have been famously summarized as describing “Who/ says what/ in which channel/ to whom/ with what effect?” (Lasswell 1948, p. 37). That is, many of the questions that political communication scholars raise are related to larger questions in communication, but are specifically applied to the communication of political messages within the study of political communication. Scholars from political science also contribute to and identify as political communication scholars, meaning that theoretical and methodological influences from political science have informed the development of political communication as well.

Social movement scholars have made headway understanding activists as communicators, beginning to probe the messages they produce, and studying one important medium—large national newspapers. In the rest of this article, we showcase what could be gained by examining a more diverse range of communication questions. In short, we ask what social movement scholars could learn from a fuller investigation of political communication, including studying political communicators, political messages, media that carry political messages, audiences for political messages, and (de)mobilization and other effects of political messages. Given limited space, we focus on two larger issues that we see as uniquely pressing for social movement scholars: (1) problematizing the audience—how do messages reach them,

get attended to, get interpreted, and get acted upon; and (2) how does the context in which a message is received shape its reception and its effects?

[Table 1 about here.]

Table 1 summarizes six key research areas related to these broader concerns. The table identifies a series of problematic assumptions that social movement scholars might implicitly make about political communication, it suggests open-ended research questions that could motivate new lines of social movement inquiry, and it offers examples of specific topics meriting further study. We do not claim that this article, or this table, is an exhaustive accounting of how political communication might enrich social movement research. To the contrary, we acknowledge that our approach to this integration represents one of many possible perspectives, and we invite other political communication and/or social movement scholars to raise alternative pathways to integration.

Problematizing the Audience

The *sine qua non* for movement messaging has been media coverage, particularly newspaper coverage. Coverage in the *New York Times*, for instance, has been intensely studied with the presumption that it drives agendas, increases support, and persuades audiences (Amenta, Caren, Olasky, and Stobaugh 2009; Earl, Martin, McCarthy, and Soule 2004; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht 2002). The framing literature reinforces this perspective, assuming that once a movement generates a strategic frame, the hardest moment in the persuasion process is securing distribution of that frame. In a fundamental way, both perspectives see information access as key—potential supporters lack access to information about, or compelling frames of, movements, but once they have those, persuasion is straightforward and other structural determinants such as network connections become most consequential. We think that audience

attention, reception, and action are far more complex and that in the contemporary saturated media environment—in which it is so easy to access an overwhelming amount of information—it is the attention of individuals, not access to information, which is scarce. In other words, the shift to a saturated information environment pushes questions about audience to the foreground.

Below we outline several ways in which social movement scholars could attend to audience.

Expanding Media Environment and Dwindling Audience

We begin by more carefully considering the transformation of the political information environment, which includes shifts in both traditional media and the emergence of the Internet. There was a time when media coverage was tantamount to reaching a mass audience, but in the contemporary media landscape that is no longer true (Neuman 1991; Rucht 2004). In the U.S., for instance, there has been explosive growth in the number and variety of political and movement-relevant information sources (Bimber 2003), which in turn creates new pressures on these outlets to specialize as they compete for the attention of increasingly selective consumers (Kim 2009; Tewksbury 2005).

This has resulted in what political communication scholars refer to as audience fragmentation: the diversity of media sources has fractured audiences such that the vast majority of outlets have audiences that are much smaller than were common just twenty years ago. While this tendency has been somewhat offset by other factors (Webster 2005) and Americans' more diverse online news diets still often share a handful of common high-profile sources (Hindman 2009), even major news organizations (which have the widest reach) reach relatively modest audiences today (Pew Research Center 2015). Although there is less academic research on media audiences in the European context, industry analyses suggest similar declines, at least among newspapers (Bennett 2014). Furthermore, engagement is often briefer: in 2015, the average time

spent with online *New York Times* content was less than five minutes (Pew Research Center 2015).

