

## **The online communication strategies of a small-scale social movement: The case of the Greek 'Do Not Pay' social movement**

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### **Introduction**

Sociopolitical upheavals and economic insecurity have triggered a series of protests by various social groups over the last ten years in several European countries. Perhaps, the country wherein the intensity, frequency and size of these protests has been most notable is Greece primarily as a result of the severe economic policies implemented in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, and the ensuing signing of the bailout treaty in May 2010 (Rüdig, and Karyotis, 2014). Phenomena related to protests, large scale demonstrations and occupations have been extensively examined in various fields, for example, sociology, politics, media and communication (Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy, 2014; Della Porta, 2015; Johnson and Suliman, 2014; Castells, 2015). Despite this growing body of literature on mass social mobilisations, scant attention has been paid to small scale, everyday forms of grassroots resistance and solidarity initiatives (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2017; Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos, 2018) as most scholarly attention on small scale protests has been directed to non-political consumer movements and boycotts (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Earl and Kimport, 2009).

Drawing on social movements and communication theories (in particular, Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Cammaerts, 2018) this chapter aims to investigate the online communication strategies of small scale social movements, using as case study the anti-austerity Greek 'Do Not Pay' social movement (To kinima den plirono); this is an active grassroots movement which focuses on day-to-day micro-acts of resistance (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos, 2018). By small-scale social movement we mean a social movement, which might involve large scale networks, but whose collective action relies on everyday micro-acts of resistance and solidarity initiatives rather than mass mobilisations and protests. The 'Do Not Pay' social movement' was established in 2009 primarily as a loosely organised network whose formation was compelled by an impulsive reaction against the high fares at toll stations in Greek national roads. The founding members of the movement are Elias Papadopoulos, Leonidas Papadopoulos and Maria Lekakou, who are mother and sons, along with Yannis Damoulis. The movement quickly evolved into a much

more organised collective formation with steady presence in Greek public life through various acts of protesting such as occupation of court rooms to stop house confiscations, the restoring of electricity supply in private households whose income had been severely diminished as a result of the austerity policies and had their electricity disconnected after failing to pay their bills

Building upon previous work where we examined the movement's core ideology, identity and protest practices (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos, 2018), this chapter looks at another dimension of the movement - its online communication activities. More specifically, the chapter presents the findings of a quantitative content analysis of the Facebook page of the "Do not pay" movement. We consider this an important dimension that deserves empirical attention because online forms of communication and interaction can shed light on the tactics of resistance and mobilization of the movement in both online and offline spaces.

### **Communicating dissent**

Social movements are 'dynamic communication systems' (Fuchs, 2006, p. 101) within which individual and collective communication practices produce alternative understandings and oppositional framings that contest and seek to transform 'large-scale, collective changes in the domains of state policy, corporate practice, social structure, cultural norms, and daily lived experience' (Ganesh, Zoller and Cheney, 2005, cited in Mann, 2015, p. 159). In any given movement, movement actions – such as strategy, lobbying, mobilizing, debating, protesting, emailing, phoning, assessing, celebrating - involve communication (Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013, p. 154).

A plethora of studies has explored the relationship between social movements and the media over the last decades (Cammaerts, 2018). Largely, this can be explained by the emergence of digital media and communication technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, and social media applications, and how they are seen to be essential tools for activists to mobilize and to communicate across time and space (Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 259; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, p. 25). Media and communication matter in a variety of ways for social movements. The media shape in important ways the strategies of social change enacted by activists (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 5; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, p. 24). Every new and emerging media and communication technology that has become available, whether print, audio recording, telecommunication, broadcasting or the internet, has been appropriated by activists to achieve various goals and aims linked to their struggles

(Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013, p. 4; Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 260; Mattoni, 2017, p. 501; Cammaerts, 2018, p. 14; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019).

