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VOIP technology in grassroots politics: Transforming political culture and practice?

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VOIP TECHNOLOGY IN GRASSROOTS POLITICS: TRANSFORMING POLITICAL CULTURE AND PRACTICE?

Abstract

This article investigates how the adoption and use of digital technologies shape political culture and practice in grassroots political groups, particularly focusing on how VOIP technologies enable and/or constrain groups to work across physical space and form political relationships amongst participants. Whilst this article is grounded in a case study of one broad-based coalition in Sydney, Australia, the findings expand our understanding of how digital technology shapes political culture and practice in grassroots spaces by (a) analysing an organisation both before and after the adoption of VOIP technology and (b) focusing on a case study where the organisation attempted to *maintain* rather than *transform* their political culture and practice with the adoption of new digital organising methods. The article argues that the instrumental benefits of digital technologies come at a cost: VOIP technologies may constrain the formation of deep relationships and flatten distinctive political practices within grassroots political organisations.

This article investigates how the adoption and use of digital technologies shape political culture and practice in grassroots political groups, particularly focusing on how digital technologies enable and/or constrain groups to work across physical space and form political relationships amongst participants. Whilst this article is grounded in a case study of one broad-based coalition in Sydney, Australia, the findings expand our understanding of how digital technology shapes political culture and practice in grassroots spaces by (a) analysing an organisation both before and after the adoption of digital technology and (b) focusing on a

case study where the organisation attempted to *maintain* rather than *transform* their political culture and practice with the adoption of digital technology. The case study in the article confirms other studies of digital activism that highlight the instrumental benefits for grassroots political groups in adopting digital technologies: the ease of gathering people across wide geographic spaces (Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2017); and lowering barriers to participation such as the time or financial investment required to attend meetings or actions held in physical locations (Schradie 2018). The article shows, however, that instrumental benefits come with a cost. The shift to digital organising spaces had an impact upon the *culture* of the Sydney Alliance that demonstrates how these technologies may constrain the formation of deep relationships and flatten distinctive political practices within grassroots political organisations. The article responds to the call from Kaun and Uldam (2018: 2099) to traverse 'a two-dimensional axis of digital technologies and activist practices' in studies of digital activism in order to strike 'the balance between context and media-specificity', and this article examines not only how activist practice is mediated by digital technology, but also what activists 'do with' media – how the use of digital technology is a practice in itself.

Existing sociological literature on digital activism has tended to be biased towards the use of digital technologies to facilitate 'mobilisation, coordination, and community building' (Kavada 2010: 102) of mass-mobilisations, like the Arab Spring or Occupy movements (Comunello, Mulargia, and Parisi 2016; Schradie 2018). The examination of 'specific protest movements and major demonstrations within them' has meant that online activity is sometimes 'overstated' and everyday practices are 'disregarded' (Comunello, Mulargia, and Parisi 2016: 517). The novelty of digital technology adoption in social movements may also be overstated: not only have movements historically quickly adopted prior technologies like the 'printing press, telegraph, radio [and] television' (Carty 2015, 7); focusing on the

adoption of digital technology may obscure how 'offline mobilization and communication pathways' remain significant (Maher and Earl 2017). Particularly neglected within the literature has been an engagement with the impact of digital technologies on long-standing 'organized political forms' such as trade unions (Dencik and Wilkin 2019: 1) or broad-based community organisations like the Sydney Alliance, often because such organisations have been 'slow adopters' of and 'adapters to' new technology (Dencik and Wilkin 2019: 2).

Not only have particular 'forms' of political organisation been neglected in sociological literature on digital activism, comparatively less attention has been paid to the impact of digital technology on relational dynamics of grassroots political culture and organising than to its impact on mobilising. My focus on the relational in this article stems from both the Sydney Alliance's own emphasis on relationality (Author 2020) and social movement research, including my own, that demonstrates the significance of relationships and social networks to successful mobilization (Diani DATE; Author 2018). Bennet and Segerberg (2012: 755-6), in developing their theory of 'connective' action, outline how newer forms of connective action differ from older forms of 'collective' action in terms of the relational foundations of movements. Where collective action depended upon 'brokering' organisations and interpersonal relationships, connective action is either entirely 'self-organising' or only loosely makes use of formal organisations. Mobilising and organising without interpersonal or organisational relationships is made possible by the new forms of social media. These newer forms of connective action facilitated by social media and the Internet enable the creation of an 'instant community of insurgent practice' that are able to spontaneously mobilise large numbers of people, usually in response to 'a spark of indignation' (Castells 2013: xl). However the lack of strong organizational ties mean such mobilisations often dissipate as quickly as they emerge (Kavada 2010: 113); some scholars argue this is because when digital platforms replace or reduce the role of social movement

organisations the development of 'collective capacities' like 'decision-making, organizing, and logistics work that build trust' are also reduced (Dumitrica and Felt 2019: 3). Cammaerts (2015: 446), however, writes that digital technology play an important role in the self-mediation of contemporary movements, where it is a tool used to construct collective identity, 'transform themselves' and 'constitute themselves as a subject'. Digital technology is thus used by movements for more than just self-representation (Cammaerts 2015: 446) as this article shows.

