

CRISIS NETWORKS AND EMERGENCY BEHAVIOR: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND NON-STATE POLITICAL ACTOR ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to offer a new framework for conceptualizing the relationship between traditional channels of political expression and their adoption of emerging communication technologies to respond to the new challenges of digital crises. In doing so, it revisits the question “Are Digital Technologies Making Politics Impossible?”, approaching the questions from a non-state actor point of view. The paper offers a new view on the significance attributed to new digital technologies in collective action and the importance of how older and pre-existing networks adapt to technology during crisis mobilization, armed conflict, and protest. Scholars working to explain the impact of social movements have emphasized the importance of communicative technologies, especially media and the Internet. For sociologists and political scientists, explanations centered on political communication make sense, and the importance of connective action is widely accepted. Yet the connection between traditional and pre-existing mobilization networks, such as religious congregations, political parties, armed groups, and refugees, and modern digital communication technologies has not been well-established.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Social Media, Crisis Behavior, Non-State Actors

ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı, geleneksel siyasi katılım kanallarının gelişen iletişim teknolojileri karşısında ne şekilde dönüştüğünü açıklayan bir çerçeve geliştirmektir. Bu bağlamda makale, ‘Dijital Teknolojiler Siyaseti İmkansız mı Kılmaktadır?’ sorusunu tekrarlayarak konuya devlet-dışı aktörler açısından yaklaşmaktadır. Bunun yanı sıra makale, dijital teknolojilerin geleneksel ve yerleşmiş sosyal ağların üzerindeki etkilerini, kriz seferberliği, silahlı çatışma veya protesto gibi kolektif eylemler açısından da irdelemektedir. Toplumsal hareketler üzerine

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yazılmış geniş bir literatür, dijital iletişim teknolojilerinin, özellikle sosyal medya ve Internet platformlarının giderek artan öneminden bahsetmişlerdir. Sosyolog ve siyaset bilimciler açısından bu bağlantı geniş anlam ifade etmektedir, zira bu literatürlerde dijital teknolojilerin toplumsal hareketler üzerindeki etkisi geniş yankı uyandırmıştır. Ancak dijital ve geleneksel seferberlik ağları arasındaki bağlantı henüz çok iyi oluşturulamamıştır. Bu makale de bu bağlantıyı oluşturmak için bir çerçeve çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Teknolojiler, Sosyal Medya, Kriz Davranışı, Devlet Dışı Aktörler

INTRODUCTION

In October 2016, Cambridge University launched its inaugural Nine Dots Prize, offering \$100,000 for the best answer to the question: are digital technologies making politics impossible? The political developments in the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany have brought forward the proliferation of fake-news and their unstoppable proliferation online, influencing the very fabric of politics in those countries. The winner of the Nine Dots Prize – James Williams – argued that digital technologies exploit our collective psychological vulnerabilities and direct us into political action by feeding from the society’s collective attention economies. Social media and digital communication are by definition persuasive and create echo chambers that amplify our pre-existing beliefs and emotional response mechanisms.

In this paper, I try to expand upon this idea by introducing four representative vignettes on how older networks use and adapt to modern communication technologies. Focusing on the ecosystem of human conflict, I make the overarching argument that most traditional networks successfully adapt to the digital revolution and expand both the depth and width of their mobilization capacities. In that line, I argue that the difference between the failure and success of some digitally networked social movements lies in the extent to which they derive from traditional networks in their respective social habitats. Movements that are digital-only tend to suffer from commitment problems due to the ease and lower costs associated with digital mobilization, whereas traditional-only movements struggle to reach a wider audience in a limited window of opportunity that defines most modern movements. (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Ganesh & Stohl, 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Dunn, 2011) Therefore, the paper makes the case that successful modern social, political, and



armed movements are those that successfully tap into the intersection of old and new modes of mobilization, and only then play a role in shaping the flow of history.

