

## Nuit Debout: Representations, Affect, and Prototyping Change

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While the physical presence of Nuit Debout demonstrators has been central to the movement's strategy, the scale of technological intervention on display by activists seems unimaginable in the recently bygone mass media era dominated by relatively unhackable broadcast and print news outlets. Various media projects and strategies employed by movement participants are meeting the specific local need and conditions, and at the same time they constitute a broader technopolitical action: collective practices that take place both on- and offline, aimed at political reform or revolution. This article examines the global and local dynamics of technopolitical action as it is being played out in France, with a focus on what Nuit Debout media activists are introducing to the long-established protest culture there.

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On March 31, 2016, Nuit Debout launched with an all-night gathering in Paris's Place de la République in protest of the El Khomri labor reform legislation and the antiunion political climate it represented. Participants engaged in the kind of work strikes and street protests that have a long tradition in France, but they were also creating prototypes of alternative forms of social organization that borrow from and build on the organizational approaches taken by the social change movements that have launched in a steady stream since 2010.

The scale of technological intervention leveraged by the Nuit Debout activists would have been unimaginable in the mass media era marked by scarce broadcast channels, high-cost technology, and tight regulation. With the rise of low-cost digital tools, movements from Indymedia to Occupy Wall Street have created their own media tools and distribution platforms (Juris, 2012; Russell, 2016). The sophistication of the media strategies developed in the last half-decade was on vibrant display during the Nuit Debout action.

The activists behind the Nuit Makeuse experiment created a mobile technology collaborative, assembling digital-era makers to pool expertise. They built anonymous portable file-sharing and communication systems called Pirate Boxes that contained free open source software and inexpensive hardware. They also created an electricity-generating system powered by bicycles and held online and offline workshops on how to access and use secure software tools. Makeuse coordinator Laurence Allard said that the point of the projects was to network activist online and offline efforts. "Public urban space is currently not complemented by digital urban space," she said. "We need to ensure there is a continuum, that things are connected" (Allard, as quoted by Ferreira, 2016, para. 3).

Activists also set up a makeshift media center that included audio and video Internet broadcasting stations using existing platforms and the live-streaming apps Periscope and Bambuser. Emma Avilés, a Nuit Debout activist who also set up the Spanish M15 movement's media center, described the site of action. "Communication is our battlefield," she said, "and we believe in doing things rather than just debating about them" (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

The Nuit Debout protesters and the tools and strategies they employed are part of a broader technopolitical movement that relies on collective physical and digital world participation and practices (Toret, 2015). Today's technopolitics is reshaping collective politics and public engagement and underlining new challenges. The digital networked media environment is more open and democratic than the mass media environment, but it is also more heavily surveilled and controlled. Researchers and journalists have well documented the ways government authorities and corporate marketers track human activity using Internet technology, including the increasingly omnipresent "Internet of things" in which street cameras and automobiles and cellphones create real-time maps and archived records of the paths taken by our bodies and our minds (Stalder, 2012; Treré, 2016). The traditional cat-and-mouse relationship between authoritarian power and the practice of democracy has sped up and been written into the digital code of lives (Russell, 2016).

Much of the effort of activists involved in movements such as Nuit Debout focuses on connecting, informing, representing, and monitoring sources of power. They are doing the watchdog work traditionally carried out by journalists, albeit with new practices and tools (Russell, 2016). Media activists have a long history of creating information or "news" outlets. The downside of that activity, however, has been that the activist or alternative media they depended on functioned primarily to connect members of the public already engaged in the issues that mattered to the media makers. In recent years, key protest media strategies have been reinvented and now reflect larger shifts in technology (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Treré, 2012). The Nuit Debout action underlined two related realities in the era of ubiquitous digital networks: (1) that traditional news media remain central to shaping the opinions of members of the public and of decision makers and (2) that centralized control of the news media is waning.

Drawing on interviews with Nuit Debout activists, material from online discussions, websites, and wikis, as well as popular press narratives and secondary scholarly sources, this article highlights some of the ways the work of Nuit Debout media activists is driven by hacktivist sensibilities—or an approach to political action that combines technological skills with critical thinking to exploit the malleability of both mainstream and alternative or niche technologies. The article identifies three means through which the activists use media to disrupt power dynamics; they use media in the work of representation, affect, and prototyping. It is work that is at once practical and visionary and driven by local issues and transnational connections.

### **Representation**

What is happening in France resonates with recent scholarship on the ways emergent digital tools and platforms are reshaping politics and public engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Cammaerts et

al., 2013). Media are at the center of the action. Legacy media in France and internationally, especially broadcast news outlets, have been accused of trivializing the movement by ignoring or misrepresenting it. In a recent *Counterpunch* article, political theorist and cultural critic Gabriel Rockhill (2016) described “a virtual blackout on what might well be one of the most significant stories of 2016” (para. 2). Critics have also called French coverage of the movement disparaging (Lemaire & Salingue, 2016).

