

FAR-RIGHT DIGITAL ACTIVISM DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A PATCHWORK ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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While digital activism has formed part of social movements' contentious repertoires for at least two decades, online forms of protest have risen to unprecedented importance across the globe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article studies continuities and shifts in digital activism before, during and beyond the pandemic, drawing from a case study of the Dresden-based far-right social movement organisation PEGIDA. Seeking to shed new light on the role of the internet and social media for sustained far-right mobilisation, I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital activism since its emergence in 2014. To this aim, I draw from an original patchwork ethnographic dataset generated through participant observation of demonstrations in Dresden and digital ethnography in 2019–21 as well as undertaking a thorough literature review. The empirical analysis indicates three key findings: Firstly, the longitudinal perspective reveals that a social movement actor's digital practices are not bound to one or a few ideal-types, but highly dynamic over time. Secondly, my interpretive-ethnographic lens emphasises the constitutive dimensions of digital activism. Thirdly, the analytical focus on digital activism during the pandemic adds new insights into the relationship between the online and offline worlds of mobilisation. As a whole, this article underscores some of the key advantages of (patchwork) ethnography in relation to other methods in protest research.

KEYWORDS: Digital activism, ethnography, far right, pandemic, PEGIDA, protest

INTRODUCTION

With the omnipresence of the internet in everyday life and the development of Web 2.0, digital forms of protest have become a key dimension of social movement mobilisation around the world (Earl et al. 2010; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan 2017; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 entailed an additional quantitative increase, as well as qualitative changes, in the nature of digital activism (Mayer et al. 2021; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020). As national governments implemented lockdowns, impacting all forms of social life, including placing restrictions on the possibilities for public protest, social movement organisations were forced to shift their activities online to comply with these new restrictions. In light

of this, activists devised new forms of public protest, such as online strikes or virtual demonstrations, using websites and mobile phone applications (Buyse 2021; Hunger and Hutter 2021).

This article is based on my studies of digital activism using the example of the far-right social movement organisation Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA). Emerging in 2014, first on the social media platform Facebook and then as a street movement in the eastern German city of Dresden, by 2022, PEGIDA has become post-war Germany's most sustained instance of far-right activism. Since the group has had a dynamic relationship with the internet and social media throughout its existence, I conceive of PEGIDA as a "critical" case (Snow 2013), worthy of study to shed new light on digital activism, also, but not only, during the pandemic. Despite its strong local roots in Dresden, for an international readership PEGIDA constitutes an interesting case of far-right mobilisation also beyond the federal state of Saxony and Germany, because of its transnationalisation (Nissen 2021; Volk 2019; Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016) and its unexpected longevity (Volk 2022).

In seeking to shed new light on the role of the internet and social media for sustained far-right mobilisation, I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital activism before, during, and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. My analysis traces continuities and shifts in both the extent and characteristic features of digital activism over time, and – in line with the meaning-focused lens of interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) – pays attention to what digital activism means to activists themselves. To this end, I draw from a "patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al. 2020) of PEGIDA's digital activism, including original data generated through participant observation and digital ethnography from 2019–21, as well as a literature review.

I intend to make two contributions to scholarship. Conceptually, my work adds to an emerging body of literature on digital activism (Earl et al. 2010; Fielitz and Staemler 2020 and McCaughey and Ayers 2003), specifically on the far right of the political spectrum (Jasser et al. 2021; Froio and Ganesh 2019; Rone 2022). By revealing some of the important shifts in the extent and qualitative features of PEGIDA's digital practices over time, the analysis emphasises the dynamic and changing character of digital activism for far-right social movement organisations. In addition, the analytical focus on the pandemic provides insight into a novel form of constitutive digital activism in times when online mobilisation has become the necessity rather than a choice for social movement actors. Overall, the case of PEGIDA highlights the close alignment of the street and virtual dimensions of activism, rejecting simplified notions of a "fake" online and "real" offline world of mobilisation.

