

# Faking, Optimising and Conceding to Power Social Movement Understandings of Social Media Power

Blum, Irene; Uldam, Julie

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# **Faking, optimising, and conceding to power: Social movement understandings of social media power**

Blum I and Uldam J

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how social movement actors understand the role of social media in their activism. Concerns about commercialization, individualization, and surveillance have replaced much optimism about the potential of social media for progressive activism. Therefore, we examine social movement actors' theories and assumptions about social media, focusing on climate activism and criticism of unsustainable corporate practices. Theoretically, we draw on social imaginaries to develop the concept of media practices to consist of three dimensions: doing, knowing and assuming. Empirically, we draw on interviews with media and communication managers from the climate movement, including Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, and the World Wildlife Foundation. We show that social movement actors' media practices are characterised by theories of faking power, optimising power, and conceding to power, which are underpinned by a social media imaginary of commercial logics.

## **Introduction**

This article examines the ways in which social movement actors, including activists and NGOs, understand the role of social media in their efforts to hold big business accountable for misconduct. Social media have been celebrated for their democratising potential (e.g., Gillespie, 2010). This includes potential for facilitating debate, visibility, and self-presentation. A key arena where social media have been vested with hope for their empowering potential is possibilities for social movement actors to hold businesses accountable for misconduct (Bennett,

2003). Social movement actors have been identified as a key reason why corporations act in socially responsible ways and communicate about those actions (Maktoufi et al., 2020). However, much optimism has been tempered by concerns about challenges such as commercialization, individualization, and surveillance (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Dahlberg, 1998; van Dijck and Poell, 2013) and the embeddedness of social media in wider power relations (e.g., Fenton, 2016). For example, many social movement actors are under-resourced and face challenges in reaching wider publics, companies' monitoring their criticism, and police surveillance (e.g., Cammaerts, 2021; Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Kavada and Poell, 2021; Uldam, 2016). As such, social movement actors may feel uncertain about the efficacy of their uses of social media. The literature at the intersection of social movement studies and media studies has brought us important insights into the media practices of social movement actors (e.g., Kavada, 2015; Neumayer and Rossi, 2018). But the assumptions that underpin media practices remain under-researched. This article contributes to filling this gap by qualitatively analysing social movement actors' understandings and assumptions about social media. It focuses on social movement actors from the climate movement.

Capturing social movement actors' understandings and assumptions about social media, we begin from the concept of social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004). While important research in media studies has contributed insights on understandings of technology on the basis of the concept of imaginaries, both social imaginaries and sociotechnical imaginaries (Bucher, 2017; Kazansky and Milan, 2021; Lomborg and Kapsch, 2020; Mansell, 2012), the concept often remains analytically vague or is taken to work at different levels. Contributing to this literature, this article positions social media imaginaries in relation to media practices, including the related concept of folk theories (e.g., Toff and Nielsen, 2018; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). Doing so, we suggest an analytics of media practices that pays attention to doing, knowing, and assuming. The doing dimension of media practices has been examined extensively, often drawing on Couldry's key work (2004, 2012). The knowing dimension has also been examined (McCurdy, 2011). However, the assumptions that underpin the doing and knowing in media practices remain under-researched. Therefore, we suggest approaching media practices as consisting of three dimensions: doing, knowing, and assuming. Attending to these dimensions and the interplay between them serves to analytically operationalize the concept of social imaginaries. As such, our contribution is two-fold: (i) it provides a conceptual development of imaginaries and media

practices and (ii) it goes beyond social movements' campaigns and provides empirical insights into the understandings and assumptions that underpin them.

Empirically, this article draws on interviews with social media and communication experts from social movement organisations from the climate movement, including activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion and NGOs such as Greenpeace. The interviews focus on media practices in relation to multinational companies (MNCs) and criticism of practices that are detrimental to the climate. On the basis of this, it shows how social movement actors understand social media as both empowering and creating power challenges in their relations with MNCs (the knowing dimension of media practices). These understandings take commercial logics of algorithmic visibility for granted (the assuming dimension of media practices).

In the following, we first outline key perspectives on social movement understandings of media from a media practice perspective, focusing on the notions of folk theories. Next, we introduce the role of social media imaginaries for social movement actors. We then turn to our methodological approach, including the analytical operationalisation of social media imaginaries and detail our data collection. Following this, our analysis first examines social movement actors' understandings of social media and, second, the assumptions that underpin them with implications for (dis)empowerment.

