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MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF ANTI-AUSTERITY PROTESTS IN THE EU

GRIEVANCES, IDENTITIES AND AGENCY

Edited by

Tao Papaioannou and Suman Gupta



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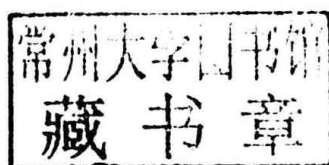
Edited by **Tao Papaioannou** and **Suman Gupta**

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Grievances, Identities and Agency

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Media Representations of Anti-Austerity Protests in the EU

This book analyses constructions of injustice, group identification and participation in news and social media in anti-austerity protests within the European Union (EU). Since 2008, EU member-states have witnessed waves of protests and demonstrations against the adoption of austerity measures and alignment of domestic economies with the prevailing global neo-liberal order. Understanding how the media represents dissent and how it influences public deliberation is of critical importance. It is accordingly necessary to explore the strategies deployed and role played by news and social media in representing and perhaps acting upon anti-austerity protests in the Eurozone crisis. This volume undertakes such a critical exploration.

Tao Papaioannou is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Communications at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus. She co-edited a special issue of *Cyprus Review* on media representation and the 2013 financial and political crises in Cyprus (Spring 2015) and *Media Studies* on critical insights in European media literacy research and policy (December 2012).

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1 Introduction

Articulating Grievances, Identities and Agency: Critical Issues in Media Representations of Anti-Austerity Protests in the EU

Tao Papaioannou

In the wake of the Eurozone economic crisis in 2008, European Union (EU) member-states such as Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain have witnessed a number of protests against the adoption of austerity measures and alignment of domestic economies with the prevailing global neo-liberal order. The implementation of austerity policies has exacerbated social conflicts within and across EU member-states, between citizens and elites. Anti-austerity protests largely condemn the neo-liberal version of democracy and capitalism, and attempt to reconceptualise social justice and equality at both material and discursive levels (della Porta, 2012; Demetriou, 2013). Using protests as a mechanism of political representation, protesting citizens usually aim to achieve their objectives through either influencing particular target groups such as key decision makers and constituencies, or communicating their agendas to as wide an audience as possible. In this process, protestors rely on media to convey, amplify and sustain their messages in order to obtain legitimacy in public discourse, mobilise political support and broaden the scope of conflict (McCarthy et al., 1996). Consequently, media portrayal of protests – or a lack thereof – influences the dynamics and outcomes of social protests. Since the institutional politics and social demands that animate contentious action have arguably become more extensively mediated and complex than ever (Cottle, 2008), understanding how media represent these and bear upon public deliberation within and across EU member-states is of critical importance. Such a project is of particular significance amidst public misgivings about the rise of far-right populist parties across Europe, the emergence of new left movements in Southern Europe and the dominance of the neo-liberal financial-political elite in national and European political spheres. As such, anti-austerity protests offer a context for examining media's functions and capacities for providing information and analysis, encouraging the deliberation of differing policies and interests, and thus enabling democracy to function.

When examining media response to social protests, in addition to mainstream news media, commercial social media platforms have become important to contemporary forms of citizen activism. Social movements, advocacy groups and non-governmental organisations increasingly incorporate such platforms into broader practices of informing, networking, campaigning and mobilising. It is widely accepted that media play a seminal part in contentious politics, and may bridge or widen fissures between different publics and within opinion formation and policymaking. It is accordingly necessary to explore the strategies deployed and the role played by news and social media in representing and acting upon anti-austerity protests in the Eurozone crisis. This volume undertakes such a critical exploration.

The following are the key questions addressed in the book:

- How do media negotiate with and represent forms of economic, political and social conflict that give rise to anti-austerity protests?
- How does discursive struggle over visibility and representation of public grievances become manifest in news and social media across and beyond the EU?
- How are collective forms of identification portrayed in and materialised through media discourse?
- How do the evolving potentials and constraints of (social) media affect consensus and action mobilisation?
- What emerging developments in the media influence forms and spaces of political activism and citizen advocacy?
- What ethical considerations attach to journalism in the neo-liberal, democratic and pluralistic contexts of the current crisis?

