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

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ABSTRACT

This article 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 promotes empirical analyses, strengthens data comparability, and improves 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 toward their release. By 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 authors observe a number of opportunities for targeted data collection. The authors close by observing the challenges and opportunities this poses to the contemporary study of digital activism.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Empirical Research, Human Rights, ICTs, Protest Movements, Social Movements, Study Design

AUTHORS’ NOTE

The research for this article was finalized at the end of January 2010, when seismic shifts in Tunisia were just beginning to resonate in the streets of Cairo. The 18 days and presidential ouster that followed were not anticipated by this article, but well illustrate some of its core assumptions and arguments.

Most obviously, the Egyptian uprising underscored the necessary relationship between digital communication and grounded realities. From international Facebook advice on how to handle teargas, to tweets asking for medicine and blankets in Tahrir square, social media behavior consistently responded to threats, exigencies and opportunities in the offline world.

Just as clearly and closely related, was the predominance of hybrid information paths that crossed the boundaries of geography and media.
and acted as the battleground in the struggle to control information. In the days preceding January 25th, Egyptian security agents were reported to be touring Cairo cafes, changing the channels of televisions away from Al Jazeera broadcasts of citizen video that had been smuggled out of Tunisia. When the full internet blackout finally came, activists broke through by physically transporting citizen video on hard drives and word-of-mouth messages to one of the last nodes of activist controlled access to the World Wide Web. These complementary examples well illustrate the interplay of contingency and hybridity described in this article. It is also worth noting that the latter activity was directly influenced by the iterative practice of the FDEP described below, and reinforces this article’s conception of iterative learning processes and embeddedness in autopoietic networks.

As this article goes to press, Egypt’s future remains largely uncertain. Also uncertain is whether the prominence of digital media in the Arab Spring has done anything to improve our understanding of digital activism. Academic debate continues to entertain the question of whether or not the Egyptian uprising was “a Facebook revolution,” which illustrates just how much we need a more sophisticated analytical model. This article suggests two analytical frames with which to develop such a model.

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 & 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, Dopatka, Hills, Law, & Nash, 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 & Nuno, 2006; Scott & Street, 2001; Custard, 2008; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009; Boyle & 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, p. 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
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