1 Reconceptualizing citizen media

A preliminary charting of a complex domain

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This chapter draws on established scholarship in a variety of disciplines, the rich contributions to the current volume, and a wide range of concrete examples of different practices to chart the territory of citizen media as an emerging field of study and offer a critical examination of the main concepts that underpin it: public(s), citizen/citizenship and media. It further explores a range of features that characterize and delimit the concept of citizen media from related terms such as citizen and participatory journalism; alternative, radical and community media; and social and digital media. We conclude with a provisional definition of citizen media that encompasses content and practices, values and narratives, the collective and the individual, the local and the global, and the concrete and the virtual, and that acknowledges the complex dynamic of appropriation and reverse appropriation within which all citizen media initiatives operate.

Citizen Media and Public Spaces and the series in which it appears are part of a broad vision that extends beyond traditional scholarship to engage with the lived experience of unaffiliated individuals and collectives as they reclaim public and digital spaces in the pursuit of non-institutionalized agendas. These citizens, a term we will shortly critique and qualify, do so through a variety of media and practices, some of which are represented in contributions to this volume. They include witnessing and documenting events first hand, either textually, through tweets about unfolding events in Libya and Syria, for instance (Chouliaraki), or visually, using mobile phones or cameras during the 2005 London bombings in the UK (Cross), the 2014 Israeli attacks on Gaza (Blaagaard and Allan), and by refugees in international waters, a no-man’s land that raises questions about the very concept of citizenship (Ponzanesi). They also include producing documentary videos to express a personal sense of alienation or raise awareness of social issues in China (Beretta); subtitling and disseminating a controversial documentary such as the BBC’s The Power of Nightmares into Spanish to intervene in political debates from a non-mainstream perspective (Pérez-González); decorating a bus stop to draw attention to detrimental changes in the housing benefit system in the UK (Hughes and Parry); blogging and creating websites to disseminate non-mainstream
news in Bulgaria (Rone); creating shared communication platforms for activists to facilitate mutual learning and cross-fertilization in the World Social Forum (Stephansen); evading censorship in Chinese digital space (Nordin); designing or participating in locative media initiatives in Denmark and the United States in order to co-create urban space (Ejsing-Duun); hacking websites and blogs on the Bulgarian Internet (Rone); and staging different types of protest – from squirting black oil on British Petroleum’s sunflower logo at the Tate Gallery in London (Hughes and Parry) to organizing nanodemonstrations consisting of plastic toys in Russian towns (Nim).

Other practices and media are not represented in this volume but are equally important to our preliminary conceptualization of citizen media as a field of enquiry. They include writing and painting graffiti in public space (Jaffe et al. 2012; Shehab 2015); producing mockumentaries (Roscoe and Hight 2001) that subvert official narratives; archiving (Elsadda 2015), a good example being the Vox Populi initiative,¹ which archives material related to the 2011 Egyptian revolution from the perspective of those involved in it, rather than those in authority; staging flash-mob performances (Molnár 2014), which might take the form of a Bollywood dance on a Mumbai train (Shresthova 2013) or flamenco dancing and singing in Spanish banks to protest the economic crisis (BBC News 2013); fansubbing, also known as amateur subtitling (Pérez-González 2013a, 2013b); volunteer subtitling and translation for revolutionary and protest movements (Baker 2016); modding, which involves modifying video games to enhance the immersive experience, or – to use an example from Layne and Blackmon (2013) – to change the narrative of a game to accommodate a feminist perspective; and performing parkour in the ruins of Gaza, as demonstrated on the cover of the current volume and on the dedication page; among many other types of intervention.

Many of these practices – like modding, producing mockumentaries, archiving and staging flash mobs – are not restricted to the type of citizen-led initiatives covered by our definition of citizen media, to be outlined in detail later in this chapter. Like most social activities, the particular form that a citizen media practice might take is part of the wider repertoire of social practices available to institutions as well as unaffiliated citizens, and even what starts off as a citizen-led initiative is often subsequently appropriated by corporate culture, as we argue later and as several of the contributors demonstrate. Our attempt to delimit a preliminary and inevitably porous conceptualization of citizen media here, and our involvement in initiating the series in which the current volume appears, are intended to inaugurate an ambitious project that involves building on existing scholarship in a variety of disciplines to map out a highly interdisciplinary territory of scholarly enquiry and practice, one where the boundaries between the university and the street, between different disciplines, and between physical and virtual spaces are all critically examined, questioned and renegotiated.

In order to establish this project on firm grounds, and without suggesting that our proposed conceptualization is not open to debate and rethinking as
we engage with the wider community, we need to clarify what we mean by *citizen, media, public(s) and space(s)* at this stage. The concepts of *the citizen* and *citizenship* already mark an interdisciplinary area of enquiry even before we link them to media and public space: they were developed in the fields of law, political science, migration studies and sociology, among other disciplines, and we engage further with them later in this chapter. *Media,* a term we also revisit later in the chapter, constitutes an entire field of studies in its own right, but it is increasingly being theorized within a wider range of disciplines, including communication studies, journalism and sociology, and often now features in discussions of performance, literature and visual anthropology. *The public* similarly crosses the domains of political science, communication studies and sociology, and when used in conjunction with the concept of *space,* as in this volume, recalls Jürgen Habermas’ (1989) notion of the public sphere. But the concept of *space* is also theorized in a range of other disciplines, including urban studies, performance, film and media studies, postcolonial studies and migration studies. Beyond academia, all four concepts – *citizen, media, public(s) and space(s)* – have acquired a variety of meanings and connotations, depending on the interpreter’s political position and the context in which they are used.

