Stop the presses?

Journalistic practices in the face of citizen-created content during pulp-mills protest in Argentina and Uruguay

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This paper analyzes how activist-created texts and images were assessed and handled by four major Argentinean and Uruguayan newspapers during a longstanding protest against the construction of pulp mills and the monoculture of trees from 2005 until 2009. Based on interviews with the journalists in charge of reporting this protest during four years, as well as with nine activists belonging to the main opposing civil society groups, this paper argues that even though new communication channels managed by activists tended to facilitate activist-created content addressed to the mainstream news media on the protest – which in itself challenges the media ecology of this region – the new communicational circumstances also nurtured conventional event-focused journalism, normalizing potentially disrupting forces.

Introduction

The relationship between citizen-created content and national and global mainstream news media in situations of social and political unrest has been altered in the last years due to new informational circumstances. Two main factors seem to be at work here: the proliferation of online citizen-created content, even in regions with low Internet and mobile phones access, and secondly the way different national and global professional news organizations assess and handle these materials in their journalistic work. Available studies deal mainly with how global media with base in the West, and national media primarily in high-industrialized Western countries, managed citizen-created materials on the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the post-election protests in Iran in June 2009. However, the study of how Latin American professional journalists are dealing with citizen-created content during situations of protest in the region is an understudied issue. This is of relevance because it may imply changes in the journalistic patterns of work with impact on the journalistic agenda and also on the visibility of activists and their
causes on mainstream media, which subsequently may impact on the political agenda.

I analyze this issue based on a case study. The environmental and social movement against the installation of pulp mills and an associated forest exploitation model based in Uruguay and Argentina started in 2005, which rejected the construction of pulp mills (initially the Finnish company then known as Metsä-Botnia, hereafter Botnia and the Spanish company Empresa Nacional de Celulosa España) on the shores of the river Uruguay, along with the monoculture of eucalyptus in Uruguay, a tree that grows quickly and directly supplies the pulp industry. The Uruguay River functions as the geographical and political border between Argentina and Uruguay. This movement gathered thousands of people blockading international bridges, thereby interrupting the international traffic of people and cargo several times from 2005 until 2010. The protest actions and the difficulties in coming to an agreement on the location of the planned pulp mills; on how contamination effects would be monitored and not least, on how the environmental social movement should be dealt with, disrupted diplomatic relations between Argentina and Uruguay severely. When bilateral negotiations failed, the governments sought international assistance, including Mercosur, the regional court of justice of Southern Common Market (at that time, a regional agreement between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), the mediation of the king of Spain, Juan Carlos de Borbón, and the international court of justice in The Hague, to help solve their differences. This last court reached a resolution in 2010, which contributed to the dissolution of the activists’ blockade, though it did not completely erase their manifestations of dissent. Amid the intense protest actions, the Spanish plant was, in fact, never built. The Finnish plant was eventually built, but it is currently being subjected to stricter environmental monitoring than the regulations stipulated before this conflict. The plant is monitored both formally by the nations involved and informally by groups of citizens. Discrepancies among the ruling governments continue until today, and protest activity in both countries is still visible in different ways.
This protest is not representative of all protests in Latin America, however, it shows some features that make it interesting as a case study: inscribed in a complex regional and global context of environmental organizations and actors, it constitutes one of the largest environmental social movements in the region due to the share number of people involved in protests, its duration over a period of several years, its political repercussions locally, regionally and internationally, and the fact of being largely covered by the mainstream news media (Melián, 2012).

The period studied (from 2005 until 2008) is significant. It provides an opportunity to get insights on the interplay between journalists and activists via the growing communicational possibilities allowed by Internet and mobile phones during the years when these technologies were first being introduced and popularized in these countries. In effect, the expansion of Internet and mobile phones in Latin America, and in particular in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Uruguay and Chile), has been exponential. In 2010, two years after the studied period in this study, over 50 percent of the population in the countries studied had access to Internet compared to 30 percent in 2005 (Calderón, 2012). Regarding mobile phones, it's possible to observe an even more dramatic curve with universal access to mobile phone within the population in Argentina and Uruguay (Bibolini y Baker, 2009: 252). Even though I have not been able to find data on mobile usage in 2005, all the journalists and activists interviewed had mobile phones from the beginning of the studied period.

