

# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND GOVERNMENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EVALUATING A COMPLEX LANDSCAPE

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*Recently, social movements have shaken countries around the world. Most of these movements have thoroughly integrated digital connectivity into their toolkits, especially for organizing, gaining publicity, and effectively communicating. Governments, too, have been adapting to this new reality where controlling the flow of information provides new challenges. This article examines the multiple, often novel, ways in which social media both empowers new digitally-fueled movements and contributes to their apparent weaknesses in seemingly paradoxical ways. This article also integrates the evolving governmental response into its analysis. Social media's empowering aspects are real and profound, but these impacts do not play out in a simple, linear fashion. The ability to scale-up quickly using digital infrastructure has empowered movements to embrace their horizontalist and leaderless aspirations, which in turn have engendered new weaknesses after the initial phase of street actions ebbs. Movements without organizational depth are often unable to weather such transitions. While digital media create more possibilities to evade censorship, many governments have responded by demonizing and attacking social media, thus contributing to polarized environments in which dissidents have access to a very different set of information compared to those more loyal to the regime. This makes it hard to create truly national campaigns of dissent. This article provides an overview of this complex, evolving environment with examples ranging from the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt to the Occupy movement.*

**A**n Egyptian activist who participated in the initial Tahrir Square uprising in Cairo, which eventually resulted in the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, told me that she felt as though the activists had more influence *before* the revolution, especially in the online world.<sup>1</sup> Digital infrastructure empowers protest movements in specific ways, and recent uprisings and large protests around the world have provided indications of this power. However, some of the same mechanisms of digitally-fueled empowerment have paradoxically led to disempowering side effects. Further, many governments have developed methods to

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respond to this new information environment, which allows for fewer gatekeeper controls, by aggressively countering these new movements, often with a combination of traditional repression as well as novel methods aimed at addressing online media.

The outcomes of movements certainly vary. The Occupy movement has had great success in focusing the conversation on inequality, but has been less effective in changing the policies that sustain it.<sup>2</sup> Austerity policies in Europe continue despite large numbers of protesters carrying out sustained occupations in multiple countries, including Spain and Greece.<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, within a year of the Gezi Park protests the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) won two major elections with comfortable margins.<sup>4</sup>

Digital infrastructure may be said to follow a trajectory common to other disruptive technologies.<sup>5</sup> Governments' initial waves of ignorance and misunderstanding quickly gave way to learning about the medium's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the development of new methods to counter dissent. However, changes to a movement's capabilities that broaden its ability to coordinate actions or to publicize its cause are real as well. Hence, the sense of diminishing online influence expressed by the Egyptian activist to whom I spoke is a story not only of a transformed online sphere, but also of other actors learning to play a new game by new rules. This includes both resorting to old-style repressive measures and applying novel adaptations to a more open, less easily controlled public sphere. This article follows that arc and discusses the ways in which online social media empowers protesters and dissidents, as well as some of its weaknesses and the evolving responses of governments.

Social media-fueled protests have broken out in many countries, ranging from traditional Western democracies like the United States' Occupy and Spain's Indignados, to emerging democracies, such as Turkey and Ukraine. Despite the idiosyncrasies of each case, there are enough similarities among these movements' trajectories to draw some conclusions about the impact of social media on protest movements, both in terms of its strengths and weaknesses.

Social media have greatly empowered protesters in three key areas: public attention, evading censorship, and coordination or logistics. Old forms of gatekeeping, which depended on choke point access control to few broadcast outlets, neither work as effectively nor in the same way as they did in the past. Digital technologies provide a means by which many people can reach information that governments would rather deny them. Street protests can be coordinated on the fly. However, this does not mean that social media have exclusively empowered protesters; they have also aided governments and other factions of society by providing them with tools they can also use to their advantage. Furthermore, the

influence of social media on the practice of protest has complex and sometimes unexpected results, including weak policy impacts and threats to the sustainability of movements.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC ATTENTION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Thanks to the Internet, public attention and gatekeeping have been altered in most countries.<sup>6</sup> Take the example of Turkey, where the government, along with acquiescent media conglomerates, has been increasingly controlling broadcast media via political and financial pressure. These magnates view producing mass media to the government's liking as a means to curry favor with a powerful regime that can dispense valuable commercial contracts in areas including the energy, construction, and automotive industries.

