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From public to digital spaces: spatial and media practices of the 2017 'Unite Cyprus Now' peace protests

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From public to digital spaces: Spatial and media practices of the 2017 'Unite Cyprus Now' peace protests

Abstract

Cyprus is a divided country affected by long-term conflict between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. A meeting among key politicians in Switzerland in 2017 raised hopes that the 43-year division would come to an end. Ahead of this meeting, peace protests organised by Unite Cyprus Now (UCN) erupted in Nicosia urging politicians to find a solution to the Cypriot problem. This study explores how the UCN protest signage was used during the demonstrations and how protesters' practices intersected across physical and digital spaces. Data was collected through an interview with a UCN peace activist, digital manifestations of the UCN protest signage online and a three-year ethnographic monitoring of the protest site. The data analysis, informed by Mediated Discourse Analysis, reveals that UCN's spatial and media practices supported activism work by enacting resistance, mobilising protests, sharing news from the ground, and circulating to local and global audiences counter-discourses of unity and peace. At the same time, social actors against the UCN initiative used the affordances of digital media to resemiotise the UCN protest signage, change its meaning and re-circulate hegemonic nationalist discourses.

1. Introduction

Demonstrations are significant events which give citizens power to express their objection towards an idea or action. Protesters transform common public spaces into sites of resistance where they make their voices publicly heard, influencing public opinion or political governance (Martín Rojo, 2014a). The exploration of social movements attracted the interest of many scholars who studied various events, from the Occupy movement, to the Arab Spring Revolution, the Umbrella movement and more. Sociolinguists investigated language choice on signage (Barni & Bagna, 2016; Shiri, 2015), types of protest signs and their functions (Goutsos & Polymeneas, 2014; Hanauer, 2015), appropriation of space (Aboelezz, 2014; Ben-Said & Kasanga, 2016; Martín Rojo, 2014b; Seals, 2015) and graffiti (Morva, 2016; Seloni & Sarfati, 2017). Other scholars focused on how activists use the affordances of social media to propagate their viewpoints and mobilise protests (Anduiza et al., 2014; DeLuca et al., 2012; Feltwell, et al. 2017; Poell & Borra, 2012; Tonkin et al., 2012). However, only a few studies explored how messages on protest signage can move across physical and online spaces and what these practices achieve for activism (Chun, 2014; Lou & Jaworski, 2016).

This study is motivated by lack of deep understanding of how the mobilisation of protest signs in both spatial and digital environments supports activism work. It focuses on the 2017 Unite Cyprus Now peace protests which attempted to foster counter-discourses[1] against dominant nationalist ideologies and practices in Cyprus. Cyprus and Nicosia, its capital, have been divided for more than 45 years due to the long-term conflict between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. A UN-controlled buffer zone, known as the 'Green Line', divides Cyprus until today into two communities: the Turkish-Cypriot

[1] The concept of 'counter-discourses' has its roots to Foucault (1970) who argued that when those who are normally spoken for and about start to speak for themselves, they produce counter-discourses which resist the power oppressing them (see also Moussa & Scapp, 1996).

in the north and the Greek-Cypriot in the south. Demonstrations near the buffer zone are not atypical in Cyprus; Greek-Cypriot protests requesting the removal of the Turkish army from the island and the return of north territories to their owners often occurred near the dividing lines of Ledra Palace and Derynia. In 2017 a significant political meeting in Switzerland raised hopes for a solution. This event sparked demonstrations of a different kind, which saw former enemies from the two rival communities coming together for the first time to fight for a common cause: unity and peace. As their demands were against dominant nationalist ideologies that have existed on the island even before the division, UCN ideological stances were often silenced by local mainstream media (Alpha News, 2020).

Using Mediated Discourse Analysis, this study explores practices that took place in the physical space where UCN protests occurred and how these interlaced with activists' digital media practices. Studying both spatial and digital practices can unveil how resistance is enacted in each space, how counter-discourses which may be silenced by top-down broadcast media become visible and circulate from physical to digital spaces, how their meanings are enhanced or even changed from context to context and how activism work is supported or even undermined once protest signage becomes viral online.

2. Spatial practices of social movements

Public spaces are socially constructed by dominant representations of powerful social groups and through ordinary people's everyday practices (Lefebvre, 1991). This conceptualisation drew the attention of sociolinguists who sought to investigate how public spaces are socially constructed through the display of written language on signs. This research area is known as 'Linguistic Landscapes'. Van Mensel et al. (2017: 423)

explain that the study of linguistic landscapes focuses on 'any visible display of written language (a "sign") as well as people's interactions with these signs'. Blommaert (2013) argues that studying linguistic landscapes is important because it can help us understand complex sociolinguistic systems.

Through human action, signs are created and emplaced in specific locations, constructing the space, projecting ideologies and negotiating identities (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). Scollon and Wong Scollon's (2003) Geosemiotics framework shows that the meaning of signs depends on their textual and visual components, their emplacement in the physical world, by whom they are created and read and the purposes they serve. They also highlight that public spaces are not static. In fact, space constantly changes to represent the values, needs and contestations of their multiple authors (Garvin, 2010; Shohamy & Waksman, 2009). Blommaert (2013) offers a conceptual framework for analysing the complexities manifested in the linguistic landscape, which he describes as multi-layered. Blommaert (2013) explored the linguistic landscape of a superdiverse neighborhood in Antwerp and using ethnography he was able to unpack the different layers and trace the historical trajectory of changes in the area.

