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## Civil society, political activism and communications in democratisation conflicts

A literature review

January 2016

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## 1. Executive Summary

Against the background of MeCoDEM Work Package 5, “Civil society, political activism and communications in democratisation conflicts”, this working paper examines the role of civil society organisations in democratisation. The paper particularly focuses on: how the media covers civil society activities; how civil society organisations communicate; and the potential of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for delivering democratic change. Based on the literature review, the following observations emerged:

- It is not always clear that civil society and the state are playing separate roles or occupying separate terrains — depending on the state form, civil society can be *inter alia* embedded in state structures, working openly with the state, have a limited role in demanding services from the state, in active open opposition to the state, or working underground and hidden from view.
- Civil society cannot always be regarded as a democratising force — while it can play such a role, depending on context, it can be violent, and in some instances even opposed to broad-based equal rights for all. In addition, civil society groups might be focussed on minimalist demands — not broad or deep societal change.
- While some of the literature delineates between social and political activism — where political activism is directed at the state and social activism focuses on a range of causes, such as environmentalism, gender and LGBTIQ rights, and services such as housing — in the countries explored under this study, activism could not be neatly divided into one type or the other.
- Although there may be variations from one context to the next, the reality of conventional ‘news values’ informing news production in the legacy media mean that democratisation conflicts (or any other conflict for that matter), are likely to be framed as ‘events’, with emphasis on the spectacle, and ‘official’ sources such as spokespersons are likely to be given prominence even when their lived experiences are not integral to the conflict. Therefore, the underlying causes and complexities of civil society contestation are unlikely to be explored in the mainstream media.
- Though a range of factors limit activist access to the media, the media is not an unbudging monolith — at times it is receptive to calls for change, especially if an organisation achieves broad support through both media and non-media activities. Activists can also deploy their own “media”, which can involve a range of cultural activities and products, including newsletters, banners and pamphlets, films and photographs, clothing such as t-shirts, dramatic productions, etc..
- While ICTs and social media have risen as prominent terrains where civil society contestation can play out, these ICTs do not work in isolation, but in relation to other

forms of communication — including mainstream media and interpersonal communication — so the impact of ICTs on contestation and democracy depends on the media, social, economic and political context in which they are deployed.

## 2. Introduction

Studying civil society and activism from a multinational perspective is somewhat tricky, given that models of civil society are not usually a perfect fit with whatever is happening at national and local levels, and in some cases, these models are barely applicable at all. To begin with, the *a priori* assumption that every country has a civil society may or may not be true, depending how one defines such a civil society, and indeed, depending on how one defines ‘democracy’ (Bodewes, 2010; Lind and Howell, 2010), and these patterns may also shift and change over time as local political terrains change (Bjork and Goebertus, 2011). For example, in some authoritarian situations, while there may be civilians, there may be no organised political structures that challenge oppression or provide different voices where there are conflicts of interest. While “civil society is often regarded as a powerful antidote to the dangers of the all-powerful and tyrannical state” (Behr and Siitonen, 2013, p.6), the extent to which civil society organisations (CSOs) are embedded in or approved by the state may alter the extent to which civil society operates separately from or in opposition to the state (Altan-Olcay and Icduygu, 2012).

To then go on to look at how this assumed civil society is communicating, both through the mainstream media and through its own communication efforts, becomes a complex endeavour. Models do not explain all the country-level communications patterns, and the existing country-level theorisation may be so unique that it is difficult to extract common threads and patterns. However, since communications are increasingly globalised, the different country contexts do feed into a global understanding of how communication connects civil society and political activists with citizens and with political authorities in new ways, presenting new opportunities and challenges.

In many countries, the ways that political protest is organised and communicated has changed rapidly in recent years, not least of which is the hashtag activism of Twitter, connecting activists to each other and to other citizens, not just locally but also internationally. But again, not every country-level hashtag has had its moment of fame at international level, and not every citizen in every county even has access to the technology and communications networks to make their impact felt in either national or multinational campaigns.

This paper sets out to explore the nature and organisation of civil society in four countries —Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa— and the ways in which civil society is communicating through the mainstream media and through other communications channels. The paper does not attempt to go into detailed case studies, but instead aims to provide an overview of the extant literature, highlighting key issues for further exploration. The paper

explores the terrain through five different sub-sections, as follows: Section 3 explores definitional issues and models of civil society and the applicability of these to the four countries studied; Section 4 explores what constitutes social and political activism and if there is any difference between the two; Section 5 looks at mainstream media coverage of democratisation conflicts and models for understanding media coverage; Section 6 explores how activists use media to communicate, mobilise support and draw attention to their issues, examining different mediums used by activists in different country contexts; and Section 7 finally, focuses on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in activism and protest.

### **3. Civil society**

Civil society, seen as a dense network of civil associations, is said to promote the stability and effectiveness of the democratic polity through both the effects of association on citizens' 'habits of the heart' and the ability of associations to mobilise citizens on behalf of public causes:

Emergent civil societies in Latin America and Eastern Europe are credited with effective resistance to authoritarian regimes, democratizing society from below while pressuring authoritarians for change. Thus civil society, understood as the realm of private voluntary association, from neighbourhood committees and religious groups to interest groups and philanthropic enterprises of all sorts, has come to be seen as an essential ingredient in both democratization and the health of established democracies. (Foley and Edwards, 1996)

Civil society is seen to be created through key organising principles, such as “the idea of rights, horizontal communication, and self-mobilization, and autonomous association, and free horizontal communication whereby all social groups are enabled to have their voice publicly heard and to exert some public influence” (Spasić, 2003, p.445).