Increasingly, mass media in Turkey, which has never been a perfect model of press freedom, has become muted in areas that were not to the government's liking, such as reporting on corruption, violence, or extralegal influence on the government's economic policies. A striking example was the aerial bombing of smugglers from Roboski, a Kurdish village near Turkey's border with Iraq, more than a year before the Gezi Park protests. This bombing, which killed thirty-four Kurdish smugglers on a routine border run, was widely known within Turkish newsrooms, but was being censored until editors received government approval to cover the event.<sup>7</sup> This story, however, broke after a single journalist, Serdar Akinan, decided he would no longer wait for government approval. Using his own money to travel to Roboski, Akinan soon found himself in the midst of a devastating scene—a grief-stricken funeral procession snaking around a hilltop with dozens of coffins being carried by wailing mourners.<sup>8</sup>

Though at the time this event was well known among the Kurdish population, who had alternative news sources and interpersonal social media, coverage of this event was completely censored in the Turkish press. Akinan snapped a picture on his cell phone, uploaded it to Instagram, and tweeted it out. In an instant, an absolute news blackout was broken as the poignant images traveled rapidly and widely through online social networks. This eventually forced mass media to cover the story, initiating perhaps the biggest public relations crisis for the government to date.

About a year after the incident, as I interviewed hundreds of protesters at

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Istanbul's Gezi Park protests, which seemingly had erupted from nowhere, journalists used similar methods to break media censorship.<sup>9</sup> Some protesters cited a moment of awakening upon seeing Akinan's photo of the Roboski funeral a year ago in their social media feeds and then turning on the television and realizing the depth of censorship.<sup>10</sup> From then on, they learned to turn to social media for more reliable news, causing Turkish citizens to be vigilant for the next instance of censorship.

## Meanwhile, CNN Turk was instead broadcasting a documentary about penguins.

When the Gezi protests erupted from a seemingly small tussle over the future of a public park—though the redevelopment of the park embodied fundamental issues of control, authority, and urban development—Turkish television stations continued to practice their established methods of censorship. Multiday clashes between protesters and police became so intense that CNN International was broadcasting live from Istanbul. Meanwhile, CNN Turk was instead broadcasting a documentary about penguins. Other Turkish television networks showed everything from cooking shows to talk programs—anything but the biggest news story of the year—as they nervously waited for direction from the government. One angry viewer moved his two televisions together: one was tuned to CNN Turk and its penguins, while the other was tuned to CNN International broadcasting amidst tear gas and clashes in Taksim. The viewer tweeted the picture out. The photo went viral, and from then on, many protesters dubbed their compliant, muted media the “penguin media.”<sup>11</sup> Over the next few weeks, as the government struggled to gain control of the narrative, protesters turned to social media—and sometimes international news outlets—to follow the protests.

Perhaps nowhere was the role of social media more iconic than in Egypt, which spawned many articles reflecting on the use of social media in social movements. However, it should be noted that social media's impact in Egypt was partly due to the fact that the country went from an extremely controlled public sphere to a fairly open one in a short period of time.<sup>12</sup> The effects of the introduction of the Internet were weaker in societies that were already more open, such as Western countries, because they did not experience the catalyst of going from a very controlled public sphere to an open, almost chaotic one in just a few years.

In Egypt, the fall of Mubarak was followed by a military takeover. Despite allowing relatively fair elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, the military soon regained full power through a coup in July 2013. During the interim year of rule under the Muslim Brotherhood, a sense of instability and chaos loomed over Egypt, with multiple, polarized groups vying for power and

influence. Ultimately, those with the guns—the military—asserted their primacy. Since then, the activists who led the initial Tahrir movement, as well as members of the Muslim Brotherhood, have been subjected to old-style repression, including lack of due process, torture, and killings.<sup>13</sup>