This article moves beyond an examination of how digital technology may undermine collective capacity to analyse how an interpersonal political culture was replicated through digital technology – where a grassroots organisation held on to a 'collective action' logic despite the adoption of digital platforms to replace face-to-face interaction. However, as the article will show, the widespread adoption of digital technologies by social movements entails 'paradoxical possibilities' (Tuzcu 2016) where new ways of engaging in politics and relating to others in movement spaces entails both opportunities and constraints.

Cammaerts' (2015: 91) analysis of the 'communication affordances' of digital technologies distinguishes between public and private; and synchronous and asynchronous digital technologies: live streaming is both public and synchronous, while VOIP is private and synchronous; a blog or newsfeed post is public and asynchronous, while email or SMS is private and asynchronous. This typology of digital technologies is a helpful analytic tool in studying how and why movements and organisations adopt and use particular digital technologies, and how an 'ecology' of digital technologies working together facilitates particular cultures of communication within organisations and movements. This article examines the adoption of VOIP technology by a grassroots political organisation: where the use of asynchronous, public digital technologies like Facebook and Twitter have been well

studied in digital activism literature, the study of synchronous private technologies like Zoom has been relatively neglected.

Where the first part of this article analyses the relational culture of the Sydney Alliance and the impact of digital technology upon it, part two of this article investigates how the adoption of digital technologies impacts the spatial dynamics of a grassroots political organisation and the relationship between space and political culture. There is a rich literature on the entanglement and co-constitution of digital and physical space in urban studies and geography, in particular. These studies typically examine the implications of such entanglements for our understanding of space in online and offline worlds (Iranmanesh and Alpar Atun 2020; Molnar 2014; Willems 2019). For example, Iranmanesh and Alpar Atun (2020: 322) argue that emerging digital spaces are transforming urban space, and they write that in contexts where the use of urban space is restricted – like during quarantine restrictions – 'social media provides an alternative space for everyday social and socio-spatial interactions'

Early internet theorists were optimistic about the potential of the internet as an emancipatory space (Daniels 2009; Loewenstein 2008) and some scholars of digital activism position digital technologies and 'mediated mobilisation' as providing activists with a 'structural advantage' to those working exclusively offline (Moore-Gilbert 2018), or as a 'third space' or new public space outside existing regimes of power (Arora 2015; Hoover and Echchaibi 2014; Smith and Halafoff 2020). Yet the case study in this article demonstrates how mobilisation, organisation, and action may occur online but the political decision makers and institutions that are the ultimate target of action exist in a relatively static offline power structure. Whilst the internet provides an opportunity to escape some of the power structures activists' encounter in physical space (for example, Lee 2016), and some technology may be 'socially shaped' by the way individuals appropriate it within their daily practices

(Silverstone 1999: 252), the internet is not a power-neutral space and 'technologies are expressions of larger social and political structures rather than being independent of them' (Kaun and Uldam 2018: 2102).

Method

This article is based on an ongoing, long-term ethnography conducted with the broad-based community organisation the Sydney Alliance in Sydney, Australia primarily involving long term participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The Sydney Alliance is a grassroots political coalition of over 40 partner organisations including religious congregations and groups, trade unions, service organisations, and other civil society groups. It is a member of the Industrial Areas Foundation, an international network of broad-based community organisations that follow an organising model initially developed by Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the 1930s (Alinsky 1941). Ethnographic research methods, primarily consisting of participant observation and interviews, is the favoured approach for recent studies of broad-based community organisations in the United States of America and United Kingdom (for example Braunstein 2017; Bretherton 2014; Wood 2007): the complexity of their internal organisation and the diversity of coalition partner organisations and individual people engaged the coalitions makes deep engagement as a researcher necessary to gain access and understanding, whilst ethnographic methods provide rich, deep data on real-life behaviour in relation to physical space, time, institutions, and ideas or beliefs (Travers 2001).