We begin our enquiry below by drawing on communication studies to examine the notions of *public and publics,* specifically engaging with some of the ways in which citizen practices address and construct public space, including physical, digital and networked spaces. We then move on to the two notions – *citizen and media* – that constitute the new territory we wish to map out, with a view to elaborating a preliminary definition of *citizen media* that delimits it as clearly as possible from the many terms with which it is often conflated, such as *participatory, community, alternative, radical, social and digital media.*

**Public space(s)**

Communication studies has traditionally drawn on Jürgen Habermas’ (1989) concept of the public sphere to theorize the political dynamics and importance of communication. The Habermasian *public sphere* is a realm in which people may freely engage in debate about issues that concern them, and where ‘access is guaranteed to all citizens’ (Habermas 1964/2010:114). It is not the state or the institutions of bureaucracy, but is ‘a sphere that mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as bearer of public opinion [and] accords with the principle of the public sphere’ (Habermas 1964/2010:115). The principle, or principles, of the public sphere consist(s) of accessibility, acceptance of a level playing field (with no privileges) and rational legitimation of arguments. Habermas’s concept privileges mass media, especially the press, as the primary mediator between the systemic world – that is, the market economy and state apparatus – and the life worlds, or individual social actors. Indeed, in his 1964 encyclopaedia...
entry on ‘The Public Sphere’, he explicitly states that newspapers, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. As facilitators of public debate and gatekeepers of the political sphere, the (mass) media are moreover in a position to influence what is being debated and how these debates impact society, as well as the state apparatus. Attempts to explain the work of journalists and the broadcast media as the so-called fourth estate continue to draw on the notion of the public sphere as theorized by Habermas, but the concept is increasingly being questioned. Its critique tends to focus on two main areas: first, the strict division Habermas maintains between the political, systemic world and its attendant bureaucratic structures on the one hand, and the life world of the public on the other; and second, the exclusive focus on rational and consensus-seeking debate and discourses in the public sphere as a whole (Torgerson 2010). Torgerson argues that rather than two separate spheres, one of which governs the other and needs mediators to facilitate debate, we should be looking at the public and systemic realm as one organic whole within which both public and systemic discourses intermingle and interact. Indeed, Torgerson believes that even the systemic realm is structured by discourse and not merely, as Habermas would have it, by bureaucratic regulations. Whereas Habermas places policy outside language, Torgerson insists on the structuring power of language, which is never neutral. It is this structuring power of language that renders the systemic susceptible to the impact of public discourse and dissent. Torgerson further argues against Habermas’ reliance on reason and rational debate and instead views policy as a contextualized process, that is, as discursive social practice.

The impact of digitalization, online interaction and mobile media in recent years has further challenged Habermas’s theorization of the political role of mass media, supporting Torgerson’s argument that the public and systemic spheres are discursively interlinked. Political party leaders comment on social issues on Facebook, announce candidacies for presidencies on Twitter, and engage in taking selfies at statemen’s funerals. The range and ready availability of diverse political voices has also changed the way we think of publics and the public sphere. Unaffiliated individuals may now engage in political conversation as easily as Members of Parliament and can cumulatively shift the ‘systemic’ agenda by posting photographs and comments or by recording and uploading visual records of a first-hand experience using their mobile devices. This multiplicity of voices and tenors, technologies and media platforms inevitably challenges the idea of the public sphere as one unifying space, as Stephansen (this volume) points out, citing the work of Nancy Fraser (1990) and her concept of counter-publics – i.e., alternative publics constituted by citizens in subordinate social positions. Michael Warner (2002), who also draws on Fraser (1990), famously argued for the idea of multiple publics: self-organizing and reflexive publics that are generated through temporal discourses and socially shared spaces. Warner’s publics are always already simultaneously personal and impersonal, because public speech is addressed doubly to ‘us’ and to ‘strangers’ connected to
each other in an imagined community (Anderson 1989). This double address connects us to strangers in such a way that our subjectivity is immediately understood as resonating with that of others, Warner argues. In other words, publics not only share discourses and social space but also social imaginaries. Within these shared social spaces and imaginaries, publics do not need to engage in face-to-face – or body-to-body – interaction. Indeed, the very sense of ‘place’ and ‘space’ has long been questioned in communication studies (Meyrowitz 1985). The ‘space’ or infrastructure that seems to encompass publics today, it has been suggested, is the Internet, perhaps because of its potential inclusivity and ability to engender a multiplicity of experience (Fenton 2012). But we would argue that the kind of publics that have unfettered access to the Internet and the digital literacy to navigate it are restricted to certain geographical areas of the world and certain generational groups. As Fenton also reminds us, ‘[t]he Internet may be democratizing, but more often than not its effects are felt most strongly in the global middle class’ (2012:155). Nevertheless, we accept – with Fenton – that the informal and unbureaucratic structure of the Internet, its transnational reach and fragmenting properties allow for unattached activism and an easy way out of political commitments: Internet publics and politics have no member lists and no physical connections, which limits and contains commitment to a political and social cause. The Internet, then, is not a democratic space per se but has the potential to function as such, for those who can access and use it, depending on the nature of various political and social practices and contexts (Fenton 2012).

