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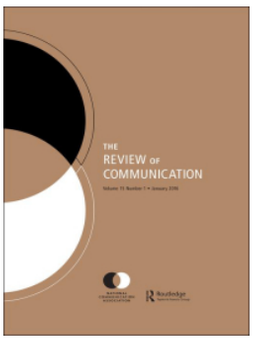
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Transnational dimensions in digital activism and protest

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ABSTRACT

This themed issue provides an international perspective on transnational processes in digital activism and protest. Against wider claims that social movements and citizen activism are shifting from the logic of spatial organization to networked flows, this themed issue foregrounds the interplay between the global and local in networked public spheres. Recent transnational movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter yield the importance of interweaving digital communication, pre-existing activist collectives, and citizen activation on a seemingly global scale. In this Introduction, we ask how political causes circulate globally, what role digital technologies play, and ultimately, what "transnational" means for seemingly universal causes, global collective identity, and activist practice. After providing an overview of the different theoretical insights that an interdisciplinary approach to digital activism can provide, we outline a conceptual framework for approaching the transnational as an entanglement of flows, hierarchies, and agencies.

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Black Lives Matter protests in Vienna, Women's Marches in El Salvador and Buenos Aires, the #DigitalStrikeOnline hashtag trending on Ugandan and Indian Twitter. These are only a few examples of how social justice issues such as racism, misogyny, or climate change have globalized. Mediated by digital technologies, political causes circulate beyond their points of origination, draw in international actors, and appeal to transnational audiences. The transnationalization of activism occurs on both sides—organizers draw attention to their causes using the persuasive and low-cost power of online communication while adherents can join (virtual) collectives with the click of a button. As such, mobilization transcends local borders, and recent activist successes show us how important a global community has become in social change initiatives. Network supported movements such as #MeToo or Fridays for Future harness the effects of localizing sociocultural issues by showing how they affect all, regardless of nationality or gender. This results in digital swarms simultaneously pressuring political elites through collective contention in different countries, generating news mediation of their efforts, and publicizing their causes further.

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This themed issue foregrounds transnational connections, spaces, and meanings as a locus of attention in the study of digital activism. With political causes circulating with worldwide digital virulence, we approach the transnational dimensions of digital activism as an entanglement of contextual concerns and global values. Although we are aware that certain collectives and causes use activism for antisocial and marginalizing purposes, in this themed issue, we prefer to reserve the term *activism* for those who push for equity, justice, and democratic participation. As such, we refer to collective forms of actions that originate from outside the realm of formal politics to "challenge some existing element of the social or political system."[1] Activism becomes a process whereby collective actors are brought together by shared experiences and values to put their concerns on the public agenda as a way of forcing political structures into engagement. In that sense, activism represents a democratic mechanism whereby grievances from below are not only given a political voice, but also afforded attention from stakeholders by way of collectivity.

Digital technologies have substantially changed the mode, rhetoric, and scope of activism. In a basic sense, *digital activism* refers to forms of collective action that engage political opponents primarily via online spaces and tactics. In their foundational piece on connective action, W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg speak of digitally networked actions organized by technologically enabled networks that aggregate dispersed individuals into a collective form of action. This occurs since networks and social media serve as new spaces to organize, coordinate, and share information.[2] Similarly, Jordana J. George and Dorothy E. Leidner identify 10 types of digitally enabled activisms, including clicktivism, e-funding, data activism, and hacktivism.[3] While digital technologies have afforded new spaces of political interaction and new tactics for activist intervention, most forms of contemporary activism make use of digital technologies to a considerable extent for organizational, mobilization, and amplification purposes. Hence, in this themed issue, we flag that the contribution of digital technologies to activism cannot and should not be approached independently of the wider media and communication ecology within which they are embedded. Furthermore, in most cases of contemporary activism, the online and the offline are seamlessly integrated.[4] We note that activists wanting to harness the transnational power of the internet cannot ignore digital dimensions in their programs as audiences have come to expect it. However, the mode and main forum of activism remain flexible. As Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam note, attention to digital activism needs to balance an interest in the digital with one in activism.[5] As such, the contribution of the digital as a broad-based and metrics-contingent space needs to be nuanced. In practice, this means shifting our focus from the assumed novelty, empowerment, or universality of digital activism to recovering its situated character.

