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Scholarship addressing the impact of digital technologies on social movements, political unrest, states, and civil society has reached a turning point. Compared with the early days—just a decade ago—when scholars started cautiously exploring the potential impact of these emergent technologies, the past 2 years have seen a flood of cases against which these initial ideas and explorations can be examined empirically and conceptually. From the ongoing Arab uprisings in the Middle East and the North Africa region to the Occupy protests in the United States, from the Spanish Indignados movement of 2011 and 2012 to the turmoil around Wikileaks and Anonymous, many corners of the world have been affected by protests and social movements that have integrated the new tools of connectivity, information diffusion, and attention into their tactical repertoire of activism.

In this special issue, we bring together a varied and complex set of articles that probe some of the many complex ways that emergent digital technologies have played a role in social unrest and politics around the world. With a decidedly global focus and a conceptually and methodologically rich toolkit, the authors seek to provide us with crucial perspectives on how digital technologies are altering politics, policy, and civics. These articles bring us both new analyses of recent events as well as fresh means of conceptually examining recent theories and speculations on the potential range of impacts of information technologies.

These articles proceed beyond the simplistic questions that dominate mainstream debate about online politics to reveal complex, multilayered, and contingent effects. As they make clear, it no longer makes sense to ask if digital technologies will exercise influence; rather, we can and should be looking at how and, also crucially, through which mechanisms. It also makes little sense to ask if “the revolution will be tweeted”—the answer is yes, since Twitter and similar technologies are now integral components of the

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formation of the global public sphere. The more important questions are about how, by whom, to what effect, and how these new media alter the information ecology. Neither is it particularly helpful to ask if Twitter alone can bring about revolutions because neither Twitter nor any other digital communication tool exists in a vacuum, and multiple factors have always been involved in enacting—or repressing—social change. Good scholarship should take this complex interplay into account as well as providing deeper analysis of different components of this complicated, intertwined mix.

Hence, the scholarship in this special issue focuses on both the how and why of existing social and civic dynamics in particular political contexts as well as the integration of communication tools and the nature of their affordances. These technologies are neither deterministic forces that autonomously bring about social realities nor infinitely flexible supertools that can completely bend to the will of their users or their creators. Rather, they exist in particular commercial, political, and civic environments that mean they offer very particular sets of affordances that help structure their potential as well as their limits in contexts of political contestation.

These studies also carefully avoid the false dichotomy between online and offline domains, in which one but not the other is considered “real” or “important.” They find ways to circumvent the outdated distinction between uncritical optimism and equally uncritical pessimism concerning the effects or influence of digital technology. Instead, the authors explore the mechanisms through which online and offline flows of information, attention, disruption, and mobilization interact, alter, and holistically influence the social and political spheres under examination.

In a rich study of social media use during protests in Chile, Valenzuela moves beyond the question of whether political protestors use social media and ask how and under what conditions these new platforms interact with activism and political protest. Although considerable attention has been paid to digital media in authoritarian regimes as well as in developed democracies, these tools have also been used extensively in the so-called third wave democracies of moderately rich countries, many of which emerged from dictatorship some decades ago. In a test of competing hypotheses concerning social media as a vehicle for activism through information diffusion, political expression, or mobilization, Valenzuela finds that it was the expression of political opinions as well as joining a cause (rather than the consumption of news) that were the key mechanisms associated with bolstered participation. Mere consumption of news on social media itself was not directly linked to higher levels of protest activity, a finding that underscores the integration of online and offline spheres. However, those who were more active in the online world of politics through expressing opinions and recruiting others were also more likely to be active in offline street protests.

Several of the studies in this volume examine the crucial question of how online networks can alter flows of information and attention. For example, Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess examine influence and information diffusion of Twitter networks within the hashtags of #libya and #egypt. Although both countries were included under the banner of the Arab Spring, which swept through the North Africa region and neighboring countries, events on the ground differed significantly between them. Although

Egypt successfully conducted a comparatively nonviolent popular uprising, Libya endured a short but bloody civil war that was ended partly through external military intervention. The countries also had different rates of online media availability and safety. These dynamics are reflected in the findings: #egypt appears to have a larger fraction of Arabic tweeters as well as multilingual users who seem to switch between languages depending on the phase and events of the moment. #libya, on the other hand, seems to have a larger set of outsiders looking in and commenting, although with a striking finding of increased use of Arabic when Libyan dictator Gaddafi was killed.