Stephansen (this volume) refines the above conceptualization of publics by arguing against treating them as ‘disembodied spaces of discourse’ and proposing instead that we conceptualize them as ‘spaces of political and pedagogic practice’ – practice that extends beyond the production and circulation of media content. This perspective, she explains, has the advantage of alerting us to the ‘material, embodied and social aspects of processes of public-formation’ and allows us to conceptualize citizen media as ‘more than just the technical infrastructure that supports counter-publics . . . [and] to consider the diverse constellation of practices that contribute to the making of publics’, as she demonstrates very effectively through her case study of shared communication activism in the World Social Forum. Stephansen’s approach nevertheless shares with other scholars we have already cited the idea of publics as made and as emergent, as being called into existence, both discursively and – from her perspective, and ours – through concrete practices.

Where traditional media studies tend to downplay the physical and concrete practices of citizens and publics, performance studies and theories of performativity add an understanding of public spaces and citizens’ interactions within them in more tangible terms whose insights extend beyond performance studies. Theresa de Lauretis’ (1987) and Judith Butler’s (1990) explorations of the power of the performative demonstrate how we perform
ourselves within the disciplining norms of society. Focusing on norms of gender and sexuality, they draw on and develop Foucault’s (1979) theoretical insights to argue that in performing according to certain norms and expectations, we simultaneously construct and uphold these norms. Building on Chouliaraki (2013), Blaagaard and Allan (this volume) discuss journalism as performative in similar terms, and argue that the performative power of this particular public space is likewise constrained by and enacts prevailing norms, in this case ‘a certain set of frames within which a news story can be heard and understood’. Nevertheless, social norms are never static: they constantly evolve and are renegotiated through our disruptive performative acts and our conscious and unconscious reworking of them. Nim’s discussion (this volume) of nanodemonstrations in Russia as ‘a form of cultural performance’ that broke with tradition, and challenged but did not (officially) break the law, testifies to the power of the human imagination and its perseverance in renegotiating and subverting prevailing norms. The very concept of a protest involving Kinder Surprise and other toys, she explains, ‘was a novelty in the history of the Russian protest movement’. While it was initially met with the usual arrests and then with ridicule from the authorities and dismissed as ‘a cheap sensation’ by some, it did force the police to engage in the process of responding to an application for a permit to hold a toy protest and managed to attract considerable national and international attention.

McDonald’s discussion of popular resistance during the first Palestinian Intifada alerts us to the transformative power of performance. ‘Collective singing and dancing’ during that period, he argues (2013:123–24),

opened up performative spaces for the integration of new communities, bodies, and ideologies. Such media did more than simply give voice to the subaltern experience of dispossession, but in the act of performance it also offered an essential means of enduring that performance. Through performance new ways of imagining Palestinian bodies and the body politic emerged, opening spaces for contemplating new directions and new possibilities in the national movement.

Situated within the field of performance studies, specifically theatre, Hughes and Parry (this volume) extend the discussion of performance and performativity in public space in interesting directions. Focusing on forms of activism where protestors draw on the medium of theatre ‘to create imaginative projections against the perceived order of things, and as tactical interventions and communicative tools’, they opt for using the term theatricality, rather than performativity, because while similarly focusing on ‘the performance-like character of the social, symbolic and material domains’, theatricality directs our attention to the techniques involved in performance, which ‘opens up an opportunity to examine how bodies work in relation to each other in contested sites through the manifestation of gestural grammars’.
A pivotal notion of performativity emerges out of this diverse body of work that suggests two interrelated understandings of what performing public spaces might entail. First, during the past three decades performance studies has engaged with the intersections between theatricality and interpretive anthropology and has drawn attention to the question of spectators and their role in mediating identity and community. The spectator is called upon by the theatricality of media to imagine herself as a (cosmopolitan) citizen and engage in acts of both local and global solidarity. Second, performativity means that we are always already performing – i.e. ‘doing’ and impacting others – through the words we use as well as our bodies, actions and other facets of our being; everything we do is a form of performance that participates in constructing the social space in which we live and act as citizens. This brings to the fore the issue of the media through which we perform and express ourselves and the question of how citizen media, as conceptualized here, interact within and construct public spaces.

Citizen media and related concepts

The public and publics, as we have argued, may be understood as emerging out of the multiple ways in which individuals and communities express themselves through performances, practices and discourses in concrete as well as virtual spaces. The media through which they express themselves are citizen media, irrespective of whether they are digital or physical. And yet, where the term citizen media is used in the literature, it often seems to be confined to citizens’ engagements with digital and social media technologies. The emphasis is predominantly on the proliferation of citizen voices in digital space, and often exclusively on citizen journalism, a term that tends to be used interchangeably with citizen media (Allan and Thorsen 2009). This is especially true in the context of the ‘I have a voice’ paradigm, as Chouliaraki calls it (2013), where ‘it is the personal and subjective imagery and storytelling that are seen as authentic and therefore truthful’ (Blaagaard and Allan, this volume; Blaagaard 2013). In this conceptualization, driven by a variety of traditions within communication studies, reference to citizen media revolves around the political or newsworthy engagement with society by citizens who use mobile technology and digital media platforms to record, report and disseminate news online and through broadcast media. This, to our mind, confines the powerful concept of citizen media to a very limited area of practice and scholarship, completely conflating it with citizen journalism, a concept we regard as part of but not synonymous with citizen media. It also assumes a very restrictive definition of technology, which we understand, following Williams (1981, cited in Blaagaard and Allan, this volume), as ‘the body of knowledge appropriate to the development of particular skills as well as the practical conditions of their application or use via a range of devices’ (Blaagaard and Allan, this volume). Needless to say, these devices need not be digital.
Bowman and Willis’s definition of *participatory journalism* is similarly too restricted to use as a synonym of *citizen media* as conceptualized here. *Participatory journalism*, they explain (2003:9), is