In this context, as the first row of Table 1 suggests, while a news story in a paper of record such as the *New York Times* remains important, so too are stories both in competing national media and in partisan online outlets; commentary by influential political bloggers; and social media posts that can include text, images, and video. Given the different goals, news standards, and journalistic practices that undergird these diverse sources of information, it is almost certain that the coverage movements receive in each will differ in important ways. Also, there is evidence of cross-over among these sources: a story might, for instance, migrate from a blog to a paper of record, not just vice versa (Chadwick 2013). To assert that attracting the media spotlight is a valid measure of movement success is painting with too broad a brush. Instead, it is important to capture empirically the variety of ways in which movements are represented in the media. While there have been limited attempts to do this by comparing newspapers to one another, and movement periodicals to mainstream news sources, we argue that far more work needs to be done in this area so that social movement scholars more actively consider the wide variety of media that might be carrying movement messages. For instance, when judging the uptake of movement messages, or the “success” of coverage, scholars need to examine audience size and characteristics to fully understand the range of potential impacts.

Entertainment, Not News

Some see the dramatic rise in entertainment media consumption as further limiting audiences for political news. For instance, research has shown that less politically interested individuals have largely abandoned hard news programs (Prior 2007). However, a range of factors may offset any ill-effects this has for movements. First, a burgeoning literature on

political entertainment has demonstrated that entertainment media, from *The Daily Show* to *The Simpsons*, can have important political effects, shaping political knowledge, attitudes, and engagement (Delli Carpini 2014). Second, persuasion processes function differently in the context of entertainment media (Moyer-Gusé 2008), suggesting that exposure to movement information through entertainment could be uniquely persuasive. Moreover, repeated exposure to media of any sort shapes users' perceptions of reality (Gerbner and Gross 1976). The more that entertainment media portray a movement's grievance as a legitimate problem, the more receptive audiences may be to the movement's cause.

Research also questions a bright line distinction between the political world and the rest of the (less obviously political) world. For instance, research shows that online hobby forums and non-political blogs host political discussions that are more deliberative and feature a wider range of views and greater tolerance for disagreement than explicitly political sites (Munson and Resnick 2011; Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). In contrast to discussion spaces organized around controversial topics, where disagreement is often paired with hostility (for example, see Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig 2014), these less hostile non-political forums could prove essential to the exchange of diverse information and the cross-pollination of ideas. Moreover, given that attitude strength is an important predictor of attitude change (Petty and Krosnick 1995), sites whose audiences tend to have weaker attitudes may also present a uniquely important opportunity for persuasion.

We argue that social movement scholars should work to understand how entertainment media may be an important driver of opinion change and movement support. Doing so could raise important questions about how activists, grievances, issues, frames, and so on are

represented in popular media, including television, film, books, and music, and what the consequences of this coverage are.

Selecting which News to Consume

When individuals do choose to pay attention to the news, media exposure is further shaped by their issue positions and attitudes through a process referred to as politically motivated (or partisan) selective exposure (see row 2 of Table 1). Most individuals tend to prefer news content that affirms their prior beliefs over content that challenges them (Stroud 2011). Although potentially empowering for social movements, which have historically suffered from a lack of media exposure and access to potential supporters, this also poses risk. While fears about online “echo chambers” (Sunstein 2001) are unfounded—individuals do not systematically avoid contact with the other side despite being drawn to likeminded content (Garrett 2009) and news consumers rely on a diverse mix of outlets both online (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011) and off (Webster and Ksiazek 2012)—important selection effects remain. Moreover, as new technologies facilitate repeated exposure to attitude-reinforcing communication, audience members tend to become more polarized: such exposure promotes stronger issue beliefs and political participation, but it can also incite hostility toward individuals holding other viewpoints (Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsfati, Neo, and Dal 2014).