Spatial changes can occur due to urban planning policies (Leeman & Modan, 2009), gentrification (Papen, 2012), political developments (Muth, 2014; Pavlenko, 2010) and conflict. Bilkic (2018) who explored the linguistic landscape of Bosnia-Herzegovina found that graffiti in territorially contested areas expressed nationalist sentiments and linguistic violence. Also, Themistocleous (2019, 2020) conducted a three-year ethnographic investigation of Nicosia studying the linguistic landscape near the dividing line that separates the Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. The longitudinal investigation showed that while traditional ideologies of division are prominent in public space, new ideologies of unification recently started to emerge.

Protests can also change the public space. When public spaces are occupied by citizens they are transformed into an 'agora' for political debate where citizens gain agency by intervening in political authority (Martín Rojo, 2014a). During protests, public spaces are appropriated as sites of resistance through various communicative practices. The production and display of signs like posters, banners, stickers and other ephemera as well as human actions like shouting slogans and marching, function as tokens of allegiance appropriating space and generating a strong sense of solidarity (Lou & Jaworski, 2016). These practices create a space of transgression where counter-discourses can be shared with the public and acquire visibility (Waksman & Shohamy, 2016). Also, they reconfigure discursively the spatial context and add another layer to the pre-existing linguistic landscape, redefining the meaning of that space (Hanauer, 2015; Shiri, 2015).

Protests are characterised by multiple participants gathering at publicly accessible physical locations. But not just any location. According to Martín Rojo (2014b), the protest site, its organisation, size, shape and location in the city, as well as the architecture and institutions around it can contribute to the protest's meaning. To date researchers explored protests in main squares (Aboelezz, 2014; Goutsos & Polymeneas, 2014; Hanauer, 2015), commercial areas (Seals, 2015; Shiri, 2015) and major parks (Chun, 2014; Martín Rojo, 2014b; Morva, 2016; Seloni & Sarfati, 2017).

Jaworski (2014) draws attention to the inherently mobile nature of protest signs. These signs move along with protesters through the city, transforming also the routes that direct to the meeting point. Scholars also found that signs become transportable not only across spatial locales but also from the immediate physical space across digital platforms (Chun, 2014; Lou & Jaworski, 2016). This phenomenon will be further investigated in this study.

3. Media practices of social movements

News media have the power to spread representations of social life, shaping cultural values and naturalising certain ideologies (Bell, 1991). These can relate to politics, economy as well as other phenomena like immigration and societal multilingualism (Jaworska & Themistocleous, 2018). Yet, according to van Hout and Burger (2017) rather than sharing value-free representations of the world, news language is likely to reflect the values and ideologies of the elite in power.

Although mass media often provide widespread coverages of protests, Mattoni and Treré (2014) report that they sometimes support hegemonic discourses, thus silencing activists' viewpoints. However, 'activist media practices' defined by Mattoni (2012) as the creative social practices that activists engage with using media objects (smartphones, tablets, laptops) enable them to bypass traditional media and foreground their own worldviews and beliefs.

Increased scholarly interest was recently expressed towards digital activism and the role of social media platforms. DeLuca et al. (2012) showed that during the Occupy Wall Street protest activists used Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to propagate messages and mobilise supporters. Theocharides (2015) revealed that Twitter was used to disseminate information among activists during the Occupy and anti-austerity movements. Anduiza et al. (2014) who explored Spanish anti-austerity demonstrations found that activists used digital technology to organise and discuss movements, connect people and spread messages across geographical areas. Poell and Borra (2012) who studied activists at the G20 meeting in Toronto demonstrated how Twitter, Flickr and YouTube were used for journalistic-type reporting. By sharing updates, information, photos and videos on social media, activists acted as media producers offering news from the ground and an 'insider' viewpoint.

As mentioned in section 2, protests are events where counter-discourses acquire great visibility. In their study, Feltwell et al. (2017) found that activists used social media platforms to challenge the negative representation of low-income communities by top-down media in the UK. They report that activists used the technological affordances of different social media to circulate counter-discourses and build an audience for their campaign. Yet, digital practices may go against activists' aims. In a study exploring tweets during the London 2011 riots, Tonkin et al. (2012) report that two groups existed: those who aimed to riot and cause damage and those who were against this practice. They found that individuals who were against used retweets to 'name and shame' riot supporters.

The present study will draw upon these dynamic conceptualisations of spatial and media practices of social movements to explore the 2017 Unite Cyprus Now protests. These peace protests are important to investigate because they were represented in a negative way by local mainstream media and the voices of UCN activists were often silenced or misrepresented. The aim of this study therefore is to investigate UCN peace activists' spatial and digital practices and unveil how these enabled them to propagate and circulate their own messages and ideologies. The sections that follow offer a brief historical account of the political situation in Cyprus and present the UCN initiative.

4. Conflict and dominant ideologies in Cyprus

The Republic of Cyprus was declared an independent state in 1960 after the liberation fight against the British colonial rule. Peace on the island, however, was short-lived. The long-term conflict between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots escalated in 1963 and the two communities were separated by the United Nations Peace Keeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). The force's main role was to preserve the peace and prevent

fighting (UNFICYP, 2021). Yet, the political situation in Cyprus deteriorated in 1974 due to a Greek military coup, followed by a Turkish invasion. A UN-controlled buffer zone was established dividing the island and splitting the capital, Nicosia, in two. UNFICYP remained on the island to supervise the ceasefire lines, maintain the buffer zone, and undertake humanitarian activities. In 1983, the Turkish-Cypriot administration in the north declared the *de facto* state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC); a state recognised only by Turkey.