This attention to situatedness is even more important when considering the transnational dimensions of digital activism. It is important to note that we opted for the term *transnational* over international, as the latter often implies a center and a periphery. Transnational has more of the grassroots character and allows enough conceptual flexibility to parse apart various dimensions of activist causes and practice. Sidney Tarrow charts six processes of transnational contention, including borrowing global appeals to mobilize for local issues, moving claims to accommodate global values, and bringing in international actors under a common cause. He further notes that globalizing activism can mobilize cosmopolitan individuals and enable cross-cultural coalitions.[6] The digital

often appears to have destabilized the directionality of flows in global activism, enabling dispersed calls to action on social justice issues to come together into a collective actor. Such broader visions of the digital as an intrinsically global arena with its globalizing characteristics can easily make it seem as if the online dimensions of movements such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter (BLM) virally spread around the world, empowering marginalized groups and creating sociopolitical change. Yet, the interweaving of the local and the digital is crucial in understanding how such movements appeared, unfolded, and made their mark.

In the case of the Netherlands, for instance, pre-existing local activist networks fighting against systemic racism were quintessential in several ways. The difficult Dutch colonial history and the growing public awareness of systemic racism had created the circumstances for the BLM movement to resonate in a way that brought people to the streets. Even though the Dutch antiracism movement had been active on- and offline since 2013, it was the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 that galvanized protest across the country under the BLM banner. A series of protests in major cities were initially conceived as a display of solidarity with the anti-Black violence protests in the United States. The Dutch movement appeared, like its U.S. counterpart, decentralized —whereas the protest in The Hague was initiated via a Facebook page by a student, three nationally known organizations worked together in Rotterdam to mobilize for street action.[7] The protests were also seen as a means of addressing institutional racism in the Netherlands and thus often linked to the local activist fight against Zwarte Piet, the infamous Dutch Sinterklaas tradition of blackface. Where the digital remained central to organizing the protests and continuing to raise awareness about systemic racism, local concerns and activist networks acted as a bridge between U.S. and Dutch publics. By late June, the BLM Netherlands protests started demanding local action on national police brutality and political recognition of institutional racism.

But why did BLM resonate, at that particular moment, in this particular context? What role played the mediatization of the U.S. movement abroad? How did organizers in both places use digital technologies to communicate beyond sharing a common hashtag? How did BLM activists in the United States digest the appropriation of "their" cause by foreign activists? Such questions point to the difficulties of disentangling the interplay in activism between the local and the global on the one hand, and the digital and analogue on the other. Transnationalism in digital activism is complex—not all transnationalization benefits a cause and liberates the marginalized; it can also bring into stark relief existing global power dynamics that favor issues on the agenda of the Global North, running the risk of cementing existing dominances in the social change arena by putting Western actors and their perspectives at the center. Disproportionate access to digital tools and language barriers challenge wider claims that citizen activism has shifted to networked contention and taken activism from the streets to online platforms.

The essays in this themed issue show how the global and local come together in networked public spheres. We are particularly interested in how the use of digital technologies intersects with, and is shaped by, often invisible pre-existing activist collectives when mobilizing citizens for contentious action. Thus, we asked how political causes circulate globally, what role digital technologies play in the process, and what the transnational meant for both seemingly universal and local causes, collective identities, and activist practices. The contributions in this themed issue investigate these points of

friction in their case studies of feminist organizing, antiextractivism activism, extradition protests, and democratization movements. The authors offer contextual insights into how local causes become connected to global values and communities, showcasing the use of digital media in transnationalizing actions and raising movement profiles.

Theoretically, the articles foreground the importance of wider communication and media ecosystems beyond the digital, charting the various transnational paths that social movements travel in contemporary digital societies. This includes local organizers bringing diasporic actors into regional political uprisings (as in the case of the Hirak movement); involving powerful international stakeholders through social media (as in the case of the Hong Kong protests); riding the publicity waves of global movements (as in the case of Turkish feminist collectives); and regional activists expanding their networks to transnational organizations (as in the case of the Phulbari movement in Bangladesh). Taken together, the contributions also flag that a critical stance is needed in studying transnational digital advocacy. This includes asking important questions, such as: Who triggers the transnationalization of local causes? Which international actors are deemed influential to bring on board? How about the directionality and reciprocation of transnational exchanges? What overarching power structures shape social justice organizing on the global stage?

As the Guest Editors of this themed issue, we approach the transnational dimensions in digital activism and protest as an interdisciplinary topic. In this Introduction, we first outline how communication studies and social movement studies can draw from each other's theoretical repertoires to develop a conceptual framework able to account for communicational, material, and contextual dimensions of activism. We then outline our proposed conceptual framework for approaching the transnational in digital activism as an entanglement of flows, hierarchies, and agencies. We conclude with an overview of the contributions to this conceptual framework made by the four featured articles.

