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## “These days will never be forgotten ...”: A critical mass approach to online activism



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### ABSTRACT

Social activists increasingly wield the power of the Internet technology to penetrate organizational boundaries and enable social and political change. Yet, research on activism beyond organizational boundaries and the role that new technology may play in it is scarce. This study explores this phenomenon by studying the dynamics of social activism through the Internet for expressing resistance to a powerful organizational regime. We first develop a critical mass approach to online activism to understand longitudinal data (2009–2013) collected from three YouTube-based cases and supplementary interviews. We then integrate the results of within-case and cross-case analyses in a process model that explains how online activism started, generated societal outcomes, and changed over time. The model suggests that online activism helped organize collective actions and amplify the conditions for revolutionary movements to form. Yet, it provoked elites' reactions such as Internet filtering and surveillance, which do not only promote self-censorship and generate digital divide, but contribute to the ultimate decline of activism over time. We provide a theoretical path for studying the phenomenon of online activism and present opportunities for organizations and social activists to direct online activities' focus from one being based on the creation of 'knowers' to one based on the empowerment of 'learners'.

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### 1. Introduction

Information Technology (IT) is shown to be a powerful resource for organizational members (Da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Prasad & Prasad, 2000) as well as key stakeholders such as labor unions and customers

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(Martini, Massa, & Testa, 2013; Shostak, 2002) to raise concerns and seek emancipation and autonomy from dominant elites. Increasingly, independent activists such as privacy advocates or external bodies such as environmental groups leverage technology to penetrate established organizational boundaries and promote, impede or influence social and political change (Prince, Barrett, & Oborn, 2014). As organizations become more open with regard to their established boundaries, they require a careful understanding of the nature of social activism beyond organizational boundaries and the role that IT may play in it. Such activism, however, refers to a new type of relationship between IT and organizations, which is not well-understood and theorized in the information systems (IS) literature. In fact, IS research has largely treated IT applications to be bounded within organizations and directly linked to managerial objectives, and has said little about new technologies that are used by external activists to transcend boundaries and alter organizational routines (Winter, Berente, Howison, & Butler, 2014).

A theory-driven explanation that sheds light on the complex dynamics of social activism beyond organizational boundaries and the driving role of IT has yet to receive significant attention. This study improves our understanding of such activism by studying (i) how social activists leveraged IT to share information and express resistance to a powerful organizational regime, (ii) how organizational elites responded to the consequences of such activism, and (iii) how these responses generated further societal outcomes. We apply the critical mass approach to collective action (Marwell & Oliver, 1993) to examine multiple sources of evidence and longitudinal data from a post-election crisis where the Internet was used for distributing information and generating societal outcomes. The research questions are (i) *What were the social and political consequences of social activism relying on the Internet (referred to as 'online activism')?*, (ii) *How did organizational elites respond to online activism and its consequences?*, and (iii) *How did these responses generate further societal outcomes?* We develop a process model that addresses these questions and explains how online activism and its role in organizing collective actions and forming new social movements progress over time. Accordingly, two key theoretical contributions are made. First, we apply the theoretical lens of the critical mass approach to collective action to the phenomenon of 'online activism', and thus extend its theoretical relevance beyond prior studies of communication and technology adoption. We take a step forward in establishing a basis for its future application in studying social activism through the Internet technology. Second, the results are integrated in a process model that elucidates the progression of activism beyond organizational boundaries and challenges the optimistic and technological deterministic hype regarding the role of online activism in enabling grassroots social movements. Specifically, our model resonates to the 'logic of opposition' (Robey & Boudreau, 1999) and suggests that (i) online activism generates two opposing forces of encouraging and inhibiting interventions, and (ii) the interplay between these forces determines the outcomes of such activism.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We begin by providing an overview of the online activism literature. We continue by discussing theoretical perspectives that explain political systems and their vulnerability to change. Critical mass approach to collective action is elaborated and applied to examine empirical data collected from YouTube-based channels and supplementary interviews. The findings are integrated in a theory-driven model that explains the dynamics of online activism. The study concludes by discussing theoretical contributions, outlining future research opportunities, and proposing changes that policymakers and online activists may undertake to better deal with the existing challenges.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Online activism

As our understanding of the relationship between politics, power, and the use of IT in organizational settings gains more theoretical rigor, new avenues for studying this relationship emerge (Jaspersen et al., 2002). Research has recently begun to connect the field with social movements to explain how IT can be used for social activism (Castells, 2012; Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2012; Wills & Reeves, 2009). For example, Wills and Reeves (2009) discuss the role of mining data from social networking sites in supporting campaigning in Britain, Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke (2012) explain how Facebook pages allow the South African public to voice their opinions and build communities of interests, and Castells (2012) demonstrates the organizing role of IT in forging a mediated emotional response to political events and then accelerating the formation of social movements.

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