The Internet's Role in the Creation of

Political Protests

A Few Theoretical Reflections

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Abstract

The current vagueness within the literature makes it difficult for empirical social science to adequately assess how the Internet affects (the creation of) political protests. The purpose of this study is, to circumvent this problem, to refine, extend and critically evaluate existing theory within the field. Using the framework laid out by Comunello & Anzera (2012) as a starting point, I have in this essay presented and argued for an inclusive definition of the term political protest in order to unite the literature under a common framework; argued for the distinction between the internet's capabilities as a space to articulate and discuss dissent and a tool to organise dissent to be seen as a more nuanced alternative to the techno-realist contra digital evangelist perspective; extended the concept of weak ties to now also take into account the different level of resources and costs associated with an individual deciding to join a particular political protest, going beyond the dichotomy that political protests organised around weak ties either does or does not lead to high-risk activism.

Key words: Authoritarian state, Internet, Political protest, Weak Ties, Space, Tool
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1   Introduction

The Internet is ever-present in modern society. It is the backbone of the financial world, it has facilitated communication, and with that, it has enabled the public to discuss political opinions more easily. In some cases, scholars even argue that the Internet has played a vital part in the creation and survival of political protests; potentially making the Internet a vital component in democratisation processes.[1]

Despite the Internet seemingly playing a part in the creation of political protests in contemporary society, theory around its actual role in these protests remain fragmented. The study of the Internet's effects on political protests is messy: due to the field's relative newness and its interdisciplinary nature, definitions and concepts are far from standardised. Much like when ordering a messy wardrobe, to overcome theoretical vagueness within a research field, one needs to establish a structure, which is the aim of this study.

1.1   Survey of the Field

The study of the internet's effects on political protests in authoritarian states is a field with influences from various disciplines; international relations, democratic theory and media and communications studies, to name a few. Throughout this varied literature, there exists a few dividing lines, most notably the one between the digital evangelists and the techno-realists.[2]

Digital evangelism is the belief that social media and other social network sites (from here on out defined as the Internet) are indispensable tools for protest

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[1] See e.g. Gladwell (2010), Howard & Hussain (2013) and Castells (2015) for further discussion.

[2] The terms are coined by Comunello & Anzera (2012).

groups in their fight against the regime (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, pp. 462-463). For example: Castells (2011, p. 779) argues that people, through the use of the Internet, can challenge the state's monopoly on the creation of meaning. That is, the state's ability to use traditional mass media to shape how citizens perceive the different government institutions. What separates the Internet from these traditional means of communication is the Internet's autonomous nature. On the Internet, Castells argues, an actor can make a decision based on individual preference, independent of state institutions (Castells, 2011, p. 780; 2015, pp. 6-7, 259). Scholars such as Howard & Hussain (2013) share Castells' sentiment, although not going so far as to define the Internet as an autonomous channel of communication.

Technorealism, on the other hand, is a school of thought firmly subscribing to the idea that the Internet is nothing else than a useless gadget in the hands of protesters. Rather, the Internet is a tool the regime can use to protect itself and intensify suppression of its people (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 462). Morozov, a techno-realist, according to Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 462), claims that the Internet cannot be said to facilitate democratisation in every case. (1) It can be used equally as, or even more, effective by the regime to surveil its citizens if necessary; and, (2) since every authoritarian state is structurally and culturally different, the Internet's democratic capabilities must be evaluated depending on national context (Morozov, 2012, pp. 11, 13, 28-31). Other scholars arguing along the same lines are Hinck, Hawthorne & Hawthorne (2018) and Gladwell (2010).

While examining the divide between digital evangelism and technocentrism, Comunello & Anzera (2012, pp. 465-466) reach some critical conclusions. Most notably, the Internet's effects on authoritarian states is not a zero-sum game; the Internet can be an effective tool for both the regime and protesters. In addition, the Internet is in itself not a factor for protest or revolution. Rather, it has the potential to, if used properly, become a highly effective tool for recruitment and organisation of protesters. And most importantly, empirical research does not show any clear support for either the digital evangelist or techno-realist perspective. Instead of focusing on this dichotomy, one should take into account the specific contextual characteristics of the different empirical cases (Comunello & Anzera 2012, p. 466). The empirical evidence referred to by Comunello &

Anzera (2012) does not extend beyond 2012. However, the ambiguity mentioned above is still present in the field (E.g. Little, 2016, contra Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright, 2020).

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

Despite Comunello & Anzera's (2012) attempt to structure the field, a considerable vagueness, perhaps attributed to its interdisciplinarity, still exist within the literature; with scholars often arguing the same points but using different terminology and without referencing each other. Prominent examples are, as will become evident in future sections, how the term political protest is defined and discussions on the internet as a tool for organising dissent and a space where dissent can be collectively discussed (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011).

This kind of theoretical fragmentation hurts the prospect of empirically analysing the Internet's effects on (the creation of) political protests. For empirical social science to be able to contribute to the cumulative process more efficiently, there needs to be a more consistent theoretical framework and conceptual apparatus available. Naturally, much of the discussion will be guided by the empirical question *how does the Internet affect the creation of political protests in authoritarian states?* But the study's research question is formulated as follows:

- *How should the Internet's effects on the creation of political protests in authoritarian states be conceptualised within empirical social science?*

Since it is not plausible to assume that I would be able to conceptualise the whole field, I have chosen to use the theoretical framework presented by Comunello & Anzera (2012) as a starting point for the discussions put forth in this study. This means that all of my extensions, evaluations, elaborations (et cetera) of theory within the field of how the Internet affects the creation of political protests will use Comunello & Anzera (2012) as a point of departure. Also, there has, at the time of writing, been eight years since the publishing of Comunello & Anzera

(2012), and given the fields relative newness and reliance on empiricism, one could argue that some kind of revision is in order.

