

Critique and Resistance: The Role of Social Media in Conflict and Protests

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Abstract

When one thinks of protest, revolution, and other kinds of political participation, images of everything ranging from Tahrir Square to Tiananmen Square flash in the mind. In an Indian context, images of satyagraha and the various marches that have adorned the history of this nation surface. For a long time that has been our conception of people coming together in the face of injustice and oppression. Barring the queues and crowds on polling dates, the space of the protest is the archetypal symbol of political participation. As participatory digital culture creeps up steadily and rapidly within both widespread usage and our cultural consciousness, it becomes crucial to reassess the space for dissent, protest, and political participation in general. In a time where wearing ideology and opinions on one's sleeve comes in the form of tweets, memes, and emojis, what role does social media play in the organisation, education and, amplification of resistance and dissent? This article will draw from the insights of scholars such as An Xiao Mina and Tala Majzoub to look at events of resistance such as the Arab Spring, Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hong Kong protests, and political engagements within India. The goal here is to situate the role of social media, with regard to events from around the world and India, in establishing a space for oppressed voices away from the conventional spaces which can often be controlled and or "enforced" by the powers that be. A space that not only facilitates but encourages political participation and promises to subvert the long-calcified structures of power and modes of struggle.

Keywords: Protest, Social Media, Memes, Censorship, Discontent

The idea of public participation is contained in an archetypal image of mass mobilisation, from Tahrir Square to Tiananmen Square, or in an Indian context, enshrined in the various marches dating back to the independence struggle. This article revolves around a changed landscape of resistance and dissent that has been birthed out of the rise of the Internet. A space for voices to become untethered to the physical bodies that have been so emblematic of protests; bodies that could be brutalised, maimed or imprisoned. But what of the anonymous, disembodied voices congregating on social media platforms, expressing opinions and organising mass mobilisation? How does one grapple with this new space of political participation and what consequences does it have for the interplay between resistance and oppression? Does the online discourse have any actual significance for the movement on ground?

Communities of Cat People

In her book *Memes to Movements* (2019), An Xiao Mina talks in the initial chapter about cats and dogs. She explores how people who loved cats were always around but because of the culturally stigmatised nature of cats and the occultist baggage their image carried, there was no community of cat lovers and indeed it seemed like only reclusive and crazy people owned cats. Normal people had dogs. As the Internet began to grow and as an increasing number of mobile phones began to sport cameras, people began to share their private moments, only to discover that there were many other ‘normal’ people who had pet cats. An Xiao begins the book with this section to outline a fundamental role of digital media. The large-scale networked communication afforded and encouraged by the Internet gave rise to communities built around commonalities where common interests and issues could be voiced, shared and amplified. Consider the chain of

revolutions and protests that are collectively referred to as the Arab Spring, in this context. There was nothing fundamentally new to the events that transpired late December of 2010, throughout 2011 and beyond. Discontent and uneasiness about the excesses of several regimes in the region were simmering just under the surface. Protest, however, is like a cat, stigmatised and discouraged within civil society, until people realise that their neighbours are troubled by the same issues that are plaguing them. This realisation came immediately preceding wholesale revolutions. This realisation came mediated through digital media. Democracy is not a word commonly associated with the region, and yet, the unprecedented scale of public participation hinted at least a desire for something of that nature. While scholars have cautioned ever since the Arab Spring that social media did not singularly cause the uprisings, even the most traditionally trained social scientists must grudgingly admit that it was at least a significant catalyst. It would be best to look at some movements to get a sense of what role social media plays in acts of mass resistance. We should start with what is perhaps the first instance of a large-scale social media driven protest.

Discontent in the Arab World

Khamis and Vaughn (2011) in quoting other scholars have made an interesting observation about the state of media in the Arab world. They observed a ‘perplexing paradox’ where there were many dissenting voices and alternative opinions in a ‘vibrant and active media arena’, and yet there was no actual change or political upheaval. This permissible dissent worked essentially like ‘safety valves’, which allowed people to experience a sort of political catharsis, where they vented their anger so it wouldn’t snowball into a large-scale movement. However, this ‘vibrant media arena’ was also a curated one as traditional media was largely state controlled. It did not

allow for granularities of individual discontent. Resistance by nature cannot happen in spaces facilitated by those that are being resisted.

Simmering Tensions — Egypt

A spark that was ignited in Tunisia found firewood in Egypt. Owing to the rapid Internet penetration, Egypt had a very active online population, ‘frequented by banned parties, radical fundamentalists, investigative journalists, and disaffected citizens’ (Howard & Hussain, 2011). The flashpoint came in the form of the murder of Khaled Said, a blogger. Just as how the self-immolation of a street vendor Sidi Bouazizi triggered widespread protests in Tunisia, the murder of Khaled Said by the hands of the police jolted Egyptian civil society out of political catatonia. Howard and Hussain quote Doug Adams when they claim that such events cause a ‘cognitive liberation’ in the masses where ‘in their shared sympathy... networks of family and friends came to realise that they shared common grievances too’. Traditional media was slow and tardy to respond to these excesses and injustices, both in Tunisia and Egypt.