Empirically, this paper introduces and analyzes the way different political actors are using digital technologies to gain an edge during conflict and crisis. Whether used by refugees, militants, or propagandists, new digital technologies are challenging all non-state actors' ability to respond to and succeed in different components of conflict: recruitment, framing, and survival. The four vignettes introduced in this paper follow the cyclical structure of a conflict, starting on the battlefield and moving into the domain of refugees, refugee hunters and protesters. One of the main critiques posed during the initial brainstorming sessions with colleagues from the political communication and social movements fields was the logic of separating "online" from "offline" mobilization. Their main argument was that these two seemingly different modes of mobilization were, in fact, one and the same, and that the digital modes of mobilization did not fundamentally change the premises and organizational aspects of social networks during crises. I remain convinced that technology changes crisis mobilization in two fundamental ways: first, technology significantly reduces the time to organize and mobilize, and provided that there is enough commitment capital, it can substantially increase the size of mobilization, making it far more transformative from a political and social point of view. Second, digital technologies have increased the frequency of conflict occurrence. (Unver, 2016) Due to the wide reach and speed of digital media, potential parties to a conflict or crisis became aware of an event in real time and across a larger geography. When such mobilization captured sufficient levels of commitment capital, they were able to field more human resources more frequently, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict and crisis. Therefore, I retain my view that online and offline mobilization, as well as digital and traditional networks, must be conceptualized and studied as different phenomena, even if I study their tandem effect on conflict in this paper.

Digital Social Movements and Political Communication and Mobilization

Through a tandem analysis of online and offline mobilization methods and crisis response, this paper is intended to make three main contributions to scholarship on political/conflict communication and crisis mobilization.



First, I propose that the literature on digital social movements struggles to understand why certain types of movements succeed and others fail because it does not specifically study how these digital movements tap into older and traditional modes of mobilization in their respective domains. Overemphasis on digital tools and communication networks has largely prevented us from methodologically observing how more established networks such as religious congregations, coffee houses, universities, or sports clubs adapt to the evolving dynamics of digital movements. In order to fill this gap, I offer four vignettes from different phases of a conflict cycle, each corresponding to a different mobilization group, using a different digital media network, in order to trace how they adapt to changing physical challenges through a dual reliance on offline and online tools. Often overlooked is the fact that basic material objects that are regularly used – as barricades, weapons, or tear gas – no longer appear in their place in conflict through old modes of communication. These tools are now being brought to the field increasingly through digital communication. Militants take selfies to conduct propaganda, which in turn will win them external sponsorship and get them heavy weapons (such as the YPG in Syria or Azov Battalion in Ukraine) (Regan, 2002; Regan & Aydin, 2006). Refugees use social media to request help in big cities, which in turn gets a material response in the form of soup kitchens or freely distributed blankets (Chouliaraki, 2017). This material response can also be negative of course, as I discuss later, which is on how refugee hunters use the same digital tools as refugees to locate them and try to attain vigilante justice.

Second, a similar argument goes with traditional networks that cannot adapt to the changing realities of digital media. If older, pre-existing networks fail to evolve into the digital medium, they become obsolete and lose their ability to establish and sustain frames. Imams who could adapt to uncommon media outlets such as Instagram or even Snapchat eventually enjoyed larger and geographically distributed follower bases, eclipsing older and traditionally better-established religious leaders (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). These “cyber clerics,” in turn, became instrumental in religious mobilization in times of crises, doing both good (disaster relief) and bad (radicalization). Movements must choose tools that will help them get the job done while keeping in mind that most of the time their adversaries are using similar outlets to counter these efforts. To that end, most movements that have failed to tip the balance of power through traditional networks have benefitted immensely from digital networks, eventually securing an edge over rival pre-existing networks. The Islamic State won the global jihadi recruitment war over *Al Qaeda*, largely because of the latter’s inability to evolve into a digital



propaganda domain (Hashim, 2014). Hungarian border hunters were able to mobilize faster than their Serbian counterparts, because they rallied around a mayor – László Toroczkai – who was able to seize the digital framing through YouTube and Twitter (Benke, 2017). Digital evolution of traditional mobilization networks is significantly understudied, and this gap in the literature has an overall negative effect on our ability to understand both digitally networked social movements and their success and failure.

Third, I suggest that over time responding to sustained challenges of technology generates new digital repertoires of mobilization that alter the existing balance of power within traditional structures of hierarchy. In frontier religious congregations of Hungary and Arizona, followers with greater technical know-how progress faster in their religious hierarchies, assuming key gate-keeping roles over that congregation's framing and narrative of the crisis. A similar trend is observable in the political domain, where individuals with obscure backgrounds rapidly climb the ladders of political promotion, ending up as the digital propaganda advisors of authoritarian leaders. This, for example, is the case with Vladislav Surkov in Russia, or Jean-Marie Le Pen's Philippe Vardon. The rise of this new "tech-savvy cohort" of digital propaganda advisors not only changes the political or religious hierarchy around them, but also the military hierarchy in militant organizations. This was the example with followers of Abu Ayyub al-Masri – the ISIS propaganda leader – who died in 2010 during an air raid. Regardless, al-Masri's social media strategy was carried on with his followers, leading to their *primus inter pares* position in other political groups within the organization, and to their publication of two ISIS e-journals: *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Political implications of digital propaganda can also be observed among ministers, bureaucrats, and politicians who run troll or bot farms.

