**Co-optation**

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Co-optation in the context of citizen media involves powerful political or commercial actors appropriating specific media produced through citizen-led initiatives, or the very rhetoric of citizen media in general, and using them to further their own goals. In such cases, the potential of citizen media to effect “aesthetic and socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor” (Baker and Blaagaard 2016:16) is substantially undermined. Instead of providing an alternative to an increasingly un-accountable, concentrated and de-democratized media system (Fenton 2012), citizen media become instrumentalized and integrated in the very same power structures they aimed to subvert.

While the co-optation of citizen media has long been a widespread practice, it became the focus of significant public attention only following the UK Brexit referendum of 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as US president. These two events brought to the forefront of Anglo-American public debate phenomena such as ‘digital astroturfing’ – defined as “a form of manufactured, deceptive and strategic top-down activity on the Internet initiated by political actors that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals” (Kovic et al. 2018) – and ‘fake news’ spread via social or alternative online media for the purpose of propaganda or monetary gain (Edson et al. 2018; Fenton and Freedman 2018). In academic research, however, other instances of the co-optation of citizen media had already been examined prior to these developments, and the study of co-optation represents an increasingly rich area of investigation. Examples include analysis of the commodification and commercialization of revolutionary graffiti in Egypt (Abaza 2013), research on government co-optation and the algorithmic manufacturing of consent during the Mexico #YoSoy132 movement (Treré 2015, 2016), and studies of the oligarchic capture of citizen media in Bulgaria whereby apparently alternative media have in fact been set up or supported by oligarchs in order to promote their narratives (Rone 2016). This entry draws on this growing body of research to discuss debates over the definitions of co-optation and their relevance for the study of citizen media. Specifically, it focuses on examples of the corporate, governmental and far right co-optation of citizen media and outlines directions for future research on these topics.

**Defining co-optation**

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary* (2019), the verb *co-opt* means first “to make someone a member through the choice of the present members”; second “to include someone in something, often against their will”; and third “to use someone else’s ideas”. These multiple dimensions of co-optation have been explored most extensively in relation to social movements (Burchell and Cook 2013; Coy and Hedeen 2005; Gamson 1975; Ho 2010; Jaffee 2012; McCarthy and Wolfson 1992; Trumpy 2008; Weisskircher, 2019). This body of scholarship has examined, for instance, the appointment of movement participants to governing positions within state institutions, the adoption and diversion of the language and rhetoric of movements by powerful political actors, and the focus on developing new technologies as a co-optation by industry (Burchell and Cook 2013; King and Busa 2017; Weisskircher, 2019). In such contexts, then, co-optation can be understood as “the ability of the established political order to respond to or accommodate new challenges and challengers without radically altering the foundation of the established political systems and processes – a de-radicalisation of the movements and a diluting of issues to accommodate them within the established political order” (Burchell and Cook 2013:742).

The term *co-optation* is not, however, without its critics and detractors. Some scholars, such as King and Busa (2017), have argued that the label is too broad and that it does not account for differences in the scale of the co-optation. It does not, for example, provide a means of distinguishing between cases in which a small number of protest leaders have been appointed to a local council and cases related to the multi-billion dollar marketization of the organic food movement by corporations worldwide. Nor does the term clarify the type of actor driving the co-optation process, that is, whether it is a governmental or corporate actor. For this reason, King and Busa (2017:4) have introduced the notion of ‘corporatization’ to describe those special cases of co-optation in which “corporate interests come to engage with ideas and practices initiated by a social movement, and ultimately, to significantly shape the discourses and practices initiated by the movement”. Other scholars have argued that the term co-optation is normatively charged and overly negative in its connotations. Lapegna (2014) has suggested that it does not reflect adequately the empowerment and positive changes that co-optation can sometimes bring about. In this sense, he argues, the “etymology of the term ‘cooptation’ (‘from the Latin cooptare, from co-‘together’ and optare-‘choose’’) actually better captures the relational and agentic elements that are lost in the common and widespread use of the term” (ibid.:9). When considering the co-optation of citizen media, therefore, we must recognize that this is an agentic mutual process, in which the actors being co-opted sometimes readily cooperate with the state and/or commercial interests, as has been the case with many influential bloggers, as well as with volunteer or paid trolls (Wooley and Howard 2017).