Conventionally, despots would expect a small amount of outcry that can be either ignored or quashed. Social media afforded the space for this anger and discontent to not just be vented but to be amplified when shared with people who had their own discontents and critiques of power. After the death of Said, Wael Ghonim, a Google employee from Egypt created a Facebook group to memorialise Said and highlight the brutality and injustice of the state machinery. This page ‘We are all Khaled Said’ became a hub for dissemination of information and mobilisation of masses. The unique position of the Internet was becoming clear. As Ghonim said in an interview with CNN in 2011, ‘If you want a free society, just give them internet access’. The true nature of this freedom came when the state imposed a complete Internet blackout. Not only were some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) deliberately delaying the blackout, but also through external

help and ingenuity, tech savvy citizens were disseminating ways to get around this blackout by setting up dial-up connections and satellite phones to continue to let the whole world know what was happening. On top of this, the sudden loss of Internet connection prompted even more citizens to come out on the streets, fearing some sort of massacre (Howard and Hussain, 2011). Digital media in this region, according to Howard and Hussain, ‘helped to turn individualised, localised, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action’.

Iran — A Decade Later

This transformative dimension of social media has also played an important part in the ongoing protests in Iran. The morality police for years have committed atrocities, and it has never been a secret that the Iranian establishment’s treatment of women is appalling. And yet, when Mahsa Amini was beaten to death by the morality police, the simmering tensions came to a boil as people congregated online to voice their dissent and abhorrence for the callous and unjust state. Women posted videos of burning their hijabs, people live streamed marches and demonstrations. This was aimed partially to eliminate a deep-seated fear of standing up to power, which citizens in authoritarian states often internalise, and partially to reinforce and validate the movement through international sympathy and support. Khamis and Vaughn quoting Daron Acemoglu point out that the reason people often hesitate from participating in protests in authoritarian states is the prospect of a failed protest. Digital media in allowing for a certain kind of participation online before people pour out in the streets serves as a testing ground of sorts where people can see that enough people believe for the protest to actually work, and by extension be safe. Digital media is of course no guarantor of safety as is abundantly clear in the case of protests in Iran

where despite tremendous traffic and attention online, people are continually being forcefully suppressed on the streets.

In the Face of Absolute Censorship — Chinese Social Media

As was clear in Egypt, censorship and blackouts don't really help to suppress voices on the Internet, often making things much worse. But what of states that have championed the granularities of censorship? Consider Chinese social media. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by all accounts has had a complete chokehold on both traditional and digital media under its Golden Shield Project, which it implemented in 2000. The sole aim of censorship, according to An Xiao Mina (2019), is 'to keep communities in the dark about what they might collectively believe...' and 'authorities ensure that people remain in a state of ignorance, receiving only a singular view...'. The way Chinese censorship works is, instead of imposing a blanket ban, specific keywords and issues (such as any mention of Tiananmen Square) are suppressed and prosecuted while the rest is allowed to flourish. An Xiao Mina calls this a modern day 'bread and circuses' employed by authoritarian regimes to keep people distracted. In 2011, when Tunisians were criticising the misappropriation of funds by showing videos of the presidential aeroplane, the state immediately took down the entire hosting site. This disruption caused even more people to engage with the issue. People who were previously not very politically active suddenly started to notice as the state 'disrupted the circus'. She claims this is exactly what China wanted to avoid and 'designed' its censorship accordingly. In as censored a digital landscape as China's, people have come up with creative ways to voice dissent and participate in covert demonstrations of solidarity.

Critique and dissent remain active on Chinese social media in the form of puns and memes such as the famous 'grass mud horse', a folkloric llama-like animal from the Gobi Desert and the

‘river crab’. On Chinese social media, the grass mud horse represents freedom and the river crab represents authoritarianism and censorship. Chinese citizens use these figures to tell tales of oppression. They get around without getting censored using the tonality inherent in Mandarin as the same characters when emphasised differently can mean different things. It appears that no matter how crisp or efficient oppression is, ambiguous references, symbolisms and puns always provide a fertile ground for voicing dissent. Due to the inherent participatory nature of social media, much like folklore, no singular person can be held accountable for what is essentially the shared cultural capital of a community. This came into focus when in 2011, following a call to action by an anonymous comic artist, people posted pictures of themselves in dark sunglasses. This seemed completely random and almost impossible for censors to catch. The sunglasses movement was in support of the blind lawyer and activist Chen Guangcheng. The meme spread like wildfire to the point where there was a flash mob featuring supporters donning black sunglasses in Longyang, which is near where Guangcheng was being imprisoned. An online movement materialised on the streets.

