Troubling Dialogue and Digital Media: A Subaltern Critique

Katie R. Place1 and Erica Ciszek2

Abstract
Over the past several decades, scholars have explored dialogue and digital media. While this scholarship has advanced strategic communication theory, it lacks a critical focus on how marginalized groups have been written out of these theories and practices. We bring a critical lens to dialogue, employing a subaltern critique to elevate the experiences and voices of members of an activist group working on behalf of low-income, minority women. Advancing theoretical and empirical work on dialogue and social media, our study approaches activist communication and dialogue through a co-optation orientation, to consider how advocacy groups are co-opted or erased through dialogic methods entailed in dominant discourses and how these groups exert agency and resistance. While social media may not always help activists penetrate the walls upheld by powerful social actors, they offer connective and transformative possibilities.

Keywords
social media, dialogue, co-optation, subaltern studies, activism, advocacy

Introduction
Strategic communication has predominantly been practiced and theorized from a paradigmatic position of behaviorism and functionalism, which considers publics and communication as means to achieve organizational ends (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Likewise, social media have primarily been practiced as a one-way tool for organizations to inform or distribute messages to publics (Kent, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Men et al., 2014, 2018). Examining this trend, recent scholarship has critiqued digital media (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Kent, 2013), finding that social media fail to foster participatory, communitarian, or dialogic relationships (Avidar et al., 2015; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent, 2013; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Thus, the potential of social media as a form of “interpersonal, consensual relationship building with an emphasis on mutual care and vulnerability,” grounded in principles of collaboration and equality, (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 70) has not come to fruition. Fitting with the call of this special issue, the purpose of this article is to interrogate the false promise of digital dialogue by attending to marginalized voices and building upon subaltern studies scholarship. Rather than lamenting the failure to actualize the potential of digital communication, this article propels digital dialogue in new directions by engaging criticisms in the literature and attending to existing gaps.

Focusing on the erasure of marginalized voices from mainstream public spheres and elite spaces of knowledge production (Guha, 1988; Spivak, 2000), subaltern studies theorize from the experiences of those socially, economically, and politically outside the hierarchy of power. In this article, we trouble the “dialogic promise” (McAllister-Spooner, 2009, p. 321) of social media through “bottom-up, community-led” (Dutta, 2018, p. 87) research that highlights the structural erasures and hegemonic forms of oppression of one group of low-income minority publics. We shift the emphasis of dialogue and social media out of the normative consensus-driven framework to the space of co-optation, focusing on the contexts of power and inequalities that shape activists’ communication efforts.

Through ethnographic research of Equality Moms, a predominantly female minority activist organization advocating for public policy change, we explore a system of subaltern knowledge production and offer scholarly and practical considerations for making space for knowledge claims. In this article, we make systemic and analytic efforts to examine

1Quinnipiac University, USA
2University of Texas at Austin, USA

Corresponding Author:
Katie R. Place, Department of Strategic Communication, Quinnipiac University, 275 Mount Carmel Avenue, Hamden, CT 06518, USA.
Email: Katie.place@quinnipiac.edu
barriers to the adoption and implementation of dialogic communication. We examine the institutional frameworks, socio-cultural contexts, and power dynamics that constrain dialogic communication, and explore how activists navigate institutional barriers when working for social change. Exploring these areas provides practical implications for practitioners about the applications and relevance of dialogic communication and marginalized publics.

Findings illustrate the hybridity activists experience with social media—utilizing them to mobilize members, while simultaneously experiencing erasure by powerful social and political actors. The article concludes with directions for future research regarding dialogue and digital media.

**Literature Review**

**Dialogue, Activism, and Digital Media**

Dialogue is an orientation to communicative engagement that prioritizes open communication, mutual understanding, and co-creation of meaning among all individuals as equal partners of a relationship (Buber, 1923/1970; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Applying this framework to web-mediated communicative relationships, Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that organizations fail to actualize the opportunities afforded by the internet by integrating principles of dialogue from interpersonal communication into digitally mediated channels. Over the past two decades, their work has generated considerable attention and has been adapted in various research studies, touting the potentiality of digital media to build dialogic relationships between organizations and publics. The conflation of dialogue and digital media has strained the development of innovative theory or practice to meet the engagement needs of ever-evolving publics. Research suggests, unfortunately, that digital technology and social media have been used primarily for one-way promotion and information distribution (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent, 2013; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Men et al., 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014), while further marginalizing individuals who lack internet access or who do not represent a dominant class (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015).

