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## FROM THE WAR AGAINST IRAQ TO THE ARAB SPRING: Digital media and transnational activism

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## Abstract

This research aims to identify the actors of contemporary transnational activism and the role of digital media in protests. Based on a literature review, two emblematic cases of transnational activism will be analyzed: the coordinated protests of February 15, 2003, against the Iraq War and the 2011 demonstrations in Egypt in the context of the Arab Spring. In studying both cases, the following questions will be explored: 1) Who are the main activists behind these protests? 2) What makes these movements transnational? 3) How did activists use social media?

### Keywords

Transnational Activism; Digital Media; Arab Spring; Anti-War Protests.

## Introduction

There are many studies on the relationship between activism and digital media available (Bennet & Sergerberg, 2011; Farrel, 2012; Castells, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Marichal, 2013; Halupka, 2016; Prudêncio & Kleina, 2017). In that context, the purpose of this work is to analyze activism with focus on its actors, digital media uses, and transnational reach. We study the cases of two episodes often mentioned in academic literature: the simultaneous protests on February 15, 2003, against the Iraq War (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Rucht & Walgrave, 2010; Habermas, 2006) and the popular insurgency in Egypt that culminated with Mubarak's renunciation on February 11th, 2011 (Castells, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Howard & Hussein, 2013), in the context of the Arab Spring.

Although we do not aim to compare those two periods, the study presents the development of digital media and its possible contributions to transnational activism. Specialized literature considers the moments around the late 1990's and the early 2010's as milestones for activism in the digital age. The first moment is marked by the intense use of websites and blogs, while the second by the support of media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube (Bennet, 2005; Papacharissi, 2009; Castells, 2013).

On February 15th, 2003, demonstrators took to the streets in various cities around the world to protest against George W. Bush and his intention to attack Iraq, an event transnationally coordinated by social movements. In 2011, protests broke in Arab countries, leading to the fall of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Based on previous works, we analyze both cases with regards to the following aspects: 1) the activists' profile; 2) what makes these movements transnational; 3) the use of digital media.

In the first part of this work, we review the broad literature on transnational activism and the internet. In the second part, we present the methodology and provide a brief context to both cases. Then, we develop a three-part discussion to address our research questions related to: the activists, the transnational character, and the role of digital media in activism.

Through selected texts and documents, we are able to draw some conclusions: digital media appear to have enabled a kind of individual activism that is not necessarily backed by organizations; despite the difficulty to measure direct political effects caused by these media, there are indirect impacts, such as independent content production and information diffusion; in the Egyptian case, diverse empirical studies show evidence of transnational communication through social media despite low rates of internet and digital media access.

## 1. Transnational activism and digital media: from protests against the Iraq War to the “Twitter revolutions”

In this section, we make a brief literature review on transnational activism (Papacharissi, 2009; Bennet, 2005; Norris, 2001; Gerbaudo, 2012). We focus on certain aspects like examples of transnational activism, the broader role of social media in activism, and the possibilities social media generate to those power disadvantaged groups called counterpublics (Dahlberg, 2011).

Gerbaudo (2012) separates transnational activism in two moments: the anti-globalization movements of the 1990's, when social media were incipient, and the demonstrations that began in 2011, year of “the protester” according to *Time* magazine<sup>1</sup>. The author argues there was a change in direction. While the anti-globalization movements were characterized by the notion of an oppressed minority expressed, for example, in the discourse of Zapatistas, the early 2010s movements convey the idea that a majority is asking for changes, as indicated in the slogans of the Egyptian demonstrations –

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<sup>1</sup> Time Magazine, retrieved in December 26th 2017 from: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20111226,00.html>.

“We are one hand” – and Occupy Wall Street – “We are the 99%” (Gerbaudo, 2012). Pipa Norris notes global protest movements existed long before the internet, like the antinuclear movement in the 1950’s, the demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the 1960’s or even the antislavery and the pro-suffrage movements of the nineteenth century.

In a recent work, Manuel Castells (2013) studies a series of movements, including the 2011 protests in Egypt, demonstrations in Iceland at the height of the 2008 economic crisis, the *Indignados* in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street. The author concludes that, despite their very different motivations, these movements present certain common features, such as the rejection of political parties and traditional media, the lack of a single and well-defined leadership, besides the intensive use of social media (Castells, 2013).

