"Not This One": Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism

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Abstract

The emergent new media ecology which integrates participatory media into the structure of global information flows has fundamentally affected the means of production and distribution of *attention*, a key resource for social movements. In social movement scholarship, attention itself is rarely examined directly; rather, it is encountered in the study of means of delivering attention such as mass media or celebrities. This conflation of the resource, attention, and the *pathways* to acquire it, such as mass media, was less of an analytic problem when mass media enjoyed a near monopoly on public attention. However, the paths connecting movement actors and public attention are increasingly multiplex and include civic and social media. In this article, I examine the concept of attention as a distinct analytic category, reevaluate social movement scholarship in light of weakening of the monopoly on public attention, and introduce and examine a novel dynamic brought about by emergent attention economy: networked microcelebrity activism. I examine this novel dynamic through case studies and raise questions for future exploration.

Keywords

social movements, internet, Arab Spring, activism, media

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Attention is a key resource for social movements. Attention is the means through which a social movement can introduce and fight for its preferred framing, convince broader publics of its cause, recruit new members, attempt to neutralize opposition framing, access solidarity, and mobilize its own adherents. Gaining attention may not guarantee desired outcomes, and attention itself may introduce other threats to movement goals; however, lack of attention is likely to smother a movement. It is thus not surprising that social movement actors devote a great deal of strategic efforts to obtaining and sustaining attention. Indeed, for many politically motivated actors—ranging from political parties in democracies to repressive governments in autocracies, from formal movements to ad hoc coalitions, such as "Anonymous"—gaining, denying, sustaining, and manipulating public attention is a key concern for all formal, semiformal, and informal movements with a stake in challenging or defending structures of power and authority.

Scholarship on social movements and politics rarely studies attention directly; indirectly, the concept is encountered through the study of media and sometimes as it relates to framing of movement messages or construction of ideology (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Oliver & Johnston, 2000). Here, in contrast, attention is analyzed directly as the resource and media coverage as the path to this resource; this article treats mass and other forms of emergent civic, participatory media, social and, as pathways to public attention. This allows differentiating the effects of participatory media and mass media on movement trajectories and being able to focus on some of the novel dynamics of these newer pathways such as, networked microcelebrity activism examined conceptually and through a case study in this paper.

Not examining "attention" as a distinct resource for social movements was less of an omission until recently, as mass media were the oligopolistic means of production, acquisition, and distribution of public attention. It was difficult, if not impossible, for a social movement to capture mass public attention without passing through mass media (Gitlin, 1980; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Thus the phrase "The media did not cover it" was *almost* semantically equivalent to the phrase "There was no broad public attention to this topic." However, the emergent new media ecology means that those outcomes can no longer be conflated in a relatively straightforward manner and that the path between social movement actions and public attention is increasingly multiplex.

In today's participatory media ecology, social movement adherents can broadcast to larger publics, mobilize their supporters, offer preferred frames, and directly engage key mediators of attention, such as journalists, celebrities, or government officials. Citizen journalism can document newsworthy events, "memes" generated by members of networked publics can affect national conversations, and online spectacles, such as those staged by the ad-hoc Internet coalition Anonymous, can help shape the public agenda. Simultaneously, this proliferation of means of media production and dissemination technologies has added to the glut of available information and hence made the procurement of attention even more crucial. In fact,

understanding attention as a resource makes effects of its scarcity more apparent. Herbert Simon (1971) noted,

> The wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. (p. 40)

Explicit conceptualization of *attention* as a distinct resource is not just more accurate; it allows examination of the impact of emergent means of attention acquisition through pathways that do not start with, or remain limited to, traditional mass media, even if they do also incorporate it. Such novel pathways to attention were a crucial part of the story of the "Arab Spring" uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 and 2012. In this article, I will examine the analytical and empirical dynamics of one novel attention pathway: *networked microcelebrity activism* that has risen across the world but especially in authoritarian states.

Networked Microcelebrity Activism

Networked microcelebrity activism refers to politically motivated noninstitutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism. The phrase should thus be understood on conceptual grounds rather than as either a judgment or an evaluation of worthiness or of privilege—which, in any case, is expressed through the privilege of attention and status whereas the activist himself or herself often remains in considerable danger from repression. The political-activist networked microcelebrity shares certain practices with the nonactivist microcelebrity, which Marwick and boyd (2011) conceptualize as a "mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (p. 14); however, since the identity of the microcelebrity activist is constructed as activist first and foremost, the audience is seen not as fans but rather as political allies, supporters, political opponents, and mediators to broader publics such as journalists; and attention is treated, at least insofar as the issue is addressed explicitly, as an instrumental resource that is sought for the cause rather than solely for the sake of attention on the person.

I conceptualize networked microcelebrity activism as encompassing microcelebrity practices (Marwick & boyd, 2011) not because these activists are celebrities in the Hollywood or fan-based sense—they are not—but because their attention-commanding ability is based on status, as practiced within and through participatory media but not limited to it, rather than institutional affiliation or membership in political parties in the traditional sense. Indeed, as Kurzman et al. (2007) argue, celebrities are a status group in the Weberian sense, and the "the primary interpersonal privilege of celebrity is attention." The *networked* descriptor calls attention to use of social and civic media to access networked publics as a central part of their ability to command attention.

These activists are not merely spokespeople for their movements, even though they practice that role but not in an official, permanent, or even explicitly recognized capacity; however, nor are they ordinary grassroots activists, even though they remain embedded in networks of activists and maintain peer relationships within their political groups in ways that differ from previous generations of "celebrity" movement spokespeople (Gitlin, 1980).

