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Kavada, A.; Poell, T.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# From Counterpublics to Contentious Publicness: Tracing the Temporal, Spatial, and Material Articulations of Popular Protest Through Social Media

Anastasia Kavada<sup>1</sup> & Thomas Poell<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>School of Media and Communication, University of Westminster, London HA1 3TP, UK<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1090 GN, Netherlands

*This article presents a new approach to the study of public contestation through social media. Developing this approach, we make three conceptual moves. First, to capture the dynamic character of contemporary contestation, we shift attention from publics to publicness as an interactive process. Second, we turn the focus from the “counter,” as a public or space distinct from the dominant sphere, towards distributed forms of contention. Finally, instead of considering media as arenas of claims, we investigate how media are constitutive of contentious publicness, which can be studied along its material, spatial, and temporal dimensions. These moves lead to an analytical framework through which trajectories of contentious publicness can be systematically traced and evaluated. Through case studies on the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the Occupy protests, we demonstrate how this framework can be employed to examine the construction of new contentious actors and evaluate their democratic legitimacy as claim-makers.*

**Keywords:** Public Contestation, Social Media, Counterpublics, Materiality, Spatiality, Temporality, Public Sphere

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Research on contemporary protest and social media suggests that key shifts are taking place in the articulation of public contestation. These platforms are thought to facilitate more fleeting and dynamic instances of publicness that connect actors from different geographical areas and political regimes around the globe. As mobile technologies become omnipresent in protest, street activity is now inextricably entangled with national and transnational public communication. At the same time, as social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, increasingly involve masses of users, “national” political issues and relations, more frequently than in

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Corresponding author: Anastasia Kavada; e-mail: A.Kavada@westminster.ac.uk

the past, play a key role in online contention (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2012). These media also appear to contribute to an acceleration of communication and to the construction of more transient connections. At the height of protest events, flashes of collectivity are produced on the streets and on major social media platforms, tying large numbers of people to these events (Barassi, 2015; Kavada, 2015). Furthermore, the intense use of social media in protest, prompts us to consider how the algorithms and business models of these platforms affect the expression of contentious publicness (Dencik & Leistert, 2015; Poell & Van Dijck, 2015).

In this article, we sketch an analytical framework for studying the highly dynamic, transnational character of digitally-mediated activism. To do so we move beyond the notions of counterpublics and networked publics that characterizes much of the research on digital public contention. Instead, we attempt to conceptualize publicness as a *process* that is constituted through the material, temporal and spatial relations from which it emerges. These relations are in turn affected by the use of social media that form part of the material infrastructure of publicness, constituting its spaces and shaping its temporalities.

To evaluate the *democratic* implications of digitally-mediated contestation, we argue for a context-specific and situated analysis which focuses on how flows of contentious publicness affect political relations; that is how new actors or claim-makers are constituted, political arenas are reorganized, and discourse and claims are legitimated. We explore whether and how such flows of public contestation challenge unequal power relations, paying attention to the particular political-cultural configuration in which this publicity is generated. Examining such configurations can be complex as they often include different types of political regimes -liberal democratic and authoritarian- and can also substantially evolve over time to include new sets of actors and issues.

In what follows, we develop our theoretical approach in three conceptual moves that help us to examine how social media and digital technologies more generally are involved in particular episodes of contentious publicness. We then use the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the following Occupy protests in the United States and United Kingdom as examples to illustrate our approach and its application. These examples demonstrate how moving from counterpublics and network publics to processes of contentious publicness makes it possible to gain a more precise understanding of the role played by social media in the communication of protest in particular political regimes.

### From publics to publicness

Our first theoretical move allows us to shift attention away from the rather static notion of “the public” that lies at the heart of the concepts of “counterpublics” and “networked publics.” The concept of “counterpublics” has been developed in critical dialogue with the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, which has been a

central reference point in theorizing how mediated publicness affects democratic processes. Habermas ([1962] 1991) defines the public sphere as a space located between the market and the state, where private individuals can debate public affairs unencumbered by state or commercial interests and arrive at a public opinion, oriented to the common good.

During the 1990s, various authors have questioned the unitary nature of the public sphere, stressing the multiplicity of arenas where such publicity emerges. The notion of counterpublics materialized within this line of enquiry. It originated in Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas, which highlighted the existence of multiple "subaltern counterpublics" that operated alongside the 18th century bourgeois public sphere discussed by Habermas. Such subordinated groups have historically included "women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Fraser (1990, p. 67) defines "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." Hence, counterpublics have a dual character, operating both "as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" and "as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1990, p. 124).