The ethnographic fieldwork for this project began in May 2018[1], when I started participant observation of one campaign team in the Sydney Alliance: the 'People Seeking Asylum' (PSA) team. I participated in the team's regularly scheduled meetings and working sub-groups; I attended the quarterly council meetings of the Sydney Alliance and a number of

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[1] This research was approved by The University of Notre Dame Human Research Ethics Committee.

their actions; I attended their six-day residential training and have acted as a trainer on their two-day 'foundations' training course twice. In late-2019 I also began participant observation of a second campaign team that developed and organised a major campaign for 2020 called 'Postcode 2020'. The launch of this campaign was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and morphed into the development of 'local groups.' I attended (online) meetings for one of these groups over a period of two months in the first half of 2020 alongside my continued observation of the PSA team. Where my participant observation occurred in physical locations around Sydney until March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Sydney Alliance to move their organising online and from mid-March the site of my fieldwork shifted to online spaces (primarily Zoom meetings) constructed by the Sydney Alliance.

In addition to participant observation, between May 2018 and March 2020 I also conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with regular members of the PSA team, staff organisers of the Sydney Alliance, leaders of the partner organisations involved in the coalition, and the founder of the Sydney Alliance.

Relational Impact of Digital Tools on Organizing

For broad-based community organisations like the Sydney Alliance, relationships are central to both their political culture and their political power. Their organizing work and political practices aim to build deep relationships between partner organisations and individual participants oriented towards taking political action together. Historically, these 'relational practices' have occurred face to face and the restrictions on public gathering implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic presented the Sydney Alliance with a significant challenge: whether it was possible to mediate their political practices through digital technology, and whether doing so would transform the culture of the Sydney Alliance. As I will show, whilst it is possible to replicate many formal political practices on a digital

platform such as Zoom the inherent constraints of any given digital platform will result in some kind of loss. In the case of the Sydney Alliance, this was a loss of informal sociability that would – long-term – risk diluting the depth of interpersonal relationships between participants and introduce a more transactional culture.

The model of broad-based organising practiced by the Sydney Alliance seeks to engage marginalised groups in political process and decision making at the local level, ultimately with the aim of recreating communities for the 'common good' and to 'replenish democracy' (Orr 2007: 10). Whilst each broad-based organisation is shaped by their particular context, a broad framework forms the basis for coalitions like the Sydney Alliance. Warren (2001: 91–92) describes it as (1) starting with 'the institutional life that […] exists in local communities', (2) 'develop[ing] cooperative ties and enhance[ing] the leadership capacity of community members', (3) the development of a collective identity and 'commitment to the common good', and (4) building power so that coalitions can intervene 'successfully in politics and government.' What this means in practice is that broad-based community organisations are built from pre-existing civil society organisations with an active membership base – like trade unions, religious congregations, and schools. They operate according to the logic of 'collective' rather than 'connective' action (Bennet and Segerberg 2012). The coalitions dedicate significant time and effort into training and building relationships between participants from different organisations; and participants are encouraged to find the deep values and motivations they may hold in common despite differences. Warren et al (2011: 67) argue that the 'primary work' of the professional organizers who run the coalitions is 'building relationships and power among people who have common interests.'

Subscribing to a view of political capacity and power after Putnam and Campbell (2010) that sees social capital as essential for civil society groups to wield any power in the

political sphere, broad-based community organisations see their power coming from the relationships they build across diverse civil society organisations. As such, the coalitions prioritise relationships above any particular issue. This is expressed by different coalitions in different ways: 'power before program' is a slogan used by the coalition One LA (Warren et al 2011: 71) whilst the Sydney Alliance states in all its trainings 'relationships precede action' (Fieldnotes, 29th May 2018). The role of the organizer in a broad-based community organization is not 'to win a few issues but to build an enduring formal organization that can continue to claim power and resources for the community' (Stall and Stoecker 1998).

'Relational' practices are thus central to the political culture and organising work of coalitions like the Sydney Alliance. These practices are often formal and include one-to-one 'relational meetings' between organisers and participants, or between two participants; and 'relational conversations' – short carefully facilitated one-to-one or small group conversations built into all meetings. Relational meetings and conversations involve 'listening and storytelling, [and] asking constructive questions' (Braunstein 2017: 46) and are a carefully cultivated skill developed through the formal training offered by the Alliance to all participants.

However, there are important aspects of the Sydney Alliance's culture that make it 'relational' but are not contained within these formal practices. In particular, informal sociability plays an important role in laying the ground upon which more formal relational practices and political action can occur. Informal sociability can create a particular 'affective intensity' that facilitates political conversations and – potentially – rapprochement across difference (Kligler-Vilenchik 2019: 14); in an organisation as diverse as the Sydney Alliance sociability thus contributes towards the formation of relationships that will, eventually, lead to political action.