Recognizing that media coverage is not tantamount to exposure, and that news consumers play an active role in selecting the content they encounter, is consequential for social movement research. There is no single right way to account for this in empirical work, but attention to media choice is critical. For instance, asking interview informants about their news preferences and media exposure practices may enhance our understanding of their movement perceptions. Models of frame resonance may have more explanatory power when they include indicators of

where individuals get their movement information. In some cases, it may be useful to couple measures of where people get their news with an assessment of how movement information is conveyed in the chosen sources. Pairing media exposure with information about the content of that media would offer unique insight into the processes by which attitudes about social movements are formed in today's high-choice media environment.

The Rise of Social Media

It is also increasingly important to understand how messages might be promoted through alternative means, such as online social networks (see row 3 of Table 1). Social networking services are an increasingly important source of news (Pew Research Center 2014), and scholars argue that the attitudes and information shared across such networks can powerfully influence public opinion (Watts and Dodds 2007).

As a platform for sharing social movement messages, social media offers opportunities that are profoundly different than traditional news outlets. Although social media users are more likely to share content created by others than to post original content, user-generated content is an important part of the news ecosystem (Pew Research Center 2014). This presents a unique opportunity for social movements to control their media representation, but it is not without risk. Astroturfing, whereby a small number of individuals use software to create the appearance of a large grassroots social media presence (Ratkiewicz, Conover, Meiss, Gonçalves, Patil, Flammini, and Menczer 2010), can mislead the public and undermine trust in more organic online movement activity. Activist reliance on social media as a means of reaching the public also poses risk, as companies that operate social media sites have in some cases shut down activist accounts (Earl 2012).

The rise of social media might also be important because of the role that peers play in shaping news exposure. The idea that who we know influences what we know about politics is not new—this was the premise of the “two-step flow,” first introduced in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). According to this important model in political communication, media’s influence flows through politically attentive opinion leaders who regularly consume news, and who share aspects of what they learn with friends and colleagues, thereby shaping their followers’ knowledge and beliefs. The form this influence takes, however, is changing. It is at least plausible that Facebook “shares” are displacing local opinion leaders’ recommendations about what information news consumers should pay attention to (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, and Pingree 2015). The content featured on social network sites is strongly influenced by other users, especially close ties, and recommendations from these users could have a profound influence on individuals’ overall news consumption. Research has already shown that content popular among a peer group is uniquely likely to be viewed, regardless of the individual’s political predispositions (Messing and Westwood 2012): politically motivated selective exposure effectively vanishes in the face of social news recommendations. Indeed, users’ consumption of online political news has remained fairly diverse, at least on Facebook (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015), and this may be part of the reason.

These considerations put a decidedly different spin on the influence of information sharing by movement supporters. Contrary to the image of the “slacktivists” blithely clicking on links with little real-world effect, these results suggest that online information sharing can have important consequences. Moreover, social recommendations, and the algorithms that online services use to share them (Pariser 2011), powerfully influence what peers look at, and the resultant shifts in information exposure could shape public opinion. News recommendations,

especially those made through one's social network, effectively cut through the noise and complexity of the contemporary media environment, potentially overcoming politically biased exposure decisions along the way.

For social movement scholars, there is also value in understanding virality in the context of activism. What attributes of the message, the sender, and the receiver shape the diffusion of a movement message (e.g. see Aral and Walker 2012)? And what influence do these messages have? How do audience members, who by virtue of the spread of information across real-world networks may be socially and politically disconnected from the issues represented, make sense of these messages? Can a viral video effectively propagate a movement frame? Can a popular awareness-raising campaign shift or amplify attitudes? Can these messages be mobilizing, and will this mobilization be momentary or sustained? Questions such as these are not new to social movement scholarship, but new technologies and their accompanying social practices demand renewed attention to them.

Resistance to Movement Messages

We have thus far largely focused on movements' ability to attract an audience, but doing so does not guarantee that a movement's message will have the effect intended by activists or assumed by scholars (see row 4 of Table 1). There are at least three reasons that an individual might respond to new information about a movement in ways that differ from activists' expectations.