Their emancipatory potential lies in the dialectic between these two functions (Asen, 2000). Counterpublics oppose the "dominant knowledge" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016, p. 934) and discursive exclusions (Asen, 2000, p. 426) of the mainstream public sphere. They attempt to reconfigure the discursive practices of wider publics (Asen, 2000, p. 426) and propose alternative validity claims and norms of public speech (Pason, Foust, & Zittlow Rogness, 2017), as well as speech genres and modes of address (Warner, 2002, p. 86). Their emancipatory projects "do not appeal to an ideal of universality (as did the historical bourgeois public sphere) but, rather, advance affirmations of specificity in relation to gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and other axes of difference" (Asen, 2000, p. 429).

Scholars of digital media and public contention have often preferred to use concepts that point to the networked and digitally-mediated nature of online publics. This has led to a proliferation of terms that allude either to the perceived characteristics of online publics—e.g., "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015), "issue publics" (Hestres, 2014), "ephemeral publics" (Postill, 2015), "riparian publics" (Berry, 2011)—or to the genres and architectures of digital media in which such publics arise—e.g., "hashtag publics" (Rambukkana, 2015) or "calculated publics" (Gillespie, 2014). Particularly influential is the notion of "networked publics," which boyd (2011, 39) defines as "simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice." At times, studies connect the notion of counterpublic with these new terms, referring, for instance, to "networked counterpublics" (Penney & Dadas, 2014), "counterpublic networks" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016) or the "online counterpublic sphere" (Miloni, 2009).

While these different conceptualizations of online publics have allowed researchers to produce coherent narratives of contemporary public contestation, these concepts also obfuscate much of the complexity and constantly evolving nature of today's protest. Focusing more on the public as an outcome of a process of publicness, rather than on the process itself, the concepts of "counterpublics" and "network publics" are unable to capture the dynamic processes through which flows of publicness emerge and circulate around the globe. In other words, they do not allow us to think of *publicness in motion*, as flows of public contestation moving through time and from place to place.

Using the notion of publics also makes it easier to reduce the process of contentious publicness to specific actors. Thus, counterpublics are often identified with the specific social movements and organizations that join in a contentious episode (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 190). This turns the notion of counterpublic into that of an enclave (Asen, 2002, p. 431), i.e., into a group formation that has specific and well-defined boundaries, even though publics are always constituted through modes of address that refer to an audience of strangers (Warner, 2002). Crucially, identifying the counterpublic with the movement obscures how social movements develop and are shaped through processes of contentious publicness, a key concern of this article.

Publics also tend to be analytically tied to specific online spaces. These may include alternative media or a particular Twitter hashtag or Facebook page. This type of "localization" neglects that contemporary online contention often unfolds through a wide variety of social media, alternative news sites, blogs, and social movement websites. Moreover, it disregards that publicness is a process which takes place both online and offline. Within this hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2013), it is difficult to distinguish counter from dominant or online from offline.

Thus, we suggest shifting the focus from publics to publicness as a process of making things public. In this sense, public denotes "what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about." (Thompson, 1995, p. 123). This shift allows for a less static and rigid analysis of public contestation that does not restrict it to something occurring in a specific "place" and revolving around a particular "public," which is more-or-less stable through time. Instead, we aim to study publicness as a continuous activity of making things public that allows topics to cross from the private to the public domain, and which constitutes and reconstitutes the identity of key actors in public contestation. Paradoxically, with this move we effectively return to the original meaning of "public sphere" in German: *Öffentlichkeit*, i.e., "publicness" or "publicity."<sup>1</sup> This helps us to trace the dynamic process of emergence, crystallization and dissolution of contentious publics that spans both social media platforms and physical spaces of communication. As we argue in this article, this process depends on the material infrastructures of media, the practices that characterize their use, as well as the different norms, rules and regulations that affect how they are employed.

### From counter to contention

In our second theoretical move, we shift the focus from the notion of “counter” to “contention.” This allows us to evaluate the democratic implications of contemporary public contestation through social media. These distributed forms of contestation transcend national spheres and spaces and are, for an important part, disconnected from established political arrangements and organizations. The concepts of counterpublics or networked publics are limiting in this regard, as they are either too attached to the normative assumptions of the public sphere model or detached from any normative framework altogether.