There are of course definitional and conceptual concerns. Definitional issues revolve around the scope of civil society — does it include organisations and associations which are not always voluntary, such as churches or religious sects, and does it include political parties and trade unions, or should the term be confined to voluntary activist movements? The main conceptual issue is the supposed link between civil society and democracy, whether civil society is viewed as “the cornerstone of democracy” (e.g. Castells, 2008, p.78), with civil society seen as providing “the impetus for establishing elections, as well as the leadership and resources for political parties contesting these elections” (Holm et al., 1996, p.43).

### 3.1 Definitional issues

Foley and Edwards (1996, p. 39) identify two ways of viewing civil society in relation to democracy: The first approach puts special emphasis on “the ability of associational life in general and the habits of association in particular to foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity”. Drawing on recent literature on processes of ‘re-democratisation’ in Latin America, the second approach places a special emphasis on civil society as a sphere of action that is independent of the state and that is capable — precisely for this reason — of energising resistance to a tyrannical regime.

Moreover, there is also a different strand of civil society thinking which has been influential in some parts of the world in recent decades, influenced by Antonio Gramsci, who argued that civil society is the arena, separate from state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a wide range of organisations which both challenge and uphold the existing order (Lewis, 2001). For example in Serbia, civil society “contains a wide range of organizations and initiatives with divergent ideologies, political objectives, strategies and tactics, and social values. The whole spectrum is covered, from the extreme right to the extreme left, from most traditional conservatives, to liberal anti-nationalists, to anarchists” (Spasić, 2003, p.455).

More recently, a special category of civil society — mediators — have been posited who intervene between the state and ‘the poor’ to bargain and negotiate and secure “democratic outcomes for these groups” (Piper and von Lieres, 2015, p.15); such mediators might “range from celebrities through to professional non-governmental organisations (NGOs), volunteer and faith based organisations, traditional leaders, gang leaders, networks and in some cases even key individuals in a local community” (Piper and von Lieres, 2015, p.2). Therefore, civil society might be seen quite broadly, as including a range of actors each contesting social and political power relations in various ways.

Moreover, the separation between civil society and the state is not always applicable: depending on the type of state, there may be formal institutional, government-created spaces which invite civil society to participate. For example, in South Africa civil society participation is inscribed in the Constitution and at various levels of government, with local ward councils, participatory budgeting and development planning processes, as well as written and event-based processes for public comment on Bills and Acts (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, n.d.). It has been variously argued that societal conflict arises because governments fail to provide appropriate ‘invited spaces’ through which organisations or communities can actively participate in governance (e.g. Koelble and Siddle, 2013; Kotze and Taylor, 2010; Mathekga and Buccus, 2006; Mirafteb, 2009). Genuine participation is seen to curb “the

space for the rebellion of the public by taking to the streets violently” (Nembambula, 2014, p.149). Therefore, the separation between state and civil society may be collapsed, with citizens actively forming part of governance structures.

And even in less democratic countries, such as Kenya, civil society barely exists outside of ethnic and political patronage networks (Bodewes, 2010; Lind and Howell, 2010; Mueller, 2008; Odhiambo, 2004; Okuku, 2002; Orvis, 2003) due to a long history of ethnic violence and ruling parties making decisions to favour ethnic groups, rather than the general populace. In Egypt, prior to the lead up to the 2011 January uprising, only small, micro-level, civic associations, and medium-level, professional syndicates and trade unions emerged, and these usually worked in co-operation with the state, albeit having limited roles (Abd el Wahab, 2012). Therefore, it is not always clear that civil society and the state are playing separate roles or occupying separate terrains — depending on the state form, civil society can be *inter alia* embedded in state structures, working openly with the state, have a limited role in demanding services from the state, in active open opposition to the state, or working underground and hidden from view.

### **3.2 Civil society and democratisation**

Civil society is often assumed to have global relevance in strengthening development and democracy: in this view, “civil society may contribute to democratization by mediating between citizen and state, conveying citizens' interests to government, constraining government behavior by stimulating citizen activism, and inculcating democratic values” (Booth and Richard, 1998, p.780). However, it is also possible that civil society does not alter the shape of the polity much, because political authorities may respond to specific demands made by civil society activists, without changing the overall structure of governance and society (Booth and Richard, 1998). While Lewis (2001, p. 11) argues that: “By examining the local meanings being created around the concept of civil society in certain African contexts, it is possible to see how it has become part of an increasingly universal, negotiation between citizens, states and market around the world”, others question the usefulness of the concept to understanding democratic forms.

For example, in Kenya Odhiambo (2004, p.41) says ‘civil society’ in Kenya is “just another route for individual primitive accumulation without accountability to the civic community on whose behalf it purports to speak”. Politics in Kenya is so patronage based that the incentive is for civil society actors to “organise platforms for gaining power rather than creating reform” (Okuku, 2002, p.84). This shows that civil society does not automatically generate democracy — it can simply be an alternative process of power accumulation, without challenging the polity to become more democratic.

In Serbia, civil society organisations are largely disconnected from the grassroots, and civil activism is largely a middle-class activity, with organisations having a weak potential “to shift balance of social and political power and thus contribute to strengthening government accountability and rule of law” (Vuković, 2015, p.657). Nevertheless, the post-Milošević era has seen the rise of ‘illiberal civil society’ with a host of “illiberal ideologies, including anti-Semitism, exclusive nationalism, xenophobia and racism” (Kostovicova, 2006, p.31). Such elements of civil society may be “much less democratic, and more dangerous, than the government” (Spasić, 2003, p.457). Some protest movements have the potential to trigger “political polarization, and thus rapid vacating of the uncommitted or moderate centre... [pushing regime elites] towards more exclusive and repressive policies” (Vladislavljević, 2014, p.5).

