

ROUTLEDGE NEW DEVELOPMENTS
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Activism on the Web

Everyday Struggles against Digital Capitalism

Veronica Barassi



Activism on the Web

Activism on the Web examines the everyday tensions that political activists face as they come to terms with the increasingly commercialized nature of web technologies and sheds light on an important, yet under-investigated dimension of the relationship between contemporary forms of social protest and internet technologies.

Drawing on anthropological and ethnographic research among three very different political groups in the UK, Italy, and Spain, the book argues that activists' everyday internet uses are largely defined by processes of negotiation with digital capitalism. These processes of negotiation are giving rise to a series of collective experiences defined by the tension between activists' democratic needs on one side and the cultural processes reinforced by digital capitalism on the other. In looking at the encounter between activist cultures and digital capitalism, the book focuses in particular on the tension created by self-centered communication processes and networked individualism, by corporate surveillance and data-mining, and by fast capitalism and the temporality of immediacy.

Activism on the Web suggests that if we want to understand how new technologies are affecting political participation and democratic processes, we should not focus on disruption and novelty, but we should instead explore the complex dialectics between digital discourses and digital practices; between the technical and the social; between the political economy of the web and its lived critique.

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Introduction

Activist Cultures, the Web, and Digital Capitalism

The early months of 2011 were months of social and political discontent in Spain: The effects of the financial crisis and the austerity measures imposed by the Socialist government of Zapatero were impacting everyday life. In March 2011 – as the platform of Democracia Real Ya¹ was being developed, giving rise to one of the largest mass mobilizations Spain had seen since the end of the dictatorship – I had the pleasure to sit down for an interview with Barcia.

Jose Vincente Barcia, known by everyone as Barcia within *Ecologistas en Acción* – one of the three organizations I studied for the research presented in this book – was born in 1969 in Galicia but grew up in Madrid. He had been involved in environmental activism from the age of 13 and throughout his life he was an active participant in a variety of radical left social movements. He participated in the democratic movements that followed the fall of Franco's dictatorship in the 1980s; he took part in the global justice movements of the late 1990s; and he demonstrated in the streets of Madrid during the 15M movements in May 2011.

In the interview Barcia talked about his life, about his political commitment, and about his perspectives on new and old media technologies. He also talked about capitalism. At the age of 42, after almost 25 years of involvement in environmental and political activism, he had a lot to say about capitalism. When I interviewed Barcia, I had been doing ethnographic work among activists for more than four years, studying how three very different political organizations used internet technologies as tools of political action. The interview with Barcia was one of my last interviews, and what he had to say about capitalism inspired this book.

B: Capitalism is not a power outside of me, but within me. I am capitalism. [...] Now for me recognizing that I am capitalism, and that I am part of the problem, it means that I am also recognizing that I am part of the solution.

Barcia's comment really surprised and inspired me. I was struck by a fundamental contradiction. In fact, as a trained anthropologist, I had to come to terms with trying to make sense of the fact that a political activist, who had