Counterpublics are often judged on their capacity to mount an effective challenge to the discursive exclusions and practices of the dominant public sphere (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016, p. 948). Such an assessment, however, leaves the central assumptions underpinning public sphere theory unchallenged. This is problematic as the theory remains based on the ideal of the national democratic state whose legitimation depends on the extent to which it takes public opinion into account. Thus, most attempts to think of the public sphere beyond the nation state presuppose a kind of (democratic) transnational political order that the public sphere is supposed to influence and legitimate. For instance, Habermas’s (2001, p. 103) reflection on a “pan-European political public sphere” is based on the existence of a European civil society, complete with a variety of non-governmental organizations and interest groups. In turn, Fraser (2007, p. 20) suggests that for current flows of transnational publicity to constitute a public sphere, the development of “new transnational public powers” is required. Otherwise, such flows remain, according to these theorists, untethered, aimless and ultimately ineffective for the exercise of democratic politics.

The most vibrant episodes of public contention, however, frequently encompass citizens of *different* political systems, both democratic and authoritarian ones. In this regard, the conceptual challenge, as Couldry (2014, p. 57) argues, is to “move away from the idea that each public sphere has an exclusive citizen constituency towards a notion of overlapping constituencies whose mutual interactions require regulation in ways that have not yet been clarified.” From a similar perspective, we need to consider how public contestation in one context can easily spill over to another, as protest claims, aesthetics, and repertoires quickly move around the globe.

In the scholarship on counterpublics this *disconnect* between the dynamics of transnational contestation and the democratic model at the heart of public sphere theory remains unquestioned. Consequently, the democratic efficacy of contemporary contestation cannot be assessed. The same can be said for the scholarship on networked publics that either uncritically employs the notion of the public sphere, or avoids making claims about the democratic implication of public contestation altogether.

To evaluate the democratic implications of dynamic and untethered forms of contentious publicness, we suggest tethering the notion of publicness to the

framework of contentious politics. For [Tilly and Tarrow \(2015\)](#), who have made a vital contribution to developing this framework, “contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors’ interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (p. 7). Thus, they consider a social movement as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim” (p. 11). From this perspective, public contestation can be evaluated by how effectively it displays WUNC, that is the *worthiness* of the claim, as well as the *unity*, *numbers*, and *commitment* of social movement participants ([Tilly & Tarrow, 2015](#)).

Thus, the notion of “contentious publicness” draws our attention to the: (a) processes of public claim-making, (b) legitimacy of claims and claim-makers, and (c) arenas and contexts in which claims are made. To assess the democratic implications of online contentious publicness, this framework prompts us to analyze the legitimacy of claims and claimer-makers within different geographical areas and political regimes. Whether online contention promotes democratization depends on the specific institutional relations and interactions that constitute the political systems involved in the contentious process. Therefore, the normative assessment of online contention should be grounded and context-specific, carefully exploring the *where*, *when*, and *how* of popular contention.

Before we launch into such an assessment through our two case studies, we propose a third and final theoretical move that will help us elucidate the role of social media in processes of contentious publicness.

### From arenas to dimensions

In our third theoretical move, we attempt to develop our understanding of the role of the media in contentious publicness. Coming from a sociological perspective, social movement research on contentious interaction tends to disregard the mediated aspects of public contention ([van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004](#), p. 11). While many studies investigate the claims made by social movements through the media, these fail to consider how the media shape the claim-making process itself. In addition, most studies of contentious interaction consider the media as arenas of claims, as public stages where social movements appear as already formed “entities” “addressing themselves to other actors” ([van de Donk et al., 2004](#), p. 10). How mediated public contention affects the formation and character of social movements often remains unexamined.

Research on online contention from a platform studies perspective can be of help in this regard as it considers how contentious interaction is shaped by the practices of hashtagging, retweeting, or posting. It also investigates how the material characteristics and architectures of platforms affect contentious interaction ([Galis & Neumayer, 2016](#); [Milan, 2015](#)). However, much of this research focuses on specific applications and platforms. Furthermore, research on the formation of publics on



such platforms refers mostly to the structure of interactions on the platform. For instance, many studies in this line of enquiry investigate the characteristics of the networks created through Twitter interaction by mapping the number and direction of retweets and the positions that different actors take up in the network (Kavada, 2018).