**Co-optation by corporations, governments and far right actors**

Co-optation by commercial interests has been a major topic of concern within citizen media studies. Scholars have noted, for instance, how individual bloggers – writing on a diversity of topics, from food to technology and culture – have since the early 2000s been targeted as ‘influencers’ who could be effectively engaged in brand communication and marketing (Booth and Matic 2011; Li et al. 2011; Magno 2017; Uzunoglu and Kip 2014). In such cases, it has been the social standing and popularity of bloggers that different companies have sought to instrumentalize as part of their search for a more immediate connection with consumers and a way to bypass traditional advertising. Mass media corporations have also tried to co-opt citizen media by integrating citizen journalists in the news production process. For example, Kperogi (2010) has explored CNN’s launch of iReport.com in 2006, a user-generated citizen news site that allowed the corporation not only to use unpaid journalistic labour, but also to tame and appropriate for its own profit emerging counter-hegemonic voices. Cross (2016:226) examined another example of co-optation by media hegemons by focusing on the way the BBC used citizens’ amateur photos of the 2005 London bombing to drive a particular “politics of sentiment” that ultimately “was important for the justification of the War on Terror”.

Non-digital practices of citizen media may also be co-opted, as Abaza (2013) has shown through her analysis of the commodification of revolutionary graffiti from the Arab Spring. Incendiary political graffiti, whose creation involved great risk for their authors, were subsequently decontextualized and distributed as images on bags, mugs and in art galleries. Finally, we might cite Frank’s (1997) classic book *The Conquest of Cool* which demonstrates how the advertising industry used and at the same time fuelled the rebel culture of the 1960s, glorifying the aesthetic of rebellion, alternative media and a newly discovered notion of cool to boost consumerism and product sales. Today, thanks to the all-pervasive logic of commodification, once counter-cultural practices of youth expression such as skateboarding, parkour, hip-hop and rap have similarly been co-opted and have ended up as integral parts of mainstream popular culture (Lorr 2005; Stapleton and Terrio 2010; Blair 2004; Swedenburg 2004; Watts 2004).

The commercialization of citizen media additionally has systemic dimensions which relate to the transformation of the very essence of the social. Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have co-opted the language and rhetoric associated with citizen media. The claim that they promote bottom-up collaboration, sharing and emancipation has been a crucial part of their branding strategy, aptly described as ‘wikiwashing’ (Fuster Morel 2011). The problem is that no matter how radical social networks claim to be, they are ultimately designed to facilitate data mining: “[t]hey are designed to be exploited” (Ippolita et al. 2009). Community on these platforms is structured by marketing interests and citizens are reduced to a bundle of data points: “[t]he fact that online sociability is facilitated by separating users from the means of socializing and thereby creating an external, storable, and sortable collection of data about their social lives, renders the product of their online activity further alienable” (Andrejevic 2011:88).

The privatization of communication structures, the datafication of the self and the key role of algorithms in information provision not only turn citizens into transparent objects of surveillance (Couldry 2017), but also modify what they can see (Pariser 2011). The algorithmic structuring of relevance online mediates appearances and creates regimes of visibility that favour particular types of content over others on the basis of predominantly commercial criteria (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Many new citizen-led media projects claim to restore the authenticity lost in previous platforms, but commercialization soon gets hold of these self-proclaimed radical media. This is because of what has been labelled “authenticity’s reactive dynamism” (Salisbury and Pooley 2017:6): as soon as a new initiative proclaims itself as a source of real authentic media, it begins to attract marketing attention, until it too becomes tainted by corporate interests, and the cycle repeats itself. The alternative, as Indymedia have found to their cost, is marginality: without developing sustainable funding mechanisms and finding other ways to attract attention in an increasingly competitive online environment, citizen media projects will all too often remain invisible to the vast majority of internet users.

But it is not only corporations that have tried (and succeeded) in taming citizen media. The potential of citizen media to unsettle the status quo and to provide alternative values and visions of society makes them a serious threat to any established power. Thus, it is not surprising that governments across the world have experimented with different strategies for co-opting citizen media, including funding a wide range of actors who post online as unaffiliated citizens, creating government-sponsored accounts, web pages or applications, and creating content on blogging platforms in order to manufacture consent and hinder dissidence (Kovic et al., 2018; Walker 2015; Wooley and Howard 2017). Governments may additionally make use of authentic citizen media in order to collect activists’ data and engage in surveillance and pre-emptive action (Morozov 2012; Treré 2015). During the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico, for example, the government actively monitored social media profiles and the communications of activists. What is more, it turned out that one of the main websites of the movement had been created by an undercover government agent who had managed in this way to collect the data of numerous activists (Treré 2015).