In 2003, the two ethnic leaders agreed to lift movement restrictions allowing people to cross the dividing line after 30 years of complete separation. Currently, there are seven crossing-points one of which (Ledras/Lockmaci) being in the main commercial artery of Nicosia. Opening the crossing-points was a milestone which enabled travelling between the two parts and exposure to the other. Although encounters between the two communities became a tangible reality (Papallas, 2019), communication involved only brief transactional encounters (Psaltis, 2016). Multilingualism in Greek and Turkish therefore remains scarce as it is not actively promoted or supported. Within the Greek-Cypriot context for example, even through the Turkish language has been offered as an optional course in public education since 2003, learning the language of the former enemy is still considered by some as a betrayal (Charalambous, Charalambous & Rampton, 2017).

Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot political leaders have been engaging in dialogues since the division to find a solution to the 'Cypriot Problem'. In April 2004, a referendum was conducted on a UN proposal (Annan Plan) recommending federation as a solution. The proposal was approved by 65% of Turkish-Cypriots but rejected by 76% of Greek-Cypriots (Tofallis, 2016). Consequently, when the Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004, TRNC did not form part of the deal. A recent attempt saw two

leaders, Mr Nicos Anastasiades and Mr Mustafa Ackinci, meeting in June 2017 in Crans Montana (Switzerland) to negotiate a new solution. Although the Conference on Cyprus raised hopes that the long-term conflict would come to an end, the diplomatic efforts failed, marking the end of a dramatic culmination to more than two years of discussions.

Due to the tragic events of the war, strong ethno-nationalist ideologies became dominant on the island. Each ethnic group showed alignment with the respective motherland (Greece or Turkey) with whom they shared a common heritage, culture, language, and religion and considered as an ally and protector (Mavratsas, 2001; Papallas, 2019). The slogan 'Δεν ξεχνώ' [I don't forget] became a hegemonic nationalist discourse within the Greek-Cypriot community, constructing a collective memory of the tragic consequences of the war and promoting strong Hellenocentric ideological positions (Mavratsas, 2001). Cypriocentrism, an alternative ideology, promotes an independent Cypriot identity and openly supports the idea of rapprochement (Papadakis, 2005). Similar ideological struggles exist in the north with Turkish nationalism seeing TRNC as part of a pan-Turkish nation, while pro-federation nationalism promotes an inclusive Cypriot identity (Akçalı, 2011; Dembinska, 2017).

Nationalist ideological positions are often promoted through public education curricula that represent contrasting histories which victimise *the self* and demonise *the other* (Makriyianni, et al., 2011; Vural & Özuynik, 2008). Also, media on both sides play a powerful role in circulating these hegemonic discourses (Psaltis, 2016; Şahin, 2014; Way, 2011) and are often involved in a blame-game not only against *the other* but also against alternative views that diverge from dominant nationalist ideologies. Counter-discourses are considered damaging and undermining the community's cause to the benefit of the enemy (Christophorou, et al., 2010). Nowadays, some attempts are made

at official levels to promote a collective identity yet, dominant nationalist ideologies still persist (Charalambous, et al., 2013; Tum et al., 2016).

5. Unite Cyprus Now

Ahead of the Crans Montana meeting, protests erupted in Cyprus to urge politicians to find a solution to the Cypriot Problem. These protests were organised by Unite Cyprus Now (UCN), who according to their official website, is a ‘multicommunal grassroots non-party initiative of Cypriots […] promoting actions in support of peace and the reunification of the island through a negotiated settlement’ (UCN, 2020). The main actors are local people, Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot peace activists, who mobilise citizens from both sides to fight against the conflict. Their mission is to build empathy and trust between the two communities and reinforce solidarity and a common Cypriot identity. They also endorse an alternative ideology which goes against hegemonic nationalist discourses and specifically the ‘Δεν ξεχνώ’ [‘I don’t forget’] narrative. Instead, UCN promotes the narrative ‘I remember - I forgive - I move on’[2] which aims to end the official nationalist rhetoric that according to them breeds division.

UCN protests started in May 2017 and lasted for three months. As they reached a peak, both Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot members of the public started to join. Unlike other protests which tend to take place in squares, parks or commercial areas (see section 3), the UCN protests took place at the Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point within Nicosia’s UN-controlled buffer zone. This is a symbolic space because although it is a contested space that divides the two communities, it is also a shared space which

[2] **Remember** the tragic events of the past (in both sides) – **Forgive** each other – **Move on** together to a united future.