### **Social movement actors and understandings of social media**

Concerns about algorithmic challenges to visibility increasingly accompany hopes for transforming power relations by providing social movement actors with cheap, fast, and networked means of communication (Fenton, 2012; Kavada et al., 2023). As a result, our assumptions about social media, what we term social media imaginaries, are increasingly imbued with ambivalence. This has implications for democratic debate, because our understandings and underlying assumptions about social media influence how we use them. Media practices have been used to capture how people use media, including social media. However, the underlying assumptions that underpin media practices remain under-researched. In this article, we begin from media practices and draw on social imaginaries to capture their underlying assumptions.

We start by outlining the concept of media practices. We then outline the concept of social imaginaries and connect it to media practices.

### ***Media practices***

Grounded in practice theory (Schatzki, 1996), media practices have been suggested to capture what people do with media and in relation to media (Couldry, 2004, 2012). Media practices are the routinised activities that people engage in in relation to media. As routinised practices, they not only relate to what people do consciously, but also what people do routinely (Couldry, 2004). In other words, media practices capture the doing and knowing of media-related activities. This perspective has been important in shedding light on activist and civil society engagement with legacy media (McCurdy, 2011), media ecologies (Mattoni and Treré, 2014), and social media (Uldam and Kaun, 2018). To be able to also capture the underlying assumptions that underpin the knowing and doing dimensions of media practices, we propose a third dimension, the assuming dimension. We focus on the knowing dimension, which we unpack by drawing on folk theories (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). We develop the assuming dimension by drawing on social imaginaries.

### ***Media practices and the dimension of knowing: Folk theories***

As media practices not only relate to what people do consciously, but also what they do routinely (Couldry, 2004), they consist of both a doing and a knowing dimension. In relation to social media, the doing dimension and social movements have been analysed extensively, e.g., showing how activists have used social media platforms to mobilise or connect (Aziz, 2022; Uldam and Kaun, 2018). Addressing how people understand media, the knowing dimension can be seen as the theories that people develop about media (Mattoni, 2019; McCurdy, 2013). The notion of folk theories has been used to capture journalists' and users' (Palmer et al., 2020) understandings of journalism and news, and users' understandings of algorithms (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). Toff and Nielsen (2018) approach folk theories as 'implicit ways of thinking about the world that guide our behaviors' (p. 639). These studies contrast folk theories to imaginaries, specifically Bucher's (2017) notion of algorithmic imaginaries and Suchman's notion of technological imaginaries, arguing that imaginaries are abstract ideas, while folk theories are 'rooted in action,

practice, and lived experience’ and/or second-hand sources or speculations (Toff and Nielsen, 2018: 639). As such, folk theories provide professionals and users with ‘toolkits’ to draw on in the construction of strategies for action (Toff and Nielsen, 2018: 639). This arguably makes them less abstract than imaginaries. Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) takes this to mean that folk theories are both rooted in everyday experience and used to make sense of experiences. Based on this, they identify five folk theories of algorithms to show how users perceive algorithms in their daily media experiences: (i) confining, (ii) practical, (iii) reductive, (iv) intangible and (v) exploitative. While Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) approach understandings as individual rather than collective, for example, referring to users as consumers rather than citizens, their approach helps capture social movement actors’ theories of social media.

As toolkits that people draw on to make sense of experiences, folk theories closely resemble lay theories (McCurdy, 2011). Folk theories are not necessarily coherent and can be formed from misconception and, as such, come to form what Bennett (1975) has termed ‘pseudo theories’ (cited in McCurdy, 2011: 633). On the basis of this, we do not take folk theories to represent strategies or theories about how things should be done. Rather, we take folk theories to capture people’s conscious ideas about how things work as they make sense of their experiences. While folk theories capture the knowing dimension of media practices, they do not fully capture the underlying assumptions about social media, because they work at a conscious level. To capture the assumptions that underpin these conscious theories, we turn to the concept of social imaginaries.

### ***Media practices and the dimension of assuming: Social imaginaries***

Like folk theories, the concept of social imaginaries also aims to capture understandings. However, whereas folk theories are experience-based and conscious, social imaginaries capture wider ideas about societal structures and mechanisms (Taylor, 2002). Removed from experience, social imaginaries are taken for granted. As such, the concept of social imaginary has been related to hegemony (Mouffe, 2005), connecting the ways in which we collectively take for granted societal structures and mechanisms to the power of common sense. In this sense, social imaginaries, like hegemony, are not fixed but open to destabilization through counterhegemonic challenges (Mouffe, 2005). In media studies, Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) similarly connect

