Carola Richter · Anna Antonakis
Cilja Harders
Editors

Digital Media and the Politics of Transformation in the Arab World and Asia

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Editors
Carola Richter
Institute for Media and Communication Studies
Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, Germany

Cilja Harders
Otto Suhr Institute of Political Science
Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, Germany

Anna Antonakis
Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, Germany

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Table of Contents

Sticks and Stones, Clicks and Phones: Contextualizing the Role of Digital Media in the Politics of Transformation[1]

Merlyna Lim

In the last decade, we have seen major protests occurring around the world. The frequency of these protests has increased dramatically since the so-called Arab Spring started in Tunisia in December 2010. Since then, there have been thousands of protests emerging in various places in the world. Visual depictions of the protesters occupying public spaces made it to the headlines of international media such as the New York Times, The Guardian, and Der Spiegel, and were broadcasted in news hours by major satellite television channels such as CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, and even millions of bodies flooded the streets and the squares in massive sit-ins. During their peak moments, these protests were packaged, promoted, and displayed as "media spectacles" – "technologically mediated events, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form" (Kellner, 2010, p. 76). The media were mostly preoccupied with symbols and icons emerging from these protests as well as with the technologies of protests, and some were even quick to label these uprisings Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram 'revolutions'. The media attention, however, generally focuses on selected moments, which fade as the spectacle wanes.

Admittedly, academic analyses of these events are more nuanced, and some demonstrate an attempt to reveal a more complex relationship between digital media and political changes. And yet, as pointed out by Rodriguez, Ferron, and Shamas (2014, p. 3), "many of these studies, with their focus on the 'newness' of ICTs, reduce the richly contextual human relations that surround media use into a flat and unrevealing technological determinism". Over the years, the technological

1 This article is based on a public keynote lecture I delivered at the international conference on "Media and the Politics of Transformation in the Arab world and Asia" held at Freie Universität Berlin, 10 December 2015. Special thanks go to James for making my Berlin visit unforgettable and the writing process smoother.

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utopianism that dominated earlier research has been tempered by more nuanced research on the limitations as well as the potential of digital activism (see Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2011; Juris, 2012; Enjolras et al., 2013; Lim, 2013a). However, the volume of writing implicitly proposing that revolutions can occur principally, if not solely, through digital activism is still very large (see Almazan & Garcia, 2013; Bhuiyan, 2011; Chebib & Solail, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Mansour, 2012; Shirky, 2011; Stepanova, 2011). Distancing myself from technological utopianism, in this article I attempt to contextualize the role(s) of digital media in the political transformation processes. I argue that it is necessary to step back in order to view complexities of the events that unraveled in various places, to go beyond the individual moments, and start looking at the various processes preceding them. Drawing on empirical analysis from the Middle East, North Africa (MENA) and Asia, I will identify regional patterns and constellations of digital media as an instrument for protest and mobilization, and examine how regional and national contexts may define and/or shape mobilizations and social movements.

1 'Revolutionary Moments' vs. 'Social Change'

Before going further, it is important to provide clarification that 'revolutionary moments' we have seen in Egypt, Tunisia, Hong Kong, and elsewhere are neither the end result of social movements nor the culmination of 'social change'. Echoing Lakey (2012), I view social change and transformation as a long process involving complex trajectories. The mass uprisings such as those that unraveled in Tahrir Square and Central Hong Kong were the culmination of mass confrontations resulting from a rapid growth of the movement itself as it reached the point where enough people had become involved. As exemplified in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, mass confrontation can open a power vacuum and, therefore, is crucial as it is a moment of opportunity for the revolutionary movement to step into the vacuum and create, step by step, a new society, to perform a bottom-up restructuring and begin a transformational project (Lakey, 2012).[2]

In its life cycle, a social movement goes through various phases. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outline four phases, which begin with the *preliminary* stage where people become aware of an issue and leaders emerge. Mass uprisings are part of the second stage, the *coalescence* stage, where people collectivize, mobilize, and

2 For a perspective on transformation that does not necessarily target structural change see the contribution of Almut Woller on Arab anarchists in this volume.

publicly display their resistance. The third phase is the *institutionalization* stage, where the movement no longer relies on grassroots volunteerism but an established organization. The latest phase is the *decline* stage that happens when participants of the movement fall away, the movement successfully brings about the change it sought, or the public no longer takes the issue seriously.

Out of these four stages, the institutionalization stage, or what della Porta and Diani (2006) term a *bureaucratization* or *formalization* phase, is the most crucial one to social movements' pursuit for societal reform and transformation for social change. This stage is characterized by higher levels of organization and coalition-based strategies. It includes institutional building to prepare and construct a parallel institution needed when reforming or transforming the system or, in a more extreme case, replacing the 'old' system/regime with a new one. Accordingly, we will need to keep in mind that a social movement is an ongoing process, and the transformation that comes with it will always take time. In many places of the world, we see ongoing, unfinished processes that may or may not progress towards societal change and transformation.

2 The Global Wave of Protests: Commonalities and Complexities

To provide a broader context of the politics of transformation in MENA and Asia, it is useful to review a large number of large-scale national protests, namely those involving more than 1,000 protesters and covered by mainstream media between 2010 and 2015, and identify their commonalities and complexities. In my examination, I built and expanded on Carothers and Youngs' (2015) dataset and analysis, which covers 103 protests in 60 countries from May 2010 to August 2015, and combined their dataset with the database of protests (only 2010-2013) from the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Working Paper (Ortiz et al., 2013). Further, I also added more protests that happened in September-November 2015 by filtering the search for protest related news articles on Google within an associated time range. In total, my dataset includes 145 protests occurring in 76 countries. In reviewing these protests, I identify a number of factors that demonstrate commonalities as well as revealing complexities of the contemporary activism globally, with emphasis on the MENA region and Asia.