An interdisciplinary approach to transnational dimensions in digital activism and protest

In their Introduction to a journal issue devoted to digital activism, Kaun and Uldam characterize this scholarship as a growing yet diverse field of inquiry approached from various disciplines that could benefit from building on each other.[8] Where sociological approaches draw attention to processes of activist mobilization and amplification, communication and media approaches foreground the role of digital technologies in these processes. Thus, scholarship remains "dominated either by a strong focus on the *digital*, that is technology, emphasizing a universal way of using certain devices and infrastructures, or they foreground *activism* losing sight of the specificities of protest media technologies."[9]

In this section, we engage with several loci of interest emerging from different disciplinary arenas, signaling theoretical sensitivities and questions that could help future scholarship on digital activism. Where communication scholars have paid considerably less attention to the theoretical contributions on social movements developed by sociologists, the sociological lens often lacked "a comprehensive theoretization of media as a set of social processes that intersect with protest mobilization."[10] As media uses and communication strategies involving digital technologies have become a staple of activism,

the different debates in the sociology of social movements can sensitize communication scholars to the complexity of activism, serving as a good reminder that, for all their promises of agency and creativity, digital technologies remain only one of many dimensions shaping collective actions and their impact. The organization and amplification of collective action remain difficult processes, influenced by a constellation of factors such as activist communication, the availability of resources, the existence and (re)construction of social ties and networks, and political opportunities. Attention to transnational dimensions of activism can only benefit from taking a more comprehensive approach to how such factors unfold within specific contexts.

Lessons from digital activism scholarship: problematizing the digital

Media-centric approaches to digital activism have too often become fascinated by the possible advantages of the digital—and particularly social media—for activist mobilization and amplification, as well as political change. In turn, this leads to two theoretical limitations: isolationism (i.e., focusing on the digital without due consideration to its interweaving with existing media and communication ecosystems) and determinism (i.e., taking technology as a somewhat inevitable cause of social change).[11] Even when media and communication scholars borrow sociological concepts to study digital activism, these approaches often recenter the digital. It is common, for example, for communication scholars to approach social media as resources for helping or hindering mobilization; as means of forging collective identity (or even rendering it superfluous); or as means of interconnecting individuals and creating "networks of outrage and hope."[12]

As scholars took note of the integration of information and communication technologies in transnational movements, several studies warned against premature conclusions that the internet was empowering citizens everywhere alike, rendering traditional forms of protest obsolete, or creating a global civic consciousness.[13] Questions around the strength and durability of internet-mediated communication ties were raised, particularly against the fluidity of movements and activist networks, which often change in response to current events.[14] In her discussion of how the local chapters of the World Social Forum hyperlinked each other's websites, Stefania Vicari drew attention to the lingering importance of hegemonic geographical hierarches in mediated ties among activists. Her research found that online activist networks remained centered upon European and North American forums, acting as "critical connectors" that "sent and/or received a high number of links towards and/or from other network nodes, allowing exchanges between different sub-networks."[15] As is the case in offline environments, language and geopolitics shaped these online networks of hyperlinked activists, and "exchanges were still more likely to occur within geographical borders."[16]

Protest and activism became more visible around the world with the rise in internet use, but the visibility that activists achieved was uneven and often reconstructed particular hierarchies of power across different places.[17] In turn, this (seemingly) global visibility also shaped collective imaginaries in that grievances and issues, tactics of action, and political opponents become increasingly conceptualized as transnational in nature. As Libby Lester and Simon Cottle explain, the transnational in digital activism is not merely a matter of political reach or geographies of scale, but "fundamentally inheres within *how* [protests and demonstrations] become communicated and mediated around the

globe."[18] Such mediations, they argue, have an important performative effect: they manifest the transnational "as ethico-political imaginary (of what should be) and as collective political action (the struggle to bring this about)."[19] The tricky analytical task for digital activism scholarship is to recognize the negotiated and challenged nature of mediations, as they are rearticulated in the local context while still recovering their contribution to the emergence of communities of concern that are, in many ways, translocal in nature.