Given this framework and the research question formulated above, the purpose of this study is to *conceptualise* the Internet's effects on the creation of political protests in authoritarian states within empirical social science by refining, extending and critically evaluating existing theory. This will be done by: (1) Defining the term political protest in order to unite the literature under the same framework; (2) nuancing the distinction between the internet as a tool for organising dissent and a space for discussion of dissent, presenting it as an alternative to the techno-realist vs. digital evangelist perspective; (3) extending the concept of *weak ties*.

1.3   Outline of the Study

The study will from here on out be structured as follows: Firstly (chapter 2), a rundown of the study's methodological considerations will be presented. These include use of method, selection of empirical examples, material, information evaluation and a brief explanation of the Freedom on the Net index. Then (chapter 3), I will, in an effort to substantiate the analysis, define the term authoritarian state, present the study's time and analytical demarcations, as well as describe and discuss the concept of homophily in a political context; which will act as an underlying assumption for the analysis conducted in the subsequent chapter. The following chapter (4) constitutes the analysis. Here, I will argue for an inclusive definition of political protest; present a deconstruction of the Internet around its capabilities as a tool and a space; and extend the concept of weak ties. Terms and theory relevant to the analysis will be explained continuously. I conclude (chapter 5) by summarising the theoretical points made throughout the analysis and comment on the prospects of future research.

2 Methodology

2.1 Method and Selection of Empirical Examples

To be able to answer the study's primary research question, as well as in an effort to ensure the validity of the conclusions reached, I have carried out extensive research of the literature on the Internet's effects on political protests in authoritarian states. I have identified theoretical splits, obscurities, dimensions and concepts that I believe require further nuance, development or a more broadened perspective. I intend to discuss these findings by putting relevant theory up against each other, resulting in evaluations and extensions of the current framework. This approach includes elements of both theory testing and theory development, a conventional methodological overlap; Teorell & Svensson (2017, p. 52) even claiming that purely theory testing or theory developing studies are scarcely conducted.

When conceptualising the term political protest, as well as trying to incorporate different parts of the literature into a more structured theoretical framework, an increased level of abstraction is needed. This increase makes the study potentially susceptible to the issue of conceptual stretching: that the term, concept or variable being explained becomes diluted, or that case-specific conditions are not considered (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 237). Given the purpose of this essay, this risk needs to be account for, and I will consciously try to avoid it while conducting the study.

Throughout this study, I will present additional empirical examples than those discussed in the literature. This is done to determine the generalizability of already existing theory. However, since this essay will sometimes cover aspects of the Internet's role in the creation of political protests from the perspective of the protests, and sometimes from the point of view of the regime, what is considered a

relevant empirical example change. Any empirical example I put forth is based on its ability to determine the generalizability of already existing theory surrounding how the Internet affects the creation of political protests in any particular theoretical discussion. The reason for choosing a particular empirical example over another has been assessed on a case-by-case basis, with the purpose to either extend or challenge existing theory, in order to develop it. Thus, the examples presented are to be seen as manifestations of particular theoretical constructs, and will, therefore, vary depending on which theoretical discussion is being examined and elaborated on at any given point in the essay (Shakir, 2002, p. 193; Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 150-152).

For example, the prominent empirical cases covered by the field are the political protests of the Arab Spring and how China uses the Internet to further its interests (E.g. Morozov, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Chen & Xu, 2017). When elaborating on the concept of weak ties – how a political protest formed online is organised – in section 4.3, what motivates the choice of the Chinese #MeeToo protests in 2018 as an empirical example is the personal risk associated with participating in it in comparison to the Egyptian Revolution 2011. On the other hand, in section 4.2.2, while discussing the inherent ambiguity of the Internet as a space, what makes Kazakhstan a viable empirical example is the fact that the country today has a similar degree of Internet freedom as Tunisia had in 2011, it being structurally and culturally different, from Tunisia, as well as Kazakhstan seemingly trying to mimic the Chinese strategy of gaining public support by establishing pseudo-democratic institutions (MacDonald, 2015).

The is no particular reason for choosing the Chinese #Meetoo protests over any other political protests with similar size or ambition, or the Kazakh state over any other autocracy that meet the same criteria. Regardless of which empirical example I would have chosen to illustrate a certain theoretical point, the rationale behind it remains the same.

2.2   Material and Information Evaluation

Given that the purpose of the study is to refine and critically evaluate existing theory, the material used is mostly comprised of secondary sources such as scientific articles, books and reports either analysing the Internet's effect on political protests in authoritarian states abstractly or in relation to an empirical case. The contemporary literature mainly focuses on the Arab Spring or China, which is why I in a deliberate effort to broaden the theoretical framework indent to draw on other examples. Descriptions of these examples will predominantly be found through Freedom House's Freedom on the Net reports, since they, at the time of writing, represent the most thorough collection of empirical examples of political protests utilising the Internet for any given year between 2009-2019. An in-depth explanation of a significant component of these reports, the Freedom on the Net index, will be given in the next section.

The rationale behind what theoretical material is used in this study is based on a conscious effort to try to emulate the field's interdisciplinary nature: by including scholars that analyse the Internet's role in the creation of political protests from different perspectives (E.g. Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015; Little, 2016). As well as to, given study's time and space constraints, present an as representative view of the field as possible. The latter has been done by including more and less dominant scholars within the field (E.g. Castells 2011, 2015; Morozov, 2011, contra Chen & Xu, 2017; Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic, 2016).

The focus on theoretical material also brings up questions of source criticism. With this in mind, I have consequently evaluated the source material according to the four general principles of source criticism: genuineness, proximity, dependence and inclination (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, pp. 106-107). Since most of the secondary sources have been peer-reviewed according to academic standards, coupled with the fact that the empirical cases analysed occurred – at least in a historical perspective – in the recent past, I do not see either genuineness or proximity as a cause for concern. Regarding dependence and inclination, I have consciously crosschecked the source material with itself and other independent material.

