

## Research in Brief

# Can Media and Technology Help Make “Another World Possible”? Reflections from the Media@McGill Research Delegation to the 2015 World Social Forum in Tunisia

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**ABSTRACT** *This research-in-brief summarizes activities of our research delegation to the 2015 World Social Forum (WSF) in Tunis, including our participation in two associated events: the World Forum on Free Media (WFFM) and preparatory meetings for an eventual global Internet Social Forum (ISF). The WFFM and ISF provided rich terrain for our delegation to document and study contemporary struggles around communication media and technology issues. We report on these encounters as a way to foreground the many similar opportunities available to Canadian media, communication, and technology scholars at annual WSFs, in particular, the WSF coming to Montréal in August 2016. Notably, the 2016 WSF will be the first forum held since its inception in 2001 outside the global south.*

**KEYWORDS** *Social movements; World social forum; Social movement learning; Media and technology activism; Community media; Feminism; Hacking; Alterglobalization; Autonomous media*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Ce texte résume les activités de notre délégation de recherche lors du Forum social mondial (FSM) de Tunis. Ces activités incluaient notre participation à deux événements associés : le Forum mondial des médias libres (FMML) et des rencontres préparatoires pour un éventuel Forum social d'Internet (FSI). Ces rencontres ont constitué de riches terrains pour documenter et étudier les luttes contemporaines concernant les médias et la communication. Ce compte-rendu vise à faire connaître aux médias et aux chercheurs canadiens les multiples opportunités offertes lors des forums sociaux annuels, en particulier lors du prochain Forum social mondial qui se déroulera à Montréal en août 2016. Ce forum sera le premier à se dérouler à l'extérieur du Sud global depuis sa création en 2001.*

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MOTS CLÉS *Mouvements sociaux; forums sociaux mondiaux; apprentissage et mouvements sociaux; médias et militantisme technologique; médias communautaires; féminisme; hacking; altermondialisation; médias autonomes.*

### **Background on the World Social Forum**

The World Social Forum (WSF) is an annual gathering of civil society that works to cultivate alternatives to neoliberalism and to provide opportunities to collectively build alternative futures (George, 2004; Corrêa & Fil, 2005; Whitaker, 2005; Becker, 2007; Jai, 2007; Smith, 2007; Hammond, 2007; Pinsky, 2010; Juris, Caruso, Couture, & Mosca, 2013). When the forum emerged in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, it was framed as an opposition to the annual Davos meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF). To date, there have been thirteen WSF gatherings around the world. Many regional, national, and thematic social forums have also been organized. North American examples include the Peoples Social Forum that took place in Ottawa in August 2014, the annual United States Social Forums, and the Mexico Social Forum (Peoples Social Forum, n.d.; US Social Forum, 2015; Wikipedia, 2015).

The WSF's governing body, the International Council of the WSF, chose the city of Tunis for its 2015 global convergence for several strategic reasons. One was Tunisia's inspiration for popular protests that swept across the regions of the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Another reason was the success of the 2013 WSF held in Tunisia where some 60,000 people gathered representing more than 4,500 progressive organizations from 128 countries. The 2013 forum was hailed by many as a great success, thus the 2015 WSF organizers worked hard to build on its achievements for the 2015 forum. Tunis was also the location of the second of two United Nations' World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS), one in Geneva in 2003 and the other in Tunis in 2005. The 2005 WSIS led to the creation of an annual Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the first of which was held in 2006 in Athens, Greece.