2.1 Spread Globally: The Pre-Eminence of the Local and the National

As accurately observed by Carothers and Youngs (2015), the recent wave of protests differs from the last major wave of protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Unlike the previous era, protests are occurring in every region, including the Middle East, affecting every major regime category, from authoritarian countries to semi-authoritarian states and democracies (Carothers & Youngs, 2015, p. 4). As demonstrated by 1999's 'Battle in Seattle', the incorporation of the Internet in global activism was one of the most significant innovations in protest practices in the 1990s (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). The Internet-based communication networks allowed organizers to reach vast and dispersed constituencies and audiences (Smith, 2001), making it easier to establish a network of resistance beyond national boundaries. In addition, the digital networks helped to rapidly disseminate information about resistance, not only in the Global North but also in the Global South, and allowed coordinated action across borders, brokered by experienced activists across the globe (Reitan, 2007, p. 11). The transnational and global nature of the digital networks in the late 1990s was thus compatible with transnational issues that dominated the wave of protests in the early 1990s.

In the latest wave after 2010, while the protests had similarly expanded territorially and were trans-local in their character, the scope of activism has been scaled back to local and national levels. Recent protests often developed from similar issues, such as corruption and economic injustice, but most were "rooted in local and national political debates and concerns" (Carothers & Youngs, 2015, p. 5). In the last decade, the Internet itself has become increasingly local. The technology, especially with the popularity of social media, has become an integral part of everyday life and is more reflective of the sociality, as well as the resistance, that emerges from everyday social spheres. Social media, "first and foremost, is social" and social media activities "mostly revolve around fun, self-expression and social gain" (Lim, 2013a, p. 653). It can, however, allow individuals and groups to converse over political debates and concerns and potentially transform these conversations into collective resistance.

Protesters are generally motivated by short-term causes, but the conditions that enable the development of protests are longer-term in nature (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). Most protests, especially large-scale ones, are complex in nature involving multiple short-term causes where protesters are motivated by several concerns. The Tunisian uprisings, for example, reflected the Tunisians' quest for dignity, anger over corruption, high unemployment, and desire for democracy.

2.2 Short-Term and Long-Term Causes

As can be seen in Figure 1, short-term causes extracted from the dataset are wide-ranging, covering issues as diverse as fuel prices, corruption, women's rights, and a number of other issues. These short-term causes, however, can be clustered into three categories, namely: socio-economic, political (system and governance), and citizen rights. In MENA, for example in Tunisia and Egypt, the combination of socio-economic (e. g., high unemployment, widening income gap, food prices) and political factors (e. g., corruption, police brutality, authoritarianism) appears to have been the main cause for the majority of the population to rise up. Meanwhile, large-scale protests in Hong Kong and Malaysia have been driven primarily by political conditions (e. g., lack of/poor democracy, lack of transparency) and citizen rights (e. g., freedom of speech, freedom of expression, voting rights).

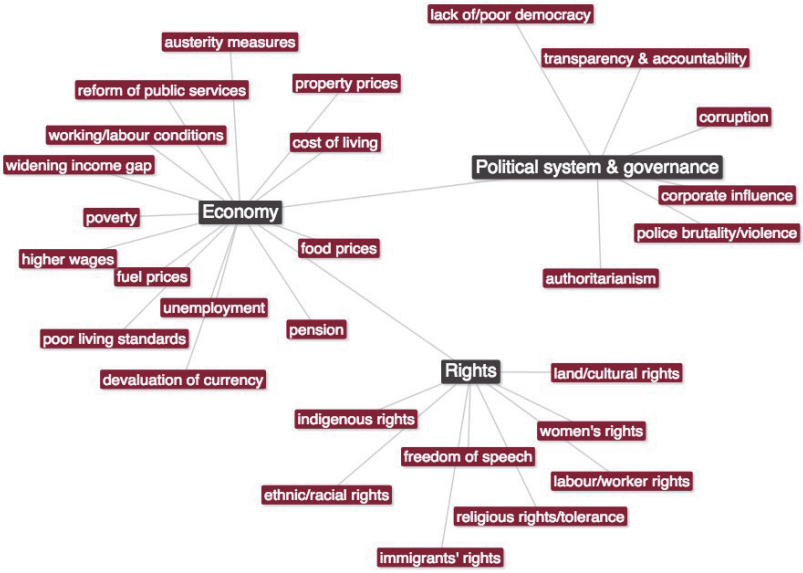

Fig. 1 Short-term causes of protests (Source: author)

While short-term causes stipulate immediate milieus for protests to emerge, they only contribute a partial understanding. To "fully understand the protest wave,

it is also necessary to consider the longer term enabling factors at work, which encompass various elements of change – technological, economic, and political" (Carothers & Youngs, 2015, p. 6). The long-term causes usually brew for many years and eventually create the conditions for collective resistance to arise.

The first long-term cause is the rise of new educated middle classes globally, especially in the MENA region and Asia, brought about by considerable economic growth in the past ten to twenty years. Protest movements across the globe, from Tunisia to Malaysia, while they might have been sparked by an event in poor areas (such as Sidi Bouzid), have generally been concentrated among the middle and upper-middle classes in urban areas. The new middle classes "develop expectations beyond material goals and gain access to education, travel, communication technologies, and other resources that give them new perspectives and capabilities" (Carothers & Youngs, 2015, p. 6). In some countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, economic growth had also resulted in stark new inequalities between sub-groups within the middle classes. For a large number of middle-class individuals, the increasing gap between expectations and realities has created a fertile ground for potential support for protests.

