Chapter 7
Contingency and Hybridity in the Study of Digital Advocacy Networks: Implications of the Egyptian Protest Movement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes an analytic approach for the study of ICTs in contentious politics and human rights advocacy. By applying the analytical frames of contingency and hybridity to study design, this approach aims to promote empirical analyses, strengthen data comparability, and improve understanding into how human rights activists strategically combine digital and grounded communications to respond to complex and changing environments. The authors explore this analytic approach and its implications through a close analysis of the Front to Defend Egyptian Protesters (FDEP), a Cairo-based initiative utilizing multiple digital media to mobilize support teams for arrested protesters and work towards their release. Applying the analytical frames of contingency and hybridity to FDEP activities in 2010, prior to the uprisings now commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, the chapter observes a number of opportunities for targeted data collection. It closes by observing the challenges and opportunities this poses to the contemporary study of digital activism.

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INTRODUCTION

Research exploring the relationship between human rights and information and communication technologies (ICTs) has developed significantly in the last decade. Following early optimism about the role of digital media in promoting freedom (Brophy and Halpin 1999), careful study has attended to the role of ICTs in monitoring human rights (Lannon, 2009); the role of ICTs in instrumentally promoting human rights by generally strengthening individuals’ capacities (Hamel, 2010); and the role of ICTs in specific relation to the freedoms of expression and access to information (Dutton et al, 2010).

Within this context, increasing attention has also been paid to the role of ICTs in contentious politics, and how access to information and digital media influences power struggles over human rights and processes of democratization. Driven largely by the challenges innovative advocacy and communication practices pose to traditional theoretical models, the resulting body of research enjoys contributions from a variety of disciplines, and is as eclectic as it is dynamic. The application of multiple and divergent analytical methods to novel empirical phenomenon has resulted in a variety of new concepts and subfields, each with their own insights and assumptions. As objects of study, “digital activism,” “new new social movements,” “dot-causes,” “liberation technologies” and “cyber movements” (to name a few) represent significantly distinct analytical approaches and traditions (Breindl, 2010; Clark and Nuno, 2006; Scott & Street, 2001; Custard, 2008; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009; Boyle and Schmierbach, 2009; Diamond, 2010; Fleming, 2002; Joyce, 2010), yet often attempt to account for the same empirical phenomena, with each exploring phenomena as dramatically different as Chinese web journalism and citizen election observation in Africa (to take just two of the many example in Diamond’s (2010) sweeping account).

This eclecticism may prove to be theoretically productive, insofar as it represents convergence on a common and clearly delineated object of study. In our attempt to approach that object, and notwithstanding the rich diversity of activities of which it is composed, we follow Joyce in using the term “digital activism,” “because it is exhaustive and exclusive—the best term to discuss all instances of social and political campaigning practice that use digital network infrastructure” (2010, pp ix).

The broad and heterogeneous collection of phenomena to which “digital activism” refers may benefit from a broad and heterogeneous collection of analytical approaches. And while there is significant potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration and insight, there is also a great need for methodological refinement, both at the level of individual research initiatives and at the broader level of a common research agenda.

Firstly, and at the register of individual research initiatives, there is a need for more empirical analysis and more rigorous study design to move the digital activism research beyond anecdotal evidence and inspirational case studies. As articulated by prominent scholars in the recent report “Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics,” produced by U.S. Institute of Peace and George Washington University:

Research design matters. Many claims currently made about the effects of new media are blind to hidden variables, confuse output with impact, or assume causal relationships that may be spurious. The first step must therefore be to get the research design right. The lack of data, a problem that is addressed later in this report, can be overcome (i.e., through better processing of online information in multiple languages), but data will only help if used in the right ways, with careful attention to which questions they can help answer. (Aday et al, 2010, p. 6).