NON-STATE ACTOR USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES DURING CRISIS

Civil wars in Ukraine and Syria coincided with the rapid proliferation of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as dominant media of social communication. While there were only 54 million monthly active users on Twitter in Q4 2010, there were 328 million as of Q1 2017, with the most significant increase taking place between 2011 and 2015 (Perrin, 2015). Likewise, when Instagram was acquired by Facebook in April 2012, it grew from 30 million users to 500 million by June 2016. The advent of these tools of modern communication changed the nature of battlefield communication, along with war propaganda.



In a former research project, I have tested mortality salience (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998; Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000; Pyszczynski et al., 2006) and terror management theories (Altheide, 2006; Aly & Striegher, 2012; Basra, Neumann, & Brunner, 2016) by measuring whether images, framing, and discourse on death and war indeed increased the likelihood of further conflict. I did that by scraping 5,803 selfies that were taken by the pro-Kurdish militant group People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, from January 2014 to December 2016 (H. A. Unver, 2016). While a time-frequency geolocation of these selfies provides great insight into geographies of contestation, the time-frequency data alone told an interesting story: while 2–3 selfies taken in an interval of two hours is nothing special, once this figure rises substantially to 70–80, it indicates preparation for an armed conflict. Although quantitative measurement of selfies on the battlefield can also be an accurate predictor of armed conflict, it mainly reveals the extent to which taking a selfie is one of the main pre-war rituals of militants. Widening the geographical extent of this research, I have started to use web crawlers to gather digital selfie data from other armed groups in Syria – the Islamic State and the Free Syrian Army – later expanding this research into Ukraine. In Ukraine too, non-state armed groups (Vostok Battalion, Russian Orthodox Army, Aidar Battalion, etc.) frequently use selfies as battlefield propaganda and do so predominantly before armed clashes.

My interviews with both refugees who had an armed history and officials who had direct involvement in the rehabilitation of returnee jihadists yielded three dominant themes. First, many of the militants are teenagers aged 16–19, and, thus, they get over-excited on the battlefield and seek to “make a mark of their greatness” permanently. Many are not afraid of death, but are afraid of being forgotten. To that end, selfies are one of the main ways of making sure their acts are not neglected or forgotten. Second, these militants use selfies to bolster morale and increase group cohesion in order to prepare for an imminent armed clash. Finally, most of these militants are runaways. Although many are estranged from their families and friends, they nonetheless purposefully leave the location data on while taking selfies so that if they die, their families will have some sort of location signature from which to pick up their dead bodies.

Ultimately, this perspective deals with the use of battlefield selfies in Syria and Ukraine by non-state armed actors – YPG, ISIS, FSA, Vostok & Aidar Battalions, and Russian Orthodox



Army – to explain how these groups use selfies as a digital framing tool through 2014 and beyond. I define these functions as ‘militancy lifestyle marketing,’ ‘capacity demonstration,’ and ‘diversionary selfies.’ In the earlier phases of an insurgency, militants seek to advertise themselves and post happy/relaxed selfies to set up group framing and attract new recruits. In the second phase, these selfies show battlefield victories (usually after a clash) in order to show off capacity and advertise skills. Finally, militant groups take diversionary selfies to mislead the opponent or provoke him into committing militarily to the wrong battle.

This debate also spills over into the refugee use of digital technologies in political crises. Monzer Omar was a Syrian refugee who fled the horrors of the Siege of Hama in August 2013. He left his family behind, since the road to Europe was too dangerous. Monzer traversed Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria, and finally arrived in Germany. He used a plethora of digital apps that aided him in navigation, news gathering, communication, and medical aid, while he dealt with smugglers, aid groups, and security enforcement officials. (Shapiro, 2015) It took him four years to reunite with his family in January 2017, following years of both online and offline awareness-building and legal procedures, including agenda-setting on social media and frequent contacts with local legal and political officials in Dortmund, Germany, both in-person and through their Twitter accounts.