Over the past several years, much has been written about social media and the opportunities they afford activist groups (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; McNutt & Boland, 1999; Saxton et al., 2007; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Research has focused on the populability and spread of social media among advocacy groups (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009), but to a lesser extent looking at how constituents perceive and make sense of organizational efforts. Although supporters of social media argue the fast pace and wide reach of digital communication provide collectives with opportunities to spur support (Chadwick & Howard, 2008), relatively few studies have explored advocacy and social media within the context of marginalized populations. Therefore, the focus of this research is grounded in the perspectives of marginalized publics.

Drawing upon interpersonal and organizational communication fields, Ganesh and Zoller (2012) synthesize and present three orientations of dialogue research and their implications for understanding activism: collaboration, agonism, and co-optation. A collaborative perspective toward dialogue emphasizes mutuality and equality, positioning dialogue as a means for open communication and building agreement (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). Within this strain, dialogue is understood as “a specialized form of communication involving consensus, collaboration, equality, and mutual trust” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 70). Instead of serving as a one-way channel of information dissemination, Kent (2013) argues that dialogue must serve as a method of communitarian engagement to encourage and nurture diverse perspectives and treat publics as valued equals.

While collaboration functions as a normative orientation that privileges consensus and equality, an agonistic approach highlights contestation. As a critical orientation, it positions social conflict as central to dialogue and activism, emphasizing the theoretical and practical significance of contestations and tensions (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). An agonistic approach embraces dissensus, reflecting the chaos of digital media platforms and challenging the notion that social media are inherently dialogic spaces (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Ciszek and Logan (2018) interrogate the relevance of the dialogic principles in social media research, suggesting concepts such as dissensus and agonism may more accurately embody the nature of organization–public interactions. Dissensus is “a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice” (Jacques et al., 2011, p. 2). A focus on dissensus centers discord and resistance to hegemonic oppression, challenging the normative framework of dialogue as an ethical form of communication between organizations and publics (Botan, 1997).

Finally, dialogue as a form of co-optation focuses on the context of power. A co-optation orientation argues dialogue is a democratic ideal in which consensus should be troubled due to power asymmetries (Richter, 2001). Advancing theoretical and empirical work on dialogue and social media, our study approaches activist communication through a co-optation orientation (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012), to consider how advocacy groups are co-opted or erased and how these groups exert agency and resistance. Although some scholars argue dialogue is a space for change and a means to engage with marginalized voices (e.g., Hammond et al., 2003), research has found that powerful parties utilize dialogue to preserve the status quo (Zorn et al., 2006) or mitigate potential resistance by activists. Activists may take on great risk as they engage with entities that have more power, perpetuating a façade of participation (Dutta-Bergman & Basnyat, 2008). As a result of these inequalities, activists challenge what they...
believe might be hidden motives for dialogue, a sentiment echoed by public relations scholar Judith Motion’s research participant who noted “Now the spin doctors know how to get to us” (Heath et al., 2006, p. 367).

Early in the development of the internet, strategic communication scholars touted social media as a space for “negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998), failing, however, to acknowledge power differentials between organizations and publics (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). While the digital environment may enrich relationship building (Kent, 2008), critics note digital platforms largely fail to actualize this goal (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Valentini, 2015). Such a promise has failed, Kent (2013) explained, because dialogue is a one-on-one relational interaction between individuals or small groups founded on fairness, trust, and relationship-building (p. 341), which is difficult to achieve across often massive, complex, and asynchronous digital platforms. To challenge the democratizing promise of dialogic theory and social media, subaltern studies offer insight.

**Subaltern Studies**

Power is a central determinant in dialogic communication, governing access to and the nature of dialogic spaces (Hammond et al., 2003). Therefore, we turn to subaltern studies to explore the experiences of those who have been excluded and silenced in dialogic and digital contexts. Originating from the study of post-colonial and post-imperialist societies, subaltern studies emerged as a critique to examine the exploitation of populations of the global South—the geographically, economically, and politically disadvantaged nation-states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010). Subaltern communities constitute raced, classed, and gendered subjectivities that are “systematically erased” from participation and are “cut off from the mainstream platforms of civil society” (Dutta-Bergman, 2018, p. 383). These communities exist at the “margins of the margins” (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010, p. 383), occupying the “very bottom of society.” Subaltern refers to the status of belonging to “inferior ranks” and is “a name for the general attribute of subordination in . . . society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1988, p. 35). Such subordination is manifested in erasure from structures of knowledge production (Spivak, 1988), which is reflected in the omission of subaltern voices and perspectives in dominant discourses. As a critical response to subordination, a subaltern critique is an interrogation of these erasures, posing “how and by whom” history is written and “whose voices are represented and whose are erased?” (Kim & Dutta, 2009, p. 148). Power and representation are central to the project of subaltern studies.