the concept of social imaginary to hegemony. Departing from this, Mansell (2012) draws on Taylor to examine how the assumptions and expectations of designers and policy-makers shape internet governance. On the basis of Taylor's (2004) definition of social imaginaries as the deeper normative notions and images of social existence that underlie these expectations, Mansell (2012) identifies a dominant imaginary of market-led technology diffusion. This imaginary of market-led technology diffusion presupposes an unregulated market as optimal for incentives for the production and consumption of information and, ultimately, enlightenment. More recently, imaginaries have been used in more specific terms that resemble work on folk theories and lay theories to examine women's groups' uses of digital infrastructures as networked feminism (Fotopoulou, 2016). They have also been used to examine how ordinary users' (Bucher, 2017; Schellewald, 2022) and professional content creators' (Siles et al., 2020) understandings of algorithms influence their use of social media platforms (Bucher, 2017) and their possibilities for circumventing inscribed uses of digital media (Lomborg and Kapsch, 2020). In Science and Technology Studies (STS), the concept sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009) is premised on visions of the future resonating at a collective level. This has also been used in ways where imaginaries are explicit and thus resemble folk theories and lay theories. For example, imaginaries have been examined as publicly performed ideas of the future, showing how corporate actors simultaneously invoke imaginaries of disruption and resources (Hockenfull and Cohn, 2021). Both social and sociotechnical imaginaries are conceptualised as non-fixed, with the possibility of multiple, competing imaginaries co-existing (Kazansky and Milan, 2021; Mager and Katzenbach, 2021). For example, in terms of sociotechnical imaginaries, Kazansky and Milan (2021) have shown how data activists produce counter-imaginaries that contest the dominant imaginary of technological innovation with its inevitability of surveillance. Here, Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein (2019) have also shown how data activists have the potential to produce 'socio-critical imaginaries'. In terms of social imaginaries, Mansell (2012) has shown how developers and designers produce 'alternative imaginaries' of collaboration. More recently, Mager (2023) has shown how search engine developers develop 'counter-imaginaries' of independence and openness rather than commodification (Mager, 2023).

This article is informed by the ways in which both social and sociotechnical imaginaries aim to capture dominant collective understandings and potential alternative understandings, but

mainly draws on Taylor's (2002) approach to social imaginaries. It does so for two reasons: (a) to go beyond the visions of the future that are in focus in sociotechnical imaginaries, and (b) because Taylor (2004) distinguishes between imaginary and theory. In this distinction, social imaginaries originate from the theorisation by individuals, often members of an elite with political and/or material power. This conceptual distinction is important, because it enables an analytical and a practice distinction, where developing theories can more readily be achieved if we uncover the assumptions that underpin these theories. To add a dimension of assuming to media practices and capture the ways in which imaginaries feed into the knowing and doing of media practices, our analytical approach combines folk theories with social imaginaries. In the next section, we first introduce our methodological operationalisation and then unpack our analytical approach.

## **Methods**

To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of media practices, we distinguish between, on the one hand, the doing and knowing dimensions of media practices and, on the other, the assuming dimension.

Examining the dimensions of doing and knowing, we focus on the cognitive frameworks that guide campaigns and protest activities, drawing on folk theories (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). For the assuming dimension, we draw on social imaginaries. In this way, we first examine how social movement actors articulate their theories about social media for campaigning and protest activities as they emerge in interviews. While other research has examined campaign and protest activities as media practices as they appear in online spaces, we focus on how they are articulated by the people who devise them. Second, we identify the underlying assumptions that underpin these articulations of theories. This analytical approach enables insights into what users choose to do and the explicated understandings on which they base their choices (doing and knowing) as well as the wider imaginaries that suture them (assuming). The analytical implications of this are that understandings shape our sense of what are acceptable, desirable, and possible strategies for action.

Capturing the assumptions that social movement actors hold, which informs their decision-making, requires engaging with them. Therefore, this study draws on in-depth



interviews and participant observation with social movement actors. This includes both activists and NGOs, specifically communication experts. As a selection criterion, communication experts are here understood as a broad range of persons responsible for external communication and/or (social) media. Twenty interviewees participated in this research, representing Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace, Danish Society for Nature Conservation, NOAH the Danish affiliation of Friends of the Earth, Forest of the World, Global Action, Green Transition, Plastic Change, World Benchmarking Alliance, WWF, Cool Earth, and an anonymised informally organised social movement organisation. These constitute organisations with a wide range of different tactics and goals, ranging from what can be termed anti-systemic to reformist organisations (Uldam, 2019). While their approaches and orientations differ, they share an interest in countering the climate crisis. Four times, we have interviewed several people from the same organisation.

In providing textual depth, interviews enable shedding light on both experiences and assumptions (Orgad, 2005). All interviewees and their organisations were offered full anonymity, and two decided to opt for this possibility, one from an organisation where we have interviewed more persons and another who was the only interviewee from their organisation, why the name of this particular organisation is also anonymised. Participant observation was conducted at three activist strategy meetings as well as civil society events to inform the interviews and our analysis of them (Schellewald, 2022; Uldam and McCurdy, 2013).