While repression has persisted in postrevolutionary Egypt, the online public sphere is markedly different from that of the Mubarak era. Before Mubarak's fall and the tumultuous Tahrir protests, Internet use was limited to about 35 percent of the population, and most of it was for traditional social uses—Facebook, family news, humorous videos, looking at baby animals—akin to the rhythms of online connectivity found everywhere else.<sup>14</sup> However, there was a small, organized, and determined network of activists who found this online space liberating. The “red lines” that could not be crossed by any other broadcast media could be contested at last on topics such as torture and corruption. In prerevolutionary Egypt, discussions of politics, corruption, and police violence were considered taboo and rarely openly discussed.<sup>15</sup> Activists in Egypt—as elsewhere in the Middle East—realized the political potential of online spaces early on. One activist told me that he dated the blossoming of political speech in the online Arab sphere to the late 1990s and the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels.<sup>16</sup> Many of the activists I interviewed cited the anti-Iraq war protests of 2004 and 2005 as the turning point, because it was the first time that many Arab governments permitted public protests.<sup>17</sup> This was the first time many activists met each other.

The advent of blogging and the rise of cheap cell phones with video cameras also created major changes as activists started acquiring, publishing, and circulating video evidence of the many grievances that made every day life difficult for citizens. One well-known blogger, Wael Abbas, became an investigative journalist—a profession that had been somewhat rare in Egypt before the revolution—and published videos of police corruption, torture, women being harassed on the street, traffic, bribery, and many other issues that were of great concern to the public.<sup>18</sup>

Another important shift followed the introduction of Facebook to Egypt and Tunisia, especially after its translation into Arabic in 2009, which allowed for a broad range of ordinary people to have access to its social networking tools. In their nascent form, these tools only reached small numbers—there were less than 30,000 Facebook users in Tunisia in 2009, but in just a few years, there would be millions of citizens from across the Middle East and North Africa who would be part of this new, growing platform. Along with the crucial influence of *Al Jazeera*, a Qatari-based news network, the introduction of social networking tools transformed the nature of the public sphere in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Such transformation in the public sphere has been a hopeful moment, though

not without contestation, as many governments learned from the initial, bumbling responses of the autocratic governments of Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia. In the examples above, both in Turkey and Egypt, digital infrastructure appeared to empower the initial phase of the movements by allowing people to coordinate and publicize more easily and to puncture censorship. However, over the mid- to long-term, governments learned to respond accordingly.

## **GOVERNMENTS LEARN TO RESPOND TO A MORE OPEN PUBLIC SPHERE**

Governments have learned to respond and adapt to these new information regimes. Strategies include legal push back, which especially targets higher profile dissidents; demonization of new mediums, which aims to keep supporters away from them; blocking, which often works to increase the threshold of motivation to reach “restricted” information rather than making it impossible; and flooding the space with supporters and sometimes paid “trolls,” people whose job it is to make online spaces difficult to navigate.<sup>20</sup>

For example, countries ranging from Russia to Turkey to Indonesia have adopted greater legal restrictions targeting social media use.<sup>21</sup> Some countries have made bloggers liable under the same conditions applied to mass media for restrictive defamation standards. This has specifically targeted high-profile bloggers with more than 3,000 readers daily.<sup>22</sup> In Turkey, the government has placed more power in a centralized Internet authority and less under the control of the courts, which are still under pressure from the government.<sup>23</sup> In Russia, new laws place bloggers on the same legal footing as publishers and will force Internet companies to store their data inside Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Especially when combined with repression, such levers of legal control can be effective, although more so if the government has a support base to begin with, as it does in Russia and Turkey. As with all such measures, repression of information sharing will not completely work to a government’s advantage if the public is thoroughly dissatisfied with its government. However, in cases of a polarized public, repressive measures can create an environment in which government opponents find it difficult to make headway.

Demonization is also an important tool in the arsenal of governments that wish to counter social media’s influence but are not in a position to completely block it. For example, the Turkish government employed a significant campaign of social media demonization, especially platforms used by dissidents, such as Twitter.<sup>25</sup> Although there were a few weeks in Turkey when Twitter was completely banned, the ban was not fully effective because it was relatively easy to circumvent by using widely available proxies or Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Of course, it



is possible to also ban such circumvention tools, as China does, but this is difficult for countries such as Turkey—or even Russia—that lack the same kind of large, insular social base. Additionally, countries similar to Turkey cannot ban VPNs without making it extremely difficult for many companies to operate, which, in turn, only hurts their economies.