Internet, Social Movements, and the Ecology of Attention

In examining the impact of the Internet on the process of politics and political change, scholars often focus on topics such as the changes to mechanisms of participation, development of sense of collective identity, creation of community, weakening of "preference falsification," and framing of political discourse (Farrell, 2012; Garrett, 2006). Although some of these mechanisms have been analyzed as potentially weakening democratic participation, for example, through "homophilous sorting," in which like-minded individuals mostly find and hear from each other in "filter bubbles," many of these mechanisms are seen to increase participation and as potential positive. In particular, the lowering of participation costs has been proposed as a key mechanism of democratization (Benkler, 2006), and it has been argued that the Internet facilitates "lower costs of certain kinds of collective action by making it cheaper to communicate with others and provide means of decentralized action" (Farrell, 2012, p. 39). Lowered participation costs often lead to discussions of "slacktivism," characterized as low-cost participation through online methods.

However, conceptualizing attention as a distinct resource sheds new light on some of the debate around the mechanisms through which the Internet is altering politics by altering barriers to and mechanisms of participation in the public sphere. For example, slacktivism, often derided for lack of impact, can also be understood as an intervention in the attention ecology. Thus, rather than a slacktivist-activist distinction, which relies on a conceptualization of separate "real" and "virtual" worlds in a digital dualist framework (Jurgenson, 2012), one should study various strategies for acquiring attention and examine the tactical ability (or lack thereof) of social movements to link attention, a necessary but not sufficient resource, to movement outcomes—and as decades of research on the relationship between media and movements shows, this has always been complicated.

Attention Acquisition Through Mass Versus the New Media Ecology: Power, Control, and Trade-Offs

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argue that social movements "need news media for three major purposes: mobilization, validation and scope enlargement" (p. 116). Following with the conceptual distinction introduced in this article, this can be restated to say that media have long been the main pathway for the public attention movements need for these three purposes. I propose that the emergent new media

ecology is introducing new dynamics to this relationship, and examining these requires separating conceptualizations of mass media, the path, with the resulting resource, attention. Mass media had long been the key "capital" resource (or means of production) for the commodity (product) of attention; however, recent sociotechnical developments have introduced new and, crucially, more participatory and distributed means of production of attention.

This divergence between attention and mass media has a multitude of consequences. As many scholars have noted, acquiring attention through mass media has involved significant trade-offs, some quite detrimental, to social movements, such as losing control of framing of events and also having to engage in tactics that may be advantageous to obtaining the crucial media coverage while injuring the desired message (Gitlin, 1980; Meyer & Gamson, 1995). In fact, the inability to control framing of movement message by mass media has been a consistent finding in social movement research. As Benford and Snow (2000) summarize, a vast amount of scholarship finds that "social movement activists rarely exercise much control over the 'stories' media organizations choose to cover" (p. 626).

The trade-offs movements encountered in their interactions with media stemmed, in part, from the fact that social movements have long been at a "power dependency" disadvantage vis-à-vis mass media (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) because of the oligopolistic control the institution had over attention acquisition. The media, with their near monopoly on public attention, needed the movement less than the movement needed the media, and the value of media to movements has been higher than vice versa. This imbalance has meant that the media have more latitude to filter and to frame movement messages, since being ignored or being unsympathetically covered has generally had great costs for a social movement—whereas anger at media from social movement actors, who tend to be neither media's main customers nor their bosses, can have little to no impact. With the emergence of alternative means of attention acquisition, movements still need mass media, which are still the biggest conveyor of public attention, but the relationship is less that of an oligopoly to a desperate customer.

Mass media's power as a gatekeeper is most evident when they ignore a movement; however, being covered is just the first step in the attention acquisition process, as the content and shape of that attention in the form of "framing" of the movement message is crucial to prospects of a movement (Benford & Snow, 2000; Bennett, 1975; Meyer & Gamson, 1995). Media themselves operate in existing political hegemonic frames, which means that "certain actors [are] given standing more readily than others, but certain ideas and language are given a more generous welcome" (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993, p. 119). In contrast, social movements tend to be challengers to the status quo and, as such, lack ready acceptance of their standing and framing. Thus, gaining attention to a challenge as well as having the challenge framed in a positive manner often works at cross-purposes. It is not surprising that politics of the spectacle has long been an attention acquisition strategy and a natural temptation for a challenger movement. The spectacle comes at a cost: As Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) put it, "those who

dress up in costume to be admitted to the media's party will not be allowed to change before being photographed" (p. 122).

Emergence of participatory media may change the power media have to frame social movements, as social movement actors can forcefully offer their framing, diffuse their preferred framing to large audiences in ways that would have been simply impossible or prohibitively costly before social media, challenge journalists directly, or create a strong enough attention ("buzz") around their own framing that it becomes harder to ignore.

An example to this comes from early 2012 when the breast cancer advocacy foundation Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure came under sustained social media attack for its decision to defund its contribution to Planned Parenthood's cancer screening programs, including 1.3 million messages on Twitter in just one week of the controversy through hashtags, such as #komen or #plannedparenthood, as well as a widespread campaign on other online social platforms (Preston & Harris, 2012). The campaign pushed the issue to the national agenda and on to mass media, forcing a reversal from a clearly surprised Komen leadership, which had expected a stronger control over the public messaging (Preston & Harris, 2012). Similarly, the shooting death of an unarmed teenager in Florida, which was initially not prosecuted and accepted as self-defense, reverberated for weeks on social media, especially among civil rights communities, despite an almost complete lack of mass media coverage (a few isolated articles with no follow-up) and finally bubbled back into the national news, resulting in reopening of the case and an (ongoing) trial.

Even positive mass media coverage does not equate to a movement's getting its preferred message out. For example, the Nuclear Freeze movement's "enormous" demonstrations in 1982 ended up with media's concentration on "the rally's size and good behavior," which in turn "smothered and obliterated the urgency and terror that had brought so many together" (Meyer, 1990, p. 130). Many movements, especially successful ones, have consciously and strategically adopted a stance of developing "repertoires of protest" designed to attract the maximal positive national attention in their preferred framing (Torres, 2003). These repertoires often need to be updated through cycles of "tactical innovation" (McAdam, 1983) to remain in the public eye. New media ecology adds to these repertoires of protest, which can both help with preferred message framing as well as gaining attention.