Thus, “the values civil society actors promote are not always democratic” (Spasić, 2003, p.450), and civil society structures do not automatically lead to democratic imaginaries. In some countries, “criminal organizations build their networks of support in the poor communities in exchange for patronage and forced protection” (Castells, 2008, p.84). This leads us to consider whether the emerging concept of ‘uncivil’ society is useful in thinking about manifestations of civil society that challenge liberal democratic values.

Glasius (2010) argues that violence is usually most singled out as a characteristic of ‘uncivil’ society, but that exclusivist or dogmatic ideologies and general rule-breaking also count; and that academic debates centre on whether the use of the category is too western-centric and on whether uncivil society should be considered as part of a wider category of civil society. John Keane (2013, p.135) has argued that “all known forms of civil society are plagued by endogenous sources of incivility”, but nonetheless distinguishes between a civil and an un-civil society, differentiated by a tipping point in the use of violence:

A highly developed civil society can and normally does contain within itself violent tendencies, that is, patterns of incivility or behaviour prone to violence that can and do threaten to accumulate synergetically to the point where the occasional violence of some against some within a civil society degenerates into the constant violence of all against all of an uncivil society. (Keane, 2013, p.136)

Similarly,

[v]iolence or non-violent physical resistance has been one way of acting politically for those not granted the authority to speak. Such violence – by contrast with the legitimate violence of the state (Max Weber) – lies at the edge of legitimate politics; it is often not given the name of politics and called ‘terrorism’. (Couldry, 2015, p.120)

In the South African case, focusing too heavily on the violence produced by communities ignores how individual and collective bodies “suffer from everyday violence” caused by their inability to access both services (water, sanitation, shelter, healthcare, etc.) and “complicated legal and political systems” meant to protect citizens (Stewart, 2014, p.3). It also ignores how communities have often been involved in protracted engagement with the state in “slow and patient styles of activism” (Robins, 2014, p.94), which often remain invisible because they are not as spectacular as violent, disruptive forms of action. Although the South African government provides ‘invited spaces’ for civil society to participate, for various reasons civil society may not want to participate in these and may instead invent their own spaces through which to participate in politics; such ‘invented spaces’ may in turn be delegitimised or even criminalised (Miraftab and Wills, 2005) — they may easily be regarded as ‘uncivil society’.

So violence demonstrates a “paradoxical combination of liberatory and oppressive symbolic and physical practices” (Von Holdt and Kirsten, 2011, p.32). Lau et al (2010, p.13) examine how “violence is a nurtured male activity” from individual to group levels, to the extent that it appears to be a ‘natural’ response to perceived threats. Seemingly, South African young men in protest “have to draw on the repertoires of militarized masculinities of the past” (Langa and Kiguwa, 2013, p.23) in order to recover their sense of manhood when they cannot be the provider because limited economic or employment opportunities are available to them.

As in Serbia:

[W]hile it is possible to argue that resorting to violence marks the absolute boundary between ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ societies... it is evident that violence ... does not come from nowhere, but rather is embedded in specific broader political subcultures that cannot be denied the status of civil society element. (Spasić, 2003, p.457)

Often, for example, violence from civil society might be in response to violence from the state with police or armies often being critical “protagonists in collective violence, both when they are absent from scenes of mass violence and when they themselves engage in collective violence against protesting communities” (Von Holdt and Kirsten, 2011, p.3). In many countries it is quite common for not only protestors, but also the state to rely on public violence and brute force (Tsheola et al., 2014) to negotiate the local political terrain. In the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, state actors were involved in inciting and encouraging the violence (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008); in this case then, violent civil society can be seen as an extension of ethnically-based state violence.

In addition to engaging violently with the state, civil society groups may engage violently with each other — civil society tends not to be a homogenous whole but diverse and sometimes contesting the same terrain in different ways. In Kenya, the “lack of a common political project has subsequently come to influence civil society’s contradictory and often fragmented positions on matters of national importance” (Lind and Howell, 2010, p.336). While the ideal is that in political protests civil society come together in a “a flurry of cultural activity ... reflecting the action and stirring it” (Hassan et al., 2015, p.5), as happened in the 2011 Egyptian January uprising, it is not uncommon for civil society groups to face-off. So, for example, in Serbia “the liberal civil society that emerged during the Milošević period was stretched, finding itself in a position where it had to battle undemocratic forces emanating both from the civil society and from the state” (Kostovicova, 2006, p.22). Because of the need to engage for civil society groups to engage with each other, in the Serbian case, it has limited the capacity of civil society to engage the state (Kostovicova, 2006).

However when one views violent citizens acting against the state (or other citizens), it is clear that groups of citizens acting together to bring about change in the political terrain are not an automatic force for democracy. Efforts towards democracy from one group can be derailed by the actions of another civil society group, and civil society groups might be focussed on minimalist demands — not broad or deep societal change. Indeed the relationship between citizen groups and the state, and the nature of the action taken, cannot be understood as fitting into a global civil society paradigm, but instead must be examined with an eye to locally-specific circumstances, embodying a range of different perspectives and world views — rather than considering the concept of civil society in purely theoretical terms, “one has to examine the actual circumstances of its usage” (Spasić, 2003, p.457).