Bennett (2005) draws attention to the matter of a more diffused coordination in contemporary movements of the digital age, which reflects the technology itself. The author argues the tendency of these movements to bring together distinct groups with different ideas may cause some confusion as to the purpose of the protests. In that perspective, activism in the name of human rights is based on ideas like diversity and social justice that generate a kind of “relaxed framing” (Bennet, 2005, p. 205). From a sociological approach, Castells establishes some effects of the use of internet tools in the social movements that emerged over the last decades. As the author explains, the horizontality of networks favors cooperation and solidarity while, at the same time, reducing the need for formal leadership.

A recent research (Peron, 2016) on the effects of digital communication in transnational activism points to five categories: 1) Incentive to the configuration of the cause. That is, the use of digital media for formulating and disseminating the issue. 2) Engagement multiplication, which involves activists’ collaboration through digital media to obtain more supporters. 3) Structure flexibilization. Movements become virtual and no longer need physical headquarters, which enables their transnationalization. 4) Planning instruments. This means activists can use digital tools to make plans and strategies. 5) Action diversification (cyber events, online protests, cyber-attacks).

However, a more pessimistic view warns of the risk of a practice called slacktivism (Morozov, 2011), a kind of low-effort social media activism that brings comfort but has no political or social impact. In this case, social media users have the illusion of meaningful engagement just by joining a Facebook group or liking a post.

According to Papacharissi (2009), the possibilities digital media offer to activism fit perfectly in the counterpublics model in which less privileged social groups compete to have voice in the public sphere (Fraser, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009; Avritzer & Costa, 2004). Couldry (2010) focuses precisely on that fundamental characteristic that defines human beings: to have voice on something. The author indicates that giving voice to a plurality of publics would be crucial to legitimize decisions with international consequences, such as the Iraq War<sup>2</sup>.

Highlighting the capacity of digital media to connect and sustain subversive movements, Papacharissi (2009) indicates that these websites or networks generally have the following goals: to establish the development of a movement, a collective identity, and mobilize supporters and organizations related to the theme. Furthermore, digital media enable the practice called “citizen journalism”, which is the production of independent content outside conventional journalism (Bruns, 2014). Castells (2008) describes the new media environment in which individuals are able to transmit images and messages to broad audiences as “mass self-communication”. New possibilities for defining causes, producing independent content, and internationalization are among the likely contributions of digital media to activism. Also, perceived changes in activism due to digital media are: decentralized leadership, greater diversity of protest agendas, and more engagement possibilities for publics that are generally excluded.

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<sup>2</sup> Luís Mauro Sá Martinho gave an interview on Couldry's (2010) book to Casa do Saber. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/2JGmEZe>

## 2. Methodology and the examined cases

For this case study, we chose to examine two episodes often mentioned in the literature on transnational activism: the simultaneous protests on February 15th, 2003, against the Iraq War (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Rucht & Walgrave, 2010; Habermas, 2006), and the uprising in Egypt in the context of the Arab Spring (Castells, 2013; Howard & Hussein, 2013). The purpose of this section is to present the methodology and to give a brief context on the two selected episodes.

### 2.1 Methodology

This research is based on the existing literature about both cases. We searched Google Scholar using terms in English first, assuming it would lead to more results, and then in Portuguese. Concerning protests against the Iraq War, we searched “15 February 2003”, which generated 7300 results. Since many of these results were unrelated to our theme, we added “anti-war protests”, with 461 results, and “protests against Iraq War”, with 1010. The most comprehensive work about that date is an edited volume by Walgrave and Rucht (2010) that assembles studies conducted simultaneously by researchers in the United States and Europe. We also found several news, NGO reports (Simonson, 2003), an article by Habermas (2006) on protests within the context of a transnational public opinion, and the documentary *We Are Many* (2014).

In the case of the Egypt uprising, the process was similar, though we found more material and empirical studies. Our search for the terms “Egypt”, “Arab Spring”, and “social media” on Google Scholar led to 99500 results. The search for the same terms in Portuguese led to 1960 results. We found a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* (Wilson & Dunn, 2011; Cottle, 2011; Lotan, 2011), besides field research (Gerbaudo, 2012; Castells, 2013), and the autobiography of the Google executive recognized as an influential figure in the organization of protests in Egypt (Ghonim, 2012).