Legacy media have a long record of downplaying dissent. Media researchers argue that the reason lies in the fact that professional journalists gain credibility by highlighting the points of view and the agendas of official and otherwise elite sources and that those views and agendas mostly run counter to the views and concerns of activists (Cammaerts et al., 2013; Gitlin, 1980). Mass media era activists won coverage mainly by creating spectacles that would draw the attention of news reporters and editors whose professional routines privileged spot coverage of events over sustained coverage of long-term issues (Gitlin, 1980). The downside to strategies that aimed to garner the attention of mainstream media—whether market- or government-supported media—is that the effort can distort a movement. The movement could become stagey, the message distorted for the cameras, authenticity diluted, and the mission steered this way or that way in the hands of reporters. In those ways, coverage ended up impeding rather than facilitating the flow of information the movement intended to deliver to the larger public (Gitlin, 1980).

Nuit Debout media activists leverage the networked media environment to do more cheaply and efficiently the work activists have always done: mobilize support, frame and counterframe messages, critique the system, and resist forces that seek to maintain the status quo. But they are also savvy about extending their messages to larger publics and creating their own media in ways that avoid the distortions endured by past movements. As Baki Youssoufou, Nuit Debout activist and founder of the progressive online coalition Active Generation, explained, the Nuit Debout media center was created to allow the movement to create a “proper narrative,” one that corrected the misinformation being generated by the mainstream media. “We built the media center, with friends from the M15 movement who came to help us, to make a proper narrative and to fact check and counter the lies being told by mainstream media,” he said (B. Youssoufou, personal communication, September 6, 2016). Two teams were deployed: one in the field taking photos and gathering information and the other publishing reports on social media. The strategy worked perhaps better than anyone anticipated. On March 31, 2016, *Le Monde* e-mailed and asked permission to use a Storify piece assembled by the movement’s media center. The piece was chock full of video, images, and tweets from activists. The Storify piece was the first piece on the Nuit Debout action published by *Le Monde*. As Avilés put it, this marked a significant moment in the movement. “We managed to hack the traditional press with narratives we produced,” she said, meaning that they were able to disrupt the traditional tendency of the press to downplay or misrepresent protest movements (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

### **Affective Publics**

Media power is fueled by the power to represent events, people, and movements. It is also fueled by the ways it can shape political and social relations. Papacharissi (2015) writes about how networked publics “feel their way in” to news stories—through tweets, videos, status updates, Facebook likes, and so

on—and that such activity helps shape the story narratives. Indeed, under the right conditions, social media activity works to strengthen (Leung & Lee, 2014) “counter public spheres,” or mediated spaces where nonmainstream and oppositional political views are expressed and win support (Dahlgren, 2005; Fraser, 1992). The process of connecting through online platforms can create spaces where political engagement, as well as opportunities for identification and solidarity, occurs that in turn drives collective resistance (Ardizzoni, 2017; Treré, 2012). Media anthropologist Jeffrey Juris (2012) sees social media as contributing to an emerging “logic of aggregation” that navigates the viral flow of networked information, bringing people together in physical space who may espouse diverse views and concerns.

Nuit Debout media activists also have tapped into the notion of affective publics by taking stock of the French public mood. In particular, they took stock of the emotional landscape left in the wake of the terrorist attacks that rocked Paris and the French population just five months earlier and the international UN climate summit hosted by the city on the heels of the attacks. According to Avilés,

Our strategy was informed by emotional analysis. People in France are fearful and in shock after the terror attacks and then the tension surrounding COP21. Other movements within France are trying to build on that fear. We were trying to bring people out and share with each other. (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Nuit Debout tailored the movement around the idea that the first step was to “bring people out to meet each other and to help them find their way” (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

The strategy of inclusion represented a departure from the approach taken by the old guard French political left, which Nuit Debout activists described as reluctant to use digital tools in part because they feared ceding message control. “It’s like two different generations facing off,” said Avilés, adding that the traditional left prefers to create movement followers rather than movement participants. “You can see this in the words they use, calling people who join up with them ‘bénévole,’ meaning volunteer” (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 9, 2016). Opinions also differ on what the protests are about. Youssoufou said that, unlike the older generation of activists, he does not believe the identity of the movement is accurately defined as anticapitalist. “That’s ‘68 language,” he said. “I don’t understand or give a fuck about all of that” (B. Youssoufou, personal communication, November 15, 2016). People at the center of the Nuit Debout movement maintain that the struggle its members are waging is more about a mindset than any one enemy. “What we have in common is that we all have problems in our various countries, and we have the choice to leave it or to fight it,” Avilés said. “Both action and inaction is a sort of participation, because if you are not taking action you are complicit in the problem” (E. Avilés, personal communication, September 6, 2016).

### **Prototyping Change**

The Nuit Debout movement uses Facebook and Twitter as broadcasting tools, but members also seek to use tools that reflect political, social, and ethical values that align with those of the movement. Building and adopting technological tools and platforms constitute a particularly powerful form of

engagement. It is not only practical but also a form of mental practice in which participants form the habit of imagining and prototyping positive change and new realities.