#### **4. Social activism and political activism**

Delineating civil society groups in terms of whether they participate in social or political activism is tricky because there is a continuum between these forms of activism, and groups may act differently at different times. One would normally associate political activism with party politics, and civil society groups befitting the ‘political activist’ tag would be those aligned to political parties or political causes, such as challenging the form of government or demanding human rights (Yang, 2009). In the same vein, groups identified as ‘social activists’ would probably be ‘non-aligned’ to party politics, and focusing on/advocating a range of causes that may include equal access to housing and water, the environment, LGBTIQ rights, access to medicine, minority rights, etc. (Yang, 2009). The distinction between the two types of activism is generally based on where activism is targeted, with

political activism conceptualised as activity targeting at the state and political reform (Yang, 2009), whereas social activism might seek to change society.

So, for example, in gender-focussed activist groups, those seeking policy change from government in terms of the roles of women in society can be seen as political activists, while those challenging the roles of men and women in society might be regarded as social activists. However, it is possible that one civil society group may take on society and the state. So, for example, the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa targeted the state with demands for medicine, but also multinational pharmaceutical companies to make anti-retrovirals affordable to South Africans. In terms of more conservative civil society groupings, as in Serbia, anti-LGBTIQ activists might demand that the state legally reserves marriage for heterosexual relationships, while at the same time encouraging homophobia in society (Stakic, 2011).

Literature on political activism provides a somewhat bifurcated picture. On the one hand, Western citizens — particularly the youth — are argued to be “politically apathetic” and in need of “rejuvenation” (e.g. James, 2011), due to politicians having become “less representative and responsive to the citizen needs” (Vukelic and Stanojevic, 2012, p.388). On the other hand, the post-industrial West has witnessed a refocusing of political engagement outside of the parliamentary and political party system, giving birth to the emergence of ‘new politics’ (Dahlgren and Gurevitch, 2005). Pippa Norris (2002) challenges the notion of an apathetic citizenry, citing the swelling of the ranks of social movements, such as environmental activism in the 1970s, or suggesting that political activism “is as strong as ever, but now it’s digital— and passionate” (Zuckerman, 2013).

In ‘emerging’ democracies the picture is equally complex. In Kenya, the notion of political parties is very different to Western ideas of political parties because its:

Leaders and politicians have shifted from party to party and in the process made strange bedfellow alliances with each other. Even those who are in opposition now have been in each other’s governments and cabinets at one time or another. (Mueller, 2008, p.200)

Therefore, it is difficult to conceive of activism in Kenya as being embedded in parties (political activism), and with political parties in a constant state of flux it is difficult for civil to build a momentum of political activism (Bodewes, 2010; Orvis, 2003). On the other hand, one finds initiatives in the slums aimed at environmental clean-up and tackling government’s non-provision of services (Wamucii, 2011), which while being usually defined as social activism, could easily spin into political activism if organised to challenge the government to provide services. The difficulties in defining activism also become clear when one considers

“religious activism” (Silberman et al., 2005) in Kenya, where for example the increasing sacralisation of conflict has led to the rise of al Shabaab, which sees itself as part of a “larger, millenarian struggle between Islam and infidelity” (Vidino et al., 2010, p.221).

Under Mubarak in Egypt, prior to the 2011 revolution, CSOs had to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs, with licence applications turned down for vague reasons, and the state having a say over board membership and decision making; thus the state exerted powerful control over CSO activities (Altan-Olcay and Icduygu, 2012). Furthermore, CSOs in Egypt were dominated by older men of a higher socio-economic status, regardless of which segment their work was targeted it at (ibid). Hence, “CSOs were seen as more successful in rallying support for ‘apolitical’ values than for ‘politically sensitive ones’” (Altan-Olcay and Icduygu, 2012, p.172), filling a void created by the state’s retreat from welfare provisioning. Arguably then, activism in Egypt was usually social activism, but with the 2005 rise of Kefaya, with its discourse on democratisation and its call for Mubarak to resign (Lim, 2012), arguably the terrain shifted and activism became more political. However, this is rather simplistic, given that oppositional movements in Egypt have been, and continue to be, polarised based on religious affiliation — whether Islamist or liberal secular (Lim, 2012). Even in the 2011 Tahir Square uprising, where these religious differences were temporarily overcome, it is difficult to characterise the protagonists of the revolt, with some arguing that the revolt was about “bread, freedom, and social justice”, while others argued that it was about “human dignity” (Baker, 2015). It is also difficult to separate out the extent to which the sought after changes are simply national regime change, or a contestation of globalisation and the political alliances between national governments and the multinationals who supply weapons (Baker, 2015).

In Serbia there “has been a partial transfer of personnel and influence from civil society to the state apparatus: some individuals have moved from civic organizations to positions of power, mostly at the level deputy ministers, advisors, or in local and regional bodies” (Spasić, 2003, p.454). This means that former political activists have become imbedded in the state, and their challenges, therefore, can be seen as political. Nevertheless, as in Western countries, Serbian young people have “turned away from mainstream politics” to create “new arenas and innovative ways of expressing their views, political claims and particular identities” (Vukelic and Stanojevic, 2012, p.388). Particularly, young people have become interested in ‘lifestyle politics’ and neighbourhood politics of squatting and reclaiming “devastated public spaces, usually followed by negotiations with local authorities in order to reconstruct places, revitalise neighbourhoods, and make a long term contribution to sustainable development of the local community” (Šešić et al., 2015, p.195). And in respect of gay rights in Serbia, which can be regarded as ‘lifestyle politics’, in

fact the LGBTIQ movement was able to link itself to pro-EU activism and the pro-democracy cause in the 2008 elections (Gould and Moe, 2015), showing how 'social activism' and 'political activism' can intersect.