Methodologically, the article aims to expand patchwork ethnographic approaches to data generation, bridging both physical and digital variants of ethnography. It thus offers new perspectives on how to conduct ethnographic research in a pandemic context, when the modalities of access, as well as the field itself, is changing rapidly. While

the merits of ethnography are appreciated in political science (Brodtkin 2017; Wedeen 2010) and social movement studies (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014; Mosca 2014), researchers of the far right have long chosen *etic/externalist* over *emic/internalist* approaches to their research subjects (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Goodwin 2006; Pilkington 2021). Applying an ethnographic lens to PEGIDA's digital activism, I also contribute to a growing body of research employing an ethnographic approach to far-right activism (Blee 2007; Fangen 2020; Pilkington 2016). Focusing on the practices of meaning-making by research subjects themselves, this approach allows for insights into activist digital practices and the meaning of digital activism for field participants. Approaches such as patchwork and digital ethnography in particular emphasise that online fieldwork is not, *per se*, inferior to physical immersion, but in fact yields original and relevant results (Abidin and de Seta 2020; Góralaska 2020; Hine 2017).

The article is structured as follows: Firstly, scholarship on digital activism is reviewed, with particular attention to the specific context of the far right in Germany and the shifts in activist digital practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, I justify my case selection, lay out the patchwork ethnographic approach, and provide an overview of the corpus at the core of this study. Structured into four sub-sections following temporal logic, the ensuing analysis explores continuities and shifts in PEGIDA's digital activism. Finally, I discuss some of the advantages of my methodological approach *vis-à-vis* other methods, and finish with an appeal to take digital approaches to ethnography more seriously.

THEORISING DIGITAL ACTIVISM

At the intersection of political science, social movement and communication studies, concepts such as “digital activism”, “internet activism” and “cyberactivism” designate various types of protest that take place on the internet and in social media (Earl et al. 2010; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan 2017; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). From the perspective of social movement studies, digital activism can be broadly defined as “all those activist practices making use of digital infrastructures, that is hardware and software, to push social and political change”¹ (Fielitz and Staemler 2020, 427; see also Joyce 2010). Such practices include online campaigns and petitions, social media-based communications among activists, and hacking attacks, among others. The actors associated with digital activism range from individuals across loosely coordinated collectives to organized groups.

1 All originally German-language quotes, both from literature and empirical data, have been translated by the author.

Recent contributions to the field offer useful typologies of digital activism. Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemmler distinguish between five ideal-types of this kind of activism, depending on the specific practices, infrastructure, and actors involved (Fielitz and Staemmler 2020, 430). In their framework, the first type of digital activism, click activism is mainly associated with individuals signing online petitions on “petition platforms and social media”. Secondly, hashtag activism primarily refers to loose clusters of people that “solidarise, debate, propagate and manipulate” under a common hashtag. Campaign activism, the third type of digital activism, refers to social movement organisations that draw on “internal platforms, social media, and messenger services” to “organise, mobilise and report”. Fourthly, hack activism signifies practices such as “leaking, the denial-of-service attacks and hacking” by “open and closed collectives”. The fifth and final ideal-type, tech activism, signifies the “designing, coding and running” of “software, services and alternative platforms” by communities of production.

In addition to classifying different types of digital activism, scholars have shown a particular interest in the multifaceted relationship between the online and offline dimensions of mobilisation, or, more generally, between the allegedly “fake” online and “real” offline worlds (Fielitz and Staemmler 2020, 426; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). By expanding on previously available contentious repertoires, the internet and social media offer a myriad of new opportunities for mobilisation. Moreover, virtual communication and networking both facilitate and complement a more conventional repertoire of collective action such as demonstrations and other types of street protests (Baringhorst et al. 2017; Rucht 2014). At the same time, digital variants of activism and the emergence of genuinely virtual movements raise fundamental questions about the political agency of movement actors (Kavada 2016) and the ontology of movements as such (Cammaerts 2021; McCaughey and Ayers 2003).