Subaltern studies are about power, who has it and who does not, who is gaining it and who is losing it. “Power is related to representation: which representations have cognitive authority or can secure hegemony, which do not have authority or are not hegemonic” (Beverly, 1999, p. 1).

As a result of these power imbalances, voices of subaltern populations have been historically absent from public discourse due to a lack of access to mainstream platforms where knowledge is produced and circulated (Dutta-Bergman, 2005), resulting in the omission of subaltern experiences in popular and academic discourses.

In contrast to other forms of critical theory, the commitment of a subaltern critique lies in its exploration of consciousness in subaltern contexts. Drawing upon the foundation of subaltern studies, a subaltern critique provides a framework to listen to the voices of those who have been excluded and erased (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010; Spivak, 2000). As a subaltern project, this research seeks to write history from below, listening to the voices of low-income minority women, by engaging in meaning-making with communities and making space in academic literature for the perspectives of those communities who have historically been marginalized in strategic communication research. The research question guiding this study is as follows:

**Research Question:** How do marginalized members of a low-income grassroots activist organization make sense of social media and dialogue in their advocacy work?

**Method**

In their special issue on digital dialogic communication, Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) acknowledged the need for methodological diversity, moving beyond content analysis (cf., Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018), and calling for new approaches to propel research. In this study, we examine digital dialogue through qualitative, ethnographic research. This method was chosen because it was most appropriate for understanding and respecting the lived experiences of marginalized informants and to determine how their meanings and practices are formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12). This study focuses on the experiences of members of Equality Moms (pseudonym), an American women’s empowerment grassroots activist organization that has been a championing voice for Black, low-income individuals experiencing homelessness and oppression since 1993. Prior to the study, the principal researcher spent 4 years between 2014 and 2019 attending Equality Moms meetings as a supportive observer, as an ally, and as a volunteer.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

Upon receiving institutional ethics board (IRB) approval for all aspects of the study, members of Equality Moms were recruited to participate. At the onset of the study, the principal researcher attended an Equality Moms meeting to discuss the research, shared the call for informants, and passed around a paper sign-up sheet. Individuals who completed the sign-up sheet were then invited to take part in the study through a formal recruitment letter shared according to each
individual’s preferred method of communication, such as email, text message, or landline phone call. Next, a snowball sampling method was utilized because it is beneficial for recruiting marginalized populations (Noy, 2007). Early interviewees recommended additional Equality Moms members to participate in the research, helping to establish credibility for the project. Equality Moms members were chosen as the sole informants of this study, as Equality Moms represent a unique majority-women, low-income, Black grassroots advocacy organization fighting for fair housing, prison reform, and healthcare reform in an urban area that suffers from extreme income inequality.

The principal researcher conducted and audio-recorded face-to-face interviews between January 2018 and March 2019, guided by a 13-question protocol. The protocol included rapport-building questions (e.g., “What do you love best about Equality Moms?” and “When you hear ‘digital media’ what feelings come to mind?”), grand tour questions to get an overarching understanding of informants’ advocacy and social media (“How does Equality Moms use digital or mobile media to advocate?”), and more specific questions to understand implications regarding low-income publics and digital/mobile media (“What are your personal preferences regarding advocacy using social media or mobile devices?”). The resulting sample of interviewees included 15 women and 2 men, ranging in age from 21 to 78 years, 13 of whom were Black, 2 of whom were Latina, and 1 of whom was White. All interviewees self-identified as low-income and members of the grassroots advocacy organization, Equality Moms. To protect their privacy, all informants were assigned a pseudonym.

**Data Analysis and Limitations**

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for patterns and themes using a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998). First, both researchers individually read each transcript line-by-line multiple times to identify themes and patterns. Second, a list of codes was created and shared among the researchers to list each emerging theme or pattern. The list of themes and corresponding codes was further narrowed via ongoing re-reading of the transcripts. Finally, themes and corresponding codes, as well as exemplary passages, were listed under each research question. During the analysis and coding process, the researchers remained mindful that their own identities, biases, experiences, or interpretations could influence the data analysis process. Member checks (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilized during the analysis process when the researchers were uncertain about or required clarification regarding a phrase or quotation under analysis. For example, the researchers contacted interview informants via email and asked them to clarify additional elements.