The World Forum of Free Media (WFFM) is among several thematic gatherings that now occur at the annual WSF. Created as a space of encounter for activists engaged in struggles for free expression, independent media, and alternative communication, the first WFFM was held in 2009 during the WSF in Belém, Brazil, with the slogan "communicate to mobilize and mobilize to communicate." The second WFFM was held in 2012 at the Peoples Summit Rio+20, which took place alongside the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, and marked the twentieth anniversary of the 1992 Earth Summit. At that meeting WFFM participants approved plans to work to strengthen a globalized free media movement concerned with regulations enabling democratic media, the central role of technological appropriation, and free and open source technologies. The third WFFM was held in Tunis in 2013 and initiated a debate on the need for a common framework of principles and challenges to organize around; this effort resulted in a proposal to develop a World Charter of Free Media. Although the WFFM has reached many people around the world, its 2015 organizers expressed a desire to encourage more participation from English-speaking media activists, especially from Canada and the US. Our research delegation played a role in bringing Anglophone as well as Francophone perspectives from Canada to the 2015 meeting of

the fourth WFFM. It was at the 2015 WFFM that participants adopted a final charter (World Forum of Free Media, 2015).

Another thematic gathering at the 2015 WSF in Tunis that aligned with the research interests of our delegation was an effort to organize the first-ever Internet Social Forum (ISF). Organizers of the ISF brought together at the WSF planned for a bottom-up perspective on the “Internet we want” rooted in values of democracy, human rights, and social justice.

### **Media@McGill research delegation: Goals and activities**

Media@McGill is a hub of research, scholarship, and public outreach on issues and controversies in media, technology, and culture. Based in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University, its projects, interdisciplinary in nature, involve scholars from many disciplines and fields as well as artists, activists, and media practitioners. Supported by several small grants from numerous McGill programs, the delegation organized activities before, during, and after the forum. Our research questions focused on the extent to which the WSF, WFFM, and ISF cultivate new generations of scholars, citizens, and educators committed to driving public engagement and innovation in challenging prevailing orthodoxies, leading public debate, engaging decision-makers, and informing public policy about communication and technology.

Our activities included a pre-meeting in Montréal with the Québec WSF 2015 delegation and a meeting of the McGill community to comment on a draft of the World Charter on Free Media discussed earlier as preparation for the WFFM in Tunis.

During the WSF, we participated in numerous meetings and events, conducted individual research, and led a variety of sessions on topics related to communications and technology, some of which we detail in the sections of the report that follow. Upon our return we made presentations about these activities at the Union for Democratic Communication (UDC) conference in Toronto on May 1–3, 2015. We also hosted a post-WSF/WFFM Town Hall at McGill to share experiences about the WSF with the McGill community.<sup>1</sup> At present, we are also working to organize a potential McGill partnership with the Québec collective that succeeded in convincing the International Council of the WSF to bring the Forum to Québec in 2016. What follows are three brief reports on research and work at the 2015 WSF by delegation members Gretchen King, Sophie Toupin, and Stéphane Couture.

### **Opportunities for scholar-activist engagement on community media issues**

The Tunis forum was Gretchen King’s first experience participating in an annual WSF convergence. As a doctoral candidate and scholar-activist interested in how autonomous media and communication technology can support social movements, King found the WSF provided an important site for connecting her activism and research agendas. For example, she facilitated a participatory workshop with community radio stations based on her dissertation fieldwork conducted at Radio al-Balad 92.4 FM in Amman, Jordan. Nearly a dozen people attended the workshop from Tunisian and Moroccan community radio stations. The resulting exchange of experiences on the

outcomes of her dissertation project enriched her data analysis and corroborated some of the conclusions of her doctoral research.

More generally, she concluded that the WSF offers graduate students opportunities to immerse themselves in contemporary activism and networking initiatives. One example at the 2015 forum that King experienced was the TRANSMESH initiative shared during a WFFM workshop. A Tunisian-based activist demonstrated how to install a mesh network, a technology that allows for the sharing of content digitally over community communication networks that are independent of corporation or government control. Two scholar-activists from Germany discussed the effort to build TRANSMESH, which is a political movement and a network that aims to link mesh networks across national and political borders to establish decentralized and independent communication infrastructure. TRANSMESH illustrates how graduate students can use the WSF to strengthen links between media activism and activist scholarship. For King, these experiences were not only productive; they were transformative. Not only did she enrich the outcomes of her dissertation research but she also connected with new and old media movements gathering in Tunis, including the above mentioned TRANSMESH network, activists from the Independent Media Center (IMC) of Africa, and members of the Association mondiale des radiodiffuseurs communautaires (AMARC).