Like Serbia, South Africa also experienced a situation in which former activists were incorporated into the state in 1994, and this saw a temporary demobilisation of society immediately after the end of apartheid (Marais, 2011; Seekings, 2000). However, as early as 2000 civil society starting organising again to resist the privatisation of public services, through organisations such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC). These social movements undertook social activism around provision of services to poor communities, while at the same time undertaking political activism challenging global neo-liberal policies imposed by the popularly elected African National Congress (ANC) (Reddy, 2010). In addition there has been a proliferation of so-called 'service delivery protests', where impoverished communities across the country rise up to protest against *inter alia* lack of housing, water, electricity and sanitation provision, poorly performing local systems of participatory governance, corruption and nepotism at local government level, etc. (Alexander, 2010; Bond and Mottiar, 2013; Booysen, 2007; Kunene, 2014; Piper and Nadvi, 2010; Tapela, 2012 and others). What is interesting to note, at least in the South African case, is that while several of the issue-based organisations focus their activism around predominantly 'social issues', there are also political undertones to the content of their activities. Some of them maintain organic albeit informal links to political parties, rendering it somewhat difficult to allocate an unproblematic tag to the scope of their activism.

None of the countries explored in this literature review present a clear case of distinguishing between social activism and political activism. Nevertheless, considering these terms is useful for exploring the different qualities and characteristics of activism across countries, and for understanding the issues which can limit political activism, such as the fractured political party form in Kenya, or the religious divide in Egypt.

## **5. Media coverage of democratisation conflicts**

Before the advent of the modern, democratic nation-state interactions between protestors, authorities, and publics were mostly localised, immediate, and direct; today it is in the news media that the most relevant part of the mutual observation and interaction between protestors, publics and authorities takes place (Koopmans, 2004). Gamson and Wolfsfeld argue that gaining standing in the media is "often a necessary condition before

targets of influence will grant a movement recognition and deal with its claims and demands” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p.116).

Given that contemporary conflicts are increasingly mediatised events (Cottle, 2008) the manner in which these are framed by the media is often a subject of contestation. When “protest movements elevate key issues on the social agenda and provide a voice to disenfranchised individuals” (Boyle et al., 2012, p.2), media coverage tends to fall within the ‘protest paradigm’, whereby media coverage tends to support the status quo and disparage those contesting the status quo.

While protest movements typically need media to achieve protest goals, “such coverage may not be forthcoming unless protesters engage in dramatic and even violent action. However, those very actions that attract media attention are often central features of stories that delegitimise the protesters” (Boyle et al., 2012, p.4). Such delegitimation within the ‘protest paradigm’ influences 1) how the civil society groups and political activists are viewed within the broader public sphere and 2) the communications strategies these civil society groups devise in order to maximise visibility and influence. “Answering the core questions about citizen experience in the democratic process increasingly requires understanding the centrality of mediated political communication both in the governing process and in citizen perceptions of society and its problems” (Bennett and Entman, 2001, p. 1).

The essence of media framing is “selection to prioritize some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events” (Norris et al., 2003, p.11). Gitlin (1980, p.7) describes media frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation...by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual”. Through framing, the media may help distribute power in society, because when the media slants, “those favored by the slant become more powerful, freer to do what they want ... those who lose the framing contest become weaker, less free to do (or say) what they want” (Entman, 2007, p.170). While “protest and the quality of coverage that it receives ... [may be] important indicators of the vitality of a democracy” (Boyle et al., 2012, p.3), the goals of protest groups are frequently not covered, and instead media tends to focus on civil society’s tactics — usually the more extreme the tactics, the less favourable the coverage becomes.

In unequal societies where both the legacies of the past and present neoliberal policy choices combine to limit the choices for full citizenship for many, protest action by the marginalised is often framed by the (mainstream) media as irrational and illegitimate, and the voices which dominate these frames are ‘legitimate’ voices of the elites within ‘official’ circles.

However, while in Western societies the official voices of elites might overlap, with political and economic elites strongly combined, this may not be the case in all societies. In South Africa, for example, the black political elite and the white economic elite may not share the same interests (Pointer, 2015; Steenveld, 2004); these contesting elites might therefore differently shape media coverage. In Kenya, from 1992 onwards, the media was radically liberalised and at the forefront of pushing for a multi-party democracy. With more than 100 languages spoken in Kenya, media liberalisation led to numerous local stations, each broadcasting in a specific local language and popular with local audiences. Competing elites (including politicians) own and manage these local radio stations and have been implicated in the 2007 post-election violence, as local radio stations with different ethnic affiliations were seen to be encouraging inter-ethnic violence (Ismail and Deane, 2008), so that, while the media coverage may have favoured elites, the media did not automatically favour a national elite.

International research on the media framing of protests highlights how protests are often treated by the media as “a potential or actual disruption of legitimate order” (Gitlin, 2003, p.271). Conflict and violence in protests may be portrayed as dysfunctional, not as “an important vehicle for establishing social relations” (Mander, 1999, p.4). Whereas protestors may have come together to act collectively, “media discourses work to encourage adversarial frames” (Gamson, 2003, p.102). Media coverage tends to focus on the actors and actions, not the “structural causes of events” (Gamson, 2003, p.93). The media’s chosen frames are often “controlling, hegemonic and tied to larger elite structures” (Reese, 2007, p.149), revealing “the imprint of power” (Entman, 1993, p.55). While protests are often viewed as “the most surefire way to access the media arena”, often, by protesting “advocacy groups seem to do themselves more harm than good” (Wouters, 2015, p.2). If protestors pose a threat to the status quo, they are more likely to receive critical treatment from the media (Boyle et al., 2012).

