



Critical criminological research on environmental and social harm: Some lessons learnt and suggestions for future research

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In this research note, I want to offer innovative examples of ways in which criminological research can develop new approaches to social movement research focusing on uncovering environmental and social harms, including the harms caused by police repression and criminalisation. These examples aim to inspire future critical criminological studies analysing environmental harms as well as 'social harms' (Hillyard & Tombs 2004, 2007, 2017; see also Boukli & Kotzé, 2018, and Canning & Tombs, 2021) – which are all harms that tend not to be included in legal definitions of 'crime' and therefore not to be protected by the criminal law. Such scholarship (which in green-critical criminology focuses on the study of both human and non-human suffering) also focuses on the physical, emotional and psychological harms to people caused by state or corporate actions and inactions as well as by criminalisation practices and police repression (Canning & Tombs, 2021). This research note specifically focuses on the latter.

This short piece benefits from the recent research I conducted with my colleagues at the University of Essex – and, in particular, from the lessons we learnt from that research. The research projects in question addressed the uses of Twitter by the criminalised environmental movement NOTAP in Italy (Di Ronco, Allen-Robertson & South, 2019), and the intersections between the online and offline rep-

representations of the activists' protests (Di Ronco & Allen-Robertson, 2020). As I will explain in more detail in the main sections of this piece, when studying activists' technosocial (Castells, 2012) practice, innovative computational tools – such as the ones we used in our studies – can facilitate the collection and sorting of important social media material related to activists' online practice, which can go a long way towards uncovering unrecognised sources of harm and suffering that are often obscured by mainstream media. As our research demonstrates, however, to be able to capture activists' lived experiences of policing and criminalisation in a comprehensive way, social media research should not be conducted on its own: it should always be combined with on-the-ground qualitative ethnographic research. To assist with this aim, critical criminologists can also rely on a recent and quite innovative repertoire of sensory and participative (itinerant) methodologies, which I address in the final part of this note.

Let me turn now to our research on the uses of Twitter by the criminalised environmental movement NOTAP. Our interest in the topic dates back to 2017, the year when I first joined Twitter: it was generated by me stumbling – quite by chance – into #NOTAP tweets. These tweets sparked my criminological imagination: their embedded visual material depicted militarised construction sites in rural settings (see Figure 1), heavy police presence with officers in riot gear making these sites inaccessible to protesters, and police violence and brutality against the protesters.



Figure 1 and 2: *Images of militarised construction sites in San Foca (Melendugno).*

Credits: The Author.

But who are the #NOTAP protesters, and what are they fighting against? They are activists opposing the building of the TAP pipeline, a mega-project funded by the European Investment Bank (EIB) that aims to bring natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe through Georgia, Turkey, Greece and Italy – with the hope being in this way to reduce the EU's gas dependence on Russia.

Our interest in the activists' protests against this pipeline on Twitter led to our first study, which computationally collected #NOTAP tweets via our 'Listener' tool. This 'Listener' tool monitored Twitter's streaming API for relevant tweets and ran for 24 hours a day on a remote server for three consecutive months, collecting all #NOTAP tweets published or shared by Twitter users during that time. Through a virtual and visual ethnography of the textual and visual material embedded in the collected tweets,¹

1 This means that we collected and analysed not only the (quite limited) text of the Twitter posts but

we were able to identify the harms that the activists associated with the TAP pipeline, as well as the representations of their protesting as peaceful and of police repression as violent and excessive. This research therefore revealed the great potential of qualitative data analysis combined with computational methods for the collection of social media material for the critical criminological study of social media activism: this can go a long way towards uncovering unrecognised sources of harm and suffering that are often obscured by mainstream media.

We attempted to explore this further in our recent second study, which focused on the realities and representations of on-the-ground environmental resistance and the intersections of these with visual representations of protest on Twitter. In short, in addition to studying visual material from Twitter, which we computationally collected and categorised, we also interviewed activists and conducted on-the-ground ethnographic research around the pipeline's landing point. For the online part of the research, this time we decided to run our 'Listener' tool for a much longer time – nine consecutive months.

In this second study, we also qualitatively analysed the (online and offline) data we had collected, through content analysis. We found that, although online and offline representations of protest may at times coincide, there are also substantial differences in the ways that activists represent environmental protest offline and on Twitter. Our findings suggest that, for example, the online Twitter space is mostly used by activists to criticise the government's decision to allow the pipeline – in addition to conveying information on the protest and their organised events, of course. Much of the activists' work and experiences do not, however, end up on Twitter: the on-the-ground research, in particular, helped us to shed light on some of the strategies of resistance used by the activists, as well as on their lived experiences of repression and intimidation by the police, which did not emerge from our online studies.