In addition to newspaper editorials, stories and special issues, we also identified a project at the University of Washington, USA, that published two extensive reports on the events (Howard, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013). After selecting the bibliography, we identified passages in the material related to our three research questions: 1) the main actors of digital activism in both the examined episodes; 2) the transnational characteristics of activism; 3) the uses of digital media.

Some relativizations should be made regarding methodology. This work uses a qualitative method of case study, a research technique that some may consider less reliable or observation intuitive (Duarte, 2006; Ituassu et al., 2019). However, we follow Yin’s (2001) idea that case studies are generally the preferred strategy to explore issues of “how” and “why” kind, when the researcher has little control over the events, and when the focus turns to contemporary phenomena within a real-life context. Our intention here is not to generalize, but to present a perspective, a narrative, an approach on transnational activism based on a literature review about the selected cases. Also, exploring two episodes that happened in different moments enables a longitudinal analysis.

### 2.2 “Not in my name”: protests against the Iraq War

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003, millions of people in hundreds of cities took to the streets holding posters with messages like “Not in my name”, “No blood for oil” and “The world says no to war” in a collective and organized action against the Iraq War. It was reported that some kind of protest happened in 600 cities. The literature uses superlatives like “the largest example of collective action in history” (Walgrave & Rucht, 2010, p. vii), “the largest [demonstrations] since the end of the Second World War” (Habermas & Derrida, 2006, p. 40), and “the largest anti-war demonstrations [in the United States] since those against the war

in Vietnam” (Verhlust, 2010, p. 1).

Efforts for the collective organization of a protest began a few months before the formal declaration of war. After a meeting in Barcelona in 2002, the idea gained strength in the first European Social Forum, which took place in November of that same year in Florence, Italy (Verhlust, 2003).

FIGURE 1: ESTIMATED NUMBER OF DEMONSTRATORS PER CITY ON FEBRUARY 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003.



Source: BBC, 2003<sup>3</sup>

### 2.3 “We are all Khaled Said”: 2011 protests in Egypt

At the end of 2010, protests erupted in diverse Arab countries, leading to the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and Muamar Kadafi in Libya. Demonstrations also reached Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, and Yemen. The series of protests became known as the Arab Spring and has also been referred to as the social media revolution, the Facebook revolution, the Twitter revolution, and even the wiki revolution (Farrell, 2012; Howard, 2011, 2013; Cottle, 2011). Varied demands included the end of corruption, improvements in quality of life, more jobs, political freedom, democracy, and human rights (Beissinger, Jamal, & Mazur, 2015). The Egyptian uprising began a few days after Tunisian president Ben Ali was overthrown. On January 25th, 2011, the date that would become one of the most used hashtags on Twitter, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to protest against the dictator Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for 30 years. After 18 days of protests based in Tahrir square, downtown Cairo, Mubarak resigned from office.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2765215.stm>

### 3. Discussion

Here we present information collected from literature on the theme. Each subsection discusses one of the three research questions: 1) The profile of activists in those two contexts; 2) the role of digital media in both episodes; 3) elements that made these protests transnational.

#### 3.1 From organized coalitions to “solitary” activists

In this subsection, we identify the main actors involved in both episodes, especially those that used digital media and acted in a transnational way. Overall, both cases had the support of civil society organizations. But the Egyptian case counted on activists who used Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube individually to promote the cause and make denunciations.

Coalitions of anti-war social movements had a central role in protests against the Iraq War (Simonson, 2003). Among them were the Win Without War (WWW)<sup>4</sup> coalition and the United for Peace and Justice Coalition<sup>5</sup> in the United States, Stop the War Coalition (STWC)<sup>6</sup> in the United Kingdom, and Act Now to Stop War (ANSWER)<sup>7</sup> of international scope. Established in 2002 by former US congressman Tom Andrews in the face of threats against Iraq, the WWW coalition works to this date against any US interference in the Middle East, Afghanistan or Iraq. In the UK, the STWC was the best-known and played an important part in the organization of protests in England and other European countries (Simonson, 2003).