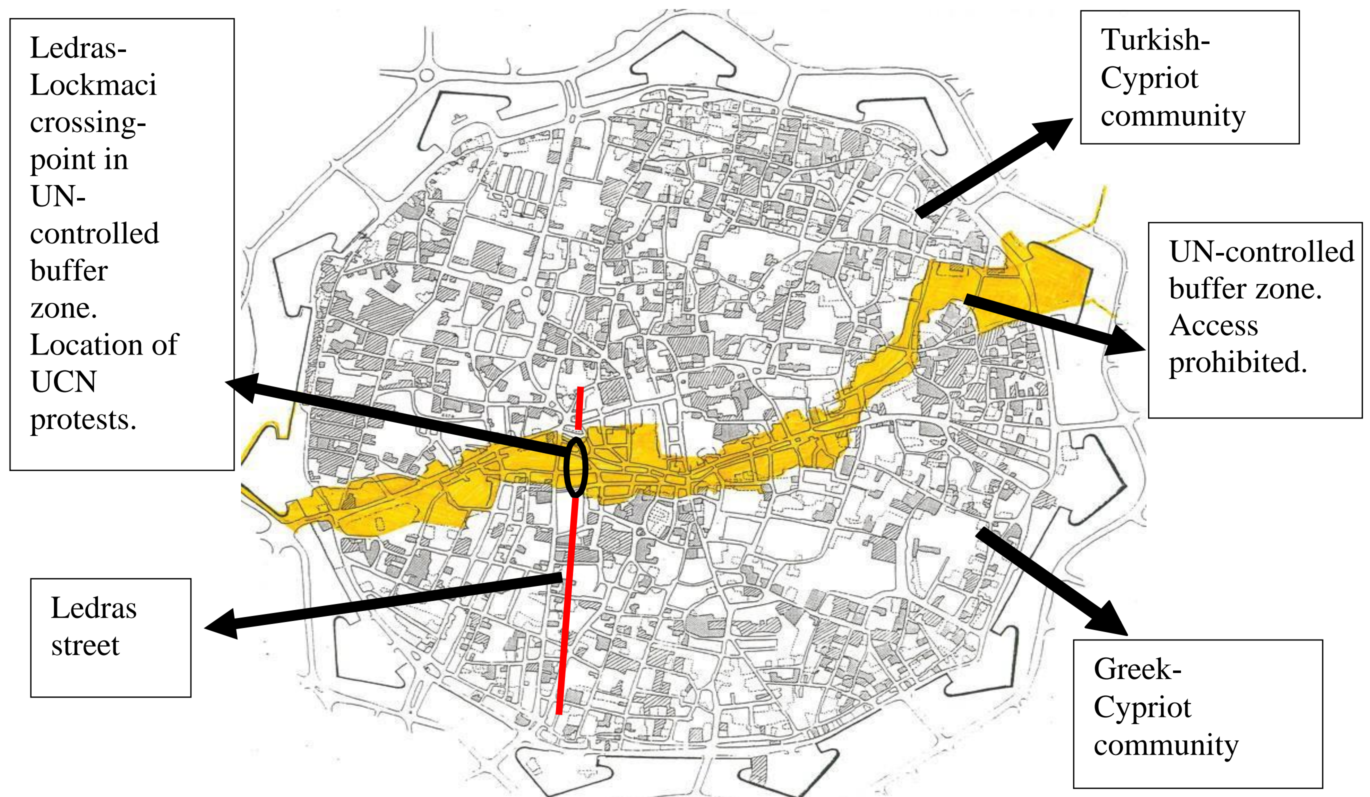
functions as portal (Kallen, 2010) that enables people to exit and enter from one linguistic, cultural and physical environment to another.

6. Methodology

6.1.Data collection

The first step of this project involved fieldwork at the Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point in central Nicosia (Map 1). Although the buffer zone divides Ledras street (the main commercial street) in two, this crossing-point (Figure 1) permits pedestrian access to the two communities. The area is patrolled by UN troops and roadblocks prohibit access to the rest of the buffer zone beyond the portal. Immigration control and police guard each entrance where people who cross must show their passports. Although the buildings in the buffer zone have been renovated, they remain abandoned and commercial activity is prohibited.

Figure 1: UN-controlled buffer zone at Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point.



Map 1. Nicosia's city centre.

Ethnographic monitoring[3] was conducted for three years (2016-2019). During this period, I engaged with this area and performed longitudinal participant observation (see Themistocleous, 2019; 2020). First-hand familiarity and personal contacts with people who live, work and shop in the centre of Nicosia enhanced my understanding of this locale. Also, the longitudinal nature of this method enabled me to observe changes in the area before and after the 2017 UCN protests. In total, 122 photographs were collected from this portal and in this study I present traces of the UCN protest signage in the linguistic landscape. A semi-structured interview with 'Lydia' (pseudonym), a UCN peace activist,

[3] The term 'ethnographic monitoring' originates from Dell Hymes (Van Der Aa & Blommaert, 2011; Blommaert, 2013). It is a layered programme starting from intensive and longitudinal ethnography of a given context which then moves to participatory engagement with social actors in that context. It is intended to make visible emic knowledge from voices that may be vulnerable or obscured (Blommaert, 2008).

was conducted in October 2019 to obtain insights about the initiative, their motivations and signage.

To explore digital manifestations of the UCN signage, the data set was supplemented by images of the movement obtained from online sources. The aim was to follow the trajectory of the UCN protest signage from its production and circulation and, similarly to Chun (2014), the 'following the object' approach (Lash & Lury, 2007) was implemented. According to Chun (2014), mapping the course of a sign completely is almost impossible, but this method can reveal textual and spatial relationships of protest discourse. Photographic data was collected from the UCN Facebook page after obtaining permission from its founding members. In total, 621 images posted between May 2017 and July 2017 (the period under investigation) were obtained.

According to Mattoni and Treré (2014), restricting the focus to only one digital manifestation of protest signage can risk overlooking important aspects. Therefore, the next step was to conduct a Google image search to identify other UCN protest signs online. The Google search revealed three manifestations in ΟΝΗΣΙΛΟΣ (ONISILOS) (https://www.onisilos.gr/), a website used by journalists and politicians to write articles on political matters. Additionally, the Google search unveiled two memes. These digital signs were selected because their meanings were considerably different from those shared by UCN.