From our on-the-ground research we gathered, for example, that the activists' experiences of repression and intimidation included not only police violence, arrests and humiliation during arrests, but also onerous fines (up to EUR 4,000), cautions, expulsion orders and place bans, as well as various charges of, for example, blocking traffic, the use of force against public officials, and trespass. In addition, many activists who we formally or informally interviewed spoke about the perceived close police surveillance they had to endure: they reported being wiretapped and closely monitored by the police in their social media accounts. They also felt constrained in their freedom of movement, as some of them had been banned from entering certain towns, cities or territories, or had systematically been stopped by the police in any part of Italy they went to. The activists also reported seeing undercover police around their homes at night, and feeling insecure and afraid for themselves and their families during the night.

Our on-the-ground research also illuminated some specific activist practices that did not emerge from our online studies. A good example is the so-called 'information collection and dissemination strategy' of the NOTAP movement, which relied on the activists' use of mobile cameras and social media for the crowdsourced countersurveillance of law enforcement and the TAP company. In essence, pictures and videos of activists that captured police malpractice and corporate irregularities were shared with other activists on dedicated WhatsApp groups and then spread widely through (among others) Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and the movement's website. As we illustrated in our article, such a use of

also the visual and textual material that was included in those posts (e.g. pictures, videos, newspaper articles, Facebook posts, etc.).

mobile cameras and social media by activists is coherent with the notion of ‘hybrid heterotopia’, as elaborated by Wood and Thompson (2018): according to these authors, ‘hybrid heterotopias’ are mediated spaces in which given dominant (on-the-ground) orders are challenged through people’s constant connection to the internet, social media and apps.

I want to conclude this short article by mentioning the limitations of social media and, by extension, of social media research within and beyond criminology. It is no secret to the social sciences that social media are not accessible to all and that people’s digital media literacy also varies (see e.g. Park, 2012). In practice, this means that data collected on social media are far from comprehensive – they only reflect the perceptions of *some* people, obscuring those of others who do not have access to, or do not actively participate in, social media. In addition, as our second study demonstrated, social media are not a space in which all activist practices are shared (see, for example, the ‘information collection and dissemination strategy’ described above); it is also not the space in which activists share their lived experiences of criminalisation, police repression and intimidation – which we were only able to grasp through our on-the-ground research.

This leads to the last point I want to make here, which is the importance of combining online and offline research when studying criminalised social movements and activists’ experiences of harm – including the harms of criminalisation. This also makes sense in the light of the recognised technosocial nature of social movements, which use different combinations of offline and online opportunities for activism, protest and resistance, to achieve the protest’s aims (Castells, 2012; Powell, Stratton & Cameron, 2018). As illustrated in this short article, social media can be an extremely important platform on which social movements can set out their experienced harm and suffering as a result of state, corporate and police decisions and actions – particularly when the voices of these activists, and the abuses against them, are rather under- or mis-represented in mainstream media. As our research has shown, moreover, to capture the (otherwise relatively unheard) voices of activists on social media, qualitative criminological researchers can rely in their research projects on the assistance of innovative computational tools, which can greatly facilitate the processes of data collection and sorting. However, to be able to grasp more comprehensively activists’ practice and activists’ lived experiences of social control, policing, surveillance and criminalisation, on-the-ground research is essential and should be combined with the online study of social media activism.

As a final note, I would like to mention here the rather recent repertoire of sensory and participative (itinerant) methodologies that have been developed within critical criminological scholarship (see e.g. Natali, 2019; Natali, Acito, Mutti & Anzoise, 2020; Natali & de Nardin Budó, 2019; Neville & Sanders-McDonagh, 2019; O’Neill & Roberts, 2019). These studies have shown how walking with participants, or participants’ itinerant soliloquies, can improve the capturing and unpacking of people’s experiential perspectives and narratives of harm and suffering in specific spaces. Future on-the-ground critical criminological research into criminalised social movements would immensely benefit from the use of some of these methods, too. For example, walking with criminalised activists in ‘spaces of resistance’ – such as the natural environment (e.g. the TAP pipeline construction sites) or rural or urban settings (where people protest or live (and feel in danger)) – can go a long way towards unpacking activists’ lived experiences of social control, policing, surveillance, criminalisation and victimisation, as well as exposing broader social harms.

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