Researchers of the far right have also set out to explore far-right digital activism online, demonstrating that the virtual world has become an important dimension of mobilisation. Non-monitored social media platforms provide venues for far-right virtual communities to form and expand (Jasser et al. 2021). Similar to social movements from across the political spectrum, in this internet age, far-right actors engage in “campaign activism” when using digital communication platforms to gather domestic constituencies and network transnationally (Froio and Ganesh 2019; Miller-Idriss 2020). Far-right players also appear as “tech activists” as they run the so-called alternative media platforms that both propagate fake news and produce original content (Rone 2022). In Germany, while demonstration politics in the “battle for the streets” still plays a key role for the far right (Virchow 2011), digital activism is also on the rise. Over the past number of years, numerous websites and social media accounts orchestrated by far-right activists, groups, and clusters have emerged. German (speaking) internet users consume fake news on platforms such as Political Incorrect News (Weisskircher 2020), and engage in novel forms of virtual symbolic interaction such as “meme wars” (Bogerts and Fielitz 2018), among others.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital activism has risen to unprecedented importance across the globe, including in western democracies that would usually allow for protest to take place in the public space (Mayer, Stern, and Daphi 2021; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020). As researchers have only recently started examining the long-term shifts in the digital activism of far-right social movement organisations before and beyond the pandemic, my analysis sets out to shed light on some of the – possibly novel – qualities of digital activism during the pandemic, and its relationship to both online and offline mobilisation before it and in other issue-areas.

A PATCHWORK ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO DIGITAL ACTIVISM

My research strategy involves conducting a case study of a pre-existing social movement organisation, namely the Dresden-based PEGIDA, undertaking a thorough literature review, and an extended period of ethnographic observation. I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital practices from its early phase of mobilisation in 2014–15 over the months before the pandemic in 2019–20 to the outbreak and first year of the pandemic in 2020–21. Due to its dynamic relationship with the internet and with social media dating back to 2014, PEGIDA constitutes a 'critical' case (Snow 2013) of digital activism that lends itself especially well to generate new insights into the phenomenon beyond just a single case study. Since PEGIDA's emergence in Dresden, its main contentious activities have taken the form of street demonstrations in the historic centre of Dresden, organized initially weekly and later mostly bi-weekly (Geiges, Marg, and Walter 2015; Patzelt and Klose 2016; Rucht et al. 2015; Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018). At the same time, PEGIDA always maintained an online mobilisation footprint (Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018, 23–26) and was therefore considered a "typical social media phenomenon" (Scharf and Pleul 2016, 84). When the German national and regional governments imposed stay-at-home measures to contain the spread of the new coronavirus in March 2020, including a ban on mass gatherings in public, similar to many other organisations around the globe, PEGIDA adapted its forms of action to the new situation (Volk 2021). Oscillating between right-wing radicalism, extremism, and populism (Kocyba 2018), I consider PEGIDA to be "far-right" – an umbrella term that captures both outright anti-democratic and more nuanced anti-liberal positions on the right of the political spectrum (Mudde 2019; Pirro 2022).

Methodologically, I draw from the meaning-focused research paradigm of interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), specifically the notion of "patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al. 2020) to (re-)construct PEGIDA's digital activism before, during and beyond the pandemic. This critical approach to ethnographic research aims to adapt the interpretive method to the various constraints on fully (physically and mentally) immersing oneself within a field or a community of study (Eggeling 2022).

For instance, it affords researchers the opportunity to combine different types of data generated both through conventional immersive fieldwork and in online settings, thus appreciating the internet not only as a source of data, but as a field *sui generis*, where meaningful social interaction takes place (Góralaska 2020; Hine 2017; Mosca 2014). The main proponents of patchwork ethnography, Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chita Watanabe, argue that the concept relates to the “ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process”. Rather than replacing immersive fieldwork, patchwork ethnographies maintain “long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking [...], while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production” (Günel et al. 2020).

Specifically, my patchwork ethnography of PEGIDA’s digital activism includes overlapping physical and digital fieldwork phases, as well as short-term field visits between 2019–21. I conducted participant observation throughout a more conventional fieldwork phase in Dresden in the autumn and winter of 2019–20, an entirely virtual phase during the pandemic spring of 2020, and a couple of short-term trips to Dresden in 2020 and 2021. In addition, I systematically archived web content produced and published by PEGIDA, namely on the website www.pegida.de, and on social media pages. Both on the streets of Dresden and online, I assumed the role of a (silent) participant observer, either joining the participants in front of the stage and marching in the city or accessing leader Lutz Bachmann’s YouTube channel to experience live streams as they were happening. Relying on both immediate and mediated techniques of recording such as jotting down, photographing, filming, downloading, and screen-shooting, a corpus was generated that includes detailed field notes, photos, videos, flyers, demonstration memorabilia, and social media posts. As I was studying an ‘unlikeable group’ (Pasieka 2019) whose political positions strongly differed from my own, I reflexively engaged with my own role as a participant observer throughout the multiple layers of fieldwork, deskwork, and text work constituting the research process (see also Kocyba and Sommer 2022).