The second long-term cause is the mushrooming of non-governmental and civil society organizations around the globe in the last two decades, especially in developing parts of the world where civil society had previously been weak (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). By 2006, Egypt had more than 23,000 NGOs, over 10,000 in Tunisia, and over 26,000 in Morocco (Anheier & Toepler, 2009, p. 269). In Asia, there was a tremendous growth of NGOs and CSOs in 1990s and 2000s. In 2000, there were more than 20,000 registered NGOs in China and several thousand at district and community level in Vietnam (Yamamoto, 2000, p. 43). In 2009, Thailand had 19,878 registered NGOs, Malaysia 14,000, the Philippines 70,200 (Nesadurai, 2012, p. 223). Furthermore, the youths, who were among those on the front line of the uprisings in 2011 in the MENA countries and Asia, have been central to the formation of this growth. In fact, over the past decade, many civil society organizations have been established by youth groups who came together around youth-related issues. Examples include the Al-Thoria Studies Center in Jordan, which was established by youths and has a young staff base; the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt, which was founded by the youth members of Kifaya (the movement that engineered the first oppositional protests against Mubarak in 2003) (Lim, 2012); and the Scholarism, a Hong Kong-based secondary school student activist group formed in May 2011, which initiated a mass protest against the Moral and National Education, a new curriculum endorsed by the Chinese central government in July 2012 (SCMP, 2012). While not always democratic and sometimes even characterized by elements

subversive to democratization, civil society may assist the emergence of democratic forces in a given society.

The third long-term cause is the failed reform and/or, in some semi-authoritarian countries, problematic democratic transition. The previous cycles of global political changes in the 1980s and 1990s had contributed to reform, economically and/or politically, in dozens of countries, yet many of those states faced difficulty and/or failed to bring their transitions to fruition. The so-called third wave of democracy that swept through the globe and especially Asia in the 1990s has increased citizen awareness and expectations that the government should be accountable to its people. However, most countries struggle to make democracy and reform work, leaving citizens dissatisfied with the way democracy and reform function in practice, and making these countries fertile soil for protests (Carothers & Youngs, 2015).

Digital media is neither a revolutionary driver nor a cause of the protests. However, the rapid change in communication technologies make information more widely available to people, giving them "a greater awareness of how others are asserting themselves against entrenched power holders in other countries and of how their own political and economic conditions compare with those of others" (Carothers & Youngs, 2015, p. 9). Digital media, especially social media, facilitate exchanges among citizens, enabling them to collectivize around shared grievances rooted in long-term conditions as well as short-term causes.

2.3 Triggered by Local Events

Long-term causes create necessary conditions for collective awareness (of shared dissatisfactions and contentions) and short-term causes provide an immediate environment for collective networks of resistance to emerge. For protests to break out in certain places at certain moments, they need triggers that are usually manifested in the form of local events, most of which are highly symbolic and visually dramatic. For example, the dramatic self-immolation of Muhammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the high-profile police brutality case of Khaled Said in Egypt.

Such local events, however, would not trigger widespread protests if not publicized widely. In other words, the event needs to be viral in order to trigger protests. Here digital media can potentially play an important role in making a local event viral. However, such a process is not easy or natural. As exemplified in my detailed analysis of the Tunisian uprisings (Lim, 2013b, p. 937-938), the virality of Bouazizi's self-immolation was possible through the employment of three key mechanisms:

> "First, the availability of the archetypal image that had iconic value – Bouazizi's burning body – elevated the non-event of the poor to the public spectacle. … Second, frame alignment with a master frame that culturally and politically resonated with the entire society successfully fostered a sense of injustice and identity that united the people of Tunisia. … Third, the activation of a hybrid network … to facilitate connective structures that became a platform to generate collective action among Tunisians who shared collective identities and collective frames, and *connective action* [Bennett & Segerberg, 2013] among individuals who sought more personalized paths to contribute to the movement through digital media."

2.4 Not Spontaneous but with Historical Roots

My analysis reveals that most protests are not spontaneous but involve a longer-term mobilization and are rooted in a long history of resistance and struggles. The major mass protests that took place globally, including those in Tunisia, Egypt, Malaysia, and Hong Kong which were comfortably framed as 'spontaneous and sudden' by Western observers, should be seen as the result of long processes of the transformation of politics. If Occupy Hong Kong, which is more popularly called the Umbrella Movement, suddenly made it onto our radar, it was not because the uprising suddenly emerged from social media, but because many observers, especially Western media, had not been paying attention to various events preceding it. As a matter of fact, just months prior to the Occupy Hong Kong protests in September 2014, there was a big protest on the first of July. This was one of the annual rallies that have decorated the streets of Hong Kong since July 1, 2003, where half a million Hong Kongers rallied to successfully overturn Article 23 of the Basic Law, which would have prohibited any act of treason, sedition and subversion against the People's Government of Central China.

Similarly, the failure of international mainstream media to cover expressions of dissent in the Arab world, Asia and elsewhere has contributed to the collective imprint that these uprisings are 'sudden and spontaneous'. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were more than a decade in the making (Lim, 2012; 2013b), while the seed of the Malaysian Bersih movement was planted in 1998 through the emergence of the reform (*reformasi*) movement and various political protests afterwards (e. g., Hindraf, anti-ISA, and anti-Lynas) (Lim, 2016; 2017).