In summary, this case study offers the opportunity to analyze the interplay between journalists of agenda-setting national newspapers and key activists, regarding a particularly significant environmental protest, during the years when Internet and mobile phones became a common feature among journalists, activists and among middle classes in these societies.

Mainstream media and activists

The relationship between activists and mainstream media journalists is complex because different logics, practices and goals meet (Lester & Hutching, 2009).
Activists have often encountered difficulties in advancing their arguments within the news media repertoire (Downing, 2001; Atton 2001, 2004; Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Atkinson, 2010; Lievrouw, 2011) in different socio-political circumstances. In the Latin American professional news media context, fundamentally dominated by a commercial logic that privileges the representation of economic interests (Waisbord, 2000; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Rockwell & Janus, 2003) this has not been an exception.

Despite the fact that media studies have repeatedly shown that mainstream media simplify, criminalize and trivialize social movements and protests in different media ecologies, for instance, in Brazil (Pereira Da Silva & Rothman, 2011), in Sweden (Ekman, 2011), and in the US (DeLuca; Lawson, & Sun, 2012), among others, there is a ‘mutual dependency’ between social movements and mainstream news media. The symbiotic relationship has been characterized as a ‘power struggle’ because it implies a negotiation of access, shaping of meanings and circulation of symbols among them (Lester & Hutchings, 2009).

Old media (TV, newspapers, radios) are valuable for activists because they represent the possibility to put pressure on politicians and to reach as many people as possible (Lester & Hutching, 2009). Beyond the proliferation of content by globally linked environmental organizations and social movements through social media, blogs and websites, activists still regard old media coverage of their actions as highly important in what concerns general public awareness as well as a way to push for actions on the part of authorities (Jha 2007; Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Melián, 2012). Physical protest action is one of the strategies used to raise news media attention to the point that has it has become ‘reflexively conditioned’ (Cottle, 2008: 853). Mainstream media are prone to cover spectacular actions, especially those that involve thousands of people gathered to denounce different social, political or economic issues (Castells, 2009) in public physical places.

However, with the advancement of new information and communication technologies, activists seem to be attempting to tip the balance between the
professional and amateur supplies of mainstream media coverage in situations of social and political protests. Depending on the kind of protest, whether violent incidents occur and the socio-political context and media environment in question, activists have been more or less successful in this respect. Some argue that by expanding the reporting capacities of news organizations, citizen eyewitness images, for instance, have transformed the visibility of contemporary humanitarian and political cries around the world (Andén Papadoupulos & Pantti, 2013:960).

Journalism and social media is a rapidly expanding research field. Some studies have focused on social media as a professional journalistic tool (e.g. Hirst and Treadwell 2011; Hjort, Oskarsson, and Szabo’ 2011). Researchers have also analyzed journalists’ professional norms, ideals and identities in relation to social media (e.g. Bogaerts 2011; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). A recent study highlights that despite an increasing use of social media by professional journalists in Sweden, this usage differs significantly in terms of age and place of work (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013). Despite journalists increasingly using social media as a tool for new information seeking and as a thermometer of the ambient among different social circles, where activists practices are only part of, there is little evidence of change in the thematic sources created by journalists when covering social protests (Jha, 2007; Melián, 2012). The present study aims at contributing to this field of study, by initiating a discussion and providing a perspective in what concerns protests in Latin American countries.

**Methodological framework**

The empirical materials in this study are semi-structured interviews with all the activists in charge of communication tasks in the three main groups within the selected environmental movement (9 in total) and the journalists (4 in total) in charge of covering the protest for the main four national newspapers in Argentina and Uruguay (Clarín, La Nación, El País and La República). The use of semi-structured interviews (with a scheme of questions) has advantages because informants can describe practices that occurred in the selected period. At the
same time, interview use has limitations in the sense that informants provide only a reconstruction of practices for the analyst.