The networked nature of digital media and the participatory potential of Web 2.0 have inspired significant debates about whether and how such characteristics of communication technologies enable - or not - more horizontal and inclusive forms of political participation and resistance (Conover et al., 2013, p. 1; Treré, 2015, pp. 904-905; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, p. 24). Moreover, the information environment that social movements face nowadays is increasingly complex, entailing fragmentation of audiences, the rise of social media as an information source, selective exposure to media, information overload, or even algorithmic biases in terms of access to specific pieces of information (Earl and Garrett, 2017, p. 479). In particular, digital technologies have extended the activists' action repertoire (Cammaerts, Mattoni, McCurdy, 2013, p. 10; Cammaerts, 2018, p. 5). However, along with the new media, traditional media and offline communication intersect and often work together within social movements (Mattoni and Treré, 2014, p. 259; Cammaerts, 2018, p. 77). Hence, the study of intersecting communication practices provides us not only with a better understanding of collective action but also with a clearer overview of the transformation of this action from one site of political engagement to another (Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017, p. 398; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, p. 25).

The framework that best describes our approach for the scope of the current research is the concept of "communication ecology", which emphasizes the fact that information technologies and other forms of communication are intertwined with other social practices within specific environments (Mattoni, 2017, p. 495). According to Nardi and O' Day (1999, p. 49), communication ecology is "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular environment, whose spotlight is not on technology, but on human activities that are served by technology". The communication ecology stands for communication connections, under specific social and cultural conditions, which are employed by an individual in order to construct knowledge and to achieve goals (Broad et al., 2013, p. 328; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, pp.24-26). In this context, it is also important to consider that social movements take shape in both online and offline spaces in which participants enact the movement (Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Uitermark, 2017, p.404).

Focusing on the level of production of meaning and the expression of a collective self-identity, social movement actors produce or encode meaning through negotiated discourses and frames (Conover et al., 2013, p. 1; Treré, 2015, p. 903), whereby the former represents inherent contingency, and the latter, strategic attempts to fix meaning, to establish

ideological boundaries and to construct a 'we' versus 'them' rhetoric as a basis for a collective self-definition (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos, 2018). At this level of analysis, collective identities and ideological enemies are constructed, solutions to the problems the movement wants to tackle are imagined, and a call to action is articulated (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 29). It is against this backdrop that a new 'communicative resistance grammar' emerges (Treré, 2015, p. 901).

These movement discourses and frames, and the collective identities that emerge from them, are self-mediated through a range of mediation practices using textual, audio and visual formats, distributed offline and online, locally, nationally, and transnationally. Different media and communication technologies have different affordances that are more or less useful to certain mediation logics relevant to activists (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 29).

The repertoire of communication actions of the social movements is shaped and influenced by the affordances provided by a variety of media and communication technologies. Different media and communication technologies have distinct embedded affordances that are relevant to activism. This opens up the potential for activists to shape these technologies to their needs. The relevant possibilities include public and private forms of communication, taking place in real time or asynchronously. Social movements and their activist members tend to use all the media and communication technologies available, and to combine their technological affordances to fit with their various activist strategies (Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013, p. 91; Cammaerts, 2018, p. 69).

For instance, the affordances offered by media and communication technologies are used to mobilize for (direct) action. In addition, media and communication technologies are used increasingly to coordinate protest actions and connect people within the movement. Finally, media technologies are also used for recording acts of protest, producing protest artefacts, while the archiving and circulation of protest artefacts are also mediated (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 70).

From this perspective, the appropriation of media and communication technologies by activists is situated at the 'intersection between social context, political purpose and technological possibility' (Gillan, Pickerill and Webster, 2008, p. 151) and can be briefly categorized in three major aspects:

1. Disclosure: communication and dissemination of movement discourses and frames, the mobilization efforts for direct action and the performance of protest;
2. Examination: on-the-spot coordination of direct action, internal organization, and decision making or permanent revision of strategies and tactics; and

3. Remembrance: production of protest artefacts (e.g. logos produced to represent the organization or mobilization, photos of protests, slogans), documenting of (police) violence or prosecutions against movements' members, and archiving of the movement's self-representations (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 76), or even underlining them by repeatedly promoting protest artefacts in non-protest posts.