The bans, however, and the demonization campaign—in which government officials repeatedly called social media a “force for evil,” a “destroyer of families,” a “purveyor of child pornography,” and a “haven for treason”—were aimed more to solidify government supporters than to target opponents, because the charges were so hyperbolic.<sup>26</sup> It served as a signal to its loyal base that this new medium was untrustworthy, unclean, and dangerous. This was an effective response because it did not completely thwart dissidents’ access to social media, which likely would have been a futile effort, but instead made much of its own base wary of the medium.

Many governments have adopted a multi-pronged strategy to address the new environment for gaining attention brought about by the emergence of the online sphere. First, most governments inevitably realize that it is not possible to go back to the days of total information control. When the Mubarak regime shut down all Internet, social media, and cell phone networks during the last days of his presidency, it was a clear signal of an inability to understand new realities. Within hours, activists had pierced this censorship by using smuggled satellite phones, a few remaining Internet connections, and other methods of circumvention, and had reconnected with the rest of the world, even if at a much narrower bandwidth. Modern governments rarely attempt such shutdowns. Instead, their methods are to demonize social media, so their supporters who are not already on social media remain away and those supporters who are already on social media use the platform to voice their support for the government.

Hence, activists in the post-Mubarak environment found the online public sphere much more crowded and contested. Rather than shunning social media completely, the Egyptian military council put their own “communiques” on Facebook, and tens of thousands of government supporters, some genuine, some employed, chimed in with their own points to counter and/or harass activists.<sup>27</sup> Some Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood opponents who were partial to the military

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even adopted the “protest/petition” model of the activists and collected what they said were millions of signatures against the Muslim Brotherhood-led government. They held their own Tahrir rally asking the government to step down. A few days later, the Egyptian military took over the country.

In Turkey, which has a democratically elected government and, hence, is a different case than Egypt, the political polarization and demonization of social media information, coupled with absolute control of mass media, led to striking results. According to a Pew poll, 49 percent of citizens in Turkey did not use social media to get news and information about the anti-government protests; in a striking parallel, this was almost identical the percentage who were dissatisfied with the country’s direction (51 percent).<sup>28</sup> Analysis of the content of Russian television news versus the Russian blogosphere has found that the topics covered had little overlap. For example, the most common words in the Russian political blogosphere indicated political discussion and included words such as “civil,” “Democrat,” “corruption,” “political,” “reforms,” and “consciousness,” while these terms are entirely absent in the Russian top 25 mainstream media set, replaced by purely technocratic language including “meeting,” “infrastructure,” “Moscow,” “directions,” “implementation,” “regional,” and “construction.”<sup>29</sup> Depending on where one got information, mass media, blogs, or social media, the pictures presented would be strikingly different.

In other words, many governments have recognized that they cannot fully conquer social media as an alternative source of news and public opinion formation. Governments can try to divide, polarize, and counter its influence by both joining it, with their own supporters or employees, or by beating it, via demonization and/or bans, which do not completely block motivated citizens but help keep government supporters from using and trusting it. Hence, compared to pre-2011, it is no longer just the activists who understand this medium better. This complex environment means that governments cannot maintain control via old repressive methods, but new forms of control are still emerging.

## **NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE AND EVALUATING CHARGES OF “SLACKTIVISM”**

A common criticism of the Internet’s role in society has been that it leads to “slacktivism”—the tendency to click on links or like posts rather than taking concrete actions or steps.<sup>30</sup> However, dividing the concept of “actions” into online and offline spheres often misses the point of social movements. As Charles Tilly, a leading scholar in the field, argues, at their core, social movements are demonstrative in that they display worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.<sup>31</sup> Worthiness is about convincing people of the rightness of a cause. Unity is a signal