For example, a typical Sydney Alliance council meeting prior to late-March 2020 involved an informal shared meal before the meeting, where participants have time to catch up and chat over food. The council meeting in early-March 2020 – the last in-person meeting before the Sydney Alliance moved all its organising online – was held in the offices of a trade union partner organisation in Sydney's central business district. Arriving 40 minutes before the start of the meeting, I found food laid out on platters in the large open-plan kitchen space outside the meeting room and the room already buzzing with conversation. Whilst some people took plates of food into the meeting room and sat down for in-depth conversations at tables, most milled around in the kitchen area. Staff organizers wandered around greeting everyone and occasionally making introductions. By the time the lead organiser began hustling us into the meeting room to start the council meeting I had spoken to five different people – two of whom I'd never met before – and made plans to have coffee in the coming weeks with one of my new acquaintances for a more formal relational meeting (Fieldnotes, 4th March 2020).

The shift to organising exclusively online only a few short weeks later was a drastic change for an organisation whose bread and butter was face to face organising. The Sydney Alliance was not opposed to technology: like other social movements and organizations, broad-based community organizations' self-organization has been transformed by 'mobile phones […] and personal computers' (Askanius 2012 in Kaun and Uldam 2018: 2100). The Alliance had pre-existing digital infrastructure which it used to efficiently operate and communicate with their leaders (and the international IAF network): a website, organizational email accounts, a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, and mobile phones. The Alliance has a regular Monday email sent to their mailing list - 'Across the Alliance', and most face-to-face meetings are organized by a combination of email invitations and phone calls. However, these digital tools are predominantly used for

coordination purposes (Cammaerts 2015: 92), rather than as a platform for action. The real 'work' of the Sydney Alliance – relationship building, discernment and decision making, and holding politicians to account – happens face to face.

In adopting a VOIP platform – Zoom – to mediate their organising work when they were forced to shift to online organising, the Sydney Alliance organisers consciously attempted to replicate their existing political practices online rather than adopt new ones. From late-March 2020 the regular one-to-one meetings between organisers and leaders, the campaign team meetings, and council meetings all were mediated by Zoom. Hjarvard (2008: 114) distinguishes between mediation – where communication is passed through a particular media technology – and mediatization – a long-term process 'whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a result of the growth of the media's influence.' Scholars of digital activism have argued that digital media has resulted in the 'mediatization' of activism: Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory of 'connective' action suggests the very logic of social movement action has changed from one premised on collective organisation to personalised, horizontal networks like those found on social media platforms.

However, Zoom is not a 'social media' where a movement constructs a public identity and builds a horizontal network through which to spread information. Cammaerts (2015: 91) categorises VOIP technologies like Zoom as 'real time' and 'private/inward' forms of digital communication with more in common with older synchronous technologies like the telephone than with social media. Users must know the 'meeting ID' of the Zoom call to join – in the case of Alliance meetings, these were sent in email invitations to existing participants. Zoom thus cannot be used – in this way, at least – to mobilize new participants unconnected to the organisation; nor is information 'shared' on a public forum as in Twitter or Facebook. Whilst the intention of the organizers in moving the Alliance's political practice

from offline meetings to an online VOIP platform was to enable cultural continuity - replicating exactly the particular relational practices of offline meetings on the online platform - the move to Zoom did impact upon the culture of the Alliance.

The formal relational practices that are the foundation of the Alliance's organising culture were able to be mediated with little change on Zoom – although there was a short learning curve for the organisers. At the first Council Meeting held on Zoom, the organisers had not yet learned how to set up 'breakout rooms' where meeting participants could be divided into smaller groups or pairs. The usual 'relational conversation' was thus not feasible: with over 60 people on the call, having each person share a personal reflection would take over an hour. Instead, the meeting chair asked a representative from each partner organisation present to share a reflection on the top challenge they were facing as an organisation due to the COVID-19 crisis (Fieldnotes, 23rd March 2020). Where each participant would usually get a chance to have a structured and reflective conversation with either one other person, or a small group focused upon their personal experience, values, and motivations – the meeting instead gave time to organisational (and more impersonal) reflection with only a handful of people speaking. In addition to making the majority of meeting attendees passive 'watchers' rather than active 'participants', this also resulted in a loss of 'relational' interaction between participants.

The notion of 'affordances' has been significant to the study of digital activism. Affordances are the possibilities for action contained within a particular technology - and users can be aware, or unaware, of these possibilities (Cammaerts, 2015: 89). The flipside of affordances are constraints - the things a particular technology is incapable of doing. In one respect, the Zoom platform contained the 'affordances' necessary for the Sydney Alliance political practices to continue unchanged: the synchronous video technology allowed meetings to continue as planned, with face-to-face interaction (albeit through a computer).

