

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: CIVIC INNOVATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Edited by Markus S. Schulz

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COMMUNICATING CHANGE

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STUDIES IN MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATIONS VOLUME 27

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EDITED BY

MARKUS S. SCHULZ

*Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and
Social Studies, Germany*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Markus S. Schulz is researcher at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies and the New School for Social Research. A passionate teacher, he taught in various disciplines on both sides of the Atlantic, including Bauhaus University Weimar (media studies), City University of New York (CUNY) (urban studies), New York University (NYU) (Latin American studies), Virginia Tech (global studies), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (sociology). He earned his PhD from the New School for Social Research after studies of Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Freie and Humboldt Universities in Berlin. He has published widely, including many books and articles on social theory, democratic participation, collective action, global media, and future imagination. He won for his work national and international recognition, including the International Sociological Association (ISA) Bielefeld Prize for the Internationalization of Sociology, the Candace Rogers Prize of the Eastern Sociological Society, the Elise Boulding Prize, the World Society Foundation Award, and the honors degree from the Collegium of Peruvian Sociologists. He has given scholarly talks on all continents and held recent visiting research appointments at Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH) and Sorbonne in Paris, France; Oxford University in the UK; the Universities of Hamburg and Munich in Germany; Universidad Tres de Febrero's (UNTREF) Interdisciplinary Center for Advanced Studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina; and at Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City. He served as Vice President for Research of the International Sociological Association, President of the Third ISA Sociology Forum, and Founding Editor of the WebForum (<https://futureswewant.net>).

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Marine Gauss is a doctor of sociology and has been a lecturer at Université Paris Cité for seven years. She successfully defended her thesis in September 2023, focusing on the emergence of feminist digital media around the 2010s and their critical role in the public sphere. She is particularly interested in the dynamics of empowerment, a concept she translates as “*empuissancement*,” highlighting a cultural and theoretical reappropriation. She emphasizes the various circular logics of consciousness-raising, subjectivation, and actorization around the notions of collective power, freedom, and democracy, and articulates them with the critical theories of the Frankfurt School.

Magdalena Karolak is Associate Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, UAE. She received her PhD in Linguistics, MA in Political Science, MA in Culture: Latin American Studies, and BA in French Language. Prior to working at Zayed University, she held Assistant Professor positions in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In 2014–2015, she was an American Political Science Association Middle East and North Africa (MENA) fellow (USA), and in 2022–2024, she was a fellow at the Center for Local Administration (KSA). Currently, she is a non-resident research fellow at the Gulf Research Center (KSA) as well as a writer fellow at the Emirates Literature Foundation (UAE). Her research interests include transformations of societies in the MENA region. She has published more than 50 journal articles and book chapters on the shifting gender relations, social media, culture and identity, and political system transformations in MENA countries. She is the author of four scholarly monographs.

Doohyeong Lee is a PhD candidate at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 and the Centre Max Weber, France. His dissertation focuses on the evolution of social movements in South Korea since the 2000s, with a particular emphasis on cases such as the 2008 candlelight vigils against the import of US beef and the 2016–2017 candlelight vigils calling for the resignation of President Park Geun-hye. His research interests include activism, civil society, the social history of Korean social movements, and the political system.

Lidia Lo Schiavo is an associate professor in General Sociology at the University of Messina, Italy. She was promoted to full professorship on December 1, 2023. Her main research interests revolve around youth studies, sociology of movements, social theory, and sociology of migrations. She is a member of the Board of the RN 30 ESA Network and member of the RC48 ISA Network and of the Italian Association of Sociology – AIS. She has been invited as a visiting

professor at the Manchester University and at the Manchester Metropolitan University (October 18–23, 2024). Her recent publications include: Lo Schiavo L., Rebughini P. (2023), Youth Multidimensional Political Activism Between Singularisation and Mutualism: The Case of Up Network, in *Cambio. Rivista sulle Trasformazioni Sociali*, pp. 1–16. *Soggettività studentesca, Generazioni, Partecipazione e Condizione giovanile in Italia*, Morlacchi, Perugia, 2023 (book). Student Protests Against Neoliberal Education Policies in Italy. Three Student Organizations, in Bessant J., Mesinas M. A., Pickard S. (eds.) (2021), *When Students Protest*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York/London, pp. 105–122. Youth Condition, Student Movements, Generations, and Sociological Critique. A Theoretical Discussion Based on a Case Study, *Quaderni di Sociologia*, n. 87, 2021: 187–207.