Analysing the interviews, we adhered to the methodology described by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013). This research design allows rich contextualization and an appreciation of subjective views, which are central to theorizing understandings and assumptions. Following this, we developed a three-stage process for analysing and coding interviews.

The first stage involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts to identify first-order conceptions through open coding, which meant that we stayed very close to the data to identify the understandings that emerged to develop the first-order conceptions. We searched for articulations of the knowing and doing dimensions of media practices in conjunction, because interviewees did not separate the two. The second step focused on identifying similarities and differences among the first-order conceptions. Based on these similarities, we clustered the first-order conceptions into second-order themes. Hence, the second-order themes represent higher-order categories that emerge from interactions between conceptual categories and the first-order

conceptions (Glozer et al., 2019). We then clustered the second-order themes into three overarching third-order dimensions representing the knowing and doing dimensions of media practices, namely the three folk theories (Table 1).

The fourth and final step identified the deeper held assumptions that underpin these doing and knowing dimensions of media practices, drawing on the concept of social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004). In this way, our identification of the assuming dimension of media practices is deduced on the basis of our analysis of the doing and knowing dimensions of media practices, because imaginaries remain unarticulated.

**Table 1: Coding overview**

<b>1st order conceptions</b>	<b>2nd order themes</b>	<b>3rd order dimensions: knowing and doing dimensions</b>
I actually feel that on social media it's much easier, it's much more balanced. It's a kind of an optic illusion, that you can act like you are bigger.	Practical social media Challenging power through optical illusion	Faking power: Creating an optic illusion
on Twitter you have 15 minutes to get attention to your tweet...It's very important that your tweet gets reactions and interactions right away... and that makes us more sure that we are going to get seen by politicians, media, citizens.	Confining social media Creating algorithmic optimisation by playing the algorithm	Optimising power: Playing the algorithm
We used to be able to use Facebook a lot for campaigning. Very good platform for us, but then they've changed their algorithms...if you want reach on Facebook, we have to pay for it. Facebook is a bit like a lost cause.	Exploitative social media Economics of algorithmic visibility	Conceding to power: Economics of algorithmic visibility

**Analysis: Imagining digital media power**

Our analysis shows that social movement actors have developed a set of folk theories for navigating social media to campaign on the climate crisis. We identify these folk theories as (i) faking power: creating an optic illusion (ii) optimising power: playing the algorithm, and (iii)

conceding to power: economics of algorithmic visibility. In the analysis below, we first detail these folk theories of social media, which capture the knowing and doing dimensions of media practices. On the basis of this, we identify the imaginary that underpin them, what we term a social media imaginary of commercial logics.

### ***Faking power: Creating an optic illusion***

With the internet's democratising promises long ago reassessed, social movement actors still understand social media to hold empowering potential. They understand this potential as connected to social media as a space where they are stronger than they are offline: 'Actually, organisations like NOAH and other climate organisations and networks have the upper hand on social media.' (Organisational Development, NOAH). This knowing dimension of media practices is echoed by the CEO at the NGO Plastic Change: 'I think that we are much stronger on social media than we are in reality and in financial terms...yeah, definitely and I think it is our role as NGOs and activists and green organizations to really call the bluff.' Social movement actors in this study connect this to possibilities for faking power. It is based on experiences of doing social media, where bigger is an advantage, in terms of reach and economic resources. The rationale is that alerting wider publics to criticism of companies will influence public sentiment towards corporate conduct and, with this sentiment, ultimately influence politicians to regulate corporate practices. It is for reaching wider publics and thus appearing bigger that social media platforms are seen as conducive, as also illustrated in the following quote: 'social media gives you an opportunity to actually get out to a broader group of people' (Advisor, Forests of the World). Social movement actors see themselves as 'smaller', especially in terms of economic resources. They experience this as a challenge to leveraging the potential of social media platforms to enable them to reach wider publics. Across interviews, economic resources are seen as clearly shaping work routines, and limitations in goals and execution strategies often arise. For example, it is seen as limiting to the allocation of staff to produce content for social media profiles, as one interviewee explains: 'the biggest challenge is just that it takes your resources...and it's really time-consuming if you want to do it right.' (Advisor, Forests of the World). Many interviewees concur with examples from their media practices such as, 'we are not that many people' (CEO, Plastic Change) and 'we don't have that many staff, we can't be

everywhere in the same way as they [companies] are.’ (Campaign Lead for Food, Forest and Nature, Greenpeace).