In the Egyptian case, raw data from the protests demonstrated a remarkable escalation in the decade before the uprising. The Solidarity Center (2010) recorded 2,623 protests taking place between 1998 and 2008 and a total of 284 worker protests in the first half of 2009 alone. The 2011 Tahrir uprising cannot be detached from the historical landscape of protests and resistance spanning more than one decade,

involving various activist groups and organizations such as the Kifaya movement, the April 6 Youth Movement, the activism of textile factory workers, and the 'We are all Khaled Said' Facebook-facilitated group (Lim, 2012). Every historic moment has history and some moments are anchored in long, deep, and complex histories.

2.5 The Chief Role of 'Hybrid Media/Communication Networks'

As pointed out by many scholars, and suggested in earlier parts of this article, social media have been vital in the mobilization of contemporary protests. However, it is important to note that in most cases, social media were not the primary tool for mobilizing and organizing protests. Rather, we witnessed an extensive utilization of cellular phones in all of these protests, with an incorporation of social media in some of them, and, most importantly, the chief role of 'hybrid media/communication networks' beyond cellular and social media. The more detailed analysis of the roles of digital media, including social media, will be provided in the next section.

3 The Specific Roles of Digital Media

Observably, there are similar characteristics and mechanisms in digital media activism and mobilization across the regions. Digital media is not only incorporated immediately before and during the protests, but is also embedded in various processes of the politics of transformation through popular protest movements. In the following sections, I analyze the roles of digital media by tracing how the media is embedded in various stages of the making of social movement and ground my analysis in the empirical stories from Tunisia, Egypt, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. I outline a social movement's development from its genesis, as it emerges in multiple spheres of imaginaries and resistance, through its successive trajectories, as it engages and mobilizes diverse publics, to its unfolding as interconnected events, as it displays collective power through public performances (Lim, 2015).

3.1 Multiple Spheres of Imaginaries and Resistance

The role of digital media can be traced to the origin or the onset of the movement, namely the spheres of imaginaries. Social movements begin with the ability to

imagine. Imagination allows the collectives to envision a more desirable future, different from the present. Radical imagination is fundamental to any collective attempt to ascertain resistance and solidarity in the form of a counter-hegemonic movement (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2014).

Multiple spheres are required for a collective radical imagination to emerge and sustain itself. Indeed, social movements rarely originate in one imaginary sphere. From my research, I learned that for each and every social movement, there were multiple spaces of origin that emerged separately and then gradually came to constitute one larger, denser network. The 2010-2011 Tunisian revolutionary uprising originated in the radical imagination that emerged both in the long tradition of labor activism as well as in more than one decade of digital activism against state censorship (Lim, 2013b, p. 923-26). The capacity to imagine a different, more desirable future among Egyptians that culminated with the 2011 Tahrir uprising did not simply start with the 'We are all Khaled Said' Facebook page. Its genesis can rather be traced back to the Kifaya oppositional movement against Mubarak in 2003-2007, the labor activism of textile factory workers in 2006-2009, and the activism of the April 6 Youth Movement—the main organization behind the 2011 Tahrir protests (Lim, 2012). These spheres of resistance were online, offline, and in-between spaces (the April 6 Youth Movement used cyber-cafés as one of the main activism sites).[3]

The 2014 Occupy Hong Kong movement also originated in multiple different spheres, such as through the establishment of the OCLPHK (Occupy Central with Love and Peace Hong Kong) group by the university law professor Benny Tai a year prior to the big protest in September 2014. It additionally emerged through the legacy of Hong Kong urban street march culture, student activism, and labor unionism that has a long history of public civic engagement (Butenhoff, 1999; Chiu & Lui, 2000). Occupy Hong Kong was also rooted in more recently formed student activist groups, most notably Scholarism, a Hong Kong-based secondary school student activist group. The spheres of imagination in the Occupy Hong Kong movement can be traced to numerous classrooms of secondary schools and universities, where students, teachers, and professors mingled and immersed in frequent communication and interactions, as well as heavy online interchanges and conversations on various political blogs, Facebook groups (every single school and university student activist group maintains an active presence on Facebook), Twitter, and Instagram.

Power is exercised through the propagation of dominant socio-political imaginaries. The dominant imaginaries, such as that of the state, tend to express and

3 For an analysis of the performance of the April 6 movement after the uprisings in 2011 see the contribution of Hanan Badr in this volume.

re-inscribe power. The radical departure from the dominant imaginaries is crucial to the creation of sites in which alternative and radical imagination can emerge, grow, and spread; sites in which narratives of resistance can be created, communicated, and practiced (Lim, 2014; 2015). Digital media add to the possibility of multiple spheres of radical imagination emerging. In these spheres, everyday practices of resistance are communicated and exchanged, in *repetition* and *routine*, through *interactivity* and regular *flows* and *exchanges*.[4]

3.2 Mobilizing Diverse Publics

Beyond the imaginaries, social movements are ultimately about establishing and expanding networks of resistance involving diverse publics. In the process, social movements go through various mechanisms, from brokering and bridging to the mobilization processes marked by framing and diffusing.

