

INTRODUCTION

#EDUCATION/RESISTANCE: ACTIVIST MEDIA IN STRUGGLES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Radio Plantón (Oaxaca teachers strike, Mexico)¹.

CUTV (Quebec student strikes, Canada)².

Don't Cut Off our Tongues (Yolngu peoples, Australia)³.

#TellPearson (transnational campaign)⁴.

Whether print, oral, visual or, digital, information and communication technologies have always been a part of social mobilizations (Downing, 2010). Historically, activist media practices have played a role in a range of internal and external communications functions. The more visible external functions include public protest, popular education, fundraising and monitoring the public obligations of the state and other actors. Internal communications are needed to build and sustain collective identity and shared vision as well as for decision-making, coordination and networking. However, activist education media remains an under-researched area in both education and social movement studies (Thapliyal, 2018).

A more extensive academic literature can be found on the significant influence of corporate media on education politics and policymaking (see e.g. Baroutsis, Riddle, Thomson, 2018). While most of this scholarship is situated in wealthy Anglophone countries such as the USA, UK and Australia, emerging scholarship documents similar trends in other countries such as China (Suspitsyna, 2014), India (Sarangapani & Vidya, 2011),

1 Denham (2008).

2 Thorburn (2013).

3 McCallum, Waller & Meadows (2012).

4 Hogan (2018).

Japan (Takayama, 2008), Portugal (Viseu & Carvalho, 2018) and Sweden (Reimers, 2014). Critical, feminist, and cultural studies researchers have highlighted the deep and complex relationships between the media, the state, and the market, which has distorted and silenced the demands of subaltern groups and smoothed the passage of deeply anti-people and anti-public social policies, including public education (Giroux, 2011). This literature has also deepened our understandings of neoliberalism as a form of 'public pedagogy' which operates to construct and reproduce the citizen-as-consumer -- not just through schools but through all state apparatus and public institutions including diverse forms of news and entertainment media (Giroux, 2011). In comparison, we know far less about how education activists have used media to counter the cultural, economic and political discourse that normalise neoliberal education reform. However, we do know that activist media practice – as with any other form of social practice – is contested terrain. It involves cultural work – the work of knowledge production and exchange and is intrinsically concerned with the legitimization or delegitimation of values and worldviews (de Sousa Santos, Nunes, & Meneses, 2007).

The use of information and communications technologies in struggles for social change, however emancipatory in intent, always contains the possibility to reproduce domination and create new forms of inequality (Rodriguez, Ferron & Shamas, 2014). In fact, as we have learned from the scholarship on cyber-, networked and internet-based activism, new digital networked technologies cannot be automatically conflated with wider participation and deeper democratic deliberation (Couldry, 2010; Juris, 2012). Hence, the proliferation of terms such as hashtag activism, clicktivism and slacktivism in relation to the use of social networking media to respond to contemporary social problems.

On Twitter, the hashtag symbol is used as a label to find and contribute to discussion on a specific topic (e.g. #postcolonial, #Trump and so forth). It is created by adding the # symbol in front of the word, or in front of a phrase shown without spaces (#educationresistance). Internet-based activists across the political spectrum have used hashtags to frame slogans to amplify silenced voices, raise awareness and build online communities across physical barriers of time and space around

issues of inequality and social justice (well-known progressive examples include #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, #Indignados, and #MeToo). Twitter is also now a part of education policy discourse with hashtags such as #NAPLAN and #IGiveaGonski (Australia), #CommonCore, #EvaluateThat and #ParentTrigger (USA) and #TellPearson (transnational). Twitter has provided a powerful platform for collective struggles for recognition – for excluded and misrepresented social groups to build transnational communities which resist and contest dominant political and media discourse and even set mainstream media news agendas. It has also provided a free and virtually unaccountable platform for the propagation of populist and fascist discourse. Emerging research suggests that the discourse produced in these virtual spaces tends to contribute to polarization rather than democratic deliberation (see analyses of #BlackLivesMatter by Carney, 2016, and #TeachforAmerica by Brewer & Wallis, 2015).

Undoubtedly, the emergence of the Internet has contributed to a reconfiguring of politics and culture, in particular a refocusing of politics on everyday life (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). In particular, Web 2.0 networked technologies have enabled new spaces for dissent and participation by particular demographic groups in particular contexts e.g. those who are already interested in politics and have the requisite media skills and resources. However, they are not without structural constraints produced by the digital divide, state surveillance, and the unrelenting capitalist drive towards commodification and consumerism through digital platforms. The use of the hashtag (#) in the title of this Special Issue simultaneously acknowledges and problematizes the incorporation of new media into the strategic repertoires of education activists.

Insurgent media

This Special Issue of *Postcolonial Directions in Education* highlights research and writing on the role of insurgent media in defending and expanding public education. It brings together interdisciplinary and comparative scholarship on a diverse range of media practice and technologies utilised by education activists.

