

**Social Media as a Strategy for Protest Movements in an Era of Government  
Control**

by

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## **Abstract**

In a new era of surveillance and control, governments have expanded their digital knowledge and strategies to prevent and disband social movements and demonstrations. In light of the resurgence of several protests worldwide, have new technological strategies been employed by protest leaders to counteract government efforts? Have digital tools adapted to government control? This study analyzed how social media has adapted in the face of repression in non-Western protest movements through the analysis of digital strategies evoked by protest leaders to organize demonstrations, mobilize people and persuade the undecided. Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and the resurgence of protest in the territory in 2019-2020, and Sudan's 2011-2013 protests and the subsequent 2018-2019 Intifada were chosen as case studies. A thematic analysis approach illustrated the different strategies implemented by both activists and governments and the ways in which social media evolved throughout the protest movements. This highlighted the various ways tools adapted to best facilitate the organization, mobilization and persuasion efforts to counter-act government repression and digital intervention. The technological evolution of social media has created an unprecedented level of transparency that allows for injustices actioned by governments to be shared on an international platform. This has ultimately led to a transfer of power to the people in times of social unrest and protest.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Literature Review .....	4
The Creation of Citizen Journalism .....	4
The Role of Traditional Media with Regards to Protest .....	7
Transformation of the Role of Social Media in Protest Movements.....	9
Does Social Media Challenge Government Control? .....	14
Theoretical Framework and Methodology .....	17
Case Studies .....	21
Hong Kong .....	21
Sudan .....	23
Analysis .....	27
Organize .....	29
Mobilize .....	34
Persuade .....	37
Discussion .....	41
Conclusion .....	46
Bibliography.....	49

## **Introduction**

Digital media has sparked an evolution in how information is created and shared. Prior to the popularization of social media, communications and journalism were restricted to television, newspapers, radio and word of mouth. This greatly impacted how people and communities became informed and influenced about the news and the world around them. These avenues are often privately controlled or subject to pre-approved government narratives, limiting the diversity and transparency of said content. As the cost for technology decreases globally and public access to the internet increases, the reach of information and the news has grown exponentially, creating new paths for connecting with like-minded individuals within cities, regions and abroad. It has also allowed for any individual with internet access to create content and spread messages, oftentimes avoiding government restrictions. Most importantly, social media has become an effective tool in mobilizing support across physical boundaries for a variety of causes, such as policy change, humanitarian projects, and activism.

The evolution of media has been particularly impactful in cases of protest movements and public unrest. Although traditional news sources have always played a vital role in sharing details about demonstrations to both communities and governments, new forms of social media are now contributing to the distribution of information and logistics in these events. As such, protest groups are allocating resources to building and maintaining strong communications teams, ensuring their goals are being shared and discussed nationally and internationally on across platforms. Communication strategies have become fundamental to mobilizing and organizing support at all levels. They have also become a useful tool for monitoring the impact of demonstrations and creating an unprecedented level of transparency by assessing police and military involvement and providing live footage of events. Non-democratic governments who have built their legitimacy on “fear, compliance and obedience” are threatened by new communication methods and information flows they do not, and cannot, control (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019).

However, to counteract these efforts, some leaders have implemented strategies to prevent citizens from posting content with damaging messages (Jost et al., 2018), have prevented foreign journalists from entering and reporting on the events (Jost et al., 2018), and have completely cut off all media communications between their citizens and the outside world, including through internet black outs (Barnett, 2019). Government tools and strategies to repress unwanted ideas and filter content available to their citizens have become more sophisticated and adaptable. They can

manipulate and repress online content, as well as streamline their own messages within their country and with the international community. These efforts are relatively new and have only been refined in the last decade.

The literature has largely focused on two separate perspectives: how social media can be used as a tool in protests and, more recently, on how governments have responded and attempted to control social media during protest movements. Moving the debates beyond these two positions, this research will instead look at how social media has adapted as a tool for protest in this new era of government control. Two cases will be explored in this research paper: the Hong Kong protests that began in 2014 and have continued into 2019, and the early 2010s and the 2018 Intifada in Sudan. Both cases demonstrate long-term social issues and recurring demonstrations that erupted on an international scale during a post-government control era using online social media. Hong Kong has had several major protests in 2014, 2016 and 2019 against China's growing control on the Special Administrative Region. In Sudan, protests against the government, especially regarding the inflation of food prices, have been ongoing since 1985. The Intifada movement of 2018-2019 and coinciding protests occurring in Sudan have succeeded in circulating messages on social media and engaging the government and political parties to participate in the protest and directly address concerns (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019). These cases help demonstrate the power of social media as a protest strategy, the limitations of digital activism in the face of government control, as well as explore the new and renewed digital strategies developed in the face of this control.

## **Literature Review**

### *The Creation of Citizen Journalism*

The internet and its platforms have caused globalization to evolve more rapidly than governments and international institutions have been able to monitor. Originally anticipated as a tool for individuals and like-minded groups to connect and discuss general issues, the speed and efficiency with which information is now shared is unprecedented. This acceleration in communications has also stimulated all areas of politics, the global economy, and international relations, creating an "acceleration of all reality" (Poell, 2019; p.610). It has also allowed ordinary citizens to participate in the spread of news and information through the creation of their own user-generated content (UGC). UGC involves any form of content that is posted or

published on a social media platform by a user regardless of its format (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). Although individual users cannot fully control the reach of their content, networks are equipped with various tools to expand the user's reach to a wider audience (Zeitzoff, 2017). UGC is used to measure both the rate that messages travel and the proximity of reach, meaning how far a message can travel from its original creation. Through the development and popularization of social media, UGC has become subject to 'gatekeeping' practices, which are tools that used to filter content and control narratives (Zeitzoff, 2017; Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Al-Saggaf, 2006). This is especially evident with content surrounding national and international news (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). It has created a more complex system for transmitting information, allowing for more real-time communication and a faster pace news cycle, but also information that is not as 'free flowing' as it would seem.

Through the new dissemination of information paired with the increasing role social media is playing in a globalizing world, the phenomenon of citizen journalism has developed. A citizen journalist is "a person who reports or comments but is not paid for [their] work" (Chiluwa, & Adegoke, 2013). With regards to various social media, it is a user who publishes informative news content, oftentimes providing first-hand accounts, images, or videos of an event, or contributes to the spread of that information (Milan, Tumber, Waisbord, & ASCA, 2017; Chiluwa, & Adegoke, 2013; Ingram 2008). A study conducted by Karlsson (2011) demonstrates two existing narratives between mainstream media and citizen journalism (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). The more dominant states that "citizen journalism is restrained by traditional news institutions through the organization's gatekeeping process of selecting specific UGC to include" (Ali & Fahmy, 2013, P. 58; Karlsson, 2011). On the contrary, the weaker "finds that journalism is gradually changing its practices to allow for more UGC" (Ali & Fahmy, 2013, p.58; Karlsson, 2011). Through citizen journalism, content is published online before it even reaches the news outlet. Although this can be of random unplanned events, this can still be regarded as the creation of news and not simply contributing to traditional news outlets.

In the context of protests, citizen journalism is vital as the reporting through traditional media on the scene can be both dangerous and expensive. Traditional media sources rely on citizen journalists who can provide primary sources and testament (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). During the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto, citizen journalists played a vital role in documenting the excessive police presence and actions. They used social media platforms to publish livestream reports which added

to the various media documenting police checking IDs, and the arresting, detaining, and beating of protestors, which further fueled the protest and the outrage (Poell, 2019). Despite the uncertainty surrounding the relationship between citizen journalists and traditional journalism, the importance of the former in national and international news has increased dramatically and has become a critical resource in traditional media.

Additionally, UGC has become a primary source of data in studies that analyze the way in which messages contribute to systemic change in offline events (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). Historically, politicians and industry leaders have controlled narratives in framing and relaying news through traditional news outlets (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). Some scholars argue that social media provides an outlet to publicize perceived wrongdoings committed by the state, or to move beyond the state-controlled narrative, as it creates a modern way to mobilize support (Zeitsoff, 2017). This is particularly important in situations where people are protesting their government. The framing of these situations is no longer exclusive to controlled media and government messages.

A recent study by Olson (2016) displayed two types of leading activists who have made significant progress in protest movements using social media using community clusters and broadcast networks. Community clusters form “around news and popular ideas, while the communities themselves are disconnected from one another. The small groups stimulate discussion on a particular topic, which can then expand into a broader conversation.” (Olson, 2016, p.776). Broadcast networks, for their part, “form specifically to disseminate information from a thought leader by retweeting his or her ideas” (Olson, 2016, p.776). Thought leaders can be a celebrity, a reporter, an activist or the leader of a non-profit movement, and they can all trigger a broadcast network (Olson, 2016; Rainie 2014). Both community clusters and broadcast networks form around newly popularized ideas and stories and help contribute to the discussion and shape public conversation (Olson, 2016). These types of activism can increase the likelihood of long-term change as it mobilizes more support for longer periods of time. This is due to the ways that community clusters form to create many groups which essentially discuss the same topics and interact together, ensuring news spreads beyond a small echo chamber. Broadcast networks keep conversations going as they continuously share original content from the admired personality.

Olson’s article specifically analyzed the Bring Back Our Girls Movement that began around the abduction of girls from Chibok, Nigeria in 2014. This protest movement was an attempt to attract national and international attention for the abduction and calls for the return of hundreds

of female students kidnapped from a secondary school by militant group Boko Haram (Olson, 2016). The community clusters and the broadcast networks played a large role in garnering international support and highlighting the lack of public trust in the government. Although they were successful with their goal of raising awareness regarding the kidnapping, they also used their growing popularity to push other issues onto their platform, which eventually resulted in the Chibok schoolgirls falling into the shadows from international headlines (Olson, 2016). The responsibility to continuously engage with the international community and to mobilize local support has fallen on the community clusters, and without the broadcast networks it is difficult for messages to extend beyond the local activists (Olson, 2016). It is one of the main reasons why activist groups have begun to employ “professional public relations officers [to] develop elaborate media strategies” (Poell, 2019). This is to mobilize both supporters and resources for the cause, amongst others.

#### *The Relationship between Traditional and Social Media with Regards to Protest*

There is increasingly new research that compares traditional media such as television news channels and radio channels to social media and digital platforms. Although traditional media continues to play a fundamental role in the news cycle and in controlling the narrative of various issues (Olson, 2016; Ali & Fahmy, 2013; Heaven, 2011; Meraz, 2009; Bowman, 2008), the benefit and importance of social media is growing rapidly. A major component of the Arab Spring revolutions that occurred in Egypt, Iran, and Libya was the spread of information and event logistics through social media and considered to be the birth of citizen journalism (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). This was due to the ability for content produced by citizens to reach international news agencies and strengthened the support for the activist group (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). During the Arab Spring, the debate of which form of communication was more important remains contested. The ability of professional journalists to transmit news and pictures using traditional methods played an effective role in mobilizing both national and international support (Chiluwa, & Adegoke, 2013). However, it cannot be denied that social media had played a bigger role than ever before in a protest movement.