2.2.1 The Freedom on the Net Index

While discussing how the Internet affects the creation of political protests in authoritarian states, I will occasionally state an autocracy's level of Internet freedom at a given point in time. To be able to make such remarks, I will use data provided by Freedom House's Freedom on the Net index, an index that ranks a country's degree of internet freedom on a 0-100 scale, 0 being most free. The Freedom on the Net index assesses a country's level of Internet freedom based on three variables: obstacles to access, limits on content and violations of user rights. (1) *Obstacles to access* refer to the cost of the broadband connection, computers, cell phones and other technologies that are needed for citizens to be able to access the Internet. A regime's deliberately established barriers, such as slowing or shutting down Internet connection during specific events, are also included in the measurement. (2) *Limits on content* describe to what degree a state censor or block certain sites on the Internet by manipulating information, discouraging dissent by the extensive surveillance of online commentators, or by regulatory constraints making it difficult for citizens to publish content. (3) *Violations of user rights* are derived from the severity of a regime's surveillance, persecution and oppression of citizens expressing critical opinions online (Freedom on the Net Methodology, 2020).

3 Definitions, Demarcations, and an Assumption

In this section, I will present things that are needed to substantiate and contextualise the study's analysis. Because of the complexity of the field, an outright operationalisation of the different terms and concepts will, as mentioned earlier, not take place; rather, they will be defined continuously. An exception to this rule is, however, how to define an authoritarian state since it, besides political protest, is the study's most important term. Following this definition, the study's demarcations will be explained in order to put the analysis into a larger context. Then, the study's underlying assumption will be introduced and discussed.

3.1 What is an Authoritarian State?

The purpose of this essay is not to discuss term authoritarian state, solely to use it to be able to make a distinction between a state that is democratic and one that is not. The field is consistent in not defining the term authoritarian state other than through the form of providing empirical examples (E.g. Gladwell, 2010; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Hinck, Hawthorne & Hawthorne, 2018). This inconsistency leads to the field not differentiating between different types of autocracy models, such as the military dictatorship or hybrid regimes. Following the literature, I will in this essay, rather than define the term authoritarian state directly, define an autocracy as being a state that is *not democratic*; making all states that are not democratic equally as authoritarian. MacDonald (2015, p, 12) contends that there is an adequate level of consensus in the field to be able to define *democracy* as a state that features the public selection of the chief executive, and contain a set of rights to ensure a free and fair selection of said executive. I will in this essay use the V-Dem's Regimes of the World index to define to what degree a state has to

protect these subsidiary rights in order for the selection of the chief executive to be characterised as free and fair – classifying states that are defined as anything other than liberal or electoral democracies as being a*utocratic* (V-Dem, 2020, p. 26)*.

3.2 Demarcations

Since this study is dependent on the V-dem regime of the world index to assess which states are to be characterised as authoritarian, the study's time frame is limited to the years where data from the index is available – 2009-2020.

I have in this study deliberately limited the frame of analysis to how the Internet affects the *creation* of political protests. Most of the existing literature, Howard & Hussain (2013) and Castells (2015) being notable exceptions, does not make a clear distinction between the different phases of a protest. By arguing for the Internet's effects on a political protest as a whole, scholars choose generality over nuance, thus risking to overlook the intricacies of the Internet's role in each specific phase of a protest. To not risk the opposite, I have in this study chosen to discuss aspects that focus on the creation of political protests, but that can be used as components to analyse the protest as a whole, as opposed to the other way around.

The reason for focusing on the creation of political protests, as opposed to any other time in their lifespan, is because I find the overarching theoretical framework surrounding the capacity-building, preparation and ignition phases[3] of political protests underdeveloped when compared to theory on the internet's role in coordinating anti-regime actions once a protest is already mobilised. Additionally, this demarcation is needed due to the time and space constraints associated with the writing of a bachelor thesis.

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[3] To use Howard & Hussain's (2013, p. 124) terminology.

Furthermore, as part of the literature points out, individuals taking part in political protests do not use online forms of communication in a vacuum, new and old forms of communication work together. Jenkins (2006, pp. 259-260) defines this dynamic as convergence culture. If one assumes that political protests will use any means possible to frame their views and coordinate their actions, they are expected to use all channels of communication available, as well as be switching between offline and online tactics (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, pp. 4-5; Iskander, 2011, p. 1227; Morozov, 2012, p. 365). The same logic can be applied to the actions taken by a regime to suppress its citizens. Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright (2020, pp. 13-14) states that digital repression has not replaced traditional means of repression such as acts of violence; they have been added to the authoritarian toolbox.

This point is crucial, but I will not elaborate on it any further. Since the essay is only concerned with theory on how the internet affects the creation of political protests in authoritarian states, a discussion around offline tactics and traditional means of communication is, at least as it pertains to the purpose of this essay, not needed to be had. It is enough to simply state that the analysis conducted in this study exists within the framework of convergence culture.

3.3   Homophily in a Political Context

In their reasoning, scholars such as Aouragh & Alexander (2011), Castells (2015) and Van Laer & Van Aelst (2010) all share the underlying presupposition of *homophily*: "the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001, p. 416). In a political context, this translates to an assumption that if the number of individuals who share similar anti-regime preferences increases, then so too will the number of political protests (Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic, 2017, p. 21). With the help of the internet, citizens with equivalent grievance levels against the current regime can spread their opinions online, identify, and sometimes even follow, each other; thus overcoming the fear of standing alone, becoming more

likely to take part in collective action as a result (Hofheinz, 2011; Castells, 2015; Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic, 2017; Chen & Xu, 2017). Scholars outside the field of the Internet's role in political protests have argued that there is a marked tendency for adults to associate themselves with those of their own political orientations (Verbrugge 1977, 1983; Knoke 1990; Huckfeldt & Sprague 1995; Centola, 2013).