PEGIDA’S DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Having laid out the article’s theoretical and methodological foundations, I will now analyse PEGIDA’s digital activism, paying attention to its extent (“how much”), form (“how”), and variety (“what kind”). Essentially a longitudinal analysis, I trace shifts and continuities in activist practices over time. In line with my constructivist-ethnographic lens, I also seek to shed light on what digital activism means to PEGIDA activists themselves. The analysis is structured as follows: an introductory part draws from published

scholarship to reconstruct PEGIDA's digital activism before my own data generation was initiated. In line with most of the literature, it focuses on PEGIDA's initial phase of mobilisation in 2014–15. The ensuing second, third and fourth sections build on my original patchwork ethnographic corpus to explore PEGIDA's digital activism in the months before the outbreak of the pandemic, during lockdown, and throughout the first year of pandemic.

Large-Scale Online Mobilisation, 2014–15

The internet and social media have played a key role since PEGIDA's emergence in 2014. In the early phase of mobilisation PEGIDA's extensive digital practices fitted large-scale “campaign activism” and, to a lesser extent, “tech activism” (Fielitz and Staemmler 2020, 430). In fact, the role of social media was so important that Stefan Scharf and Clemens Pleul (2016, 84–86) refer to early PEGIDA as a “typical social media phenomenon” that “uses Facebook as a retreat off the streets” for the “construction of its own realities and new identities”. Leading activists used social media, specifically Facebook, as a tool to communicate among themselves, mobilise participants and inform each other about and report on street events (Vorländer, Herold and Schäller 2018, 23–26). In the first months of its existence, PEGIDA's Facebook group became a popular digital venue for exchange and debate, attracting up to 200,000 likes (Institut für Demokratieforschung 2016, 42–47). It also became a tool to network with other actors from across the German-speaking far-right scene (Scharf and Pleul 2016, 88–90).

The existing research takes not only an instrumentalist perspective that sees social media as a mobilisation tool, but sometimes relies on an interpretive lens to demonstrate that digital activism was a constitutive factor of the PEGIDA phenomenon. Not only did PEGIDA emerge as an initially “open” and later “closed” group on Facebook (Geiges et al. 2015, 11), and thus existed first in the online space and only later as a street phenomenon. In the weeks which followed its first street demonstrations a loose collective consolidated online in parallel to the street protestors. According to an empirical study by the Göttingen-based Institute for Democracy Research (2016), its online followers and participants in debates on Facebook only partially overlapped with the demonstrators in Dresden. In fact, “[i]t nearly seems as if there were partially different people moving on the data highways on the one hand and the streets of the Saxon capital on the other” (25). Not surprisingly then, the offline and online variants of PEGIDA differed somewhat in ideology and discourse. Even more so than the demonstrations in Dresden, the PEGIDA Facebook page provided a space in which the “culture of discussion [...] was, to a substantial degree, uninhibited and coarsened, and also crossed the line of what would be a punishable offence” (Vorländer, Herold and Schäller 2018, 23). Mainstream social media sites such as Facebook became a challenger rather than enabler when the company shut down PEGIDA's page for the first time in 2017, citing the far-right positions and extremist rhetoric voiced there.

Overall, in the early phase of PEGIDA's mobilisation, the relationship between the offline mobilisation on the streets of Dresden and online mobilisation on Facebook was intricate and unstraightforward. Underlining the fact that digital communication practices were key to PEGIDA's street demonstrations, the review of the literature confirms, on the one hand, that strong ties existed between the virtual and the "real" worlds of mobilisation (Rucht 2014). On the other hand, it reveals that both worlds were to some degree disentangled, as at least two PEGIDAs, one on the streets and one on Facebook, existed in parallel to each other. However, the online PEGIDA impacted its street version, since the extreme positions uttered online contributed to the extremist image of the street demonstrators.

Limited Online Activity 2019–20

By autumn 2019, five years after PEGIDA's emergence, the extent and characteristic features of the group's digital activism had essentially shifted towards what could be considered a weak variant of campaign activism. My observations derived from my immersive fieldwork phase in Dresden in 2019–20, indicate that online activity was comparatively diminished both on the supply and demand sides, and mostly connected to the street demonstrations rather than constituting a dimension of mobilisation in its own right.