With these questions in mind, analysing media discourse on anti-austerity protests in the EU requires reflective deconstruction of media representation, wherein the relations between national and European governing institutions and elites, state agencies and protesting citizens are constructed and performed. There is, for instance, no necessary unity amongst them; neither is there amongst the popular masses. There have been various accounts of the dynamic interplay between late neo-liberalism, the politics of austerity, public discontent and media coverage of the economic crisis in recent years. For example, research studies have examined media representations of the crisis in the context of those individual member-states that have accentuated neo-liberal austerity policies (Mercille, 2015; Papaioannou and Hajimichael, 2015; Tzogopoulos, 2013). Focusing on questions of identity, agency, solidarity, citizenship and democracy, books such as *Social movements in times of austerity: bringing capitalism back into protest analysis* (della Porta, 2015a), *Understanding European movements: new social movements, global justice struggles, anti-austerity protests* (Fominaya and Cox, 2013) and

Austerity and protest: popular contention in times of economic crisis (Giugni and Grasso, 2015) offer overviews of the processes and dynamics of protest movements in the context of austerity. Still, the likes of *Critical perspectives on social media and protest: between control and emancipation* (Dencik and Leister, 2015), *New media and public activism: neoliberalism, the state and radical protest in the public sphere* (Roberts, 2014), and *Social media, politics and the state: protests, revolutions, riots, crime and policing in the age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* (Trottier and Fuchs, 2015) explore social movements' strategies for using social media as campaigning and structuring devices to organise protest rather than just represent it.

This has, then, been a rich field of investigations and analysis and production; and yet, none has adequately addressed the issue of comparing and contrasting media representations of anti-austerity protests within and across EU member-state countries. There is a need to examine media portrayals of – and interventions in – protests and issue-based campaigns, with an emphasis on how these relate to citizen advocacy from domestic to European to global levels. Such investigation must necessarily adopt a comparative perspective across news and social media and across political and national contexts. The media's role in anti-austerity movements in Europe has so far appeared as an ancillary or tangential concern, an interstitial factor, as the theme of occasional context-specific papers or chapters, but has eluded focused, sustained and comparative analysis. And yet, as will become apparent in the following chapters, such scholarship and publications as are available do attest to the great importance of this issue.

Increasingly, recent research is detecting less straightforward and more fractured media response to protests, suggesting complex mitigating variables in media politics of dissent. A number of social, political and technological changes might be responsible for this. First, mass demonstrations are increasingly moving from the political margins towards public acceptance for an expanded range of causes, involving many political groups and actors at various levels. Globalisation, Europeanisation and Euroscepticism, left populism (e.g. Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece) and right-wing nationalism (e.g. the UK Independence Party), the global or Eurozone financial crisis and the War on Terror have combined to produce a new world order in which geopolitical interests and outlooks have shifted. News reporting of demonstrations taking place across different EU countries has become more intricately interconnected. Such changing dynamics in turn alter the alignment of the media's interests with those of political elites, leading to more complex media interactions with governments and global institutions and media representations of dissent. Second, the social and technological trend of freer and wider access to information and a complex and pervasive media ecology – comprising mainstream, alternative and independent media platforms and increased

communication flows and interactive capabilities – have made possible new forms and spaces for contentious politics, facilitating international and even global dissemination. In considering the new turns of contentious politics, the commercial interests and agendas of media providers need to be factored in (Papaioannou, 2015). Third, news reporting of protests is inflected by the increasing convergence between anti-austerity protestors and journalists as members of the middle class, resulting in more supportive media coverage and criticism of neo-liberal policies and their polarising social effects (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014).

These recent developments prompt new approaches for the analysis of the contemporary media politics of dissent. This crucial field of mediated democracy, in the context of anti-austerity protests in the EU, requires comparative examination across media, temporal-spatial contexts, and more importantly, modes of social mobilisation. It is broadly recognised that news media are largely relevant for protestors' inclusion in wider society, in order to obtain public recognition and support and to generate pressure for policy response. At the same time, the ongoing transformations in information and communication technologies and grassroots media practices have undoubtedly affected the mediation opportunity structures facing protest actors. As seen in some protests in Spain and Greece, social media have played a crucial role in the articulation of citizens' grievances and coordination of protest action, nationally and internationally (Khondker, 2011). Arguably, social media have also expanded the symbolic process of their constitution as collective or connective forms of identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Papaioannou and Olivos, 2013). The networked nature of social media may decentralise hierarchical, top-down movements and generate new forms of 'flat' social movements, emphasising personalised action frames such as those enabled by individual (or collective) content production and input. More broadly, social media may alter the political opportunity structure by further publicising dissensus amongst the political elite (Bennett, 1990) and creating lines of communication for protestors to engage new political players and draw international attention to national or local problems. With that said, research has detected disparities between online communication, interest and action and offline engagement, indicating a process of participation more complex than previously thought – from minimal to more ambitious modes, from online to offline (Carpentier, 2011; Kroh and Neiss, 2012; Papaioannou, 2013). Hence, understanding how contentious actions are negotiated in the online environment also has implications for transferring online interests to online and offline participation.

Additionally, functioning policies need information-flow to engage citizens, and that information is usually first created and circulated by news media and then redistributed and commented upon on social media. Most news media organisations nowadays provide news in the