In this article, we develop a more comprehensive approach by exploring how social media affect the *material*, *spatial* and *temporal* dimensions of contentious publicness. This allows us to examine how social movements are constituted as claims-makers in this process, and how they attempt to influence and steer processes of contentious publicness. In turn, this helps us to assess the democratic implications of the specific material, spatial and temporal configurations of contentious publicness, investigating how these affect the legitimacy of claims and claims-makers in the particular contexts in which such publicness unfolds.

We think of social media within public contention as specific material arrangements that include data, algorithms, interfaces, as well as devices—smartphones, laptops, tablets—and infrastructures—mobile telephone masts, Wi-Fi hotspots, Internet servers. These material characteristics shape the affordances of social media, the uses that they are most suited for and the ways in which they enable or constrain specific protest activities. However, these affordances also depend on the organizations, media, and end-users that interface with these technologies (Hutchby, 2001). In this respect, we need to consider how end-user license agreements, as well as the business models and infrastructures of platforms shape contentious publicness. And, consequently, how the materiality of contentious publicness—the ways in which it appears or “materializes” as metrics, photographs, videos, or text—influences its democratic implications.

Social media also shape the *spatiality* of contentious publicness, the spatial dimensions of making things public. Drawing on Lefebvre (1991), we understand space as both “produced by” and “producing” social relations. Rather than thinking of space as the container of social action, Lefebvre argues that space is generated through the interaction between the “designers,” “regulators” and “users” of space. Lefebvre thus considers spatiality as emerging through the interaction between the material aspects of space, the cultural schemas and discourses that are invested in it, as well as the everyday uses of space. He therefore distinguishes between three dimensions of space that together form a triad: perceived, conceived, and lived. Perceived space refers to the physical and material aspects of space, such as buildings and squares, or in our case the materiality of social media. Conceived space includes the mental aspects of space, and the symbolic representation of space in diagrams, sketches or discourses. Finally, lived space refers to “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of “inhabitants” and “users” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original).

The notion that space is produced through interaction further implies that space “is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed” (Masey, 2005, p. 9). This also means that space is multiple—that there are multiple



experiences, understandings and arrangements of space occurring contemporaneously (Massey, 2005). Thus, from the perspective of this article, we aim to understand how the multiplicity of spatial relations enacted through social media allow particular modes of contentious publicness to take shape and promote or close down opportunities for democratic publicness.

*Temporality*, the third dimension of contentious publicness, directs our attention to how the use of social media affects the rhythms, speed, and degree of synchronicity of public contentious communication, as well as its timing and long-term horizon. Temporality can also be thought as both produced by and producing social relations. This approach entails examining how temporal structures are created collectively through the use of schedules, deadlines, calendars, clocks and seasonal events which provide rhythm and form to everyday life (Orlikowski & Yates 2002, p. 684). Like spatiality, the social production of time is closely entwined with materiality, including the technical infrastructures for measuring and calculating time, for circulating discourses about time, and for enforcing specific rules about the timing of interaction.

Social media can be thought of as such material infrastructures whose technical capacities for speed, synchronicity, liveliness, and the durability of communication through time shape the temporal structures and rhythms of everyday life. The temporal role of these media also depends on the ideas and discourses that the media are invested with—how they are perceived by users in relation to time—as well as the practices that develop around their use (Keightley, 2013).<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, we consider how these sets of temporal relations that dominate contentious publicness today have major consequences for the legitimacy of claims and claims-makers.

In this article, we illustrate our argument by reflecting on particular episodes of public contestation, when established political relations are challenged and the spatial, temporal, and material dimensions of contentious publicness are more easily traced. While in practice these dimensions are inextricably connected, we distinguish between them for analytical purposes. Thus, we do not view them as discrete dimensions, but as angles and entry points into the analysis of contentious publicness.

### Case studies

To explore the material, spatial and temporal dimensions of contentious publicness we focus on two case studies of major episodes of online contention. The first case study focuses on the Egyptian Kullena Khaled Said (We are all Khaled Said) Facebook Page. This page, which was “liked” several million times and received tens of thousands of daily comments at its height, became a vital stage for the expression of public grievances about the Mubarak regime in the months leading up to the Egyptian uprising of early 2011. The page was created, in June 2010, to protest against the murder of Khaled Said, a young middle-class Egyptian man, who

was beaten to death by Egyptian security forces (Ghonim, 2012). Wael Ghonim, the Dubai-based head of marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa, originally set up and developed the page in close collaboration with journalist and activist Abdel Rahman Mansour.