Despite attempts to bracket biases and conduct “member checks” to strengthen the validity, clarity, and representativeness of the quotations captured, limitations still exist. Limitations may be associated with differences in interview length (30–75 min in length), interview location (interviews at busy coffee shops, advocacy meeting site, or homes), or the principal researcher’s identities as a White, middle-class, cisgender woman with advanced degrees. To ease potential participant anxiety, the principal researcher ensured each participant that information would remain confidential and that the goal of the research was simply to listen and learn. Importantly, this case is not representative or generalizable to Black, low-income, marginalized publics at large; however, the case may offer beneficial insights for considering inclusive, respectful engagement with Black, low-income, minority publics in the future.

Through this project, in conjunction with Equality Moms members, the researchers participate in the production and circulation of knowledge around activism and advocacy. This requires an acknowledgment of our privilege as researchers. We recognize that our engagement with informants may further marginalize them, and we may have tried to “fit subaltern narratives into our research agendas, knowledge structures, and methods” (Kim & Dutta, 2009, p. 149). These informants are not the subjects of our study, but conscious producers of their own biographies and narratives. To respectfully engage Equality Moms members as co-constructors of knowledge and to strengthen the validity of our findings, the principal researcher often attended membership meetings as an ally, shared the study’s findings with informants, and engaged in follow-up discussions and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Findings**

Interviews with informants encapsulated a perception of the duality of social media: the utility social media provide for activists and the simultaneous invisibility of their advocacy work on social media. On one hand, informants described how social media provide a method for mobilizing activists, supporting one another, and connecting the group to broader social justice-oriented causes. On the other hand, informants acknowledged the dialogic flaws and shortcomings of social and mobile media, encapsulated by a sense of frustration and skepticism. This duality coalesced around four dominant themes: (1) ethic of care and support; (2) social media for mobilization; (3) invisibility and erasure; and (4) vulnerability through advocacy. Evidence for each theme is detailed below.

**Ethic of Care and Support**

Informants described an ethic of care (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) that fuels all Equality Moms advocacy efforts spanning digital media, traditional media, and interpersonal communication environments. Members articulated how Equality Moms’ dialogic efforts centered around caring and giving voice, even though authority figures, like government officials, often did not embody such efforts. Deanna explained, “I am my sister’s keeper . . . And we care about you and I
want you to care about me. We care about our whole . . . and therefore that’s why we have to do this.” This sentiment was echoed by Andre, who described how members embody a protector role for marginalized individuals in the community: “We’re kind of like the knights for the people. We like to step up and, you know, show that we’re not afraid. We’re like a really brave organization of people and we’ll do anything to get our things across.” Identifying as “knights for the people,” Equality Moms emphasize the care, connectedness, and responsiveness to the human condition (Gilligan, 2011) that is central to their advocacy work.

Expanding upon the aspect of care, informants emphasized how their advocacy efforts strive to give voice to and help those who are unable to help themselves. “Equality Moms are the voice for people who don’t have one—or who can’t voice—or don’t have the inclination to. That is where Equality Moms comes in by being the voice for the people who don’t have one,” explained Ursula. Brynn similarly noted, “I want to help the members that really can’t get the help that they need.” Despite pressure for the organization to engage in larger scale or social media-based communications efforts, much of members’ time is spent offering interpersonal support and serving others. This sentiment was encapsulated by Vera: “I wanted to help myself and help others. I was going through changes and just getting out of jail and stuff and I wanted to devote my time to helping myself, keeping myself clean, and helping others.”

Bringing social media into the mix, informants described how they perceived social media might help cultivate supportive, caring, and interpersonal dialogue among Equality Moms members. Taryn explained the potential of Facebook for supportive dialogic engagement:

I want to say “oh my gosh you guys are great. Keep going strong! I’ll come in when I can to volunteer or help!” I want to see an update. [I can respond with] Do you need more support some other way? I want to follow you guys and see how this is going . . . Congratulations if it went great. And if it didn’t, offer my support to make the next event better.

Data suggest social media provide a space for interpersonal communication among organizational members, a space to asynchronously connect and provide support to others, a force that builds relationships among members and undergirds the organizational structure for mobilization and action.