> [t]he act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

Lievrouw (2011:215) offers a similar perspective, asserting that *participatory journalism* ‘adopts the values and practices of mainstream news production and public opinion to cover issues, concerns, perspectives, and communities that are ordinarily sidelined by the mainstream press’. Our own research suggests that citizen reporting on and documenting of events is often at odds with ‘the values and practices of mainstream news production and public opinion’; indeed, members of some collectives such as Mosireen in Egypt (Baker 2016) tend to be deeply suspicious of such values and practices, and of the entire institution of the press and mainstream media.

Rone (this volume) alerts us to another, related issue here. She makes a distinction between *participatory* and *citizen journalism* and argues that in participatory journalism, ‘audience members contribute their voices to a centralized information news source’, whereas citizen journalism ‘is not dependent on the central presence of third party organizations’. In this sense, Rone explains, ‘citizen journalism could be perceived as giving voice to those whose voices are ignored or suppressed and as capable of producing counter-publics and counter-discourses’. Notwithstanding the overlap and confusion surrounding the various terms we have cited so far, the idea of independence from a third party mediator or benefactor is highly relevant to our attempt to define *citizen media*, as we explain shortly.

Thinking along the lines we wish to pursue to elaborate a more robust conceptualization of citizen media, Rone also argues that ‘[t]he impact of citizen journalism [itself] . . . cannot be understood without placing it within the broader system of interdependencies involving mainstream traditional journalism and other citizen media practices such as graffiti, protest art and rap/hip hop, among others’. All contributors to this volume embed their discussion of different types of citizen media practices within this broader framework of citizen media research.

The current preoccupation with and conflation of citizen media with social and digital media is another phenomenon we would like to challenge. We view this development as restrictive as well as insensitive to the realities of the uneven global distribution of power and resources. It ignores the fact that many individuals and communities across the globe still lack adequate Internet access and relevant levels of digital literacy to participate meaningfully in the digital revolution. Such marginalized communities continually
find ways of engaging in social and political life that are not captured by terms such as social media or digital media, and are grounded in physical spaces and concrete relations rather than virtual reality. Indeed, even those who exploit the full potential of digital technology to create virtual spaces in which to interact, foster diverse practices and mobilize are aware of the importance of the concrete dimension of their interactions. Stephansen (this volume) reports Tobias, a German activist she interviewed in Belém, Brazil, confirming that ‘the physical co-presence afforded by participation in shared communication practices is fundamental to processes of network-building’. Tobias goes on to explain:

I’m here and I do my coverage, but the fact of me being here has other effects, I speak to people, people speak to me . . . this is a bit . . . this process of articulation and network-building . . . I think this is very important, our participation in the coverage always has as a consequence that we are a living network.

We therefore propose a preliminary conceptualization of citizen media that does not restrict definitions of media and public space(s) to virtual spaces and digital means of expression but encompasses both the virtual and the physical, the digital and the concrete, as well as the possibility of the one acting through and upon the other (Isin and Ruppert 2015). Isin and Ruppert dismiss the idea of two separate spaces – online and offline – and argue that ‘cyberspace is a space like social space, cultural space, economic space, or psychological space’ (2015:41) within, across and through which we act and engage in political discourses and practices, a view we would certainly endorse. We thus wish to advance an understanding of citizen media that is flexible enough to allow insights from diverse fields from within and outside academia to bear on the discussion, and sensitive enough to variations in social and geographical settings to capture all forms of citizens’ engagement with their environment. This is not to ignore or downplay the importance of virtual and digital spaces in shaping citizen engagement today. As Nim explains (this volume), while citizen-led movements and collectives often exist offline, ‘their offline existence has to be confirmed by their presence in media networks and may at times undermine this presence’.

Perhaps the closest to our current attempt at conceptualizing citizen media is Rodríguez’s various definitions of citizens’ media – rather than citizen media – in her outstanding body of work since 2001. We begin with her definition of citizens’ media in Fissures in the Mediascape (2001:15):