Olson (2016) demonstrated that the relationship between traditional media and social media has evolved to where they may be codependent, which has also been supported by the Center for European Studies (CES). This means that those who produce content through traditional media

are looking to social media for information, and vice versa. The CES noted that “social media [platforms] have worked to disrupt oppressive governments and repressive policies worldwide as people have used social media to bypass traditional media to organize in-person protests and rallies” (Olson, 2016, p.777). This outlines how over time social media has increased in terms of legitimacy and grown with growing public dependency. The role of social media may be more or less important in an event, dependent on what news method is agreed upon to be a more viable resource to spread information and mobilize both national and international support. In countries where the government has imposed restrictions on or has monopolized traditional media, digital platforms provide transparency in the telling of news to international audiences.

Termed “the protest paradigm” (McCluskey, Stein, Boyle, & McLeod, 2009; McLeod & Hertog, 1998), traditional 24-hour news cycle has dictated the pace of coverage which protest movements generate to highlight the performance and the spectacle of the street demonstrations (Poell, 2019). Newspapers and television news are mostly dependent on real-time broadcasting, shaping segments around what is currently happening locally and nationally. They are responsible for delivering news across other streams of events such as sports, politics, and entertainment. Due to “the protest paradigm”, activists traditionally shaped their demonstrations around the convenient times and availability of the news cycle. It has been more difficult for activists to keep a consistent hold on its audience to mobilize support for actions to further the cause through traditional outlets. Through active gatewatching (Poell, 2019, p.617; Bruns, 2008, p.74), this provides the opportunity for activists to shape their own narratives in the news, as they can not only directly publish news, but also respond to the media in a public way that will not necessarily be edited or removed as it might be in traditional media. Gatewatching has become an efficient strategy when using social media to ensure that the content promoted by activist groups becomes the most popular and potentially trends. The role of community clusters and broadcast networks becomes important here as they contribute immensely to gatewatching. It also contributes to the narrative picked up by traditional media as the latter reports trends throughout its daily news cycle.

### *Transformation of the Role of Social Media in Protest Movements*

The new nature of social media as both a form of communication and a platform to deliver essential information has impacted how protests are initialized, developed, discussed, documented, and shared (Poell, 2019; Larson et al., 2019; LeFebvre, 2016). A study by Zeitzoff found that

social media has influenced conflict through reducing the costs of communication and increasing the scope and the speed of information, and changing the ways actors strategically interact “in response to communication technology changes” (2017, pg 1). As social media allows individuals to filter content and handpick their network, protest movements can generate strong support groups locally and internationally. It also provides the ability to expand networks to include celebrities and influential people (Zeitzoff, 2017). Discussion on social media can act as a megaphone, in essence “broadcasting the message from the core activists to the mass public and importantly to a global audience” (Lefebvre, 2016), assisted by sophisticated algorithms that feed individuals content based on previous activity and preferences (Zeitzoff, 2017).

In his study, Zeitzoff states that “social media allows individuals to ‘hack’ protests” (2017, pg. 6). Protest movements and demonstrations are organized more quickly and executed more strategically through the tools social media provides. Recruitment and mobilization of support is simplified through the broadcasting effects of content on social media. For the United States Women’s March in 2017 against President Trump, protest organizers used social media to collect emails to ensure all potential supporters had access to all the necessary information, as well as to “facilitate recruitment to follow-up political activity and identify new women to run for political office” (Zeitzoff, 2017). The collection of emails also brought about a sense of community among the protestors, strengthening demonstrations and the motivation to push forward the agenda. Social media has also broadened the potential number of local supporters to organize and mobilize for demonstrations and international support for resources.

Jost et al. (2018) discussed the idea of a participation threshold in protest movements. This refers to ways that if “the number of other people protesting against the regime falls below that threshold, then the potential costs of protesting (relative to the likelihood of success) will discourage the individual from participating” (Jost et al., 2018). Prior to social media, it was easier for governments to frame protestors as rebels and have this be the primary narrative in the media, elevating the potential costs of participating in the demonstrations for much of society (Jost et al., 2018). On the other hand, social media increases and may also alter the knowledge of the potential costs of participating, as it allows people to organize efficiently while also opening communication channels to occurrences of violence and police presence (Jost et al., 2018). The study theorizes that this ability alone increases the likelihood for protests and demonstrations to occur as it lowers the cost for people to act (Jost et al., 2018). The article compares Malcolm Gladwell’s argument

that social media promotes “slacktivism” or “the act of participating in obviously pointless activities as an expedient alternative to actually expending effort to fix a problem”, with Bennet and Segerbeg’s study (2011) that claims social media has sparked “connective action” referring to “the relatively decentralized, diffuse nature of organization in these social movements constitutes their basis for success rather than a sign of failure” (Jost et al., 2018). The former means that people may feel they have participated enough just by sharing primary or secondary online content to their following, whereas the latter refers to the spontaneity of organizations and demonstrations, along with the 24-hour engagement, is what attributes to the success of digital activism (Zeitsoff, 2017).

Social media has also built-in tools that have further modernized potential strategies to be used during protests and demonstrations. One tool that has become especially useful for discussing protest movements on social media is the hashtags on platforms such as Twitter. Since the popularization of social media, most protest movements have used the hashtag option in order to make all information centralized and accessible. This included logistical details for demonstrations, links to resources and donation sites, and real time footage and information following the movement. Users can also participate by posting with the hashtag, which can span across multiple social networks, broadening outside the scope of the echo chambers (Jost et al., 2018). A few of these well-known hashtags include, #OWS from the Occupy Wall Street movement, #Jan25 from the protests in Egypt (Jost et al, 2018), and #BlackLivesMatter from the racial equality movement in the United States, but now resonating more globally. Manuel Castells, a Spanish sociologist, speculated that hashtags are treated similarly to occupied spaces as they create community and a space for discussion, but while also maintaining a good level of representation and diversity (Olson, 2016). They help take conversation outside of the natural “echo chambers”, meaning networks of like-minded people who may become unwilling to consider other perspectives that can form in digital spaces (Jost, 2018; Olson, 2016). This aspect in particular is important for protest movements as it allows news and updates to reach outside the region of the protest, which can act as a type of echo chamber.

A key part of social media is the ability for individuals to create and share content with their network (Zeitsoff, 2017). With new algorithms, platforms are especially good at recommending other users to follow based on activity, likes and interests (Zeitsoff, 2017). A study conducted on the Charlie Hebdo protests in France conclude that “someone connected by strong,

direct ties to people highly motivated to participate in a protest is more likely to participate herself than someone occupying a network position farther away from, or connected with weaker ties to, others intent on protesting” (Larson et al., 2019). This ‘selection story’ phenomenon allows for news and conversation to spread quickly across social media networks. This, with the hashtag tool incorporated into social media networks, increases the influence-by-exposure that elevates the number of supporters in the protest movement, as seen with the Charlie Hebdo movement (Larson et al., 2019). The consequence of the echo chamber, however, is that debate and discussion of protest topics can become trapped within these closed networks once out of the news cycle. This makes it difficult for activists to garner support and control narratives told by mainstream media and conversations predominantly influenced by polarized crowds (Olson, 2016).

Several protest movements have catalyzed the interest of scholars in the role social media plays in activism. Iran, as the first Twitter Revolution, also provides further evidence of the role social media can play in assisting revolutions and activism. Following the 2009 election, widespread accusations of fraudulent success triggered supporters of the opposition to demonstrate against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Zeitsoff, 2017). Despite the efforts of the government to prevent communication between local activists and the international community, a video capturing the murder of Neda Agha-Soltan was distributed to the website current.com by Iranian activists (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). The video was then successfully uploaded on Youtube and Twitter by Western media, which transformed her into an icon for the Iranian freedom movement (Zeitsoff, 2017; Ali and Fahmy, 2012). As a result, the former American president Barack Obama released a statement condemning the government of Iran (Palmer, 2009). This is also the first recorded time where social media was heavily relied upon for the coordination of protests and the distribution of key updates to international audiences (Zeitsoff, 2017). Although the true importance of social media is disputed, what is undeniable is the reach and speed of images and information during the movement generated unprecedented levels of support (Zeitsoff, 2017).

The sharing of information played a large role in the 2011 protest movement against President Mubarak in Egypt, also known as the ‘Facebook Revolution’; though in some cases it is referred to as a Twitter Revolution as well. Facebook provided Egyptian activists with the ability to share photos of a young businessman who was beaten to death by police outside of a cafe (Bradley 2010). After the Facebook page ‘We are all Khaled Saeed’ was created it gained over 350,000 followers through the following weeks who were then invited to protest in person or online

(Heaven, 2011). Khaled Saeed and the Facebook page became catalysts for the revolution against the Egyptian government, which influenced surrounding countries to also stand up against oppressive regimes (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). Citizen journalists earned a tremendous amount of legitimacy both during and following the events that occurred in Egypt (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). However, the study by Ali and Fahmy outlined that Saeed only became a symbol of the movement after the distribution of his image by traditional news organizations (Ali and Fahmy, 2012). Egypt also saw the rise of government pushback. One of the tactics often employed by oppressive governments is the shutdown of the internet and cell phone service, which was experienced in the Egyptian uprising (Ali and Fahmy, 2012).

Events in Egypt dovetailed other protests throughout the Arab world, in a series of events now referred to as the Arab Spring. It is regarded as the most crucial protest movement within the body of literature exploring the relationship between activist movements and social media. Following long-standing and deeply rooted issues in the Middle East, a series of uprisings emerged to fight against the oppressive regimes such as in Tunisia, which influenced surrounding nations in the Middle East but also extending into Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa (Joseph, 2011). Social media platforms were relied upon to organize boycotts, protests, and demonstrations (Olson, 2016). The removal of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011 is widely known as the successful outcome of the “Twitter Revolution”, attributing the results to the power of social media platforms (Druzin & Li, 2015). Twitter played a major role during the Arab Spring due to its hashtag tool, which caused the events to trend internationally and appear to all twitter users around the world (Joseph, 2011) Similar events took place in Libya in a movement informally known as the ‘Twitter Revolution Take Two’ (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). In response, the Gaddafi regime blocked all communication between the Libyan population and the rest of the world (Ali & Fahmy, 2013), yet activists still managed a way to access social media and utilize it to upload raw footage, make comments and provide content to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). This revolution was successful in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime (Ali & Fahmy, 2013).

The Arab Spring set a precedent for digital activism (Druzin & Li, 2015) and provided strategies for protest leaders around the world to use social media to attract international support and mobilize a population. Research by Joseph (2011), which analyzes the role of social media during the Arab Spring, demonstrates that social media played a major role in spreading “revolutionary contagion across the region”. Protest leaders advocating for democracy in Tunisia

and Egypt, where the Arab Spring started, gathered a major following from countries who would later have uprisings of their own (Joseph, 2011). Some scholars are more timid, however, in their assessment of the impacts of social media in protest. A study on the Arab Spring conducted by LeFebvre (2016) found that social media may not have had the causal effect on protest movements some have presumed. Although social media allows activism to “scale up” very quickly, it may not result in long-term changes, especially considering the constant changing of news to follow the 24-hour news cycle (LeFebvre, 2016). The author admits that digital social platforms allow for “capturing public attention, evading censorship, and aiding in coordination of event logistics”, while also acting as a bridging tool between the activist core and the mass public (LeFebvre, 2016). The latter is important in situations where the government has complete or almost total control over traditional media (LeFebvre, 2016). Despite the convincing conclusions provided by this study, long-term changes cannot yet be measured with most social media dominated protest movements occurring within the last ten years. Even more, there are now additional factors to consider with the continuous evolution of technology and social media platforms, along with the government efforts to control them.

