Political Dysmetropsia – Activist tactics in the (under)formatted world of social media

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In an age of social media, activists are met with an abundance of opportunities to engage in things near and far. An activist engaged in environmental causes, for instance, might be presented with a photo from his brother's community garden next to a plea from Greenpeace to support wildlife in the Arctic. Should the small but home grown salad be evaluated in relation to the precarious situation of distant polar bears? Or is the familiar relationship to the brother and his garden a reminder that there are limits to the range of issues we can care for? Such challenges can be referred to as 'political dysmetropsia', borrowing the name of a group of visual illusions, which distort one's sense of size or depth.

This paper presents a study of how activists handle political dysmetropsia in their social media practices. We draw on Thévenot's sociology of engagement to argue that engagement always raises questions about how the environment should be understood (Thévenot 2007, 2014). At the same time, we observe that social media give this challenge a specific shape. Social media-induced political dysmetropsia, we propose, is an urgent but overlooked challenge for contemporary social activism. Our contribution is to develop a conceptual framework for analyzing how activists handle this challenge.

Thévenot proposes three different regimes of engagement ranging from the most familiar to the most public. Each of these regimes come with their specific engaged reality and specific engaged good, which means that the theory captures a world where the same things can seem small or large, far and near, depending on how they are engaged and in what moral register. Thévenot talks not of 'frames', which are culturally mediated, but of materially and morally supported 'cognitive formats' which are bound to specific regimes of engagement. A central focus lies on the appropriate *formatting* of both the communicated object and its environment. This points towards an analysis of the role of technical infrastructures like social media in activist engagement.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012:745) take a step in this direction with their analysis of how political engagement is mutually constructed with communication technologies. The authors argue that social media allow for more personalized frames to coexist, changing earlier dynamics of social movement organizing where more rigid collective actions frames took center place (Benford and Snow 2000). We propose that the focus on *formatting* raises interesting questions about the conditions under which such personalized frames come about and play out. Instead of viewing them as "already internalized or personalized" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012:753), we analyse them as conditioned upon the environment of experience that a given communication infrastructure supports.

We take Facebook's news feed as a case that demonstrates that even when activity happens through fixed technical formats, users are also presented with a highly complex and politically under-formatted environment due to the platform's agnostic relation to content. Activists meet an abundance of opportunities to engage in things near and far, and big and small issues, all mixed up and treated similarly by the social media platform. Drawing on Thévenot, we can say that both familiar and public ways of communicating are present side by side and even folded into one another. Each has their own way of establishing relevance and means of taking part in common matters.

Based on observations and interviews with activist social media users, we identify four different tactics for handling political dysmetropsia on social media: *contextualizing*, *purifying*, *translating* and *compositing*. *Contextualizing* refers to the work of giving information and communication a context that clarifies the appropriate from of engagement. *Purifying* refers to the act of removing all complexity by imposing one dominate regime of action, exemplified by the politician profile where Facebook is turned into an official platform for public communication. *Translating* refers to converting things from one format to another, for example by publicly communicating embodied attachments through images – enacting what Thévenot refers to as a common-place. Finally, *compositing* is the tactic that most clearly takes advantage of the under-determined format and combines elements from different regimes. When a activist calls upon friends and loved ones to sign a petition against the exploitation of our planet s/he is playing on multiple registers and formatting engagement in a composite fashion.

References

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