Amy Mowle is an early-career researcher exploring the intersections of technology, power, and social change. Her work examines how digital platforms shape collective action, identity formation, and governance, with a particular focus on feminist activism and networked publics. She holds a PhD in Sociology from Victoria University, where her research investigated Reddit's r/TwoXChromosomes as a case study of networked feminism in the digital field. Her research engages with broader questions about how power operates in digital environments, from the politics of content moderation to the algorithmic amplification of particular voices and narratives. She has published in high-impact journals and contributed to interdisciplinary discussions on complex systems, governance, and digital inequalities. In her current role as a research fellow, she applies systems thinking to study how digital and multisectoral collaborations influence decision-making and legitimacy in contested policy spaces. With expertise in qualitative methods, discourse analysis, and computational social science, she brings a critical lens to understanding emergent social practices in digital contexts. Her work contributes to debates on the role of digital infrastructures in shaping contemporary social life, governance, and resistance.

Paola Rebughini is Full Professor of Sociology of Culture at the Department of Social and Political Studies, University of Milan, Italy. Her research interests lie in social theory and cultural theory, agency, everyday life, cultural aspects of the globalization process, youth mobilizations, and young adults' forms of individualization. On these topics, she has published widely in top peer-reviewed international journals. She is the author of *Framing Social Theory: Reassembling the Lexicon of Contemporary Social Sciences* (Routledge, 2022, edited with E. Colombo); *Youth and the Politics of the Present. Coping with Complexity and Ambivalence* (Routledge, 2019, edited with E. Colombo); *Sociology of Difference. Gender, Culture, Nature* (in Italian) (Carocci, 2022); *Children of Immigrants in a Globalized World. A Generational Experience* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, with E. Colombo). She is Editor of *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia* and Co-editor-in-Chief of *Violence. An International Journal*. She is currently the Director of the PhD school in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research at the University

of Milan. She has been a member of the International Sociological Association since 2006 and has actively participated in almost all its editions since then, she was as well a board member of the ISA Research Committee on Social Classes and Social Movements (RC47).

Ligia Tavera Fenollosa is a sociologist specializing in collective action and social movements across various contexts, including post-disaster situations. She earned her PhD in Sociology from Yale University and is currently a full-time professor at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Mexico City. She has been actively involved in the International Sociological Association, serving on the boards of Research Committees RC48 and RC07. She currently serves as the President of the Mexican Network for Social Movement Studies. Her research focuses on both contentious and non-contentious collective action, exploring its role in social, cultural, and political change; the pursuit of social justice; and the empowerment of civil society. Some of her publications in English include: *Eventful Temporality and the Unintended Outcomes of Mexico's Earthquake Victims Movement*, in Rossi, F. M., von Bülow, M. (eds.) (2016), *Social Movement Dynamics: New Perspectives on Theory and Research from Latin America*, Routledge. *Protest Artifacts in the Mexican Social Movement Sector: Reflections on the "Stepchild" of Cultural Analysis*, with Johnston H., in Almeida P., Cordero A. (eds.) (2015), *Handbook of Social Movements Across Latin America*, Springer Press. "The movimiento de damnificados: Democratic Transformation of Citizenry and Government in Mexico City," in Cornelius W., Eisenstadt T. A., Hindley J. (eds.) (1999), *Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico*, Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego.

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INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: CIVIC INNOVATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Markus S. Schulz

Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt, Germany

The opportunities for change that open during moments of crisis tend to close quickly. Calls for transformation abounded when COVID-19 emerged, but these gave way soon to desires for a “return to normalcy.” Similar cycles follow “natural” disasters that are shaped in their devastation by prior institutional design. On the other hand, activists may also create opportunities for change under conditions that seem impossible to overcome. This volume explores the role of different modes of communication, social imagination, and creative efforts to solve critical problems, promote equity, and change the status quo. How do social actors from civil society communicate in response to crisis? How do they use existing means of communication and invent new ones? How do they form social movements that connect activists and publics and foster inclusive deliberation? How do they overcome obstacles rooted in different cultural, economic, juridical, political, and social contexts? How do they articulate alternatives to retrotopian politics, authoritarian leadership, patriarchalism, and neoliberal subjectivities? How do they generate democratic agency, strategies, visions, and the solidarities that nourish these? How do they communicate change? This volume brings together scholars of communication, political science, sociology, and studies of culture, media, and gender to examine these questions through a series of pertinent case studies. The authors have carried out empirical fieldwork in Australia, France, Iceland, Italy, Mexico, South Korea, and across quite distinct worlds of cyberspace. The volume is structured in three parts. It opens with Part I on

“Civic Innovation,” then zooms in on “Digital Feminism” in Part II, and concludes with Part III on “Connecting for Change.”