6.2.Data analysis approach

The analysis adopts Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon, 2001) capitalising also on the concept of 'resemiotisation', i.e., when meaning 'shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, from one stage of practice to the next' (Iedema, 2003: 41). The underlying principle of MDA is that discourse cannot be

studied in isolation from the situated social actions that people take with it. In this approach, the unit of analysis is the mediated action which is conducted by social actors through mediational means, or what Scollon (2001: 7) calls 'cultural tools'. These include language but also other modalities like symbols, images, graffiti, signs, art, and material objects. MDA does not only focus on language *per se* but instead views discourse as one of the many available mediational means which social actors use to take action. Therefore, instead of studying discourse *as* action, MDA studies discourse *in* action.

MDA is a useful approach to study aspects of protests as it enables the researcher to consider the different activist practices that can take place in public, from signage production to the appropriation of space, to the enactment of resistance and the circulation of discourses (Ben Said & Kasanga, 2016; Lou & Jaworski, 2016). This approach can equally help us understand activist media practices, paying attention to the flow of media productions, circulations and re-circulations that surround social movements (Mattoni & Treré, 2014). Overall, by adopting MDA one can unveil the social processes that support the flow of discourses, meanings and interpretations during social movements.

The concept of 'resemiotisation' (Iedema, 2003) is also important for studying meaning making processes as signs traverse across social groups, time, space, objects, and media (Scollon, 2008). According to Iedema (2003: 29) resemiotisation provides analytical means for tracing how semiotics are translated from one into the other as social processes unfold. Adopting this framework to investigate the mobilisation of the Occupy Los Angeles protest signs, Chun (2014) argues that social actors undertake mediated actions by using, sharing, engaging and transforming protest signs and as the latter are mobilised in different locales, new meanings are created dialogically along with the discourses of the protest sign. This is what Scollon and Wong Scollon (2003: 205) call

‘interdiscursive dialogicalities’, in other words, how the meaning that is attached to a given sign can change through its interaction with other signs.

7. Data analysis

7.1. UCN spatial practices: Counter-discourses and reterritorialisation

The first step of this analysis is to trace the trajectory of the UCN protest sign starting from its creation and display in the linguistic landscape of the buffer zone. Lydia, the UCN peace activist, explained in the interview that the choice of the protest site was crucial because the division of the island poses accessibility and ideological challenges (extract 1). Accessibility, because people who emigrated from Turkey to the north after the partition of the island are considered illegal and are not permitted access to the Republic of Cyprus. Ideological, because many Greek-Cypriots consider showing their passports at the crossing-points morally wrong, as this act indicates recognition of a ‘border’. Lydia emphasised that the Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point in Nicosia’s UN-controlled buffer zone was an ideal locale because it permits access from both communities by foot and avoids issues with immigration control. Also, this area was considered a safe locale because it is a neutralised, non-ethnically loaded space, guarded by UN (extract 2).

Extract 1

‘there are Greek-Cypriots who might want solution but who might not want to go to the other side. And there are Turkish-Cypriots who might want solution but might not want to go to the other side, or they are not allowed to. So, this space enabled everyone to be there. People didn’t have to cross to the other side, they didn’t have to show their passport, but they could come to protest with us.’ (Lydia)

Extract 2

'It had to be a place that is common, that enables both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots to come together with safety. Think about if they [i.e. Turkish-Cypriots] came to our side, if both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots went to Eleftheria Square, how exposed the Turkish-Cypriots would have been there. If we went on this side [i.e. north] how exposed the Greek-Cypriots would have been there. But here [i.e. buffer zone] it was a space, because it is the 'dead zone', that is secured by the UN because we had the UNFICYP to look after us.' (Lydia)

Lydia said that initially social movement actors created their own hand-made placards using mediational means (carton, marker pens) available to them on the spot. As more citizens from both communities joined the protests, the UCN initiative was founded and soon their official logo was materialised (Figure 2). Lydia explained that the choice of colours on the logo was symbolic as white and yellow are the characteristic colours of the Cypriot flag, avoiding associations with Greece or Turkey and promoting a common Cypriot identity.

Figure 2: UCN logo.

UCN also created monolingual and multilingual protest signs with key messages. Lydia explained that language choice on these signs was crucial as the messages had to be inclusive and address both ethnic groups in their native language. Because multilingualism in Greek and Turkish is scarce, English functioned as a lingua franca. It also enabled the protesters to address politicians as well as global audiences (extract 3).

Extract 3

'I speak Greek, the other one speaks Turkish, English was the only language that we could use to understand each other. And to address the politicians and the whole world so that the protest is inclusive.' (Lydia)

UCN protest signs were displayed in the buffer zone alongside hand-made placards, stickers, pins and t-shirts worn by social movement actors. Linguistic landscape fieldwork between 2017 and 2019 revealed that traces of these protest signs still remain at the Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point today. As shown in Figure 3, various UCN stickers are still emplaced on official public signs and the built environment. The discursive actions through various mediational means embodied in protest signs added another layer to the pre-existing linguistic landscape of the buffer zone, creating a transgressive space where conservative, nationalist ideologies are challenged by UCN's counter-discourses. These latter express alternative ideologies of forgiveness, unity, and peace and index progressive, liberal and post-conflict allegiances. Discursive actions during the protests resulted to branding this space as a site of resistance and a safe space where protesters from both communities come together to express and share with participants, passers-by, and spectators these alternative ideologies. The longitudinal ethnographic monitoring of the area also revealed that after the 2017 peace protests, an

increasing number of multilingual ephemeral signs started to surface in the area aiming to strengthen the social ties between the two communities, making counter-discourses even more visible in public space (Themistocleous, 2020). This finding provides further support to the understanding that public spaces are dynamic, fluid, and constantly changing (Chun, 2014; Garvin 2010; Lou & Jaworski, 2016; Shohamy & Waksman, 2009).