As a participant observer of the demonstrations in Dresden I learned and later confirmed through my independent web-based research, that the group's campaign activism at that time was associated with the website www.pegida.de, the channels *Lutziges Lutz Bachmann*, *PEGIDA live* on the video sharing platform YouTube, as well as pages and channels found under the name "PEGIDA" on novel social media sites such as Telegram and the Russian network VK. Mainstream social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were quite insignificant. At the demonstrations, the protest leaders Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch, and Siegfried Däbritz advertised PEGIDA's online presence, emphasising that a subscription (to the YouTube channel, for instance) would not entail any financial cost. All of these outlets were regularly updated, with several website entries per week and numerous social media posts per day. However, none of them counted significant numbers of followers, often only a few thousands, nor were they particularly interactive.

Among PEGIDA's web pages, two types can be distinguished based on their tight or loose links to street PEGIDA. Principally serving to inform and report from protest events, the (non-interactive) website was closely linked to the demonstrations in Dresden. In most cases, these website entries referred to one specific demonstration in Dresden and did not debate general themes or engage with public protest elsewhere. They were published a few days before and after the respective demonstration, announcing the date, time, venue, and sometimes a theme, and sharing web links to videos of the speeches and march afterwards. Similarly, Lutz Bachmann's

YouTube channels had strong ties to the demonstrations in Dresden and they often hosted live broadcasts from these protest events. In turn, the pages and channels on social media followed a different logic. Regularly updated by Lutz Bachmann in the fashion of “click activism”, they mostly served as forums to share content from other websites and social media accounts rather than to publish original posts or incite multilateral debates.

My ethnographic observations thus indicate that social media had ceased to play a constitutive role by the autumn of 2019. By then, the group had already repeatedly disappeared from mainstream websites such as Facebook, thus putting a sudden end to its online community. Also, no online PEGIDA emerged on the new communication channels provided by Telegram or VK, even though they would have been less prone to censure hate speech and incitement to violence on their platforms. Instead, the new social media pages and channels were of unidirectional nature in that the posts and shares on the Telegram channel barely received any likes or comments. Similarly, the YouTube livestreams of demonstrations were meant to be watched rather than discussed. Thus, it came as no surprise when demonstrators did not mention PEGIDA’s website or social media channels when informing me about “interesting news outlets”. For instance, at the Christmas event on 15th December 2019, a middle-aged, male protestor gave me a meticulously hand-written overview of online media platforms, printed journals, and books that listed the far-right German-language “Compact Magazin”, together with a variety of conspiratorial websites – but none of PEGIDA’s web pages were to be found within.

This leads me to conclude that PEGIDA constituted itself as a collective actor primarily in the regular demonstrations. In line with protest ritual theory (Casquete 2006), the ritualisation of street protest has shaped PEGIDA’s development since 2015 (Volk 2022; Vorländer, et al. 2018, 19) – as opposed to its digital activism, which had dominated its early mobilisation success. My data does not give a clear answer as to why the virtual parallel PEGIDA did not persist until 2019. Yet, based on my ethnographic observations I assume that, firstly, the digital dimension was of minor interest for demonstrators in Dresden. Most of them were not digital natives, so to them the essence of PEGIDA was as a symbolic performance of demonstrating, and they paid little heed to virtual mobilisation. A case in point is when activists, speaking into a camera filming the demonstrations for broadcasting on YouTube, praised those people on the square who were “doing a PEGIDA”, and mockingly criticized supporters that had stayed home. Secondly, the PEGIDA Facebook page and other associated channels also lost their appeal for like-minded individuals in their homes. As a result of the first shut down of the page in 2017, the continuity of activism was disrupted. Simultaneously, it might also be the case that users drifted to newly emerging outlets that were quickly gaining popularity, because the protest organisers seemed to be unable to generate innovative content and debate.

A Constitutive Virtual Community 2020

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, PEGIDA's digital activism underwent a sudden and fundamental qualitative shift. After the period of limited online activity in the months before the pandemic, digital activism became a constitutive factor in April 2020, as it took a different form than the one known during the early phase of large-scale online mobilisation. My digital ethnographic observations conducted in the spring of 2020 revealed PEGIDA as a virtual community that did not provide a digital communication platform for debate and exchange, but instead became a novel form of virtual "demonstration politics" (Virchow 2011). I observed how, instead of creating a new "parallel PEGIDA", leading activists attempted to transfer the "real-life PEGIDA" onto the world wide web.