Contemporary social movements are using advanced forms of technology and mass communication as a mobilizing tool and conduit to alternative forms of media (Carty and Onyett, 2006, p. 229). The internet is thus potentially more persuasive and effective in diffusing social ideas and actions within a global community of interest than any other communication technology in history (Carty and Onyett, 2006, p. 231).

Developments in digital technologies meant that social media has become in recent years more and more important tool in the make-up of dissemination strategies of activists (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 81; Prentoulis and Kyriakidou, 2019, pp. 35-36). They are used to spread the word, to share information, to prepare for future direct action, to connect to other struggles, and to keep the fire burning among sympathizers and followers (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 81). Equally important, is the way in which social media have enabled more personalized forms of public engagement trough content sharing across media networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

Finally, it is important to understand that the use of social media from the perspective of disclosure, according to the activists, enables relatively small organizations effectively to punch above their weight, without the support of strong formal structures (Cammaerts, 2018, p. 82), becoming constitutive factors, rather than just facilitators of the movements' activities and communication strategies (Cammaerts, Mattoni, McCurdy, 2013, p. 13). This discussion points to the key role of digital media in providing not only the organizational infrastructure in which protests and mobilizations are propelled and coordinated, but also in constituting the communicative ecologies where expressive forms of communication are manufactured, shared, and appropriated (Treré, 2015, p. 906).

Drawing on this theoretical framework, we formulated the following research questions and hypothesis:

RQ1: Which is the communication strategy of the "Do not pay" movement as articulated in the movement's public communication, specifically, the content published in the movement's Facebook page ([www.Facebook.com/denplirono](http://www.Facebook.com/denplirono))?

H1: We expect the Facebook page of the “Do not pay” movement to include content related to all three main publicity categories of a social movement (i.e. disclosure, examination, remembrance).

RQ2: With what proportion each category (disclosure, examination, and remembrance) contributes to the published content under scrutiny? This proportion will provide us with more concrete evidence on the communication strategy of the “Do not pay” movement.

In addition, we will seek to explore the grade of public feedback and engagement through the examination of the number of likes, comments and shares for each post, given that social media users selectively interact with some posts, and not others, through Facebook’s native features (likes, comments and shares) (Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2014). In this way, we are also able to identify the category/ies with which the followers of the page interact most and how this interaction takes place.

## **Methodology**

The method used for the current research is quantitative content analysis, briefly defined as the systematic, based on scientific criteria, analysis of the characteristics of various messages (Kyriazi, 2001; Neuendorf, 2002). It is a systematic, reproducible technique for transforming the content of various forms of messages (text, still and moving image, sound etc.) into fewer categories of meaning, based on specific codification rules (Stemler, 2001; Miller and Brewer, 2003), ultimately, allowing the researchers to examine large amounts of data through a systematic methodology. The primary target of content analysis is the systematic research of the content of the unit of analysis (text, image, news item, advertisement etc.) (Berelson, 1971). In this research, the unit of analysis is the post on the Facebook page of the “Do not pay” movement, posted from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 until December 31<sup>st</sup> 2018. We chose the specific two-year period since both years, 2017 and 2018, are years of intense activity on behalf of the “Do not pay” movement, due to the increased number of auctions taking place in Greece as part of the fulfillment of the obligations of the country towards its creditors. Additionally, 2018 marked the introduction of electronic auctions, as a governmental response to the cancellation of numerous auctions due to the movement’s activity.

The movement’s FB page was counting 40,000 followers at the time that this chapter was written (<https://www.Facebook.com/denplirono>). During this period, 712 posts were published. The posts were analyzed in terms of their content as already stated in the research questions and the relevant research hypotheses. While the focus of this study is on