A recent study on media framing of service delivery protests in South Africa over one year, for instance, found that the most prevalent frames in the mainstream media emphasised the ‘war spectacle’ (dramatic images of the theatre of conflict), the idea of the ‘failed state’ as well as the criminality of the actions of the protestors. The ‘official’ (government officials, police sources) sources topped the list of preferred media sources, and the net effect of the framing of the protests was to delegitimise the protestors (Pointer, 2015).

Moreover, framing aside, the media can also be selective about which protests to cover. As McCarthy et al. (1996) have argued, while protest is central to politics in Western democracies it is known to citizens mainly through portrayals in the media; yet the media

cover only a small fraction of public protests, raising the possibility of selection bias – with news coverage of protests increasingly subject to the impact of media issue attention cycles. A study by Wouters (2015) found that in Belgium, depending on which actors were involved in a protest, protest action was more likely to receive coverage, and more likely to receive balanced coverage – with unions receiving the most coverage and the most balanced coverage, peace protests receiving a fair amount of coverage, while environmental protests received very little coverage and the coverage received was less balanced. They also found that while protest received more coverage than other forms of advocacy (for the same groups), coverage was more in-depth when non-protest advocacy was used by advocacy groups.

However, there is some evidence that communities and organisations may have difficulty accessing the media at all without protest: “structural inequality, racialised poverty and everyday violence ... do not easily lend themselves to spectacular media images of human suffering” (Robins, 2014, p.95). Protestors must engage in action that has ‘news value’ for the media (Barnett, 2003). More extreme and dramatic activities are more likely to attract media attention (Baylor, 1996); while the protestors may wish to deploy frames that “negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.615), the protesting community is only likely to get media attention by highlighting conflict and contention: conflict may be necessary to ensure a “maximum diffusion of information about social problems” (Tichenor et al., 1999, p.31). For example, Tapela (2012, p.75) highlighted that South African communities were deliberately creating dramatic events (burning tyres, blockading roads, etc.) to attract media attention: “media is informed prior to the protests and ... protests do not start before journalists arrive”.

There is no shortage of academic research that has shown a bias in how social protests have been covered by the mainstream news media. Koopmans (2004, p.267) for example, argued that:

The decisive part of the interaction between social movements and political authorities is no longer the direct, physical confrontation between them in concrete locations, but the indirect, mediated encounters among contenders in the arena of the mass media public sphere... Authorities react to social movement activities if and as they are depicted in the mass media, and conversely movement activists become aware of political opportunities and constraints through the reactions (or non-reactions) that their actions provoke in the public sphere.

In the South African context, for instance, research has shown similar patterns of media coverage of social movements (as obtaining in the global North), characterised by a

general sense of delegitimisation, a focus on the 'spectacle', and in some instances paying disproportionate attention to the selected voices of 'leadership', normally better educated and articulate individuals framed as the epitome of the 'trouble makers' (Chiumbu, 2012; Dawson, 2012; Pointer, 2015; Willems, 2012). In the case of South Africa's Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), for example, the media for several years relished in the personality of Trevor Ngwane as the 'dreadlocked, rebellious' face of the APF, with the result of simplifying, even cheapening complex structural and social challenges that pushed thousands of citizens into engaging in the forms of action they did. In isolating individual 'representatives' of social movements for coverage from time to time, the media are therefore not interested in broader social causes underpinning the protests, but rather in the spectacle of it all. Furthermore, in undertaking the day-to-day work of a movement — building solidarity, networking, consensus building — “media spectacles are very difficult to sustain over time and seldom produce the kinds of state responses desired and required” (Robins, 2014, p.98).

While there may be variations from one context to the next, the reality of conventional 'news values' informing news production in the legacy media mean that democratisation conflicts (or any other conflict for that matter), are likely to be framed as 'events', with emphasis on the spectacle, and 'official' sources such as spokespersons are likely to be given prominence even when their lived experiences are not integral to the conflict.

This 'mediatisation' of politics has raised concerns about the excessive power of the media, expanding beyond the boundaries of their traditional functions in democracies. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) use the term mediatisation to denote problematic consequences of the development of modern mass media, with politics continuously shaped by interactions with mass media. Drawing on the work of Walter Lippman, they highlight how the mass media present only a highly selective sample of newsworthy events from a continuous stream of occurrences; events are identified as newsworthy when they satisfy certain rules of news values, the selection process is determined strongly by journalistic worldviews and media production routines; and the media's selective sample of events that are reported defines what appears to be the only reality for most citizens and the political elite – news value criteria such as proximity, conflict, drama and personalisation impose a systematic bias upon the media reality of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

The above highlights that there are limits to how civil society actors can increase the visibility of their concerns in the mass media, with a message's salience impacted by how other actors respond to that message – what Koopmans (2004) refers to as resonance. Of course protest groups also have their own media and communications systems, though these do not place their issues upon a national agenda.

## 6. Political Activists and Media Usage

While some civil society groups may not seek media attention, instead relying on face-to-face interaction to achieve a “profound impact on a limited number of people” (Rucht, 2004), most civil society organisations seek quantitative mobilisation, with the goal of reaching as many people as possible, in order to shape public opinion. This goal is achieved via mass media. Activists employ various tactics to enter mainstream media’s news agendas and receive positive coverage, since activists rely on mainstream media to reach audiences that may be of strategic importance to the activists’ cause, even if these may not be the activists’ primary support base. Mass media is seen to be “extremely important for almost all political actors”, and this includes social movements and protest groups (Rucht, 2004, p. 29).