The selection of activists and journalists represents a ‘purposive sample’ Silverman (2006), as the interviews aim at illuminating the specific practices that I focus on. A representative sample of activists per group would not have been ideal as I focus on the Internet and mobile phone practices in the groups involved in the movement, although as performed by specific individuals selected within the groups. By interviewing those in charge of communication tasks I obviously leave out the assessment of many other activists involved in the groups. This decision has two basic explanations: a practical one that has to do with difficulties in identifying and interviewing activists of a loose network of individuals in the case of the ACAG, and of interviewing people that did not actually work with the communication tasks geared at journalists. The selection of journalists working for the print press was also purposive as these are influential media that set the agenda for the rest of the media spectrum.

Thematic analysis was the method selected to analyze the interviews. This analytical ‘pattern matching’ strategy (Yin, 2003) was the most appropriate for managing a great volume of text. Thematic analysis enabled the organization of the material according to the themes that informants dealt with during interviews on the backdrop of the theoretical framework of the study.

**Media-suited actions**

In line with research on how social movements consider mainstream media significant for putting pressure on politicians and to disseminate their cause widely (Lester & Hutching, 2009) activists in this study considered the coverage of the protest actions by mainstream media very influential. Within this movement, the gathering of bodies in the public space, which actualizes the rights of citizens to protest (Butler, 2011), was the preferred way to campaign. Demonstrations were spectacular (blockades, boats parades and car parades involving thousands of people), which transformed them into events suitable for media coverage. These actions were the preferred way to demonstrate because
activists expected media coverage on them and hoped for higher chances of actually pressurizing national authorities to remove the authorizations to build pulp mills by the river. Blockades were not a new way of demonstrating but a proven method in this region. Other social movements had successfully gotten to be on the news and thus on the public agenda.

Even though physical protests were the main means of demonstrating, activists planned these activities counting on the Internet and mobile phones at hand. In effect, organized in the middle of the countryside, demonstrations had to be timed so journalists could write their stories in computers placed at cybercafés in the nearby cities. This was done for two reasons, journalists did not have own laptops so they needed to work in cybercafés and secondly because mobile phones did not have access to the Internet at the time.

In addition, meetings were planned using the same logic. Held until very late in the evening, one or two times a week, in the countryside under the open sky or at the shelter built to house the activists responsible for the blockade, meetings would never end too late so journalists would miss the opportunity to report back to their newspapers on time by using their mobile phones. Mobile phones were used to coordinate the last details of the news article with the editorial team located in the capitals. The main body of the article had been prepared in advance in an Internet café from where journalist could do research work. This first version of the article would be sent to the editorial team early in the evening. The final adjustments, including the title and the introduction according to the outcome of the meeting and the decisions taken, would be communicated by mobile phone at the last minute. In this way, activists made sure resolutions taken regarding the physical demonstrations were included on the front page of newspapers the next morning.

**Availability and ‘statement journalism’**

An event-centered logic dominates the journalistic coverage often associated with conflicting stakeholders, thus neglecting to situate the event within an explanatory context (Dunwoody & Scott, 1982; Nelkin, 1995). Far from promoting a nuanced perspective on the protest, the availability of activits,
granted by mobile phones, fed the reigning ‘statement journalism’, as defined by journalists. This kind of journalism is basically characterized by the use of comments of a social actor to prompt the comment of other social actors on a particular issue or event.

The availability of contacting activists by mobile phone was perceived among the interviewed journalists as one of the most influential aspects of the use of new communication technologies on their journalistic coverage. Journalists and activists were dispersed in an area of several kilometers and mobile phones were assessed as vital to contact activists. In fact, journalists contacted activists mainly on their mobiles. They generally did not use e-mail or social media because many of the activists were not permanently connected to the Internet, especially those sustaining the blockades. Activists were contactable for journalists regardless of the time of day or where they were. This suited the needs of immediacy of journalists, who were heavily pressed for time, which was basically associated with their particular working conditions. The accessibility provided by mobile phones, on the other hand, also paved the way for the event-centered journalistic coverage.

“I mainly called them on the mobile phone. They did great with this. The mobile phone was always available and this facilitated my work enormously (...). A journalist needs things now, not tomorrow or in half an hour (...) when you have open telephones you help the journalist a lot. Even more with the cheap journalism of statement that leads to nowhere that we do here. I do not agree with it but sometimes your editor asks for this.” Argentinean journalist.

