

Participation and Media: Comparative Analysis of Anti-Austerity in the Eurozone Crisis

Introduction

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The year 2008 marked the beginning of a global financial crisis that severely affected how social, political, and media spheres are perceived by citizens. Its impact reached longer than its negative economic cycle, posing vital questions about power elites and social movements for social sciences. This Special Section aims to provide a better understanding about how the civil society of 5 Southern European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain) channeled their discontent toward their political authorities and the austerity economic decisions taken to solve the crisis. A comparative approach is completed among 6 articles tackling these critical times from different perspectives and applying several research methods to observe how collective action was organized in the streets and in mediated environments. The final picture confronts us with several unsolved challenges for representative democracies, as the growing distance between political leadership and a civil society that has developed new ways to express their demands online. Some lessons are applicable to new critical scenarios where risk, uncertainty, and threats to democratic and media systems become increasingly likely to emerge.

Keywords: media participation, social protests, anti-austerity, European Union, financial crisis

The global financial crisis of 2008, together with the debt crisis of 2010, was a serious blow to Europe, the European Union (EU), and in particular to several countries in its southern rim. Compounding the difficulties for these countries was the enactment of neoliberal austerity policies by the EU, aiming to

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attain economic stability. These policies, which involved massive cuts to the public sector, engendered much social devastation and political turbulence. The national governments of Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece especially came to be seen by many of their respective citizens as callous agents of the EU, carrying out orders from Brussels. Many citizens felt that their governments had become unresponsive to public demands, that they had become what we might call “civically deaf.”

This, in turn, added a further dimension to the crisis, a perceived deepened democratic deficit, or indeed, a profound lack of legitimacy of the respective national governments, and of key institutions of the EU—the European Council, the European Central Bank (ECB), and the European Commission. Thus, two sets of protests, anti-austerity and prodemocracy, often cojoined, were set in motion (Forminaya, 2017). There was considerable variation among these countries in the response to this dual crisis, but, generally, we can say that autonomous actors and established political organizations on the left began to mobilize protests—with varying intensity and efficacy—against the austerity policies and for enhanced democracy. And in all cases, social media played a key role in providing an essential infrastructure, as legacy media were often considered as part of the problem rather than as actors capable of providing solutions.

Participation, Power, and the Political

On the one hand, we can situate these protests as a part of larger global movements—for example, for economic justice—and on the other hand, these mobilizations largely had a national character (Papaioannou & Gupta, 2018). There have no doubt been links among them, and certainly international journalism outlets and researchers provided further diffusion, but these protest movements operated largely within their respective national boundaries, with little overt pan-EU coordination. Within each country, the response focused on generating and mobilizing shared interpretative frameworks of meaning, which were anchored in collective identities as “ordinary citizens.” Moreover, protest generally targeted specific issues that manifested the negative impact of austerity and/or democratic deficits at the national level, whereas claims pointing out to European solidarity and collective action were scarce and secondary.

Response among the protest movements demonstrated various strategies and tactics. Further, protest using social media many times also involved interfaces with the journalism of the dominant media. As we shall see in the following articles, the dominant media (and the political elites) varied in their own response to austerity policies and to the protest movements themselves. Thus, the relationship between protesters via their social media and political elites with their dominant media was often multifaceted and protean, especially as political circumstances evolved. The degree of success among these movements of course varied as well, and so did the results of the several political elections conducted after this turbulent period, with different crystallization processes between social movements and representative political institutions.

To engage in protest movements is a form of participation, involvement in the dynamics of democracy beyond the formal parliamentary procedures of voting. Such movements do not spring forward, fully formed, from nowhere. They have their origins in specific circumstances and evolve in the interplay between particular structures and agency—on both the individual and group level. There is usually a “prehistory” to the formation of political and of subjective dispositions that lead to participation—before its emergence in the public eye. For example, as Zamponi and Fernández-González (2017) show, in the case

of the anti-austerity movements in Southern Europe, the protests were preceded by a long evolution of the critique of capitalism in its current neoliberal form. This was especially prevalent within academic circles. This emerging counterhegemonic discourse could then be readily situated within the context of the austerity crisis, with students and others via the movement striving to reach broader publics. Thus, behind the headlines and before the immediate crises, there had been an array of critical groups and networks, in various settings, which helped facilitate participation.