Mobilization, Validation, and Scope Enlargement and the New Media Ecology

What Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) consider to be the basic social movement goals of *mobilization, validation*, and *scope enlargement* have all been seriously affected by changes in the attention ecology. The impact occurs through multiple mechanisms but almost always involves the changes to the channels of attention collection and diffusion.

Mobilization through mass media tends to create conflicts with the "mainstreaming" of content required to reach nonmembers; mobilizing messages can strike the wrong tone for mass media or may seem superfluous. An example is U.S. presidential

candidate Howard Dean's Iowa Caucus concession speech aimed to mobilize a crowd of supporters. Speaking over their roar, Dean's voice cracked as he exhorted his supporters not to give up, and this exhortation was picked up by a unidirectional mike as an isolated, shrill scream. What to internal supporters was straightforward mobilization became translated to external audiences as immaturity or extremism worthy of ridicule (Kreiss, 2012). Increasingly, there are lower-cost and higher-reach means of directing mobilizing messages to supporters without depending on mass media (Karpf, 2012). Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, e-mail lists, YouTube channels, and other outlets provide means to reach members with mobilizing messages at scales similar to that of broadcast but without having to go through traditional channels of broadcast.

This development, however, does not solve the problem of message crossover for social movements; rather, it complicates it. Mobilizing through the Internet also means that *all* messages are potentially more visible to broader audiences and may yet turn into the same clash of audiences, especially if the message employs language that may be seen as offensive outside the intended audience (as was seen in the case of the infamous "47%" comments by presidential candidate Mitt Romney). The ability to microtarget messaging might even increase the tendency for enclosed epistemic communities—or "filter bubbles"—to form around political messages, making them even less suitable to mainstream audiences if they do indeed cross over. As with many things, networked technologies create multiple and conflicting dynamics rather than a simple strengthening of one path.

Mobilization also often includes diffusion of social movement tactical craft. Andrews and Biggs (2006) show that mass media can become a key means of diffusing movement tactics *within* the movement, even exceeding the role of interpersonal social networks or movement organization. The rise of Internet-based social networks creates more enhanced ability to share movement tactics without necessarily requiring mass media intermediation. For example, it was widely reported, and confirmed in interviews by the author and others, that many protestors in Egypt during the 2011 uprising relied on social media–conveyed advice by Tunisian protestors, who had gone through the experience just weeks earlier, on methods for dealing with tear gas and police repression. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue, many social movements may be undergoing a transition to "connective action," in which networked technologies alter dynamics of collective action by changing within-movement communicative affordances. Instead of relying on formal organizations or mass media, movement adherents can connect with each other on their own terms. As with other dynamics, this change may come with other trade-offs, as lack of formal organization may limit the strategic choices of the movement (Kreiss & Tufekci, 2013).

Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993) second role for mass media, *validation* among broader publics as a legitimate movement, continues to strongly interact with mass media framing of a movement even if public attention can be obtained through alternative means. Of course, that relationship, too, has been altered, for example, a movement that the media would be disposed to portray as without standing or legitimacy can acquire enough attention to make this framing less tenable. Sustaining internal

legitimacy can help a movement acquire the external validation by surviving periods in which media framing might have unflattering or hostile. Before the Arab Spring activists became better known, many of them sustained dialogue with each other through social media or through shared platforms, such as that of Global Voices. Their years "in the wilderness" were spent not in isolation but in constant contact and dialogue with each other (interviews with the author).

Scope enlargement through recruitment and broadening the base of supporters is also greatly affected by the diversification of means of attention gathering. For example, movements can reach broad audiences through having their message go "viral" through social media networks—and such "virality" often develops in conjuction with mass media coverage, as was discussed earlier in the cases of Komen decision to defund Planned Parenthood and the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Although it is not possible to provide a counterfactual—whether the decision would have sparked such widespread media coverage without the social media push—these cases show the more complex paths to attention and scope enlargement in networked public spheres and the importance of peer-to-peer networks, a path that had been much less viable before the advent of digital social media and its affordances of easy copying, sharing, and distributing among interconnected peer networks.

Spokespersons, Celebrities, and Movement Microcelebrities: From Appointed to Emergent Spokespersons

Another way in which mass media influence within-movement dynamics has been through rewarding certain movement actors and behaviors with attention at the expense of others. As Gitlin (1980) documents in his study of media coverage of Students for Democratic Society and the antiwar movement in the 1960s, mass media outlets tended to highlight flamboyant, provocative, media-savvy, or spectacle-oriented movement actors (carrying Viet Cong flags, dressing or acting in a flamboyant fashion, for example) with more coverage while ignoring the other messages emanating from the movement. Hence a small section of movement actors, chosen largely by mass media, came to monopolize public attention and became de facto movement spokespersons. Gitlin also argues that media framed the movement as a group of extremists who were excessively focused on trivial matters and highlighted and exaggerated internal dissent within the movement—all of which, in effect, meant that the movement lost control of its message and lost its broader appeal. In the end, the process Gitlin (1980) dubs the "making and the unmaking of the new left" resulted in fringe elements that dominated the message and the movement's becoming isolate, and finally running out of steam as disillusioned and tired adherents left.

The process of emergence of movement spokespersons—their exposure as well as interactions with media—is one of the key areas significantly affected by new media. To better describe this shift, I will first briefly discuss the fracturing of publics, hence the increased importance of focusing attention, and then examine traditional celebrity activism before returning to networked microcelebrity activism.