While some civil society groups, such as trade unions and prominent NGOs might have access to the media, there are usually groups like social movements outside the ‘institutionalised political game’, that do not have many opportunities to make their voices heard. The relationship between mainstream media and social movements has traditionally been (and in many ways continues to be) seen as one of asymmetrical dependency (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993) in that the position of media at the centre of a mass communications network gives media a spectrum of options for ‘making the news’, while movements have traditionally had fewer options beyond the mass media for getting their messages to wide publics. To attract media attention and “overcome or at least cope creatively with their asymmetrical dependency on the mass media ... [protest organisations must] exercise considerable creativity in deploying various tactics aimed at reducing asymmetrical dependence” (Carroll and Ratner, 1999, pp.26–27). If these groups are not reported on by the media, they remain known only to their own in-group of participants and supporters rather than the broad public (Rucht, 2004).

Activists attempting to enter mainstream media agendas need to cultivate a “careful understanding of the needs and rules of the mass media” (Rucht, 2004, p.32) if they hope to receive positive coverage. Activists attract the attention of media by appealing to conventional news values such as conflict, proximity, prominence, etc. to attract the attention of mainstream journalists. In conforming to the ‘news value’ agenda of the mainstream media, activists will typically be interested in generating media discourses that grant them three things, namely: standing (i.e. quantity of coverage that places the movement clearly in the public gaze); preferred framing of the issues at hand (i.e. a construction of the news that features the terms, definitions and codes of the movement) and sympathy (i.e. coverage which is likely to gain sympathy from relevant publics) (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993).

By staging protests or rallies for instance, activists confront established holders of power in society, and the conflict that ensues is then covered by the mainstream media. Demonstrations and protests have often played a crucial role in developing and subsequently enacting democracy, constituting “a bridge helping to overcome possible disconnects between publics, opinion formation and policy-makers” (Cottle, 2008, p.853).

When publics constitute a movement or organisation, they develop collective action frames as “adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic issue or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.615). The collective action frames are typically “agentic and contentious in the sense of calling for action that problematizes and challenges existing authoritative view and framings of reality” (Snow, 2008, p.385). The distinctive and evolving culture of a movement may “conflict with media and mainstream culture” (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993, p.115), so the media often frames protests as “a potential or actual disruption of legitimate order” (Gitlin, 2003, p.271). In that the media “are not neutral, unselective recorders of events ... [they] are part of politics and part of protest, the three of them are inextricably intertwined in ongoing events” (Oliver and Maney, 2000, p.463).

Whereas protestors may have come together to act collectively, “media discourses work to encourage adversarial frames” (Gamson, 2003, p.102). Therefore, in trying to attract media attention, organisations face two different battles: first, a fight for media access and second a fight “for the definition and framing of a covered issue” (Walgrave and Manssens, 2005, p.116). While the media focus on the dramaturgy, it is also true that activists increase the dramaturgy in order to attract media attention. Arguably, “activism is not fully thinkable or operational apart from performance” (Hamera, 2014, p.418). Protests often involve singing or music such as drumming, costuming (such as organisational t-shirts), and props such as banners and placards: such symbols can be seen as “highly powerful tools of spurring civic engagement, building social movements, and promoting social justice” (Singhal and Greiner, 2008, p.11). In Serbia, at one point, activists ditched the mass protest as a strategy altogether and instead started “mocking the regime through small, well-planned performances” (Bieber, 2003, p.84). Later movements in Serbia engaged in “convoys traveling through Serbia, rallies, speeches, open-air concerts, public panel discussions, door-to-door campaigning, [making] leaflets, bulletins, artifacts with political slogans” (Spasić, 2003, p.451).

In addition, activists and protestors may act to frame themselves as peaceful and non-violent. In Egypt, for example, the 2011 regime change started with protest on 25-28 January, but thereafter it became a performance of ‘collective restraint’, whereby the crowd

“controls and regulates its behaviour by ... inhibiting in-group divisions and presenting a united front, curbing the use of violence, and ostensibly conforming to social values and expectations” (Saouli, 2014, p.3). This was essentially about ‘social representation’ whereby a group of people define themselves as peaceful, in contrast to violent repression by government, police and/or military actors. This performance of a united front made the usual media frames of unreasonable and unruly protestors impossible, and helped build international support for regime change in Egypt and depriving Mubarak of his ‘symbolic power’ (Saouli, 2014). In addition:

[A]ny snapshot of Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian revolution would reveal widespread use of diverse cultural products in association with the protests ... [including] signs displaying excerpts of anti-regime poems, makeshift stalls selling political books and novels containing anti-regime content, and an extensive use of placards with handwritten Twitter hash tags and titles of Facebook pages,

as well as “literature and songs were performed, recited, chanted, sung or displayed at sites of protest with the intention of both reflecting the action and stirring it” (Hassan et al., 2015, p.1; p.5).

Such strategies are a marked contrast to protestors that resort to violence to attract media attention — seeing and understanding violence “as a language, a message, a way of calling out to higher authorities about the state of things... [and] a warning at the same time” (Von Holdt and Kirsten, 2011, p.27). But even though other communities may read protests in a supportive way and go on to follow their example (Booyesen, 2007), protestors’ efforts to exert influence and communicate do not necessarily get read and rewritten by the media in ways they would choose. Conflict and violence in protests may be portrayed as dysfunctional, not as “an important vehicle for establishing social relations” (Mander, 1999, p.4). Violent tactics are unlikely to elicit media support (Baylor, 1996) or indeed the desired support from other political actors.