A result of social media being used as a tool for protest is that it holds authorities accountable for their actions (Barnett, 2019; Milan, Tumber, Waisbord, & ASCA, 2017). With the internet’s ability to erase both physical and political borders, there are greater consequences for leaders when a highly mobilized population begins holding demonstrations (Druzin & Li, 2015). UGC posted on social media cannot be completely deleted or disappear once published, it can only be superficially deleted. In the context of protest movements, this means that content published in a way that shames or hinders the representation of a leader cannot completely be taken back and can actually be reproduced. This allows for greater transparency than traditional media would allow for. As social media is a low-cost option, it is widely used, and as it is interactive, information can quickly spread (Cheng & Chan, 2017; Theocharis, 2014). In many ways, social media thus serves “as an essential ‘public screen’ enabling the immediate and emotional mediation of public events, large-scale discussion and collective responses to these events” (Cheng & Chan, 2017, p. 231; DeLuca & Peebles, 2002). Digital media also shapes protests to be more horizontal instead of vertical, meaning it promotes an anarchic structure rather than a hierarchical one (Cheng & Chan, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Razsa & Kurnik, 2012). These

horizontal networked movements encourage more participation and action (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Governments have, however, become very aware of the power of social media.

### *Does Social Media Challenge Government Control?*

A study by Joseph (2011) shows that prior to 2011, most governments did not have the knowledge or technology to implement country-wide tools for censorship. Over the last ten years there has been a shift in the ways technology can counteract messages and the spread of information on social media. Several countries have benefitted from the “increased communication and organizational capabilities offered by [social media] platforms” as they have gained greater insight into public discourse and thought (Barnett, 2019). However, control over the spread of information has become increasingly difficult to monitor and regulate. To counteract this lack of ability, oppressive governments continue to implement repressive internet policies (Barnett, 2019; Olson, 2016) are putting increasing effort to control communications (Edwards, Howard, & Joyce, 2013). Both Iran and Albania have “blocked internet gateways and mobile phone networks during politically tumultuous periods (Edwards, Howard, & Joyce, 2013). In 2009, efforts from the Iranian government to prevent developments in the growing protests the results of the presidential election severely impacted the growth of the movement (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). The government actively blocked sites and prevented communications between local activists and international news agencies as well as deleted or blocked websites to interfere with the flow of information. Government officials also used social media platforms such as Twitter to monitor the actions of activists and found ways to control the narrative, playing a crucial gatekeeping role to prevent activists from mobilizing support (Loewenstein, 2010). Several participants, including leaders of activist groups and high-ranking journalists, were detained and subject to severe mistreatment (Baird, 2010).

In the early developments of social media, there was a general hope for cyber utopianism: the idea that technology universally facilitates “forms of online communication that lead to understanding, openness, connection, immediacy and action vis-a`-vis distant suffering” (Scott, 2015). However, controlling the information accessible by citizens is increasingly used as a means to maintain political power by some states (Druzin & Li, 2015). China is arguably the most referenced country when discussing aggressive internet restrictions, as it began enforcing these policies early on in the popularization of social media platforms (Barnett, 2019; Joseph, 2011). In

the beginning of the internet's popularity and usage, China sought to ensure social media would not become an efficient tool in mobilizing its population against the government (Barnett, 2019; Jost & al, 2018; Druzin & Li, 2015). Without a virtual private network (VPN) it is not feasible to access Western social media sites (Barnett, 2019). The government uses technology to “identify and quash attempts to organize public assemblies and demonstrations—while simultaneously allowing criticism of the government, apparently so that they can monitor public opinion” (Jost & al, 2018). Although this prevents activists from connecting with potential international support, it also prevents citizens from becoming informed of events occurring outside of their country (Barnett, 2019).

Government media restrictions have led protest groups to use different methods to demonstrate against policies and leaders, such as bypassing censored websites, and communicating with international journalists. In the past, these have led to social media blackouts, which are difficult to combat as seen in Iran in 2009 (Ali & Fahmy, 2013) or in Zimbabwe in 2019 (Barnett, 2019). Social media has also made it easier to identify participants and protest groups. Citizen journalists who participate in planning events and demonstrations have become targets of authoritarian regimes and have been subject to harassment, intimidation, and even death (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). Governments can use social media platforms and data accessible on the internet to follow and monitor individual activists and find ways to infiltrate activist groups (Zeitsoff, 2017). Social media also informs the government of the logistics of demonstrations, allowing them to shut down events or to use other tactics to discourage protesting (Zeitsoff, 2017). To discourage the use of social media as a political tool to speak against policies, authoritarian governments also promote the idea that protesting is a byproduct of Westernization through digital social platforms (Barnett, 2019). These types of government bodies have implemented restrictions or have forbidden altogether the use of UGC by foreign journalists when reporting events (Barnett, 2019; Vandewalle, 2011). This is to repress local support for Western ideologies and democracy.

Nonetheless, activists and human rights organizations have found ways to combat oppressive regimes that allow for the continuation of support for local protest movements and the spread of event details relevant to those occurring within that country (Edwards, F., Howard. & Joyce, 2013). Most often, people have found other ways to access blocked websites through the use of VPNs, international SIM cards, or through contacts outside the country. During the Arab Spring, hackers around the world found ways to provide locals in Egypt with access to the internet

during blackouts (Russell, 2011). Also, a volunteer-based group called the OpenMesh Project worked to establish secondary wireless internet connections through cell phones (Russell, 2011). These collective events relied on internet companies donating routers and technology innovators donating patents (Russel, 2011). Often, in non-Western countries, during protests when Western media becomes restricted, activists can find new sources of information in major regional media sites such as Global Voices and the Tunisian blog Nawaat did during the Arab Spring (Poell, Thomas & van Dijck, 2015). In some cases, international audiences, particularly in the US, tune into these alternative media sites to continue tracking events. It is also a way to minimize interference and influence from outside sources, keeping the central issue at the focus of the movement as portrayed on social media (Russell, 2011).

The role social media has played or can play within protest movements has been highly debated. Yet, over time its importance and utility has grown as the world becomes further interconnected, and as more people in developing countries gain access to the internet and social media platforms. The function of social media during protest movements is to act as a tool to organize and mobilize local and international support for the cause. Over the last decade, there has been a growing level of trust put into the internet by people worldwide to expose inequalities and abuses of power. In their research, Druzin and Li used the term cyber utopianism, “the notion that the internet is innately emancipatory, its decentralized structure favoring the politically oppressed” (2015). They use different methods and media to stand out in a market or on a platform that becomes quickly oversaturated with similar content (Poell, 2019). There are also issues with moving the focus from the drama of the live protest to the underlying political, socio-economic, or ethnic issues. In countries where protest movements target authoritarian governments, alternative media and objective journalism delivers more event-driven protest reporting, which fits into the mainstream news cycle (Poell, 2019). We are currently, however, at a turning point where both protest leaders and governments are counteracting each other’s efforts in increasingly sophisticated ways. To better understand this turning point, it is important to understand if and how social media has adapted to government efforts to control the message and how protestors are using these platforms as resources in their movement.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Technological advances have expanded the potential tools and strategies available to protest leaders around the world. As the affordability for cell phones, and accessibility to computers and portable internet has increased, more have been able to take advantage of social media to communicate with national and international audiences. Minority voices now have the chance to be heard and potentially gain support in the fight for rights and better quality of life. Leaders, however, have also learned to contend with social media, increasingly controlling the internet, especially when faced with demonstrations against their policies. This major research paper is guided by the following two questions: **In light of the resurgence of several protests worldwide in an era of government control, have new tools and strategies been employed by protest leaders to control the narrative of their demonstrations and mobilize both local and international support? Has digital protest adapted to government control?**

In a new era of government control, political authorities are actively combatting efforts from protest groups to mobilize, organize and persuade. Through implementing internet restricting policies, triggering media blackouts and both arresting and prosecuting protestors, governments are aware of the important role that access to social media platforms plays during protest movements. The goal of this research is to determine the significance of the role social media plays in protests despite government efforts, specifically in non-Western movements. This is based on two assumptions. Firstly, digital media's real-time characteristic allows for swift changes to counteract actions made by the government. For example, the unexpected presence of police or military at a location can lead to a change in location in minutes and this information can be distributed to large networks quickly and safely. And secondly, the ability to persuade those outside of the protest area instigates strong reactions from the government both in terms of force and in public relations.

By social media, I refer to the definition outlined by Sarah Joseph in her research on the Arab Spring which is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (2011, p.146). By "Web 2.0", I refer to the "Internet platforms that allow for interactive participation by users" (Joseph, 2011, 146). Digital activism is a popular term used to define the use of social media for protesting and is defined as "civil, non-violent, and rarely involves hackers" (Edwards, Howard, & Joyce, 2013, p.5). This paper also used a variety of terms that refer to

publishing or interacting with content on social media such as posting, tweeting, retweeting, hashtag, and liking.

For this study, I followed the model outlined by Agur and Frisch (2019) to compare levels of mobilization, organization, and persuasion (Zeitsoff, 2017). By mobilization, I refer to the “ways that participants of the movement used social media to motivate activists and would-be activists to add their physical and digital efforts to the protest” (Agur & Frisch, 2019, p.5). Mobilization is an essential component in protest demonstrations as it defines the level of power achievable by the movement. Mobilizing large groups of people proves to the government in power that the issue is significantly important to its people, despite their attempt to influence otherwise. The ability to mobilize large numbers of people also demonstrates the legitimacy of the movement and of the movement’s leaders. For organization, I refer to “the ways that participants of the movement [...] used social media to gauge participant sentiments and plan strategically to increase pressure on the government.” (Agur & Frisch, 2019, p.5). When analyzing the level of organization, the focus is on the latter half of the definition. Social media as a tool for organization has revolutionized protest movements as a whole, and it remains a critical component for logistics and communication. Communication tools used for organizing have had to adapt to monitoring and tracking technologies that continue to become more sophisticated. Lastly, I used a modified version of Agur and Frisch’s definition of persuasion and defined it as the ways that leaders of protest movements are successful in using strategies to gain more local and international support. The ability to effectively persuade one’s local population is key to growing the number of people mobilized for demonstrations. International support is equally as important considering the pressure of other governments on one is stronger than the local people. Government interference online and offline can prevent the success of this key component, which protest groups have had to work around.

These interdependent concepts provide a framework to compare and contrast the three most important aspects of a protest movement. Mobilizing supporters must be successful to properly organize demonstrations and concrete policy objectives. This also involves persuading the population that is difficult to mobilize such as adversaries of the government and those who are undecided, along with the international community. These together effectively demonstrate the “justness of protest’s cause, necessity of its demands, and validity of its civil disobedience methods” (Agur & Frisch, 2019, p.5). Comparing events within these concepts allows for

government efforts and protest adaptations to be properly highlighted. When a government imposes a state-wide blackout in response to demonstrations, the ability for protesters to continue to access social media to disseminate information and visual content reveals the evolving role of social media platforms. This allows for an analysis that demonstrates both the cause-and-effect aspect of adaptation, while also illustrating how the interdependency of the concepts in events.