From a broader horizon, we can say that all forms of political participation have some sorts of sociocultural prerequisites that expedite such involvement. The concept of participation is important, yet, because it derives from several currents in the social sciences, its meaning remains somewhat fluid (see Carpentier, 2011, for an extensive treatment). For our purposes, briefly, we simply assert the importance of treating “participation” and “politics” broadly: to acknowledge the ever-present potential for collective antagonisms and conflicts of interest in all social relations and settings (see Mouffe, 2013). This takes us beyond the confines of institutionalized politics and thereby incorporates the terrain of protest movements. What is essential here is the character of participation: It always has to do, in some way, and however remote (or mediated), with a confrontation with power relations. Moreover, power arrangements refer not only to such obvious manifestations as the military and police or the corporate sector but also to cultural and discursive forms (i.e., control or influence over symbolic environments). This angle becomes of course highly relevant in regard to the impact of social media on broader publics. Further—and very importantly—the notion of power involves both “power to” (enabling) as well as “power over,” in the form of coercion, constraint, or influence. Thus, participation is in itself an expression of some degree of enabled power.

The Social Media Environment

The use of the Internet for political purposes emerged almost simultaneously with its spread as a mass phenomenon in the Western world in the mid-1990s, and continued with Web 2.0 and the emergence of social media, reaching a global and ubiquitous presence in our daily lives and political spheres. Though there were voices of warning and skepticism, overall, analysts and observers mostly lauded the Net as an opportunity for enhancing what was by then seen by many as a problematic reality for democracies—namely, inadequate participation among citizens. Moreover, this optimism included participation in protest actions and social movements, and researchers could see new forms of practices and political identities emerging (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, is a key text; see also Robertson, 2018; Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson, & Lilleker, 2013, for useful overviews).

At the same time, another analytic trajectory began to manifest itself, characterized by skepticism and even alarm over how the online environment was developing. Many authors today warn—from various positions—about the nature of the online environment and the dangers it can hold for democracy (Bartlett, 2018; Morozov, 2011; Nagle, 2017; Valenzuela, Halpern, Katz, & Miranda, 2019). Various authors underscore that the dark side of social media derive from their political economy (Zuboff, 2019), their technical sociologies (Webb, 2019), from the way in which antidemocratic actors use these media for baleful purposes such as propaganda, lies, trolling, and harassment (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2019) and/or from the way these media intersect with the growing problematics of establishing consensus around what is taken as truth (Dahlgren, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2019).

Yet, despite these obstacles and dangers, participation via social media continues to grow, and these media continue to be used for civic, democratic purposes. In the U.S., researchers found that about half of Americans engaged in some kind of political or civic activity via social media last year (Anderson, Toor, & Smith, 2018). And it seems that these media are contributing to alter the way a new generation of citizens views and engages in politics (Novak, 2016; Poindexter, 2018); we witness robust participation in protest movements via social media in many contexts around the world. Contemporary research examines the potential and limitations of social media-based protest in nuanced ways, highlighting the specific contingencies that shape protest in particular cases (Gerbaudo, 2019; Mortensen, Neumayer, & Poell, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). The fast spread and popularity of social media has also forced legacy media industries to adapt their products and practices, exploring new roles and strategies in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) where political decisions are deeply mediated in a public, fluctuating, participated, and socially constructed environment (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

**Participation and Media:
Comparative Analysis of Anti-Austerity Protests in the Eurozone Crisis**

The articles we have collected for this Special Section on Participation and Media: Comparative Analysis of Anti-Austerity Protests in the Eurozone Crisis offer a compelling array of such research. The contributions analyze citizen participation in social change (or the lack thereof) and contemporary media politics of dissent in the context of anti-austerity protests in the Eurozone crisis since 2008. This Special Section includes empirical studies of media construction of citizen protests in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, providing comparative examination of social protest development across media, temporal-spatial contexts and modes of political mobilization. Individually and collectively, these articles investigate the circumstances under which news media representation of protests potentially fosters or impedes citizen articulation of advocacy; they also discuss mobilization identities and strategies, in particular through online and social media. Such comparative and contextualized analysis of collective action and contentious politics is of particular significance amid recent political developments in Europe and the dominance of the neoliberal financial-political elite in national and European political spheres. Thus, this collection aims to contribute to current global debate about the complex relationship among media, citizen participation, and democracy.

As mentioned above, the Eurozone crisis actually consists of a series of interrelated economic and political crises that have generated public discontent and exacerbated conflicts and divisiveness within the EU, with the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU being the most prominent. During these crises, the scope and scale of anti-austerity protests in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain and other EU member state countries against the neoliberal rationale and its austerity-based policies have varied. Moreover, their contentious opposition to hegemonic doctrine on the crisis have produced opportunities for them to be portrayed and interpreted in multiple ways—in news and social media, nationally, and across Europe. Because the institutional politics and social demands that animate dissent have now become more extensively mediated and complex than heretofore (Cottle, 2008), understanding how the media represent them and how they bear on public opinion formation and policymaking is of critical importance. It is therefore necessary to examine the values, strategies, and mechanisms adopted by news and social media in constructing anti-austerity protests and European conflicts in the Eurozone crisis.