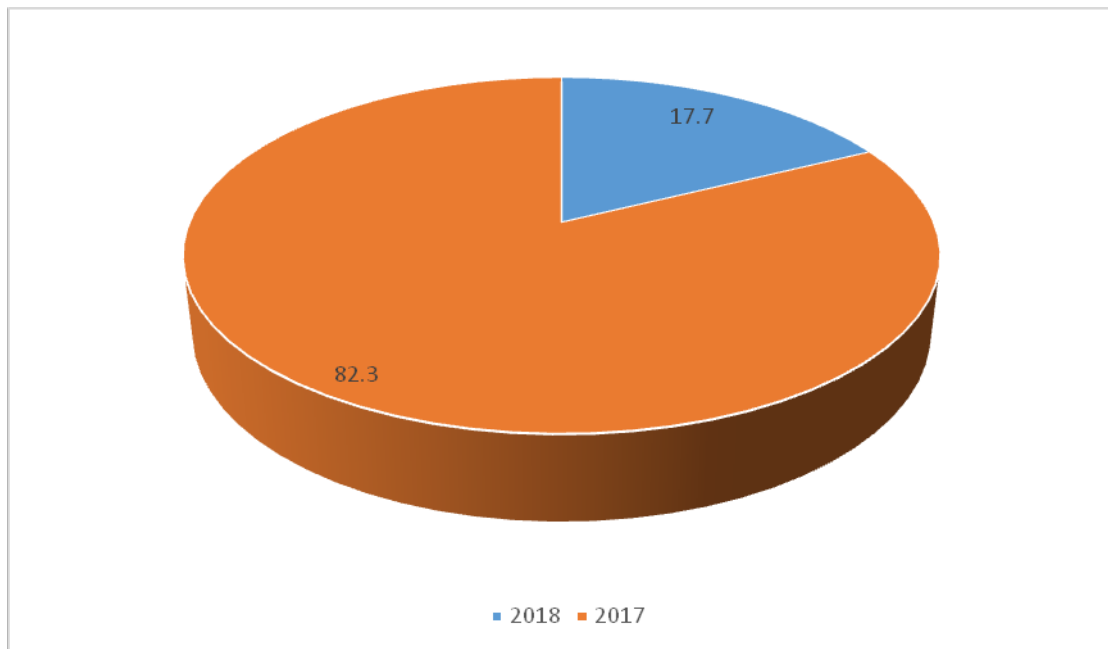
the movement's FB page it is worth mentioning that the movement has also an updated website ([www.kinimadenplirono.gr](http://www.kinimadenplirono.gr)) that includes the movement's manifesto as well as other information that demonstrate its aims, collective identity and actions (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos, 2018).

The quantitative analysis of the posts was conducted with the use of a coding protocol focused on the three basic categories of social movements' publicity (disclosure, examination, and remembrance) and their sub-categories -as presented in our theory- and the elaboration of the results was conducted with the use of SPSS 25. The statistical test implemented to assess some of the characteristics of the communication strategy of the "Do not pay" movement was the t-test (Field, 2017).

### **Findings and discussion**

Over the two-year span of our research, the more "active" year in terms of published posts is 2017, with 586 posts (82,3%), compared to the 126 (17,7%) of 2018 (Graph 1). Though both years appear to be rich in activities on behalf of the movement (mainly auctions cancellations and electricity reconnections), the difference in the number of posts can be partly attributed to the reduction of the number of posts referring to the same action. In 2017, there are cases of four different posts promoting the same action (first a call to action, then a couple of posts with images and videos and a last one linking to media coverage of the action). This is not the case in 2018, when each action is presented even with a single post. In addition, in 2017 the movement seemed to have attracted the interest of national and international mainstream media significantly more -as it results from the relevant posts-, compared to 2018.