The visibility of digital technologies in activism exploded with the antiausterity movements and the Arab Spring. On the one hand, news media coverage hyped the role of technology in connecting and empowering citizens to intervene in the political landscape.[20] On the other hand, social media became increasingly imagined as quintessential and universal symbols of protest (e.g., featured on protest signs or graffiti).[21] This enthusiasm has also been mirrored in the development and subsequent popularity of the connective logic framework within digital activism scholarship. Developed by Bennett and Segerberg, this framework proposes that social media's ability to aggregate individual voices/grievances is, in itself, sufficient for organizing protest. In turn, this means the construction of a collective identity and action frames, often driven by actors that took on an organizing role, is no longer required for protest mobilization. For Bennett and Segerberg, movements such as the 15M/Indignados or Occupy represent a new form of mobilization wherein digital technology serves as "organizing agents." Digital technology enabled the emergence of decentered and leaderless activist networks in which individual participation consists of personal messages and activist contributions as opposed to collective action frames.[22] In addition to such conceptual frameworks foregrounding networks and networking as "the new social operating system,"[23] the relative accessibility of online traces of digital activism and the ensuing computational turn in social science research have contributed to a growing trend of approaching digital activism as a form of connective action and studying it through its online traces only.[24]

These theoretical and methodological approaches, however, remain problematic for several reasons. Suay M. Özkula, Paul J. Reilly, and Jenny Hayes note that in focusing on particular online platforms (primarily Twitter and Facebook), "digital activism research disproportionately produces knowledge of *particular social groups* as well as *very specific dynamics of activism*, i.e., ad-hoc issue publics aggregating around hashtags and through short messages on sites like Twitter."[25] Take, for instance, the excitement over hashtag activism, which has been accompanied by the emergence of a vocabulary that often erases both the local and the larger contexts in cases of digital activism. Terms such as "hashtag publics," "digital publics," "distant witnessing," or "networked activists" often imply a rather universal experience, equally available to all social strata in all corners of the world. Furthermore, such terms theoretically frame specific forms of activism (e.g., hashtag activism) that, while often anchored in the United States, are presented *as if* they bear no connection to local politics, histories, or even technological imaginaries among the citizenry.[26] Without denying the theoretical usefulness of such terms or recommending a return to methodological nationalism,[27] our point here is that local contexts remain significant in digital activism, even when the latter takes place primarily online.

Unlike the sociology of social movements, digital activism scholarship rarely reflects on these transnational dimensions. In our own study of the European national chapters of Fridays for Future (FFF) during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were

struck by differences in the communication and tactics of actors across national chapters, as well as by the apparent digital connections between them.[28] On the other hand, we noticed the symbolic power that national chapters afforded Greta Thunberg and the international FFF hub on their Facebook pages. The latter were adapting the movement's framing of climate change to the new realities and vocabularies of the pandemic while the national chapters were domesticating these new frames by linking them to local news, actors, events, and initiatives. Such transnational dynamics, however, remain difficult to fully understand by means of an analysis of available online traces only. In a transnational movement such as FFF, the connections between different localities and the flows of ideas, resources, know-how, people, etc. need to be disentangled and made sense of against the multiple contexts within which they unfold.

Lessons from social movement studies: the political impact of globalization on activism

Where the rise of social movements (and, subsequently, their study) has been interwoven with national politics, social movement scholarship has increasingly reflected on the impact of globalization on activism.[29] For example, Jackie Smith has distinguished between two types of impact: the globalization of the political context within which activism takes place and the changes in movement dynamics brought along by globalization (i.e., the emergence of global issues, of new arenas where activists can engage each other, and of new types of resources and strategies of action).[30] This overview suggests that activism increasingly brings the local and the global together in contextual ways, while the stability and long-term impact of these articulations remain open.

One area of inquiry drew attention to the importance of the emerging global political arenas where activist pressure can be built, as well as the sedimentation of multilevel governance structures upon which activist pressure can be exerted.[31] The political opportunity structure model had long pointed to the influence of the political structure on activism, albeit in the context of the nation-state. David N. Pellow highlights four aspects as relevant: the openness/closure of the political system; the stability or cohesion of the elite networks; the availability of elite allies; and the forms of institutionalized repression of activism.[32] The emergence of new political institutions (e.g., international bodies such as the International Court of Justice, regional governance structures such as the European Parliament, etc.), actors (e.g., international nongovernmental organizations, diasporic communities, etc.), and legislative instruments (e.g., trade agreements, international treaties, etc.) characterizing global political environments renders each of the four aspects of the political opportunity structures increasingly complex. The multilevel governance structure can help activists by creating new allies and spaces for political action; diffuse political decision-making and responsibility across geographically dispersed institutions and actors; and foster the willingness of local political actors to respond to or abide by international agreements. These conditions, however, can be both a blessing and a curse—such transnationalization can propel causes and restrict change all the same. The "nested institutions" of global political environments, as David S. Meyer calls them, can thus hamper local political structures and citizens alike. As such, "the strategic battle between movements and states takes place on a moving landscape in which actors may be nested in a variety of different institutions,