This Special Section undertakes such a timely exploration by addressing the following key questions:

- How are forms of economic, political, and social conflict constructed in news and social media within and across member state countries that have experienced sovereign debt issues?
- What are the (enduring and emerging) dominant news values embedded in news media coverage of citizen protests?
- How do social media relate to protest mobilization in different settings with varying outcomes?
- How does the changing state of media influence forms and spaces of citizen participation in the neoliberal and pluralistic contexts of the Eurozone crisis?

Past research suggests that news media have been significant for protestors to obtain social inclusion, mobilize political support, and sustain the scope of conflict (McCarthy, McPhail, & Smith, 1996). Contemporary research tells us that this is still the case (Papaioannou, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Alternatively, social media offer activists potentially useful and empowering platforms to construct grievances and solidarity. Articulation of these issues influences the extent to which agency and contention resonate within targets of protest mobilization and the wider society (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Khondker, 2011). As such, the centrality of the role of media in contentious politics today needs to be explored while taking into account the potential uses of digital communication technologies for voice, networking, and information dissemination (Dahlgren, 2013). The lenses provided by news and social media within and across EU member states affect public understanding of the economic and political situations in which anti-austerity protests take place. Through analysis of both mainstream news media and grassroots social media practices in various protests within selected social, political, and cultural environments, this project offers a current understanding of the conflicting reality that is developing in the fractured, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory (networked) political spheres within the EU.

While examining these national cases of citizen protests for discursive recognition and potential hegemony, spatial-temporal context is also considered; this connects to the critical views of the broader systemic narrative of austerity and neoliberalism as a global trend defining political, economic, and social affairs. Anti-austerity protests occur within evolving European conflicts in their interrelated yet distinctive contexts that both constitute and influence their dynamics and consequences (Papaioannou & Gupta, 2018). Some of these developments include the implementation of increased austerity measures, a climate of political instability that has led to multiple elections, the change of government, the emergence of radical parties as significant political actors, or the rise of right-wing parties advocating anti-EU positions and/or promoting nationalistic discourse.

Also, this section attempts to explore media and protest strategies, narratives, and meanings that occur in different protests with varying success. This approach also strives to link media constructions of various protests within a historical, geopolitical perspective to determine how national differences fit within wider network of media and protest politics (Papaioannou, 2018). Such considerations would yield insights on the variables and dynamics now at work in media constructions of collective action and narratives of

(anti)austerity and neoliberal democracy, contributing to more analytical, nuanced understanding of the role of media, political participation, and dissent.

Finally, research suggests that media coverage of the crisis and public response is shaped by opinions of domestic and international elites, leading news providers, and variations in national media systems, as well as by journalistic and political cultures and audience expectations (Picard, 2015). Such differences would be expected to produce discrepancies in information and analysis of citizen protests across EU member states, particularly among those that have experienced severe liquidity crises or lingering crises. Thus, a comparative approach will reveal determinants of the social construction of anti-austerity protests in national discourses and whether and how those practices differ, allowing reconceptualization of certain normative concepts in communication and participation theory.

Content of This Special Section

This Special Section is composed of six articles, focused on the analysis of relevant aspects of media and participation in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain.

The first article, by Camilo Cristancho, Eva Anduiza, Mariluz Congosto, and Silvia Majó-Vázquez, "Contentious Responses to the Crises in Spain: Emphasis Frames and Public Support of Protest on Twitter and the Press," analyzes how different frames adopted by news organizations and social media affected public support for protests against austerity measures in Spain. The authors identified frames using a supervised approach and two sets of data. The first data set consisted of 2 million tweets gathered during the major demonstrations of the Indignados movement between 2011 and 2013. The second data set included protest-related content published by four major Spanish newspapers during those demonstrations. The results indicated that public support for anti-austerity protests was conditioned by understandings of the crisis. Frames addressing the political system were negatively correlated with support for protests against austerity measures compared with those frames describing the crisis as an economic issue. Additionally, challenging and controversial frames generated lower acceptance of the protests among the population than those that primed social problems.