### **Graph 1: Posts per year.**

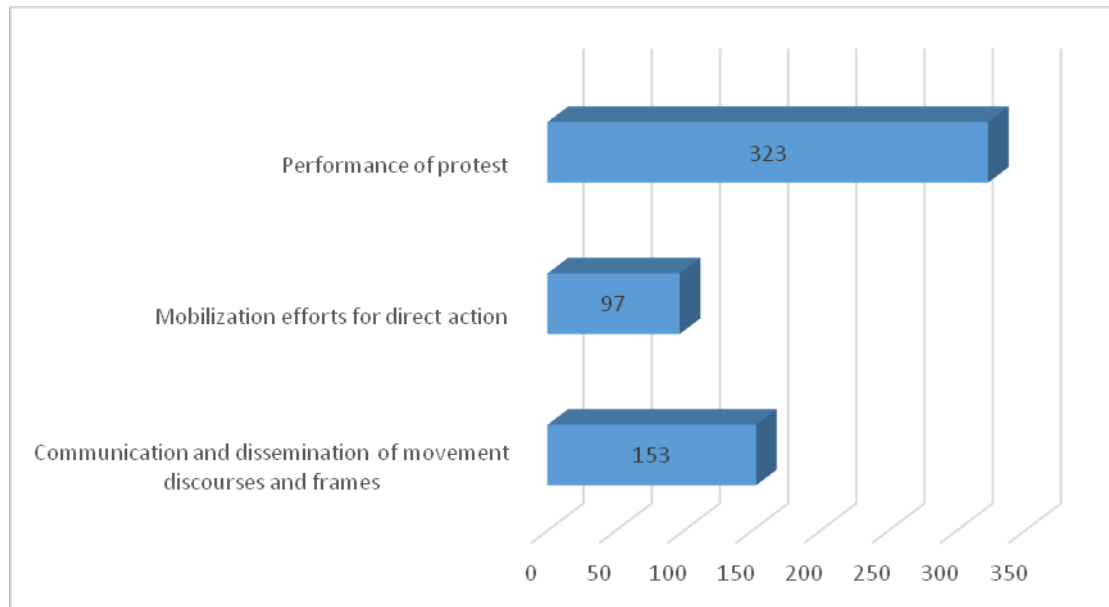


Moving on to the “disclosure” category of the social movements’ communication strategy, one observes that almost half of the posts (323 out of 712, 45,4%) aim - either exclusively, or among others - at communicating the performance of collective action on behalf of the members of the “Do not pay” movement. In the vast majority of the posts, this performance has to do with the protests opposing the confiscations of the houses of impoverished citizens due to unsustainable debts and electricity reconnections. Both are micro-acts of resistance that challenge the consequences of the implemented austerity policies (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos 2018). A significant percentage of the posts (153 out of 712, 21,5%) includes or is dedicated to the dissemination of the movement’s goals and grievances, and the formation of the “us versus them” framing of the movement. These posts usually blame – ‘them’ - the political (the SYRIZA government) and financial elites (the troika and the banks) for implementing neoliberal policies that bring about austerity and are harmful to the people. A third and last sub-theme of the “disclosure” category is the mobilization to action. These 97 posts encourage sympathizers of the movement to participate in the protests organized by the movement. These posts were - in most cases - publishing the program of the auctions of those houses that had been confiscated in the different courts of Athens and other major Greek cities. The posts were also urging people to prevent them from happening. As an overall observation, 80% of the posts (573 out of 712) either include, or are dedicated to disclosing the movement’s discourses and frames, the



mobilization efforts for direct action and the performance of protest (Cammaerts, 2018) (Graph 2).