Contributors to this issue have explored the following questions:

- What do education activists actually do with different kinds of media or information and communication technologies?
- How does activist media practice represent and/or ‘reframe’ current and historical issues in public education? and
- How do education activists navigate in hegemonic media and policy spaces and practices constituted by dominant financial and political powers?

The Alto al Simce (Stop Standardised Testing) campaign, Chile

Public education policy is currently dominated by economic, technical, and managerial rationalities (Apple, 2006) which emphasize competition, choice, and economic efficiency. These rationalities justify and enable different kinds of educational privatization. In this context, Fine, Ayaala and Zaal (2012) identify three characteristics of standardized testing that further educational privatization. First, the outsourcing of testing to commercial providers facilitates the explicit outflow of public dollars to for-profit corporations, such as Pearson Education, that design and administer tests for curricula in many countries. Next, local, state and global educational policymaking is increasingly influenced by policy advisors who work for market-oriented philanthropies and corporations. Last but not least, they argue that the use of testing technologies has contributed to the systematic and structural realignment of educational opportunities “to bolster schools for children of the elites and a few deserving ‘Others’” (p.685) at the cost of schools which predominantly serve poor and working-class children.

The article by Loreto Montero, Cristian Cabalin, and Lionel Brossi documents a longrunning campaign in Chile to end highstakes standardised testing called *Alto al Simce*. The campaign was supported by a diverse coalition of education activists who deployed a range of media to challenge dominant discourse on standardised testing. Drawing on the scholarship about cyberactivism, the authors show how the campaign connected and amplified voices of dissent to share their

stories – particularly those directly affected by the negative consequences of testing. Through a creative and collaborative use of different media technologies, the campaign spoke through multiple voices – namely traditional experts such as university academics as well as school students, parents and teachers – to diverse audiences including the news media, policymakers and the public. Activists collaborated to produce digital as well as virtual spaces for collective protest and resistance.

Indigenous Education Media, Australia

The relationship between media and indigenous social movements has been extensively documented by scholars of Indigenous media (Carlson and Dreher, 2018; Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner, 2012; Wortham, 2013). However, collective struggles for indigenous issues in the domain of public education remain underdocumented particularly in Australia (Petray, 2011; Waller, 2012)

In this Special Issue, Lisa Waller, Kerry McCallum, and Scott Gorringer map the Indigenous media landscape in Australia in relation to highly mediatized policy debates about how to improve education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples. The authors use an Indigenous strengths-based educational and research methods framework called Engoori to discuss how Indigenous media outlets resist and replace deficit discourse, specifically about school attendance and truancy, in the corporate news media,. They articulate the role of diverse media including community radio, television, digital and print news in co-constituting and sustaining a rich, alternative discourse on ATSI education. This discourse draws on reclaimed histories and knowledges to support the construction of positive identities, community and belonging for ATSI students, parents, teachers and communities.

Activist documentary films

A significant component of the intellectual work that occurs in social movements is concerned with combatting the historical amnesia and organized forgetting facilitated by hegemonic cultural institutions including education and the media (Choudry, 2015). Revealing and promoting histories from below is intrinsic to the construction and legitimation of oppositional identities and the resulting forms of collective action, as we see in the struggles of women, youth, cultural minorities, peasants, people with disabilities and Indigenous peoples.

In this Special Issue, Nisha Thapliyal compares two documentaries made by education activists in the USA and India. Both films seek to counter dominant, a-historical media representations of public education as a system in crisis and relatedly, market-influenced school reforms. In both countries, wealthy market reformers have harnessed the power of media – particularly the genre of documentary film – to influence political and public discourse about educational reform (Nambissan & Ball, 2010; Scott, 2013). Made by grassroots activists working on shoestring budgets, the two films seek to counter the rhetoric of educational privatization in situated ways. The U.S. film *An Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* draws on the voices of students, parents and teachers to document decades of education inequalities and exclusions reproduced by the market-driven reform of charter schools. The Indian film *We shall Fight, We shall Win* resists privatization through revealing and voicing a narrative of a two centuries long historical struggle for public education. Both films interrogate the capacity of educational privatization to ensure promote equity and diversity in education. In doing so, they highlight how struggles for public education are intrinsically connected to historical struggles for economic, cultural and political justice.

Teachers Union Media

In the last decade, public school teachers have claimed the Internet as a space in which to voice their individual and collective resistance to market-informed, punitive performance- and accountability-based reforms to their working conditions (Shiller, 2015). These voices speak back to overwhelmingly negative representations of public school teachers in mainstream media over the last two decades (most recently see e.g. Dumas, 2013; Baroutsis, 2017). Social networking media has played a significant role in grassroots initiatives to resuscitate local (Brickner 2016; Meiners and Quinn, 2016; Weiner, 2013) and transnational social justice unionism (Hogan, 2016).