Attention, Information Overload, and Fractured Publics

While having to go through mass media–created challenges, as outlined, movements were also provided a great opportunity when the stars aligned (Thrall et al., 2008). In the era of dominant broadcast television, news programs, especially prime-time broadcasts, focused public attention with unparalleled power. Perhaps the best anecdote reflecting this is the incident in which, after hearing of Walter Cronkite's commentary about the Vietnam War that America was "mired in a stalemate," president Lyndon B. Johnson was reported to have said, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America" (Wicker, 1997), and announced a few months later that he would not be seeking reelection. Similarly, television played a key role in the successes of the civil rights movement (Torres, 2003).

In contrast, in today's information ecology, there is no one prize "broadcast" that can command mass attention in the same manner as in the era of broadcast dominance. Even before the Internet, the increase in channels of cable television had begun to fracture mass media's command of public attention. During that transition period, mass media as a whole played the same gatekeeping role while the power of each institutional actor decreased through the multiplication of channels and choices. As of 2011, barely 15% of households tuned in to nightly news broadcasts, which were divided among three major channels: ABC, CBS, and NBC.

This fracturing of publics, somewhat ironically, increases the importance of "focusers" of attention, which can be institutions (media outlets), individual mediators of attention (and on social media, this includes prominent journalist-curators, such as Andy Carvin), celebrities, or algorithms (such as trending topics on Twitter), that can bring attention to a topic, framing, an idea, or an event. It is in this context that many social movements have turned to traditional celebrities as potential focusers of attention (Thrall et al., 2008). Highlighting some of the dynamics of interplay—and the tensions—between social movements and celebrities can also help highlight the transformation that the microcelebrity activism practices bring about.

Celebrities and Social Movements

It is increasingly common to see celebrities as spokespeople or supporters of social movements, acting as event headliners, testifying before Congress, and being highlighted in traditional media, where interviewers "often ask them about the state of world peace, their position on the Middle East, the environment, presidential politics, and so on" (West & Orman, 2003, p. 116). The attraction of alliances with celebrities for social movements is clear: Celebrities command attention and "are accorded the chance to speak publicly about political issues, whereas experts on the issues, not to mention average citizens, have far less chance of gaining access to the media" (Kurzman et al., 2007, p. 358). In an age of fractured publics and tougher competition to reach mass audiences, many social movements have turned to this path (Meyer & Gamson, 1995; Thrall et al., 2008).

Celebrity activism, however, while capable of bringing attention to a cause, rarely happens within a framework outlined by the organic activists of the cause (Meyer & Gamson, 1995; West, 2008). Scholars have found that "in constructing their legitimacy to speak for a movement, celebrities frequently alter the claims of that movement to more consensual kinds of politics" (Meyer & Gamson, 1995, p. 181) and the "very spotlight of notoriety that comes with celebrity participation may drown out some movement claims and constituents" (Meyer & Gamson, 1995, p. 187). Another issue that comes with celebrity activism is that of "standing:" as celebrities, being elites who are well-off and come from privileged backgrounds, gravitate toward movements that either do not challenge or can coexist with such attributes (Meyer & Gamson, 1995).

In sum, social movements are attracted to celebrities for their ability to command attention; however, just like aiming for mass media coverage to acquire attention, this strategy comes with trade-offs as traditional celebrities have their own agendas, may not be able to offer the substantive arguments preferred by the social movement, may drown out other movement actors, and may dilute the message to make it conform to needs of the celebrity persona.

Networked Microcelebrity Activism

As defined earlier, *a networked microcelebrity activist* is a politically motivated actor who successfully uses affordances of social media to engage in a presentation of his or her political and personal self to garner attention to a cause. Networked microcelebrity activists are distinguished from official spokespersons of movements and are rarely employed in official capacity by an organization, and even if they are, their influence and reach are often significantly greater than that of the nominal organization. These activists tend to be young and offer testimony of their own activism and travails, serve as citizen journalists, and mix mostly political commentary with personal interaction through social media.

Microcelebrity activists first came to the forefront of international attention in the Arab Spring. Some activists, especially those with Twitter accounts, became more visible through their vivid, personal, and tumultuous on-the-ground reporting from Tahrir Square during the Egyptian uprising, during which traditional media had limited to no access to the area. Many of these activists had been using Twitter and Facebook to organize within-country and pan-Arab activist networks and already had a substantive—but not extraordinary—local or regional social media profile before the uprising brought international attention. Some found each other through social media, as lack of an open civic space in their own country had meant activists and dissidents were relatively few in number and not necessarily encountered by chance or through neighborhood ties or other typical social organizations (interviews with the author). Overall censorship and repression meant there were few other avenues for political discussion, organizing, and information diffusion, and being a competent social media user often went hand in hand with being an activist. Hence, when the uprisings began, there was a ready "cadre" of social media–savvy activists in the region.

These activists often faced the choice of which language to use for social media outlets. The cases described in this study as networked microcelebrity activists almost always choose to tweet and write in English, at least part of the time, and hence target a potentially broad international audience. Very few use English solely and many switch between English and Arabic and also switch languages depending on the nature of the event. Language choice on social media is a complex and highly politicized topic and beyond the scope of this article. However, these activists' choice of English, at least partially, reflects a prioritization in acquiring international attention to the cause as well a desire and an ability to act as a bridge between their native country—and their dissident politics—and broader, global publics.

Networked microcelebrities often gain their initial attention because of their citizen journalism from scenes of highly charged events where traditional journalism resources are scarce. However, unlike accidental citizen journalism, such as that of a person witnessing a plane landing on the Hudson or unknowingly living next to Osama bin Laden and live-tweeting the raid on his house, these activists are better described as activist citizen-journalists, or citizen-journalist activists, as they do not merely encounter newsworthy events but seek them, and their reporting is often openly sympathetic, charismatic, and emotionally charged. In these situations, the activist is at once reporting on the events, advocating for the cause, attempting to attract attention to the event, and often also portraying a first-person, in-the-middle-of-it account of a highly charged, personally high-stakes situation.