Brokerage or *brokering*, the "production of a new connection between previously disconnected sites" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006, p. 31), is one of the most important mechanisms in social movements. Brokering is a mechanism needed to allow small circle conversations, usually formed among disaffected elites, to traverse various representational channels and interest group distinctions and reach diverse publics. In the network dynamics, brokerage is a process that happens when a certain node acts as a broker that connects two nodes that are otherwise separated (in the absence of ties). When there are no or limited physical spaces available to do so, blogging and other types of networking in the digital space may facilitate these brokering and bridging processes. Prior to the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, circles of oppositional actors were isolated from each other, polarized along political and religious orientations, such as right-wing Islamism (e. g. the Muslim Brotherhood), liberal secularism (e. g. Wafd and Al-Ghad activists), and left-wing secularism (e. g. activists of the Egyptian Communist Party) (Lim, 2012, p. 237). As physical spaces were controlled, the brokerage could not happen in an offline setting. In the Egyptian blogosphere, however, the brokerage occurred when bloggers who belonged to diverse ideologies were linked to each other to form a plural and diverse oppositional network (Lim, 2012, p. 237; Radsch, 2008). Similarly, in the Malaysian electoral reform movement, the brokerage occurred as previously disconnected Malaysian activists and concerned individuals belonging to various ideologies

4 Abir Kopty's contribution in this volume discusses the somewhat clashing utopian and dystopian perspectives on the envisaged impacts of digital media on movement formations.

(e.g. Islamist, secular and liberal) and backgrounds (e.g. Malay, Chinese and Tamil/Indian) networked in the blogosphere, and this mechanism contributed to the formation and expansion of the reformist network (Lim, 2016; 2017). The brokerage, as exemplified in the Egyptian and Malaysian blogospheres, allowed disconnected activists and proto-activists (concerned individuals who seek to join activism networks) to assimilate their experiences and to deliberate beyond their own existing ideological boundaries.

The brokerage can extend to a process known in the resource mobilization theory as 'linkages', namely *bridging* two disparate networks to expand resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) by allowing resources to be mutually shared. *Bridging* allows small groups with limited resources to expand and grow within an interconnected collaborative network (Yuce et al., 2014). Brokering and bridging, exemplified in the Egyptian and Malaysian blogospheres, can also be seen as a necessary step towards transforming multiple ideologically bound and resource-poor groups into a relatively resourceful networked movement that has access to various social groups and representational channels.

Beyond brokering and bridging, to mobilize diverse publics, social movements need to apply a mechanism called *framing*, a process that is central to mobilization as it can foster collective identity across geographically dispersed individuals (Garrett, 2006) by allowing them to identify shared grievances through framing processes (Aday et al., 2012). Here, framing processes refer to the way that meaning is constructed to legitimize collective activities and actions (Gamson, 1992). The role of frames is to organize and guide action by rendering events meaningful (Snow et al., 1986), mostly by clarifying and simplifying the reasons and rationales of participation. Since it is affordable and ubiquitous (in urban areas), digital media can be used to disseminate the resistance vastly and rapidly.

Digital and especially social media, however, are not inherently friendly to the narrative of injustice central to social movements. Social media comprise the world of memes dominated by sensational narratives around celebrated personalities. In this landscape, it is unlikely for complex narratives of injustice to be virally disseminated (Lim, 2013a). Activists, therefore, have no choice but to simplify and even oversimplify the narratives, generating symbols and icons that resonate with the larger public in order to increase the possibility of successful mobilization (Lim, 2013a). The simplification practices are inherent to the creation of an injustice frame (Gamson, 1992) that emboldens the sense of injustice, evokes shared emotion and rage, incites public outcry, and mobilizes antagonism against the common enemy.

This framing process was evident in Tunisia as activists transformed Muhammed Bouazizi, a street vendor who never graduated from high school, into a symbolic figure of the Tunisian uprisings. Bouazizi was 'framed' as an unemployed university

graduate who self-immolated himself after being publicly humiliated by a female police officer, thus crafting a story that culturally and politically resonated with the entire population, particularly the highly educated urban middle class youth, which ultimately galvanized public outrage against President Ben Ali (Lim, 2013b). Similarly, in the Egyptian uprisings, activists transformed Khaled Said, a young man killed by Alexandrian police in a drug-related scene, into a unifying poster-child of Egypt's disparate reform movement. Not only did activists elevate Said into "a figure with saint-like qualities", but they also simplified "the dynamics of his life that led up to his death" (Ali, 2012). Through the activists' frame of injustice, the story of Said as "young, social media savvy, urbanized, and anti-authoritarian" successfully ignited the rage and evoked the motion of urban educated middle class youths in Cairo and Alexandria as they rallied against Mubarak (Ali, 2012; Lim, 2012). Another commonly used framing method is establishing an image of a targeted opponent as the incarnation of evil and a universally certified enemy, such as Adolf Hitler. Visually depicting Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Chief Leung of Hong Kong with a Hitler mustache is a conspicuous attempt to paint them as a certified enemy – a reincarnation of Hitler, an evil, and a common enemy of the people.

To engage diverse publics, social movements need to expand socially, demographically, and geographically (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). In the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, digital media were limited in their capacity to reach across geographical boundaries because of low Internet penetration rates and because of the deep divide between urban and rural areas. In Tunisia, 85 percent of the population had access to a cellular phone but only 20 percent were Facebook users in 2010; while the broadband connection was robust in coastal areas, the poorer interior areas were mostly disconnected and did not even have reliable mobile phone coverage (Brisson & Kontiris, 2012, p. 97). A hybrid network consisting of social media, big media (e. g. Al Jazeera), and small media (e. g. cellular phones, laptops, pocket cameras, and memory cards) contributed to a successful mobilization. In this context, *intermodality*, namely the linkages from the Internet and social media to other networks, is a crucial process. An example from Tunisia below illustrates the importance of *intermodality:*

> "When massive protests broke out in these two border towns near Algeria, police blocked the roads, isolated the towns and squashed the protests with brutal massacres … [but] could not prevent the information from going out. People took videos with their mobile phones and pocket cameras documenting police brutality and passed them to activists who transferred them to memory cards. Activists put memory cards inside sneakers and threw the sneakers over the border to Algeria. From here, these cards were transported to Tunis to be uploaded online by activists in the capital and some eventually got to Al Jazeera's news desks" (Lim, 2013b, p. 934).