Nuit Debout activists communicate internally using open source secure tools and platforms. They use the encrypted messaging apps Signal and Telegram, for example, tools that work like text and e-mail combined, allowing users to send multimedia files and create group lists or channels. The movement's communication is more distributed and more secure than the communication of past movements (B. Youssoufou, personal communication, September 6, 2016). Avilés (personal communication, September 6, 2016) explains, "When Telegram was introduced, it sentenced email to death. It shattered the way things were being communicated . . . the control and endless blah blah of email. Communication became liquid, out of control, liberated and spread to the people."

The activists using the Telegram app made "developer groups" to work on new tools and a "terrain group" to send back video, image, and text reports from the city streets. Telegram also allowed users to set expiration times on communications, after which they were lost to the ether and irretrievable. For more long-form deliberative communication, the activists used the free software Loomio, an online tool for group decision making developed by Occupy activists. These tools are influencing political action, and they are being shaped by the values of the people who make and use them. The activists may be most influential for so intimately tying the work of developing and refining media tools to the work of social protest.

A September 2016 communication training workshop run by those involved in Nuit Debout and M15 media centers offered workshops on what they described as "social transformation, political impact strategies and the development of a distributed mobilization culture and networks" (Strategie et Communication 2.0, 2016, para. 1). Workshops included practical trainings on how to use various live-streaming platforms such as Bambuser and Periscope, how to ensure network privacy and security, and how to increase search engine optimization. There were also sessions devoted to more nuanced elements of communicating the movement, some of which resembled traditional strategic communication strategies. Topics included the importance of tone, the use of humor, and how to connect with "granny culture" (those least likely to understand or have contact with the movement). Some of the topics were specifically tailored to activist participants. One of those topics was the importance of embracing the hacktivist ethos in movement collaboration.

### **Return to the Technopolitical**

Indeed, the ethos that propels hacker culture has threaded through the interconnected global series of protest movements that have unfolded since 2010 and that are reshaping how publics engage and communicate (Russell, 2016). The case of Nuit Debout illustrates the ways commercial and open source platforms are being used in France and around the world to communicate activist views and to envision and experiment with alternative technosocial arrangements. It also points to the ways technopolitical action is being tailored to local contexts.

A quality that runs through technopolitical action is the existence of a community of practice, people who collaboratively problem solve by exchanging information, expertise and assets, and documentation (Wenger, 1999). These media makers and technology developers are working to create political movements that are distributed, collective, and inclusive, and to reshape the material politics of media. "We draw on hacker ethics—a commitment to a particular code of conduct, work dynamic, open source tools, and making the world better," said Avilés. "All of that has seeped into the movement (Avilés, personal communication, September 6, 2016)." This sort of media use and development is what Lievrouw (2011) calls "alternative computing" (p. 118) which she argues is characterized by distrust of centralized authority, mainstream social conventions, and privilege; mostly small scale, but with sometimes far-reaching implications, and aimed at reconfiguring infrastructure and tools. Activists engaged in alternative computing today are finding efficient and cost-effective ways to organize, mobilize, and influence how their movement and issues are represented. But it is also through alternative computing, driven by a hacktivist sensibility, that activists are working to imagine a more democratized media landscape, an increasingly central component of political actions today. As Hands (2011) puts it, "By putting technology into the hands of the people, technocapitalism is unwillingly opening itself up to a new cycle of democratization and social, economic and political flux" (p. 47). Technopolitical activism has brought new emphasis to challenging media representations and structures. Nuit Debout activists demonstrate how this is done through global networks and practice while still attending to local realities.

Each site of recent social unrest has unfolded in unique geopolitical circumstances. Some places such as Tunisia and Egypt fought to overthrow authoritarian regimes (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011), others such as the Spanish M15 and the U.S. Occupy Movement fought against corporate and political corruption and graft within democratic states (Castañeda, 2012).

France is unique in the dominance of relatively left-leaning politics and prominence of protest culture. The country has a long history of youth protest, most influentially manifest in the May 1968 action, and continuing through to more recent rallies against proposed changes to work pensions. Yet, Nuit Debout is viewed as a break with the old left (Kouvelakis, 2016). The movement has expanded to address grievances beyond labor laws, including the declared states of emergency and security crackdowns that have been commonplace since the 2015 terrorist attacks, and the movement has done so by reaching out to segments of the population not typically drawn to the streets to protest.

"What is happening in France right now with Nuit Debout is very important because it expresses the *ras-le-bol* (fed-upness) of French people as far as political representation is concerned" (Holmes, 2016, para. 5), said an activist quoted in *The Guardian*. "Basically, it's all the people who have leftwing sympathies but who feel betrayed by leftwing mainstream political parties" (Holmes, 2016, para. 5). Avilés said that the Nuit Debout French protesters have been luckier than their counterparts in Tunisia, Greece, and Spain. "We are not yet completely in the shit," she said (personal communication, September 6, 2016), and for that reason they seem unprepared to fully challenge the old systems head on. They are warming up, she said. But in the warm-up, they seem to be developing powerful communication strategies and building international alliances that will alter the face of resistance in France for years to come.

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