In a similar vein, Aday and colleagues analyze audience attention within several Arab Spring–related Twitter hashtags. However, unlike that of Bruns et al., this study does not examine tweet content directly but rather focuses on clicks to links within tweets as its key object of analysis. This is accomplished through the combination of two unique data sets: full-text archives of four Arab Spring hashtags and metadata for link clicks provided by the link-shortening service bit.ly. Two main research questions are investigated: first, whether the audience for linked content originates primarily in the Arab-speaking world or elsewhere; and second, whether clicks accrue primarily to legacy media sites like that of the *New York Times* and CNN or to participatory sites such as YouTube and WordPress. Findings indicate that the vast majority of clicks originated from outside of Arab countries and that a disproportionate share of attention fell on legacy sites compared to participatory sites. Along with the Bruns et al. article, this piece spotlights the outsized contribution of uninvolved spectators to the popularity of social-media-borne information flows focusing on the Arab Spring.

Gonzales-Bailon et al. examine the diffusion of information and influence in online social networks around protest activities with an explicit eye toward uncovering structures of hierarchy, power, and influence. The authors test theories of collective action by examining the structure of Twitter networks. Going beyond the obstacles posed to collective action by free-rider problems, they study social influence as embedded dynamics that work through social networks. The benefit of a rich Twitter data set allows them to study these networks in greater detail than is usually possible. The authors conceptualize collective action as a process of contagion or diffusion and proceed to identify dynamics of these diffusion processes. Working from a data set of the “Indignados/M15” protests that swept Spain in May 2011, they find that influential individuals are not always apparent through presumptive indicators of influence such as follower counts. They identify early activists they refer to as “hidden influentials” who help effectively frame the movement and mobilize outreach. The authors also find that “ordinary” users play a key role in triggering global cascades—even if many of their attempts fail, their sheer numbers mean that they do sometimes succeed in crucial ways. Hence, this study is both an interesting exploration of hierarchy and structure in online political mobilizations as well as an example of how participatory media can empower ordinary users.

Tufekci also looks at the changing environment for social movements and activists in an article that examines the loosening of the coupling between attention and mass media conceptually and empirically through case studies of “micro-celebrity” activists

who have emerged primarily through the Arab uprisings. She examines attention as a distinct conceptual category and develops the notion of “micro-celebrity” in the political realm, and her findings supplement the picture provided by Aday et al. and Gonzales-Bailon et al. about social movement consequences of being able to acquire attention through networked and participatory media. Tufekci contrasts her findings with earlier research about the interaction between media and activists, especially as it pertains to the emergence of “celebrity” social movement spokespersons, as detailed by Gitlin (1981) and others. She concludes that the weakening of the mass media monopoly on public attention is creating a new ecology of attention that incorporates mass media rather than sidelining it (as also documented by Aday et al.). Rather than almost complete dependence on mass media for attention, activists find themselves facing a more complex media environment, one laden with more possibilities, but also one with new questions about power, privilege, and visibility.

Sauter’s study examines a very different sort of political activist—namely, the hacktivist alliance dubbed “Anonymous,” which has been quite successful at gaining attention in recent years. Originating among the image sharing boards of “4chan,” and first emerging as a political actor after battling the Church of Scientology, Anonymous has played prominent roles in several major political events of the past few years. From attacking Tunisian government websites during the Tunisian uprising to protest actions in solidarity with Wikileaks, these activists have made their voices heard on issues of importance to them. Sauter follows the evolution of one of Anonymous’s primary tactics—the “distributed denial of service” (DDOS) attack—from a highly technical programming operation into one with an intentionally lower barrier of participation. Its latter form comes to resemble traditional types of civil disobedience such as sit-ins, in which critical masses of participants are crucial for success. Her carefully executed historical tracing of this evolution highlights how the technological affordances of political activism are embedded in political and sociotechnical environments as well as the choices made by the actors. The study of the evolution of DDOS reveals the fascinating history of a particular kind of digital activism and once again highlights that even the most seemingly “online-only” forms of activism like that of Anonymous are also embedded in broader social and political settings that extend offline.

Finally, Gleason looks at Twitter as a potential informal learning space and examines particular slices of hashtags related to the Occupy movement in the United States to explore the first-person experience of a participant who is part of the broader public of #ows. He finds that between 30% and 40% of tweets in the #ows hashtag contained hyperlinks that in turn contained many different types of information about the movement. These include tactics, rationales, and even articles critical of the movement, which demonstrate why and how such public spaces have become important for social movements. Furthermore, his examination of this hashtagged public space shows the transformation of conversations enabled by participatory media—large percentages of the links pointed to user-generated content, highlighting the importance of new digital technologies in altering the ability of social movement participants to frame and shape their own messages of mobilization and information.

Overall, these articles bring a diverse set of research methods to bear on a wide range of theaters of social unrest. They provide us with nuanced portrayals of their objects of study, many new questions about new media and social unrest, and even a few conclusive empirical answers. As the editors of this special issue, we look forward to more scholars taking up more of these questions as the field continues to move from broad brushstrokes to fine-grained analyses and develops further conceptually, empirically, and analytically.

Reference

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