Research suggests that journalistic norms and values that undergird news production as a process of media hegemony influence representation of dissent, manifesting in selection and description biases in coverage of protests. Within the broader discussion of the role of the media in representing austerity-based policies in the Eurozone crisis, the second article, by Tao Papaioannou, "Dominant and Emerging News Frames in Protest Coverage: The 2013 Cypriot Anti-Austerity Protests in National Media," seeks to identify the mechanisms that shape news framing of anti-austerity protests by examining the portrayals of the 2013 Cypriot protests by two national newspapers and a public television channel. The results revealed a sparing emphasis on the law and (dis)order frame, but validations of national sovereignty in all media coverage. Further, national TV demonstrated a tendency to privilege official sources and situate the protests within the discourse of responsible politics and blaming European economic governance. Alternatively, newspapers deployed frames legitimating protestors' grievances, criticizing international and national political actors, but also accentuating the protestors as hopeless victims rather than as citizens demanding institutional accountability. In view of the media's orientation to the destabilizing elite consensus embedded in the

Cyprus–EU bail in negotiations and their representations of relevant social criticism, this article examines the conditions under which news media relax some conventions of reporting protests.

The third article, from Inês Amaral, explores how the Portuguese social movements organized their mobilization, both on the streets with a series of public demonstrations conducted between 2011 and 2013, and in the digital landscape, to achieve their demands. Based on a quantitative and qualitative online content analysis of digital editions of two daily newspapers and the Facebook pages of two social movements, "Citizens Beyond Troika: Media and Anti-Austerity Protests in Portugal," complete an in-depth exploration of an entire cycle of protests. As an outcome of a hybrid and mediated interaction process, findings prove that social networking sites, as Facebook, played an important role as a self-mediation technology in promoting engagement and mutual recognition among protesters. These sites were also a basic element to understand the digital media coverage, as news media companies were able to reframe the social debate and foster some of the demands expressed by demonstrators, establishing significant and valuable connections between their claims and the social rights acquired in the Portuguese process of transition to democracy conducted in 1974.

In 2010, as part of the Troika intervention into Ireland, the imposition of metered domestic water charges and the creation of a centralized water company was agreed on. Domestic water in Ireland heretofore was paid for from general taxation and was universally available to those on the national system. The imposition of water charges met with spontaneous militant action at the local level, including the blockading of districts to prevent meter installation and mass protests involving hundreds of thousands. Media coverage of the movement was both negative and hyperbolic. The community-based campaigns were quickly dubbed "violent" and were accused of being "infiltrated" by "dissidents" (terrorists) and other "sinister" elements, and minor acts of disobedience such as pickets and sit down protests were recast as "violent." In response, water activists used social media networks, mainly Facebook, to disseminate opposition, bypassing the established media, and also, often via "secret" Facebook groups, to organize direct actions such as street blockades and protests. The theoretical argument underpinning the fourth article, by Henry Silke, Eugenia Siapera, and Maria Rieder, "Social Media as Scaffold: The Use of Social Media Groups in the Irish Water Movement," is two-pronged: It makes a case for an increasingly widening gap between the media and the public, where media begin to operate as political actors themselves rather than as mediators or watchdogs. Secondly, the article explores the use of social media by activists both to disseminate subaltern views and as a scaffold for political action. The article relies on a triangulated methodology wherein the authors conducted qualitative interviews with activists in four cities, a content analysis of mainstream media coverage (November 2014–February 2015), and a content analysis of the three most popular Facebook pages of the Right to Water groups.

The fifth article, "Media and Twitter Agendas for Social Mobilizations: The Case of the Protests in Defense of the Public Healthcare System in Spain," by Pere Masip, Carlos Ruiz-Caballero, Jaume Suau, and David Puertas-Graell, analyzes the citizen protests in defense of the public health system and against the proposal of merging two hospitals in the city of Granada. The merger was scarcely covered by the mainstream media, until a physician denounced the hospital system reform in a Facebook video that soon became viral. From that moment, a social online mobilization began facilitating greater involvement of citizens and civic organizations, reaching traditional political actions. Using a multimethod approach, based

on content analysis, interviews, and social network analysis, this case illustrates the mobilizing capacity of social media and the ability of social media to set the social agenda and influence the mainstream media. Finally, the analysis also explains how new online social leaders become microcelebrities with high mobilizing capacities.

To conclude, in the sixth article, "News Media Framing of the Anti-Austerity and Pro-Europe Movement During the 2015 Greek Bailout Referendum," Fani Kontouri and Andreas Kollias discuss how Greek news media Twitter accounts framed grassroots protest/support activities of the anti-austerity and the pro-"Europe" camp, their protagonists, in the days before and after the July 2015 bailout referendum. The Greek referendum offers a special case to study the protest paradigm in complex, hybrid, and polarized protest arenas, where two opposing protest camps mobilize massively to achieve their political aims. They analyzed 1,999 media tweets with references to grassroots protest/support activities and public opinion in relation to the referendum using content analysis processes and framing devices. The analysis shows that media tweets indexed both protest camp's framing strategies while they relied on source hierarchy to report on their activities. Results show significant differences in framing depending on the protest cycle, challenging the protest paradigm. However, media emphasis on high-profile information sources upholds the dominant feature of this paradigm.

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