Journalists also made use of the mobile phones as a substitute for their actual presence, as ‘a way to be there’. Mobile phones were used to support the journalistic coverage of events that were happening somewhere else other than where the journalist was. The long distances between the different groups of

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1 Just to give an idea of the distances we are talking about: Buenos Aires is 226 kilometers away from Gualeguaychú. Montevideo is 309 kilometers away from Fray Bentos. Gualeguaychú is 30 kilometers from the bridge and Fray Bentos lies just beside the river and the bridge.
activists, the variety of actions taking place and the fact that journalists were covering many themes for several media organizations, transformed the mobile phone into an extension of themselves. Through them they could be ‘present’ in a situation, in contact with activists or others, in ways that were useful to pretend to have been in the situation.

“There was a time, from the end of 2005 until the beginning of 2008 when there were daily ‘asambleas’, sometimes three a day, extremely long with 30 people on the speakers’ list...Constantly car parades, demonstrations, activists’ traveled back and forth to Buenos Aires to talk to the ambassadors. The activities were endless and constant; they would rain on you. We covered a lot but not everything and then the mobile phone was crucial to be where things were happening without being there (…)”. Argentinean journalist.

The use of mobile phones as an extension of the journalists was possible because activists were willing to, and saw the benefit of providing their perspective on what was happening. Sometimes images were also sent to help journalists to experience “what it looked like there.” It could be argued that the activists’ descriptions and images sent by mobile phones to journalists from the location where demonstrations or meetings took place were used as sources of information. However, even though this content provided by activists to journalists became part of the journalistic coverage somehow, it was somehow ‘hidden’ from readers because it was used to compensate for the fact that journalists had not been able to be on the spot.

**Activists’ content as online sources**

The activists’ websites were part of the journalists’ daily media menu. Even though they checked these websites often, journalists did not assess them as generators of information they had benefited from. In other words, most of them did not admit at first to openly use activists’ websites or other online content produced by them as journalistic sources. This might be explained by the fact
that sources that could speak of prevention and long-term consequences tended to be ignored.

“No, I did not get it (information) from the website of the ACAG (...). I saw plenty of material that was very well used by the people in Gualeguaychú. They used this issue of the technologies very well, uploaded videos, and have good pages. They worked it out really well. They used all the aspects of the technologies of information.” Uruguayan journalist.

Only one journalist openly admitted that the activists’ websites, emails sent by the groups and even the chats used by younger activists, were valuable and indispensable to carry on part of her journalistic work. This was explained as a means of compensating for her limited budget though and not in terms of the additional source opportunities. Again, the interest here is on the actual event and not in finding information long-term consequences.

However, contradictory to their own opinions on the value of activists’ websites and other online content, these same journalists actually described ways, during the interviews, in which this content had influenced their journalistic coverage. For instance, content received through the chain of emails and published on the websites, (usually the same information would be posted on the website and sent by email), was sometimes the starting point for journalists to investigate incidents that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. Eventually the online content produced by activists would also lead them to new sources. Emails linked activists, citizens and journalists forming a network of organizations and individuals through which different types of content circulated. Journalists took part in an intense exchange of information facilitated by people and organizations supporting the anti-pulp mills movement. They would take advantage of those bits of information they considered of journalistic value and skim over the rest of the content. This flow could translate into the possibility to contact a person or to follow up on a piece of information provided.

“People connected to the anti-pulp mill movement would always send information to us. In other words, emails circulated between people in Fray
Bentos, Gualeguaychú, and Paraná. The flow of emails was very high. (...) What I mean is that Movitdes sent something to the environmentalists in Paraná and these would communicate it to those in Gualeguaychú...and a woman from Pontevedra would tell her story about smells, asthma, illnesses and what was happening there because they had pulp mills. I contacted her later on. (...) It was this type of chain if you understand me.” Argentinean journalist.

This flow fed them with the ideas and arguments that people, activists and organizations were discussing or reading. These e-mails could also consist of articles originally published by mainstream media. As activists would send mainstream media articles that they considered of interest to other activists, people, organizations and also journalists. These flow of information helped journalists to be updated on what was going on within the movement and how activists reflected on issues concerning the conflict. Activists’ information was never quoted as source though.

The flow of digital information via e-mails also contributed to the general monitoring of mainstream media that journalists usually perform. In this case, if journalists found something that they had missed, for instance, they would corroborate the information published and then initiate a new news article for the media they were covering for. In this case, journalists would provide the media as the source of the information.