Malaysia, where 60 percent of the population is online, tells a different story. The Bersih movement, which took place in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru, and Penang where the Internet penetration rates are between 70 to 85 percent, relied heavily on social media (Lim, 2016; 2017). Yet, Bersih activists still had to employ low-tech communication networks, such as flyers and SMS (Short Messaging Services), to reach rural areas, and hold traditional *ceramah* (lectures/speeches) in mosques and community centers (Khoo, 2014; Lim, 2017). Activists also commenced a *Balik Kampung Bawa Berita* (bring the news back to your village) initiative which encouraged Malaysians who had online access to bring Bersih messages to the offline communities in their home towns/villages in the form of hard copies (printouts) and CDs (of blog postings, websites, and YouTube videos) (Ibrahim, 2012). The *intermodality* of various media helped the Bersih movement to diffuse its message across diverse publics (Lim, 2017). In Tunisia and Malaysia, activists utilized digital media to break the government's control and monopoly over the production of knowledge and the information flows. However, to further diffuse the movement and reach diverse audiences, activists needed to incorporate the practices of *intermodality*.

3.3 Public Performance of Social Movements

Social movements claim their power through the public performance of resistance by occupying public spaces. By marching on the Habib Borguiba street (Tunis), the Tahrir Square (Cairo), the Central Hong Kong, and the Independence Square (Kuala Lumpur), social movements demonstrated people's capacity to act collectively and to appear simultaneously in the political "space of appearance" (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). With the incorporation of digital media, connected individuals can publicly perform their resistance in online space by promoting, among other things, hashtag activism.[5] However, as "[b]odies and their visibility to public are central in the struggles for power", the practice of protest and symbolism still necessitates physical sites for corporeal assemblies and "[b]y occupying public spaces with visible bodies, social movement presents itself vis-à-vis the power it seeks to challenge, symbolically and corporeally" (Lim, 2015, p. 121).

5 A hashtag is a type of metadata, consisting of a word or an un-spaced phrase prefixed with the hash character (#), used to cluster conversations around certain topics in social networking sites. Hashtag activism refers to an effort to collectively curate a massive number of short statements by using certain hashtags.

In their public display of resistance, movements need to sustain their presence beyond the initial protest amidst possible government shutdowns and physical attacks. In the Egyptian uprisings, protesters needed to anticipate physical violence around Tahrir square and its adjacent downtown streets. These downtown streets, unlike those in other parts of Cairo, are wide and spacious, and welcoming to large vehicles such as riot vans, armored vehicles, and water cannons (Al Saleh & Arefin, 2011). It was therefore valuable that knowledge about the physical surroundings and how to survive and react to the physical encounters with police forces was disseminated online and offline in the form of a 26-page manual prior to January 25th, 2011. While calls for protests were posted on social media, the protests themselves began in a number of key mosques and churches. These sites were located in densely populated working-class districts such as Shubra and El-Dakrour. While marching toward the square, protesters urged Egyptians watching them from balconies and windows to join them, leading to the growth of masses (El-Ghobashy, 2011). At various junctures leading to the square, protesters encountered security forces. The security forces, however, were disoriented as the protests had begun from multiple locations involving various protest groups (El-Ghobashy, 2011). In such a situation, Twitter was not contextually useful. The knowledge to maneuver the physicality of the battleground thus became more significant than Twitter.

By comparison, in the historic 2012 Bersih 3.0 protest in Kuala Lumpur, protestors utilized smart phones while marching and used Twitter not only to coordinate, but also to support and assist each other in maneuvering the riot police's physical coercion. Prior to the protest, activists made marching routes downloadable in GPS format (see Figure 2). Twitter usage in this case was more embedded in the physical space. Twitter exchanges were marked by frequent occurrences of the place names where the masses were gathering, such as Dataran Merdeka, Masjid Jamek, Pasar Seni and Jalan Tun Perak. In Figure 3, we can see the relationships between various words used in Bersih related tweets, illuminating visual overviews of place-related and atmospheric/situational words. Protesters reported using Twitter to assist each other in physically navigating around tear gas and water cannons and in finding alternative routes out of police barricades.

Fig. 2 Figure 2: An example of Bersih 3.0 rally marching routes, downloadable in GPS format (Source: author)

Fig. 3 Phrase nets of the most frequently used words in Bersih 3.0 related tweets[6] (Source: author)

Similarly, Occupy Hong Kong was marked with a heavy utilization of social media during the protests. Most exchanges on Instagram took place in the sites of protest such as Admiralty, Soho, and Central Hong Kong (Johnson, 2014). Social media was predominantly utilized by protesters to communicate, coordinate, and physically survive the protests. Information about physical safety and survival, such as an electronic safety guide for tear gas exposure, a manual of civil disobedience, and legal helpline numbers (in case of arrest), was disseminated online mainly using social media platforms.

The sustainability of a protest is also supported by its visibility beyond local sites, to national and global audiences. By reaching global audiences via the utilization of digital media and transnational/international broadcast media, the movement expands beyond the boundary of state control and authority, and it opens new opportunities for international support and pressure. In the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Malaysia and Hong Kong, global audiences were a world away from the squares, parks, and streets where the protesters were gathering. They did, however, help to globalize the movement and to amplify local voices and narratives. The linkages between collective bodies in the squares and connective bodies in digital media can help the sustenance of social movements.