That said, from the perspective of a scholar-activist working in autonomous media and technology, it was also striking to observe the general lack of media infrastructure and participatory production opportunities for WSF participants in Tunis. Media activists tried to open a radio studio to stream live from the WSF, but no location was found to host the equipment and participatory broadcast. Delegation members also noted that there was no overall forum-sponsored “campaign” concerning media, communication, or technology. For example, when registering a workshop at the WSF, participants can choose from among ten campaigns to categorize their proposal. None was available for media and technology activism at the 2015 WSF. Delegation members concluded that including a campaign for media and technology activism in future forums would ensure a way for the forum to work toward transforming hegemonic communication systems around the world and toward strengthening social movement media.

For the 2016 forum in Montréal, delegation members are already working to include a forum-wide campaign around media activism, where participants can propose media, communication, and technology related activities that enable networking, sharing skills, and building an infrastructure that facilitates autonomous communication and media production during and beyond the annual convergence.

Picking up on the research questions delegation members took with them to Tunis, King also noted the large presence of presenters and events hosted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The prevalence of NGO participants contrasted with her understanding of the WSF being a space primarily for social movements. Activists and scholar-activists have defined “NGOization” as the “professionalization and institutionalization of social action” (Carmody, 2014). The NGOization of the WSF was discussed within the Tunis forum during a session called “Decolonizing the WSF,” which analyzed the hierarchies evident in the WSF process that the participation of large

NGOs perpetuates at the exclusion of grassroots communities (Stephansen, 2015). Whereas the WSF offers an alternative space for social movements, delegation members agreed that WSF participants must also consider the ways “state and capital seek to fully exploit the ambivalent and accommodating position of NGOs to crush peoples’ movements” (Choudry & Kapoor, 2013, p. xi). A question for King, thinking ahead to the 2016 forum, is how WSF participants can be assured that the forum provides a space independent of the interests of state and capital.

### **Opportunities to collaborate with activists working at the intersection of technology and feminism**

As already noted, historically the WSF has not been a place where communication and technology have been considered front and centre political issues, but this is slowly changing. The WFFM is an exciting example of this shift. Committed to the fight for free (as in freedom) knowledge and for alternatives to the models of communication controlled by multinational media and technology corporations, media activists who have led the WFFM process are bringing visibility to issues that have long been sidelined at previous forums, and a change in the collective action frame (Benford & Snow, 2000) around these issues. Even more interesting for researchers such as Sophie Toupin—the delegation member who researched and participated in 2015 forum activities in the areas of feminism, tech activism, and hacker culture—is the fact that the WFFM has in its past two iterations set up a hacklab (Maxigas, 2012), where tech-savvy activists and hackers converge to discuss issues related to technologies, as well as organizing hands-on workshops to heighten the tech skills of social movements.

Yet even with the WFFM at the 2015 WSF, the relationship between feminism, technology, and the WSF is even more in its infancy. The Association for Progressive Communication (APC) has done important work advancing this relationship, particularly with its Feminist Principles on the internet (APC, 2011). These principles highlight access, global governance, privacy, and the relationship between online and offline violence, for example. However, more convergences are needed at annual forums to bring together media, tech, and feminist perspectives. Taking a feminist stance on technology, including the internet, is paramount as Donna Haraway (1988) highlights in her claim that “the struggle over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over how to see ...” (p. 375).