The case studies being used for this research are the Hong Kong protests the government of China and the protests in Sudan against government corruption catalyzed by continuous inflation and rising poverty rates. Both states have had ongoing uprisings over the last ten years with regards to the same overarching issue of control. As Sudan and Hong Kong have seen fluctuations in protests over the last several decades, both have had opportunities to evolve alongside the growing sophistication of social media. Several protests have had digitally recorded demonstrations and events uploaded to social media platforms and have gone viral. In Sudan, the ultimate goal was for a change in government to one that is less corrupt and will promote efforts to eradicate poverty, lower inflation and improve access to necessary resources. In Hong Kong, it was to limit China's control over the Special Administrative Region and work toward independence and achieving statehood.

This paper used a qualitative analysis of both peer-reviewed academic research and news articles from various media sources. I first created a timeline for each case study, to outline the context of the protests and any key events. Then, a thematic analysis approach was applied, where the strategies and counterstrategies were divided into three categories: those used for organizing demonstrations, those used for mobilizing support, and those used for persuading the undecided. Lastly, I applied the research questions to the events analyzed to demonstrate how social media platforms adapted as a tool over time, and how they can help create a potential visualization for future adaptations. Additionally, it is to reflect on the depth and importance of these adaptations for future protest, in a potential era of more aggressive government control. Due to the recentness of both case studies, it was necessary to value equally academic articles and the various news sources. The latter provided real time details as they occurred and the sources as to where the journalists received the information they published. This research also considered important publications that played a key role in the individual movements, for example the press releases distributed by the Sudanese Professional Association that communicated logistics for the Sudanese demonstrations.

There are some limitations to this research. Firstly, the analysis is subjective based on my understanding of the events and my interpretation of the goals of each strategy. I categorized these efforts and strategies implemented by both protest leaders and government to the best of my comprehension of the cases, using a multitude of sources for reference. As a result of this, my qualitative analysis is limited to my own knowledge, understanding and unconscious biases. Secondly, the more recent protest events in both cases took place in the last few years. This means there is a lack of research analyzing the most recent fluctuations in demonstrations and protest efforts. As Hong Kong is currently experiencing ongoing political protests and social unrest, this research will focus most on the 2014, 2016 and 2018 uprisings, contributing only slightly to the current events. Lastly, there is an overwhelming amount of data if one considers every social media post by protest leaders as an effort to organize, mobilize and persuade. Considering the time constraints of this research paper, I relied on already conducted research to highlight the most important themes found among the data throughout the social media history of these protest movements. These limitations demonstrate key areas for future research such as qualitative behavioural analysis on protest movements, sociocultural research into a potential global protest culture, and providing a basis to analyze ongoing protests in the future.

## **Case Studies**

### *Hong Kong*

Support for the leadership of the Chinese government in Hong Kong has steadily declined since transfer of the territory back from the British in 1997, causing more tension to build within the last twenty years. The lack of universal suffrage in the executive and legislative branches of the Hong Kong government has made it difficult for the demands from the public to be heard, considered, or implemented (Lee & Chan, 2011). Hong Kongers have been calling for more democratic reform for decades. However, in the past seven years, the demands have gained more traction with the younger generations. On July 1st, 2003, over five hundred thousand people mobilized to march against the introduction of the National Security Bill (South Morning China Post, 04 July 2019). Then, a one-day protest erupted on July 29th, 2012, primarily led by teachers and students, against changes to the curriculum that would have introduced pro-China discourse with the goal of making the younger generation more accepting of China (Gunia, 20 Jun 2019). Although short-lived, changes were not made, and pro-China discourse was not

introduced into the school curriculum. Since 2003, demonstrations have been held annually on July 1st on the anniversary of the handover (South Morning China Post, 04 July 2019).

Protesting became the only effective option of conveying needs and discontent (Lee & Chan, 2011). The Government of China's proposed reforms to pre-screen the candidates for the Chief Executive of Hong Kong election, triggered the Umbrella Movement. Beginning partially with the civil disobedience campaign, Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP), unprecedented protests exploded across Hong Kong with hubs in essential districts such as the main financial district (Admiralty), the central working-class neighborhood (Mong Kok) and a large commercial site close to the financial district (Causeway Bay) (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). The goal of the Umbrella Movement, which developed into an unprecedented 79-day occupation (Cheng, & Chan, 2017; Tang 2015), was to achieve universal suffrage and to achieve greater political independence from China. By late September 2014, the large-scale demonstrations were quickly counter-acted with police action (Tang, 2015). The unforeseen use of tear gas by police further contributed to mass mobilization of participants who represented both the pro-democracy and the anti-police brutality stance (Agur, & Frisch, 2019; Lee & Chan, 2016). Visual content rapidly spread across platforms, strengthening the call for more support at the demonstrations (Agur & Frisch, 2019). Following the first day where tear gas was dispersed, activists equipped themselves with yellow umbrellas for protection which then became the symbol of the movement. The yellow umbrella came to represent the identity of the activists who participated in the movement, and the risks they took to express their political views and the change they wanted to see for a freer and more democratic Hong Kong.

Locally, people continued to react negatively to the actions of the police. Many came around to record the actions of the police, to discourage any further police violence, and to support the students at the forefront of the movement (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Both local and international media reported that activists were being denied supplies, food, and bathrooms (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Their identities were also revealed and police searched their homes for anything that could be incriminating (Cheng & Chan, 2017). The movement developed into one that also represented workers and professionals, proving it was much bigger than what was expected (Cheng & Chan, 2017; Branigan, 2014). Despite the high levels of motivation among the activists, the demonstrations began to dissipate after over two months of demonstrations. Although their demands were not met, the Umbrella Movement gained international attention and support. This

movement led and organized by the public in Hong Kong mobilized over fifty thousand people for demonstrations to protest against the CPP. It also left many, primarily the younger generation, frustrated with the outcome and already mobilized for the next demonstrations or movement (Chan, 2016).

Following the Umbrella Movement, demonstrations were held sporadically over the years. Most notably in 2016, two separate events sparked demonstrations. Firstly, violent demonstrations began in Mong Kok after the government began to impose regulations to filter out unlicensed food vendors (Gunia, 20 Jun 2019). What became known as ‘Fishball Riots’, named after the fishball hawkers who are iconic to the Hong Kong food scene, also mobilized participants from pro-democracy groups involved (Gunia, 20 Jun 2019). Hong Kongers quickly took to social media, spreading messages with the hashtag #fishballrevolution (Bundy & Ma, 20 Jul 2018). This hashtag provided updates of police violence as well as many pieces of live footage of police violence and activist retaliation (Moss, 9 Feb 2016). Many began to draw parallels between the activists from the Umbrella Movement and the Fishball Riots in an attempt to demonstrate that the fight against the CCP was not over (Bundy & Ma, 20 Jul 2018). Secondly, in August of 2016, two lawmakers used their swearing in ceremony to pledge allegiance to Hong Kong after six candidates were unable to run for legislative council, which sparked the first pro-independence protests in Hong Kong’s history (Gunia, 20 Jun 2019). The development of pro-independence discourse and groups in Hong Kong led to a crackdown by the CCP declaring the Hong Kong National Political Party as an illegal group and expelling a foreign journalist for hosting a discussion with one of the members (Gunia, 20 Jun 2019). Although these demonstrations were short lived, it reminded the Hong Kong government that there were unhealed sentiments from the Umbrella Movement. One of the rebel lawmakers, Leung Kwok-hung, brought a yellow umbrella demonstrating the movement was not over (BBC, 12 Oct 2016).

This was made clear in 2019, when Hong Kong witnessed the largest demonstrations in over a decade following the government’s attempt to amend the current Fugitive Offenders Ordinance (Hunag, 2019). Over one million people attended the first demonstration on June 9th, 2019 (Ramzy, Ives & Fei, 09 June 2020) and over two million on June 16th, 2019 (BBC, 28 Nov 2019). Protests continued up until August of 2020 despite the widespread presence of Covid-19 in the region. The long-lasting, violent clashes between protesters and police have been documented and shared, with many strategies recycled from the Umbrella Movement. Solidarity protests spread

to the UK, France, US, Canada and Australia (BBC, 28 Nov 2019). This predominantly leaderless movement was fueled and led by social media and collective action (Shao, 15 Aug 2019). It also saw the reveal of publicly attributed accounts to China on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p. 4). This means that the government and its surveillance institutions had been able to infiltrate into conversations on social media to influence narratives being shared by Hong Kong local and international news. Social media platforms responded by undergoing mass removals of false profiles. During the takedown, Twitter publicly highlighted China's role in the creation and dissemination of propaganda using these accounts (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p. 20). The activists adapted and displayed a new, expert knowledge of cybersecurity and surveillance techniques in pursuit of their goals (Shao, 15 Aug 2019).

### *Sudan*

Sudan has had several movements sweep the country since its complete independence in 1956 (Berridge, 2020). Following the first coup in 1965 (Berridge, 07 Jan 2019), high levels of government corruption and dissatisfaction in the 1970s over food shortages, settlements in the South of Sudan and the opening of Sudan's exports to agricultural goods worsened economic issues (Pike, 21 Oct 2020). As exports were prioritized, domestic inflation, food shortages and the cost of gasoline spiked, which launched a country-wide strike and demonstrations in the 1980's. This led to the toppling of the tyrannic Nimeiri government in 1985, however the economic situation continued to worsen (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019). Public dissatisfaction remained rampant as tensions continued to increase during this period. Professional unions played a large role in the 1985 protests as organizers and liaisons for policy change and continued to establish itself as a supporter for the people during this time (Berridge, 07 Jan 2019).

Following another coup in 1989, Al-Bashir became the leader and spent a large portion of his efforts appointing elites to powerful positions in the government to coup-proof his regime and to both create and fund regional militias (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019). He introduced several security divisions with overlapping responsibilities who were unaware of what the other did and had limited contact or communication between the divisions (Hassan & Kodouda, 2019). When the Arab Spring began in 2011, the Sudanese government was prepared and had systems in place to prevent a coup and mediate risks to the regime. The government succeeded in shutting down the internet, preventing local Sudanese people from communicating the events and the police

brutality being inflicted on the public (Adeshokan, 2019; Barnett, 2019). They had also issued arrest warrants to prevent the journalists from covering the protest movements and to prevent the spread of activist sentiments (Adeshokan, 2019).

This demonstrates the level of sophistication the government had early on with regards to cyber technology and security, which far exceeded that of the local population. Internet blackouts were successful in that the lion's share of the population could not contact anyone locally or internationally. The movement in Sudan was not able to reach the revolutionary capacity of other countries in the Arab Spring primarily due to the strength of government efforts to contain and disperse the protests. This can be seen again in 2013, when over 200 people were killed by police during political demonstrations against the rise of both bread and fuel (Jost et al, 2018). In the same year, the government was exposed primarily through digital activism for abusing its power and attempting to control humanitarian funds during the case of Nafeer (Jost et al, 2018). Following a catastrophic impact on the agricultural sector due to flooding of the Nile, the Nafeer group mobilized approximately 8000 casual and regular volunteers primarily through Facebook (Jost et al, 2018). Many were discouraged from participating as the government circulated propaganda messages implying that protest would equal death which ultimately led to continued economic distress (Jost et al, 2018).