In the first chapter of Part I, Ligia Tavera Fenollosa brings us to Mexico City on September 19, 2017, when it was struck by a powerful earthquake with a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale, causing over 200 fatalities and damage or collapse to a large number of buildings. Her chapter is entitled: “Crisis Response, Civic Innovation, and Digital Media: Learning from the 2017 Earthquake in Mexico City.” Tavera Fenollosa explores how civil society responded to this disaster with a diverse range of grassroots inventions. Like other disasters, the earthquake punctured normalcy. In the aftermath of the earthquake, there was a rather chaotic situation, in which rumors abounded while accurate information was hard to come by. Tavera Fenollosa’s analysis focuses on the digital initiatives that diverse civic groups launched, either by drawing on existing apps or platforms or by inventing ad hoc new ones. Comparing the response to this disaster with another major earthquake that had struck Mexico City exactly 32 years earlier, when digital communication was still in its infancy, Tavera Fenollosa finds that the adoption of digital communication and social media has transformed the ways in which solidarity, mutual assistance, and social support are exercised in response to the disaster. On the positive side, she sees citizens empowered by their use of digital tools to become active providers of information, rather than merely passive consumers. Acknowledging the hard to avoid shortcomings of lay reporting, she highlights the creativity of citizen-led initiatives that innovated digital tools to verify information. She emphasizes the key role that journalists and social activists played in the earthquake’s aftermath. Her research suggests that civic innovations based on open-source code might be more sustainable in the long term and more portable than those relying on the templates of commercial providers. Tavera Fenollosa’s study of the social response to the disaster demonstrates how civic innovation under adverse conditions helped to address urgent information and communication needs but also had the effect of strengthening the communal fabric of civil society.

The following chapter by Magdalena Karolak is entitled “Citizen Participation and Online Environments after a Crisis of Democracy: Lessons from Iceland” and, like Tavera Fenollosa, examines civic innovation after crisis, in this case the aftermath of Iceland’s 2008–2011 financial crisis that shook the country and its political system. The inadequate political response, the discovery of profound corruption between bankers, officials, media, and academics, and the ensuing collapse of trust into the elite led to a broad mobilization of civil society online and offline, thereby popularizing social participation and voicing demands for political reform. In her empirical study, Karolak interviewed both activists and state representatives. Her findings provide nuanced insights into the role digital tools can play in the strengthening of political culture and democratic practices. Among the lessons Karolak distilled from her fieldwork are the importance of network building to sustain long-term engagement; the need for creating independent, yet holistic and well-monitored platforms to keep participants connected and to prevent exclusionary or discriminatory hate speech through appropriate “netiquette” and legal processes; and the need to mesh online and offline activities.

Part II is dedicated to studies of digital feminism. It opens with the chapter by Marine Gauss, entitled “French Digital Feminism: An Oppositional Praxis within the Dominant Public Space.” Gauss argues that, around 2010, French feminists began to engage in a new form of media activism. Instead of retreating to the underappreciated fringes of the public sphere, they rather aimed for the more prominent, dominant public space, challenging from there established tenets of public opinion and entrenched attitudes. French feminists created new digital advocacy formats, including chronicles, newsletters, podcasts, verticals, videos on dedicated platforms, and webzines. Gauss shows how the feminist visions publicized across these new formats challenged the dominant patriarchal culture through inclusive and intersectional perspectives. She discusses how social privilege and high education afforded the activists the access to dominant culture industries that they needed for their emancipatory goal of launching a cultural revolution through the feminist pedagogy of a sustained transvaluation of gendered representations. Gauss points to the delicate balance between avoiding the reproduction of authoritarian patterns and feeding neoliberal backlash, while building a movement and disseminating immanent criticism, concrete utopias, and a spirit of democratic empowerment.

The next chapter continues the analysis of digital feminism by moving from the francophone public sphere to the anglophone TwoXChromosomes (2xc) community on the Reddit platform. Amy Mowle’s contribution is entitled “Digital Self-disclosure in Neoliberal Times: Problematizing Feminist Consciousness-raising on Social Media.” Mowle conducted a thematic analysis of posts and comments made to Reddit’s 2xc. She observed that the overwhelming number of posts focus on individuals and their actions while largely leaving out the less tangible structural context and mechanisms that shape these. Her study reveals a contradiction between potential personal empowerment and the foreclosure of a collective perspective that prevents the structural critique needed for feminist consciousness-raising. Mowle shows how instances of online self-disclosure in this digital feminist community tended to enact neoliberal templates of individualism and commodifying self-exploitation. Yet, Mowle argues that such experiences are hardly ever problematized within broader feminist social critique. She challenges the reliance of feminist activism on digital media platforms and questions whether digital self-disclosures can effectively contribute to feminist consciousness-raising if issues related to pervasive neoliberal rationality and the resulting depoliticization are not adequately addressed.