While social movement actors do see social media as awarding them some power vis-à-vis companies, they nonetheless express an understanding of this power as fake. This is captured in the following quote from the CEO of the NGO Plastic Change: “I actually feel that on social media it’s much easier, it’s much more balanced. It’s a kind of an optic illusion, that you can act like you are bigger...which is a good thing for the smaller green organizations.” This shows how social movement actors in this study connect power to size and, ultimately, resources in terms of people, time and money. Here, social movement actors see themselves at a disadvantage. This is where they see companies as holding the “real” power, whereas they merely fake power by appearing bigger in social media, as exemplified by this interviewee: ‘our budget and our resources are very limited and they are multinational corporations, sometimes they can just, they can afford doing this, and they can also afford doing something else.’ (PR and Press Responsible, Green Transition Denmark). This reflects the folk theory identified by Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021), which views algorithms to be practical in the sense that they can be worked to the advantage of users. So do social movement actors in this study. Their folk theory of faking power through optic illusion entails the possibility of fake power being translated into real power. Most social movement actors in this study understand such algorithmic optimisation to become possible if they successfully play the algorithms of social media platforms.

### ***Optimising power: Playing the algorithm***

While social movement actors see social media as central to ensuring their campaign gains visibility among wider publics, they also understand the media landscape as fragmented and, as such, a challenge, where oceans of information is constantly posted. In response, they understand making something “trend” or being featured in people’s feeds as important. An Activism Campaigner from Greenpeace explains: ‘on Twitter you have 15 minutes to get attention to your tweet...It’s very important that your tweet gets reactions and interactions right away, and when you’ll do that, it will end up in the “the most trending” or “most relevant”...and that makes us more sure that we are going to get seen by politicians, media, citizens.’ A similar effort is also mentioned by other interviewees, for example: ‘when we post something it’s in close

collaboration to make it happen on multiple channels at the same time.’ (Creative Lead, Greenpeace). Where the first interviewee emphasises the importance of initial engagement with posts, the second focuses on cross posting. In both cases, this relates to playing the algorithm. This is not a subversive approach. Rather, it implies optimising algorithmic possibilities by playing the algorithm abiding the rules of the game (Monterde and Postill, 2014). This emerges across interviews, as also illustrated in the following quote: ‘as a communicator you get a good understanding for how important something can become if you manage to create the right post with the right topics on LinkedIn, then you can make it extremely far.’ (Communication, Marketing, and Fundraising Director, WWF). In their daily operations, however, algorithmic optimisation is a challenge: ‘...you can use a lot of time setting up an amazing post and be like “this is going to be great”... and then nothing happens. And then you can do something more random and then it just has a really good impact.’ (Advisor, Forests of the World). Despite their folk theory of playing the algorithm to attain visibility, it does not always transpire as planned.

This playing the algorithm is closely connected to power. Interviewees feel like they are playing a cat and mouse game with the tech giants’ constant tweaking of their algorithms so that visibility requires users to pay for reach. Social movement actors have limited budgets, especially compared to MNCs, which makes paid reach difficult to prioritise. This dimension of knowing in media practices reflects Ytre-Arne and Moe’s (2021) identification of the folk theory of algorithms as confining. This creates power asymmetries, as social movement actors’ content will not appear in the feeds of users who have not engaged with climate related content or profiles. In our study, social movement actors understand algorithms as confining, but in a way that calls for optimisation. Reaching wider publics is seen as difficult. But rather than resignation, the knowing dimension of this media practice has social movement actors work to increase skills for optimising power.

Knowing these challenges and working to optimise them constitute what we term a folk theory of optimising power that guides how visibility in social media platforms can be attained despite power asymmetries. As the PR and Press Responsible at Green Transition Denmark articulates it: ‘We're growing, really growing on LinkedIn... for paid advertisement, we have so limited budget, but here we can see that if we keep it up, and we post and we answer when people write, we don't have to use that much money. That's a big advantage for us.’ It is on the

basis of this theory of playing the algorithm that social movement actors do social media practices, leveraging the affordances in a social media ecology.

Consequently, social movement actors understand their communication to be effective only insofar as algorithmic logics are known and taken advantage of. In other words, they see leveraging the empowering potential of visibility as conditioned by their capacity for playing algorithmic logics to their favour. While social movement actors have ample experience of being media-savvy and skilful users with efficient digital repertoires of contention, they also understand challenges to algorithmic optimisation to hinder the efficacy of their social media strategies for creating an optic illusion. Their understandings of these challenges constitute a folk theory of conceding to power, which we turn to below.