New Media and Refugees

Monzer’s story is by no means unique. In the summer of 2015, thousands of refugees fleeing from war in Syria flocked into Budapest’s main train station. This was the fourth foreign country refugees had crossed, covering about 2,500 kilometres within several weeks. The logistics of moving such a large group of people, in a relatively short period of time – and without a central authority leading the exodus – are immensely difficult. It was Nina Kov – a Hungarian artist – who first diagnosed the need for multilingual refugee apps with local information and created InfoAid, which catered to users with limited data plans and included a diverse set of refugee information such as train timetables, clean water outlets, and pharmacies in Budapest. (Eddy, 2015) Meanwhile in Croatia around the same period, Valent Turkovic developed makeshift cheap Wi-Fi routers called “MeshPoint” so that refugees could access life-saving information even in places without a static Wi-Fi router. (Wall & Mulligan, 2015) The app portfolio for refugees proliferated significantly since then, generating its own



market, with localized information and multilingual support. Maps, doctor-free diagnostics, family/friend discovery tools, and real-time translation apps are just some variants of this booming market. The booming market, on the other hand, creates a new digital network that not only Syrian refugees, but all displaced people in the world – and those that seek to help them – participate in and benefit from.

Refugees are perhaps among the oldest forms of organized non-state networks. They are as old as human conflict itself, occupy a central place in human history, and have been amply theorized on within a plethora of social disciplines, from philosophy to religion. More contemporary approaches to refugees cluster around the nodes of the effects of social/cultural dislocation on human behaviour (Chaichian, 2015; Diamond, 1998; Ravenstein, 1885), as well as the effects of technology on migration (Banerjee, 1983; Fortunati, 2013). Digital networks of refugees went hand in hand with static and mobile physical networks during this major refugee movement. Static physical networks were camps, communes, and squats, whereas mobile networks resembled the “fellowship of the ring” in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, with different groups and figures entering and exiting the quest at different times. Static offline networks reflect a pause in a refugee’s journey; they are static either because they are in a camp, a temporary commune, or a housing compound they have settled into recently. Static refugee networks interact with digital networks on issues such as legal identity establishment/protection (biometric data), local settlement information (housing, establishing a business, and setting up finances), or legal settlement information (registration). Mobile refugee networks are transient in nature and usually temporary; it is unlikely that refugees that travel together end up settling together. This means that the basic unit of refugee networks is not always the family. Quite often, relatives can be lost on the way, which brings in the most immediate necessity of digital networks and apps that help refugees find family members. “Refunite” was one of the most famous of these apps, created by Danish brothers David and Christopher Mikkelsen. (Munford, 2017) Further needs of a mobile refugee network revolve around real-time communications (Whatsapp and also encrypted variants such as Telegram) and real-time intelligence (avoiding smugglers, finding healthcare, weather information, and news).

The overwhelming majority of successful refugee cases reflect skillful deployment of offline networks (such as aid groups, refugee camp administrators, and local officials who physically aid refugee movement or settlement) and online networks (apps, forums, and social media).



For example, while it was information apps that directed refugees to help points, their ability to actually reach those points was usually made possible by physical interlocutors – smugglers, local enforcement officials, or aid groups.

Same technologies that allowed refugees to survive and connect also worked for the opposite side: border hunters and anti-refuge vigilante groups. Sandor Jankovics joined the Hungarian “border hunter” regiment in March 2017, following his friend Adrienn Heronyanyi, who had joined earlier, in 2015. (Than, 2017) Both young men joined the specially formed unit upon the rallying cry of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, who described the flow of Syrian refugees as the “*Trojan Horse of terrorism.*” (Gorondi, 2017) Hungary had erected a long fence along its southern border, after thousands of Syrian refugees poured in through the summer of 2015. According to Eurostat, Hungary topped the list of EU countries that received the highest number of asylum requests per 100,000 local population as of 2015, (“Asylum Quarterly Report” 2017) explaining some of the zeal with which the southern border was ‘protected.’ Hungarian border police had shocked international observers in September 2015, when they launched tear gas and sprayed water on the refugees along the border, aiming to deter future influxes. The refugee crisis for Hungarian border hunters was a crisis of national security, for which they mobilized.