However, it is unclear whether this homophily is caused by political similarities or similarities in other social characteristics that also correlate with political preference (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001, p. 429; Little, 2016, pp. 153-154). In other words, there is a risk of confounding. Yet, because the result of the homophily will be the same regardless, one could argue that the relevance of confounding can, in this case, be questioned. The relationships between the opportunities for citizens to, by sharing their grievances online, identify others with similar political preferences and an increased likelihood of collective action against the regime is not dependent on which political or social characteristics cause the connection. This is the case because the aim here is not to prove causality, just to assume that individuals tend to associate themselves with those sharing similar political preferences, regardless of the underlying factors as to why they do it.

The reason for introducing homophily in a political context is because the concept will act as an underlying assumption for the rest of the study, as well as be alluded to in future sections. Thus, an awareness of it is needed for full understanding.

4   Analysis

Picking up where Comunello & Anzera (2012) left off, I will in this section argue for an inclusive definition of political protest to overcome the fragmentation within the literature, present a deconstruction of the internet around its capabilities as a tool and a space. I argue that this distinction is to be seen as more viable than the technorealism contra digital-evangelist perspective. Lastly, I will extend the concept of weak ties by nuancing the varying levels of risk associated with different types of political action. The reason for structuring the analysis in this particular way is because the different sections build on each other.

4.1   Contemporary Political Protests – a Framework

The literature is indecisive when it comes to defining the term political protest, with scholars using "rebellion", "revolution", "protest", "anti-regime action", "protest movement", "dissent movement" and "social movement" to describe the phenomena (E.g. Shirky, 2011; Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Castells, 2015). In this section, I will discuss these different descriptions, and then argue that they, at least as it pertains to how the Internet affects the creation of political protests, can fall under the same definition.

The Internet has, by lowering the amount of time, effort and money required, as well as by making it easier to gather a large number of people from around the world into new, digital communities, changed the inherent nature of protests. The Internet is not just allowing a recreation of earlier protests, but changing their makeup entirely (Schiffrin, 2017, p. 119). This train of thought is elaborated on by Gladwell (2010). He makes a distinction between traditional protests and protests channelled through social media. Gladwell compares the Iranian protests in 2010 to the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1960s, claiming that the activism associated with the civil rights movement

was centred on strong ties, which means that an individual is more likely to participate in a protest if it has personal ties to it. This is in contrast to the activism built around social media and the Internet, which is characterised by *weak ties*: an individual's involvement in a protest is not dependent on personal connection. On Twitter and other social media sites, individuals follow and are followed, mostly by acquaintances and people they have never met, making the Internet a tool for building networks. These networks, in turn, allow individuals to share ideas and communicate with "marvellous efficiency" (Gladwell, 2010). Because of their weak-tie structure, social media protest movements do not, as opposed to strong-tie movements, have a clear hierarchy (Gladwell, 2010).

The idea of contemporary social movements being organised horizontally, with their basis created online, without a de facto leader, is furthered developed by Van Laer & Van Aelst (2010), Castells (2011, 2015) and Howard & Hussain (2013). Van Laer & Van Aelst (2010, p. 2), following Diani (1992, p. 13), define a social movement as: "networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity". The emphasising of a social movement's informal structure and the plurality of those participating in it are apparent similarities with Gladwell's (2010) thoughts on the matter.

Castells (2015, pp. 249-255) defines a social movement as a peaceful, leaderless, horizontally organised constellation of different networks, whose keynote is created on the Internet, but manifested once the movement expresses itself in the urban space. The urban space is the physical space where a social movement operates, predominantly by occupying symbolic or cultural buildings or squares (Castells, 2015, p. 250). Howard & Hussain (2013, p. 66) implicitly share this characterisation, although not adhering to Castells' overarching theoretical framework. Castells' (2015) definition is more specific than those of Gladwell (2010) and Diani (1992), but the weak-tie structure remains, with the leaderless, horizontal structure and diversity of those involved being underlined.

Castells (2015, pp. 258-259) does, however, explicitly state that the goal of social movement is to achieve societal change. This characterisation differs from Gladwell's (2010), Van Laer & Van Aelst's (2010) and Howard & Hussain's (2013) description of the term, which gives no other criteria than the social movement being organised around weak, as opposed to strong, ties. Castells

(2015, pp. 13-15, 250-253) – as well as Howard & Hussain (2013, p. 11) – argues that a social movement brewing online is only manifested in the urban space after a certain event, that once and for all shows the ineptitude or corruption of the regime, is propagated online; making the will-be participants of the social movement angry and more likely to take risks. For example, the Egyptian police's murder of Khaled Said in June 2010, after he distributed films exposing corruption within the Egyptian police department, lead to the creation of a Facebook group that rapidly gained over 70 000 members (Howard & Hussain, 2013, p. 21).

By expressing their critical opinion online, people can identify others with the same preference, overcoming the fear of being alone in a cause, which in turn makes them less scared of taking part in collective action (Hofheinz, 2011, p. 1421; Castells, 2015, pp. 246-247; Chen & Xu, 2017, p. 793). This rationale entails that an expression of dissent online precedes the creation of a political protest, even when its goal is to achieve societal change, making it possible to argue that the underlying purpose of every political protest, big or small and independent of its actual ambition, is to express dissent. Furthermore, if the field were to limit its cases of analysis to only being contemporary revolutions – of which there are relatively few – theory developed by empirical social science on the Internet's role in the creation of political protests would not be able to be as widely applicable as with a broadened definition.

