

Editorial

## Why We Should Distinguish Between Mobilization and Participation When Investigating Social Media

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### Abstract

In the recent past, social media has become a central channel and means for political and societal mobilization. Mobilization refers to the process by which political parties, politicians, social movements, activists, and other political and social actors induce citizens to participate in politics in order to win elections, convince others of their own positions, influence policies, and modify rulings. While not sufficient on its own for facilitating participation, mobilization is necessary for participation to occur, which justifies examining mobilization specifically to understand how people can be involved in politics. This thematic issue of *Media and Communication* presents various perspectives on the role of social media in mobilization, embracing both its recruitment side (traditional and non-established political actors, social and protest movements) and its network side (the ways citizens respond to mobilization appeals). Taken together, the thematic issue highlights the multifaceted nature and scholarly fruitfulness of mobilization as an independent concept.

### Keywords

activism; campaigning; citizenship; political mobilization; social mobilization; new civics; political parties; politicians; social media; social movements

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Political and societal mobilization is key to involving citizens in political processes. However, academic consensus has not yet been reached regarding a precise definition of mobilization. Indeed, sociology, political science, and communication research tend to look at the phenomenon from different angles and set conceptually different emphases. One of the most fundamental problems this situation creates is the conceptual conflation of mobilization and participation. While the two can go hand in hand, we argue that mobilization must first be present for participation to occur, although other conditions are also necessary. Mobilization refers to the process by which political parties, politicians, social

movements, activists, and other political and social actors induce citizens to participate in politics in order to win elections, convince others of their own positions and influence policies, and modify rulings (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). To understand how people can be involved in politics, therefore, mobilization must be examined as an independent concept.

The close connection between mobilization and participation is particularly evident in the observation by Schlozman et al. (2018, p. 50) that people do not actively participate in politics “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked.” These writers explained that not being asked may be related to isolation in recruitment networks. These networks can be viewed from two perspectives: from the *recruitment*

perspective, suggesting a focus on direct mobilization efforts by political actors (e.g., parties, social movements); and from the perspective of *networks*, such as citizens' social networks (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). The two perspectives have in common that modern communication environments in hybrid media systems have multiplied opportunities for coming into contact with both top-down and bottom-up direct mobilization calls (Russmann et al., 2021).

For many decades during the rise of democracies, political and societal mobilization reflected a top-down process (Deutsch, 1961) used by the state and hierarchical organizations (e.g., parties, religious institutions). In that context, political mobilization essentially involved marshaling supporters to cast their ballots, but their participation in political processes was not desired. To date, as articles in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication* reveal, traditional political actors still primarily engage in mobilization as a top-down process. However, since the 1970s, with the emergence of new parties (e.g., the New Left) and new social movements (e.g., anti-nuclear power and environmental movements), mobilization increasingly evolved toward becoming a bottom-up process (von Beyme, 1992). These new actors became agents of mobilization, while being personally affected fostered some citizens' participation with respect to certain causes (von Beyme, 1992). As a result, traditional political actors were increasingly forced to react to the shift in citizens' involvement as they moved toward more participation in political processes. Then in the 21st century, social media provided a new channel and means for mobilization, which since then has grown even stronger, combining both top-down and bottom-up processes.

While the styles and presumed effects of mobilization appeals on social media are similar to those of traditional mobilization appeals, e.g., appearing on partisan-centered posters and in mass-centered TV commercials, social media allows for a more detailed targeting of certain social groups and even individuals. With the use of relatively few resources (compared to traditional mobilization), multiple audiences can be mobilized using different appeals at the same time. Citizens' technical ability to share messages among social media networks might be considered an effective tool for mass-centered mobilization (Russmann et al., 2021).

## 2. Overview of the Thematic Issue

The 13 articles contained in this thematic issue focus on the role of social media in mobilization from various perspectives and highlight the multifaceted nature and scholarly fruitfulness of the mobilization concept. We collected studies on mobilization's recruitment side (the ways that diverse actors use social media for mobilization) and its network side (the ways that citizens respond to mobilization appeals). Several studies combine both elements, showing their close interconnectedness. The broad spec-

trum of methods used emphasizes the multiperspectivity of mobilization as an independent concept.