Walgrave and Rucht's (2010) extensive study applied the same questionnaire in eight countries to compare the actions of demonstrators in the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and the United States. Regarding the profile of the “average” demonstrator in the eight countries studied, the survey shows a high level of education and a very significant participation of women and young people (Walgrave & Rucht, 2010). According to Bennett's (2010) analysis about participants of the February 15th demonstrations, one of the characteristics of these protests would be the “complex political identities”. Since these individuals have multiple interests and participate in networks with different claims, they would make the cause circulate in diverse communities. That scenario is different from a few decades earlier, when protesters were more focused on a specific issue. Also, some authors point out that many of the protesters did not have previous experiences in demonstrations or relations with social movements behind the organization (Tarrow & Mcadam, 2005; Barkham, 2013).

Wall and Zahed (2012) suggest participative media amplified political communication, disseminating individual voices to broader networks. Their study proposes Youtube and other digital media were used as political tools to create a personalized Egyptian dissidence (Wall & Zahed, 2012). A figure who is constantly associated to the articulation of protests through Facebook is Wael Ghonim<sup>8</sup>. Born in 1980 in Cairo, Egypt, Ghonim has a bachelor's degree in computer engineering and completed his master's in finance in an international university. He worked at Google as head of Marketing for the Middle East. Ghonim stated that, from his base in Dubai, he saw photos of the body of Khaled Said, the young man beaten-up by the police, and created the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” by himself

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<sup>4</sup> <http://winwithoutwar.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stopwar.org.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.answercoalition.org/who\\_we\\_are](http://www.answercoalition.org/who_we_are)

<sup>8</sup> On Ghonim's role, see “Arab Spring: Google's Wal Ghonim on the fall of Mubarak”, *The Guardian*, May 18, 2011, <https://goo.gl/3lhtS7>, and “Ativistas da Primavera Árabe são favoritos ao Nobel da Paz”, *Veja.com*, October 6, 2011. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/7lcyUH>.

and anonymously (Ghonim, 2012)<sup>9</sup>.

Another activist frequently mentioned in the media in connection with the Egyptian revolution is Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26-year-old woman who graduated from the University of Cairo and was one of the founders of the April 6th Movement. Created in 2008 to support the strikes of textile industry workers, the movement had an important role in summoning protests against Hosni Mubarak's regime<sup>10</sup>. The activist recorded dozens of videos in which she spoke close to the camera. In one of those videos, posted on Youtube on January 18, 2011, Mahfouz declared she was going to Tahrir Square on the 25th to fight for her rights and asked everyone to do the same. The activist, who was briefly arrested by the Egyptian military, received a nomination for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize (Wall & Zahed, 2012).

Gerbaudo (2012) indicates the majority of demonstrators lived in upper-class neighborhoods, studied in international universities, and were used to traveling to Europe and the United States. In a research about demonstrators in Egypt, Beissinger et al. (2015) described the following profile: they were over 30 years old and had a high level of education. As per their occupation, the same research concluded that more than half the demonstrators, 55%, belonged to the "urban middle-class": liberal professionals, employees or directors of public or private sector institutions. In a survey to identify the occupation of Twitter users during the Egyptian protests, Lotan (2011) mapped the types of actors that participated in the political conversation using #25jan and #egypt. Users that most used these hashtags were bloggers, journalists, activists, and the so-called "bots", automated service accounts. Organizations and existing traditional movements acted online in favor of the risings as well. Peron (2016) cites the example of the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the main opponents of the Mubarak regime. According to the author, the organization's official website, which offered content in Arabic and English, would have played an important part during protests. Howard and Hussain (2013) suggest the early months of demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia were not exclusively supported by traditional political actors, such as unions, parties or religious groups. Protests would have created networks of people, many of them without a previous history of activism, such as young entrepreneurs, government workers, women's groups and the urban middle class.

Finally, part of the literature on the 2003 protests points to the protagonism of social movements organized in face-to-face and online forums. In Egypt, individual activists reached enormous visibility on the internet promoting the cause and information on protests. In both cases, reviewed works point to a similar profile, the predominance of middle-class activists, many without a history of political engagement.

### 3.2 Protests and the internet: from email to social networks

This section gives an overview of the possible roles of digital media in both cases, including their uses to promote the cause, summon and mobilize protests, and produce content. Regarding demonstrations in Egypt, the greater availability of empirical research enables us to show data on Internet penetration in that country, which indicate social networks may have had less reach than estimated.