This is even more important given that within the WSF’s feminist gatherings, such as the Women’s Assembly, feminists have yet to fully recognize or embrace technology as an issue of imminent concern or to navigate existing media and technology circles to bring a much-needed feminist perspective to that work. While recognizing that the global feminist movement is faced with dire and pressing problems, such as poverty, illiteracy, and violence, technology—beyond its simple usage—must also be acknowledged as a feminist issue. All would benefit from having feminists engage more deeply in internet access and governance in addition to technological literacy, among other issues. As Judy Wajcman (1991, 2004), Lisa Nakamura (2014), and Virginia Eubanks (2011) have argued, technology impacts all realms of life where feminists are active. Examples include the exploitative nature of labour (such as online communities as commodities, data mining by data empires, and poor labour conditions in factories

designing devices); the relationship between digital technology, democracy, and movement building; and the relationship between online and offline violence.

Toupin's engagement with the WFFM in Tunis involved raising awareness about the relationship between technology, feminism, and activism. She recommended to WFFM organizers the importance of creating a safe space where women, queer, and trans\* people are invited to learn and share how to protect themselves online. This was supposed to be the theme of an event that was cancelled following a terrorist attack in Tunis in the days before our delegation's departure from Montréal. An event called the Gender and Tech Institute (GTI) spearheaded by Tactical Tech Collective, APC, and Media@McGill was cancelled for the safety and security of the LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Intersex) participants and facilitators. While the WSF carried on its activities as planned in a highly securitized environment, it is important to mention that anti-feminist disruption did occur. One example included push-backs at the Women's Assembly, where signs such as "Blah Blah Blah" (meaning that was it pointless) were held by several young men, indicating their view about the irrelevance of talking about women's rights issues at the WSF and particularly in the Maghreb (Ghorbani, 2015). Other insults and intimidations LGBTQI activists faced were visible in public demonstrations in Tunisia during the WSF.

Despite these limitations and challenges and in addition to the striking lack of women, queer, and trans\* people as participants, facilitators, and organizers in the hacklab, Toupin helped set up the hacklab and brought a feminist perspective to technology and hacking. Her contribution to this space was informed by her own activism experience and research on feminist hackerspaces, feminist hacking practices, and feminist approaches to free and open source software.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on new forms of feminist technical praxis and feminist pedagogy focused on learning about technology; understanding hacking as a form of subjectivity and a mode of techno-political engagement; and working to reconceptualize the relationship between feminism and hacking are all part of a feminist activist research agenda.

Feminist researchers and hackers have a crucial role to play in future WSFs in framing the importance of feminist tech activism for the global feminist movement(s). The move that Toupin is hoping for at the 2016 WSF is twofold. First, for the feminist movements involved within the WSF to consider the internet and technology as more than tools to be used for campaigning and organizing, but as a feminist issues per se. Second, she hopes for more engagements from feminist, queer, and trans\* hackers.

### **Opportunities for scholar-activist encounters on tech and media issues**

Stéphane Couture's engagement at the Tunis World Social Forum involved taking an active part in organizing the WFFM described earlier, which brought together approximately 300 people at the Tunis Forum. The WFFM was organized using a consensual mode of decision-making, and it involved partners from France, Brazil, Morocco, and Tunisia.

The most concrete outcome of the WFFM was its adoption of the World Charter on Free Media (World Forum of Free Media, n.d.) mentioned earlier in this brief. The process of drafting the charter launched in Tunis in 2013 during the third WFFM and

continued throughout 2014; seminars were organized in Brazil, Morocco, Tunisia, and France to provide opportunities to deepen debate among journalists, alternative media makers, and media activists about the first version of the charter. The charter's aim is to be used as a document for advocacy around free media as well as a use for education purposes about free media issues. Indeed, a few weeks after the charter was adopted, several university professors indicated interest in using it in their classes. Along with participants from McGill University and the Montréal community (experienced media and communication scholars along with local activists), Media@McGill delegation members played a significant role in commenting on the draft version of the charter and the subsequent WFFM deliberation process about it in Tunisia. Before the forum, we organized a bilingual workshop at McGill to discuss and comment on the charter draft. Participants quickly came to the conclusion that the charter, as it had been drafted, did not acknowledge much of the history of communication rights. Important questions were also raised about the goal of the charter, as compared to many other charters already written on the subject of free media. During this workshop, we faced significant challenges in the sense that we had to keep in mind that the charter was not written by researchers from our shared scholarly tradition (North American communication studies), but by activists coming from very different cultural and epistemological backgrounds and histories of engagement. Contributing to the charter offered a good experience in working at the intersection of research and activism.