This Special Issue provides two contemporary accounts, by Leon Salter and Cameron Malcher respectively, of media practices situated in teachers' unions in New Zealand and Australia respectively. Leon Salter's article analyses recent campaigns produced by the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) to show how activist media can contribute to the articulation of a shared ethical culture and vision for the defense

of public education. As previously discussed, mainstream media plays a key role in the reproduction and legitimization of a global market-oriented reform movement. NZEI set out to counter dominant discourse centered on competition and accountability with values of collaboration, social justice, democracy and professionalism. Salter argues that this kind of historically situated education activism can democratically ground a Leftist populist movement anchored on an ethics of care and community.

Cameron Malcher reports on the strengths and limitations of digital and Internet-based communications in current education campaigns of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. This chronological account traces how the development of union communications accompanied shifts in the ways in which the union engaged with a changing membership and policy and political environment.

This Special Issue concludes with reports. There is a conference report from Doris Gödl which connects with a number of themes explored in the research articles including colonial cinema as a key site of meaning-making and identity production for citizen and nation. Gödl's report also highlights how the transgressive capacity of media is always shaped and circumscribed by the socio-historical locations and contexts in which this media is produced. There is also a report on a summer school penned by Giulia Montefiore. It deals with power/knowledge from a global south perspective.

Possibilities and challenges

The advent of Web 2.0 technologies has certainly augmented the media power of media savvy activists. In particular, social networking media has facilitated multi-directional communication at low cost and high speed. The scholarly literature has also highlighted the affordances of digital and Internet-based media to sustain and increase the volume and visibility of counterpublics. This interdisciplinary Special Issue provides insights into the complex and situated nature of activist communication processes particularly as they relate to education.

The activists featured in this issue have used old and new technologies to disseminate movement frames independent

of mainstream media, challenge specific ideological enemies, preserve movement artefacts, as well as recruit, network, organise and coordinate virtual protest and direct actions (Cammaerts, 2015). At the same time, activists rarely rely on a single form of communications media. Furthermore, new technologies have not supplanted traditional media practices involving print, radio, television or traditional modes of organising and mobilisation.

These complex and situated accounts of activist media practice caution against simplistic conflation between activist media and social action. They underline the importance of contextualized analyses of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms of ‘media power’.

First, each of the contributions in this Special Issue highlight the challenges of producing and disseminating activist media in a hostile mediascape where market and business perspectives are amplified at the expense of progressive voices and grassroots activists. The authors show that mediatisation, as conceptualized by Shaun Rawolle (2010), can be seen in the influence of media on education policymaking processes (e.g. standardized testing in Chile); representations of policy issues (e.g. the crisis in public education in India and the USA); government policy priorities (e.g. market-oriented school reform in New Zealand); and, the “effects” of particular policies (e.g. truancy policies for ATSI students). Relatedly, the articles from Chile, Australia and New Zealand underline the congruence between dominant media institutions and activist narratives about public education.

Second, this scholarship reminds us of the influence of historical mobilisations for public education on current sites of struggle. The use of media by activists to reclaim histories ‘from below’ in order to sustain the struggles of the present is a defining characteristic of grassroots struggles as evident in the accounts from India and Australia. However, all four sites of activism explicitly acknowledge the legacy of historical mobilisations for public education ranging from anticolonial and antineocolonial movements in India and Australia respectively to the U.S. Civil Rights movement and contemporary Chilean student movement.

Third and relatedly, activist media practice is shaped sociohistorical locations as mediated by factors including education levels, race/ethnicity/indigeneity, class, gender, language (see e.g. Allen, Bailey, Carpentier et al., 2014; Korn & Kneese, 2015). These locations shape particular beliefs and decisions about the use of media in relation to decisions about how and when to engage the broader public, as well as hegemonic institutions such as the news media and state apparatus. In this Special Issue, only the Chilean campaign worked with the explicit goal of influencing news media in order to shift federal government policy on testing. The remaining articles focus on other functions of activist media such as the expression of dissent and alternatives to dominant education discourse.

This kind of complex and contextualized analysis explored by the contributors to this Special Issue reveals both the possibilities and limitations of activist media production in mobilizations for public education. It also underlines the need for further inquiry into the pedagogical processes that shape activist media. First, in this age of information warfare, who listens to whom? This question has been more elegantly posed in the scholarship on the politics of listening when the subaltern speaks (see e.g. O'Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher, 2009). Neither cyberspace nor cyberactivism are intrinsically egalitarian and democratic (e.g. as demonstrated by Paulo Gerbaudo's work on purportedly 'leaderless' movements in the Arab Spring).

Second and relatedly, Arturo Escobar (2014) cautions against the reproductive functions of unreflexive activist media practice, which does not engage with power dynamics, and the political economy of emerging technologies (Escobar, 2014). Very little is known about the extent to which education activist media enable more collaborative and nonhierarchical forms of being, in which people learn and act together within activist communities.

The struggle for public education is a struggle to reclaim and, in some instances, reconstruct a social imaginary where education is not for the privileged few and valuable knowledge is not reduced to a binary of productive or disposable (Bauman, 2003). It is hoped that the insurgent media documented in this Special Issue contribute further to our understanding of how we imagine, think about and enact a politics of resistance and transformation.

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