### ***Conceding to power: Economics of algorithmic visibility***

Differences in economic resources is seen as providing a challenge for social movement actors campaigning to hold MNCs to account, with MNCs having significantly more economic resources at their disposal and more capacity for paid reach. Visibility in social media is thus more than a way to reach wider audiences, it is also seen as a space where battles of power and influence are won and lost. Nonetheless, users with bigger budgets have opportunities to address such pressure by paying for reach and buying advertising space to communicate their own narratives. This understanding of economic power differences, which privilege the more resourceful, creates an expectation that social media platforms not only create power asymmetries that can be circumvented through algorithmic optimisation, but also asymmetries that persist. A Campaign Lead from Greenpeace describes how the NGO had put a lot of work into building a follower base on Facebook, work they now see as undermined by Facebook's changes to the news feed algorithm, requiring paid content to reach followers. Following this experience, she describes the platform as 'a bit like a lost cause'. Responding to these changes, Greenpeace has changed their strategy and reduced communication efforts on Facebook:

We used to be able to use Facebook a lot for campaigning...and was very, very effective. Very good platform for us, but then they've changed their algorithms...if you want reach on Facebook, we have to pay for it, which is just really annoying...Facebook is a bit like a lost cause, and we don't spend a lot of resources

on Facebook anymore because it's just we don't get much out of the work we put into it.

The PR and Press Responsible at Green Transition Denmark describes similar experiences: 'it's kind of like Facebook made themselves irrelevant for us, because we can't afford to be there and I think that's maybe also one of the reasons why people go elsewhere.' Even the larger NGO WWF agrees: 'it has everything to do with resources and choices of which platforms to be active on come down to: 'How thinly can we spread ourselves vs how much can we engage' (Communication, Marketing, and Fundraising Director, WWF). A Media Responsible from Extinction Rebellion articulates similar experiences: 'we tried talking about how it's good to post at certain times, but whether it's done... It often ends with being whenever people have time.' Their understandings reflect scholarly concerns that the internet is far from a level playing field (Fenton, 2016), where companies which have more economic resources also have an advantage when it comes to visibility and persuasion. NGOs with comparatively small budgets might struggle with this obstacle and see a need to take their communication to platforms, which they see as still not having curbed unpaid reach to the same extent as Facebook, with LinkedIn being mentioned by some interviewees as a new favourite e.g., by Green Transition Denmark, WWF, and the Danish Society for Nature Conservation. In this way, they concede to the power of social media platforms that privilege companies, because companies have more resources. Underpinning this is also the fact that viable alternative technologies simply do not exist. With social movement actors' interest in reaching wider publics, commercial social media platforms remain their best option to see their desired visibility come to fruition.

Other interviewees point to the commercial logics that underpin Facebook's algorithm as contributing to polarisation. One speculates that because Facebook earns money from interactions, they also benefit from confrontational comments: 'They don't care about what kind of interaction there is as long as it is interaction, and I think they just found out that the easiest way to get interaction is to have people with completely different points of view.' (Organisational Development, NOAH). The interviewee continues: 'Media likes conflict, and media they want this black and white perspective. They want things to be uncompromisable.' This points to an understanding of the interplay between social media and legacy media. It echoes earlier findings that activists see navigating news logics as central to gaining media

coverage (McCurdy, 2013). In this study, legacy media is seen as privileging the sensational, not least conflict, which implies an understanding of news as driven by profit, with sensational news selling more newspapers or gaining more viewers – or more clicks on social media platforms. In relation to the latter, legacy media logics become subsumed by the algorithmic logics of social media platforms. In this way, social movement actors in this study articulate media practices that entail knowing how algorithms work, which informs how they *do* social media by faking power, optimising power, and conceding to power.

### **Imagining digital power and the power of imagination**

The folk theories of faking, optimising, and conceding to power all share one dominant assumption: They all take the commercial logics of social media platforms for granted. We term this a social media imaginary of commercial logics. This imaginary can be discerned across three folk theories. First, it can be discerned from their theory of faking power, as they try to fake power vis-à-vis companies by optimising the power of platform algorithms. For example, they develop skills (Uldam and Kaun, 2018) to optimise algorithmic visibility. As one interviewee says: ‘...activists can use social media to spread words pretty fast and effectively’ (Organisational Development, NOAH). Second, it can be discerned from their theory of optimising power, as social movement actors try to optimise power by playing the algorithms of commercial social media platforms. In this way, they adapt to the commercial logics imposed by economic growth by engaging with rather than rejecting commercial logics (McCurdy, 2011; Kavada et al., 2023). The ways in which these commercial logics are key to the business models of the platforms remain unarticulated and uncontested. For example, this is illustrated when the CEO from Plastic Change compares social movement actors’ possibilities for visibility on social media platforms to influencers and advertising: ‘the influencers are a good example of having a huge reach without actually being a conglomerate of a company.’. Third, it can be discerned from their theory of conceding to power, as they give up on achieving visibility on Facebook and instead shift their focus to LinkedIn – another commercial social media platform. This echoes the dominant imaginary of technology and communication as tools identified by Mansell (2012) in her analysis of designers’ and policy-makers’ imaginaries of the internet. Here economic growth



is uncovered as idealized goals that can be facilitated by technological development. In this study, however, social movement actors do not idealize economic growth, but merely assume it.