First, neutral and factually accurate reporting on an issue may be disbelieved for a variety of reasons. In an effect known as the "hostile media phenomenon," individuals are predisposed to see political news coverage as slanted in favor of the opposition even for messages that are relatively balanced (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). This means that both sides of an issue may

see the same story as favoring their opposition and be disinclined to believe it. The dynamic is evident among more partisan sources, too, although with some differences: individuals on opposing sides of an issue may agree on the direction, but not the extent, of bias, consistently attributing greater bias to the opposition (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chih-Yun Chia 2001). The tendency to see bias where there is none can also sustain groups premised on false pretenses. Supporters of such groups are likely to dismiss claims that their beliefs are inaccurate or their actions harmful as more evidence of bias on the part of those delivering the message. Witness the persistence of anti-vaccination beliefs in the face of careful fact-based messaging (Nyhan and Reifler 2014). Tactics building on these biases have also been effectively used by the climate-change denial movement (Weber and Stern 2011).

Second, individuals tend to be skeptical of messages that are clearly intended to have a specific effect (Byrne and Hart 2009). Social movement messages are frequently intended to be both informative and persuasive, and although activists view these messages as pro-social, the broader public (including both those unfamiliar with the movement, and those opposed to it) may view the claims more cynically. Audiences tend to ignore or discount messages that they see as manipulative, and to derogate sources that have a stake in the information provided (Byrne and Hart 2009). Strategic messages can also inadvertently prime contradictory thoughts, causing the messages to have unintended effects (Cho and Salmon 2007). For example, an anti-smoking campaign may cause recipients to reflect on the appealing qualities of smoking. In the most extreme cases, strategic communication can have boomerang effects, eliciting changes in attitude or behavior that oppose the desired effect (Byrne and Hart 2009).

Third, people's prior attitudes influence their information processing, a phenomenon commonly referred to as "biased assimilation" (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979) or "motivated

reasoning” (Lodge and Taber 2013). Emotion is commonly cited as a driving force (Lodge and Taber 2013) of these biases. It is not uncommon for two individuals to reach opposing conclusions in the face of the same evidence, with each finding disproportionate evidence supporting his or her prior beliefs. An implication of this is that although technologies make it easier for movements to share evidence supporting their grievances (e.g., posting confidential documents or activist-recorded videos), this will not necessarily promote agreement about the legitimacy of activist claims. For instance, we would expect radically different reactions to the recent spate of American videos posted on social media showing police shootings and other confrontations with (often African-American) citizens depending on the viewers’ prior attitudes: some will see a clear justification for police actions, while others will see blatant use of excessive force.

All of this has implications for activists’ ability to communicate strategically. Activists are mobilized, and supporters swayed, by a shared understanding of grievances grounded in an empirical reality, such as working conditions or a political injustice. But movements’ ability to use communication to promote this shared understanding is threatened by the three types of biases outlined above. Just as it is useful to ask where people get information about movements, rather than assuming that everyone relies on the same sources, it is useful to examine differences in how people perceive the information they encounter. It would be valuable to understand, for example, who trusts first-hand activist accounts (e.g., photos tweeted from a protest) and whether those from-the-street messages do more or less to win over supporters than other types of coverage of the same event. Another important avenue for research concerns how people decide which version of “the facts” to trust. For instance, claims about vaccine safety are core to the anti-vaccine movement: supporters rally evidence of vaccines’ purported dangers while medical

experts, public health scholars, government officials, and others work to counteract these activists' claims. The role that media, especially new communication technologies, play in this conflict over meaning is critically important.