The Farmers of Twitter

In 2020, Indian farmers gathered outside Delhi to protest against three new laws that they deemed to be unjust and exploitative. Though protests have become a mainstay in the Indian consciousness lately, there was something quite unique about this one. Learning from the fact that traditional media had been used to demonise and discredit the anti Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)-National Register of Citizens (NRC) protests, the farmers began to directly engage the masses through social media while simultaneously gatekeeping and booing away television reporters. Television journalists in India are believed to act largely as state apologists, disregarding or demonising all signs of dissent or protest. The protestors were quick to identify

this trend that had been emerging for a few years and systematically blocked reporters from covering the protest, assuming they would distort the story. This allowed them to control the narrative to a great extent. Even when there were reports of violence on 26 January 2021, the protest managed to survive the ensuing blame and vilification by presenting their side of the story, unmediated by an allegedly biased media. Since a majority of the farmers participating in the protest hailed from the state of Punjab, they were able to leverage the large Sikh and Punjabi diasporic communities composed of relatives and acquaintances. The support welling from these diasporic communities, both in the form of crowds and tweets, created international awareness of the issue and instances of abuse of power by the police. This was also pivotal in spreading the protestors' side of the story and countering attempts to discredit the movement.

International Support and Protesting a War

The dissolution of physical borders afforded by the Internet has been a game changer, from the Arab Spring to Iranian Protests, Farmers' Protest and the Russian invasion. Garnering support far beyond domestic borders has proven critical to the survival of movements and public morale. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is an excellent example of this. On 24 February 2022, Russia unceremoniously barged into Ukraine for a 'Special Military Exercise'. Those in denial and those who were convinced of imminent invasion alike remained glued to TV screens and Twitter, looking at crumbling buildings and desolate cries of ordinary people. Ukraine was about to be wiped off the face of the map. Then something extraordinary happened. The same hapless and desolate voices turned into battle cries. As of writing this, Kiev still stands, Russian troops are being pushed back and territory is being reclaimed. It was immediately evident within the first few days of the invasion that Ukraine was dominating the information war, which ran parallel to the one on ground. Even as Ukraine was being bombarded, it was suddenly the paragon of

sovereignty, freedom and the very idea of a modern state. Plastered across screens were classical images of David vs Goliath.

Threats to sovereignty aren't anything new, therefore even as the world continues to root for what was once a very less discussed corner of the world, a question emerges — how was Ukraine able to pull this off? There can be no doubt about the competence of the Ukrainian military strategists in orchestrating an impressive counter-offensive but in only looking at this, we run the risk of ignoring a key dimension of this resistance — that of public participation, especially via social media. When the Taliban took over Kabul in 2021 after the hurried egress of U.S. troops, they did so without firing a single bullet.¹ Public will, morale and by extension the mobilisation of civilians was altogether missing. As far as ordinary people were concerned, it seemed like there was nothing to resist or perhaps they felt like they had no agency in the fate of their country. Cyberactivism, civic engagement and citizen journalism are fundamental to protests according to Khamis and Vaughn (2011). Although not a protest in the traditional sense, the apparent difference in military strength, the brutalisation of civilians and the fervour for freedom that has emerged from this conflict combined with Russian propaganda has generated abstract links to an image of a people's uprising. Ordinary Ukrainians exchanging critical information, organising strategies to resist the Russian attack coupled with acts of citizen journalism through smartphone cameras have been crucial to the survival of Ukrainian cities. The Russian propaganda machinery has often been characterised as a 'firehose of falsehoods', alluding to the voluminous information consisting of partial or complete fiction that is peddled through every channel of communication available. The initial strategy was simple: to challenge the legitimate government in Ukraine, labelling it as a Nazi regime while legitimising Putin as a noble saviour of the oppressed. The 'weaker' Ukraine would collapse in a matter of days and

Zelenskyy would flee much like Ghani did in Afghanistan. This would have been a near infallible propaganda strategy before social media became viable and pervasive. While traditional media outlets can often be censored, coaxed, ignored, labelled, and threatened, social media is a beast of its own. If the propaganda and censorship machinery in China, which is in order of magnitude more sophisticated, cannot impose itself completely on the very social media it claims to control, there was no hope for the Russian firehose. While it is generally believed that Kremlin's 'Nazi' rhetoric at the outset of the invasion was meant primarily for generating consensus amongst Russian citizens, the propagandists failed to account for the transnational operability of social media platforms. We now see even those entrenched deep within the propaganda echo chambers grow restless as the streets of Russian cities overflow with protestors condemning the invasion.