Referring to ‘citizens’ media’ implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.
Where we wish to depart from this definition concerns its restriction of the term to *communities*, as evident also in Rodriguez’s choice of the plural form of *citizens* rather than *citizen*. By contrast, we wish to work towards a definition that encompasses interventions not only by a variety of group formations, including communities and collectives of different sizes and compositions, but also by individuals – without losing sight of the fact that individual political acts address and conjure up a public and in this sense remain social acts. Generic examples we can cite include the lone graffiti artist who operates somewhere in the space between valued artistic activity and illegal criminal behaviour; the individual blogger who exercises his or her citizenship by creating a space of dissent, often becoming a target of oppressive regimes; the rap singer who performs in order to effect change rather than make money. Ellie Cosgrove’s dance against sexual harassment in a London Underground tube carriage on International Women’s Day in 2013 provides a specific example of an actual citizen media event that justifies our broader definition of the term to include individuals acting in public space. Cosgrove returned to the same carriage where she was sexually assaulted two years earlier to perform in public a dance that expressed her anger, discomfort and embarrassment at a deeply personal traumatic experience. As she danced, a sign she placed next to her read ‘On the 4th Aug 2011 a man ejaculated on me in this carriage. Today I’m standing up against sexual harassment everywhere’. This individual, brave act of defiance also justifies our insistence on paying attention to concrete rather than merely virtual spaces in attempting to elaborate a definition of citizen media. In this case, the concrete, physical space – the exact same carriage Cosgrove was assaulted in on an underground line – is highly meaningful. The dance had to be performed where a traumatic lived experience needed to be revisited, challenged, exposed. Cosgrove had to ‘take ownership of the space where somebody else exerted power over her against her will’ (Bates 2013). This example also specifically highlights the importance of affect (discussed in Pérez-González, this volume) and of the individual body. As Culp (2013) explains, and as evident in some of the examples we go on to cite,

regardless of all of the new and innovative forms of protest that have followed the boom in social and media technologies of the twentieth century, the body remains the basic tool of protest – especially when [*sic*] is not reduced to its suasive power. Even when discourse breaks down, the body continues to exert force.

Several other examples of individuals intervening in public space through the medium of their body are discussed in this volume. They include the Turkish protestors, Erdem Gündüz, who stood in silence on Taksim Square for 8 hours on 17 June 2013, eluding the prohibition on mass gatherings and attracting the attention of passers-by, and eventually the local and international media. Hughes and Parry’s discussion of this and similar examples
Reconceptualizing citizen media
draws on the concept of gesture to make sense of such interventions from
the perspective of theatricality. A gesture, they explain,
composes the body on a precipice by holding it in an attitude of attention . . .
Each gesture reveals the precarity of the body’s staking of its claim, but
also materializes a bodily form that restores a sense of order . . . As such,
protest gestures call on the apotropaic potency of theatricality to sup-
pport the composure of bodies engaged in gesturing towards a different
world at the same time as facing the present, in all of its terrors.

Another example discussed by Hughes and Parry is an artist-activist known as
‘vacuum-cleaner’, who cleaned highly visible urban spaces, such as New York’s
Wall Street and London’s commercial district, during the three-months leading
up to and following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, using a recycled 1950s model
vacuum cleaner, and wearing a cleaning contractor outfit with ‘cleaning up
after capitalism’ on the back. Such gestures, they argue, ‘produce quotidian
clefts that draw attention to a desire to remake the world in a way that exhib-
tsits care for all forms of life’.

And finally, as Beretta demonstrates in her contribution to this volume,
much of what we would consider instances of citizen media – in her case,
documentary film produced by amateurs in China – is not necessarily
focused on the community, nor on effecting political change. It may instead
look inward, to the self, to the film maker’s own life and immediate rela-
tions, the intricacies and mundane happenings of daily life, and express his
or her personal desires and aspirations.

Returning to Rodriguez’s body of work, her subsequent, 2011 definition
of the term in Citizens’ Media against Armed Conflict: Disrupting Violence
in Colombia is broadly in line with our own thinking. However, it raises
another issue for us, as it seems even more restrictive than the 2001 defini-
tion. Citizens’ media is defined here as
communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own
languages, codes, signs, and symbols empowering them to name the
world in their own terms. Citizens’ media trigger processes that allow
citizens to recodify their contexts and themselves. These processes ulti-
mately give citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into
empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and
driven by well-defined, achievable utopias. Citizens’ media are the
media citizens use to activate communication processes that shape their
local communities.

(2011:24; our emphasis)

The emphasis on local communities rules out interventions that are directed
at global issues and events that impact communities and individuals across
the globe, or at least much of it.
And finally, the definition of citizens’ media by Rodriguez et al. (2014:151), while not restricted to social and digital media, specifically restricts the concept to citizens’ interaction with media technologies:

Many different terms are used to label media technologies appropriated and used by social movements, citizens’ groups and grassroots collectives, including: alternative media, social movements media, participatory media, community media, radical media, grassroots media, autonomous media, the French term ‘médias libres’, the Spanish term ‘medios populares’, and citizens’ media.

Although, as mentioned above, we are assuming a broad understanding of technology (and media technology) along the lines proposed by Williams (1981, cited in Blaagaard and Allan, this volume), as ‘the body of knowledge appropriate to the development of particular skills as well as the practical conditions of their application or use via a range of devices’, this definition seems to still rule out some of the most important media we propose to include in our definition of citizen media, especially the human body.