No alternative imaginary to contest the dominant social media imaginary of commercial logics emerges from the three folk theories of social media power. This is in contrast to data activists who produce counter-imaginaries that contest the dominant imaginary of technological innovation (Kazansky and Milan, 2021; Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein, 2019; Mager, 2023) and developers and designers who produce alternative imaginaries of collaboration (Mansell, 2012). No interviewees in this study discussed or even hinted at the possibility of using non-profit platforms and showed no alternative ways of thinking about commercial logics. This difference likely relates to the focus of social movement actors in this study. They focus on climate issues, and approach social media and algorithms as tools rather than the object of advocacy, resistance, or policy. Dovetailing on this, social movement actors in the climate movement produce alternative climate imaginaries. For example, climate activists have been shown to invoke counter-imaginaries of social-ecological well-being to contest dominant imaginaries of fossil fuels for economic growth (Uldam and Askanius, 2020). But no counter-imaginaries to the social media imaginary of commercial logics have emerged in this study. This points to a difference that data activists contribute to alternative data imaginaries (Kazansky and Milan, 2021), and climate activists contribute to alternative climate imaginaries (Uldam and Askanius, 2020), but not alternative social media imaginaries. This absence of alternative imaginaries has implications for action – the doing dimension of media practices.

### *The social media imaginary and implications for action*

The assuming dimension of social movement actors' media practices constitutes a horizon of contestation that conditions possibilities for action. Taking for granted that social media work on the basis of commercial logics, social movement actors in this study tend to follow a certain trajectory of strategies. Whereas the literature on folk theories talks about toolboxes, we term this repertoire of strategies "trajectory". We do so to signal its historical ambit and gradual removal from experiences and reflexivity towards common sense (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020). While past experiences are important, the development into common sense risks bracketing off the development of new strategies and alliances (Bailey et al., 2007; Bennett, 2020). Adapting to the

profit-driven logics of commercial social media platforms fails to transform them, which, in turn, further incentivises sensational packaging (Bennett, 2020; Kavada et al., 2023). For example, playing by the logics that underpin algorithms in social media platforms entails wrapping critique of corporations' unsustainable practices in sensational packaging, e.g., by framing criticism in conflictual terms. In this way, the social media imaginary of commercial logics fosters folk theories that risk further privileging sensational and divisive tactics at the expense of resonance. This is a risk because criticism in such packing can more easily be framed and dismissed by companies as conflictual or too radical. The taken-for-grantedness of commercial logics of algorithmic visibility also emerges from social movement actors' shifts from Facebook to the platform LinkedIn. Here, they abandon a commercial platform, because its profit-driven logics impede their struggles for visibility, to migrate to another commercial platform. LinkedIn may be characterised by different technological affordances (AuthorA, forthcoming), but Microsoft's ownership of the platform means that those affordances are underpinned by profit-driven logics as they would be in other commercial platforms, still impeding possibilities for unpaid reach. In this way, taking commercial logics for granted also fails to challenge the tech companies behind the platforms to rethink the ways in which their algorithms rank and recommend content based on popularity and engagement, which again may favour sensationalist or divisive messages.

**Table 2: The knowing, doing, and assuming of media practices**

<b>The three dimensions of social movement actors' media practices</b>			
<b>Assuming</b>	<b>A social media imaginary of economic growth</b> Social movement actors' knowing and doing revolve around adapting to the commercial logics of platforms. This creates a horizon of contestation that conditions possibilities for action.		
<b>Knowing</b>	<b>Faking power: Creating an optic illusion</b> Social movement actors understand social media as enabling an 'optic illusion' of power, enabling them to appear larger than they are.	<b>Optimising power: Playing the algorithm</b> Social movement actors understand algorithms as constraining but strive to optimise their algorithmic visibility by playing the algorithm.	<b>Conceding to power: Economics of algorithmic visibility</b> Social movement actors understand social media to require resources to achieve visibility and give up on certain platforms to prioritize limited budgets for other commercial platforms.
<b>Doing</b>	<b>Trajectory of strategies</b> Wrapping messaging in sensational packaging. Using commercial social media platforms.		<b>Impeded avenues</b> Collaboration with data and media activists. Using alternative non-profit, open-source platforms.