Figure 3: UCN stickers at Ledras/Lockmaci crossing-point in Nicosia’s buffer zone (source: Author’s ethnographic monitoring 2016-2019)

Lydia revealed that it was equally important for UCN to share their messages with wider audiences beyond their supporters in the buffer zone. This was achieved through

reterritorialisation of the protest sign. Figure 4 shows one of the UCN signs being projected on a high-rising building in the Greek-Cypriot part of Nicosia, approximately 1 kilometre from the buffer zone. UCN signage was also mobilised across space when a group of peace activists flew to Switzerland to protest in Crans Montana (Figure 5). Through their presence and the display of their signage in a new locale, protesters temporarily constructed the linguistic landscape of Crans Montana as an additional site of contestation abroad.

Figure 4: Reterritorialisation of UCN signage in Nicosia (source: UCN Facebook)

Figure 5: Reterritorialisation of UCN signage in Crans Montana (source: UCN Facebook)

On both occasions, the reterritorialisation of the protest sign across spatial locales enabled UCN to reach wider audiences and make their messages visible to individuals beyond the neutralised, safe space of the buffer zone. The projection of the UCN signage on the building in Nicosia circulated messages of unification, forgiveness and peace to Greek-Cypriots who may or may not share the same ideological position. Lydia believed this was crucial because, as evidenced by the 2004 referendum (see section 5), the Greek-Cypriot community is more reluctant to accept federation as a solution. This alternative voice therefore temporarily gained visibility in a public space which is dominated by conservative nationalist ideologies, as demonstrated by Themistocleous (2019). In Crans Montana, messages of unity expressed by UCN signage reached audiences beyond Cyprus and targeted politicians who participated in a meeting which was about to decide the future of the country.

7.2. UCN media practices: Mobilising the protest and sharing 'real' news

Digital manifestations of the UCN signage started to emerge on social media platforms in May 2017. Individuals begun to use media objects (computers, tablets, smartphones) to act as media producers and share on the UCN Facebook page photos of events that were taking place in the buffer zone (Figure 6). These posts showed demonstrators carrying protest signage, placing them on the walls of the abandoned buildings, and being actively involved with activities (shouting slogans, knitting, dancing, reciting poems, giving public talks, using bodily movements to form human chains and victory hands). Additionally, social movement actors digitally transformed the original UCN logo to promote social events on their Facebook page which aimed to highlight the cultural similarities between the two communities ('Poetry/Dance Unites Cyprus') (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Sharing events from the protest site on Facebook (source: UCN Facebook).

Figure 7: Appropriation of UCN signage to promote events (source: UCN Facebook).

Media producers creatively appropriated their digital messages using affordances enabled by Facebook, like indicating the location of the event, using hashtags, adding text describing the posted item and inserting text boxes that contained the UCN logo or other messages they wanted to share (e.g. 'Every day. Same time. Same place.'). Followers were also able to share comments of support. The protest signs and the UCN logo became therefore an important element of the UCN movement, promoting further the circulation of counter-discourses of forgiveness, unity, belongingness, and peace. Additionally, the reterritorialisation of the event from the buffer zone to online spaces functioned as a way of organising and mobilising the protests, reaching audiences locally and globally, encouraging therefore further participation to the cause.

When a group of UCN members travelled to Crans Montana mediational means like smartphones and tablets and social media like Facebook were crucial for keeping the two protest sites connected. This is evident in the text that accompanies the photos that were posted on Facebook in June 2017 (Figure 8): 'watching from Crans Montana live

the event at Ledra/Lokmaci – at Crans Montana' and 'All ears and eyes are in Crans-Montana but the hearts and minds of the Crans-Montana Unite Cyprus group are in the buffer zone in Nicosia. History is made today. #UniteCyprusNow'. Supportive messages were also posted by followers.