What we have done so far is review and critique some of the literature on concepts related to and potentially overlapping with our proposed (re)conceptualization of citizen media. The latter, as will become clear in the next section, will depart from existing definitions in a number of important respects. Specifically, we attempt to avoid the prevalent focus on citizen media as content rather than as practices, values, narratives, and forms of individual and collective agency; the tendency to conflate citizen media with citizen or participatory journalism, and with it the reduction of citizen interventions in public space to the coverage and dissemination of news; the assumption that citizen media, still understood as citizen journalism, adopts the practices and values of mainstream news institutions; the common reduction of the concept to social and digital media and a tendency to disregard or downplay the face-to-face dimension of citizen interactions in public space; emphasis on the collective or community and disregard for the individual citizen; the focus on stable communities, which obscures the many forms of loose, temporary groupings characteristic of modern societies, including ‘ad-hocracies’ (Pérez-González 2010) and what Pérez-González (this volume) refers to as ‘fluid sociality assemblages’; and the privileging of the local at the expense of the global.

Reconceptualizing citizen media

We begin our attempt at reconceptualizing citizen media with a critical look at the meaning of citizen and citizenship, which seems to be taken as self-evident in much of the existing literature on citizen media and related terms.
Ponzanesi’s contribution to this volume demonstrates clearly why it is no longer possible to adopt a definition of citizen and citizenship that is based on the concept of the nation-state or a mere document such as a passport or identity card. Ponzanesi focuses on migrants stranded between nation-states but who are nevertheless able to document their precarious existence, to act as ‘witnesses of their own suffering’, and ultimately bring a successful court case to fruition against a nation-state, Italy, that is not their own, using Article 34 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This study alerts us to the expanding landscape of liminality in which increasingly more people – like the refugees discussed in Ponzanesi – are now forced to live. As Ponzanesi argues, even ‘these zones of marginalization and exclusion, heterotopias or non-places, can actually become places of semi-belonging and transformation’, and hence spaces within which individuals and groups can act to bring about change. It is also important to bear in mind that the boundaries of nation-states, such as they exist, are always porous, and that many individuals and collectives of the type we wish our reconceptualization of the concept of citizen media to embrace increasingly act across geographical borders, within a global, shifting public space that is part physical and part virtual and that does not accord them the status of citizens as traditionally conceived. Our citizens are not citizens because they vote in elections and pay taxes within the confines of a nation-state. They become citizens when they engage in practices – perform political and aesthetic acts of citizenship (Isin 2008; Isin and Ruppert 2015) – that transform their sense of self and their environment, without expecting personal reward in the form of financial or cultural capital, and without the mediation of a third party or benefactor.

We further need to acknowledge that the very concepts of citizenship and nation, like that of democracy, are often the site of a complex and insidious exercise in hegemony, a tool in the hands of the powerful. Jonathan Cook’s (2010) discussion of why Israeli ‘citizens’ are classed as either Jewish or Arab nationals demonstrates this clearly:

Israel refused to recognise an Israeli nationality at the country’s establishment in 1948, making an unusual distinction between ‘citizenship’ and ‘nationality’. Although all Israelis qualify as ‘citizens of Israel’, the state is defined as belonging to the ‘Jewish nation’, meaning not only the 5.6 million Israeli Jews but also more than seven million Jews in the diaspora.

Cook goes on to explain that ‘the special status of Jewish nationality has been a way to undermine the citizenship rights of non-Jews in Israel’, and that many laws in Israel ‘specifically privilege Jews, including in the areas of immigration rights, naturalisation, access to land and employment’. Indeed, Israel creates national groups ‘with no legal recognition outside Israel, such as ‘Arab’ or ‘unknown’, to avoid recognising an Israeli nationality’.
The exploitative use and abuse of these concepts is also evident in the case of Ponzanesi’s migrants, victims of Italy’s push-back operations in the Mediterranean:

On 3 October 2013, ... an overcrowded boat containing almost 500 migrants capsized less than one kilometre off the coast of Lampedusa, resulting in the death of an estimated 300 refugees, mostly originating from Eritrea. The tragedy shocked Brussels, with the European Commission president José Manuel Barroso travelling to Lampedusa to pay tribute to the line of 300 coffins. The symbolic but empty gesture of the Italian government to grant them citizenship after death speaks of the paradoxes and abuses committed in the name of citizenship and border control.

Citizenship, then, is a constructed category (Mouffe 1992) and a crucial site of struggle over identity, territory, resources and narratives. Rodríguez’s (2001:20) definition of citizens’ media, quoted earlier, is in line with this understanding of citizenship as constructed and enacted. It is also in line with Stephansen’s argument (this volume) that citizen media are ‘media through which individuals become citizens’. With this critical understanding of citizenship in mind, we may now move on to elaborate who might count as citizen in citizen media and what might be understood as media through which individuals and collectives can enact citizenship.

It is difficult to find a term that allows us to delimit the agents of citizen media, whether individuals, collectives or entire communities, from the many types of individuals and groupings that operate in society. We deliberately avoid referring to them as members of civil society; the citizens in our understanding of citizen media often do not subscribe to this contested notion, and for good reasons – see Ehrenberg (1999) for a thorough critique of the concept of civil society. Rone (this volume) points to ‘the growing global tension between civil society and the type of expertise it promotes and produces, on the one hand, and on the other, new social movements and the kind of collaborative knowledge they engage in developing from below’. For many, in fact, referring to an individual or group as a ‘member of civil society’ is now a way of discrediting them. Rone explains why:

... the ideology of bottom-up organization has been implanted top-down by Western think tanks and ... funding is made accessible only to people who have the necessary cultural capital, including knowledge of foreign languages and skill in ‘writing up’ projects.