The most recent military coup in 2019 was a result of the Sudanese Revolution that began in 2018. It was prompted by an announcement from the government to triple the price of both bread and fuel (Al Jazeera, 18 Dec 2019; Adeshokan, 2019). Although beginning in the small towns of Eldamazin and Atbara (SPA, 7 Feb 2020), anti-government protests spread across the country quickly. On April 6 of 2019, a sit-in was organized in commemoration of the 1985 protest that removed President Jaafar Nimeiri from his harsh rule. This sit-in would "become the hub of the protest movement's struggle for democracy" (Al Jazeera, 18 Dec 2019). This particular protest was also to highlight the months of protests that had been happening since December 2018. Following this first round of major protests, Al-Bashir was removed from his position through a military coup on April 11th, 2019 (Bendimerad, 13 Jun 2019).

Although this was a monumental moment for the Sudanese people, the sit-in continued as the people demanded for civilian rule (Bendimerad, 13 Jun 2019) and the delivery of Al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Al Jazeera, 18 Dec 2019; Adeshokan, 2019). The leader of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that took over, Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, stepped

down after a day in power due to continued demonstrations, leaving Sudan without a head of state. This was followed by a month long, violent cycle between pro-democracy groups and the government (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). On June 3rd, over 100 protesters were killed in an attack by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) with the goal of dispersing the sit-in (Elmileik & Khalil, 12 Aug 2019)), led by General Darfur whose actions are supported by the UAE and Saudi Arabia (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). Throughout August 2019, negotiations took place between the TMC and the Declaration of Freedom and Change Forces (DFC) for a 39-month transitional government period (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). In September of 2019, Abdalla Hamdok was sworn in as the leader of the transitional government, albeit overseen by an 11-member Sovereignty Council (SC), with five members from the TMC and six civilians (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). A transitory parliament will be appointed by both the DFC and by political groups who were not affiliated with Al-Bashir's regime (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). This loss of government power gave activists an advantage as they were better organized and better connected to the international community than in previous protests.

The government of Sudan holds an almost total monopoly over the communication of news and overall knowledge to its citizens (Jost et al, 2018). Former President Al-Bashir made censorship and military violence a vital component of his regime (Durie, 2019), executed by the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) (Jost et al, 2018). The NISS have been known to block unwanted messages and articles, slow down websites and hack private accounts (Jost et al, 2018). Because of this, they often controlled the framing of government actions as positive and beneficial to the local and international communities (Jost et al, 2018). The government under Al-Bashir was able to instigate fear, undermine beliefs, change meanings of symbols, and build a strong status quo through its activity on social media (Jost et al, 2018). All digital activity is subject to digital sanctions and surveillance by the government of Sudan.

The United States was also involved in controlling the communication of international news in Sudan due to the US-embargo implemented in 1997 in connection to alleged terrorist activity (Jost et al, 2018). These sanctions were lifted in 2018 which caused the economy to worsen quickly and dramatically instead of benefitting from new American business (Jost et al, 2018). Nonetheless, the lifting of these sanctions has allowed Sudanese residents to protect and update the American software systems to use tools such as social media (Jost et al, 2018). The growing digital capacity, along with the rollback on American sanctions, has pushed the government to

improve its technical capabilities to further oppress activism and induce fear to prevent any mobilization against the government (Jost et al, 2018). However, the ability to carry out such actions is not available to all governments. It is often only accessible to those whose perspectives fall in line with the head of state (Jost et al, 2018).

Sudan's Intifada movement has been led primarily by the SPA, a group composed of trade unions who have fought for better work conditions and wages. Members of the SPA, both domestic and international, relied heavily on social media for communication among members and to the public (Durie, 2019). Throughout the period of the protest movement, the SPA has also been publishing press-releases on their website and distributing them through social media for both informational and mobilization purposes. SPA members all over the world took advantage of their access to the internet by sharing several hashtags to share information about the events and the dangerous circumstances in Sudan (Durie, 17 Sept 2019).

The implementation of the DFC, spearheaded by the SPA, is the ultimate goal of this movement that has continued on and off since 1989 (SPA, 13 Feb 2019). To build a new state based on freedom, peace and social justice, the government had to be taken apart and had to be re-built with the needs of the people as the cornerstone of the new government. This Intifada is a revolutionary moment for Sudan as it is directly combatting decades of discrimination against peoples "faith, political affiliation, ethnicity, geographic locales, and gender" (SPA, 07 Feb 2019). Through their joint press releases, the SPA and both its partners and supporters have encouraged demonstrations to continue, have exposed the lies and exaggerations in speeches made by Al-Bashir and the NISS, and have successfully mobilized both local and international support to act, whether physically, financially or digitally. As the identities of SPA members are carefully guarded (Abas, 28 Jan 2019), they had avoided being reprimanded, arrested or executed during the year-long protests. Members used encrypted communication tools to call for protests and exchange information (Abas, 28 Jan 2019).

## **Analysis**

The following analysis demonstrates the role social media played in the two cases studies outlined above including the ways in which the government balanced against the strategies used by the activists, and how activists, in return, counter-balanced with new tools and strategies

available through social media platforms. Despite censorship and internet shutdowns, digital media continued to play a strong role in organizing protests, mobilizing supporters, and persuading those outside the region to put added pressure on the government. These cases showed a shift in how protest movements have been conducted, demonstrating the transfer of power to the people and away from the State using social media.

China has been the most successful country at “constraining the political power of its internet” while also having a societal acceptance of these restrictions (Druzin & Li, 2015, p.1). China’s control of the mainland’s access to social media includes blocking websites, using people employed to monitor and shape digital activity, flagging key words, and “funneling connections through a handful of state-run operators that act as digital arteries to the outside world that may be filtered” (Druzin & Li, 2015, p.14). The Chinese population, or at least an important segment of it, is comfortable with the general monitoring of their digital activity and supportive of the regulations (Druzin & Li, 2015). This also proves generally true for the youth, who are now the largest demographic (Druzin & Li, 2015). The ultimate goal of these efforts is to minimize the organization of large-scale political engagement and the potential for demonstrations (Druzin & Li, 2015). However, Hong Kong is currently detached from these censorship policies as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) (Agur & Frisch, 2019). However, Hong Kong’s digital environment is not completely democratic. Social platforms are still surveilled in a similar method to that used in mainland China for the purpose of monitoring digital activity and conversation (Agur & Frisch, 2019). Between the 2014 and 2019 demonstrations, government efforts to exert more control on Hong Kong increased. This democratic erosion was measured by Freedom House in their annual Freedom in the World survey, where Hong Kong dropped 9 points (Boyajian & Cook, 2020). Nonetheless, people in Hong Kong retain the ability to speak more openly online (Agur & Frisch, 2019). This has led to social media becoming a key tool in protests, but also in self-mobilization, meaning demonstrations and campaigns against the government inspire more engagement on public discourse online (Agur & Frisch, 2019).

In 2014, the people of Hong Kong achieved several milestones through their digital activism. Activists self-mobilized independently, despite a missing network structure due to the spontaneity of the movement (Cheng & Chan, 2017). Facebook and WeChat, both multi-purpose social media apps with messaging abilities, were widely used to mobilize the local population,

coordinate demonstrations, and inform protesters of incoming police involvement (Agur & Frisch, 2019). Twitter was used to keep international news outlets and allies informed of events (Agur & Frisch, 2019). New social media platforms were introduced during the protests based on need and adaptability. Firechat, which has bluetooth connection features, became popularized as a back-up communication tool during times where signal outage was anticipated (Agur & Frisch, 2019). There was also Telegram, a more secure rendition of WhatsApp, and WeChat, used primarily for communication and later, developed into a multi-purpose tool. As messages on Telegram were more likely to be subject to Chinese censorship and surveillance technology, it was not a primary tool in 2014 (Agur & Frisch, 2019). However, in 2019 this was less of a concern and Telegram also developed into a tool where activists created channels to share logistical details, low level “intelligence”, and share live updates (Shao, 16 Aug 2019).

For the case in Sudan, we are comparing how social media adapted following the 2011-2013 protests during the Arab Spring, and how those strategies were further applied to the events that occurred in 2018 and 2019 in organizing events, mobilizing people and persuading the international community. The central obstacle for Sudanese activists is the ability of the government to directly cut internet access to close the country off to the outside world. This occurred during the Arab Spring, which caused demonstrations to remain relatively small, despite the large influence from other Arab Spring movements in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia (Yeranian, 26 Dec 2019). It also kept the actions of the government generally hidden from the international community, who were more focused on the larger scale movements in countries such as Egypt (Yeranian, 26 Dec 2019). Activists in the 2018-2019 movement recognized these errors and made efforts to prevent history from repeating itself. This involved securing Sudanese activists stationed outside of the country, acquiring alternative technologies, and ensuring transparency between the protest leaders and the activists and international community.

Strategies used by the SPA in 2018-2019 allowed the movement to grow rapidly and exponentially. Through press releases, hashtags and UGC, real-time information was provided to the local and international community. This created a new layer of transparency that would normally not occur during protests in a country with heavy control over their traditional media outlets. Another key characteristic of the 2018-19 Intifada is the class-wide participation in the movement, which was heavily due to the SPA as they were representative of both interests. The public and private sectors stood in solidarity with students and unions (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020),

providing the ability to organize sit-ins at various locations. These characteristics shifted the power to the people for the first time, and with the protection of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the people were able to hold on to this power and this momentum for over a year, with the strong support of social media and its tools. The role of the SPA as the leaders of the movement provided both local and international supporters with a spokesperson to follow and track for updates and content. The SPA released statements and published content in both Arabic and English to ensure that domestic and foreign audiences had access to the correct information that could not be distorted by those outside of the organization. The following breaks down the strategies adopted and adapted in each category.

### *Organize*

The ability to organize strong and cohesive demonstrations plays a significant part in communicating the legitimacy of a movement. It is also key in ensuring peaceful-protest laws and rights are abided by to minimize the potential for mass-arrests, police violence and damage to both public and private property. Social media's ability to facilitate protest lies in its communication tools to ensure organizing demonstrations is quick and efficient. It also provides activists the ability to share information regarding flash events such as unexpected police presence or road closures, ensuring that a new location could be selected, and activists could be redirected. In the research, this ensured maximum participations while also allowing for demonstrations to continue for a longer period as logistics became adaptable.

The key social media platform at the forefront of organizing demonstrations during the 2014 Umbrella Movement was WhatsApp. As the most common encrypted messaging platform, it allowed organizers and participants to coordinate events and "interpersonal tactical logistics" (Agur & Frisch, 2019). With over a billion users, it is known as the most widely used communication tool in the world (Deccan Chronicle, 2016). It's many privacy features allowed logistical conversations to be had safely, while also avoiding potential censorship, and ensuring that if the police unexpectedly had access to one's phone, conversations and identities could be hidden (Deccan Chronicle, 2016). Facebook was also used in moments of violence or potentially dangerous events with the police for transparency and to ensure protestors avoid the area (Agur & Frisch, 2019). As Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Hong Kong, despite the site being banned in mainland China (Chan, 2016), it was simple to send communications

through large networks in a very short time frame. Details of the next demonstration or event were oftentimes communicated by a Facebook post or WhatsApp message to large groups. The OCLP, who had been unprepared for the movement to grow as large and as rapidly as it did, began by using email as their main online tool for communication. They initially relied heavily on traditional media, but when the portion of participants became increasingly student and youth based, they adapted to these social media platforms (Agur & Frisch, 2019).