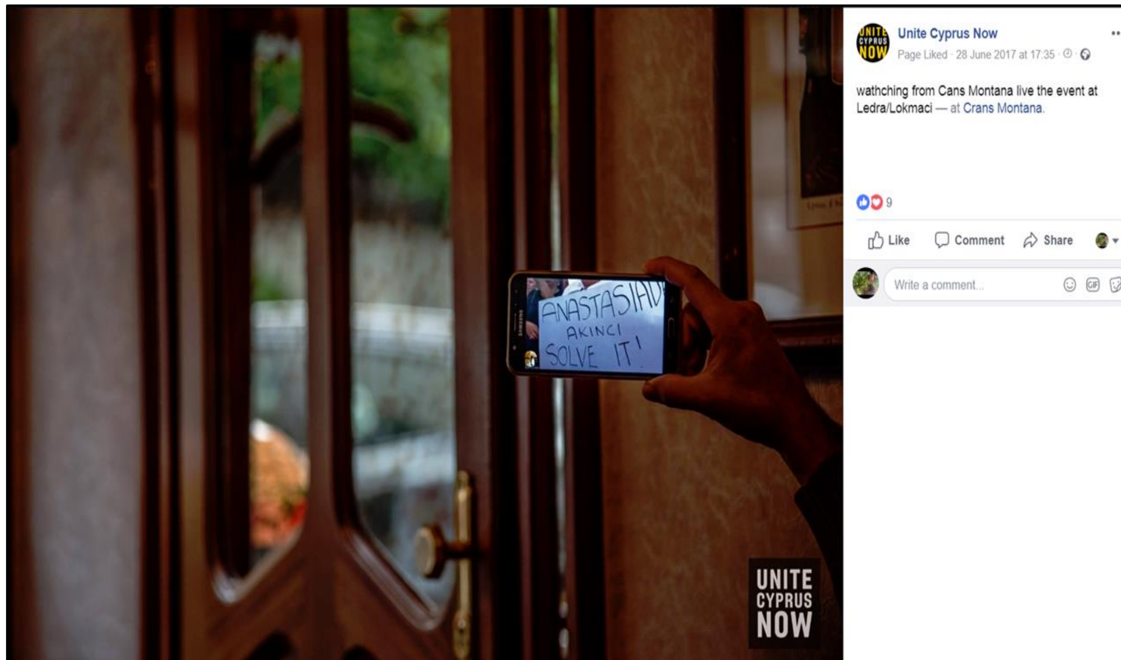
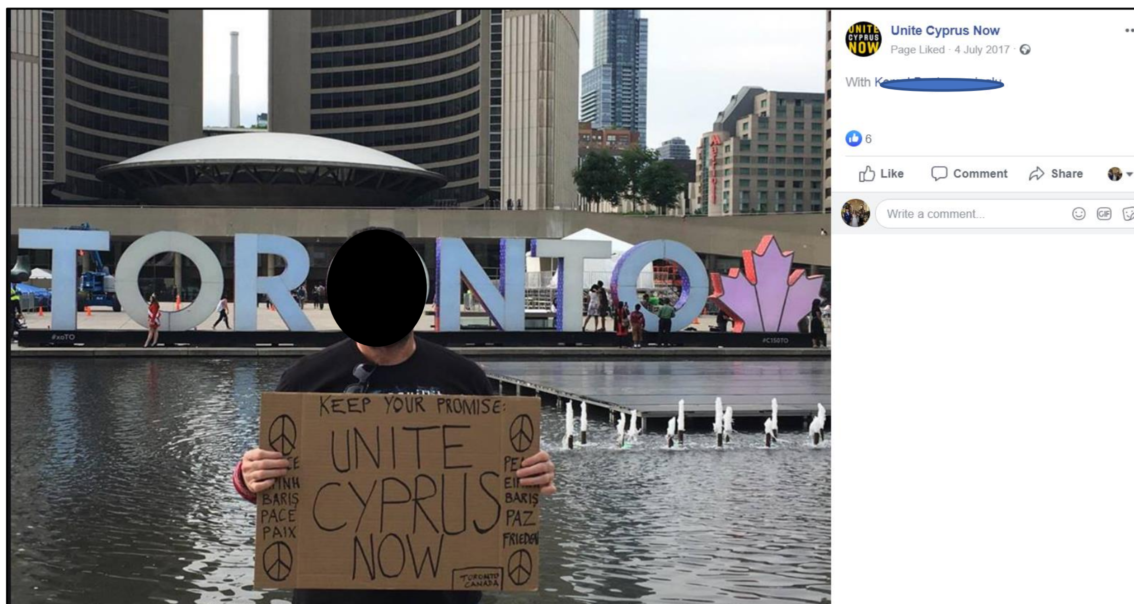


Figure 8: Connecting the two protest sites (source: UCN Facebook)

As the UCN cause went viral, peace messages were taken up globally by media consumers who in turn became media producers. By July 2017 multiple iterations of the UCN protest sign started to emerge as social actors from around the world, who were unable to physically attend the buffer zone protests, creatively used mediational means (placards, UCN logos printed on paper, artifacts, their body, pets, and digital technology) to produce their own peace signs and share them on the UCN's Facebook page (Figure 9). In this case, the UCN peace signage was mobilised beyond the encampment site of the buffer zone into diverse locales around the world. Through their signs social actors showed alignment with the ideological positions of UCN, further encouraged the mobilisation of the protests and, most importantly, made UCN's voice even stronger.



#UNITECYPRUSNOW
Unite Cyprus Now
· 4 July 2017 ·
In New York, New York.
9
Like
Comment
Share
Write a comment...

Photos from Unite Cyprus Now's post
Unite Cyprus Now
3 July 2017
Like
Comment
Share
Write a comment...
UNITE CYPRUS NOW
PERANTO

Figure 9: Global mobilisation of UCN signage. (source: UCN Facebook)

The peace activist explained that media practices during the UCN protests played a fundamental role for the initiative. Firstly, by posting photos of the protesters and their signage on Facebook, peace activists kept the morale of the initiative and encouraged the mobilisation the social movement. Yet, what was more crucial was that social media was

used for sharing an 'insider' viewpoint and news from the ground. Lydia believed that because UCN promotes counter-discourses, mainstream media were not always broadcasting the protests, silencing therefore the initiative (extract 4). Media consumers who engaged in journalistic-type practices disseminated 'real' news and foregrounded the degree of support globally. These practices promoted further the circulation of ideologies of unification, forgiveness and peace that go against conservative hegemonic discourses of nationalism and division.

Extract 4

'The media didn't broadcast them or if they did ...errmm... they didn't want people to know that this thing was happening, they didn't want to, but at the times that they did broadcast the events, they only showed a few scenes and misrepresented what happened [...] Because the media, they are controlled. At the end of the day the media could have said 'hey guys, everyone should go and protest too', in other words to promote the protest instead of hashing-down and not talking about it'. (Lydia)

7.3. Resemiotisation of the UCN signage: Disaffiliation and nationalist discourses

The existence of divergent discourse cycles in Cyprus became particularly evident as user-generated texts in the form of memes started to emerge in digital spaces featuring protest imagery and the UCN protest signage. Memes are multimodal media texts that consist of text and image, often involving intense resemiotisation by undergoing constant reproduction and remixing (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). As they are circulated by social actors across digital spaces, memes have the potential to go viral and extend to larger audiences. Research demonstrates that memes often draw attention to social meanings and stereotypes and shed light on ideological stances (Milner, 2016).