### 2.1. How Do Traditional Political Actors Use Social Media for Mobilization?

The first three studies featured in this issue show that top-down communication (still) predominates in mobilization efforts by traditional political actors, such as parties and politicians. In the traditional political sphere, mobilization from below (generally) needs to be triggered through mobilization from above.

Anna-Katharina Wurst, Katharina Pohl, and Jörg Haßler (2023) linked political mobilizing appeals theoretically with three campaign functions—information, interaction, and mobilization—to systematize a broad range of varied mobilization appeals. However, their content analysis of Facebook and Instagram posts by political parties and their top candidates in the 2021 German federal election campaign revealed that political parties primarily used their social media communications to mobilize users to vote.

Márton Bene and Gábor Dobos (2023) investigated a still neglected issue—politicians' social media usage at the local level. The results of their study of almost 20,000 Facebook posts from the 3,152 Hungarian municipalities over two years showed that political mobilization on the local level was rather limited compared to the national level. Facebook activity was higher in the case of larger municipalities, politicians in more prominent positions (e.g., mayors), and politicians belonging to a national party.

In another study, Michael Kowal (2023) investigated ways that social media can encourage voters to make campaign donations as a specific form of mobilization. Taking the example of the most viral posts from the 2018 and 2020 US House of Representatives elections, Kowal found that on days when posts went viral, campaign donations for the respective candidate often increased significantly. Given that relatively small, individual donations have most recently become increasingly important in campaign financing in the US, creating viral posts can result in significant real-world consequences.

### 2.2. How Do Influencers Use Social Media for Mobilization?

Influencers as new political actors are becoming increasingly more important in integrating citizens into political processes. Their importance, however, varies greatly depending on the country's context, as the three articles described next show.

Considering their increased importance as sources of information for young citizens, social media influencers have enormous potential to shape young citizens' political opinions and mobilize them. By means of qualitative interviews, Christina Peter and Luisa Muth (2023) gathered data that showed that young users in Germany

often complement the information they receive from news media sources with information from influencers to make sense of the political information received. The users considered political influencers, distinguished from regular influencers who occasionally address political and social issues, as reliable political information sources.

At the same time, exposure to political influencers can also negatively impact democracies, as Rachel Gibson, Esmeralda Bon, Philipp Darius, and Peter Smyth (2023) demonstrated in the context of the US. Their survey results showed that political influencers' followers tend to be more politically extreme and more likely to follow conspiracy narratives than those who tend not to follow influencers. At the same time, audiences of influencers are more engaged offline and online. The authors concluded that, as more extreme positions are mobilized, political influencers' growing importance might further deteriorate societal consensus in the US.

For protests in authoritarian countries with limited communication freedoms, social media that is not controlled by the state can be particularly important for anti-regime communicators. In a mixed-methods study on the role of Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook in Russia during the Free Navalny protests, Sofya Glazunova and Malmi Amadoru (2023) discovered that social media is a double-edged sword for anti-regime influentials: The large visibility the platforms provide makes the anti-regime influentials dangerous for the regime and, thus, leads to further suppression and existential threats directed towards them.

### *2.3. How Do Social and Protest Movements Use Social Media for Mobilization?*

The three articles discussed next, which address the mobilization strategies of social movements, illustrate that even movements that appear highly professional rely on trial-and-error approaches and personal experience with respect to digital public communication. Moreover, innovative forms of communication, such as memes, have a specific mobilization potential.

Building on the mediatization approach and gathering data through semi-structured interviews, Marlene Schaaf and Oliver Quiring (2023) uncovered ways social media account managers of 29 social movement organizations in Germany adapted to social media logic. The activists did not consider themselves to be experts but, rather, as having adapted to the success criteria for social media by "learning by doing" without necessarily understanding the workings of the underlying algorithms. However, this adaptation was limited, for example, regarding the personalization of leaders in grassroots movements or the communication of sensitive issues.

Giuliana Sorce (2023) employed qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Fridays for Future activists from nine countries to explore the extent to which they were aware of the importance of algorithms in digital mobilization. Despite the common perception of

Fridays for Future as a movement of digital natives, the activists' awareness of the way social media algorithms work was not sufficiently strong to enable them to design strategies for optimal algorithmic diffusion, and their efforts to critically reflect on the platforms' profit maximization were minimal.