Networked microcelebrities often acquire attention both through their direct social media outreach, for example, their Twitter followers, and through being featured by traditional mass media. Unlike the case outlined by Gitlin (1980), where mass media acted as a de facto picker of movement spokespersons, the relationship between the microcelebrity activist and the mass media, as well as the movement, is more complex and multidimensional. In many cases, microcelebrity status is enhanced and cemented through mass media appearances, which then further social media status by bringing more attention and followers.

For example, Egyptian activist Gigi Ibrahim has appeared on the BBC, was featured on the PBS show *Frontline*, has been on the cover of *Time* magazine, was a guest on *The Daily Show*, and has been the recognizable face of the Tahrir revolution in many media outlets. Her social media presence reflects this trajectory: On January 31, 2011, she had about 3,200 Twitter followers; 1 month later, she had almost 11,000. On the anniversary of the January 25 uprising, and in a year of tumult, more demonstrations, and intense mass media coverage, she was approaching 40,000 Twitter followers (and approximately 20 months after January 25, 2011, the number is more than 60,000). Her popularity on social media and coverage by mass media are closely interlinked phenomena, as Ibrahim was partially educated in the United States, attends the American University in Cairo, speaks English flawlessly, and is often described as attractive and well-spoken; she is thus a natural cultural and social bridge. Her politics, self-defined as "revolutionary socialism," however, represents a relatively small group in Egypt and would ordinarily be defined as marginal in Western media. This is, however, only rarely mentioned in Western mass media accounts and in her personal

appearances—if anything, the process appears to be reverse of that described in Gitlin (1980), in that the sympathetic personal account, expressed through social media in a charismatic and culturally appropriate manner, has overshadowed the political views that might have otherwise resulted in her marginalization.

Networked microcelebrity activists are networked not only in the sense of being connected to Western media, journalists, and broader publics. They are also networked to their internal political publics, which complicates the dynamics of their microcelebrity status as compared with the purely mass media–driven celebrity status analyzed in Gitlin (1980). For example, in October of 2011, cofounders of the Egyptian April 6th movement, Ahmed Maher and Waleed Rashed, intended to "brief" congressional staff as part of their U.S. tour. Shortly after their news release went out, however, other prominent networked activists started objecting to the appearance. Gigi Ibrahim, referenced above, tweeted, "SHAME ON 6 of April !! you don't go to congress http://www.aaiusa.org/press/release/co-founders-of-april-6th-youth-movement-on-capitol-hill/ . . . #PoliticalStupidity." (The link has since been taken down, but I have a cache of the press release.) Hossam el-Hamalawy, who writes the prominent blog www.3arabawy.org, also tweeted the following: "The US congress does NOT need Egyptian activists to 'brief' them about the situation. Come on! http://bit.ly/o4C8ay #Fail #Imperialism." After more turmoil about this event, which played publicly on social media, Maher and Rashed canceled the briefing and limited their appearances in the United States mostly to events in college campuses as well more activist-friendly activity in the form of a visit to the "Occupy Wall Street" encampment in Zuccotti Park.

As exemplified above, unlike the mass media–chosen "spokespeople" of the anti-war movement who felt unaccountable to the movement, as outlined by Gitlin (1980), the networked microcelebrity activist is often under intense scrutiny by the movement members. Similar to the way networked social media, such as Facebook, can be identity *constraining* through their peer and nonpeer surveillance affordances (Tufekci, 2008), networked activism, although far from a "flat" structure in which all participants are equal, can nonetheless constrain actions of those who are more privileged in terms of visibility and reach: Microcelebrities may be noninstitutional actors but they remain embedded within social and political networks of grassroots activists with alternative structures of accountability and representation.

Finally, for the networked microcelebrity activists, social media are a place of self-presentation and framing in both the political and personal sense. Many of the most prominent activists use social media primarily as an activist tool, with more of their updates containing political events, testimonies, and documentations; however, many monitored for this study (selected both through observation and interviews with activists and through accounts identified as influential by other studies) also include personal updates with differing frequencies (and the relative mix of personal and directly political in a microcelebrity activist feed, although beyond the scope of this study, is a potentially important research question). The particular calculations, strategic presentation, and conscious and nonconscious decisions to share (or not share) nonpolitical moments on these media create new questions about the emergent faces of activism.

I continue and conclude this article with a case study in one of the more complex countries, Bahrain, where an uprising continues as of this writing but neither has been successful in changing the political order, as in Egypt or Tunisia, nor has involved having the country descend into a full-fledged civil war, as in Syria.

Notes on Methodology

As this is a theory-building rather than theory testing paper, cases and data were selected in order to highlight conceptual issues. The Twitter account of the main case study, Zainab Al-Khawahja, was followed as of the start of unrest in Bahrain on February 2011 until January of 2013 during which period she tweeted almost 20,000 times. Her tweets as well as responses to her tweets were analyzed during events which highlighted conceptual concerns of this paper such as arrests, demonstrations and other high-profile incidents. The twitter stream of her (and other examples) was checked at least once every week to examine that weeks' worth of tweets to ensure no major incidents were missed. Other examples were selected based on knowledge built during the author's broader research into use of social media in the 2011 Arab uprisings dubbed the "Arab Spring" as well as conversations with staffers at international human rights organization working in the region as well as discussions with regional activists themselves. Traditional media mentions of Angry Arabiya and other activists discussed in this paper were tracked through systematic searches through Lexis Nexis databases.