All in all, it could be said that the exchange of information via newsletters and e-mail was then another way in which activists’ online practices were influencing the journalistic coverage. In this sense processes of re-mediation or ‘borrowing from each other’ (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) took place on different levels. Certainly, the content produced by activists was transformed and adapted following the journalistic conventions in place and in any case, all kind of sources would have followed the same process of transformation. The difference here is that activists

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2 There were also anonymous e-mails that circulated widely. They mixed private and public matters ‘unveiling’ not confirmed details of the private lives of activists, public officials and journalists. They had low legitimacy status both among activists and journalists.
had a concrete way of presenting content that was actually taken into account by journalists. Eventually, it could become part or even influence the agenda and the perspective from which journalists would write, as illustrated by the examples mentioned previously, even though it was not cited.

Initially journalists sought frames for understanding the forest industry and the pulp mills issue beyond the locality due to the newness of the issue and their lack of experience in dealing with environmental news. This led them to do online research on the forest industry and pulp mills beyond local sources that included global environmental NGOs like Greenpeace International, which had supported the regional movement in the first years. Some of them also searched globally for news on environmental disasters related to pulp mills published by mainstream media mainly in Spanish and also in English. This contributed to framing their initial understanding on the issue differently.

"Entre Ríos had the same policy with the eucalyptus plantation and the pulp mills (...). In those days, we did not see the pulp mills as something so harmful. Later, the environmental issue became more visible. For us, journalists, this was the same: we understood the pulp mills as something very good, an alternative to just exporting the raw wood. In time, we got to know - basically because some Uruguayans alerted us - that Ence was to install a plant. Argentinean journalist.

Online information provided by global environmental organizations provided a context for the regional protest, adding a more nuanced and informed understanding of it. To search for information online was assessed by journalists as particularly important in this case because environmental issues, and specifically, pulp mills and forest industry, were not part of the regular set of themes they were used to taking care of.

Preferred source logic

A commercial logic dominates mainstream media in Latin America, greatly explained by the very close links between media owners’ editorial line and the
power (García Canclini, 2001; Waisbord, 2000). This contributes to strengthening the influence of high-ranking political sources, usually the preferred journalistic sources within mainstream media, something that indeed shapes the journalistic agenda (Bennett, 1995). The interplay between these activists and journalists followed this logic, in this case, both in favor and against activists depending on the position of the government in each country. The main local and national political voices and business interests supported the protest in different ways in Argentina. In Uruguay, the situation was exactly the opposite. Consequently, while mainstream media in Argentina was willing to include activists as sources in their accounts of the conflict, according to the activists, Uruguayan mainstream media excluded Uruguayan activists’ and gave preference to governmental and companies’ sources.

“For Argentinean was a dirty work, ‘piquetero’ was even worse. To be an environmentalist meant you were willing to do dumb things (The blockade) played against those of us who wanted to inform about what happens with the forest industry (...). If you are with the Argentineans you are a ‘piquetero’ and you boycott the government of the Frente Amplio, recently enacted, and then you are against Tabaré Vázquez. You never heard that you were against a decision but against the whole government’s performance. This had a huge impact during a long period of time. We can feel it still today because we got isolated from the people. Ordinary people saw this conflict as a conflict between Argentineans and Uruguayans because this was what the media gave them every day. It was like a classic football match.” Uruguayan activist.

Uruguayan activists felt they had experienced enormous difficulties in reaching the established media in their quest to make their own critical account, beyond the actual possibilities provided by the Internet and mobile phones to facilitate contact with the journalists. As they had been established many years before, they had already been in contact with journalists in numerous situations before this one. Initially they their attempts to try to advance their positioning got some response. Later on, this response faded and the Uruguayan journalists stopped
contacting them or taking up the information sent by them. Some NGO activists were even told that there was an explicit order to exclude critical reports on the pulp mills and their negative impact.

“Slowly all doors were closed within the Uruguayan media. We know that there was an order from the Presidency to limit the publication of the other opinion, the critic one. Some journalists faced a lot of difficulties to continue publishing our position until a point where their programs were even cancelled.” Uruguayan activist.