affected by alliances, policies, and even the rhetoric of extra-national actors"—but "[t]he degree to which exogenous factors affect national political opportunity structure will vary from issue to issue, and over time."[33] Attention to the political alliances and spaces within which digital activism becomes embroiled reminds us that the interplay between local and international political structures can generate exciting opportunities for activists; yet, we should also ask whether and how these opportunities become politically effective, especially long term. Importantly, such opportunities are not necessarily available to everyone, as political opportunity structures remain "deeply racialized and gendered," shaping "the access and possibilities of change for social movements."[34]

Second, the rise of global politics has also been accompanied by the rise of global issues. The local—often understood through the lens of the nation-state—has been an important driver of collective mobilization. Indeed, many small-scale movements or regional groups remain active at the local level and never make it to the national stage, struggling to scale their efforts and mobilize more broadly for their cause.[35] Shared grievances often grow out of the domestic policies and regulations shaping everyday life, making citizens generally more attuned to national politics; yet, the national context has often been (mis)understood as creating stronger solidarity bonds and providing shared cultural codes that can more easily facilitate mobilization. Globalization, however, intensifies the circulation of issues across borders while increasing the public's awareness that some issues are, by nature, transnational. But is this realization also accompanied by the emergence of global solidarity? And what can activists do to mobilize citizens to engage with global issues and politics?

Massimiliano Andretta, Donatella della Porta, and Clare Saunders suggest activists tackle global issues in various ways.[36] Collective and cooperative transnational mobilizations represent two different forms of activist coordination across countries to bring together different networks, themselves formed of various subnetworks. Here, collectives take different routes. For instance, the Global Justice Movement targets international political institutions, while Arab Spring actors focus on domestic politics. Such mobilizations depend on (and are shaped by) the paths of international collaborations among organizers. Conversely, rooted cosmopolitanism and domesticated mobilization tackle global issues via domestic coordination that is either influenced by ideas and tactics used elsewhere, as in the case of the Occupy movement, or entirely localized with primary reliance on local repertoires of action, networks, and addressing local political targets. In practice, these forms of mobilization can be mixed and matched, depending on available resources and current events.

Yet, bringing global and local dimensions together remains a challenge for activism. Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow outline three ways to transnationalize movements: by diffusing the framing of grievances and the tactics of action across borders, by domesticating global frames and practices to local contexts, and by externalizing issues by pressuring external actors to intervene in domestic causes.[37] Digital technologies and international online media bring in new ways to accomplish these tasks, creating new conditions for the transnationalization of activism and protest. Digital activism scholars could benefit from keeping an eye out for how digital technologies facilitate or hinder diffusion, domestication, or externalization. In particular, scholars should pay attention to how these different strategies merge local and global dimensions and how this changes organizers' protest communication patterns and media practices, on the

one side, as well as the journalistic treatment and mediation of causes, on the other. Additionally, the connective and organizational affordances of digital technologies should not be assumed as universal, as they are shaped by access to resources, social capital, and digital literacy skills. In particular, simpler digital movement strategies (e.g., the creations of English-language hashtags) should not be understood as the hallmark of global movements. While these practices bring international visibility and can create "intense bursts"[38] of global engagement, scholars have also problematized their alleged power to mobilize for long-term and dedicated contention on the issue at stake and noted the destructive impact of online backlash and reappropriations by countermovements.[39] Nevertheless, there is something to be learned from causes that manage to travel across the world and resonate with dispersed audiences. Perhaps the digital remains as one important common denominator in these success stories.