Indeed, in a Facebook post in mid-March, the Alliance posted an image of a zoom meeting with the caption 'still organising face-to-face' (Sydney Alliance, 18th March 2020). Those who did not have a webcam on their computer or a mobile phone with the capacity for video calling could dial into meetings by telephone. After the first few meetings, organisers quickly learned how to use the affordances of the Zoom platform to continue formal relational practices in Alliance meetings - primarily through moving people into breakout rooms for short 'relational' conversation in pairs or very small groups. Reflecting on the transition to online organising, an organiser said 'a lot of things we thought weren't possible to do online are possible' (Participant 14).

However, the constraints of the platform meant the opportunity for the unstructured social time that is so central to the Alliance culture was extremely limited: at one subsequent meeting, the time spent 'waiting' for the meeting to start was filled with spontaneous conversation by a couple of more confident meeting participants while others joined (Fieldnotes, 26th March 2020). As there is only one channel of sound, there was a limit to how many people could participate in this spontaneous social conversation without talking over each-other, and only those confident enough to talk in front of the whole meeting spoke. By moving the meetings to Zoom, the opportunity for spontaneous and informal 'small talk' that might often be enjoyed between two or three people sitting next to each other was missing. Similarly, the practice of sharing food together could not be replicated. Even the more formal relational practices were, at times, constrained by the VOIP technology. An organiser noted 'trying to have a relational meeting with someone over zoom and then the internet just dropping out or things freezing, it takes away from the flow of the conversation' (Participant 14).

The 'relational' culture of the Sydney Alliance does two important things for the coalition – and their dilution through online organising has consequences for the political

culture of the Alliance. First, the formal and informal practices build collective identity - and therefore the ground on which to take political action - in what is an otherwise highly diverse body of participants. Theorists of collective action argue that identifying with a collectivity 'including a sense of mutuality and solidarity' is a pre-requisite for taking action together (Hunt and Benford 2004: 434). Melucci's (1995: 45) interactionist account of collective identity claims that collective identity is a process - rather than fixed - and refers to 'a network of active relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions.' The act of 'relating' to another person in the organisation - explicitly cultivated by the relational practices of the Sydney Alliance - is thus essential for bridging the wide diversity within the Alliance. By emphasising the importance of identifying how your personal experiences shape your public life and interests through storytelling and listening to others in order to understand their political interests and motivations, the Alliance builds collective identity not on shared interests but on a shared commitment to relationships, listening, and curiosity.

Second, the rich network of relationships built across the Alliance - between people from diverse civil society and religious organisations - is an important form of social capital that forms the basis of much of the Alliance's power. One of the weekly Sydney Alliance newsletter emails sent mid-way through the COVID-19 lockdown stated: 'Whether a disaster is natural or economic, we know that two things are critical in a crisis: relationships & coordination' (Sydney Alliance 2020a). The relationships formed in the Sydney Alliance are not a by-product of campaign work, but rather a goal in-and-of themselves. Wood (Wood 2007: 186) calls these 'intentionally cultivated ties' a 'central font of strategic capacity' and argues that relational organising generates the 'greatest strategic asset' for broad-based community organisations. The Alliance themselves, unsurprisingly, also recognise the importance of the relationships built through their organising. The 'micro-organizational

work' (Stout 2010: 8) of relationship building between partner organisations and individual participants is how the Alliance attempts to create democratic power and the capacity to mobilise.

The Sydney Alliance was able to replicate the *formal* relational practices on Zoom – nearly entirely unchanged although sometimes interrupted by technical difficulties. The 'logic' of action thus remained the same: the Sydney Alliance was still an organisation that relied upon formal civil society organisations to provide pre-existing networks and worked to build relationships oriented toward action through face-to-face meetings. The loss of *informal* sociability, however, meant that the unstructured social time that formed the ground on which the formal practices could more easily occur was missing. No longer could you meet a new person informally at a large meeting – and then organise a formal relational meeting if you seemed to share common ground. Nor was their time to have the informal 'catch-up' conversations – checking in on how a holiday went, what children are doing, or on the health of a loved one – that often allow pre-existing relationships to flourish. As outlined above, it is the depth of these individual relationships that allow such a diverse coalition to take political action together. Over time, the loss of informal sociability will dilute the relational culture of the Alliance. A study of two Israeli political networks on WhatsApp found that the network that included casual social conversation had a different 'affective intensity' and promoted conversations across political difference more readily than the network exclusively engaged in political talk with no sociability (Kligler-Vilenchik 2019). Relying only upon the formal relational practices to maintain the 'relational' political culture of the Alliance means that interpersonal interactions within the organisation will be directed toward political action much more explicitly – resulting in a more transactional political culture.