**Graph 2: “Disclosure” posts.**



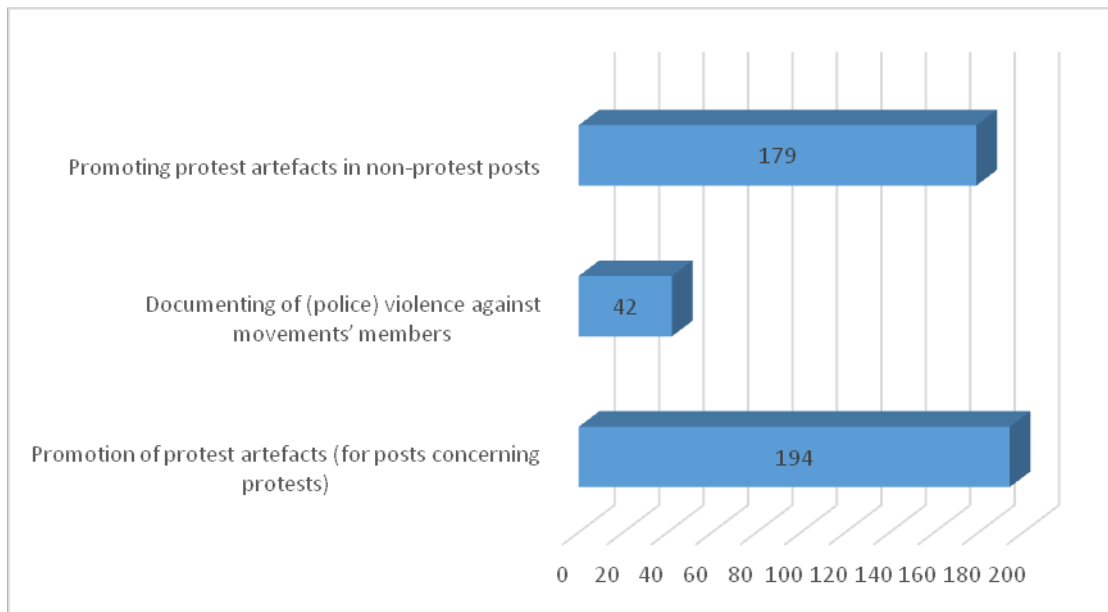
In contrast to the high percentage of posts including “disclosure” discourse, only a small percentage of the posts we examined during 2017 and 2018 included “examination” discourse, and, more specifically, internal organization efforts (52 out of 712 posts, 7,3%). Those were the posts addressed to people who might want to affiliate with the movement, either by participating in the frequent acts of protest, and/or by discussing their problems, seeking the movement’s advice or demanding action. What is absent from the examination discourse is the on-the-spot coordination of direct action and the decision-making or permanent revision of strategies and tactics. The lack of promotion of decision-making processes around strategies and tactics through the Facebook page might relate itself with the micro-scale of acts of protest. This suggests that the organizational dynamics is more akin to the model of classic collective action rather than relying on sharing and personalization of content that leads actions and content to be disseminated widely across social networks, which is typical of the model of connective action devised by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). The high frequency of the small-scale protests, along with their dispersed character (e.g. in different courts throughout the country) and their inherent micro-act rationale (specific, targeted interventions, instead of mass demonstrations), do not require the use of social media as an on-the-spot organization tool. In addition, the lack of discussion or revision of strategies and tactics reveals an ideologically consolidated

movement, which has already crystallized its character and rationale. One should not forget that this movement is the most long-lived grassroots social movement in Greece, having been active for almost a decade, since 2009 (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos 2018). In addition, the founding members of the movement (Elias Papadopoulos, Leonidas Papadopoulos, Maria Lekakou and Yannis Damoulis) are still active and constitute the administrative committee of the movement. In that sense, the consolidated core structure and basic actors of the movement seem to follow a stable activist strategy that is difficult to challenge. After all, the achievements of the movement, which include the cancellation of significant number of auctions, reconnections of electricity, rather than a wide publicity in both mainstream and non-mainstream media does not seem to require any significant strategic revision.

Last but not least, “remembrance” refers to the production of protest artefacts (e.g. logos produced to represent the organization or mobilization, photos of protests, slogans), documenting of (police) violence or persecutions against movements’ members, and archiving of the movement’s self-representations (Cammaerts, 2018), or even underlining them by repeatedly promoting protest artefacts in non-protest posts. As shown in Graph 3, the promotion of protest artefacts, either in posts referring directly to protests, or in other posts, seems to be amongst the main aims of the movement’s posts in their Facebook page. A total of 373 posts (out of 712, 52,4%) include characteristic pictures, videos about protest events and slogans seeking to create protest artefacts for the page’s followers. Apart from that, there is a small number of posts (42) documenting actions against the movement’s activities and members, mostly in the form of legal action undertaken by the companies who own the Greek national roads. These posts mostly refer to the occupations of toll posts by the “do not pay” movements between 2009 and 2012. In a few cases, the posts criticize the exercise of police violence against members of the movement during their attempts to abort electronic auctions by specific notaries.