Further complications arise as part of the literature use a variation of the term political protest without theoretically defining it (E.g. Chen & Xu, 2017; Shirky, 2011; Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic, 2017). However, since these scholars discuss the same empirical examples – the Arab Spring – as Gladwell (2010), Catsells (2015) et cetera, it is plausible to assume that a protest, as (not) defined by Chen & Xu (2017), Shirky (2011) and Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic (2017), could be, but does not necessarily have to be, a social movement. Following this reasoning, studies that only define the term political protest by giving empirical example are, as long as they originate on the Internet, eligible to be used under the theoretical framework for social movements. This being the case, I argue that all political protests, as long as they originate on the Internet, are to be characterised as built around weak ties.

We have thus arrived at a conclusion: every form of protest discussed in the relevant literature forms to express some level of dissent and, within the framework of weak ties, every form of protest will initially express dissent in the same way – through the Internet. With this in mind, I argue for a definition of the term *political protest* as any form of dissent expressed by the citizenry against the regime. The citizens expressing this dissent are, following Gladwell (2010), organised around weak, as opposed to strong, ties, but are not necessarily to be characterised as social movements. This definition makes it possible to analyse material where some variation of political protest is abstractly defined as anti-regime action, independent of structure (E.g. Little, 2016; Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright, 2020).

Following the rationale outlined above, I will in this study use *political protest*, *protest,* *anti-regime* *action,* *revolution* and *protest movement*/ *movement* interchangeably.

4.2   Tool vs. Space – a More Nuanced Perspective

The literature provides no clear evidence for either the digital evangelist or techno-realist perspective; making an analysis how the Internet affects the creation of political protests in authoritarian states through this dichotomy futile (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 466). The Internet is in itself not a factor for change. It is merely a channel of communication through which citizens with anti-regime preferences, as well as the regime, can, more or less efficiently depending who you ask, further their interests (E.g. Van Lear & Van Aelst, 2010; Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015). In this section, I will present a deconstruction of the Internet that considers this more nuanced way of analysis.

Aouragh & Alexander (2011) argue for a distinction between the Internet as a tool for organising dissent and a space where dissent can be articulated and discussed. *Space* is referred to as the Internet offering a dynamic ability to shape opinion, as well as contribute to the "tipping point" where dissent expressed online is manifested through the creation of a political protest. *Tool* is defined as

how individuals actually use the Internet in any given political protest (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011, pp. 1348-1349). This perspective is not dependent on the Internet itself being a factor for change, since there needs to be some external factors that generate dissent to be articulated or discussed, as well as an external purpose is a requirement for the organising of said dissent.

The deconstruction of the Internet around its capabilities as a virtual platform and a tool to coordinate mobilisation, is present throughout the literature but articulated in different fashions. Little (2016, p. 153) differentiates between how the Internet allows citizens to solve two problems: the political coordination problem and the tactical coordination problem. *The political coordination problem* refers to the fact that individuals must decide whether or not to take anti-regime action without knowing how many others dislike the regime enough to join. To solve the political coordination problem citizens use the Internet to identify others with similar political preferences. This can, due to homophily, result in either an increased or decreased likelihood for the individual to take part in collective action depending on how widely shared the particular political grievances are. The political coordination problem shares apparent similarities with Aouragh & Alexander's (2011, p. 1438) space-dimension, with the Internet's dynamic ability to shape opinion as the main component in both theoretical models.

The tactical coordination problem is described by Little (2016, p. 153) as citizens, conditional on participating, deciding when, where and how to protest against the regime, not knowing which tactic their fellow protesters will choose. The Internet's role in solving this problem is more straightforward, as better information and communication technology almost always has a positive causal effect of mobilisation through improving tactical coordination (Little, 2016, p. 153). The Internet being used by citizens, as a tool, to coordinate anti-regime action, is comparable to the distinction made by Aouragh & Alexander (2011).

Shikry (2011) argues for a similar kind of distinction, even if not expressed directly. He claims that the US government should change its strategy to promote democracy abroad from "tools designed to reopen access to the Internet in countries that restrict it" – an instrumental approach – to an environmental view (Shirky, 2011, p. 31). This alternate perspective thinks about social media as "a long-term tool that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere" (Shirky,

2011, p. 32). Although using the word tool to describe both viewpoints, Shirky (2011) draws a clear line between the Internet's role as a virtual platform with the capability to change public political behaviour over time, and its use as a tool to coordinate particular actions.

Since the Internet's coordinating capabilities, for the most part, come into play after a political protest is formed, most of the discussion in this essay will be focused on the Internet's role as a space. The distinction is, however, still important to thoroughly explain, as it could be argued that it illustrates two aspects that are relevant when comparing the tool-space dynamic to the divide between technorealism and digital evangelism. (1) Depending on if the Internet is seen as a space or a tool, the time frame for it to have a political impact change. (2) By distinguishing between the Internet's capabilities as a virtual platform and a tool for coordination, the ambiguous relationship between the Internet as a space and the creation of political protests is highlighted.

4.2.1 The Internet as a Long-Term Project or a Short-Term Tool

Shirky (2011) claims that the Internet, as already mentioned, is to be seen as a long-term project. He believes the connection between communicative freedom and political freedom to be a fundamental truth, claiming that the development of a strong public sphere precedes political change. Even though a populous can, in some instances, use the Internet to support and overthrowing of a regime (Shirky, 2011, p. 32). Hofheinz (2011) ads to the discussion by arguing for scholars to take the social and cultural dimension of the Internet into account, rather than solely focusing on its political aspects. The Internet reshapes relations between groups and individuals in the sense that authority is no longer unquestionably followed (Hofheinz, 2011, pp. 1423-1424). Individuals use the Internet to find answers themselves, coming to their own conclusions (Hofheinz, 2011, pp. 1425-1426; Shirky, 2011, p. 36; Castells, 2015, pp. 6-7).