Spatial Impact of Digital Tools on Organizing

The physical space available to and used by grassroots political groups shapes their culture and strategy. Scholars have long theorised how space shapes social interaction – and in particular how the design and accessibility of public space like streets, neighbourhoods, and parks enable or constrain interaction and participation in democracy (Marston 2003; Martin and Miller 2008). In many contemporary cities across the globe, so-called urban 'public' spaces are increasingly governed by the market – such as shopping malls or restaurants – whilst streets and government buildings are tightly policed by ever-more militarised police forces (Bodnar 2015; Davis 2006; Jones 2016). Despite a history of urban public spaces being important spaces of political action (Arora 2014), physical space for free public gathering by grassroots political actors is thus increasingly curtailed. Unlike movements and activist groups that seize public space in disruptive protest actions, the Sydney Alliance uses pre-existing congregational spaces across Sydney free from the control of either the market or the state and in doing so, constructs and maintains a non-contentious and moderate political culture based on relationality and political pragmatism. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, forced the Sydney Alliance to fundamentally reorient their relationship to physical space and the City as they moved their organising on to the Zoom platform and this, inevitably, impacted upon their political culture.

Prior to the COVID-19 public health orders restricting public gatherings in Australia, the Sydney Alliance utilised a range of physical spaces for their organising work. The six-day residential training I attended in May 2018 was held in an old Benedictine convent building in Sydney's North-Western suburbs, now run as a Catholic retreat centre. Participants in the training slept in narrow, simple bedrooms on the top floors where Nuns used to be housed. The training occurred in large flexible rooms on the ground floor looking out to trees, next to the window-lined dining room where we ate together that encompassed over a quarter of the

floor space of that level (Fieldnotes, 27th May 2018). Other meetings, trainings, and actions I attended were held in the crypt of a central-Sydney Uniting church, in a decommissioned chapel at a Catholic convent in Sydney's Inner-West, and in the meeting rooms of various trade unions in central-Sydney. The Sydney Alliance relied upon the physical infrastructure of their partner organisations to host meetings and smaller actions: and as religious organisations and trade unions make up the majority of partner organisations in the Alliance, their spaces are most frequently used.

The spaces used by the Sydney Alliance are not necessarily 'public', but they do all operate outside the control of either the market or the state. Further, they are specifically designed for congregation. The use of these spaces for political action creates a fundamentally different political culture within the Sydney Alliance than if they gathered in and occupied (legally or otherwise) streets and government buildings. First and foremost, the use of pre-existing congregational space is non-contentious. As I have argued elsewhere (Author 2019) the Sydney Alliance is a moderate political actor and it draws political power from bringing 'unlikely' political actors into political action – not from disruption and contentious action.

Second, the trade union spaces and the religious spaces each impart different characteristics to the Sydney Alliance culture. The trade union meeting rooms are typically highly functional, with purpose-built whiteboards and fixed projectors, good lighting, matching tables and chairs, and neutral décor. In some of the spaces, such as NSW Trades Hall, the meeting rooms look out onto posters or banners celebrating and commemorating historic trade union campaigns or advertising current ones (Fieldnotes, 19th October 2019). The religious spaces are, usually, less functional: projectors are propped onto unstable tables, much-used whiteboards are wheeled in, and a wide variety of tables and chairs make up the seating, which are usually kept until they are no-longer usable. However, there is usually a

large kitchen with mismatched crockery and cutlery, a zip for boiling water, cups for tea and coffee, and space to lay out and serve food.

Discussing the cultural differences of the trade union and religious partner organisations in the Sydney Alliance, an ex-organiser said 'So unions are really good at acting, and they're not very good at relating or reflecting. And churches are really good at relating, quite good at reflecting, and not very good at acting' (Participant 16). The Alliance's political culture incorporates both: expending significant resources to build strong relationships between both partner organisations and individual participants – evident in their use of formal relational practices, and incorporation of informal sociability into all their meetings and actions (discussed in greater detail in the following section) – and engaging in highly pragmatic and strategic political actions and campaign that focus on concrete outcomes.

A consequence of the Alliance's use of pre-existing congregational space borrowed from their partner organisations is that their political action is diffused across Sydney's suburbs. Where public assembly and political action is often characterised as a concentration of bodies in space (Butler 2015), the Alliance rather engages smaller numbers of people with relatively high frequency across the geography of Sydney. This has long posed a challenge for both organisation and participation: in the early years of the Alliance they formed local organising groups in the geographical regions of Sydney. These local groups ultimately failed - they were a large drain on the organisational resources of the Alliance, as the dispersed geography of Sydney made travel between the groups time consuming and costly for organisers (and the Alliance didn't have sufficient resources for an organiser for each group); and as the structures of power in Sydney operated predominantly at the city (or even State) scale, there were few problems that could be addressed solely by focusing on the hyper-local (Interview, Participant 2).