Transnational dimensions of activism: sensitivity to local specificities and hierarchies of power

The focus on globalization is also problematic, as the term itself implies a certain universality of scope and experience. The transnational, in turn, has emerged as a "more humble" alternative with increased sensitivity to the partiality of localities that are brought together.[40] Sensitivity to how activists connect and organize across borders allows scholars to focus on linkages and flows between different localities, while also paying more attention to the specific localities that are thus being brought together. For instance, Daphné Josselin argues that in the late 1990s, local activists approached the transnational dimension of their worldwide debt cancellation campaign through the prism of their domestic access, political opportunity structures, past histories, and opportunities for international ties. All of these were unevenly spread, as "often the message and tactics being spread across borders developed within a particular domestic setting, and might not thrive on foreign soil."[41] In that sense, the transnational lens preserves a sensitivity to the partiality and local specificities of these linkages and flows—instead of merely describing or approaching issues or activism as "global," it draws attention to the different pathways through which an incomplete (and potentially unjust) "global" is constructed.

The quality and durability of ties among activists are a central concern in such transnational approaches. Mario Diani and Ivano Bison, for instance, distinguish between coalitions that are usually short-lived and instrumental, and dense forms of coordination that link together identities and solidarities.[42] Transnational ties between activists can, of course, be formal or informal with the more formal ones growing into joint campaigns and mobilization processes. Some networks, such as diasporic communities, provide overseas support to local contention. Others aim at changing international policy by targeting multiple organizations and institutions, as is the case with the environmental movement. Importantly, such networks often entail a diversity of activist actors, with different capabilities and resources, such as citizens or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).[43]

Transnational ties among activists are thus heterogeneous in many ways: "some forms of connection. . . allow the rapid spread of information and influence; other forms of connection (e.g., division into 'factions' by region, gender, or issue area) may inhibit

communication and make coordinated action more difficult."[44] Another question here is how diverse actors negotiate their participation in, as well as the power dynamics within, transnational networks. Kathryn Sikkink draws attention to the complexity of transnational ties by distinguishing three scenarios driven by local needs. In the first scenario, activists reach out to international actors and institutions in order to circumvent local blockages and repression (the boomerang effect). In the second scenario, activists feel pushed to establish international relations because the locus of local decision-making has been delegated (at least partly) to supranational institutions (the democratic deficit and defensive transnationalization). In the third scenario, activists act locally but use international action in a complementary manner (insider–outsider coalitions).[45]

In the case of large transnational activist collectives (e.g., the Global Justice Movement or intermovement participation in the World Social Forums), ties between activists can be nonhierarchical but based on multiple leadership groups. They can also act as laboratories of alternative political values, foregrounding participatory decision-making and inclusivity.[46] Yet, this is not always the case. Inequalities in the availability of resources along with different understandings of the local issues and the political opponents shape the availability and strength of transnational ties.[47] In some cases, activists representing "local subjugated knowledge and its richness are displaced and even marginalized by transnational movements and coalitions acting globally."[48] Thus, in addition to different activist actors within transnational networks experiencing various constraints and needs, there are differences in their degree of professionalization. All of these are part and parcel of the challenges of transnational ties.[49] Finally, in focusing on the opportunities of transnational ties for activism, we should not forget they are equally open to countermovements.[50]

The transnational lens recovers the importance of local contexts and refocuses attention on the quality of the ties among activists. For digital activism scholarship, this is an important reminder of the need to recover heterogeneity and to preserve an analytic sensitivity to the struggles and tensions within transnational exchanges, ties, and processes.[51] Furthermore, this tension foregrounds the necessity to ask: Which localities are linked together, how, and why? And what role do digital technologies and online media play in the circulation of causes and formations of transnational solidarity? Importantly, as movements are constantly adapting to new circumstances, attention to transnational dimensions should also reflect on the dynamism of ever-changing relations and processes.[52] These include the arenas in which they play out (i.e., analogue, digital), the audiences they draw (e.g., local, regional, national, or international), and the framing of the causes themselves.

A conceptual framework for approaching the "transnational" in digital activism scholarship

One of our suggestions is to recover the importance of the multidirectional flows that permeate transnational connections (digital and nondigital), but also to do so with an eye to the role of power within them. When looking into how climate change NGOs across the world connect and interact on Twitter, Hong Tien Vu, Hung Viet Do, Hyunjin Seo, and Yuchen Liu echoed Vicari's earlier finding, showing how North/South hierarchies continue to permeate the production of content and the amount of

nodes on the issue; "such inequality," the authors remind us, "means that the voices representing the developing world are hardly heard."[53] This intersection between power and digital activism is further complexified by Saif Shahin, Junki Nakahara, and Marian Sánchez's study of the Black Lives Matter movement in Brazil, India, and Japan. In these contexts, the "transnational flow of ideas and meanings intersects with subnational fault lines of power—triggering cross-national alliances that social justice movements can benefit from and the cross-national antipathies they may have to contend with."[54] Power in transnational contexts is, then, never straightforward. As "crowd-enabled elites" diffuse transnational issues and frames, grassroots groups pick them up and insert them into local contexts. In this way, "digital diffusion leads to cultural hybridity" that reflects "local agency and creativity rather than capitulation to hegemonic Western values."[55]