The Demobilization Effect of Cross-Pressures

Researchers studying deliberation have also confirmed a reaction to discussions and media that are politically contentious that should be troubling to social movement scholars (see row 5 of Table 1). Cross-cutting exposure, including the consumption of counter-attitudinal media and social interactions with those with whom we disagree, does have positive consequences for deliberative democracy, such as increasing awareness of rationales supporting other viewpoints (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002) and promoting political tolerance (Mutz 2002). But it also has more harmful effects: it can increase ambivalence and discourage political involvement (Mutz 2006). Even more troublingly, there is evidence that these effects are contingent on initial attitude strength: deliberation can make moderates and/or people without strongly held views withdraw from dialogues while polarizing individuals with more radical views and hardened opinions (Wojcieszak 2012).

These risks should trouble social movement scholars because they suggests that polarized messaging, such as that around pro-choice versus pro-life, may drive bystanders away from movements, even as it reinforces commitment by existing participants. Do movements that use polarized frames draw fewer mainstream supporters, but greater numbers of hardened activists? This also suggests that movements might productively segment their audience into groups based on how they are expected to respond to different messages. For instance, one set of frames or messages may be directed toward the general public, which will include many bystanders and

may therefore benefit from less polarizing rhetoric, while other messages might target movement members, who may be bolstered by polarizing rhetoric.

Messages in Context

Political communication research suggests that the context in which information is received, or action is to be taken, can affect persuasion (see last row of Table 1). Research on “priming” has shown that cues embedded in the messaging environment can shape which attributes are most salient when an individual is forming assessments of issues or political actors (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). For example, media exposure (e.g., watching the news) can influence the weight individuals give to different factors when reporting attitudes about government, political leaders, or issues (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier 2009). Significant shifts in support can be produced by priming people to think about issues on which the target fares well or poorly: asking about the economy immediately before asking about favorability toward an elected official might generate different responses than first asking about foreign policy. The attributes activated by a prime may concern specific features of the object being assessed, such as where a candidate stands on a particular issue, or they can derive from more abstract group features, such as stereotypes and prejudice (Valentino and Vandebroek 2014). Priming is not focused on simple or direct changes in belief; instead, priming emphasizes how message context shapes its interpretation and how people react behaviorally to that information.

For social movement scholars, deep consideration of potential priming effects could highlight the importance of information and decision-making context to contemporary social justice struggles. For example, a number of scholars have argued that voting might be influenced by the voter’s location when casting a ballot (Pryor, Morehouse Mendez, and Herrick 2014).

This can be quite important to social movements. For instance, it might be possible that the use of churches as polling places might prime negative beliefs about gays and lesbians, effecting support for votes related to gay rights (for research on Proposition 8 in California: Daniels 2011; Rutchick 2010). Similarly, voting in schools may influence votes related to education (Berger, Meredith, and Wheeler 2008). To the extent that primed concerns influence voters' decisions, priming could counteract or reinforce mobilization efforts, although priming effects diminish quickly with time (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier 2009).

While this suggests important, even potentially decisive, in-situ effects of priming, research on priming suggests that the information environment is a capacious concept: movement messages may fall flat if consumed in spaces or contexts that prime negative evaluations of the movement or its supporters, or may get a surprising bump if consumed in spaces or alongside other media that prime positive evaluations of the movement or its supporters. When context shapes how messages are attended to, and interpreted, context can have an influence on the developing beliefs different audiences have about movements. Considering such effects could dramatically change social movement scholars' research agenda with respect to media, communication, and even action so that researchers become much more concerned with studying where potential supporters, actual supporters, targets, and opponents gain information about movements and take movement-relevant actions.

Conclusion

Scholars of digital protest have begun to import insights from political communication into social movement studies, raising important questions about information dissemination, consumption, and reception. We hope to extend this to social movement scholarship more generally. While once possible to side-step communication questions, changes in the media

landscape and the growth of the Web have made this a dangerous strategy for social movement scholars going forward. Less nuanced understandings of communication processes increasingly imperil social movement scholars' ability to: (1) understand contemporary (and, potentially, even historical) social movement dynamics; and (2) remain the dominant intellectual force in the study of protest-related phenomena (as an increasing volume of research is being published outside of social movement studies outlets). If social movement scholars are to continue to make fundamental strides in understanding protest, we must investigate and learn from research on media and communication processes that has been developed by political communication scholars.