Concerning the February 15 case, Vehrlust (2003) believes the demonstrations were possible due to two interrelated mechanisms: the face-to-face dynamics of social forums, which were annual at the time, and electronic communication. The author mentions mostly email lists and websites. Hence, email lists of organizations enabled communications between the local meetings of social forums, like Florence in 2002 and Porto Alegre in 2003 (Verhlust, 2010). Though seemingly unimportant today, email lists appear

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<sup>9</sup> Ghonim, W. "Let's design social media that drives real change", TEDGlobal, Geneva, December 2015. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/wael\\_ghonim\\_let\\_s\\_design\\_social\\_media\\_that\\_drives\\_real\\_change?language=pt-br](https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_let_s_design_social_media_that_drives_real_change?language=pt-br).

<sup>10</sup> "Sexo feminino se destaca nas redes sociais", Folha de São Paulo, March 19, 2011. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/3bSfCU>; "Prêmio Nobel reconhece papel das mulheres na revolução", Folha de São Paulo, October 8, 2011. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/F5ELsk>.



to have been at the time the tool that allowed the arrangement of an international day of protests with the same slogans and banners (Tarrow & Mcadam, 2005; Bennett, 2010).

Simonson (2003) highlights the role of the website *MoveOn*<sup>11</sup>. The platform offers links for signing petitions and facilitates donations and the launching of crowdfunding campaigns. At the time of protests, it had more than 750 thousand members in the United States. The website would have become one of the best-known organizations of the anti-war movement. According to the platform's founder Wes Boyd, *MoveOn* was intended to connect those who did not support the war, but were not always comfortable to show their position on the streets. John Rees, one of the main coordinators of the Stop the War Coalition, would have said that most of the February 15th organization was done over email, cellphone text messages, and with graphic material made by professional designers (Simonson, 2003).

In the Egyptian protests, perhaps the most emblematic example of online mobilization was the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Said", created by Google executive Wael Ghonim in 2010 (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Pavlik, 2011). Launched first in Arabic and then in English, the page protested against the death of a young Egyptian man beaten down by the police for disseminating a video which denounced police corruption<sup>12</sup>. The young man's murder and the creation of the Facebook page are regarded not just as triggers for the beginning of protests in the country but also as a milestone for the use of social media in the configuration of that cause. Different authors consider Facebook pages were elements that contributed to the organization and promotion of protests in Arab countries (Castells, 2013; Pavlik, 2011; Ghonim, 2012; Peron, 2016).

Mason (2012) lists the functions of what he called the full suite of information tools that were used by activists. Facebook was used to form groups and establish connections, while Twitter had the main function of disseminating real-time news and information about the logistics of street protests. Youtube and photography websites, like Instagram, Flickr or Twitpic, had the tasks of showing protests underway and denouncing acts of repression. Gerbaudo (2012) indicates the intense use of Twitter as a way of drawing people to the streets, since protests in Egypt had the characteristic of physically occupying public space. Another line of reasoning argues that the repression of regimes naturally leads to the use of social media, which are little controlled spaces of expression. In that perspective, the popularity of such media would have been stimulated by repression in other means of communication (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Cottle, 2011). Another role attributed to digital media concerns independent content production. Castells (2013) believes videos showing police violence toward demonstrators may have contributed to the mobilization against Mubarak.

Internet access and the penetration of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in Egypt in the early 2010's should be considered in the analysis of the role of social media in protests. In 2011, just 25% of Egyptian homes had internet access, 4% of Egyptian adults had a Facebook account, and 0.15% were Twitter members (Dubai School of Government, 2011a). The study also concluded that Twitter communication was almost entirely done by some "elite" users. Therefore, only a minority of users would be really active in content production. The majority of users would be using Twitter as a newsfeed (Dubai School of Government, 2011b). According to Wilson and Dunn (2011), a possible explanation for Twitter's low penetration rate in the country is that, unlike Facebook, it did not have an interface in Arabic at the time.

Diverse studies analyze Twitter despite its limited use compared to Facebook (Howard, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lotan, 2011; Dunn & Wilson, 2011). The likely reason for that is the fact that Twitter is completely public. Given the low rates of internet and social media penetration in the country,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://front.moveon.org/>

<sup>12</sup> "Movement Began with Outrage and a Facebook Page That Gave It an Outlet," Jennifer Preston, The New York Times, February 5, 2011. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/ogx0Q>.

some authors argue the role of social media may not have been central for the uprising (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Beissinger et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there were consequences to the use of these platforms, such as the shift from sheer entertainment to political engagement (Dubai School of Government, 2011a).