Part III explores the strategies, organizational forms, and creative agency that generate the future visions of social movements. This part begins with a chapter by Doohyeong Lee, entitled “From Ideologists to Programmers: Activists’ Roles in Contemporary South Korean Social Movements.” Lee conducted in-depth empirical research on collective activism in South Korea. Focusing on movement strategies, he combined qualitative interviews with activists in key roles during the first decades of this century and quantitative document analysis of movement statements and press releases. This was a dramatic time in South Korean politics. The worldwide famous candlelight vigils of 2016/2017 that were organized to protest government corruption resulted in the historic impeachment of

a Korean president. In his study, Lee found a shift in the role of activists from “ideologists” to “programmers.” The movement leaders were no longer important because of their ability to articulate an elaborate ideology but rather because of their talent in “managing” and “programming” events that brought together citizens from the most diverse walks of life, irrespective of any intricate details of their ideologies or worldviews. Protest events became festivals, in which citizens could participate autonomously as individuals without having to submit to any rules or expectations by leaders. Organizing according to the lowest common denominator helped attracting large crowds. By implication, the movement programmers did neither offer any agreed-upon proposal for the period after the president’s ouster nor any institutional alternatives to the representative system. Thus, the mobilization of citizens flourished, but the imagination of futures stayed for the most part within a mosaic of fragmented individual groups from where it may or may not enter broader social debates. Lee emphasizes that the role of activists is never static but adapts to the broader social and cultural conditions.

In their contribution, entitled “Critical Agency and Creative Imagination: Snapshots of the Future among Youth Networks of Activism in Italy,” Lidia Lo Schiavo and Paola Rebughini bring us to Italy, where they conducted longitudinal field research from 2017 to 2022, including around 100 qualitative in-depth interviews with young activists. Their focus is on “Up,” an activist network that weaves together diverse local youth groups against neoliberal policies. In this empirical research project, Lo Schiavo and Rebughini find a new form of activism that responds not merely to the discontent with traditional representative politics, the failure of established political organizations to incorporate youth, and the readily recognized problems of social inequality, gender discrimination, and environmental destruction, but also to the more submerged individualization process that goes hand-in-hand with neoliberalism. In Lo Schiavo and Rebughini’s analysis, Italian youth experience this individualization as atomization, isolation, and pressure to adapt to market demands to become self-centered, always flexible, private, and entrepreneurial subjects. The neoliberal contradiction between the promise of empowering autonomy and the realities of precarity and self-commodifying alienation provides the background to a creative search for emancipation and communal solidarity. Lo Schiavo and Rebughini describe a generation of activists reinventing politics by experimenting with collective self-help, experience sharing, and a mutualism rooted in local projects of concrete political participation. Rather than merely accepting that “dystopia is already here,” as one activist noted, or retreating into vague abstract utopias, this locally rooted, communicative networking sustains hope by generating tangible utopias and heterotopias through direct action in the present, practical plans, and initiatives centered on care and solidarity.

Moving from South Korea and Italy to a transnational case rooted in Mexico, Part III and the volume close with a chapter entitled “Communicating Across Borders: Unlikely Alliances and Poetic Visions” by Markus S. Schulz. Drawing on empirical media analysis and fieldwork, this study examines the role of media technology, imaginative visions, and strategic rhetoric within a specific economic, political, and social constellation. Its focus is on the pioneering case of digital

activism by the Zapatista movement. This movement emerged from the remote mountainous rainforests of the Southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas just months after the invention of a graphic web browser and the first connections by local nongovernmental organization to the Internet. This case received worldwide media attention and was often cited as evidence for the claim that digital technology was to foster the rise of a global civil society, solidarity across borders, and the empowerment of local grassroots actors. The chapter shows how a transnational movement emerged and mobilized on behalf of the insurgent indigenous Mayan peasants and in protest against the neoliberal mode of globalization. It traces how this movement aligned with mobilizing networks that were formed against the North Atlantic Free Trade Treaty and a broad national movement for democratization and human rights in Mexico. It discusses how and why a *prima facie* unlikely alliance was woven between indigenous peasants and urbanites from scores of cities around the world.

In conclusion, the inter- and transnational case studies compiled in this volume demonstrate a complex array of communicative dynamics that affect responses to crisis, social mobilization, and efforts for equity. Although the social actors at the grassroots have not nearly as many resources at their disposal as economic or political elites, research findings suggest that connecting and communicating across divides can unleash creative agency to an extent that, at certain junctures, it can compensate for resource shortcomings. The authors are not only contributing toward filling theoretical gaps but also to the socially relevant questions about how to sustain democratic practices and nourish vibrant civil societies capable of civic innovation and inclusive deliberations about alternative futures.