Like in Egypt and more recently in Iran, and like the cryptic memes on Chinese social media, suddenly perceptions of the conflict were no longer dependent on what was being reported. It was videos and images shot by Ukrainian citizens and the soldiers on the ground, countering Kremlin's every claim about the nobility of the 'special military exercise'. These were then retweeted and amplified by the global community, making them impossible to ignore. The globality of social media allowed images of destroyed tanks and Russian soldiers to pierce through the din of propaganda deep within Russian cities, stirring them out of their detached sentiments about the war and onto the streets. Acts of cyberactivism and hacking have been employed by anonymous groups from within and without Ukraine to target Russian-affiliated Twitter accounts and news stations. This in turn has caused unease and discontent within Russians and sparked protests.

Financial Aid, Strategies and Trolls

The situation in Ukraine has highlighted yet another, perhaps more concrete dimension to the significance of social media. It has been functioning as an interface for services such as SignMyRocket, which add a memetic layer to the global financial aid to Ukraine. People can pay a certain amount of money to get anything of their choice painted on weapons and ammunition aimed at Russian troops. The funds go towards supporting Ukraine. The Super Bonker 9000, a 2S7 Pion continues the trend of assigning silly meme names to ostensibly 'serious' objects such as a 203mm cannon. This has been done multiple times in the past, most notably when a British Autonomous Underwater Vehicle was named 'Boaty McBoatface'. The fact that memes are involved does not make light of the gravity of the issue. Actual help is going to people who need it. Memes provide a space for laughing together through a painful and terrifying period.

Social media is trite with trolls and propagandists creating a very deliberate clutter, a sheet of noise to confound real issues. To combat this, volunteers from all around the world have come together to form a loose and unofficial collective on Twitter called 'North Atlantic Fellas Organization (NAFO)'. They are at the forefront of the current information war between Russia and Ukraine. Every claim by Russian officials or sympathisers is countered and trolled by an army of people with a version of the Shiba Inu meme dog as their profile picture. Memes are a way of 'doing culture' on social media. They are a means of 'performing' one's identity, allegiances and ideological positions. While most commonly recognised as image macros that are meant to be funny, almost every conversation on social media and every discursive position is potentially a meme. This is precisely why when Mikhail Ulyanov tweeted 'You pronounced this nonsense. Not me' on June 19, 2022, it was immediately picked up by NAFO members as an ironic battle cry.

In the Hong Kong protests of 2019, like Egypt almost a decade before, social media was used as a tool to mobilise masses, avoid detainment and boost the morale of protestors. Social media acted like a handbook for dealing with police brutality as individuals exchanged strategies to subvert suppression tactics and keep the police from identifying them. It also allowed the protests to largely remain 'leaderless'. In Ukraine, it is being employed for maximum visibility, not only of the large-scale destruction of civilian spaces, but also to humanise and glorify those that are fighting to protect their country. Social media has been pivotal in providing actual lifesaving help to Ukrainian citizens. There were countless posts and tweets across Twitter and Reddit informing Ukrainian citizens on how to destroy tanks, make Molotov cocktails and perform many other offensive and defensive manoeuvres in order to thwart the Russian attack. A new feature has emerged due to the specific nature of this struggle. It is the organisational use of social media. Alongside President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukrainian officials are leveraging social media for outreach and narrative building. Twitter has essentially become an international relations arena.²

Final Thoughts

The evolution of the role played by social media is intertwined with a couple of other metrics. It correlates to Internet penetration in the region, the number of users online engaged with the issue and also the digital infrastructure available. Compared to 2011, the role of social media has greatly evolved. There are services to directly fund efforts, social media platforms that prioritise privacy and anonymity and most of all a well-connected and robust Internet infrastructure. When Russia threatened Ukraine's Internet infrastructure, the Starlink service was deployed to keep the flow of information steady.³ After Long-Term Evolution (LTE) and Broadband, the Internet is about to transition over to 5G technology and beyond. This will, in turn, change the way in

which the Internet contributes to resistance and movements. The ease of accessibility with high-speed Internet and high-quality cameras on smartphones, security afforded by Virtual Private Network (VPN) services continue to make the Internet a fertile ground for voicing dissent. Resistance on the Internet does not stand independent of on ground movements. This much is clear. What has remained constant about its role is that it provides an alternative space for various voices to congregate before they take to the streets. A place to gather the numbers. A space where they cannot be harmed or silenced. Along with advances in technology, it remains to be seen how states around the world react to this new dimension of dissent. It remains to be seen how free and open the Internet remains. However, if multiple movements across the last decade are any indication, voices of dissent always find a way.

Notes

- This sounds apocryphal but I've used it to highlight how little resistance they were met with.
- Twitter has over the years been used by politicians and diplomats. It is nothing new inherently, but the way it is being leveraged for coverage, diplomatic goals and aid by the Ukrainian government is extremely interesting and is certain to become an International Relations case study.
- Amid some drama, Elon Musk, the owner of Starlink, went on to remove the services. It is worth mentioning because when the service was deployed, it proved crucial.

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