We have attempted to start an explicit and extended dialogue between social movement studies and political communication by highlighting some ways in which political communication scholarship can suggest new questions and offer novel perspectives on current social movement research topics. Table 1 summarizes these ideas. We do not claim to have provided an exhaustive review of how these two literatures could be knitted together. We have argued for a focus on audiences and information context, but there are doubtless many other ways to bring these fields into conversation. Instead of being exhaustive, we have tried to provocatively illustrate how this common research territory could benefit from crosspollination between distinct intellectual traditions. We hope that other scholars will suggest alternative recombinations of these fields, perhaps even from different theoretical traditions including from European scholars since our review has been more American in its focus.

We are not the only ones to note the importance of communication research and concepts to social movement studies. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) have gone so far as to argue that social movements should be recast as fundamentally communicative acts, an argument that

implicitly positions communication—and not sociology or political science—as the discipline with the single greatest potential for explaining the inner workings of movements. We think such arguments go too far, ignoring essential structural aspects of social movements and overplaying the role of beliefs in motivating participation (i.e., research has long shown that belief is not enough to compel action and that some people participate who are not believers, but are brought in through social connections). In fact, while not our focus here, there are many things that political communication scholars could learn from social movement studies. We are not arguing for a fundamental rethinking of what social movements are or even a repositioning of beliefs or ideology as causal factors in our models. Instead, we are arguing for a more robust social movement studies that builds on the advances of political communication as it draws on findings and arguments from that literature to advance work on critical social movement topics and open up new research frontiers within it.

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Table 1: Social Movement Concerns Drawn from Political Communication Research

<i>Prompt</i>	<i>Ask</i>	<i>Research Questions</i>
1. Don't assume all media messages are received.	Under what conditions are media messages more likely to reach potential movement audiences?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do members of the public get information about movements in a hyper-competitive media environment? • How do movements' representations vary across diverse media and outlets? What is the audience size and composition associated with those outlets? • What role do entertainment media play in shaping social movement perceptions? • What attributes of message, sender, and receiver shape the "viral" diffusion of movement messages? • Do theories that help scholars understand reactions to traditional media apply equally to information shared over social media, including "viral" resharing cascades?
2. Don't assume that all information crossing the proverbial desk of audience members is consumed.	What conditions increase the likelihood that potential movement audiences will consume the movement messages they encounter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do individuals decide which movement messages to consume, and which to ignore?
3. Don't assume that media gatekeepers are always most influential.	Under what conditions can more informal and peer-based information exchange be influential in movement processes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the influences of social recommendations on individuals' response to movement information in both the short and long-term? Are socially shared message more or less persuasive? Under what circumstances, if any, can social recommendations overcome political biases? • How do individuals make sense of viral activist messages absent the larger movement context?
4. Don't assume that movement messages are received and interpreted as intended.	What factors affect how people interpret and decide whether to trust movement messages that they consume?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do individuals predispositions color their understanding of movement information they encounter? • How do individuals decide what to believe in an information environment offering support for almost any claim? • Are first-hand activist accounts (i.e., user-generated content) uniquely believable or consequential?
5. Don't assume that the availability of favorable information translates into action.	How and under what conditions do consumed messages affect action by receivers/interpreters?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do polarized frames promote a participation gap? That is, do they attract hardened activists while deterring participation among others?
6. Don't assume that information is context-free.	How does information context matter to message reception, interpretation, and behavior?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the context in which messages are consumed influence actions or judgments based on those messages? • How does priming inform social movement activity? Do message conveyed by the space in which an action takes place shape individuals' behaviors? • Can activist messaging prime desirable responses among recipients?