**Social Media and Mobilization**

In addition to cultivating support for each other, social media were perceived as providing a method for Equality Moms to mobilize and engage in activism and advocacy work. Explaining how social media are central to organizing, Ursula shared the following:

we use the medium as just a means to build our brand—but it helps with our organizing because most everyone has access to mobile or social media in some form through Facebook, texting, Twitter. Texting and SMS and emails get us organized, give directions, and centralize our communications.

Similarly, Taryn perceived social media as critical for building the Equality Moms brand and encouraging a broader social justice community to engage via hashtags. She stated the following:

If you hashtag anything, all your hashtags will just flower. So, it’s like if you couple with other things that are going on, that are similar to your cause, and you hashtag them, it will go back to you . . . But, also getting that word out bigger and bigger.

In addition to mobilization around important hashtags, members touted the capability of social media to circulate online petitions for causes important to Equality Moms and their low-income housing advocacy work. While these modes of communication are non-dialogic, they connect Equality Moms to one another and allow them to feel anchored to the broader community of social justice advocacy work. However, despite the opportunities social media afford for organizing and disseminating content, Equality Moms emphasized sentiments of invisibility, erasure, and defeat, which are illustrated below.

**Invisibility and Erasure**

The advocacy work of Equality Moms is ultimately shaped by the lived experiences of people who have been systemically oppressed and erased from dialogue on multiple structural levels and communication channels. Informants acknowledged they felt relatively invisible on social media amid the overwhelming span of digital media, the complexity of managing social media platforms, and the difficulty of organizations like Equality Moms to gain visibility in an environment of infinite and ever-changing content. Echoing this sentiment, Jace lamented that making Equality Moms truly visible on social media would equate to a full-time job, something their grassroots volunteer organization does not have the time or financial resources to support. He explained the following:

I think they don’t see us. Because that’s how big social media is . . . Remember I started out saying that social media’s a job too? It’s a job for somebody to be up there all day, messaging back people, getting information, sharing information.

Limited by the time constraints of volunteers like himself, he expressed frustration in the expanse of social media for generating awareness of Equality Moms to a larger target audience of community members, like-minded activists, and legislators. Similarly, Mila expressed a sense of defeat regarding use of social media for Equality Moms advocacy work, sharing, “It’s work! You know, the thing with [social
media] is that you have to have a person to manage it and stuff like that.” Informants suggest the organization’s messages are asphyxiated by the stream of messaging that circulates social media platforms. Amid the content whirlwind, members of Equality Moms struggle to generate widespread organizational visibility by “going viral.” As Nora described,

For instance, on Instagram, they have you know, healthy eating, and that is constantly trending. . . . So, that’s how Equality Moms needs to be, something that’s trending every day that can get you going. Or on Facebook, but [frustrated] if it’s something that you have to look for; it’s really not going to be that effective.

While seemingly nonsensical memes and GIFs circulate the digital landscape and generate conversation, the real-life struggles encapsulated by the organization’s posts lack social media engagement that would suggest their content is reaching broader audiences. Ursula shared her hesitation to use social media for activist dialogue:

In politics, it is all about personality. In this instant gratification society where we have grown from the technology and we have been groomed by this technology . . . politicians do not care about social media to make policy.

Ultimately, Equality Moms members acknowledged that meaningful engagement or dialogue on social media feels nearly impossible to achieve.

Overwhelmed by the complexity and vastness of social media for their advocacy work, informants described how they turn to face-to-face tactics in their activism. Brynn explained, “I prefer to talk to a legislator face-to-face. You get your point across. If you call with a phone, they just put you aside. They just toss you aside like you’re trash.” Similarly, Connie advocated for direct communication because “if you contact them on email or whatever, they’ll be gone. Or on Facebook, but [frustrated] if it’s something that don’t make any sense. They’re telling me listen, you’re going to go to advocate successfully. I don’t want to advocate in places that don’t make any sense. They’re telling me listen, you’re going to go to the Capitol or you’re going to [center of city] . . . And this is where you will be seen, your voice will be heard . . . you can take pictures, you can tell your story. So, all these right avenues make me feel better about my voice being heard.

These late-night meetings that they have of the aldermans [sic] that take place at 10:00 and 11:00 at night that affect both of us and most of us are home with our kids. And we can’t be there, and they’re making these decisions about our neighborhood and our people that live in our neighborhoods. That’s a problem. That’s a big problem. It’s strategic. It’s so that the voices that need to be heard are not saying anything. So, they’re putting us on mute.