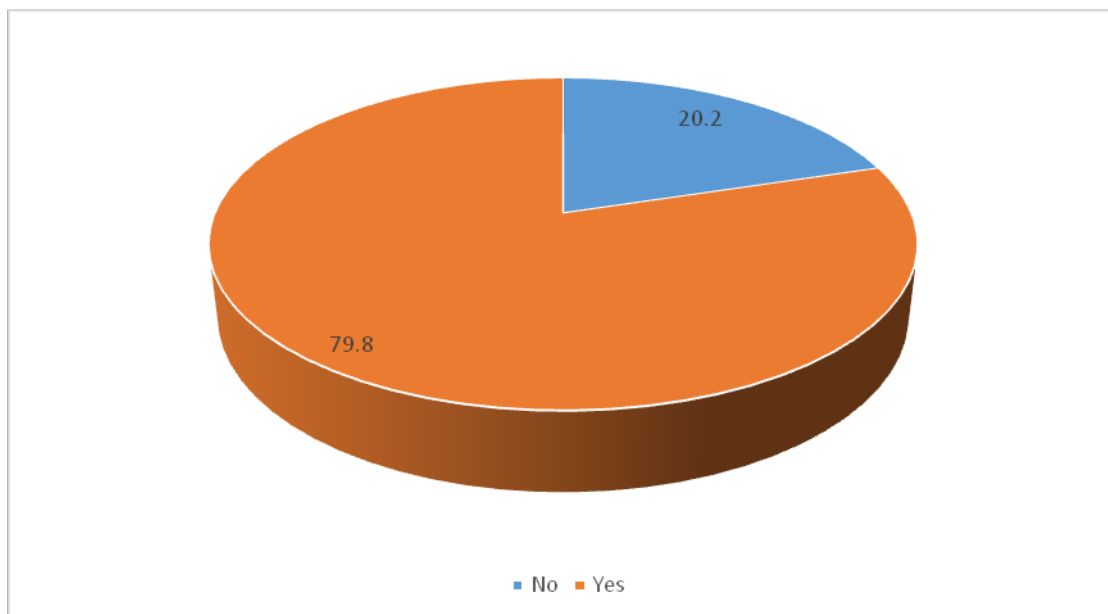
According to the abovementioned results, we accept our first research hypothesis that the movement’s posts on Facebook would include content related to all three main publicity categories of a social movement (i.e. disclosure, examination, remembrance). What is interesting, though, in terms of the communication strategy of the movement is the proportion of each of these categories. The posts containing “disclosure” content appear to be the most frequent ones, followed by “remembrance” posts. The posts containing “examination” discourse are much less frequent in the two-year period we examined.

**Graph 3: “Remembrance” posts.**



The most important feature of social media applications is their interactive character. This interaction is expressed in Facebook through likes, comments and shares of a post. First, we coded for the existence of comments in the posts. As shown in Graph 4, the vast majority of the posts (almost 80%), include comments, an important indicator of significant interaction in the communication context of the “do not pay movement” Facebook page.

**Graph 4: Percentage of posts with or without comments.**



Apart from the existence of comments, we counted the number of likes and shares per post. Both likes and shares are important indicators of interaction in Facebook, but shares lead to more impressions<sup>1</sup> and typically, more likes. When someone shares a post, the post then becomes visible to all of their friends on the social media platform. Shares might lead to a post going viral, as a share leads to an exponentially greater possibility of people to like, comment, or further share the post (ELWOODZ, 2017). Our measurements provide us with a mean of 196,40 likes and 22,67 shares per post. We further elaborated the means of likes and shares by implementing t-tests with the sub-categories of “disclosure”, “examination” and “remembrance” that appeared in our measurements as independent variables.