Once in Tunis, we discovered that our comments on the Charter draft corroborated others' criticisms. To further engage in the discussion and arrive at a final version of the charter while in Tunis, four workshops were organized with WFFM participants. Each workshop focused on one of the following questions: Why do we need this Charter? What are free media and who are we to talk about this? What do we criticize and what do we propose? How should we implement this charter?

Of particular interest to our delegation was the question about the definition of free media. Indeed, it was noted in our workshop at McGill that, while the concept of "free media" in the title of the draft charter sounded more like a reference to freedom of press, its content related more to what is known in communication studies as "alternative media," or "community media." The WFFM Tunis workshop addressing the definitional question ("What are free media and who are we to talk about this?") concluded that the notion of "free media" should be left open to different interpretations given the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts in which the charter was written and might later be used.<sup>2</sup> That Tunis WFFM workshop also defined free media as autonomy vis-à-vis commercial or state practices and the fight against all forms of domination, both within the media's organizational practices, and in the world.

As noted earlier, after 14 years of social forums, issues around communication and technology at the 2015 forum were still fairly marginal. Mentioned earlier was the noted absence of a "communication campaign" as a possible choice for the registration of proposed activity. So-called "tech issues," such as free software and Internet governance, were however addressed within different spaces, especially the WFFM and in meetings of the Internet Social Forum (ISF).<sup>3</sup>

Within the WFFM, these issues were raised through the trope of the “Internet as Common Good” and the relationships between media activists and hackers. Indeed, the 2015 edition of the WFFM was preceded by the writing of different sets of articles on issues relevant to themes of WFFM articles that were put together in a special issue of a French journal about free and open Internet and the meeting of media-activism and hacktivism (CoreDEM, 2014). These provided background for the WFFM and many other events. Couture intervened in the WFFM on questions concerning the intersection between hacktivism and free media activists as well as on internet neutrality.

In addition to the WFFM, meetings about planning an Internet Social Forum (ISF) presented an occasion to discuss issues about the internet, particularly internet governance. In general, most of the public meetings about the ISF concerned very general discussions about internet issues in addition to organizational protocols necessary to officially launch an ISF process. For example, at the ISF workshop on March 26, 2015, nine presenters spoke about general issues around the internet and only at the very end was there discussion about the proposal to organize a global ISF. Multiple times questions were raised about whether or not there was actually a need to convene an ISF considering the fact that there is already a similar process called the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), a yearly event convening enterprises, state and civil society organizations, and tech communities to discuss Internet Governance. That said, for the ISF organizers, the goal is to create a global meeting space similar to the WSF for civil society with more progressive politics concerning Internet Governance than those who convene annually at the IGF. By placing the ISF under the umbrella of the World Social Forum, organizers seek to frame the ISF as an anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberalist space (as described in the WSF Charter of principles) for discussion of issues about Internet Governance (Mimoun, 2015; Osava, 2007; WSF Memory, n.d.).

Tensions between ISF and WFFM participants also emerged in various meetings and informal discussions. Some of the tensions relate to the closeness in their respective agendas, particularly around tech and internet issues. For instance, concerns were raised multiple times about the need to be careful not to disperse the scarce resources of the too few activists working on communication and technology issues. Underlying this argument, however, seems to be a deeper political issue around the multistakeholder versus multilateral perspectives on Internet Governance (DeNardis, 2014; Guerrini, 2014). Indeed, even a few weeks before the meetings in Tunis, concerns were raised as to the real aim of the ISF, considering that some of its conveners took in the past a very strong stance against the multistakeholder perspective on Internet Governance (Malcolm, 2015).