The Microcelebrity Activist-Journalist: Case of Zainab Al-Khawaja

Bahraini activist Zainab Al-Khawaja comes from a prominent family of dissidents. Her father, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, is one of the country's leading dissidents. After she spent 12 years in exile, including living in Denmark and attending college in the United States, she returned to Bahrain with her family in 1999, at which time Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja founded the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. After a decade of activism following his return to Bahrain, during which he was repeatedly harassed and occasionally arrested, assaulted, and detained, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja played a leading role in the February 14th movement in Bahrain, which followed the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

In the early days of the 2011 uprisings, Zainab Al-Khawaja's Twitter account, under the handle of @angryarabiya, had approximately 2,000 followers. Her Twitter bio at the time read, "I love democracy & freedom. Therefore, I hate Arab dictators, and American neo-colonialism. Wanna know why Arabs are angry, I'll tell u." Her follower count increased throughout 2011 and 2012 as Bahrain found itself roiled in dissent and repression. She added approximately 1,000 followers in the month following Bahrain's February 14th demonstrations. The aftermath of the uprising saw increasing repression. Zainab's father was among those arrested (he was later sentenced to life in prison). Although his arrest would have been newsworthy even in

past eras because of his overall prominence, the way the story broke and got attention was different .

The world learned of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's arrest thorugh a series of tweets from @angryarabiya very shortly after Bahraini police burst into her family's house around midnight on April 8th, 2011. As tweeted by Zainab Al-Khawaja, the police beat up, dragged, and took away Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja as well as her husband and brother in-law. Shortly after her father was taken, she tweeted,

> THEY JUST CAME! They took my dad, my dads blood is still on the stairs! They hit my dad so much! They beat him and he cudnt breath [*sic*]

A few minutes after the raid, she sent out a rapid series of tweets describing the events, her own devastation, and her personal and political determination (the spellings have been preserved to convey the immediacy and feel of the tweets):

> they held my father from his neck & started dragging him down the steps. they lay him on the floor between the steps & started beating him

> we heard door of the building being broken, then the door of the apartment. my father went straight to the door, they started shouting

> they pushed me, my mum & sisters in a room, n they shouted at us. one of them closed the door and then opened it real quick in my face.

> One of them grabbed me form my shirt and started dragging me up the stairs, my mum was begging him to let me go

> another was shouting, if she doesnt shutup bring her down too.

> then they locked the doors on us, and took the men to the lower apartment, lay them on the ground and started beating them

> I started shouting "God will show you on Judgement day" I kept shouting "intooon 7a66ab jahanam"

Her Twitter stream continued with her personal devastation and ended that day with a message of defiance:

> When they unlocked the door, I ran down & saw drops of blood on stairs. My fathers blood, my brave heroic fathers blood

> I knelt on the stairs and kissed the spot where I saw them beat him as he said he cudnt breath.

> I will go sit with my mum, she keeps saying be prepared for the worse. If any1 can do anything for my dad, husband & brother in law, plz do

Alkhalifa, YOU CANT BREAK US, U CANT BREAK US. WE WILL ALWAYS STAND STRONG AGAINST YOU.

In the next days, Zainab Al-Khawaja started a high-profile hunger strike—even though she was still nursing her 2-year-old daughter, Jude. She and her supporters tweeted out pictures of her, with and without her daughter, as well as pictures of the detained men of the family. Her struggle was at once described at a very political level, but also the personal and emotional stakes were both conveyed and vivid. Her hunger strike was covered in a variety of news outlets, including *The New York Times* and the *Guardian*, as she updated the world through her Twitter account.

Her hunger strike was met with both great concern among her social media followers and disdain and criticism among people in Bahrain who supported the monarchy. However, the attention was not all external, and it certainly was not all positive. Bahrain is perhaps one of the most contentious online political spheres because of the combination of high rates of social media participation and the political and ethnic polarization that sharply divides the country. Starting with the hunger strike, there was a significant amount of social media–directed attacks about her, including a parody account, "@hungryarabiya," which mocked her hunger strike and her quest for public attention. Parody tweets included ones such as the following: "I'm a whore for topics that appeal to the media, also I have a cute baby. LOVE ME WORLD"; "I went crazy in court today, yelling Allah Akbar. Boy am I gonna have stories today . . . ."; and "I'm out of breath, I need to lie down. But first I must tweet about it."

Although she eventually ended her hunger strike without her family being released from prison, this period can be considered a turning point in her evolution as a microcelebrity networked activist. Tweeting in fluent English, she increasingly became a symbol of Bahraini dissidents to the outside world and a thorn in the side of the Bahraini ruling family. By May, her follower count on Twitter had risen to approximately 10,000, and she was being regularly featured on mass media in Western countries as well, which sometimes directly quoted her tweets rather than interviewing her.

Throughout this period, Zainab Al-Khawaja also acted as an activist citizen-journalist. Between April of 2011 and January of 2012, she attended nearly every major protest in Bahrain, carrying her Blackberry at all times and reporting about chants, police presence, teargas, and activities in real time. She also made a point of visiting families of prisoners, people killed during protests, and other activists. She often relayed stories of what parents and relatives of people who had died were saying, along with uncensored pictures of the dead, pictures of injuries, and pictures of parents and other survivors.

As argued earlier, this not an analysis of old media versus new media but, rather, an examination of the emergence of highly networked, dense, but also hierarchical information ecology in which newly emergent microcelebrity activists gain access to, and become means of, flow of attention and visibility. And mass media are certainly a crucial and huge part of global attention flows. To that effect, Zainab Al-Khawaja's social media followers included prominent journalists around the world, which created a further twist for Bahrain's regime especially when she started engaging in civil

Figure 1. Bahraini Activist Zainab Al-Khawaja stops a row of riot police in an image that ricocheted around the world while the stand-off continued.
Source: Mohammed Mirza, via Yfrog and published in *The New York Times*, December 1, 2011.

disobedience. Coupled with her personal visibility, the presence of observers who went with her to demonstrations to document what happened to her as well as her own minute-by-minute reporting of her actions put the regime in a position similar to that of a traditional dictator's dilemma: Arresting her often generated an immediate wave of negative publicity for the regime, whereas not arresting her resulted in her engaging in disruptive activities, such as blocking riot police cars, going to otherwise low-visibility villages where there were protests and documenting them, and overall creating a political problems because of her ability to command attention.