In early April 2016, Frank Dohnányi, a rural “border hunter,” told *Al Jazeera* that a mere “border fence” was not enough to stop refugees, which made it necessary to mobilize the border hunter regiment through digital means. (Mohdin, 2017) Dohnányi was using InfoAid, the app created by another Hungarian – Nina Kov – to track refugee flow. InfoAid was designed to help the refugees, but the warnings posted in the app also made border hunters’ job easier. Upon detecting movement and transit tips on InfoAid, Dohnányi could communicate with other border hunters in the adjacent rural areas (and even on the other side of the border in Serbia) to coordinate a crackdown. The cooperation between Hungarian and Serbian volunteers followed a religious logic – defending Christian Europe – which was outlined at the highest level in an Orban op-ed in Germany’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “We shouldn't forget that the people who are coming here grew up in a different religion and represent a completely different culture. Most are not Christian, but Muslim ... That is an important question, because Europe and European culture have Christian roots”. (Karnitschnig, 2015).



Laszlo Toroczkai, the mayor of the border town of Asotthalom, took the idea of digitally defending Christianity to another level. As the founder of the ultra-nationalist “64 Counties Youth Movement,” Toroczkai frequently posts images and videos of captured refugees. (“Hungarian radical right wing youth movement enjoys public financing,” 2014) On March 7, 2016, he took things a notch further by putting up a video of three refugees captured in cooperation with Serbian border patrol, which he stated was done through social media. According to Toroczkai, although funding for more “official” border hunters comes from the government, in more rural and remote areas, citizens fund their own patrol units. The funding for these units is derived from the rural Hungarian Catholic church network, which acts as both the ideological overseer of the border hunters, as well as the main financing network of their operations.

On the other side of the world, in the United States, Jim Gilchrist – the founder of the Minuteman Project – asserted a similar line:

Those Syrian refugees, who we are supposedly vetting thoroughly, come from camps run by the United Nations. There are no Christians in those camps. They risked death if they seek refuge there. So the refugees who are on the list, who get on the list, they are almost entirely Muslim. The UN system accepted by Mr. Obama effectively locks Christians out. (Mohdin, 2015)

The Minuteman Project was established in 2004, following an overall sense of self-reported frustration in Arizona against illegal immigration. In 2005, around 1,200 volunteers were recruited to “defend” the Arizona border, some of whom returned to Utah to establish the Utah Minuteman Project. The Minuteman Project was built upon similar foundations as the Hungarian border hunters: the protection of national (also religious) identity against an overwhelming influx of refugees. For the Hungarians, this influx consisted of the Syrian refugees; for the Minuteman Project, it was mainly the Mexicans. Although the Syrian refugees were predominantly Muslim and Mexican immigrants were Catholics, this did not change the overarching response against a similar stimulus both in Hungary and in the United States. In May 2015, the Minuteman Project declared “war” (Operation Normandy) on what it called the “porous areas” between San Diego, CA, and Brownsville, TX. (Cesca, 2014) “If you are familiar with the Normandy invasion of France in 1944, then you have an idea how large and logistically complicated this event will be,” Gilchrist stated on the project website.



“However, there is one difference. We are not going to the border to invade anyone. We are going there to stop an invasion.”

The paradox of the Minuteman Project lay in its discursive reliance on “Christian soul,” while it acted as a border protection unit against Mexican immigrants. This religious caveat is interesting as in November 2010 Utah Minuteman Project chairman Eli Cawley condemned a bill easing restrictions on immigration: “The issue is cheap illegal alien labor and church membership, and everyone knows it.” He implied that Mexican cheap labor was as problematic as adding numbers to Utah Catholic churches, challenging Mormon-Catholic demographics there. The same motive exists in Arizona where the Evangelical Protestant base (26%) is challenged by Catholic incomers (21%), mostly from Mexico.

Although the project entered an interregnum in 2010, it still recruits large numbers of volunteers to patrol the Arizona border. With the election of Donald Trump, the group even got a much-needed lifeline into the political mainstream, evidenced by the note “Trump Wins! Minuteman Project Mission Accomplished!” displayed on the group’s website. A newly formed Arizona Border Recon – a group that organized in Mormon and Protestant churches there – was especially skilled in the use of digital media. Although Jim Gilchrist himself has a low follower base on Twitter, anti-immigration and Minuteman-affiliated accounts have proliferated after the election of President Trump, enjoying far larger support bases. Many of these accounts are connected through a large network of local opinion-makers and are connected to alt-right figures in other parts of the United States and even in Europe. Through a dual mobilization in Evangelical and Protestant rural churches, and social media, the Minuteman Project resembles mobilization dynamics of Hungarian border hunters. One major difference is that while Minutemen thrive in a social media environment, Hungarian border hunters usually exploit apps designed to help refugees. Although these two types of anti-immigration mobilization are directed against different religious groups and nationalities as well, the adoption of the religious discourse, along with relevant rural/frontier churches, makes these groups comparable in terms of digital/traditional networks in crisis mobilization.