Thus, although the Alliance organises on a city (rather than neighbourhood) scale, in February 2020 (the month prior to the COVID-19 public health restrictions being implemented) 14 of the 23 events and meetings listed in their weekly 'Across the Alliance' emails were held in the central business district or neighbouring, inner-city suburbs. A member of the PSA team reflected on the difficulty of attending political meetings and actions held in the city, although not by the Sydney Alliance, when she lived in the Western suburbs: 'if they [political actions] are in the city, that is not easy, necessarily, if you have short notice, to turn up at a city thing that might be in the middle of the week' (Participant 13). Organisers recognised this was an ongoing challenge with Alliance organising, with one noting 'when we're bringing all the different voices of our communities together in terms of people who live in Mount Druitt and […] in Vaucluse. Finding a location that is convenient for everyone to get to at a reasonable time […] is really tricky' (Participant 14).

The introduction of public health restrictions on gatherings in response to COVID-19 in March 2020 fundamentally reoriented the Sydney Alliance's use of physical space and relationship to Sydney as a geographic entity as they were forced to move their organising online. In his study of a South Korean social movement, Lee (2016: 2259) writes that the activists' 'appropriation of cyberspace' was a reaction to the 'fragmentation and commodification of physical public spaces in Korean cities' that stymied their efforts to mobilise effectively in physical space. The Sydney Alliance's pivot to exclusively online organising was a similar reaction to the loss of physical space, although in this instance because of state imposed restrictions on gatherings to control the COVID-19 pandemic. These instances of 'exploration' (Lee, 2016: 2262) or appropriation of digital technologies to circumvent state restrictions echo the hopes of early internet theorists that the internet was a space of freedom with emancipatory potential (Daniels 2009; Loewenstein 2008: 9), and of

more recent digital activism scholars writing on 'third spaces' or new digital public space (Arora 2014; Halafoff and Smith 2020).

Mattoni (2017: 501) argues that the increasingly widespread use of digital communication technologies has changed the 'temporal and spatial characteristics of political participation and mobilization.' Indeed, many studies of digital activism have emphasised how digital technology enables activists to create global digital networks connecting local struggles to each other. For example, in a study of an anti-mining camp in rural Sweden, Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig (2017) identified how the use of digital technologies – social media in particular – allowed the local activists to connect their fight to anti-mining struggles and movement intellectuals globally, and for supporters unable to be physically present at the site to organise parallel protests and actions in support of the cause. For the Sydney Alliance, the transition to organising exclusively through digital technology did *not* transform the scale at which they operate: on the one hand, the Sydney Alliance is already a member of an international network of broad-based community organisations – the Industrial Areas Foundation – with pre-existing and formal communication channels that pre-date social media; on the other hand, they remain a city-wide coalition that organises to target local councils, state government, and local members of federal parliament. However, organising through video conferencing *did* transform the Alliance's ability to organise participants effectively across the diffused geography of Sydney.

Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig (2017: 312) note that while 'movements are increasingly … digitized … [they] tend to act from or around specific geographical places and areas.' In the case of the Sydney Alliance, this is the sprawl that is contemporary Sydney. Using the Zoom platform to mediate meetings, the Alliance identified neighbourhoods in Sydney where multiple existing and active Alliance leaders resided and formed 'local organising groups' in those areas. By July 2020, there were 15 local organising groups

dispersed from Hornsby in the city's north, to the Blue Mountains in the west, to Camden in the south (Sydney Alliance 2020b). Some of these groups conducted 'listening' campaigns on a local scale – collecting stories about the challenges facing local communities; others attempted to build relationships with strong local civil society groups in their neighbourhood to create a strong network of local, organised relationships in a traditional community organising effort.

The local groups formed during the COVID-19 pandemic face the same challenges regarding the concentration of power and decision making that earlier iterations of neighbourhood groups did, but the use of Zoom rather than in-person meetings made resourcing local groups significantly easier, with organisers able to attend multiple meetings in different – widely dispersed – neighbourhoods on the same day without leaving their home. Further, organisers found 'it's easier for people to come to meetings, especially after hours meetings' (Participant 14): Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig's (2017) finding that digital technology allowed supporters unable to present at the site of the anti-mining struggle to participate through other means is born out in this case. Whilst the participants in the Alliance are not dispersed across multiple countries, they do nonetheless face barriers to participation such as inadequate public transport, long commutes to meetings, the cost of transport, and insufficient time to attend meetings in person. Shifting the meetings to Zoom thus removed (most of) these barriers for Alliance participants.