To understand how particular material, spatial, and temporal relations were instantiated through Kullena Khaled Said, all available data—14,072 posts, 6.8 million comments, and 32 million likes—exchanged through the entire lifetime of the page from June 2010 to July 2013 have been collected (Poell et al., 2016; Rieder et al., 2015). The present analysis especially focuses on the period from 1 January to 15 February 2011, three days after the Mubarak regime fell. To gain insight in the dynamic of communication on the page, for each day the top three admin posts that received most comments and likes, and the top 10 most liked user comments on these posts were translated from Arab into English. These posts and comments were analyzed through emergent coding (see Poell et al., 2016 for more details). This primary research was supplemented by the rich body of literature on social media and the Egyptian uprising, allowing us to both analyze contentious social media interaction in detail, as well as how this interaction was situated in the larger contentious episode.

The second case study focuses on the Occupy movement which began in New York in September 2011 with the occupation of Zuccotti park. Inspired by the Egyptian uprising, protestors railed against Wall Street and the excessive influence of economic powers on politics. They also called for a political system characterized by equality, inclusiveness and justice and tried to practice these ideals through their own methods of decision-making and organization. Soon Occupy camps appeared all around the world and global days of action were organized. However, most of the camps were evicted by the spring of 2012 and the movement went into decline.

Our research draws on 75 in-depth interviews with participants in Occupy Wall Street, Occupy London, Occupy Seattle, Occupy Boston, and Occupy Sacramento. Interviewees played different roles in the occupation: they were involved in media teams, the facilitation of assemblies, the development of technological tools, logistics and security, while a minority was just occasional participants in the movement. This research was complemented with document analysis of the minutes of meetings and of the major statements emerging from the movement.

As this article focuses on theoretical elaboration, in the analysis that follows we draw on our empirical results, but we do not present them in detail. Instead, we use them to illustrate the application of this theoretical approach to empirical research.

### **Materiality**

In this section, we first consider how the infrastructure of social media affects the dynamics and form of contentious of publicness. Metrics, such as number of likes or retweets, are particularly influential in this respect as they play a vital role in

legitimizing the claims made, as well as the standing and legitimacy of protest movements as claims-makers.

The administrators of Kullena Khaled Said and of the Occupy pages and accounts frequently cited the numbers of likes and comments generated by their posts to demonstrate that social media had become legitimate platforms of public expression. In their protest reporting, mass media also frequently cite the numbers of likes, views, and shares that a protest call, video, or photo has received. With the increasing use of social media as an environment monitoring tool in newsrooms, social media metrics affect whether a protest will be covered by the mainstream media. Therefore, metrics affect the legitimacy and recognition of collective actors within flows of contentious publicness.

The publics constituted through social media and their legitimacy in a process of public claim-making are not given at the outset. As Gillespie (2012) notes with regards to Twitter, the shape of the “us” on social media platforms is by no means transparent.” What the Twitter algorithms produce are “not barometric readings but hieroglyphs” (Gillespie, 2012, p. 20). Thus, the key lies in the combination of online and offline publicness, the trajectories with which publicness saturates both online and offline spaces. What metrics mean and how they should be interpreted is a matter of struggle itself.

This is what in both cases made the occupation of public space crucial for these two movements. Showing up as a metric on social media platforms is not given the same weight as forms of contestation associated with what Butler (2015) calls “body politics.” The assembling of bodies in physical space still appears to carry more legitimacy than the gathering of people online. Putting your body on the line, exposing it to police violence and risking exhaustion, illness, and even death, is considered much stronger evidence of commitment than any form of online activity. Therefore, it was this link between the materiality of physical bodies amassing offline with their representation on social media, through photographs, video and live-streaming technologies, that “gave flesh,” literally and metaphorically, to the social media metrics.

This can be clearly observed in Occupy where the main function of social media was to bring people to the physical occupations where they could be involved in the movement more intimately and develop relations of solidarity and commitment (Kavada, 2015). Physical occupations became the stage for a performance that was remediated online, disseminating content around the participatory democracy practiced in open assemblies, the demands voiced in the streets and police brutality and repression (Kavada, 2015; Feigenbaum, Frenzel & McCurdy, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012).

The materiality of platforms is also connected to the appearance and functions of social movement leaders, a feature that affects the legitimacy of social movements as claims-makers. In both cases, social media platforms allowed these movements to appear as grassroots eruptions of public sentiment. No specific leaders or recognizable and already existing organizations were put forward. Although internal

hierarchy and leadership within the protest movements remained essential in mobilization, social media communication concealed their identity (Bakardjieva, Felt & Dumitrica, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017b; Kavada, 2015; Poell et al., 2016). The fact that contentious communication spreads spontaneously and without much organization or effort is a feature that legitimates social movements as claims-makers since it presents them as authentic expressions of public sentiment (Flesher Fominaya & Cox, 2014; Polletta, 1998).