This themed issue thus responds to calls for a more nuanced approach to the digital, one that is mindful of the "one-medium bias"[56] and that pays explicit attention to the relationship between digital technologies and their wider media ecosystems. Furthermore, this conceptual framework espouses the urgency of recovering the importance of historical, political, and cultural contexts shaping the material circumstances within which citizens conceptualize the political usefulness of activism and are able to act on it. These contexts cannot be merely an afterthought or a recommendation for further reflection; we advocate here for meaningfully taking them on board in the conceptual frameworks and research designs of digital activism scholarship.

The essays in this themed issue draw attention to the need for an engagement with the transnational dimensions of digital activism that goes beyond descriptive uses of this term (i.e., beyond simply calling networks or processes "transnational," without further attention to which distances are being closed down and how). Building on Sakia Sassen's earlier suggestions, we emphasize the need to approach transnational digital activism as sociodigital phenomena entangled in "a 'thick' matrix encompassing all sorts of actors, aims, and forms of power and powerlessness."[57] Given the paucity of studies on this topic, we signal the need to further question the transnational as an uneven and multiscalar terrain, stretching from material resources, (digital) know-how, and social (digital) capital to protest tactics, symbols, and imaginaries. For us, such examinations are necessarily recovering and problematizing not just the (re)production of different forms of power (i.e., discursive, financial, reputational, etc.), but also the importance of reconceptualizing, in a nonessentialist way, the local in shaping digital activism.

Arjun Appadurai's distinction between different flows of people, images, media, technology, and money crisscrossing within everyday life remains analytically inspiring for us.[58] Rather than being a mere descriptor of an event or a context, "flow" provides a vantage point from which social dynamics can be approached and investigated. Importantly, acknowledging these flows can take different (or nonisomorphic) paths that enable us to capture the (re)production of power within the multiple social practices constituting everyday life. In the context of digital activism, there is a need to understand more not only about the ways such flows temporarily bring different localities (e.g., local, regional, national, or international) together, but also about the directions within these flows. As Thomas Olesen argues, the question here is "how (and whether) [local, regional, national, and international] levels are integrated. . . and the

way in which social actors construct them."[59] However, this also suggests that transnational dimensions are changing depending on the vantage point(s) from which they are approached: the transnational of the 2017 Romanian anticorruption movement is quite different from that of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in Nigeria.

This themed issue, then, recommends conceptualizing the transnational as intersecting dimensions within the everyday practices of digital activism—from cultural flows that help construct grievances to the diffusion of tactics of action and circulation of activists from one location to another, and so on. Importantly, transnational dimensions are riddled with tensions and generative of new conflicts. Sometimes, they bear the traces of colonialist, imperialist, and other historical power dynamics. Such dynamics are also contemporary—the local, for instance, is "often the scene of power struggles between local actors who are themselves embedded in larger external networks."[60] In that sense, the transnational is not, in and of itself, emancipatory or progressive—something well illustrated by studies of far-right digital mobilizations.[61] Instead of an emancipatory/conservative lens, attention to transnational dimensions could center on the question of agency: How are these dimensions enabling individuals to have control over their lives and to intervene within political decision-making structures?

Approaching the transnational dimensions of digital activism thus entails disentangling intersecting flows, hierarchies, and agencies. While there is a need to further develop the "analytical tools that help conceptualize the interconnectedness of transnational episodes of mobilization and global and local processes of transformation," attention to what Sabrina Zajak calls the "pathways of transnational influence" is a good starting point.[62] How do we spot transnational paths? How do we disentangle them theoretically, and how do we capture them methodologically (particularly those that do not leave online traces for us to study)? How can we recover questions of voice and agency, emancipation and marginalization, and impact when following these pathways?