6 The graph was created using PhraseNet from Many Eyes, a data analytics platform from IBM (Viegas, 2015).

4 Regional Differences

While there are similar mechanisms and patterns in the roles of digital media pertaining to activism and mobilization across the regions, regional and national contexts differentiate these practices in the MENA countries and Asia. In my analysis, I identify differences based on three categories, specifically: regional contagion effects, urban middle class population, and digital connectivity.

4.1 Regional Contagion Effects

A contagion effect was evident in the emerging Arab World protests of 2011. Within a month of the downfall of the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali in January 2011, the protests spread like wildfire to Egypt and almost every Arab country. Protesters copied and borrowed the methods and tactics of the revolts, with varying intensity and outcomes. The strong contagion effect, however, is not apparent in Asia. Arguably, there are a number of factors contributing to this dissimilarity, which I will explain in the following paragraphs.

Spatial contagion of protests, whether it is national, regional, or transnational, fundamentally relies on information transmission; that is, the actions and messages of the protests must become known so they can spread. Media and communication networks are vital to this process. In the context of MENA, the role of Al Jazeera cannot be minimized. Since its establishment in 1996, the Qatar-based satellite news network has redefined journalism and has become a force in Arab politics (Sakr, 2007, p. 113). By working closely with locally based journalists, correspondents, and informants, Al Jazeera also established the practice of networked journalism[7] that was vital to the dissemination of information in repressive media landscapes. By providing the infrastructure of transnational networks for information transmission, Al Jazeera contributed to the regional contagion effect in the MENA region. The hybrid network formed by the linkages between Al Jazeera, other regional media (e. g. Al-Arabiya and BBC Arabic Television), and social media networks further strengthened the contagion effect in the region.

The fundamental underlying factor contributing to the effect is the cultural proximity of the MENA countries. Cultural proximity refers to "nationally or locally

7 Networked journalism can be defined as "journalism that sees publics acting as creators, investigators, reactors, (re)makers, and (re)distributors of news and where all variety of media, amateurs and professionals, corporate and independent products and interests intersect at a new level" (Russell, 2011:1).

produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based on regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements" (Straubhaar, 1991, p. 51). This is not to say that the Arab world is culturally homogenous. Rather, it is to recognize the importance of shared language and cultural attributes as a unifying force in the region, particularly the prominence of Arabic as a unifying language despite the existing other cultural-linguistic groups in MENA, such as the Amazigh (or Berber) populations in North Africa. Meanwhile, unlike in Asia, at the time of the uprisings there was no fragmentation of the social media landscape in the MENA region. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were commonly used in the MENA countries. With the cultural proximity and the commonality of social media platforms among nation-states, Al Jazeera and digital media facilitated the materialization of overlapped and networked transnational spheres of resistance in the 2011 uprisings.

Asian countries do not share comparable cultural proximity. While some Asian countries may share a certain degree of proximity in political ideology, economic liberalization, or socio-cultural modernity, the information transmission across borders needs a translational process that does not automatically transpire. The lack of a unifying language and transnational news networks in the region are among the dominant barriers to the translational process. In Asia, social media landscapes come in diverse forms and operate in multiple socio-political contexts, including multiple language and political systems. Chinese social media users, for example, adopt Weibo and WeChat that are distinctively Chinese and are not widely used anywhere else.[8] Blog posts, Facebook posts, and tweets produced in Asia demonstrate a variety of languages and cultural codes that are unique to each country. In my examination of the Occupy Hong Kong and the Malaysian Bersih movements I did not find any cross-country information flow. While both movements scaled up from the national to the global to include diasporic communities, each was still anchored in the boundary of the nation-state. With the pre-eminence of national contexts, while protests in one country may inspire activists in other countries, the contagion effect is less likely to take place in Asia, especially when compared to that of the MENA region.

8 For a more detailed analysis of Weibo and its implications for society, see the contribution of Zihao Lin, Andrea Hamm and Susanne Reinhardt in this volume.

4.2 Urban Middle Class Population

Asia has undergone rapid growth and urbanization as well as significant economic transformation. As its economies expand, its middle class grows and its population moves to the cities. As of 2017, 49 percent of the population live in urban areas (2.2 billion) (World Bank, 2017). In 2013, it was estimated that 1.8 billion of the total world population were in the middle class and this number will grow to 3.2 billion by 2020 (Kharas & Geertz, 2010). Asia is almost entirely responsible for this growth as its middle class is forecast to triple to 1.7 billion by 2020 (Kharas & Geertz, 2010).