Yet, the material design and regulation of social media platforms soon put anonymous administrators into leadership positions. In both movements, social media gave the administrators a public stage to distribute messages to large numbers of people and exclusive access to the metrics and demographics of user engagement. On Facebook pages, for instance, admin posts are displayed on the main timeline and are directly visible to users. By contrast, user comments, except for the last few, can only be accessed through further clicking. On large pages such as Kullena Khaled Said user comments are, consequently, like a continuous stream with the admin post as the frame. Admin posts are also written in a collective voice since administrators speak as Occupy or as Kullena Khaled Said (Kavada, 2015; Poell et al., 2016). This provides administrators with significant power as they can embody the collective voice of the movement.

Yet, the very existence of leaders in contemporary social movements remains fundamentally problematic, endangering the cohesion and legitimacy of these movements. The power of administrators was especially contentious in Occupy, a movement that above all valued equality and horizontality. It was at the center of various tussles and “password wars” with some administrators attempting to bar others from accessing the page. This harmed the legitimacy of the movement in the eyes of some of its participants as it appeared that it could not practice what it preached. In the Kullena Khaled Said case, Wael Ghonim as the page administrator became the central target for supporters of the Mubarak regime, portraying the admin as a foreign agent. This delegitimized the page and undermined its role as a key stage of public contention.

### Spatiality

In our examination of spatiality, it is first important to consider how social media propel the *globalization* of contentious publicness. Worldwide these media provide the same user interface, uniform architecture, and clean aesthetic. In Lefebvre’s terms, the “conceived” dimension of social media spaces, in terms of their discourses, protocols and architectures, points to a global space.

Indeed, in both the Egyptian uprising and the Occupy movement, contentious publicness constantly overflowed the national framework. In the case of Kullena Khaled Said, as the page generated increasing user activity, it was shared and liked by large numbers of users outside Egypt. These global flows of publicness were reinforced by transnational media coverage of the protests as, following the Tunisian

uprising, news media from around the world closely reported on the events in Egypt. This combination of transnational media attention and intense global social media communication forced the international political community to take position on the Egyptian protests and it somewhat restrained the reaction of the Mubarak regime to the protests (Castells 2012, pp. 61–62).

Vital to observe is that even though social media constitute global communication infrastructures, the transnationalization of contentious communication is never automatic or self-evident. It involves activists making concerted efforts to verify, translate, aggregate, and circulate information in a systematic fashion, making it accessible to international audiences and media. Moreover, there are crucial instances of brokerage involved in linking different spaces (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). It is through such linking practices that the protests in Egypt could become a major inspiration for the Occupy movement in the United States and beyond. Tahrir became a symbol of insurrection, inspiring similar occupations of public squares in other countries. Hence, the blog post by the Canadian culture jamming network Adbusters, the first call to occupy Wall Street, asked: “Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?” (White and Lasn, 2011).

In exploring the spatial relations of contentious publicness, we also need to consider how digital media construct social movements as claims-makers. In Egypt, the exchanges on the Kullena Khaled Said strongly evoked the ideal of the united Egyptian people, opposed to the corruption, violence and abuse of the regime. The Facebook page was produced as a “national space” through which Egyptian protesters became conscious of themselves as a public: “We are all Khaled Said.” The Kullena Khaled Said page thus allowed groups previously excluded from public political discourse—especially young middle-class Egyptian Internet users—the legitimacy to express their concerns and obtain a voice as “the Egyptian” people.

By contrast, once Occupy Wall Street changed from a “one demand” protest to a movement with many claims and demands about the political and economic system, it shifted from a national protest, based in New York but focused on the U.S. government, to a movement that was simultaneously local and global. Occupations spread to different cities across the United States and to other parts of the world. The occupations had a distinct local character, influenced by the politics and activist communities of particular cities, and a global character, addressing the failures of a global capitalist system that increased inequality and allowed economic interests to rule political life. The social media streams generated by the movement often focused on specific cities or local spots, such as central squares or locations with symbolic resonance like Wall Street. At the same time, the “We are the 99%” meme became an important placeholder on social media to connect a wide variety of oppositional groups both locally and globally (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). This was directly linked with Occupy’s efforts to gain legitimacy as it could present itself both as a global expression of the 99% and as a set of local occupations that practiced an alternative form of politics, turning public squares into hubs of civic engagement.