Civic meetings are often announced with little advanced notice, not allowing members adequate time to find child care or make accommodations, a move that informants believe politicians do to prevent groups like Equality Moms from protesting when issues pertinent to their members are being discussed.

While informants lamented that their voices are often lost amid the noise of digital media and face-to-face civic dialogue, their perspectives are not entirely excluded from public domains. Members of Equality Moms are well known at the state capitol where activists regularly testify, pointing to the significance of non-digital communication in advocacy work. They bring attention to their experiences and demands at community meetings, rallies, parades, festival booths, and opportunities where their experiences can be shared. They voice their own personal stories, but also believe in standing up and speaking for those who may live in silence and may be afraid to express their opinions. Members are acutely aware that they might be heard, but not always listened to. This, however, does not stop them from standing up against powerful social actors like housing developers, corporations, or politicians to represent themselves and the issues they are fighting for.

**Vulnerability through Advocacy**

While Equality Moms unite behind their collective voices using tactics of testimony and protest, they acknowledge the constant battle to have their grievances acknowledged and voices recognized by decision makers. Findings suggest activism is a constant fight against institutional oppression and systemic erasure, a battle that is fought via groundwork in the trenches through an attitude of guerilla warfare. This rhetoric was employed by Mila when talking about her advocacy:

When I fought my battle, it was our battle. And anyone else had a battle it was my battle as well, because I know the struggle. So, I think that’s what Equality Moms is. It’s about knowing the struggle and coming together and doing something about it, you know?

Reflecting previous findings, informants described their advocacy as a combat best fought in person on the front lines. Taryn explained,

[Equality Moms] is giving me the keys to the room where I can go to advocate successfully. I don’t want to advocate in places that don’t make any sense. They’re telling me listen, you’re going to go to the Capitol or you’re going to [center of city] . . . And this is where you will be seen, your voice will be heard . . . you can take pictures, you can tell your story. So, all these right avenues make me feel better about my voice being heard.

Thus, informants are not armed with social or mobile media, but tools of their lived experiences: their stories, their
struggles, and their presence. Leesa, a leader in the group, described this as Equality Mom’s core strength,

Our strength is getting out and speaking about what we do. I think especially if you’ve had the lived experience because then people are more willing to listen to you—not many people are willing to share what they’ve lived. And I think that’s the strongest advocacy there is. Your testimony.

Getting their voices heard, however, requires vulnerability and risk. One participant, Kelly, shared that she feels like she is often the only voice on the issue:

It seems like my voice is the only voice that’s being heard . . . I’m not the only one who’s going through [this]. Or am I the only one who has the, I wouldn’t say the power, but the willingness to speak up. You know, because it is vulnerable. You know, I make myself vulnerable at the same time, you know, people are listening because it’s the personal stories that are making a difference.

She highlighted the sense of risk she feels when speaking up, putting herself in a situation of peril, to be the voice of the community. Being the voice of those who are silenced is a dangerous position experienced by several informants. This perception of risk is described by Jace:

All the issues that people bring up during the monthly meetings could be a documentary. If they was [sic] willing to share their stories. All those stories matter. And all those stories have a big impact because there’s people going through the same thing. But, they have no way to let it out. No way to share their story. Some people are too scared. Some people don’t know how. They just don’t have the resources.

Jace’s sentiment points to the lack of institutional and social resources to safely convey and mobilize around these narratives. Individuals have many stories that could be strategically articulated, but there is anxiety and suspicion around incorporating them as part of a communication campaign and sharing them in very public ways. Data highlight the reluctance and resistance members face with sharing their experiences, a fear that leads to self-silencing. Self-regulation may happen for a variety as articulated by Andre:

It’s like some people are hesitant because it’s like some people are shy. Some people they’re like they want to put their input out there, but they’re afraid of what the public might say, what the cops might say. They might patrol and all of a sudden do their insane things and sometimes it might be just what authority figures might think.

The fear of being seen and identified is a sentiment echoed by Kami. She lamented, “I think some people don’t want their face to be seen, because one, they’re afraid. A lot of people are afraid.” Even though the organization provides platforms and opportunities to speak, some are apprehensive to voice their opinions or share their perspectives out of concern for repercussions.