This critique recalls Clemencia Rodríguez’s (2011) argument that citizen media should not be thought of as an asset or help to Western (media) institutions, nor as a tool for disseminating public service announcements. Rather, citizen media must be understood as community building practices that engage their participants directly in multiple and grounded ways.
important to keep this critique in mind as we attempt to distinguish between instances of citizen-led engagement in public space and what Rone (this volume) refers to as ‘orchestrated citizen media initiatives’.

We opt, at least provisionally, for *unaffiliated citizens*, by which we mean citizens who act on their own impetus – rather than in the context of a corporate structure, a political party, a media organization, an NGO, or similar institution – in the pursuit of a non-institutionalized agenda, and without the mediation of a third party or benefactor. This rules out an initiative such as the University of Manchester Citizen Science Project,¹ for example, which is institutionally driven rather than citizen-led, and has a clear benefactor: the University of Manchester.

By *media* we clearly do not mean *the media*, i.e., the press and the mass media, as is understood by the lay person, nor exclusively social and digital media. Instead, we mean the material and immaterial artefacts and devices that may be endowed with expressive power by human agents and used to communicate information as well as emotions, values, narratives. This includes the human body itself, as argued earlier, as well as an app or a piece of software used in locative media events (Ejsing-Duun, this volume), or to help migrants cross the US/Mexico border to reach water via a GPS system (Hughes and Parry, this volume). It also includes an artefact such as a tear gas canister or a tent, as Feigenbaum explains (2014:22) with reference to the Occupy movement:

> The circulation and remediation of tear gas canisters form part of occupiers’ resistance. Symbolic solidarities are built around them, while material strategies for resisting tear gas and opposing its manufacture also move across and create social-movement networks. Tents and tear gas are just two of the significant objects that shape and mediate communication in the transnational Occupy movement. ‘Other media’ objects including fences, walls, and barricades also become communicative sites of exchange in places of political struggle . . . We cannot understand what it means to Occupy without these objects.

Our definition of *media* in this context also includes recognizable genres such as documentary film, blogs, a march, a petition – any format that can be injected with specific meanings, values and expressive power. As Baker explains (2006:86):

> [O]nly a weak, marginalized party under some form of threat from a more powerful opponent would resort to the genre of ‘petition’. Issuing a petition is in itself an attempt to elaborate a narrative in which the party being appealed to is portrayed as powerful but unfair or ill-advised in some sense, and the party doing the petitioning (which may include hundreds and even thousands of signatories) is marginalized but morally superior and able to draw on ‘people power’.

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The Internet, including social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, a newspaper or television channel, a cinema or theatre, are all media platforms, spaces where different types of media – an image, a joke, a video, a film, a petition – can circulate, be endowed with specific expressive power, and multiply. This attempt at clarifying what we mean by media as part of the specific term citizen media does not mean we can avoid using media in any of the myriad other meanings it has acquired in the literature, nor be able to qualify it every time we use it, given the ubiquity of the term. Nor does it mean that the media covered by the conceptualization we offer here are the preserve of unaffiliated citizens, the agents of citizen media as defined above. Not only are all such media part of the wider social repertoire available to mainstream institutions as well as individuals, but they are also subject to the dynamics of appropriation and reverse appropriation that characterize all interactions in society, as discussed below.

Our definition of citizen media can now be provisionally worded as follows:

The concept of citizen media encompasses the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics.

Questions of appropriation and reverse appropriation in the context of citizen media

Blaagaard and Allan (this volume) remind us that ‘the logic of mediation that governs our societies to an increasing extent very quickly assimilates the efforts of giving and presenting alternative voices, always threatening to put them into the service of capitalist power’. Rone (this volume) provides examples of the co-optation and incorporation of citizen journalism in Bulgaria ‘into the already existing media universe of unclear ownership, scandalous content, and promotion of oligarchic interests’. Along similar lines, Cross (this volume) describes the use of citizen media content by media outlets like CNN and the BBC as ‘a kind of symbolic bleeding through of public concerns’, and suggests that citizen media content (in her case photographs taken at the site of the 2005 London bombings by individuals caught in the underground tunnel) was exploited to drive a ‘politics of sentiment’ that was ‘ultimately important for sustaining the wider justification for the global “War on Terror”’. Appropriation can thus take the form of an institutionalization of empathy, especially in news coverage of violent events, as
also evident in Chouliaraki’s contribution. Chouliaraki queries how citizen witnessing contributes to the transnational institutionalization of empathy in her analysis of the different foci of BBC’s incorporation of citizen voices in its reporting on the conflicts in Syria and Libya. She approaches the issue through the conceptual lens of citizen voice as a ‘securitization of news’ and demonstrates the use of citizen media to promote a politics of pity that now seems to drive global exchanges. Even this politics of pity, she demonstrates, is evoked selectively and to different ends in the coverage of recent conflicts in Libya and Syria.

Appropriation of the expressive power of graffiti connected to the Egyptian revolution provides another example from a different practice of citizen media. Abaza (2013), among others, bemoans the increasing commercialization and commodification of this citizen media domain. International funding organizations and cultural centres and curators, she explains, ‘offer programs and propose spaces through funds for celebrating street art, music and artistic expression’, but in reality these interventions co-opt street art ‘by taming it through exhibiting graffiti in galleries and in safe spaces’. She goes on to warn that investing in art has become ‘a forum for gentrifying public spaces and a way of manipulating violence, ultimately creating a new wave of a “culture industry” highly dependent on financial capitalism’.