of determination; numbers illustrate public support; and commitment is indicative of the ability to persist and potentially disrupt. Hence, participants' acts within a protest movement should be judged on the basis of whether they can achieve those goals, rather than on an artificial division between online and offline or between virtual and "the streets." In fact, the widespread notion that protests and actions in the streets work better than online social media movements does not necessarily hold—movements with large street actions can and do falter, often because they lose the fight for worthiness in the public eye. The impact of online, symbolic acts depends on a great many factors, including the political opportunity structure, the willingness and ability of the state to enforce repression, and elite cohesion. Street actions are also not magic wands for social movements, despite the "asphalt fetishism" that sometimes infuses these discussions. Privileging a call "to the streets" as if that were an inevitable right answer to all movement challenges often takes place, rather than an evaluation of movement trajectories and impacts in their complexity.

Of Tilly's first three considerations for social movements, online symbolic acts may go the longest way in terms of "worthiness." For example, the LGBT movement in the United States has waged multiple campaigns online, including one in which Facebook participants were urged to change their profile pictures to a version of the Human Rights Campaign "marriage equality" icon. As Facebook's data scientists noted, this was a viral campaign with great participation.<sup>32</sup> Correspondingly, support for gay marriage among young people has been increasing steadily over the years.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this correspondence is not enough to prove causality, but it is noteworthy that this movement has not recently employed other traditional means of protest action. In a more striking example, a recent survey shows that in one year the notion that the criminal justice system may be biased to the detriment of African Americans has doubled its support among 18 to 29 year-olds—an astounding jump in such attitudinal measures—as multiple online campaigns, including ones about the deaths of teenagers Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Missouri, went viral online.<sup>34</sup> Once again, these are not conclusive claims to direct causal links, which are difficult to make in cultural or attitudinal shifts, but it seems reasonable to conjecture that people do change their minds both through being introduced to new information and, perhaps more importantly, symbolic actions from peers observed online.

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Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA), which called for structural modifications to the Internet to increase the ability to censor copyright violations, were first presented, protesters organized online to black out major websites and flood Congress members' offices with calls. This led to an almost overnight political shift within Congress, as hundreds of members who had previously supported the bills switched positions. In this particular instance, the strength of numbers as displayed through social media was convincing.

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Depending on context, online acts can either signal strong commitment or fail to do so. For example, Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei's repeated open defiance to restrictions of his speech on Twitter displays strong commitment; while the simple act of typing may be easy for many, the act of sending tweets under an authoritarian regime is not. However, it is also true that online infrastructure can cause certain acts that previously signaled stronger commitment to now signal less. For example, the

aforementioned SOPA and PIPA calls were orchestrated through the landing pages of major sites such as Google, Tumblr, and others. During this time, when one first accessed the Google page, there was an option to send an automated, pre-recorded phone message, for free and over the computer, to a congressional representative. Because the barriers to action were significantly lowered, in the future, such an automated phone call may not convey the same level of commitment as a traditional phone call to a Congress member in the past. Further, future actions of this kind may become less effective as politicians adjust to interpreting signals generated with more ease through the affordances of digital infrastructure.

## **COORDINATION AND LOGISTICS: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND EASY GROUP FORMATION**

Throughout history, coordination and repression of protests and dissent have been impacted by the imbalance of communication capabilities between protesters and law enforcement. For example, while I was interviewing participants in the Gezi protests, I would often have no clue what was happening even a hundred feet away from me unless I checked Twitter on my cell phone. After some effort to find the right people to follow, this provided an eerie sense of aerial, ambient awareness of the situation. Without augmented reality tools, the chaos of the protest itself makes it extremely hard to get a clear sense of the environment. The added confusion from tear gas, people running, and the police charging compounds this

difficulty. Before digital connectivity for the masses, the police had a largely one-sided advantage with radios, helicopters, and specialized training. Now protesters, too, can coordinate on the fly, and do so quite effectively.

Social media's impact on coordination and logistics is not only limited to coming together during a protest and being informed of the whole surrounding area. News gathering and information distribution can be seen as organizational challenges that have been greatly altered by the Internet. During the Gezi protests, four young college students acting as volunteers formed a "citizen news network" in response to the mass media failure a year earlier during the bombing of the Roboski villagers. They coordinated a massive citizen news sharing and verification network that effectively functioned as a viable, alternative media source. I have observed the workings of this effort, which would have taken dozens of trained professionals and infrastructure in the pre-digital era, and found that the young students used ordinary digital equipment and a coffee shop with free Wi-Fi. The network @140journos effectively curated, collated, and verified information from and about protests as well as other political events that would otherwise not have made it to mainstream television in Turkey.