The 2019-2020 protests relied differently on digital platforms to organize demonstrations. The leaderless structure of the movement made it more difficult to organize cohesively, although the guerilla-style demonstrations were equally as difficult for the police to prepare for and prevent. Access to social media platforms and the security development of applications such as Telegram has further hindered both the Hong Kong and the Chinese governments (Friedman, 17 Sep 2019). From the conclusion of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the media tool evolved with several key features that both directly and indirectly contributed to the 2019-2020 protests. Firstly, it added an account self-destruct feature and later passcode lock feature (Telegram, 2020), which prevented police from gaining access to conversations and personal information when phones were confiscated. Second, it added the ability to create channels, where large groups of people could be involved in one conversation (Telegram, 2020). 2018 saw the addition of streaming features and the enhancement of the channel feature by allowing non-users to access them outside of the app. This allowed for information and updates being transmitted through Telegram to also be shared by anyone and with anyone with internet access (Telegram, 2020). This brought the app to another level, as the channels were only accessible with the channel link that can be distributed across networks but are kept hidden from those without the link (Telegram).

Nonetheless, digital monitoring tools were employed by the CCP and in Hong Kong. Following the 2014 protest events, the Hong Kong government in support by the CCP had increased their efforts to “surveil, disrupt, and sow misinformation in digital communications related to political protest in Hong Kong” (Agur & Frisch, 2019, p.3). The police had been arresting activists based on their digital communications and online activity (Mozur & Qiqing, 03 Oct 2019). Following the Umbrella Movement, the sentiment known as “white terror” has grown increasingly popular across Hong Kong (Hu, 12 Sep 2019). “White terror” explains the fear of being reprimanded or prosecuted for any forms of activism, including posting criticism of the government online (Hu, 12 Sep 2019). Rumours that initiatives to create databases with

information on protestors has sparked a movement to gather information on activists and police from both pro-democracy and pro-government sides (Hu, 12 Sep 2019). Additionally, umbrellas became a tool to mask the identities of protestors as much as a tool to shield against tear gas and police violence (Mozur & Qijing, 03 Oct 2019). With masks, the protestors were unidentifiable by policy and by surveillance cameras (Hu, 12 Sep 2019). Circulating photos and videos of police action early in the movement, coupled with lessons learned from the Umbrella Movement, activists were able to come equipped during demonstrations. The 2019-2020 protests saw activists have a better understanding of cybersecurity and the ways they could protect themselves and their family, while still participating in the movement. This allowed for an added level of protection and a lesser chance of being prosecuted in the future as activists knew how to minimize digital footprints and how to add extra levels of security.

Another important consideration in Hong Kong's protests is the inability to organize or mobilize support in mainland China. To prevent pro-protest messages from spreading to mainland China, the CCP strengthened the level of censorship and used teams of pro-government "netizens", online users and accounts, to muffle discourse and content published by Hong Kong activists with pro-government dialogue (Agur & Frisch, 2019). The goal was to ensure that the protest leaders would not be able to organize any demonstrations in mainland China. These efforts shaped the perspective of the Chinese population about the events happening in Hong Kong. Many details of the movement were unknown to those on the mainland, leaving them with little knowledge from the Hong Kong media and only the ideas put forward by the CCP. This led to the Chinese actively denouncing the movement both online and within communities, minimizing the potential for the movement to physically grow beyond the borders of Hong Kong. This would have been a major development in the demonstrations as it would have extended the areas for demonstrations as well as it would have allowed for the mobilization of more people.

Sudan approached the use of social media as a tool for organization in the same way that protest leaders did in Hong Kong, however their advantage was that the movement had a clear structure and leader. Their ability to organize demonstrations in solidarity across the country was only possible due to the access of social media, especially in the early months of the movement. Most importantly, activists became well versed in digital security methods to bypass government-imposed internet restrictions (Kushkush, 13 Apr 2019). This was learned from the Arab Spring protests when the government's successful internet blackouts left activists disconnected from their

families and the outside world (Parker, 21 Jun 2019). They were primarily “used to carry out harsh punishments on demonstrators” (Parker, 21 Jun 2019). After 2013, many purchased VPNs to be able to bypass restrictions and be prepared for future blackouts (Kushkush, 13 Apr 2019).

The SPA was efficient in communicating logistics for demonstrations, despite connectivity interruptions and blackouts. In their press releases, the SPA included logistical details for the upcoming planned sit-ins and demonstrations, giving all internet users the ability to participate and mobilize others to follow. In a press release on January 29th, announcements were included at the end with details for the scheduled demonstrations on the night of January 30th and January 31st, which were to take the place of the sit-ins. The SPA was able to change events during the protest within short time-frames due to their access to social media. This is the same for the call published on March 11th, calling for a day of civil disobedience for March 13th (SPA, 11 Mar 2020), which spread across Sudan. Later in 2019, the SPA began creating week-long schedules for action, as seen in the post on their website dated July 5, 2019 titled “Schedule for grassroots revolutionary action” (SPA). These schedules targeted everyone in Sudan, with details on neighbourhood marches, city marches, and larger centralized demonstrations in areas such as Khartoum and Omdurman (SPA, 05 Jul 2019). This ensured that both leaders and the international community were aware that protests were being organized peacefully and transparently. It was also an effective way to communicate details ahead of time so that activists could organize other responsibilities around the demonstrations.

From the first day of the protests in December 2018, the Sudanese government began counter-acting all media efforts as a communication tool to the national public and to the international community. According to the RSF, “a paramilitary group led by a senior member of Sudan’s ruling Transitional Military Council” (Bendimerad, 2019), there were “at least 100 cases of journalists being arrested and that critical newspapers were harassed and silenced on a near daily basis by the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS)” (Durie, 2019). As Sudan heavily monitors and controls the traditional media outlets, the internet and social media provide a more secure space to communicate with people and news outlets within and outside of the country (Bendimerad, 2019). With mass amounts of content being shared with local and international media, primarily through digital spaces, the government shut down the internet in Sudan, with one shutdown lasting over 20 days. Despite government efforts through Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and RSF to prevent and disperse the

demonstrations, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) provided protection to the protest participants (Ahmed, 21 Nov 2019).

To combat these government efforts, the SPA utilized their international members and contacts to ensure an SPA presence on social media remained consistent. Information was able to be communicated with those abroad, and those actors were able to update digital media profiles, post updates and content, and ensure transparency of the events in Sudan continued. The SPA also used their ability to publish content to spread awareness of danger in areas that demonstrations were occurring. For example, an urgent warning was issued on June 3rd, 2019 warning citizens of the killing and burnings occurring in front of the coup military's headquarters (SPA). This allowed for activists to be quickly redirected to other locations for demonstrations but also added to the level of transparency as some activists published pictures and videos of the events.

### *Mobilize*

The ability to mobilize large amounts of people to join physically or digitally in a movement is an essential component in gaining legitimacy and increasing the potential of success. Since the Arab Spring, mobilization strategies have been primarily facilitated by social media. This is due to the ability to access hundreds of thousands within the same region for physical participation, as well as millions internationally for support. In the Umbrella Movement, images and videos published and shared by users was a primary source of mobilization of both youth and working age groups. These images strengthened the existing sense of community and inspired a need to protect the Hong Kong identity against the CCP promoted 'one party, two system' discourse (Agur & Frisch, 2019). Mobilization efforts in these movements had to focus mostly on counter-acting government interference and dispersion efforts. However, in Sudan, mobilization was focused on creating a strong sense of community across the country (Kushkush, 13 Apr 2019), and countering manipulation efforts put forward by both Al-Basir and then the interim government. Digital platforms allowed for quick decision making, transparency and access to important resources, such as doctors and lawyers. By using social media to highlight these three aspects of the movement, activists were able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people in both case studies.

The Hong Kong population was easily mobilized in both the Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 resurgence. During the former, the Chinese government seemingly had a prepared

mobilization strategy in place to counteract activists' efforts. There was government interference on chat platforms such as WhatsApp and WeChat (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). Government bots and technology professionals who disguised themselves online, distributed stories and messages promoting the idea that the Umbrella Movement was only going to result in internal issues in Hong Kong. The messages were carefully constructed with "authentic voices" and colloquial vocabulary to influence other users (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). These were very convincing and encouraged people to either share negative thoughts about the movement or to not discuss the subject at all. Government supported anti-occupy groups began to counter-demonstrate in early October alongside the Umbrella activists. The goal of the government-run bots was to grow the counter-protest group to balance against the protestors while also being able to mobilize as spontaneously as the other.

Social media platforms learned and adapted to the events from the Umbrella Movement and provided better tools that were used by activists. In 2019, the application Telegram saw a 323% increase in first-time downloads, alongside a growth of encrypted messaging platforms (Shao, 16 Aug 2019). The sophistication of streaming features across applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Telegram directly contributed to the level of transparency. Transparency provided by these types of social media network tools played a large role in mobilizing support in the Hong Kong movements. Twitter also contributed to expanding the level of transparency in the most recent protest movement. Thousands of Twitter accounts were purchased and repurposed by pro-China bots, in the sense that they shaped the accounts to seem as though the person was not Chinese, as well as the PRC (DiResta et al., 2020). These inauthentic accounts promoted anti-protest sentiments and attempted to make pro-China by tweeting links to pro-police articles (DiResta et al., 2020). Twitter conducted mass sweeps of these accounts and removed user access, suspended, and deleted thousands (DiResta et al., 2020). These actions were praised by activists and the international community as it demonstrated a movement toward a more democratic, transparent, and accurate social media platform. It also helped shape the narrative of the 2019-2020 protests in the favour of the Hong Kong activists, further proving the idea that China's efforts to slowly expand their control beyond mainland borders is happening.

Unlike the digital activity in Hong Kong protest movements where the focus was mainly on mobilizing large amounts of the population for demonstrations, Sudan's social media goal focused on mobilizing against government efforts to silence the movement (Jost et al, 2018).

During the Arab Spring protests in 2011-2013, the rebel demonstrations were led by students and young activists, and without a planned structure it became disorganized (Kushkush, 13 Apr 2019). A lack of unity and support from the working class, combined with the threats and silencing efforts by the government, prevented the demonstrations from continuing. In the 2018-2019 Intifada, the SPA was a clearly defined leader making the mobilizing of people more efficient and a stronger sense of community possible. The SPA used press releases to denounce, debunk or discredit almost every statement made by Al-Bashir and the transitory government that followed the coup in April. This kept the Sudanese people mobilized and participating in demonstrations.

With every action undertaken by the government, a press release was published by the SPA to highlight disagreement, lies and exaggerations. When Al-Bashir declared a state of emergency on February 27, 2019 despite peaceful protests, the SPA in partnership with the Democratic Alliance of Lawyers, released a statement addressing the many ways this declaration was unconstitutional and illegal (SPA, 27 Feb 2019). This was the same case when the military, or the “security committee”, launched a coup on April 11th using the same tactics and promoting the same ideologies that have kept the people of Sudan oppressed for the last several decades (SPA, 12 Apr 2020). The SPA released and shared several press releases explicitly encouraging the people of Sudan to reject the coup alongside the organization. In the statement made by the SPA, “the streets never betray, and we shall meet there” (SPA, 11 Apr 2019). These statements and this action on social media were met with ample amounts of support and large crowds formed at key locations, united by the SPA statements. Following the April 11th demonstrations, President Al-Bashir resigned. Protests were encouraged to continue for days despite imposed curfews and the heavy presence of the military.