Where the use of religious and trade union spaces shaped the culture of the Sydney Alliance prior to their use of digital technology for organising, the shift to conducting their organising exclusively on Zoom invariably impacted on political culture. Scholars of digital activism have noted it is a mistake to treat the internet as a 'neutral' space (Treré and Mattoni 2016: 291; Couldry 2015). Cauldry (2015: 621) argues that we must consider how political action conducted online is 'constituted by … platforms for data-led profit, not political or

social ends.' Whilst the Zoom platform is not a social media platform, it is still a commercial platform. Just as shopping malls and restaurants are designed for interactions predicated on a market logic, so the Zoom platform was designed primarily for businesses and operates with a commercial agenda. Alliance meetings were no longer being shaped by cultures of hospitality, relationality, and political efficiency – but rather by commercial logic of a large technology company: for example, meetings could no longer be hosted by anyone with the willingness to do so, as the ability to host meetings with multiple participants lasting longer than 45 minutes required access to a paid version of Zoom.

Further, multiple security issues have been reported on the platform – from 'Zoom bombing' to the lack of end-to-end encryption (Lee and Grauer 2020; Marczak and Scott-Railton 2020) – all making political organising work conducted on the platform vulnerable to disruption and surveillance. In response to concerns that Zoom calls routed through China could be monitored by the Chinese government, Zoom offered secured routing only to those willing to pay for the privilege (Reisinger 2020). Meanwhile, as with large social media companies, Zoom's privacy policy allows the company to do 'essentially … whatever they want' with user data (Reisinger 2020). These concerns were absent from the discussions I witnessed within the Alliance during their period of organising exclusively online, and the organisation risks treating Zoom as a 'neutral' online space – where the challenges to their work come from apolitical technological constraints rather than the commercial nature of the Zoom platform itself.

The activists in Lee's (2016: 2259) study adopted digital technology in reaction to the loss of physical public spaces in Korean cities. The Sydney Alliance's pivot to online organising was a similar response to the loss of physical space, although in this instance because of state-imposed restrictions to public gathering in response to COVID-19 rather than a commodification of public space. This shift to relying exclusively on digital

technology to organise did not, however, change the scale at which they operated – nor did it 'globalise' their action. But digital tools did give the Alliance a solution to two spatial problems: the closure of public space by the state due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenge of coordinating and funding organising across the sprawl of contemporary Sydney. Whilst the former challenge is short-term (in this particular case), the latter has been an ongoing problem from the inception of the organisation and the Alliance is likely to continue with a hybrid organising model after the pandemic, 'I think when this is over we will still be doing some meetings online or switch between doing some […] face to face and some online' (Participant 14). Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig (2017: 312) argue that 'activist media practices, and digital articulations of political grievances, need to be understood not as disentangled from physical geographies but instead, as intertwined with them.' The Sydney Alliance's pivot to digital organising was a reaction to, and shaped by, the political and spatial context of their offline world.

Conclusion

Digital activism literature has tended to focus on the transformative effect of digital technologies on activism – particularly at the level of scale and the logic of action. This article and the case study within it, by contrast, demonstrates how grassroots political groups can harness digital technologies to solve problems of geography and restriction whilst still maintaining a local scale and collective action logic. There are great instrumental benefits to grassroots political groups in adopting digital technologies: such as organising across large geographic space and lowering some of the barriers to participation in action. However, whilst the affordances of a VOIP platform like Zoom may allow the replication of political practices aimed at developing deep interpersonal relationships, it's constraints nonetheless

'flattened' the distinctive relational culture of the Sydney Alliance by removing the possibility for informal sociability.

Further, whilst digital technologies can be used to 'escape' restrictive physical public spaces governed either by the market or the state, grassroots political groups cannot so easily escape from commercial logic or surveillance when using corporate digital platforms like Zoom. Further, even if organising could occur outside existing power structures in online spaces, the issues on which many grassroots groups organise remain governed and shaped by those very power structures and the groups themselves, inevitably, must shape their political action and strategy to those structures.

This article has shown that, even when resisting the transformation of scale or logic of action, digital technologies nonetheless change the culture of grassroots political groups through flattening distinctive political practices and constraining the development of deep interpersonal relationships. The use of VOIP platforms like Zoom by grassroots political groups is likely to continue long past the end of COVID-related restrictions, given the instrumental benefits of their adoption. Whilst we have a good understanding of how asynchronous digital media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have transformed political action over time, more study is needed into the use of VOIP platforms like Zoom by grassroots political groups and the long-term effects on collective action cultures and practices.

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