The corpus of data I collected through my patchwork ethnography before and during the pandemic indicates that the qualitative shift in PEGIDA's digital activism was directly related to its street mobilisation, or, more accurately, the lack thereof. The political response to the pandemic significantly disrupted the protest routine that PEGIDA had developed over the previous five-and-a-half years. Due to the restrictions imposed on public gatherings during lockdown, the group was unable to organise street demonstrations for the first time since 2014. A novel form of constitutive digital activism was therefore developed to compensate for the lack of public events. Specifically, the leading activists organised six "virtual marches" on the video sharing platform YouTube in April and May 2020, transferring the five-year street protest ritual to the virtual space (Volk 2021). The following vignette, drawn from the fieldnotes generated during my virtual observation of PEGIDA's first online protest event, illustrates what a virtual march entailed:

On a Monday evening at the beginning of April 2020 around 1,000 internet users accessed the channel 'LUTZiges Lutz Bachmann' on the online video sharing platform YouTube. They are waiting, as YouTube puts it, for the beginning of a livestream. The screen is still showing a static image, namely that of a digital collage reading "For our country, our culture and our values! Dresden's first virtual evening stroll" in front of the German national colours: black, red and golden. There is quite a lot of activity in the chatroom where logged-in-users greet each other and exchange information about protest events across Germany. Then, a video begins, showing a handcrafted toy truck with three figurines bearing PEGIDA stickers on their chests standing in it, and a couple of paper flags arranged around a tiny desk. The video is accompanied by the so-called PEGIDA anthem, instrumental music reminiscent of a football song. After about four minutes, the host Wolfgang Taufkirch appears on screen in front of a German flag of crumpled fabric. He declares: "It is Monday, 6th April 2020, and we welcome all patriots here to this live stream, a platform of resistance!" With these words, he launches PEGIDA's first virtual march.

Over the following hour, YouTube users were able to witness something falling in between a group video call and an online conference. Leading activists took turns speaking live, while familiar guests from the German-speaking far-right scene appeared in pre-recorded audio and video recordings from

what seemed to be their homes. After about half an hour – 1,700 users had accessed the page by then – the moderator Lutz Bachmann announced the beginning of the “virtual march”, and on the screen flickered a high-speed video of the march in Dresden on 17th February 2020. In response, the chat board erupted with heart-emoticons in the colours black, red and golden. Two more speeches later Lutz Bachmann announced the end of the event, but not before sharing plans for further virtual marches in the following weeks. In the chatroom, viewers responded enthusiastically by hitting the “like” button. After sealing the event with the usual recording of the German national anthem, the organisers waved goodbye to the viewers, and shortly thereafter, the livestream stopped.

In addition to replacing street protest, this unprecedented form of constitutive digital activism bridged the offline and online worlds of mobilisation in novel ways. Crucially, the virtual marches highlighted that both worlds are not disentangled, but closely intertwined. Instead of being restricted to an allegedly “fake” online context, digital activism is part of *and* constitutes the “real” world of mobilisation. The example of PEGIDA demonstrates how a social movement organisation can shift from the digital realm of social media to the real-life public space and vice versa. Arguably, this insight was obvious to the activists themselves, as the protest organisers, as well as the participants in the YouTube chatroom, considered the virtual marches as genuine PEGIDA protest events. I was able to observe that they congratulated each other for their virtual mobilising success and included six virtual marches as events no. 202 to 207 in their event calendar updated since 2014.

Declining Activism 2020–21

When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down and lockdown regulations were lifted across Germany in mid-May 2020, the extent and form of PEGIDA’s digital activism changed yet again. My data generated via digital ethnography and short-term field visits to Dresden in 2020–21 show that PEGIDA’s digital practices quickly returned to what they had been in the months prior to the pandemic, namely a weak form of campaign activism, lacking the constitutive element of online mobilisation. There was no increase in digital activism to replace street demonstrations during ensuing lockdowns in late 2020 and 2021, respectively, ensuring that PEGIDA’s mobilisation overall declined throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

PEGIDA again constituted itself a ‘street player’ rather than a virtual actor. In line with my fieldnotes, it organised in total 32 street demonstrations between the first pandemic street rally in May 2020 until the seven-year anniversary event in October 2021, but no further virtual marches. Activists mainly used social media to announce and report from street demonstrations. They did not take up the opportunity afforded by the internet to provide a platform for exchange, such as in the early phase of mobilisation, nor to maintain the novel type of virtual community created in the first weeks of the lockdown. Interestingly, PEGIDA’s digital activism did not become constitutive later on, in 2020 and 2021, when pandemic restrictions tightened yet again, precluding

more street demonstrations. Rather than reviving “virtual marches” on YouTube, leading activists suspended public protest for an extended amount of time.