Sudan focused on extending this sense of community outward into the international audiences facilitated by social media. This was primarily due to the high potential for internet blackouts that without awareness, would have left the people of Sudan disconnected for days, and possibly weeks. SPA members outside of Sudan who successfully avoided the blackouts created several hashtags, such as "Tasgut Bas", #SudanUprising, and #BlueForSudan, in both Arabic and English to keep information and updates easily accessible (Durie, 2019). The use of slogans to mobilize people across ethnically and racially diverse groups played an important role in gaining international recognition and support (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). Other slogans that were frequently used were “Freedom, peace and justice” (Hursh, 19 Dec 2019), “We are all Darfur” (Bishai & Elshami,

01 Mar 2020), and "Just fall – that is all" (Hursh, 25 Feb 2019). The hashtags provided a central place on digital platforms to keep activist created UGC along with updates and articles published by international news sites. Twitter was widely used to communicate updates and information on the events and the actions of the military. The SPA ensured there would be a consistent presence on Twitter regardless of any government interference, as international support and awareness became a driving force in the Intifada.

The second most important aspect of social media in Sudan's protest was the element of transparency. Although not as restricted as China, Sudan's internet and social media access is easily controlled by the government. One of the most highlighted broadcasted events of the Sudanese Revolution was the June 3rd massacre that dispersed the sit-in following the SPA's call for an all-out strike (SPA, 03 Jun 2020; Durie, 2019). Broadcasting the event was for transparency and information purposes. The former would keep the TMC accountable for those who would be injured, killed or imprisoned, while the latter demonstrated to the whole world the lies the TMC had been communicating through traditional media to their people and to the international community. On June 4, 2019, the SPA called for the demonstrations to continue and emphasized the importance of documenting all violations and crimes carried out by the militia government (SPA). The press releases and communications content issued also called for the international community to pay attention and denounce the TMC in every way they can (SPA, 03 Jun 2019). The broadcasting of these demonstrations brought tens of thousands of supporters to the street against the military's control and the delay in the promised transfer of power to the citizens. The TMC made counter-statements defending their actions, stating that there were "infiltrators, people who want to jeopardise progress" (BBC, 30 June 2019). This further aggravated the protestors and online media platforms as all that was being shared were pictures and videos of civilians being injured by the TMC and other militias. This led to more discussion on the events happening in Sudan and even more support mobilized digitally for the activists.

### *Persuade*

The ability to persuade the local and the international communities is an important component in protest movements and has been more easily facilitated by social media within the last ten years. Persuading occurs when information and content can influence others to agree with

and support the message being conveyed. This is key to reaching outside the echo chamber that occurs when content becomes trapped in a closed distribution a small group of users.

The CCP, with their dominating presence in both traditional and international media, had the ability to shape much of the narrative with regards to the Umbrella Movement. Portraying the activists as an unpopular and violent group of students, international actors were encouraged to denounce the actions of the protesters. Activists attempted to counteract this narrative by focusing on shaping a “sympathetic media narrative [...], crafting statements posted to Facebook, and creating viral memes that would resonate sympathetically with average Hongkongers not active in the protests” (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). Social media was the central method used to create this narrative and persuade those who were unconvinced that the movement was to the benefit of the people (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). To bypass the internet restrictions and censorship methods, protest leaders were able to set up chat-groups to communicate with local and foreign journalists (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). These chat groups were held in several different languages, which was hailed as a key aspect assisting in the spread of content and the increased levels of international support (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). The 2019-2020 protests saw a resurgence in the same narrative pushed by the CCP, except with more aggressive language.

Prior to the Umbrella Movement, OCLP organizers had set up a social media presence for the sole purpose of persuading national and international audiences to support their cause (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). The goal was to use their technological set-up to put pressure on the government for more democratic policies and was not built to support the magnitude attributed to the growth and development of the Umbrella movement (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). Although their set-up was relatively small-scale, the days following the events on September 26, 2014 saw over 1.3 million protest-related tweets (Cheng, & Chan, 2017; Dastagir & Hampson, 2014). As the Umbrella demonstrations continued without signs of wavering or concession on either side, efforts to persuade the international community to garner more support became increasingly aggressive (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). Twitter was also primarily used to keep foreign journalists and the international community informed as although it is not commonly used by Hong Kongers, it was widely used by international reporters covering the events happening in Hong Kong (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). As this platform is not used in China at all, the protest leaders largely influenced and kept control of the narrative (Agur, & Frisch, 2019).

These efforts were more aggressive during the 2019-2020 protests, with the CCP pushing the narrative that protesters aimed to destroy Hong Kong to establish independence (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p.20). The popular news source, China Daily, published an article featuring a video of a “protester holding a toy weapon, falsely claiming the toy was an M320 grenade launcher used by the U.S. Army and stoking fears of protester violence” (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p.19). Many articles were tested on Weibo and those that performed well would then be shared on Twitter and Facebook to reach the international community (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p.20). Twitter users noticed a surge in the number of accounts without followers who were attempting to contribute to and correct the narratives regarding the news about the Hong Kong protests (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p.20). Over 200,000 Twitter accounts were suspended following the mass takedowns performed by the company (DiRiesta & al., 2020, p.20). Twitter was directly involved in counteracting persuasion attempts from the CCP.

The support from the US is a key contribution to persuading international actors. In 2014, Chief Executive Leung made a statement on live television that foreign interference was to blame for the activists’ motivation to continue demonstrations (Timmons, 20 Oct 2014). Directly highlighting the US as an actor involved in encouraging and potentially controlling the movement, Leung and the Chinese media emphasized that this would be no match for the CCP (Timmons, 20 Oct 2014; Hua, 11 Oct 2014). Although these accusations were denied by both American government officials and the Hong Kong protest leaders, these sentiments were continuously communicated without any proof (Timmons, 20 Oct 2014). During the Umbrella Movement, the CCP focused their efforts on discrediting the American perception of the protests and its criticism of the Chinese government. This differed from the approach used during the 2019-2020 protests, possibly due to the leadership of President Trump. Instead, the focus shifted away from the US government toward celebrities, who were shunned or professionally reprimanded for posting on social media in support of the protestors. For example, the CCP released a statement following a tweet from NBA general manager, Daryl Morey, in support of the movement stating that his comments were “deeply offensive” (Perper, 22 Oct 2019). Another example is the famous videogamer, ‘Blitzchung’, who was stripped of his title after he declared his support for the movement during a gaming tournament (Cusick, 8 Oct 2019). Although this did not directly attack the US government, it interfered with its institutions and its values which generated tensions within itself.

Persuading the international community to support the Sudanese people became an integral part of the digital media strategy. Social media allows for a global digital community to form and come together on important issues to evoke the change they want to see. This characteristic of the digital media is a fundamental reason that the movement was able to continue for over a year. Hashtags, such as the #IAmTheSudanRevolution, were generally used as an organizational tool so users can access the most up to date information in a central location. A primary symbol of the Sudanese Revolution following the June 3rd massacre was the death of Mohamed Mattar, a young activist and engineer (Elmileik, & Khalil, 12 Aug 2019). This led to an online movement where people across social media platforms posted photos and changed profile pictures in solidarity with the Mattar family (Elmileik, & Khalil, 12 Aug 2019). The primary goal for activists in Sudan was to persuade the international community to encourage and echo the demand for a civilian-led government.

Engagement from celebrities was also highly sought after to minimize the potential for an echo chamber and to also have more people feel connected to the movement. Dozens of celebrities and influencers, such as Rihanna and Wyclef Jean, began to make statements, standing in solidarity with the SPA and the activists (Elmileik, & Khalil, 12 Aug 2019). However, internet blackouts were the prime strategy used to combat efforts to influence and persuade the international community. These events allowed for the Sudanese government to exert almost complete control over its image and the narrative of the protests. They claimed that the internet shutdowns were in the interest of national security (Durie, 2019). Nonetheless, protestors were explicit in stating that the blackouts were to prevent information and content from spreading regarding the police and military violence against the protestors, including the executions that were being publicly carried out (Durie, 2019). With the use of VPNs and their international members, the SPA did not lose momentum despite the blackouts. Keeping the international community engaged was a key strategy in keeping the movement alive. A strategy employed for this was the releasing of press releases in both English and Arabic, with some addressing the international community directly. A key observation here is the diversification and translation of content in several languages acted in favor of the protest leaders. Resources needed to be set aside to ensure proper translations were available in the necessary languages; oftentimes English content was mandatory.

The international community was not receiving much information from social media platforms due to the heavy restrictions imposed by the government (Ahmed, 21 Nov 2019). With

the support of several countries with economic interests in Sudan, there was a joint effort in encouraging the leadership of al-Bashir and his supporters (Ahmed, 2019). This control did not stop activists from reaching the international community, through social media, to create discussion and mobilize support. The hashtag #BlueforSudan began to trend in June, 2019 following the death of Mohamed Mattar, a 26 year old man who was shot by the RSF (Al Jazeera, 13 Jun 2019). His friends and family began to change their Facebook profile picture to match that of Mattar while also encouraging their friends and those in their networks to do the same (Al Jazeera, 13 Jun 2019). As per Al Jazeera, the colour began to represent all those who died from the events of the uprisings (13 Jun 2019). Another hashtag joined the trending topics across social media platforms days following the sit-in. The #IAmTheSudanRevolution hashtag was endorsed by the SPA who are originators of the demonstrations (Bendimerad, 13 Jun 2019). This hashtag in particular mobilized a lot of support within the international community and caused international outlets to pay closer attention to the events happening in Sudan (Bendimerad, 13 Jun 2019).

Digital media was used to counteract traditional media propaganda. The Sudanese government and the RSF used traditional media to distort the perception of the events occurring. In a statement made on Sudanese national television on January 29th, 2019, the leader of the NISS, Salah Goush, had made claims that those they had detained would be released and that they were being treated well while in detention (SPA, 7 Jan 2019). To further prove this to the local people and the international community, they allowed few detainees to be shown on television and to be asked questions (SPA, 29 Jan 2019). The press release on January 29th by the SPA was quick to point out that this was a ploy and that prisons had already reached capacity due to the RCF conducting mass-arrests (SPA, 29 Jan 2019). Being held in deplorable conditions without a guarantee of being released, the SPA made several statements denouncing these actions and focusing resources on mobilizing larger crowds to minimize the chance of arrests.

## **Discussion**

The analysis above presents several findings on the relationship between social media and protest movements. In an era of government control, social media has developed into one of the most important tools in the building and sustainability of a movement. It proves to be both shareable and adaptable. The strategies used by activists were effective and directly impacted the

development of the movement. Activists were able to use platforms to gather support and physically mobilize thousands of people for demonstrations. Protest movements are becoming increasingly influential, shifting the trend of having ‘crowds of individuals’ (Castells, 2015) to having ‘networks of networks’ (Juris, 2012, p. 272). This means that the more people speak about the movement and to the actions of both the activists and the government, the more likely people will mobilize to support them (Juris, 2012, p. 272). These networks are created through the sharing of information, personal opinion and personalized content on digital platforms that are then shared beyond one user’s network (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This characteristic also brings a greater sense of community and unity, encouraging more participation while further expanding networks. This study also showed that the greater the networks become, the more aggressive counteracting strategies will be.