Scholars outside the field of the Internet's role in political protests argue for the Internet's identity-making compatibilities. Groups of people critically and reflectively discussing issues online result in the creation of new, collective

identities (Nip, 2004; Austria, 2007; Soriano, 2013). Cover (2015, p. 149) even contends that digitally constructed identities compete with more traditional forms of community such as national identities. Putting into question, but not eradicating, the appeal of nationality as a way for the individual to construct its contemporary selfhood.

It takes time for these identities to be created, however. For example, starting from the 1990s, Tunisians political bloggers and digital activists continuously challenged the state's control of the public sphere by offering an alternative to the official political narrative (Breuer & Groshek, 2014, p. 31). One of the essential functions of these digital activists was helping to construct a collective identity supportive of resistance to an increasingly unpopular regime (Murphy, 2009, pp. 1138-1140), culminating in the Tunisian Revolution 2010-2011. This process can be contrasted to the Internet's role during the ignition phase of the Tunisian Revolution. In this phase it became an effective communication channel for citizens to bypass the regime's censorship efforts, spreading videos and information that the state-controlled media was trying to conceal (Howard & Hussain, 2013, p. 122; Breuer & Groshek, 2014, pp. 32-33; Castells, 2015, pp. 22-23, 28).

To use Aouragh & Alexander's (2011) terminology, the Internet's dynamic ability to offer a space where public opinion can be changed, contributed, over the course of many years, to Tunisia's reach of the tipping point in December 2010. Then, just before, but mainly after, the formation of street demonstrations all over Tunisia, the Internet provided protest participants with a tool to diffuse information and coordinate their actions in a matter of seconds, minutes or days. This leads us to a conclusion: by distinguishing between the Internet as a space where dissent can be articulated and discussed and a tool to organise dissent, the different time frames for it to have a political impact are highlighted. The space dimension is seen as a long-term enterprise, while the impact of the tool dimension is more immediate.

By keeping this time frame discrepancy in mind, it can be argued that assessments on how the Internet affects the creation of any particular political protest become fairer. Depending on if the Internet's role is as a space or a tool, its use, and thus its political impact, will differ. Furthermore, I argue that the tool-space dynamic, by being able to assess how the Internet is actually used in any

given case have better prerequisites to be able to consider contextual factors, at least when compared the techno-realist contra digital evangelist perspective.

4.2.2 The Inherent Ambiguity of The Internet as a Space

One of Comunello & Anzera's (2012, p. 465) main conclusions was that the Internet could be used effectively by both the regime and protesters. This is partly because the concept of homophily can work both ways. As first mentioned in section 3.3, individuals can, through the sharing their political opinion online, identify others with the same preference, overcoming the fear of standing alone, becoming more likely to take part in collective action as a result. (Bacaksizlar & Hadzikadic, 2017; Castells, 2015; Hofheinz, 2011).

What allow citizens to identify others with similar preferences are the horizontal flows associated with communication through the Internet. These flows make it possible for individuals to challenge the state's monopoly on public speech, empowering each individual user more than ever before (Castells, 2011, pp. 777-779; Hofheinz, 2011, p. 1426). Horizontal flows are also what enable networks and political protests organised around weak ties to communicate and spread ideas and information with enormous efficiency (Gladwell, 2010). As mentioned in the last section, political activists in Tunisia used the Internet's capabilities as a platform for discussion to create an alternative political identity to the one being offered by the regime (Murphy, 2009, pp. 1138-1140). This phenomenon has also been observed in Kazakhstan, a country structurally and culturally different from Tunisia, but with similar levels of Internet freedom at the time of observation. Both countries were characterised as "not free" by Freedom on the Net, with Tunisia scoring 81/100 in 2011 and Kazakhstan 62/100 in 2018 (Freedom on the Net, 2011, p. 16; Freedom on the Net, 2018, p. 25). Kazakh students sharing anti-regime grievance online created, at least among students, an alternative political narrative to the one offered by the state, with individuals becoming more distrusting of political institutions as a result (Bekmagambetov et al., 2018).

However, as articulated by Little (2016, p. 153) in his definition of the political coordination problem: if individuals, through the sharing of political opinions online, discover that their preference is not as widely shared as previously thought, they will become less likely to take part in collective action. The ambiguous relationship between the Internet as a space and the creation of political protests thus provide an explanation as to why a regime may sometimes opt to make public communication through the Internet available to a certain degree (Morozov, 2011; MacDonald, 2015; Little, 2016; Chen & Xu, 2017).

In the 21st century (2001-2017), political protests are tied with elections as the most common method through which autocracies collapse (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright, 2020, p. 9), more than ever reinforcing the idea that if the elites lose the consent of the governed, their days in power numbered. Thus, an authoritarian state cannot survive on violence and repression alone. Rather, a regime needs to find a way to please citizens under its rule adequately – it must to some degree be responsive to its citizens' political preferences (He, 2006; MacDonald, 2015, Chen & Xu, 2017).

Chen & Xu (2017, pp. 793-794) argues that citizens are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the political status quo. The citizens' preferences might be correlated, but to what degree is unknown to each individual. At the same time, the regime is not fully informed of the preferences of its citizens, but get some signals from the overall level of dissatisfaction against the status quo policy. By allowing public communication through the Internet, the regime enables the horizontal flows alluded to earlier. These can, as already mentioned, either encourage or discourage a citizen from taking part in collective action. However, public communication through the Internet also generates vertical flows from the citizens to the regime.