This extraordinary ability to coordinate also extends to logistics in surprising ways. In Egypt, three young women and a young man, only two of whom were physically in Cairo, effectively coordinated the logistics and operations of ten field hospitals during the height of violent clashes in Tahrir Square in November 2011, which resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds injured. Managing the supplies, volunteers, and the injured among these field hospitals was no easy task, especially given the chaotic situation and the stressful environment for volunteer doctors and nurses. Although social media was used as a key tool for requesting supplies, it often only added to the confusion, as people who had not known whether an order had been filled would repeat prior days' requests. By itself, social media does not automatically facilitate easier organizing of logistics, and can lead to confusion as well. But, as with the case of Turkey's @140journos, this logistical challenge was quickly remedied by a few volunteers who stepped up to organize supplies for these field hospitals. Within a few days, with the help of Twitter, Google spreadsheets, phone calls, and mobile messaging apps like Viber, these four young people had successfully taken over supply logistics.<sup>35</sup>

Similar stories can be told of other recent protests. The largely southern European "Indignados" protests, which took place in different forms within Spain, Italy, and Greece, were mostly organized and coordinated online. During 2011, in an explosion of youth anger in the United Kingdom, young people used messaging programs such as Blackberry Messenger to inform each other of local situations, dangers, and opportunities during a month of unrest.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, Occupy pro-

testers in the United States often relied on social media to amplify their message and to organize.<sup>37</sup> In country after country, protests and social unrest are coordinated, organized, and enabled through digital media.

However, such empowerment through digitally-fueled organizational capacity also creates surprising weaknesses for movements.

## ORGANIZING QUICKLY AND AT SCALE THROUGH DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE: A POTENTIAL WEAKNESS?

In order to better understand the complex consequences of digital infrastructure on social movement trajectories, I propose a “capabilities and signals” approach. With capabilities, I am adopting Amartya Sen’s “capabilities” approach from development economics and applying it to political movements.<sup>38</sup> Sen’s approach calls for a look at capabilities—functionalities an actor can undertake—rather than outputs as the true measure of development or progress. In human development, this means focusing on indicators such as literacy, health, and well-being. It gives people agency and the capability to carry out further acts—as opposed to GDP, which merely measures economic output. With signals, I am referring to the idea that protests are, among many other things, *signals of capacity* to power, especially with regard to capacity for disruption, negotiation, and the challenging of power.

In protest movements, this means focusing on the capabilities that are developed, rather than what participants can do at any one moment, and the signals those capabilities can send. An examination of movement capabilities that focuses on outcomes misses the profound changes brought about by technology. By allowing protesters to scale up quickly, without years of preparation, digital infrastructure acts as a scaffold to movements that mask other weaknesses, especially collective capacities in organizing, decisionmaking, and general work dynamics that only come through sustained periods of working together.

Hence, digital technologies certainly add to protester capabilities in many dimensions, but this comes with an unexpected trade-off: Digital infrastructure helps undertake functions that would have otherwise required more formal and long-term organizing which, almost as a side effect, help build organizational capacity to respond to long-term movement requirements. Working together to take care of the logistics of a movement, however tedious, also builds trust and an ability to collaborate effectively. Consequently, many recent movements enter into the most contentious phase, the potential confrontation with authorities, without any prior history of working together or managing pivotal moments under stress.<sup>39</sup> They are able to do this because digital infrastructure, as described above, creates shortcuts that allow a few people to quickly manage tasks that would have otherwise taken many people a long time to execute. At first, this appears to be an

advantage. However, over the long term, this has become a significant obstacle for many movements.