Despite these ideological tensions, many informal discussions took place that enabled reaching kinds of cooperation between organizers of the WFFM and the ISF. It is precisely these types of discussions that the WSF actually enables, which is why Media@McGill delegation members found the 2015 WSF in Tunis productive on a number of levels, especially from the perspective of media and communication studies.

### **WSF 2016 in Montréal and beyond: A role for Canadian media and communication studies scholars and students?**

While the engagement of our delegation was productive and enthusiastic, we shared many criticisms about the 2015 iteration of the WSF. It was noted for instance that despite the large number of participating organizations (over 4,000) and recorded activities (over 12,000), individual participation was lower than in previous forums that also took place in Tunis (Massiah, 2015). As previously mentioned, some criticized the WSF for leaving too little space for autonomous social movements, such as the popular movements in Greece, Spain, or Africa. Additionally, numerous people who were suspected as being state-sponsored actively disturbed some activities (especially those related to the geopolitical situation in Maghreb). Finally, organizations were also active at the forum defending the agendas of the World Bank or distributing religious books, activities that run counter to the purpose of the World Social Forum, causing some to suggest that the WSF process is currently in crisis and might soon come to an end.

So, what is the future of the World Social Forum? After two years of work, a collective from Québec succeeded in convincing the International Committee to let Montréal host the 2016 forum. As the first WSF held in the global north, organizers consider the 2016 forum a good opportunity to renew the social forums and infuse a new dynamic into the process, which is approaching its fifteenth anniversary. Negotiations are now underway to determine how the WSF will be funded and where it will be located, but it will likely include different universities in downtown Montréal (Université du Québec à Montréal, McGill, and Concordia University) as well as Montréal's Quartier des Spectacles. Media-related thematic events, such as a new edition of the WFFM, have also been confirmed.

The upcoming Montréal WSF in 2016 offers an opportunity to reflect on the inclusion of NGOs and to emphasize the participation of social movements, including those led by Indigenous peoples. Québec and Canada have been sites of struggles against austerity and extractivism, movements that have been led by youth, students, trade unions, and Indigenous peoples. Québec has the honor of hosting the first WSF in the "global North" and now faces the challenges of organizing a solidarity space for 50,000–80,000 participants that is inclusive of a broad representation of social movement actors and organizations.

We think that it is essential for communication scholars across Canada to learn more about the history of the WSF and to consider becoming involved in planning sessions, workshops, and other events that can bridge scholar-activist work on media and technology issues. The WSF 2016 also provides an unparalleled opportunity to engage with peoples' movements from around the world about our many shared issues and concerns.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. These discussions and experiences are enriching the special issue Sophie Toupin is co-editing with Shoawen Bardzell and Lilly Nguyen on feminism and (un)hacking for the *Journal of Peer Production*, which should be released in winter, 2016, thereby making a strong connection between activist-research and our engagement in such space.
2. It has to be noted again that the WFFM was an intercultural encounter in which North American Anglophones were a minority. The frame of reference about “free media” was more of a direct translation from the French term of *médias libres* a concept that is rooted in the movement of *Les Radios Libres* (or pirate radios) in France and Italy in the 1970s. On the contrary, the French translation of “community media,” *media communautaire*, has a bad connotation in France and Maghreb countries, as it is referring to a media aimed at local or ethnic communities that is exclusive and closed off.
3. A “digital security tent,” was also installed during the WSF. This tent was sponsored by organizations such as the Montréal-based Alternatives, Reporters without Borders, Access, and some other independent media groups (L’Héritier, 2015).
4. Note that this Research in Brief does not provide a bibliography for academic and civil society literature on the World Social Forum. There is a large literature on the forum in many languages, and this article only mentions a few of these sources for the general reader.

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