This perspective offers a “technology and conflict” contribution to the theoretical strands of private enforcement of laws (vigilantism) (Navarro, 2008; Tyner, 2012), anti-refugee far-right extremism (Koehler, 2016; Lazaridis, Campani, & Benveniste, 2016; Tinti & Reitano, 2017), and the concept of “productive other,” where invented external enemies help consolidate



group cohesion and mobilization (Barsky, 1994). Although offline mobilization dynamics of these theories are well-established, a comparative inquiry into how modern technologies and digital interconnectedness affect them is still an under-studied domain.

Alihan Kuriş is a 34-year-old architect and is also the chief imam of the Süleymancı congregation in Istanbul. Süleymancıs are a sub-denomination of the *Naqshibandiyya* movement within Sufi Islam and were established in 1888 in Silistra, Bulgaria, to set up local Ottoman-Muslim resistance against Bulgarian separatists. These Süleymancı networks operated through a tight-knit mosque network that communicated through calls to prayer (*adhan*) in order to warn other towns and villages in case of a brigand attack. While churches and church bells worked for similar purposes in the prolonged conflicts of the 19th-century Balkans, what made Süleymancı mobilization different than Bulgarian-Orthodox (and other Christian) variants was its extremely elaborate set of personal connections that reached the Sultan's Palace in Constantinople. A Süleymancı frontier imam was regarded as a “mujahid,” who was tasked with protecting the frontiers of the empire against rebels and, in that capacity, could send privileged messengers directly to the capital, and the imperial palace – in the absence of alternative connections to the frontier towns – took frontier messengers more seriously than those who came from other parts of the empire. Over more than a century, Süleymancıs – along with other Sufi congregations from other parts of the empire – retreated as the empire lost its Balkan provinces, eventually establishing their headquarters in different parts of Turkey. For Süleymancıs, this was the Fatih district – the seat of a once-formidable empire. From there, Süleymancıs communicated with other brotherhoods within Anatolia and retained a strong political interest.

On the night of July 15, 2016, Alihan Kuriş received reports of some military movement on Istanbul's Bosphorus Bridge. Like all Sufi brotherhoods, Süleymancıs also have followers from all parts of Istanbul; when a suspicious activity takes place, it is communicated within the ranks of the congregation's hierarchy. If the suspicious activity is indeed serious, it is delivered to the chief imam for a decision that will concern the entire ranks of the brotherhood. Alihan Kuriş was spooked, since similar reports of military movements came from other parts of Istanbul as well. Fearing a coup attempt, he ordered all of his followers to “pour into the streets” – using SMS, Whatsapp, and posting – wait for it – a Snapchat video! Since Snapchat videos are deleted after a set period of time, Islamic brotherhoods increasingly adapted to that social medium to communicate sensitive information to the followers, without



any risk of these videos being used as evidence against them in court. Within 30 minutes, Süleymancı followers started to concentrate in three areas where soldiers established defensive positions: Bosphorus Bridge, Taksim Square, and Istanbul Central Police Headquarters. In the next hour, Süleymancıs in Ankara mobilized as well, also overrunning key checkpoints of the rogue soldiers and others in İzmir, Bursa, Diyarbakır, and Adana, and poured into the streets in defiance. Simultaneously, Süleymancıs who were already at the flashpoint locations started sharing photos and videos on Instagram and Twitter, calling on others to come to their assistance. Within minutes, media shared by Süleymancıs spread like wildfire on social media, becoming the #1 trending topic in Turkey. Soon after, other dominant Sufi brotherhoods – İsmailağa, Menzil, Cerrahi, and Uşşaki – too were on the streets, attempting to overwhelm military defensive positions.