Four cases of transnational activism in digital public spheres

Our interest in this themed issue was to showcase how digital technologies impact activist causes at a global scale, how they aid (or forestall) the formation of collectivity beyond the local, and how issues take on a transnational character. From a theoretical standpoint, we sought to address some lingering questions in global activism research surrounding the launch of transnational social movements, the causes that make it to the global stage, the international actors involved, the powers that shape social justice organizing, and the flows of transnational protest in digital contexts. These questions also dovetail with our decision to opt for "transnational *dimensions* in digital activism and protest" as the title of this themed issue instead of simply titling it "transnational digital activism and protest." As the essays in this collection show, the transnational comes into play on various levels in the causes and movements they present—sometimes taking center stage, sometimes emerging as more of a byproduct. From these four featured essays, we learn that the transnational is not unilateral and is difficult to disentangle from its contextual, (geo)political, and mediated environments. We also learn that activists and organizers must find the right time, tone, and communication channels to tap into values and sentiments that find resonance beyond the local. We further learn that

seemingly universal appeals, such as gender justice or environmental justice, become actively constructed and developed as they circulate among dispersed audiences online. The digital, in turn, shapes how causes are picked up, framed, and recirculated (e.g., by diasporic actors). As such, the cultural is recovered as an essential part of the transnational; so are power structures that lead to the eventual transnationalization of movements and causes.

In their study of the Algerian Hirak movement, Alice Mattoni and Ester Sigillò investigate the transnationalization of a political movement and its reception in the diasporic community in France. The authors shed light on the role of digital media in highlighting political issues and the hybridization of the Hirak movement. The latter occurs when actors outside of the original geographical context become involved and remediate the cause to locals, fellow emigrants, and international audiences. Mattoni and Sigillò contend that the transnationalization of the Hirak movement caused changes in the movement around its politicization, organizational structure, and protest routines. The role of digital media in the movement was cemented further by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, making diasporic activists "digital organizers," thereby affecting the framing of the cause. This case study connects to our overarching question of how causes travel, how activism changes with actors outside of their native context, and what role the digital plays in these movement flows.

Transnational audiences also play a key role in the emergence of a global activist network surrounding the extradition bill protests in Hong Kong. Cheryl S. Y. Shea, Yanru Jiang, and Wendy L. Y. Leung showcase how the movement actively sought to bring in powerful international stakeholders through social media in order to pressure them into showing their support with the victims of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB). The enlisting of solidarity from high-profile actors in democratic societies was seen as a key factor in raising awareness of the political oppression. Grassroots users chose Twitter as their digital forum to address international actors and to lend the cause a transnational resonance. The authors provide us with concrete evidence, including the identity of foreign users, to show how a transnational advocacy network was formed on social media, thereby highlighting the role of the digital and specific movement flows in political activism.

Twitter also helped Turkish feminists bring international attention to femicide, a pervasive local issue. By appropriating the popular feminist hashtag #ChallengeAccepted, local organizers were able to link femicide to political developments, entice international users to partake in the digital campaign, and gain transnational visibility for their efforts by posting in English (in addition to Turkish). In this essay, Kristin Comeforo and Berna Görgülü highlight the unpredictability of digital activism, including its changing frames, the routes it takes, and the actors it attracts. Notably, the Turkish organizers rode the tails of #MeToo's gender equity popularity only to be shown how fleeting movement identification can become in online contexts. Their efforts to create a counternarrative to the self-empowerment rhetoric of feminist campaigns in networked contexts was only partially accomplished. Hence, this study's theoretical lessons tie into our questions about the directionality of transnational solidarity as well as the opportunities and drawbacks created by campaigns that rely on English as their lingua franca.

The historical development of activism from local to transnational is the focus of Anis Rahman and Mohammad Hasan's study of the antiextractivism movement in

Phulbari, Bangladesh. The authors trace how an Indigenous collective has gradually brought in transnational environmental justice organizations to help amplify their cause and sustain opposition to an exploitative British energy corporation. They explore how the Phulbari movement makes use of global appeals and transnational frames and has added digital activism. This study shows us how digital communication strategies become integrated into existing action repertoires and how transnational actors incorporate Indigenous voices to circulate the broader environmental message to global audiences.

Taken together, the four essays in this themed issue show numerous dimensions of how the global and local come together in networked public spheres. Importantly, these contributions yield that "transnational" does not necessarily equate to "global." There are preferred audiences, languages, frames, and causes that center some and marginalize others. Lastly, the essays highlight that the digital remains entrenched in hierarchies and power structures that impact the success and visibility of activist organizing on many levels. As digital technologies and networked media become increasingly important to social movements and their activists, we need to remember that the scholarly inquiry of the transnational dimensions in their efforts is not a discrete disciplinary endeavor but an interdisciplinary one that requires a broader theoretical lens to capture the intricacies at play.

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Notes

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