My observations indicate that PEGIDA returned to its pre-pandemic digital practices because the leading activists viewed the virtual marches as a stopgap and imperfect replacement for street demonstrations. In YouTube livestreams in April and early May of 2020, Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch and Siegfried Däbritz repeatedly announced that PEGIDA would “return to the streets as soon as possible”, emphasising PEGIDA’s character as a genuine “street movement in the tradition of 1989”. Unsurprisingly then, they took to the streets of Dresden whenever governmental restrictions allowed for small-scale gatherings in public, while largely complying with such restrictions as compulsory face masks or physical distancing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has studied the role of digital activism in contemporary protest politics, focusing specifically on the example of the German far-right movement PEGIDA. Drawing on a literature review, participant observation and digital ethnography, I came up with three key findings: First, the longitudinal perspective reveals that a social movement actor’s digital practices are not bound to one or a few ideal-types, but rather are highly dynamic over time. Social media offer specific opportunities at one moment or period, but may pose challenges at other times. While the case of PEGIDA underlines the agency of activists in devising new forms of digital protest in times of crisis, it also hints at the importance of contextual factors that determine the extent and type of digital activism. Second, my interpretive-ethnographic lens emphasises the constitutive dimension of digital activism. Social movement actors constitute themselves as virtual communities, both in parallel to and congruent with physical communities. Third, my analytical focus on digital activism during the COVID-19 pandemic adds new insights to the study of the relationship between the online and offline worlds of mobilisation. They are closely intertwined, mutually shaping each other, rather than being disentangled and existing separately from one another.

Crucially, this article underscores some of the key advantages of ethnography in relation to other methods employed in social movement studies and protest research. Ethnography’s comparatively high degree of flexibility proves especially useful in the context of rapidly changing fieldwork sites, such as those that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. While such standard methods as protest event analysis or surveys of participants faced severe challenges when public protest became restricted and/or illegal, my patchwork ethnographic approach allowed me to continue data generation by swiftly shifting my fieldwork site from the streets of Dresden to YouTube. At a time when other methods yielded zero data due to the suspension of street protest, digital

ethnography allowed me to compile a rich corpus of empirical information on the changing nature of protest events.

Even though digital fieldwork became a necessity rather than a theory-driven methodological choice during the lockdown, I argue that it is not a second-best and inherently inferior version of participant observation. Yielding original and innovative results, for instance regarding the constitutive features of digital activism and the emergence of virtual communities, it is a form of immersion in its own right. Undoubtedly though, the concept and scholarly practice of digital ethnography needs further refinement. Recent scholarship has pointed out numerous theoretical, technical, and ethical challenges, including how to construct the field in an unlimited online space, translating the practice of participant observation into the online world beyond “lurking”, building relationships with field participants, and representing digital empirical data in written accounts (Abidin and de Seta 2020; Góralaska 2020; de Seta 2020). In this context, my study demonstrates how the research field can be constructed dynamically by following a social movement actor on its path through the web. What emerges is a hybrid, physical-virtual multisited ethnography (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 45–6). Further research is needed to devise new definitions of immersion that include not only ‘being there’ in person, but also novel forms of virtual presence.

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the need for more research on digital activism and novel methodological approaches to generate knowledge. As social movement organisations increasingly mobilise online, scholarship should conceive of digital activism both as a dimension of activism in general, and as an empirical phenomenon in its own right. Ethnography, due to its flexibility, highlighted in the patchwork approach, is in an outstanding position to explore novel patterns of protest and generate original insights beyond just how social movement organisations’ use the internet and social media to publish propaganda. Future work should focus on the novel qualities of digital activism as well as activist choices, as they devise or discard specific digital practices.

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