



centre on
social movement
studies



CENTER FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY
RESEARCH

A conference on
Analyzing protest in the digital age
Challenges and opportunities in combining text and video sources

Organizer

*Donatella della Porta, Scuola Normale Superiore &
Swen Hutter, Freie Universität Berlin & WZB Berlin Social Science Center*

Place and date

WZB Berlin Social Science Center, December 7–8, 2023

Call for Papers

The conference aims to broaden the methodological debate about the opportunities and challenges of digital data analysis for extending research on the repertoire of protest. While social movements do much more than protest, protest actions are a primary channel through which they pressure decision-makers, become visible to the public, and generate commitment from their supporters. Therefore, social movement scholars have developed various methodologies to analyze the evolving action repertoire – studying events either in depth, through ethnographic methods, or in aggregate, as in protest event analysis, usually based on newspapers or other textual sources. With the spread of digital technologies, we have seen a (rapid and enormous) increase in the availability of diverse materials for studying protest actions. For example, the proliferation of and easy access to video material has led to its widespread application across the social sciences, especially by scholars invested in processual and relational approaches. At the conference, we want to build bridges between scholars using digital sources and methodologies and classical protest event research.

The conference builds upon a joint project at the Center on Social Movement Studies (Cosmos) at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence and the Center for Civil Society Research, a joint initiative of the Freie Universität Berlin and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. The project aims at developing ways to expand classical protest event analysis through the use of videos on contentious events that are increasingly available on the Internet. As research on social movement communication has noted, activists increasingly use cameras (often from smartphones) to record protest events and post them on social

media and various platforms. In addition, also journalists increasingly use visuals in their coverage, publishing videos of contentious events on newspaper websites. The latter also, at times, invite activists to deposit their visual materials or connect with activist media in a hybrid media environment. This is all the more the case for less routinized forms of protest, for large events, and for episodes of radicalization—which are indeed the types of protests more often covered by any type of media. In addition, activist-generated content is more likely to be used at events populated mainly by younger and more technologically savvy generations and where personalized politics is more appreciated.

At the conference, we would like to critically discuss how such video-enhanced protest event analysis might be able to contribute to expanding two frontiers in protest event research. On the one hand, it might contribute through a sort of digital ethnography to a triangulation of sources oriented to increase the validity of written sources, which we call the extractive function of video-enhanced protest event analysis. On the other hand, it can also be used in a reconstructive way by extending the range of information available with particular attention to the emotional atmosphere, the collective framing, the choreography of the event, the collective and individual participation as well as processes and dynamics more generally.

We invite submissions by scholars engaged in related efforts to expand classical protest event research in the digital age and in different parts of the world. We welcome contributions from scholars working on text-as data, image and video classification, but also from scholars working on situational and interactional dynamics relying on digital ethnography or aiming to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to study the dynamics and structure of protest repertoires.

How to participate?

Scholars interested to participate are invited to submit an abstract of about 250 words and a short bio, including affiliation and contact information to donatella.dellaporta@sns.it and swen.hutter@wzb.eu

No conference fees are required. Unfortunately, we cannot cover travelling costs, but we will provide logistical support, catering and a conference dinner.

If you have any questions, please send us an email.

Timeline

- Deadline to apply is **9 July 2023**
- The proposals will be evaluated by the organizers by **26 July 2023**