Figure 10 shows a meme that emerged in February 2019. The story behind it involved a Turkish-Cypriot couple travelling from the Greek-Cypriot to the Turkish-Cypriot community by car. They were stopped at one of Nicosia's crossing-points and, after a search by immigration control, 435 bunches of asparagus were found and confiscated. The incident was reported by local news and soon after various memes emerged on social media. One involved the UCN logo. The textual component of the logo was changed by the social actor who created the meme; the word 'Cyprus' was replaced by the word 'Ayrelli', which means 'asparagus' in the Greek-Cypriot dialect, and an image of the vegetable was added to the logo. Pictures of cars containing large quantities of asparagus we added as well as the text 'ΚΑΡΤΕΛ ΑΓΡΕΛΙΩΝ ΕΝΤΟΠΙΣΕ Η ΑΣΤΥΝΟΜΙΑ ΚΥΠΡΟΥ' [ASPARAGUS CARTEL DISCOVERED BY CYPRIOT POLICE]. Figure 11 shows another meme with similar resemiotisation processes. This meme has an image of a skeleton working in front of a PC in year 2199, while the textual component includes the UCN hashtag. Media practices in these two examples differ from those performed by UCN social movement actors. Individuals whose identity is unknown used technologies in creative ways, adapting already existing media products to appropriate and change their original meaning. Through resemiotisation, discourses of unity, peace and forgiveness promoted by the UCN signage were transformed to disaffiliation as the memes satirise the UCN initiative and degrade its values and efforts.

Figure 10: 'Unite Ayrelli Now' meme (source: Google images).

Figure 11: UCN in year 2199 meme (source: Google images).

Other memes directly attacked UCN's ideological stances. Figure 12 shows the original photo that was posted on the UCN Facebook page when peace activists protested in Crans Montana. By August 2017, a photoshopped image from the same event emerged

online (Figure 13). It shows the UCN peace activists holding their protest signage but instead of Crans Montana the background is replaced with what seems to be part of Nicosia's Wall and the Pentadaktylos mountain range. Pentadaktylos has an important symbolic value in Cyprus. After the division of the island a large TRNC flag was drawn on the side of the mountain facing the Greek-Cypriot community and lights illuminate the flag at night. Greek-Cypriots consider this as a daily provocation and a hostile act. In the meme, the Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot flags are raised at the top of Nicosia's Wall indicating possession by Turkey and TRNC. Additionally, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan marches along with his military troops smiling at the peace activists and saluting them. This intense resemiotisation, achieved through the reproduction of the text and image from the original photo and the remixing of new imagery and text, changes the original meaning of the UCN signage completely. Two other memes that projected similar nationalist discourses appeared online (Figure 14). Both kept the UCN logo but added images of red peace signs, thumbs up and fingerprints which contain the Turkish flag. The Turkish president is giving the thumbs up to UCN. This newly emerged signage is used to project hegemonic nationalist discourses which go against those projected by UCN. They also portray UCN members as naïve and damaging, campaigning for a solution which would effectively surrender Cyprus to Turkey.

Figure 12: UCN protesters in Crans Montana – original photo (source: UCN Facebook).

Figure 13: UCN protesters in Crans Montana meme (source: ΟΝΗΣΙΛΟΣ)

Figure 14: UCN and Turkey meme (source: ΟΝΗΣΙΛΟΣ)

8. Conclusion

Social movements are not something new. In fact, for many years people have been claiming public spaces to intervene in political governance and express alternative voices. What is new is the power of digital media to appropriate and circulate protest signs online and extend them through different channels and modes. A few studies explored how messages on protest signage move across physical and online spaces (Chun, 2014; Lou & Jaworski, 2016). This study delves deeper into this phenomenon and highlights the importance of viewing holistically how these two processes intersect and overlap.

This study shows that resistance is enacted in the encampment sites. Citizens gain agency by intervening in political authority creating allegiances and a sense of solidarity. Social action and mediational means, like protest signage and other ephemera, transform the character of public spaces into sites of resistance and contestation and add another layer to the pre-existing linguistic landscape. The encampment site becomes a safe space where counter-discourses that go against hegemonic ideologies are expressed and acquire great visibility in public space.

Digital activism complements these efforts. Social movement actors engage with material objects to capture, upload, and share protest signage online in an attempt to organise and mobilise protests, keep the morale, link protesters and share 'real' news. The digital manifestations of protest signs provide the trajectories for counter-discourses to continuously circulate beyond the encampment site, reaching audiences locally and globally and enabling them to participate, even if they are not physically present at the protest site. These actions make activists' voices stronger and foreground their beliefs, even if these are silenced by mainstream media.

This study also highlighted the importance of not focusing only on one digital manifestation of the protest signage. Media practices do not always support activist work. In fact, they can backfire, as the affordances of digital media enable other individuals with opposing views to engage with protest signage and adapt already existing media products, appropriating and changing their original meaning. Resemiotisation and the creation and distribution of memes can create new meanings dialogically along with the discourses of the protest sign and re-circulate divergent discourses that can damage activists' work.

Overall, by adopting Mediated Discourse Analysis and exploring the case of the 2017 UCN movement this study demonstrates the importance of viewing holistically the processes that take place in physical spaces where social movements occur and how these interlace with processes in digital media. By considering both aspects we can better understand how social action and mediational means work together to construct meaning and circulate ideological positions during political movements.

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