Digital media had a prominent role in both episodes of transnational activism, though we must consider the different technological stages of each of the moments studied. At the turn of the twenty-first century, international activism was centered in email lists, websites, and blogs. In the case of protests in Egypt, reports and empirical research reveal chats in social networks and diversified media content aimed at calling attention to the cause, supporting street demonstrations, and spreading the movement to neighboring and distant countries. However, the low rate of internet penetration in the country in 2011 cannot be ignored.

### 3.3 The transnational character of protests

This section focuses on the transnational characteristics of both cases. Concerning protests against the Iraq War, we discuss the international coordination and communications between organizations. Also, we discuss the importance of the internal context for transnational protests and the idea of a transnational public opinion. In the case of protests in Egypt, we present the results of empirical research in social networks that show transnational conversations about events in Egypt.

The idea of creating a transnational event was part of the planning of the February 15<sup>th</sup> protests. International coordination may be the feature that distinguishes these protests from other forms of simultaneous action (Verhulst, 2010). Movements against the Iraq War intensified since the attacks of September 11, 2001, in the form of vigils for peace, internet petitions, anti-war propaganda, lectures, street theatre or other cultural manifestations (Simonson, 2003). Between January 23<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the call for an international protest against the war was boosted in the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil. During the forum, there was a workshop dedicated to the planning of the February 15 protests with the presence of ANSWER, the same network responsible for organizing protests in the US (Verhulst, 2010).

However, a transnational movement does not manifest itself in the same way everywhere it takes place. One of Walgrave and Rucht's (2010) main conclusions is that protests held in the examined countries had their specificities despite similarities related to the action, slogans, posters, and peaceful atmosphere. For example, demonstrations were larger in countries that had governments in favor of the war, such as the United States, England, Italy, and Spain. Some works on that period stress the February 15th protests and the broader movement against the war demonstrate the emergence a world civil society (Pereira, 2003; Tyler, 2003). A few days after the demonstrations, Tyler (2003)<sup>13</sup> referred to the simultaneous act as the expression of a new power. According to the author, since February 15th, 2003, there are "two superpowers on the planet: The United States and world public opinion". During an interview, Habermas (2006) argued the February 15th protests in Europe indicated the birth of a European public opinion. The interviewer, Albrecht von Lucke<sup>14</sup>, asked the following question to Habermas:

When you refer to the demonstrations of February 15 as the birth of a new European public sphere, you speak of London, Rome, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, and Paris. But, weren't the protests, which extended from Jakarta to Washington, something more? Weren't they rather the manifesto of a new global public? (Habermas, 2006, p. 55-56).

<sup>13</sup> Tyler, P. "Threats and Responses: News Analysis: A New Power in the Streets", The New York Times February 17, 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/17/world/threats-and-responses-news-analysis-a-new-power-in-the-streets.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Albrecht von Lucke's interview with Habermas and Derrida was published in *Journal Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* in 2003 and later in Habermas's (2006) *The Divided West*.

Habermas replies:

I suspect the reasons and motives for protests in the West, on the one hand, and the (Islamic) East, on the other, were not the same. Moreover, an intermittent global public – one occasionally centered around specific themes – has repeatedly emerged since the Vietnam War, interestingly mainly in response to wars or massacres. People seem to agree most readily across cultural boundaries in their spontaneous outrage over gross violations of human rights. However, not all horrors draw the same attention, as is shown by Rwanda and the Congo. (Habermas, 2006 p. 55-56)

On the transnational character of the Egyptian case, the selected literature indicates Twitter as the social media associated to international communication (Wilson & Dunn, 2011; Howard et al., 2011; Peron, 2016). Wilson and Dunn (2011) gathered data from Twitter in the period from January 21<sup>st</sup> to February 11<sup>th</sup>, the day of Mubarak's resignation, using #jan25, the hashtag for the day of the largest protest in Cairo. Their work suggests that many of those tweets were posted from outside the country. Considering only tweets in English, the research concluded that just 35% of the accounts were from Egypt. Figure 2 shows the remaining 65% of accounts were mostly from Western countries and a few of them from other Middle Eastern and North African countries (Dunn & Wilson, 2011).

FIGURE 2: GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF MOST ACTIVE USERS ON TWITTER (#25JAN).