These vertical flows make it possible for the (Chinese) government to respond to public opinion and reduce the risk of collective action by meeting the policy wishes of citizens (Bei, Stromberg & Wu, 2017, p. 137; Chen & Xu, 2017, p. 793). China has in the past decades established various pseudo-democratic institutions designed to, with the help of vertical flows, provide feedback and information from the citizens (Hinck, Hawthorne & Hawthorne, 2018, p. 9; He, 2006, p. 136); reducing the citizenry to a passive instrument in the service of state policy. The Chinese regime's usage of vertical and horizontal flows is worth

mentioning because other autocracies self-consciously model themselves after China (MacDonald, 2015, p. 7; Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright, 2020, p. 3).

Given the rationale outlined above, it could be argued that one autocracy seemingly trying to mimic the Chinese approach is, once again, Kazakhstan. In 2015, the country launched its e-government platform Open Government. Through different portals, of which Open Legislation, Open Dialogue and Open Budgets are three examples, the site features concrete ways for citizens to access draft legislation, directly submit appeals and proposals to local and state authorities, as well as provide feedback on or monitor how public institutions spend funds, respectively (egov.kz, 2020). Through Open Government, the Kazakh regime can harness information and feedback given to it by its citizens in a similar fashion to the Chinese state.

What, then, makes an authoritarian state open up public communication through the Internet? Chen & Xu (2017, 793-794) argues that it depends on if the regime believes that it will experience a net gain from the endeavour. This is based on three factors:

- The positive (for the regime) policy-adjustment effect that comes with vertical flows.
- The positive discouragement effect that comes with horizontal flows.
- The negative encouragement effect that comes with vertical flows.

By being able to enact policies based on vertical flows, a regime can pre-empt collective action caused by horizontal flows (Chen & Xu, 2017, 793-794).

However, it is not plausible to assume that a regime, even after the benefits of vertical flows, is able to fully assess the political preferences of its citizens, resulting in the, rather obvious, notion that state enacted policies does not necessarily need be favoured over the status quo. This, coupled with the fact that we are dealing with autocracies, in turn, lead to there still being citizens using the Internet's horizontal flows to articulate and discuss dissent.

Moreover, since the only tangible way to assess the regime's net gain is by the amount of political protests suffered, the space dimension's long-term time frame is not taken into account. A lack of political protests does not necessarily mean that the Internet is not serving its purpose as a space where dissent is articulated and discussed. The Internet can serve the purposes of the regime in the

long term by enhancing its standing with the people to some degree, but this does not mean that the internet cannot at the same time serve the citizens by allowing them to build collective identities over a long period of time, contributing to the tipping point, as seen in Tunisia in between the 1990s-2010. Both options are, as shown by the example of Kazakhstan, in theory, equally as viable.[4]

By deconstructing the Internet around how it helps citizens solve the political coordination problem and the tactical coordination problem, by distinguishing between the Internet's role as a space and a tool, the ambiguous relationship between its capabilities as a virtual platform and the creation of political protests is highlighted. This ambiguity reinforces the idea that the Internet's role in the creation of political protests is not, in accordance with Comunello & Anzera (2012, p. 465), to be seen as a zero-sum game.

To summarise the discussion on tool vs space: the distinction between the Internet as a tool for organising dissent and a space where dissent can be articulated and discussed (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011, pp. 1348-1349) offers a more nuanced point of view in comparison to the techno-realist-digital evangelist perspective – which argues for the Internet as an instrument favouring either protesters or the regime. As shown throughout the entirety of section 4.2, the demarcation between tool and space is not dependent on the Internet in itself being a factor for change; it takes the Internet's time frame discrepancy into account; and it augments the view that the Internet's role in the creation of political protests is not a zero-sum game.

Keeping all this in mind, I would like to present the tool-space division as an alternative to the techno-realist contra digital evangelist distinction for scholars seeking to examine how the Internet affects (the creation) of a political protests in authoritarian states.

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[4] The outbreak of political protests in Kazakhstan in February 2019, after a fire in Nur-Sultan killed five children (Reuters, 2019), does not make this theoretical point less feasible, as the rationale behind it remains the same.

4.3 The Concept of Weak Ties – an Extension

While discussing contemporary political protests in section 4.1, the main theoretical framework surrounding the concept of weak ties was provided by Gladwell (2010). His article was one of the first analysing the role of social media in political protests that got widespread attention. Many scholars examining the Internet's role in the Arab Spring have cited Gladwell's article, either agreeing with or refuting his argument (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 460). I will in this section argue that a simple agreement or refusal of the claim Gladwell (2010) presented in his article, that political protests organised around weak ties seldom leads to high-risk activism, fails to consider the different levels of personal risk associated with an individual taking part in particular weak-tie actions.

Gladwell (2010) argues that activism centred on the Internet is, as already explained, inherently different from traditional forms of activism in the sense that an individual's participation in contemporary political protests is based on the sharing of similar preferences, rather than personal ties. The reliance on this form of weak tie structure allows a political protest to very efficiently spread ideas and information, but very rarely does this type of protest movement engage in activism that involves personal and/ or financial risk – high-risk activism.

Furthermore, the informality and lack of an established hierarchy characterising political protests built around weak ties makes it difficult for them to reach a consensus and set goals (Gladwell, 2010). This point is elaborated on by Castells (2015). He contends that a social movement finds it challenging to express itself politically because it is comprised of individuals with widely different preferences, who are only connected because of the protest's overarching purpose; resulting in that political actors emerging from within a political protest usually do not represent the interests of the movement as a whole (Castells, 2015, pp. 254-255). Two notable examples are the different political parties formed after

the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in 2011-2012 (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, pp. 456-457), as opposed to there being a unison political front.

Additionally, contemporary political protests have changed from being organisations that promote strategy and disciplined action, to being built around adaptability and resilience (Gladwell, 2010). In other words: "It [the weak tie structure] makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact" (Gladwell, 2010).