Discussion

Through the dynamic meaning-making process of in-depth interviews, findings from this research emerge “from” and “with” those on the margins (Dutta, 2008, 2011). We apply a subaltern critique to dialogue and social media by asking how marginalized members of a low-income grassroots activist organization make sense of social media and dialogue in their advocacy work. While some scholars argue digital media provide opportunities to create meaningful dialogue (Men et al., 2018), findings from our research suggest that despite these prospects, marginalized individuals often remain at the margins. Dialogue may not be possible when voices and perspectives are actively written out of both digital and non-digital civic spaces. Therefore, rather than privileging traditional, functionalist dialogic methods emphasizing trust and mutually beneficial co-creation of meaning (Buber, 1923/1970; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Paquette et al., 2015; Pearson, 1989; Taylor & Kent, 2014), we call for further theorization from the perspective of co-optation (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012), to bear witness to and theorize from the experiences of subaltern publics, attending to the co-optation of dialogic opportunities and the resistance and agency that grow from these experiences.

Activists, like members of Equality Moms, risk vulnerability to exert agency, challenge the imbalance of power in digital spaces, and establish discursive spaces to voice their lived experiences. They leverage their knowledge and privilege to bring to light the material needs of the most vulnerable individuals and groups they represent. The current tactics employed by Equality Moms, therefore, are not inherently dialogic. Face-to-face strategies of testimony, rallies, and protests give Equality Moms authority, a power that might be leveraged to gain entrée to dialogue. This process, in Mila’s words, is a “battle” to gain visibility and representation to bring to light the inequities faced by subaltern groups. As marginalized publics coalesce in formations like Equality Moms, social media may facilitate non-dialogic engagement, but may result in peer-networking, partnerships, and coalition-building efforts. Findings echo recent scholarship by Place (2019) who found that coalitions and partnerships with like-minded organizations, trusted intermediaries, and community networks were important for conveying trust, maximizing knowledge transfer, and bridging digital divides among marginalized publics. Such activities may then lay the foundation for the potentiality of dialogue—as an outcome of those interpersonal relationships centered around respect, commitment, and trust (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Place, 2019; Taylor & Kent, 2014).
Co-Optation Orientation: Addressing Economic and Power Imbalances

As long as inequalities exist, when theorizing from the experiences of subaltern groups, a consensus-driven approach to dialogue may be impossible. Dialogue cannot occur until power differentials are acknowledged and accounted for. Instead of adopting “dialogic concepts for nondialogic purposes” (Kent & Theunissen, 2016, p. 4041), we argue for further theorizing from a co-optation orientation of dialogic engagement. A co-optation orientation suggests that dialogue appearing to be collaborative should be approached with skepticism. Dutta-Bergman and Pal (2010) argue that through dialogic methods of neoliberal discourse, subaltern groups are co-opted and erased, a sentiment that manifested in our data. Bringing to light the silencing, erasure, and structural exclusion of activists from democratic processes, we challenge normative theorizing and practices of dialogic communication and social media that dominate much of the literature in strategic communication.

The contemporary social media landscape is driven by a “pay-to-play” economic model (Ferreira, 2019), and the ability for organic content to effectively reach target publics is decreasing (sproutsocial.com). Recent reports suggest that approximately 83%–88% of organizations pay for advertising or promoted content on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but can only expect to achieve an engagement rate of approximately 1% (Zote, 2019). Within this high-cost/low-engagement model, it is difficult for low-income grassroots activists to effectively reach or achieve dialogue via social media. As social media perpetuate a model where paid advertising is weaved into users’ feeds, systematic erasure and silencing is proliferated. Only certain individuals or organizations with resources are afforded a space to share their voices and perspectives. While social media may not help activists dialogically penetrate the walls upheld by powerful social actors, they offer connective and transformative possibilities to bring activists together. As Equality Moms attempt to disrupt the status quo and stand up to systemic and hegemonic forms of oppression on a larger stage, consensus-driven dialogue is not possible.