Source: Dunn & Wilson (2011, p. 1267). MENA is the acronym used by the World Bank to refer to the Middle East and North Africa regions.

The name Arab Spring comes from the idea that a cascading effect happened during protests in the region. Howard (2011) indicates social networks helped spread demands, or “viral democratic values”, across Arab countries following Ben Ali’s resignation in Tunisia.

Certainly, the media also has a transnational role in disseminating news. Al Jazeera is often mentioned as an important political actor, including as a source for other news organizations such as *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *Huffington Post* and *Reuters* (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Peron, 2016). Al Jazeera’s coverage was considered to be strongly against Mubarak’s government. The television channel was shut down on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, because of supposed partiality (Ramadan, 2012). Analyzing political blogs in Egypt, Howard (2011) concluded that websites mapped had links to international news sources, such as *BBC*, *CNN* and *The New York Times*, but none to regional news sources, such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabya* (Howard, 2011). According to Howard (2011), the credibility of international sources to users outside the region may explain that preference.

Hence, one line in specialized literature argues contemporary transnational activism, largely due to digital media, favors the emergence of transnational public opinion and the internationalization of causes. In the Egyptian case, studies focused only on posts and hashtags in English, which reduces the number of participants. There is evidence of transnational communication through social networks, but numbers are relative to the percentage of the population that used such media.

## Final considerations

The main purpose of this research was to identify the activities of transnational activists through digital communication. The choice of two cases in different periods, the 2003 protests against the Iraq War and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution in the context of the Arab Spring, enabled us to outline the development of digital media in activism.

We began with a literature review on the possibilities of digital media for transnational activism and counterpublics. In the second section, we described the methodology and gave a brief context of both episodes. In the third section, we discussed the collected material relative to the three research questions: the main actors leading the mobilizations; 2) what makes these movements transnational; 3) the uses of digital media.

The protests held on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2003, draw attention for being part of a plan to create a transnational movement. That goal was reached due to exchanges between social movements from different countries through a combination of digital media and physical meetings. The analysis indicates the imminence of a war against Iraq was treated as a global issue that could have repercussions for different countries, whether human rights violations in Iraq or excessive costs for the United States. Hence the transnational mobilization to try to prevent the conflict.

At the time, in the early 2000’s, the internet was operative, but social networks were still on early stages of development. Digital communication through emails, cell phones, websites, blogs, and crowdsourcing webpages was valuable, if not decisive, for the organization of protests. Regarding the actors, the study indicates the protagonism of social movements, especially those anti-war, which emerged following the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, in the United States.

In the case of the mobilization in Egypt, the study shows a strong presence of individuals unrelated to any organization, though social movements and local media were also indispensable actors. One of the identified publics consists of college students or graduated young adults; most of them were middle-class and some acted independently on social networks. The cascading effect of protests in the region is a transnational characteristic associated to events in Egypt that can be deduced but not proved. Also, a significant number of studies done on Twitter, through geolocation and hashtag tracking tools, indicate the existence of a transnational conversation about the political situation in Egypt. Since Twitter at the time

did not have an Arabic interface, a possible conclusion is that this social media was mostly used by people outside the country, while Egyptians used Facebook.

This research examines aspects of transnational activism and offers one of many possible perspectives on the subject. Although new questions emerged and will need to be addressed in future studies, we may present some conclusions: 1) Social media seem to have enabled individual activism. While social movements were central in organizing protests against the Iraq War, individuals unrelated to organizations had a strong influence in the Egyptian case through their use of social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to voice discontent and promote demonstrations. 2) The literature review shows a predominance of middle-class individuals with a high level of education. 3) Also, studies on the role of social media in activism must consider their penetration rates seen as such data indicate not everyone has access to them. 4) It is not possible to measure political effects directly related to social media, but there is evidence of indirect effects, such as individual content production, the diversity of causes, a more decentered coordination and the possibility of doing without physical space. 5) Overall, social media had an important role in forming a public for demonstrations in Egypt and the Arab Spring. However, we must bear in mind the number of people using social media to protest corresponds to a very small portion of the population.

This study has some limitations. We found very few works on activism in Portuguese. Most of the bibliography on the theme is by European and United States researchers, which offers a specific perspective on the examined cases. Here, we reviewed a small sample of the vast and complex literature on activism.

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