Finally, while citizen media have traditionally been envisaged as vehicles of left wing politics, inclusion and emancipation, we must recognize that far right movements too produce citizen media to promote exclusion, discrimination and hatred (Simpson and Druxes 2015). Precisely because they are perceived as freer and less regulated than mainstream media, citizen media have proved instrumental in the diffusion of hate speech and fake news by far right groups (ibid.). Considering the long tradition of far right citizen media, including fanzines, magazines and early uses of computer communication networks (Berlet and Mason 2015), one can speak of co-optation not so much in chronological as in ideological terms. Adopting some of the counter-culture strategies of the 1968 leftist movements, far right activists have presented themselves as grassroots community organizers working closely with and for the people (Gattinara and Bouron 2019). Most notably, by espousing the language and rhetoric of citizen media, groups such as the alt right movement in the US have presented themselves as active citizens, fighting against the power of corporations and governments, and against what they perceive as excessive political correctness (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016; Bessant 2017; Love 2017; Luke 2017; Nagle 2017; Silva et al. 2017; Simpson and Druxes 2015; Weigel 2016).

**Future directions**

It must be noted that in an increasingly converged media environment, where the concentration of media ownership and the entanglements between media and politics have reached unprecedented levels (Fenton and Freedman 2017; Jones 2016), it is difficult to separate different types of co-optation and to treat government, political parties and corporations as completely separate actors with separate interests. On the contrary, their agendas and actions often overlap. In Bulgaria, for instance, the ruling elite of politicians and businesspersons have together managed to co-opt both individual citizen media initiatives such as the Anonymous blog online and the very language of citizen media in order to promote narratives that serve their economic *and* political agenda. Thus, instead of providing a corrective to the lack of accountability, unclear ownership and scandalous content that mark mainstream media in Bulgaria, much of the so-called citizen media in the Bulgarian context clearly serves the interests of this oligarchical group, leading to the de-democratization of Bulgarian journalism, as well as the widespread promotion of nationalist narratives (Rone 2016).

Thus, future research should focus more on the symbiotic mechanisms through which governments, corporations and the far right co-opt citizen media. We might fruitfully explore, for example, how governments contract private firms to create content online, how media hegemons may lobby for government (de)regulation in order to take larger shares of the market, and how the far right may lobby against hate speech laws in order to protect the freedom of far right media. In other words, the co-optation of citizen media needs to be viewed as a complex process with multiple initiators and interaction effects. Second, we need to explore the funding and business models of citizen media projects that aim to persist over extended periods of time. That is, we need to explore existing and potential strategies through which citizen media activists might support themselves financially, without being relegated to marginality or conforming to the imperatives of online advertising, data extraction and the attention economy. Third, while governments, corporations and the far right have all tried to co-opt citizen media, we might recognize that there have also been processes of “reverse appropriation” by citizen goups (Baker and Blaagaard 2016:18-19). A good example of reverse appropriation is culture jamming (Bordwell 2002; Dery 1993; Harold 2004; Nomai 2011), which includes practices such as billboard hacking, the appropriation of advertisements and other tactical media interventions (Garcia and Lovink 1997; Raley 2009). While many of these practices have turned out to be less disruptive than intended, future discussion of the co-optation of citizen media should also take into account such acts of resistance to co-optation and/or pro-active attempts to co-opt elements of the dominant culture in order to subvert it.

**Recommended reading**

Abaza, M. (2013) ‘Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti’, *E-International Relations*, 7 October.

Shows how martyrs and martyrdom during the Egyptian revolution have been represented in graffiti as powerful instances of citizen media. These subversive forms of expression and commemoration, however, have been increasingly commodified by the needs of the international art market and turned into book albums, posters, T-shirts, hand-bags and a variety of other monetazible objects.

King, L. and J. Busa (2017) ‘When corporate actors take over the game: the corporatization of organic, recycling and breast cancer activism’, *Social Movement Studies* 16 (5): 549-563.

Explores corporatization as a process whereby large corporate entitites take over ideas and practices initiated by social change advocates, dominate the field and spread corporate-friendly versions of resistance.

Kperogi, F. A. (2010) ‘Cooperation with the Corporation? CNN and the hegemonic co-optation of citizen journalism through iReport.com’, *New Media and Society* 13(2): 314-329.

Problematizes the way in which user-generated media is incorporated by corporate media hegemons, blurring the distinction between citizen and mainstream journalism.

Wooley, S. and P. Howard (2017) ‘Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary. Working Paper N: 2017.11’, *Computational Propaganda Research Project*.

Computational propaganda campaigns take place in both democratic and autocratic countries. State governments, political parties and foreign actors use social bots, fake accounts and automation across a variety of platforms in efforts to silence opponents and to push misinformation and propaganda.