Within the Uruguayan media context (and in media other Latin American countries) the state is a very important buyer of publicity space. Implicit or explicit pressures coming from the government are regarded with extreme caution because the economy of the media can be seriously affected. This is a factor altering the Latin American journalistic agenda, which often reflects powerful and interrelated political and economic configurations (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Rockwell & Janus, 2003). As a consequence, Uruguayan activists assessed their attempts to reach the Uruguayan mainstream media as almost meaningless. Press releases, e-mails and newsletters sent to Uruguayan mainstream media were mostly perceived as an attempt to influence media coverage, but offering little in terms of results.

In the long run, this isolation had perceived consequences for the general conception of these organizations as sources of information for mainstream media, even though, ironically, some of them had distanced themselves from the Argentinean activists and the blockade as method of protest. The decision to take such a stand was not shared by all the environmental organizations in Uruguay involved in the movement.

“The government rarely debated on forestry. It was really difficult and I think we feel the consequences even today (...). Our position on the issue of the pulp mills made us loose visibility, relevance even in other issues. We were relinquished a bit...even within part of the environmental sector
because we took distance from the Gualeguaychú movement.” Uruguayan activist.

On the other hand, Argentinean activists perceived themselves as welcomed sources of local and national mainstream media in Argentina. They saw themselves as championing the issue of bringing environmental issues to the public sphere for the first time. They were aware that the international presentation of the conflict and the national government’s tacit support of the blockades, opened up for mainstream media coverage. This was a powerful factor differentiating this movement from other social movements.

“Our cause opened up possibilities for the environmental causes within the mainstream media. Some other voices started to be heard. Other social movements dared to go to the media with different environmental problems.” Argentinean activist.

As Argentinean activists had a more fluid access to the Argentinean mainstream media, they developed and maintained a system to communicate with these media that greatly relied on their use of Internet and mobile phone practices. This system would differentiate local, regional and national media in order to more appropriately adapt the content sent, in the form of texts and images. Argentinean activists’ assessed their contact with Uruguayan journalists as sporadic. They included these journalists in the mailing lists but they did not contact them further to check whether they had received the information or not.

**Conclusion**

The journalists’ interplay with activists was embedded in a larger context constituted by the journalistic ideals, actual practices and perceived limitations. These aspects framed the journalists’ assessment of the activists’ Internet and mobile phone practices. New to this particular conflict was that this was the very first bi-national environmental movement ever, which forced journalists to be systematically aware of the coverage done by the mainstream media in the
other countries. Secondly, it involved local, national and global aspects including networked people, organizations, companies and institutions that pushed them to use follow new paths to seek sources and information. Thirdly, environmental issues are rarely front-page news and matters of investigative journalism (Waisbord, 2000). This issue became both a ‘technical’ and a political issue. The journalists interviewed tended to understand their role differently, although based on the same logic of compliance, with a certain amount of critique, to the editorial guidelines of their media outlets.

Notably, mobile phones and Internet facilitated the worked of journalists providing easy contact to activists’ ideas, but also texts and images. This is noteworthy in the Latin American media environment, where privileged sources are people close to power. However, the event-based coverage did not favor the use of activists’ background information on the forest industry. Covering the emergent aspects, directed attention to the actual physical demonstrations that were taking place. This meant a ‘normalization’ of the potential disruptive effect of the activists’ generated content, an adaptation to the dominant journalistic logic.

Activists identified national mainstream media as the most efficient channels for pressuring politicians and industrial concerns by reaching as many citizens as possible, confirming the results of Lester and Hutching (2011). This is also important to understand the instrumental use given to Internet and mobile phones regarding the interplay between activists and journalists. To facilitate and assure journalistic coverage of demonstrations and meetings, activists counted on the possibilities offered through Internet and mobile phones. However, activist availability, provided by the use of mobile phones, and online information supported the needs of ‘statement journalism’ performed by the mainstream media journalists contrary to some activists’ expectations. Activists’ online content was not used as a journalistic source explicitly, which could be understood as an indication of its low status as a journalistic source in this case. Thus, the attempts to influence the journalistic coverage, by means of the new online content created by activists, were complicated by the dominant event-centered journalistic logic that largely remained intact.
References