Dialogue, in the case of Equality Moms, is not about gaining consensus or dissolving difference (Wakefield, 2008), but making space for the multivocality that represents the lived experiences of those who have been, and continue to be, erased from civic spaces. “The question then is not whether the subaltern speaks” (Spivak, 1988), but rather, as Dutta (2015) asks, “[W]hen the subaltern does speak, how can her or his voice be heard in the elite structures that systematically profit through the erasure of subaltern voices? (p. 136).” Subaltern communities, like Equality Moms, may wish to mirror initiatives like StoryCorps.org to partner with marginalized publics to record, co-produce, and preserve their stories. Brief unscripted and unedited interviews are sustain their advocacy work. While utilizing social media for intragroup communication, informants in this research often rely on face-to-face tactics to pressure politicians and people in positions of power, a finding that is consistent with Shafrir and Yuan (2012). Findings from our research demonstrate that groups like Equality Moms do not have the time, the expertise, or resources to be constantly tied to social media. They do not have robust representation on these platforms—and their subaltern agenda does not appeal to the masses. Instead, they navigate systemic and hegemonic oppression by collectively supporting each other and engaging in authentic face-to-face testimony at protests or legislative hearings.

Professional Implications

While the purpose of this research was to make space for those erased from digital and discursive environments, this project offers insights for how communication professionals may be allies for marginalized publics. Communication professionals, especially within digital landscapes, must “change how they think about publics” and “foster richer, more inclusive interactions” (Kent, 2013, pp. 341–344). Through embrace of a subaltern perspective, communication scholars and practitioners must acknowledge and value the lives and experiences of marginalized activist publics as co-creators of meaning and not simply recipients of messaging (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). Strategic communication practitioners must attend to practices of erasure and seek to undo them, working actively to establish and maintain transformative spaces and resources “so the voices of the oppressed may be heard” (Bradford & Dutta, 2018, p. 4).

Practitioners must remain mindful of how they, too, contribute to erasure of subaltern voices or carry out exploitative practices (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010, p. 367). In the case of Equality Moms, members’ lived experiences and needs regarding low-income housing, homelessness, and food insecurity are frequently erased or ignored by mainstream media outlets, mainstream social media channels, and official governmental bodies. Communicators may best combat erasure and promote representation by giving voice to the “ordinariness” (Davis, 1998, p. 78) of marginalized individuals’ lives and prioritizing their “authority of experience” (hooks, 1990, p. 29). Strategic communication and social media must embody a commitment to listen, engage, and challenge the status quo so that subaltern voices are given spaces and opportunities for participation in civic dialogue. Instead of exploiting subaltern populations, communicators must facilitate long-term relationships founded on listening and compassion (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010). Organizations must actively “listen to the other” to break down politics of domination that only serve mainstream, majority agendas (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2010, p. 369) and give prominence to voices from at the margins (Dutta, 2011). Organizations may wish to mirror initiatives like StoryCorps.org to partner with marginalized publics to record, co-produce, and preserve their stories. Brief unscripted and unedited interviews are
recorded with the intent to give authentic representation to the diversity of beliefs, perspectives, and lived experiences—and form a critical collective of voices. Ultimately, practitioners and scholars alike must be reflexive of their role in knowledge production and power relations (Dutta, 2011) while seeking to embody respectful listening and reciprocal engagement with the individual first—not the technology used to do so (Place, 2019).

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

In this study, we challenge the often taken-for-granted assumptions of social media and dialogue, adding complexity to the study of activism by highlighting the challenges associated with dialogue and disparities in status or resources. We embrace a subaltern perspective to address issues of power and conflict, bringing to light the erasures, vulnerability, and agency of an activist organization. We demonstrate the risk of vulnerability activists like members of Equality Moms take to create dialogic spaces to challenge unbalanced situations of power, demonstrating how dialogue can be constrained by powerful actors. Given the pervasiveness of inequalities, we emphasize the impracticality of a normative orientation toward dialogue, illuminating a co-optive framework that challenges a liberal pluralist model that positions social media as ubiquitous—doubting the possibility of social media dialogue for social change.

This study provides an in-depth look at social media and dialogue within the bounds of one activist organization. We invite scholars to explore additional theoretical approaches to expand our notions of dialogue to enrich our understandings of how social media function in broader social and cultural contexts. Moving forward, more research is needed that theorizes with and from subaltern communities, critiquing power asymmetries (Richter, 2001) that maintain dominant forms of social relations (Lammers, 2011) and continue to render marginalized individuals feeling powerless or voiceless.

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ORCID iD

Katie R. Place https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4930-3972

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Author Biographies

Katie R. Place (PhD University of Maryland) is an associate professor of Strategic Communication in the School of Communication at Quinnipiac University. Her research explores the intersections of power, ethics, and diversity in digital media and public relations contexts.

Erica Ciszek (PhD University of Oregon) is an assistant professor in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research examines the intersections of public relations, advocacy, and social change.