Social Media and News Making in Real Time

To illustrate the cycle of convergence of external attention, microcelebrity activist status, local repression, and global information flows, one can look a key event that occurred at the end of November 2011, when Zainab Al-Khawaja interrupted a line of riot police vehicles headed to a village where a protest was going on. She had tweeted her intentions before going to this event; the developments were also relayed by her sister, also a prolific Twitter user, now in exile. The police first wanted to arrest her but were unable to do so because there were not enough female police officers—and in a gender-segregated country such as Bahrain, women cannot be arrested by men. As she stood in front of the line of police, this dramatic image (Figure 1) showing her blocking a line of police cars and armed riot police, wearing an *abaya* and a scarf, and making the victory sign emerged on social media:

Figure 2. A police officer drags Zainab al-Khawaja after handcuffing her when she refused to leave after a sit-in." Name of photographer: Hamad I Mohammed - Reuters.
Source: *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2011.

It is important to note that this image started circulating widely as the confrontation was ongoing. This was not an "after-the-fact" photo but a contemporaneous part of the developing narrative and the event itself. Between the time she started standing in front of the police cars and the time that female police officers arrived, the standoff had caused a social media storm. The ongoing protest, playing out partially through social media, was noticed also by the media attaché of Bahrain in Washington, D.C., Saqer Al-Khalifa. In response to a tweet about the standoff by Sultan Al-Qassemi, a prominent columnist and social media personality from the United Arab Emirates with more than 100,000 Twitter followers and regular media appearances in Western press, Saqer Al-Khalifa responded also on Twitter:

> @SultanAlQassemi @angryarabiya @mo7ammedmirza @maryamalkhawaja I must say that Tweeps & Bloggers R not above the law. No 1 is in democracies

Shortly after this public tweet by the Bahraini official in Washington, D.C., the female police who had arrived at the scene in Bahrain were reportedly told not to arrest Zainab Al-Khawaja. Recounting the events, she stated that she believes that it was her prominent visibility on Twitter, and the dramatic photo, that caused the change in plans:

> They started filming me and they figured out who I was instantly and that I'm an activist and one officer kept telling the police, "*Not this one* [italics added], don't beat this one," so they didn't beat me up at first. They were attacking the protestors behind me. . . . If something happened to me, there are people around the world who would ask about it and there are

people around the world who would even act to try to get me released. And the regime doesn't want to be exposed. ("Extended Interview," 2011)

In a similar incident, Zainab Al-Khawaja was interviewed 2 weeks later by *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, who was visiting Bahrain just as the regime had launched a public relations offensive. However, a few hours after the release of her interview with Kristoff, she was arrested, again in conditions that showed female police officers handcuffing her, dragging her on the ground, and then beating her while she was handcuffed (Figure 2):

This story, too, received widespread attention as it was happening. Journalist Nick Kristof, having just left Bahrain, tweeted to his million-plus followers, "I suggest that Bahrain officials avoid torturing and imprisoning @AngryArabiya. Some day she could be their president." Kristof also wrote multiple columns about Bahrain, sometimes featuring Zainab Al-Khawaja as an example, in his high-profile *New York Times* column.

Attention, Visibility, and Protection: Political and Humanitarian Consequences of Microcelebrity Networked Activism

Whether external attention is protective of an activist or not has been hotly debated, especially by the activists themselves. After Zainab Al-Khawaja's latest arrest, detailed in the end of the previous section, Bahrain's record on long imprisonment sentences led many observers, including Zainab Al-Khawaja's sister in exile, to worry that Zainab herself could be held for a lengthy detention, followed by a long prison sentence. However, just a few days later, she was released pending trial, a fact that seemed to surprise her. She tweeted,

This morning I was in a prison cell, planning how I wud spend at least 1 yr in prison #Bahrain

I wud never have believed I wud be at home hugging and cuddling Jude tonight #bahrain

Soon after her release, Zainab Al-Khawaja was once again out in the streets, attending protests, live-tweeting from them, and meeting families of those injured, killed, and detained. In fact, the repeated assaults on her seem to have had little impact on her willingness to travel in Bahrain, documenting and broadcasting about the opposition movement in the country. Her ability to command attention also grew, and at the end of 2011, she was up to approximately 30,000 Twitter followers. She was once again arrested on February 12, 2012, and again released about a week later. She stated that she was not mistreated and told the BBC that "the only reason for that is because the government is afraid of bad media not because they respect my rights" ("Leading Bahrain Activist Released," 2012).

Later in the year, Zainab Al-Khawaja was once again detained in August 2012 and put on trial for multiple charges, including destroying government property (tearing up

a photo of the king), insulting an officer, attending an illegal gathering, inciting "hatred against the regime," obstructing traffic, and so on ("Prominent Bahrain Activist Jailed," 2012). She was shot with a teargas canister during the protest leading up to her latest arrest, and she stated that she was denied proper medical care. She was again released on October 2nd, 2012. At this point, she had approximately 45,000 Twitter followers. Soon after her release, she once again started attending rallies, funerals of slain activists, and other events and live-tweeting, sending updates and photos. She was once again detained and released in December of 2012, during which she also published a blistering op-ed in *The New York Times* challenging ongoing U.S. support for Bahrain's regime (Al-Khawaja, 2012).

Within-Movement Consequences

The emergence of such activists in the global public eye, not surprisingly, creates unequal dynamics—although this is not the same kind of "privilege" as that of a regular celebrity, as all activists, especially those in repressive regimes, take big risks to their life and liberty. Rather, it is the privilege of attention. Visibility may also prove to be a two-edged sword by increasing regime attention on activists as well. However, according to multiple accounts and attempts to trace the fate of such activists, this visibility provides a form of protection not accorded to others, which is a source of tension and unease.