An essential aspect of the Intifada protests was the use of citizen journalism on social media to both combat the media blackouts and to inform the international media of the events happening. Government efforts to block and filter social media failed early on and further instigated demonstrators. Many became angry and were further encouraged to record and share events in real time with the international community. The live videos shared on social media on June 3rd, 2019 witnessed the first streamed massacre in digital history (Durie, 2019). The spread of these videos caused the government to institute a country wide blackout that lasted for almost a week (Durie, 2019). The continuous press releases and joint statements from the SPA and the Forces of the DCF was a strategy to keep people organized and mobilized. In a joint statement released on April 9th, 2019, it is highlighted that the importance of the creative strategies implemented to organize demonstrations and mobilize people was fundamental to the movement (SPA, 09 Apr 2019). Al Jazeera played a major role in the Sudanese Intifada, providing an outlet to the local activists to communicate with the international community as well as organizing international businesses to provide access to the internet through VPN. Acquiring support on social media puts pressure on governments to acknowledge the public dissatisfaction publicly, and generally leads to some concession or negotiation. This occurred in Hong Kong, where the extradition law that triggered the 2019-2020 movement was withdrawn as the movement grew beyond expectations and garnered much international support.

The effectiveness of digital activism is heavily due to the strength and the tools already embedded into the social media platforms. Different factors were considered when attributing

usefulness, such as accessibility for local people, the level of publicness, the potential range of networking, and the types of content most associated with the platform. The role of Facebook was multi-dimensional in the Umbrella Movement and the Intifada, acting as a communication tool to mobilize people, a platform to receive informational updates, a promotional channel, and as a networking platform (Bior, 18 Apr 2019; Yung & Leung, 2014). WhatsApp, as a semi-private chat platform was used primarily for logistics and mobilization whereas more private networks such as Telegram carried more secure information (Yung & Leung, 2014). Platforms that were usually apolitical spaces became more actively politicized, developing into a common space for digital activism of different kinds (Yung & Leung, 2014).

In the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, this trajectory became more complicated as both sides became more proficient and sophisticated in their use of digital platforms. Both activists and the government used the same pieces of media to portray opposing narratives on the same social media sites (Shao, 16 Aug 2019). However, the actions of the CCP, such as purchasing Twitter accounts to spread false narratives, delegitimize its perspective. This combined with the tech-savviness and creativeness of the activists benefitted the activists greatly. In Sudan, the use of social media platforms was not as diverse, but a separation of tools for different tasks was still present. While Twitter was generally used to update the international community and to communicate internet blackouts, Facebook played a larger role in live streaming events and making logistical changes. In future protests, it may become about which side is more knowledgeable on cybersecurity, in which the government usually has an upper hand.

Digital platforms also allowed organizations to shift between different audiences quickly and seamlessly. This is seen with the OCLP changing their contact methods from email to Facebook and WhatsApp in the early stages of the Umbrella Movement. The analysis also showed that strategies used and shared can influence and help future organizers of movements and demonstrations. The People's Daily stated that the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan contributed to the strategies and tools used by the leaders of the Umbrella Movement (30 Sep 2014). This shared knowledge, made available through social media has allowed groups to learn from previous movements while also adapting those tools to their current environment. It allowed social media platforms to update and implement tools directly into their platform for ease of access and use by activists. Shared knowledge was also seen in Sudan as strategies from previous Algerian protests were reviewed and adapted (Kushkush, 15 April 2019). The internet also allows for these

strategies to be permanently archived and internationally available. This allows for tools and strategies to be improved on in the future.

Governments have gained much information and experience with the occurrence of each protest movement around the world. Following the Umbrella Movement, the CCP had collected more information to develop and improve censorship tools that would be platform-level and more market friendly (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). Instead of censorship being based on keywords, the platform would be built in a way that the censorship of content would be seamless and more effective (Agur, & Frisch, 2019). This was only made possible by the increased importance of social media. Similarly, following the Arab Spring events in Sudan, the National Congress Party (NCP) created the Cyber Jihadist Unit to conduct mass monitoring of digital platforms spaces in what was called “online defense operations” (Ibrahim, 2019). By the time the 2018 protests began, the government had already been collecting data on its people and their digital activity.

In Hong Kong, this also included hacking social media accounts to change information and gain access to the personal information of bloggers and digital activists for detainment and prosecution (Ibrahim, 2019). Following the end of the Umbrella Movement in December 2014, “many protesters felt that their extreme connectivity became a liability: comment sections on platforms like Facebook became highly contentious within the movement, with harshly worded recriminations directed at fellow protestors as various factions within the movement assigned blame for tactical and strategic failures” (Agur, & Frisch, 2019, p.7). As the movement fizzled out instead of resulting in real policy change, activists were left in fear of potentially being prosecuted for their actions or having records of these actions follow them during their academic and professional careers. The result of these fears is echoed in the 2019-2020 protests as explained in the organize section.

The analysis conducted demonstrates, however, that digital protest has adapted to government control. Platforms have found different ways to amplify minority voices and highlight global news, ensuring all users have access to updates on a variety of events. On Twitter, this is seen through the hashtag feature that keeps all information about a movement centralized for ease of access, while also allowing for many any users to contribute to the sharing of these events and updates. This was an extremely important feature in Sudan’s Intifada as SPA members were contributing from all over the world and were able to effectively communicate different updates in one place. Twitter was also one of the focuses of the resurgence movement in Hong Kong when

it became directly involved in the filtering of fraudulent accounts, counteracting government propaganda efforts. Another was Telegram, who directly updated their systems in response to the need of their audience, which put the application at the forefront of the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. Most platforms also now have offline mode features embedded into their communication tools, which still allows for platform interaction without connectivity.

The presence of traditional media also played an active role in the evolution of the role of social media. In Hong Kong and Sudan, traditional media is predominantly controlled by the government and reflects pro-government narratives. This, in many ways, forced protest leaders to use digital options to ensure the movement would make an impact. As content on traditional media outlets would be filtered, live-streamed content was a way the activists could counteract what was being displayed on televisions and in newspapers. There was a growth of citizen-run, digital news outlets to replace traditional media. Social media allowed activists to lead discussions and debates with regards to inequality, political reform, and the current available jobs to inform their supporters, adversaries, and the press of the extent of China's control in Hong Kong (Agur & Frisch, 2019). During Sudan's Intifada, the whole focus shifted to digital media. The SPA emphasized that the narratives being displayed through any of Sudan's traditional media sources was either heavily biased or false. Instead, the SPA worked hard to ensure updates and resources were available on its platforms and that they were as accessible as traditional media would be.

There were some limitations reached by social media that continue to pose issues today. Primarily, some governments continue to have the power to prevent the spread of information online. Despite mobilizing the support from the general Hong Kong public across age brackets, messages and content failed to reach the population in mainland China which would have been the key element in swaying the Chinese government. In normal circumstances, mobilizing the population outside of the affected area would not play such an important role, however in this case, the Hong Kong population was directly fighting against the CCP's efforts to control them. China's ability to contain the demonstrations to Hong Kong while also using fear of prosecution to prevent attempts at expansion was effective and was difficult to counteract against. China had called on their military to station itself at the border to prevent any possibility of cross-over from Hong Kong during both movements. This added to the lack of inspiration of the Chinese communities, especially in major cities. Coupled with the narrative proposed by the CCP and the high level of

ensorship and manipulation of all news related to the Umbrella Movement, the potential to gain access to the Chinese population for support and mobilization was extremely low.

This remained an issue in the most recent 2019-2020 resurgence, where the protesters were portrayed as detrimental to the success of China. Breaking through this barrier will be the next challenge for Hong Kong's fight against Chinese oppression and control. This has been made even more difficult with the passing of the Hong Kong National Security Law that allows for citizens to be extradited to China for prosecution and sentencing. The goal for this policy is to combat endangering national security, which is a broad term that umbrella's many interpretations. Protesters are now at risk for harsher sentences, more sophisticated monitoring and tracking, and unlawful extradition. It also presents a regression away from the freedoms Hong Kong has acquired over the past decades, which will be difficult to regain with physical CCP offices set up in Hong Kong to carry out the new law. This will change the way social media is used to communicate and the way it will be used as a tool for protest in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Political protest movements often stem from forms of inequality, whether it be rooted in class, race, access to resources, or the restriction or violation of human rights. The success of that protest movement is based on the ability for citizens to mobilize support, organize demonstrations and persuade supporters. The use of strategies and tools in social movements have evolved alongside technological advances as more possibilities for success became available. However, adaptability has become a key component in the choice of strategies when launching a protest. Ultimately, the internet has become a revolutionary tool to facilitate political transformation despite socio-economic, political, and historical differences (Druzin & Li, 2015). These cases are fitting to analyze current contexts of the increasing role of social media in protest movements. As governments aim to extend their control into the information shared on social media, Hong Kong and Sudan exemplify how activists have adapted to bypass these obstacles and restrictions. Movements adapt quickly due to the speed and efficacy of digital platforms, and these adaptations signal that both the digital world and the companies that control these platforms are learning how to implement tools to adapt to the movements. Protests contribute to the number of users on

platforms and the level of data accessible to better improve digital spaces, which as shown is equally as important to governments who seek further control over their population.

This research showed that in the battle for public opinion, social media is playing an increasingly bigger role for both sides. Future demonstrations may become more easily triggered and will not rely on events to happen in that region for this triggering to occur. Social media provides the advantage of shifting the power of the narrative that was traditionally solely held by the government towards the people. Improvements in communication, mobilization and organizations can be seen between the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests. Sudan's 2019 protests have also occurred in tandem with others in the region, with Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq having all seen the removal of their heads of state due to worsening inflation, increasing corruption and a demand for accountability (Bartu, 5 Jan 2020). Moreover, trigger events led by social media in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen have also been brewing civil unrest. In Sudan, similar chants and slogans were used by activists that had also been used during the 2011 protests (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020). There was an emphasis on the use of 'Tasgut Bas', meaning 'to fall', implying that for Sudan to become successful it must fall and be rebuilt (Bartu, 5 Jan 2020). Some are speculating that this shows the potential for a part three of the Arab Spring, or a movement triggered by similar events (Bartu, 13 Jan 2020).

This study builds on currently available research on news consumption on social networking platforms and how it has become a tool in protest movements to increase levels of support and participation. Future research should focus on tools that could directly alert government attempts to skew narratives and manipulate the public through false information. It should also consider the following questions: What is the potential role of executives or developers of social media platforms with regards to building tools into their platforms? Is there a moral influence or can governments eventually regulate the ways in which platforms are freely interactive? Is there an argument for the safety of users and protest activists that supports the argument for a less democratic internet? As the more powerful countries advocate for more democratic policies and practices in non-Western countries, more populations will become mobilized to become more representative within their governments. Political instability in countries such as the United States are also influential in both Western and non-Western countries. Most recently with the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrations in support of this primarily

American movement occurred on every continent within 48 hours of the announcement from the protest organizers.

Ultimately, the evolving role of social media in the context of protest movements invites policymakers and institutions to question the potential benefits and consequences of the democratization of the internet. On the one hand, this tool has expanded transparency in the context of corruption and human security, while also broadening the way individuals communicate with each other on a global scale. On the other, it has proven to be vulnerable to manipulation and censorship, which counteracts some of said benefits. In a world becoming more interconnected with every new technological advancement, the evolution of digital media will become a battleground for governments and privacy advocates alike. It will be important to include the critical role social media platforms play in the fight against oppression and in the movement for equality and freedom.

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