Another important aspect of many recent protests is that they are self-described as “leaderless,” and even when they allow participation by institutional groups, decisionmaking tends to be informal, and key tasks are performed by ad hoc committees of volunteers that are largely horizontalist in structure, without explicit hierarchies. This process, and the desire for this style of protesting, predates the Internet and perhaps can be compared to the “be-ins”—described as a “union of love and activism,” which involved gathering at a park and reading poetry, among other activities—of the antiwar movement in the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> However, technology has brought a new dimension to protester desires for horizontalism by allowing ad hoc organizing to address collaborative needs in an unprecedented fashion, with little to no prior experience of working together.

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It is crucially important to note that this particular style of organization—ad hoc, leaderless, participatory, and horizontalist—is often a desire expressed by protesters. Again and again, in interviews in multiple countries and settings, and in the public writings of many protesters, there has been great emphasis placed on the value of participatory organizing that resists formalization and institutionalization.<sup>41</sup> Many protesters see the protest space, especially those that incorporate persistent occupation of public space, as a crucial celebration of human values. They place great importance on expressive acts of caring, non-market interactions (setting up libraries or food kitchens), equality, and resistance to corrupt, traditional politics. Without digital technologies, it may have been much harder to organize such communal spaces with so little organizational backbone. However, the same technological tools that make it possible to carry out beneficial acts of decentralization also allow protesters to decentralize to an ad hoc system and run their protests—and when applicable, their protest camps—without dealing with the inevitable tensions around deliberation at scale, delegation of representation, and negotiation with authorities.

Recent social movements are reliant on digital infrastructure and infused with protester desires for what is often called prefigurative politics—creating spaces of alternative existence in resistance to and the rejection of markets and authorities. This begets movements that often lack the organizational capacity, formalized or not, of older movements.<sup>42</sup> Older movements, such as the civil rights movement,

were forced to take the time to develop these skills early on, but could later use them to negotiate and pivot through important moments of stress and pushback from the authorities.

For example, my research has revealed that this capacity weakness has often emerged in some movements towards the end of street protests, when the initial energy has waned and governments have begun to employ more repressive

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methods, such as what happened in the Gezi protests in Turkey, which were forcibly dispersed. Sometimes, the stress may come from multiple factors, such as weather turning less favorable for protesting, as with the Occupy movement. There are multiple reasons that protests cannot be sustained over many years and often run into energy depletion within a few months, especially under adversarial conditions. In such moments, protesters accustomed to organizing in an ad hoc manner through digital technologies or via completely

horizontal methods, like assemblies, often find themselves unable to respond to government actions or to decide their next course of action.

Toward the end of the Gezi Park protests, for example, the government requested a delegation to negotiate on behalf of the protesters. Some protesters felt that this was a disingenuous move, while others were willing to negotiate.<sup>43</sup> However, the park had no formal leadership mechanism that was universally recognized by all protesters. A loose coordinating committee had taken to running many aspects of the movement, but lacking formal recognition, it also lacked formal legitimacy. There was much contestation over who should serve as delegates, and it ended up being the government that, on two occasions, invited different cohorts of delegates to represent the park. The first was composed of fairly irrelevant people within the movement and was seen as less than legitimate by movement participants. The second invitation was extended to people who appeared to have had a long record of involvement with the movement and were active in highly visible roles, which thus garnered more approval. However, this too had no formal mechanism for recognition. In the end, the second delegation was unable to negotiate or devise a strategic plan to move forward. Instead, they met in Ankara with a government delegation, which included Turkish prime minister Recep Erdogan and leading AKP party members, and then took what was said back to Gezi park in Istanbul via a video link.<sup>44</sup>

Lacking formal organizations or an informal institutionalized decisionmaking



process, the Gezi Park movement broke up into small groups to discuss the matter, which took many hours. In the end, no real resolution was reached because some formal institutions that had taken part in the protests decided to end them, leaving behind a symbolic tent, while many individuals and some other collectives wanted to stay. This caused even more confusion, and the government moved in shortly after with a massive police presence and disbanded the camp by force.