Asia is also highly digital. With 1.8 billion Internet users, it is the region with the fastest growth and accounts for half of the world's total Internet users (We are social, 2017). Over 90 percent of this online population live in urban areas, predominantly in mega-cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Bangkok, Manila, and Jakarta. Such demographic, large-scale protests in the region, as exemplified by the Occupy Hong Kong and the Malaysian Bersih movements, are highly urbanized and predominantly rooted in middle-class driven causes, revolving around issues such as political rights, freedom of speech, transparency, and accountability. This is not to say that lower classes and/or urban population do not participate in any protests. In fact, in the last five years, countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines have witnessed numerous worker and labor strikes. In China, in 2010 alone there were over 180,000 small-scale protest events (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). These protests, however, are either routinized and contained within a certain social group (among workers or laborers only) or focused on micro-level issues (e. g., an unfair ruling by a village council) and rarely escalate to a national level. Social media usages in the region mainly revolve around urban middle class concerns, issues, and consumer cultures, and are generally disconnected from the lives and experiences of the poor.[9]

The urban middle class population is also witnessing substantial growth in the rest of the emerging world, including in the MENA region. While countries are at varied levels of urbanization, the majority of the region's inhabitants, 64 percent of the total population of 361 million, now reside in urban areas. The growth of the urban population in the MENA region, however, is not accompanied by economic growth. Compared to the economic performance of Asian countries, notably East Asian countries, the performance of the Arab world is remarkably poor. The impressive growth Arab countries enjoyed during the 2000s did not reach much of the urban middle class; rather, it created a new class of economic and political elites

9 For a discussion of different experiences with social media usage according to class and/or gender and the intersection of digital divides, see the contribution of Anna Antonakis in this volume.

supported by the rise of capitalism (Alaoui, 2016). In the last three decades, most Arab economies experienced less than one percent annual growth of real GDP per capita contributing to "one of the highest income inequality and unemployment rates globally" as well as "the lowest rates of investments of all regions" (Kadri, 2013). To exacerbate this condition, the region also experiences the highest rate of armed conflict. At over 30 percent, the level of unemployment "is most acute among Arab youths, the precise demographic that mobilized during the Arab spring" (Alaoui, 2016). Consequently, for the urban middle class population in the MENA countries, it was the accumulation of economic and social grievances that led to growing discontent in the 2011 uprisings. These grievances were also shared by the lower class populations across the regions. As they voiced their grievances and concerns through social media conversations, the urban middle class, especially the educated youths, engaged themselves with issues that overlapped with concerns and grievances of the larger population, including the poor. In comparison to MENA, the inter-class gap in Asia runs deeper. As the digital population of Asian countries grows, so does the gap between the lives and experiences of the urban middle class and the poor.

4.3 Digital Connectivity

Scholarly analysis of the Arab uprisings in 2010-2012 indeed shows that activists had incorporated digital media, especially social media, in the development of protest movements. However, social media was not the chief tool in mobilizing protest movements, mostly due to the lower penetration of mobile social media in the region. As mentioned earlier, social media users only comprised less than 20 percent of the population in Tunisia in 2011 (Lim, 2013b). Meanwhile, with only 6.5 percent of the population on Facebook (in February 2012, the number was lower prior to the uprisings), the majority of Egyptians were also not on social media (Digital Republic, 2012). With this reality, *intermodality* between social media and the more traditional networks was vital to the mobilizing process of the Arab uprisings.

While not equally distributed across the region, the digitally connected urban middle class population in some Asian countries plays an increasing role in igniting protest movements. Examples from Malaysia and Hong Kong presented in this article demonstrate that digital media are more seamlessly incorporated into the making and the sustenance of protest movements when compared to those in the MENA region. Evidently, social media activism has become a feature of almost every protest movement in Asia, from the anti-corruption movements in Indonesia and India to

the anti-extra-judicial killing in the Philippines. By utilizing digital technologies, especially mobile social media (social media platforms accessed through mobile devices), contemporary movements in Asia have helped to expand the communication spheres for citizen democratic discourses in urban areas. However, the urban-digital characteristic of these movements has made them more exclusive, and less connected to rural areas[10] and members of the population who have no access to the Internet. In other words, the digital-ness and the urban-ness of these movements have further amplified their middle-class tendency.

5 Conclusions

As digital media becomes more embedded in everyday routines, especially through social media facilitated perpetual connectedness, political conversations and actions, too, have become more and more entangled with the digital world. It is, therefore, not surprising that the roles of digital media have become more apparent in any political undertakings, including protests and social movements. By anchoring my analysis in the empirical contexts of the MENA region and Asia, in this article I have identified analogous characteristics and mechanisms in digital media activism and mobilization across the region. Digital media's roles are embedded in various stages of the development of social movements. At the onset of movements, digital media augments the formation of multiple spheres of *radical imaginaries* and resistance. As social movements develop and expand to mobilize diverse publics, digital media's roles are embedded in the *brokering*, *bridging*, *framing*, as well as *diffusing* processes. As social movements continue mobilizing and claiming its power through public performances, digital media connects to other media – traditional/old and new, big and small, mainstream and alternative – through the *intermodality* mechanism.

However, the impact of digital media on the practices of protests and social movements has complex and unexpected outcomes. Moreover, regional and national contexts differentiate not only the practices but also the results of the incorporation of digital media in protest movements. Regional contagion effects, urban middle class population, and digital connectivity are among dominant factors that shape and influence regionally contextualized roles of digital media. My analysis of the roles of digital media in the politics of transformation in MENA and Asia suggests that technologies indeed have diverse, complex effects in different socio-political

10 For a perspective on an increased connectivity between the capital and other cities in Iran in women's rights activism, see Mina Naeli's contribution in this volume.

and cultural contexts, many, but certainly not all of them affirmative. Digital media are increasingly intertwined in the socio-political spheres. Digital media does not create collective actions, protests, or social movements, but instead enables different ways to participate in any collectivized social activities. Its roles and practices, however, are always shaped, constructed, reconstructed by diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated. In conclusion, I contend that the understanding of the role of digital media in the politics of transformation should be anchored not only in the exploration of *clicks* and *phones* – the socio-political usage of the technology, but also in the inquiry of *sticks and stones* – the stories and histories of resilience, agency, and resistance of people, and the context in which the usage is embedded.

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