All of this religious-digital networking took place before Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) district networks could mobilize. As President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım were isolated with communications cut off, AKP networks were paralyzed. Indeed, my earlier co-authored geospatial study (H. A. Unver & Alassaad, 2016) revealed that, contrary to the prevalent view in the literature, it was not AKP or Erdoğan who saved the day – it was these religious networks, which worked in tandem with the latest social media outlets to spread and deepen the call to mobilize. These brotherhoods continued to use Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Vine, and Snapchat for the following week to set the agenda on anti-coup mobilization, successfully generating, orchestrating, and logistically managing a large group of anti-coup protesters.

What happened in Istanbul that night was a warning call to scholars who over-emphasized the role of digital media in protests, especially with regard to the literature on the Arab Spring. Although an overwhelming majority of Arab Spring social movements and popular mobilization literature focused on the role of social media, few studies looked at how old cultural networks such as the mosques, coffee houses, and madrasas contributed to these movements. In critiquing the “digitalist” trend within the Arab Spring literature, scholars such as Kat Eghdamian (2014), Seyla Benhabib (2014), and Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal (2014) have challenged this narrative, arguing that mosques were silent but central drivers of the Arab Spring. Eghdamian, in particular, makes a convincing case that mosque networks acted as anchors across socio-economic strata, unified grievances, and legitimized and helped support popular mobilization. Although convincing, these arguments often lack empirical



evidence, mostly because there has not been enough measurable data on how mosque networks operate in relation to digital media in times of crises. Collective action requires a sudden, yet sustainable increase in participants, along with staying power, none of which can occur without strong motivation. This is why, although social media is important in terms of spreading a message and organizing a movement, its participants have to be already dedicated to remaining in the movement for a long period of time, and why, especially in the case of the Arab Spring movement in Egypt, motivating factors, and particularly the religious discourse in creating that motivation, have been severely understudied.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of digital technologies on politics is usually diagnosed within the domain of attention economies. Attention economics takes human attention as a finite resource and models human response to information within econometric variables. As human communication spills over into digital platforms, the sheer size and volume of content and information produced by and within these platforms naturally exceed human capacity to understand, process and respond. Further stress is incurred upon human cognitive and emotional response mechanisms as trolls (human users) and bots (automated non-human actors) lead to significant distraction and information flooding online. This is especially true within the domain of politics. During election campaign periods or episodes of international crises, tactics and methods of information flooding usually exploit attention economies. Political institutions, engagement and networks too, are increasingly determined by digital interaction. Digital-savvy politicians reach wider audiences and thus make a larger impact upon their voters compared to offline politicians. In March 2017, Facebook launched ‘Town Hall’, a new feature that will allow users to locate, follow and contact their local, state and federal government representatives. Soon after, the feature was made available to desktop and mobile users, with News Feed integration. Later on, Facebook added ‘Constituent Insights’ add-on, which is offered to officials to keep in touch with their constituents online.

All of this creates a new platform between politicians, voters and political engagement processes. As this paper sought to demonstrate, a wide range of non-state actors are challenging state authority and carving out ‘digital independences’. These independences both generate a new framework for cyber-feudalism, where such independences are overlooked by states in exchange for service, or cyber-grayzones, where state authority cannot enter or hold,



and thus engages in a never-ending cycle of conflict with states. Both state and non-state actor networks have immense potential to corrupt, spoil and provoke political communication processes by means of information flooding and distraction. These digital communication spoilers have immense potential to generate, sustain and escalate crises, both within domestic settings (like protests, riots or parliamentary voting sessions) and international settings (diplomatic crises and war). (Unver, 2017)

There are two alternative choices that this digital political momentum can lead to. First, states and their non-state actor collaborators can choose to go through the spoiler-oriented scenario, where fake-news, bots and trolls become common practice in domestic and foreign interactions. As states proliferate their information flooding capacities online, digital political communication becomes 'more impossible' with main platforms like Twitter and Facebook cease to retain their relevance and importance in political affairs. Large troll and bot armies dominate online interactions as true political information becomes a scarce commodity, generating its own blackmarkets. Losing their platform in visible spaces, most political discussion will then go underground, where it will be bought and sold in private digital spaces. The second option is to come up with a digital culture whereby both state and non-state origin spoilers are kept to a minimum through regulation. Regulating digital space is in and of itself a political question that requires democracy and inclusive participation and can neither be left to the whims of state, nor tech companies. It is only through transparent and inclusive participation that an online information political culture can be established. As with any communication revolution, the advent of social media platforms have to adapt to shifts in human political communication and establish its own equilibrium as a product of human interaction itself.



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