The local, national, or global character of contentious publicness also affects its regulation. Based outside the Egyptian jurisdiction, social media platforms were difficult to censor and repress. In a country where physical space was tightly regulated, social media provided, at least initially, the main outlet for discontent and were vital for opening up democratic publicness. The Occupy movement, which emerged in a less restrictive political context, encountered more repression in physical space, with the forceful eviction of Occupy camps, rather than online.

A final spatial dynamic concerns processes of dispersion and centralization. In both cases, contentious publicness took shape through a variety of Facebook pages, Twitter hashtags, and YouTube channels. In other words, the dynamics of social media, where users can easily create new online spaces of public contention, leads to a *dispersion* of contentious publicness. The occupation of public space, in turn, played a *centralizing* role. In Occupy, for instance, the decisions taken in the General Assembly were considered binding for the whole movement. As we have also explained in the previous section, the public square became the central stage of the movements in their depiction on social media. Thus, once the occupations and camps were evicted it was difficult for both protest movements to maintain a coherence of the message in these dispersed online spaces.

## Temporality

Finally, we trace how digital infrastructures, discourses, and user practices shape the temporal relations of public contention. Digital media, especially social media, are thought to lead to an acceleration of social relations as they favor speed, immediacy, as well as a real (or present)-time orientation (Barassi, 2015; Kaun, 2016; Poell, 2019; Weltevrede, Helmond, & Gerlitz, 2014). The speed of social media has also been connected to the speed of capitalism and the rules of the market that underlie the business model of commercial platforms. To sustain the high level of online engagement that forms the core of their business model, social media continuously introduce the next set of topics that satisfy user interests, whatever these interests might be (Barassi, 2015; Fuchs, 2013).

The “speed” of social media can enhance activists’ control over the timing of protest mobilization and their ability to communicate protest to large audiences. Whereas social movement organizations have historically struggled to reach audiences through the (mass) media, social media platforms potentially enable activists to quickly and widely circulate protest materials and calls for mobilization, giving them a greater capacity to control the timing of their interventions. For instance, in Egypt no more than ten days separated the first call for mass demonstrations on the Kullena Khaled Said page and the start of the actual protests on 25 January 2011 (Lim, 2012). The speed of the mobilization process surprised the Mubarak regime and greatly contributed to its success.

Furthermore, real-time reporting practices by activists can help to generate publicity. During the Egyptian uprising and Occupy Wall Street, activists made



concerted efforts to document and report unfolding events (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kaun, 2016; Papacharissi & Fatima Oliveira, 2012). The practice of live-streaming, that really took off with the Egyptian uprising and the Occupy movement (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Kavada & Treré, 2019) played a vital role in this respect. Live videos and other materials were circulated on social media platforms, allowing for near real-time sharing. Broadcasting material in real-time makes it difficult for the authorities to control and censor the flows of contentious publicness. Speedy on-the-ground social media reports also constitute crucial sources for journalists (Hännska Ahy, 2016), giving activists more control over contentious communication.

Yet, this emphasis on the now focuses attention on the violence and spectacle of events occurring in the streets. Real-time reporting often concentrates on sensational forms of protest and confrontations with police and security forces, rather than on structural problems and inequalities (Poell, 2019). This means that activists may struggle to generate long-term attention for and politicization of contentious issues.

Speed can also be detrimental to the long-term stabilization and sustainability of the collectives created through contentious publicness. Social media are thought to be designed in a way that is both technologically and commercially antithetical to sustaining collectivity (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015). While commercial social platforms enable the initial construction of communities and publics through hashtags, pages, or groups, these platforms have no commercial interest in supporting the consolidation of such relations (Barassi, 2015; Kaun, 2016). Processes of togetherness tend to be ephemeral, on the point of giving way to the next set of trending topics and related sentiments (Fuchs, 2013). This limits the standing of social movements as claims-makers since they are perceived as fleeting, with their members lacking the necessary unity and commitment to the cause.