In addition, Michael Johann, Lukas Höhnle, and Jana Dombrowski (2023) conducted a survey of users who created and shared memes related to the Fridays for Future movement on social media. The results indicated that engaging with memes is positively related to involvement in political issues and network size, which, in turn, are related to general political participation (e.g., voting, demonstrating, volunteering). They concluded that getting people to produce and consume memes on certain political issues can mobilize them by lowering the threshold for potentially more demanding forms of participation.

### *2.4. (How) Are Citizens Mobilized on Social Media?*

The last four articles in this thematic issue examine the citizen perspective on political mobilization campaigns and point to limits of the mobilization potential of social media: Citizens can be mobilized by microtargeting messages and news curation but only under specific conditions; furthermore, online discussions can even have demobilizing effects when perceived as polarizing.

While the debate about online political microtargeting often centers around potential negative outcomes, Emilia Errenst, Annelien Van Remoortere, Susan Vermeer, and Sanne Kruike-meier (2023) focused on potential positive outcomes of targeted civic education ads on Instagram (e.g., increasing political interest, efficacy, and participation). However, their experiment with young adults in Germany did not uncover positive mobilizing effects, leading to the conclusion that such ads likely have an impact only under certain conditions.

Hannah Decker and Nicole Krämer (2023) also used an online experiment to investigate online political microtargeting processes. They examined ways in which people's prior attitudes and personality traits influenced their reception and processing of different microtargeting strategies in political campaigns. Decker and Krämer illustrated that messages are more persuasive and perceived as more positive when relevant to the citizens and in line with their prior attitudes. Furthermore, the citizens' level of extraversion turned out to be a moderating variable with respect to online ads, party evaluations, and voting intentions.

Emilija Gagrčin, Jakob Ohme, Lina Buttgerreit, and Felix Grünwald (2023) investigated the impact of users' news curation and networks on mobilization and polarization. Self-reported user data gathered from almost 1,000 participants from a two-wave online panel survey during the 2021 German federal elections showed that users' data footprints can enhance the mobilizing tendencies of news exposure for campaign participation but

only minimally for voter turnout. They found no evidence of news on algorithmic platforms reinforcing existing user attitudes or increasing affective polarization.

Finally, Martina Novotná, Alena Macková, Karolína Bieliková, and Patrícia Rossini (2023) examined what barriers hinder citizens from participating in political online discussions in times of crises. Data gleaned from their semi-structured interviews related to two recent crises (Covid-19 and Russia's war against Ukraine) revealed that the interviewees experienced online conversations as polarizing and a form of disinformation, leading to an unwillingness to participate in future discussions around controversial issues. This applied particularly to citizens who were not as resilient to polarization and disinformation.

### 3. Conclusion

The broad overview of perspectives on mobilization in modern hybrid media systems collected in this thematic issue proves that examining mobilization as a separate concept in addition to participation is fruitful, despite or precisely because of the multifacetedness of the concept. This thematic issue shows that new political actors, like influencers, have the potential to alter the way mobilization efforts integrate citizens into political processes. With a view to the complexity of today's hybrid information environment with its multitude of political actors and movements, we, therefore, highlight the importance of broadening our understanding of mobilization beyond motivating citizens to vote. Nevertheless, mobilization dynamics appear to be strongly influenced by broader political circumstances in different national contexts, which highlights the urgency for cross-country comparisons to better understand how structural conditions affect mobilization. Not only new actors but also new forms of communication, such as memes, seem to be suitable for tapping into new population groups and, under certain conditions, for mobilizing them as well.

Altogether, the thematic issue points to the lack of a "magic bullet" or a one-size-fits-all solution to integrating citizens into political processes. On the contrary, even microtargeting segments of the population with highly tailored messages only works under certain conditions, and discourse dynamics in online environments can even demobilize, especially in communication-intensive times of crises. Social scientists and communication researchers, in particular, face the exciting challenge of further deciphering which actors, messages, and communication strategies must meet which communication channel and recipient characteristics in order to mobilize citizens politically and societally. We hope this thematic issue will contribute to and stimulate such endeavours.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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