Uncovering the imaginary of commercial logics enables an expansion of the horizon of contestation. This could lead to more collaboration between climate activists and data and media activists. Such collaborations can help challenge commercial media logics and harness the power of digital media to develop counter-imaginaries to the dominant social media imaginary. This could facilitate the development of social media strategies that go beyond assumptions of commercial logics (Kavada et al., 2023; Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein, 2019).

## **Discussion**

Approaching media practices as consisting of three dimensions – doing, knowing and assuming – allows us to look at issues of power in two ways: (i) how power is understood and (ii) how understandings of power condition possibilities for action. It does so at a conscious level of understanding power and at a deeper level of common-sense understandings of power that shape the theories people develop and what they do. Social movement actors in this study have developed “folk” theories about social media as enabling them to fake power, optimise power and having to concede to power. While social movement actors in this study express an understanding of their power in social media as fake – an “optic illusion” of appearing bigger – the interplay between faking and optimising power gestures towards power that can translate into “real” power. This potential rests on their capacity to optimise their power by playing the algorithm to achieve visibility and ‘get seen by politicians, media, citizens.’ (Activist campaigner, Greenpeace). Here, power is understood as the possibility to influence public opinion to put pressure directly on companies or on politicians to regulate companies. This would not be possible if they only understood power as fake. However, the interplay between optimising and conceding to power points back to an understanding of their power as fake, as they experience often having to concede to platform power, because they do not have the resources to leverage the potential for optimising their power. For example, they struggle to find enough people to ensure they “trend” on X or enough money to pay for reach on Facebook. This raises questions of what kind of power? Material resources clearly play a key role, in terms of possibilities to pay for reach and to pay staff to play the algorithm or invest time to acquire the skills and volunteer to do so (Uldam and Kaun, 2018; Uldam, 2019).

Differences in material resources relates to differences between informally organised activist groups and formally organised NGOs. Several interviewees have a background in journalism or public affairs, some with prior jobs in ministries, or they mention colleagues who do. This reflects a wider professionalisation of NGOs (Vestergaard, 2014; Vestergaard et al., 2021). In this study, this professionalisation characterises reformist social movement organisations, which are mainly NGOs such as WWF and Plastic Change, while more anti-systemic ones such as Extinction Rebellion and Global Action rely on volunteers. These differences mainly emerge in relation to the doing dimension of media practices rather than in relation to the knowing and assuming dimensions of media practices. While activists and NGOs use different tactics (the doing dimension of media practices), they are all characterised by trying

to appear bigger, optimising algorithmic visibility and conceding to economic platform power (the knowing dimension of media practices). These folk theories are all underpinned by a social media imaginary of commercial logics (the assuming dimension of media practices). This is a common-sense understanding of platform power as operating along commercial logics. Further, it is powerful precisely because it works as common-sense and therefore remains unquestioned (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020) and thus impedes the development of new strategies and alliances (Bennett, 2020).

The social media imaginary of commercial logics is so powerful it precludes multiple, competing imaginaries. While counter imaginaries emerge in studies of data activism, they remain absent in this study of climate activism. Whereas developers, designers, and data activists approach media technologies and data as object of advocacy, resistance, or policy, climate activists and NGOs approach them as tools. At the same time, accepting the commercial logics that underpin social media platforms can be seen as the pragmatism of activism – social movement actors may focus on establishing and maintaining presences where the majority of users are to obtain ‘network effects’ rather than risking only achieving visibility among likeminded users (Kavada et al., 2023: 99). As the Communication, Marketing & Fundraising Director from WWF says: “We choose to be where most people are to get a message out”. They do so even if it means following a playbook of sensational tactics. In this sense, they may concede to power, because there is no alternative to commercial social media platforms with the potential to reach wider publics (Kavada et al., 2023). Uncovering and becoming attentive to the social media imaginary that takes commercial logics for granted is necessary to maintain the transformative potential of activism and its mediation in social media.

## **Conclusion**

This article has suggested an analytics of media practices as consisting of three dimensions: doing, knowing, and assuming. This enables an analysis that captures the dual role of power - imagining digital power and the power of digital imagination - in two important ways: First, the dimensions of doing and knowing capture the experience-based understandings that social movement actors draw on to devise strategies for action, including how these actors understand media power, e.g., how they understand social media as arenas for power struggles and as agents

with the power to condition power struggles. Second, adding the dimension of assuming to media practice theory captures the assumptions that underpin the doing and knowing of media practices, what we term social media imaginaries. Together, this enables an analysis of both how power is understood and how understandings of power condition possibilities for action. In this way, we have shown how social movement actors take economic growth and commercial logics for granted, as they navigate social media campaigning on the basis of folk theories of faking power, optimising power, and conceding to power, which are underpinned by a social media imaginary of economic growth.

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