In light of these considerations, we can observe how the formation of issues and community on Kullena Khaled Said went through different phases. In the months following the murder of Khaled Said, in June 2010, the page first became a stage for the expression of public grievances about the Mubarak regime. In this period, the exchanges on the page were relatively slower paced, dictated by the admin posts, and not yet driven by events on the streets. This allowed for the construction of a national community vis-à-vis the regime. When the protests broke out in January 2011, this dynamic radically changed. Responding to on-the-ground contentious activity, the communication on the page shifted towards information warfare: exchanging protest information and involving international media and dispersed global audiences in the uprising. This was by no means uncomplicated, as regime agents increasingly hijacked the page, undermining the admins' information strategies.

Occupy attempted to counterbalance the speed of social media communication with the slow (and almost interminable) processes of consensus decision-making taking place on the squares (Kaun, 2016). The daily schedule of the occupation on the square was following the rhythms of everyday life in the city, for example by



scheduling some assemblies and meetings at times when people could attend them after they had finished work. These processes were arranged in such a way so as to enable community building and to allow for reflection and experimentation. These features were crucial to the movement's public claims around the problems of Western representative democracy and the ways in which it could be reformed to facilitate accountability, transparency and direct participation. However, Occupy's attempt to lead by example was frustrated by the slowness of consensus decision-making, which is credited by some for wasting the movement's revolutionary energy (Gerbaudo, 2017a).

### Data Availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly for ethical reasons, as this could compromise the privacy of individuals that participated in the Occupy study or generate security risks for the users of the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Conclusion: analyzing and describing trajectories of public contestation

In this article we make three conceptual moves to develop a more effective approach for studying contemporary public contestation. To capture the dynamic character of this contestation, our first move shifts attention from publics to publicness as an interactive process of making things public. Second, we shift the attention from the "counter," as a public or space distinct from the dominant sphere, towards the notion of contention as outlined in social movement theory. This helps us to evaluate the implications of contentious publicness that often involves citizens from different political regimes, both democratic and authoritarian. In our third move, we argue that instead of considering the media as arenas of claims, where social movements appear as fully formed actors that make claims targeting other actors, we need to investigate how the media constitute contentious publicness and the actors emerging through it.

These moves lead us to an analytical framework through which trajectories of contentious publicness can be systematically traced and evaluated along their material, spatial and temporal dimensions. These dimensions are conceptualized as both producing and being produced by the social (and, by extension, communicative) relations that constitute publicness. We used the cases of the Egyptian uprising and the Occupy protests to demonstrate how this framework can be employed in research to examine the construction of new contentious actors or claim-makers, as well as the democratic legitimacy of these claim-makers and claims.

Future research using this framework to study particular contentious episodes involving social media are invited to consider the following questions. First, tracing *materiality*, it is vital to analyze the configurations of human actors and media technologies involved in the construction of the spatial and temporal relations of contention. How does the commercial orientation of social media platforms affect the

ways in which publics appear in them? How do the algorithms and metrics of platforms shape the practices of contentious publicness? And, how do metrics and human bodies compare and combine when it comes to the legitimacy and resonance of contentious publicness?

With regards to *spatiality*, the kinds of spaces constructed through social media and their connections with other types of spaces need to be examined. How are these processes of spatial construction and brokerage “mediated”? What is the relationship between mass and social media in such processes and how do these mediated practices become entwined with on the ground activities? Which actors are included and excluded from the different types of spaces? What kinds of democratic claims and relations are enabled and obstructed through the construction of these spaces?

Finally, in terms of *temporality* we have to investigate the different rhythms of contentious publicness. How are social media associated with particular speeds and rhythms? How is the construction of such temporal relations entangled with the temporality of mass media? How does real-timeliness and the synchronous (Rieder et al., 2015) connection between different spaces, both online and offline, affect the spread and resonance of public contention and its duration through time? And what are the democratic implications of the speed, Poell et al., 2016 but also the duration, of contentious episodes?

Addressing these questions can help researchers to evaluate the democratic potential of contentious publicness and the role of social media in these processes. This article sketches the conceptual outline of such research, which captures the dynamic and ever evolving character of contemporary public contention.

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## Notes

- 1 As Susen (2011, p. 44) argues, the imprecise translation of *Öffentlichkeit* into ‘public sphere’ reduced Habermas’s emphasis on the constitution of the public as a malleable process. It also accentuated the spatial, as opposed to the temporal, connotations of the term.
- 2 In other words, Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of the “triad of space” can also be employed to our understanding of time, by thinking of time as “perceived,” “conceived” and “lived.” “Perceived” time refers to the material dimension of measuring time, including clocks, calendars, etc. “Conceived” time encompasses discourses around and mental constructions of time. “Lived” time refers to the everyday practices that inform the collective experience of time.

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