As Table 1 reveals, the protest performance related posts, namely the ones who included performance of protest and the promotion of protest artefacts (e.g. photos from the protests and movement’s banners) in the posts referring to the protests of the movement are the ones that increase significantly the mean of likes per post on behalf of the page’s followers. On the other hand, the communication and dissemination of the movement’s frames and discourses, the mobilization efforts for direct action, the internal organization posts, and the documentation of violence, and persecutions against the “Do not pay movement” members are the content categories, which appear to increase significantly the mean of shares per post. The promotion of protest artefacts in non-protest posts does not seem to influence either of the means (of likes and posts). One should also point out the difference in the means of likes in the posts where violence and prosecutions against the movement’s members is being documented (215 likes) and the ones that do not project that kind of content (195 likes). Though the difference is not negligible, our t-test does not show a significant difference in the means, due to the limited number of posts including violence and prosecutions (42).

**Table 1: Mean of likes and shares per post, per “disclosure”, “examination” and “remembrance” sub-categories.**

Variable	Categories	Mean of likes per post	T-test sig.	Mean of shares per post	T-test sig.
Communication and	No	201,01	0,026	21,30	0,012

<sup>1</sup> Impressions are different from views. Impressions are about how many times one post appears in someone's feed and does not guarantee that someone interacted with your content. For more see: ELWOODZ, 2017)

dissemination of movement discourses and frames	Yes	179,55		<b>27,70</b>	
Performance of protest	No	156,81	<b>0,000</b>	21,12	0,064
	Yes	<b>244,07</b>		24,54	
Mobilization efforts for direct action	No	196,82	0,743	20,72	<b>0,000</b>
	Yes	193,70		<b>35,03</b>	
Internal organization	No	<b>198,94</b>	<b>0,001</b>	<b>23,20</b>	<b>0,005</b>
	Yes	164,12		16,00	
Promoting protest artefacts in non-protest posts	No	198,23	0,170	21,99	0,080
	Yes	186,23		26,47	
Promotion of protest artefacts (for posts concerning protests)	No	186,28	<b>0,000</b>	22,48	0,635
	Yes	<b>249,48</b>		23,68	
Documenting of (police) violence against movements members	No	195,23	0,239	22,19	<b>0,037</b>
	Yes	214,98		<b>30,36</b>	

A last significant observation – which might have implications for a future analysis of the media representations of the “do not pay movement”- are the numerous posts referring either to mainstream media coverage of actions of the movement, or to the presence of the movement’s representatives Ilias and Leonidas Papadopoulos in various media outlets (radios, press, web-pages and TV channels).

### Concluding remarks

The rationale of “disclosure” followed by the rationale of “remembrance” - are the ones that prevail in the Facebook content generated by the movement members. The findings of this research suggest that the movement seeks to promote through its Facebook page its collective identity, which is based on the opposition between “us” (the people) vs. “them” (the capitalist and neoliberal enemies) that are primarily embodied by the domestic political and financial elites. This is mainly achieved through posts that include the movement’s goals and grievances and the documentation of police violence and the legal prosecutions against the members of the movements conducted by the legal representatives of companies whose interests intersect with the resistance micro-acts of the “do not pay movement” (e.g. toll openings).

Most posts, though, include or are dedicated to demonstrating the movement in action; that is, in disseminating a ‘communicative resistance grammar’ (Treré, 2015). Videos and photos from actual micro-scale activities of resistance permeate the content of the movement’s Facebook page. In this way, the movement seeks to underpin its distinctive

form of grassroots resistance, which bears little resemblance with the actions and initiatives of other European anti-austerity movements (e.g., the indignados social movement), involved in large-scale activities such as mass demonstrations and occupations and assemblies in public space (Rovisco, Veneti and Poulakidakos 2018). For the “Do not pay movement”, civic disobedience and anti-austerity protest are carried on through micro-acts of social justice (re-connection of electricity, obstruction of auctions). With the depiction of these small acts, the members of the movement seek to have a direct and immediate contact with the Greek households afflicted by austerity measures. After all, the everyday impoverished people are the ones that the movement seeks to reach out in order to preserve its dynamic in the social imaginary of the Greek people, regardless of whether people participate in the movement in terms of active participation in its structure, organization and civic disobedience operations, or purely as sympathisers.

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