Zainab Al-Khawaja often expressed her own discomfort with this inequality even as she repeatedly attributed the regime's reluctance to give her lengthy sentences—or to torture her—to her prominence, especially on social media. As she stated,

> [The regime targets] people who are faceless, people who have no names to the outside world, who people around the world don't know about—which actually makes me very sad. Because on almost a daily basis, there are people in Bahrain who are detained, who are beaten, many of them children, 14- to 15-year-old children who are injured and beaten. . . . For me to be protected and for them not to be protected is really sad. ("Extended Interview," 2011)

Other visible activists expressed similar concerns. Razan Ghazzawi, an activist in Syria who was detained multiple times by the regime, similarly reported in a tweet that the international campaign to free her "forced [the security forces] to treat me right so that I dont go out and tell you that." She also lamented lack of attention to other dissidents. Similarly, prominent Egyptian activist Alaa Abd El Fattah, who has more than 100,000 followers on Twitter, stated in an interview,

> They knew that they couldn't torture me because of the solidarity and the media attention, so they just made sure to try to use every other measure to put me at discomfort or add psychological pressure. But every other person arrested in the Maspero incident [for which Abd El Fattah was also arrested] were [*sic*] tortured severely, and torture is still very systematic at police stations and in prisons. (York, 2011)

Alaa Abd El-Fattah also suggested that his earlier 2006 arrest and detention likely lasted longer than it would have had he been unknown but that he was spared torture then, too.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation's director for international freedom of expression, Jillian C. York, interviewed in conditions of anonymity other activists who had been detained and have been the subject of solidarity campaigns and reported that her interviewees each "said a variation on the same theme" such that "they were treated well, and sometimes even given special privileges, because of their status" (York, 2011). The activists in that case were also highly cognizant of the inequality structured in their visibility. As she recounts, the activists she interviewed expressed concern "that the same treatment was not extended to his fellow detainees, a reminder that being a blogger is a position of privilege in its own way" (York, 2011). This tension is another reminder that social media introduce novel dynamics but do not create a "flat" or "hierarchy-less" structure, as sometimes assumed.

Conclusion

As these cases demonstrate, networked microcelebrity activism creates novel pathways to attention for dissidents, especially in repressive regimes. These pathways are not orthogonal to traditional mass media but rather are integral to the emergent attention ecology where new and old forms of public visibility intermingle in complex ways. This new integration, however, is not a mere reproduction of the old order on a new scale; rather, there are substantive alterations to the power relations between mass media, formal opposition institutions, and states compared with earlier periods (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Meyer & Gamson, 1995), when there was a more stark division between those able to command attention institutionally (through mass media or traditional political structures) or personally (celebrities) and "mere" social movement activists.

Perhaps the most important difference that flows from these cases is that the "power-dependency" relationship between media and the social movement actors has been fundamentally altered. The microcelebrity activist is not monopolistically dependent on mass media for attention of broader publics. In fact, some activists have follower networks that rival readership of large newspapers. Furthermore, since the immediate follower network also acts as propagator, the reach of these activists can easily be tens of millions of people in just one or two degrees out of their core social media networks—and, of course, this kind of reach often also supports mass media appearances, further increasing visibility.

This new ability to gain attention from broader publics means that some of the strategies movement activists pursue in the search for attention operate under different conditions. Although celebrities still command massive attention, they now coexist with activists with direct connection to broader audiences. Zainab Al-Khawaja can "stick" to her own message, which remains uncompromising and includes stark descriptions of repression as well as her commitment to not accepting the legitimacy of the current monarchy in Bahrain.

Furthermore, the spokesperson-movement dynamics lamented by Gitlin (1980) have been altered. The networked microcelebrity activist is an integral part of the social movement itself, and without necessarily an institutional role or a claim to legitimacy through established, institutionalized means, or a monopoly on attention, the activist's position within the movement remains that of a peer whose political acts are visible and can be challenged from within the movement.

This weakening of formal institutional control over attention brings about major changes to state capacity in dealing with dissidents. For example, during the height of the Tahrir protests, Mubarak's regime wanted to negotiate with some of the movement leaders—however, lacking institutional leverage, these leaders themselves were not in a position to negotiate or "sell out" (Ghonim, 2012). Mass media can no longer unilaterally decide to "appoint" who gets to act as a movement's spokespersons, nor can activists who become de facto spokespersons shed ties of accountability to the broader movement, for better or worse.

Future Directions

The rise of a new kind of highly visible, networked microcelebrity activist raises many questions, both analytical and political. For repressive regimes, it creates novel political dilemmas as these activists create publicity headaches when arrested as well as when detained—and yet are not operating within traditional institutional structures. Analytically, these novel dynamics in social movements have not yet been fully theorized, conceptualized, or empirically examined in depth; yet, they are already integral to the practices of most modern movements.

The rise of the networked microcelebrity activist raises questions of attention, equality, and visibility. Many accounts of the role of social media in politics often have hopes of broader participation by multiple publics. Although networked activism can open up avenues to groups that were excluded from the public sphere, it does not create flattened hierarchies even though participation may be broadened. Every country in the Middle East has only a few microcelebrity activists, perhaps at most in the double digits, whose arrests would cause international waves. In fact, this is likely a structural feature of this network as the limited commodity is attention, not willing activists.

The dilemmas these microcelebrity activists raise for repressive regimes should not be seen only through the framework of "save a life" or "save someone from torture" through attention. Repressive regimes retain a structural and deep capacity for violence; hence, whether they refrain from killing or torturing a single person because of international pressure is unlikely to be a key path to change. The dilemma posed is not about a particular person's travails or activism but about the changes to the structure of the relationships between dissidents, civil society, and states as a result of the internal and external attention-commanding capacity of these activists. In that, microcelebrity activism points to a new dynamic in networked politics and one worth watching and exploring further.

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