In this scenario, the Gezi Park movement was unable to signal further capacity to disrupt or threaten the government, and its impressive ability to organize a protest was not necessarily a sign of further capacity to pose an electoral threat. In fact, in local elections held less than a year after the protests, the incumbent AKP emerged victorious with 43.3 percent of the vote, and Erdogan was reelected president with 51.7 percent of the vote soon after.<sup>45</sup> This was followed by a period in which AKP solidified its control of mass media and branches of government. However, the trajectory here is presented as an example, since the protesters, at least amongst themselves, possessed the tools to counter censorship to a degree.

To understand the effect of this type of organizing in comparison with the past, consider the “March on Washington,” which wanted to remain leaderless, operate in a fully horizontalist fashion, and be organized on-the-fly. Such a large march may never have coalesced in 1963 if the movement had completely eschewed leaders or organizations simply because *it could not happen at a practical level*. Technology’s affordances matter in what people can do and with how much effort. Once the march happened, it was no longer just a march of thousands of people, but rather, it signaled to those in power that an organizational capacity could threaten their interests, and that it came equipped with the political capacity to negotiate and strategize. In contrast, the massive Occupy marches that took place globally in over 900 cities on 15 October 2011 dwarfed most historical precedents in terms of size, yet were organized with approximately two weeks’ notice. They have not, however, led to discernible policy changes, certainly not anywhere proportionate to their energy and footprint. It was not the size of the protest but the capacity it signaled that mattered, and technological affordances that make it easier to put on sizable protests without similar levels of organizational capacity or experience have altered that signature.

Hence, digital infrastructure allows movements to carry out protests with the same size and energy as past protests but without similar organizational capacity. While this appears a shortcut for protests, it also engenders weaknesses, as these protests do not signal the same level of capacity as previous protests, and do not necessarily pose the same threat to governments and power.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, digital technologies have led to an unstable interregnum, where the challengers are empowered in disruption but perhaps have also been paradoxically weakened by some of their superior abilities. This is not simply because new technology allows for the bypassing of certain strategic steps, but because these steps—institutional and formal politics—are ones that protesters have been desiring to sidestep for decades. Hence, this is less a narrative of technology allowing one path, and more a story of convergent outcomes where technological affordances have intertwined with protesters' desires.

In country after country and under different circumstances, protesters have hit similar roadblocks. Further, governments have learned new ways of responding to threats posed by social media by both joining and beating the medium and developing new methods of repression and control. However, these new methods, especially of information control, can no longer function the way full-scale repression of broadcast media could operate previously, leading to polarized societies and constant tension. Examples of such countries in which there is a growing online sphere which is not fully controlled by the government include Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Egypt, and Bahrain. Meanwhile, in more open democratic countries, such as the United States, Spain, Italy, and the United Kingdom, huge street protests brought on by austerity policies and inequality have not yet resulted in fundamental changes to these policies, perhaps because these protests—while large, determined, and energetic—do not signal the same capacity to threaten, disrupt, or replace governments. Therefore, instability reigns in many countries, with neither the government able to completely repress dissent nor protesters able to fully impact policy. The story is clearly far from over: Both governments and dissidents are continuing to learn and adapt, and technological affordances are evolving as well. As always, this is a story, likely still in its early stages, of human yearnings and desires intertwined with technologies and tools. Interesting, challenging, and unsettling times await social movements and the governments they would like to challenge. 

## NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Berrada et al., "World Protests 2006–2013" (working paper, Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York: September 2013), [http://cadtm.org/IMG/pdf/World\\_Protests\\_2006-2013-Final-2.pdf](http://cadtm.org/IMG/pdf/World_Protests_2006-2013-Final-2.pdf).

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<sup>5</sup> Debora L. Spar, *Ruling the Waves: From the Compass to the Internet, a History of Business and Politics along the Technological Frontier* (Orlando, FL: Mariner Books, 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> Interviews with the author, 2012 to 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with the author, 2013 to 2014. Much of this section is composed of analysis from hundreds of interviews conducted by the author over several years. Exact dates and quotes are not provided for most interviews to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

<sup>10</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, "Is there a Social-Media Fueled Protest Style? An Analysis From #jan25 to #geziparki," *Technosociology (blog)*, 1 June 2013, <http://technosociology.org/?p=1255>.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with the author over several years; Lynch (2013).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with author, 2011; Lynch (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with author, 2011.

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