Appropriation can also be of strategies, such as humour and irony, which are key to many citizen-led initiatives and forms of protest. Nim (this volume) offers an excellent example, namely, the Russian authorities’ decision to respond to a humorous application to hold a nanodemonstration involving ‘toys from Kinder Surprise (one hundred pieces), Lego figurines (one hundred pieces), toy soldiers (twenty pieces), soft toys (fifteen pieces), miniature cars (ten pieces)’ in an equally humorous fashion, commenting to the press that the application for a permit ‘should have been sent to the puppet theatre’; that the toys were not human but at least if they had been Russian-made they would have stood a chance of being allowed to protest, and that the protestors applying for the permit were perhaps like children, who tend to think of their toys as human beings.

Reverse appropriation, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as culture jamming, works in the opposite direction. In culture jamming, ‘the images, ideas, and discourse of popular culture and commerce’ are used by activists ‘to critique and subvert that culture’ (Lievrouw 2011:215), as evident in Adbusters’ appropriation of the genre of commercial advert. This Vancouver-based initiative is ‘concerned with the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces’ and is best known for its spoof ads. Figure 1.1 is part of a series titled ‘Obsession for men’ (a similar series focuses on ‘Obsession for women’). It demonstrates the kind of humour and satire that characterize these ads: here, a handsome, muscular man peers intently into his Calvin Klein underpants, visualizing the very idea of ‘obsession’ and self-centredness.
Figure 1.1 ‘Obsession for men’ spoof ad. (Courtesy of Adbusters).

Figure 1.2 ‘Photo Op’, 2005. (Courtesy of Kennard Phillipps, www.kennardphillipps.com).
A similar strategy is deployed by Kennard Phillipps, a collective originally established in 2002 in response to the invasion of Iraq. Their most famous photomontage (Figure 1.2), dated 2005, shows Tony Blair taking a selfie against the background of the destruction he had by then clearly unleashed on Iraq. The contrast between the horrifying scene in the background and the smug, flippant attitude evident in his facial expression and the nature of the activity he is engaged in shock the viewer and deliver a powerful message of anger and disbelief at his actions and the fate of Iraq. Kennard Phillipps describe their work as ‘a critical tool that connects to international movements for social and political change’ and as ‘the visual arm of protest’.  

Conclusion

Processes of appropriation and reverse appropriation such as those discussed above complicate but also enrich our attempt to conceptualize citizen media as a field of scholarship and practice. The dynamic, shifting relationship between citizen media, as we have defined it, and corporate and mainstream culture means that the boundaries between the two are not stable and will not always be clear. Rather than attempting to tighten our definition of citizen media to the point of rigidity, we find it more productive to build the dynamic itself into any conceptualization of this evolving field, especially since deliberate appropriation is not the only process that can undercut the transformative power of citizen media initiatives. Becoming entrapped in the dynamic of visibility vs invisibility and trying to be mediagenic and newsworthy is another area of constant negotiation and renegotiation, particularly for protest movements (Nim, this volume). Lack of ongoing, critical reflection on the implications of the evolving design and practices associated with any citizen media initiative can also quickly turn it into part of the corporate market economy. As Ejsing-Duun explains, for instance, locative media projects, which are intended to address habitual modes of being in the city critically and help its inhabitants appropriate urban space, can easily turn into ‘a form of middle class, capitalist, “tourist” entertainment that turns urban centres into destinations rather than structures that serve residents’.

Citizen media initiatives continually reconfigure the relationship between the private and the public, the local and the global, mainstream and alternative media, corporations and citizens, the state and the individual. The field of citizen media thus raises vital political, social and ethical issues relating to conceptions of citizenship and state boundaries, the construction of publics and social imaginaries, processes of co-optation and reverse co-optation, power and resistance, the ethics of witnessing and solidarity, and novel responses to the democratic deficit. As we attempt to chart the territory of this evolving field and stimulate an interdisciplinary debate around its core concepts, we will need studies, as Pérez-González explains, that demonstrate through examination of many different types of citizen-led initiatives the role that unaffiliated citizens now play ‘in disrupting the cultural logic of
neoliberalism and contesting the commodification of media-based means of social and political critique’, and that attend to both the local and the global, while acknowledging the transnational reach – achieved in large part through digital media – of such initiatives.

Notes
2 Elizabeth Bird offers a similar critique of the current preoccupation with digital media, arguing that ‘[p]opular culture is experienced and lived in many different ways and the Web 2.0 environment is not the only one that matters, especially outside the West’ (2011:512).
3 We would also argue, with Pérez-González (this volume), for ‘conceptualizing [at least some] citizen media assemblages as contact zones or undisciplined organisms which enable the inter-subjective construction of states of emotion, rather than as communities built around stable subjects of emotion’ and fixed in particular locales.
5 This speaks very much to Warner’s (2002) concept of the counter-public, which by definition is the ‘under-dog’.
6 On the aggressive co-optation of web-based citizen reporting/witnessing by CNN’s iReport.com, see Kperogi (2011).
7 www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters (accessed 23 October 2015).

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Reconceptualizing citizen media


22 M. Baker and B. B. Blaagaard