There has been critique levied against Gladwell's (2010) claim that weak tie protests are ineffective in achieving significant political change. Shirky (2011, p. 38) argues that Gladwell's rationale is correct, but that it is not relevant to the question of the Internet's power – what stops committed actors from using social media efficiently just because non-committed actors does not? This does not mean, Shirky argues, that every political protest will succeed, however, since the regime still has the capability to react.

Furthermore, Gladwell's (2010) assertion that political protests organised around weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism has, hindsight being 20/20, been proven wrong. Empirical evidence since 2010 has shown weak tie protest's ability to engage in activism associated with substantial personal risk; the Arab spring, the Hong Kong protests in 2019-2020 and the protest occurring in conjunction with the election in Cambodia 2013 being three of the countless examples (Castells, 2015; SCMP, 2019; Frantz, Kendall-Taylor & Wright, 2020, p.11).

Even with this critique in mind, theory surrounding the concept of weak ties still fails to account for the different levels of personal risk associated with different tactics used by political protest participants. It is not plausible to assume the same level of risk exposure for a Chinese citizens using emojis online, protesting against the lack of anti-sexual harassment legislation, to circumvent the government's censoring of content related to #MeToo (The Conversation, 2018), in comparison to Egyptian citizens using the Internet to schedule large scale street demonstration against the regime, with the purpose of overthrowing it (Castells, 2015). Depending on to what degree a regime's hegemony is threatened, it will act accordingly to protect it (Morozov, 2011, pp. 29-31); the Chinese #MeeToo protests leading to little to no arrests and the Egyptian revolution featuring a much

more violent crackdown from the regime (Freedom House, Countries, China, 2019; Castells, 2015).

Van Laer & Van Aelst (2010) applies the thought of a hierarchy for (offline) political activism, distinguishing between different kinds of political action based on low to high thresholds (Marsh, 1977), on online forms of protest participation. They argue that an individual before deciding whether to join a protest or not, evaluates the practical participation cost inherent to a particular political action. The costs involved are the resources needed to engage in any given form of collective activity (E.g. time, money and skills), as well as the potential costs of participation; such as the cost of getting arrested by the authorities (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 6).

The typology put forth by Van Lear & Van Aelst (2010, p. 7) is based on political action in democracies, with "legal demonstrations" – which are organised online – being characterised as a protest tactic with a low threshold. Nonetheless, I would argue that the logic behind their rationale can be applied to authoritarian states as well. As illustrated by the empirical examples above, there is a difference in personal risk depending on the particular tactic protest participants use in autocracies as well. Within the framework of weak ties, what is to be defined as low threshold and high threshold political activity, as well as everything in between, needs to be determined in relation to any given authoritarian state's political landscape. For example, it is possible to assume that an autocracy's level of censorship legislation, by defining what is illegal, could potentially play a part in characterising where a tactic places on the low to high threshold-scale.

Thus, I argue that the logic behind Van Laer & Van Aelst's (2010) model serves as a natural extension of Gladwell's (2010) and Shirky's (2011) thoughts on weak ties, nuancing the concept by highlighting that political protests organised around weak ties does not only either exercise high-risk activism or not. Rather, weak tie political protests in autocracies can be more or less likely to lead to high-risk activism, depending on how the citizens assess the potential resources and costs associated with a particular tactic. The question as to why individuals in some instances choose to participate in political protests using tactics associated with high personal risk is, however, not in the scope of analysis for this essay.

5   Conclusions and Future Research

Given the framework provided by Comunello & Anzera (2012), I have in this study sought to refine, extend and critically evaluate existing theory on the Internet's effects on the creation of political protests in authoritarian states within empirical social science, in an attempt to overcome the current vagueness within the literature. The study's specific contributions toward this end have been to (1) argue for an inclusive definition of the term political protest. (2) Present the tool-space distinction as a, at least when compared to the techno-realist contra digital evangelist perspective, more viable alternative for scholars trying to examine the Internet's role in the creation of political protests. (3) Extend the concept of weak ties to now also take into account the different level of resources and costs associated with an individual deciding to join a particular political protest; going beyond the dichotomy that political protests organised around weak ties either does or does not lead to high-risk activism.

I have in this study defined political protest as any form of dissent expressed by the citizenry against the regime. The citizens expressing this dissent are organised around weak, as opposed to strong, ties, but are not necessarily to be characterised as social movements. By using such a broad definition, the fragmentation within the literature regarding how political protest is defined can be circumvented, enabling scholars to more efficiently empirically examine how the Internet affects the creation of political protests.

Additionally, the study has presented the demarcation between the Internet's capabilities as a tool and space as a concrete alternative to the techno-realist contra digital evangelist perspective for scholars to use when assessing how the Internet affects the creation of political protests. I argue that the tool vs space distinction is not dependent on the Internet in itself being a factor for change; that it takes the Internet's time frame discrepancy for political impact into account; and that it augments the view that the Internet's role in the creation of political protests is not a zero-sum game.

Lastly, by applying the logic behind Van Laer & Van Aelst's (2010) hierarchy of online political participation in democracies to authoritarian states, the field can move beyond the dichotomy that political protests organised around weak ties either does or does not lead to high-risk activism. Rather, weak tie political protests in autocracies can be more or less likely to lead to high-risk activism, depending on how the citizens assess the potential resources and costs associated with any given political action.

As stated in section 3.2, I have in this study chosen to discuss aspects that focus on the creation of political protests, but that can be used as components to analyse a protest in its entirety. I encourage scholars to take advantage of my contributions to the field when conducting future empirical and theoretical research, substantiating them or using them to further other aspects. On a more specific note, I think it would be interesting too, as mentioned in section 4.3, further examine why individuals in some instances choose to participate in political protests using tactics associated with high personal risk, while sometimes abstaining. Also, a concretisation, following Van Lear & Van Aelst (2010), of a hierarchy for online political actions in autocracies would be a welcomed contribution.

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