Protests are, however, not the only strategies organisations may deploy to attract media attention; other strategies may include attempts to shape public debate by contributing opinion articles to mainstream media, to establish relationships with journalists, feed journalists information or sending out press releases (Rucht, 2004).

The key assumption in this strategy is that the mainstream media is central to the democratic public sphere and to opinion forming, and therefore to deliberative democratic debate. According to this view, activists need to engage the mainstream media in order to participate in public debate and to shape public opinion. Despite the power relations underpinning media access, activists, using the right tools, do have a range of possibilities

for challenging mainstream discourses (Ryan, 1991). Activists may have to play according to the normative rulebook of the mainstream media, which tends to be oriented towards a societal elite whose interests might diverge from the socially and politically marginalised that activists represent (Gitlin, 1980). However, activists can also work to build a collective consensus, and as this grows and creates momentum, the media can become more receptive to their messages (Ryan, 1991).

An example of this strategy was when the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, agitating for the provision of anti-retroviral medicine in the public health sector, challenged the controversial stance by the then president Thabo Mbeki, who questioned the link between HIV and AIDS. This challenge satisfied the conventional news value of conflict and that of elite politics, and as such appealed to the sympathies of a global audience through online media as well as to local middle-class audiences. The issue of public health was however politicised as a result, which gave a certain one-dimensionality to a complex societal issue, for example, ignoring the economic structures that replicated a highly inequitable health system.

The strategy of engaging in deliberative debate is however only possible in societies where a climate of free expression makes it possible for activists to participate in mainstream media debates. In contexts where the mainstream media are repressed, or state-owned, activists have little chance of making an impact on public discourse. The commercial imperatives of mainstream media also often militate against the possibility of activists influencing news agendas and impacting on public debate about issues that may be antithetical to or not an immediate concern of elite audiences. Consequently, social movement activists often complain that they are ignored, marginalised or misrepresented by mainstream media (Rucht, 2004).

In a study entitled “Soundbitten: The perils of media-centred political activism”, based on extensive interviews with US-based social movement groups, Sarah Sobieraj (2011), explores the difficulties that movements face, as ‘outsiders’ struggling to be heard in a mainstream media system dominated by exclusionary public spheres. She argues in favour of devising communication strategies that do not necessarily always rely on the goodwill of the mainstream, corporate media for fruition. Some alternative communications strategies are discussed in the next section.

Apart from the politically focussed media pieces and protest, other forms of cultural production can also serve to raise consciousness and rally supporters. So, for instance in Egypt:

[c]ultural producers began calling for a revolutionary agenda well before the mass protests of 2011. The ambition of cultural producers to effect political change was demonstrated by the formation of the Writers and Artists for Change movement around the time of the rigged 2005 presidential elections. This movement coordinated with human rights organisations and dissident political groups such as *Kifaya* (Enough) to organise protests and weekly meetings calling for freedom of expression and democracy. (Hassan et al., 2015, p.5)

For activists, while gaining media attention is critical for success, media attention cannot be an end in itself. Organisational success hinges on successful mobilisation strategies, organisations' own communications, mobilising resources to support the contestation, and developing a good theoretical understanding of the issues that can be shared broadly (Ryan, 1991). While a range of factors limit activist access to the media, the media is not an un-budging monolith — at times it is receptive to calls for change, especially if an organisation achieves broad support through both media and non-media activities. Media, as much as states and government, is a site for political struggle and contestation: “[w]hile media exert a much greater degree of control over the representation of social movements than social movements themselves, they are not in complete control” (McCurdy, 2012, p.249).

## **7. Social activism/protest and ICTs**

Although activists often attempt to impact on mainstream media agendas, these media are frequently orientated towards middle-class audiences who do not have a direct interest in the issues that social movement activists try to put on the agenda. The mainstream media are frequently criticised for being commercialised and oriented towards an elite, with a detrimental effect on democracy (McChesney, 1999). In many regions of the world, the state continues to capture media agendas, either through coercive measures or through direct influence by means of ownership and editorial staff. Against this background, activists have increasingly created their own media to not only disseminate information about their cause, but also mobilise support for their activities.

Several iconic protests have come to symbolise the role of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for political activism, including the ‘Battle for Seattle’ in 1999 (Bennett, 2003) and more recently the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ protests (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Wasserman, 2011). The internet and — especially in African countries — mobile phones, have made it possible for activists to circumvent mainstream media to bring

their issues to the attention of a broader public and mobilise their supporters. For example, in Kenya, as the 2007 post-election violence spiralled out of control:

A group of Kenyans in Nairobi and the diaspora launched Ushahidi, an online campaign to draw local and global attention to the violence taking place in their country. Within weeks they had documented in detail hundreds of incidents of violence that would have otherwise gone unreported, and received hundreds of thousands of site visits from around the world, sparking increased global media attention. (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008, p.3)

In 2015 in South Africa, university students united around the #FeesMustFall hashtag, to launch the biggest and strongest wave of political activism in the country since the end of apartheid, and sparked further protests in both Britain and the US around issues pertaining to university funding, the out-sourcing of non-academic posts, and the decolonisation of curricula.

There is already an extensive literature around the use of ICTs for political mobilisation, and there is little doubt that digital networks can facilitate faster political mobilisation, shorter cycles of protest action and encourage new forms of collectivity (Couldry, 2015). However, consensus has not been reached regarding the extent to which ICTs can create an alternative politics and facilitate substantive social change in the long term. Assessments often hinge on the decision of whether to foreground the structural limitations of these technologies — factors such as the political economy of access, the nature of the medium that determines and limits the form and style of communication, or the agency of its users — with their creative adoptions, adaptations, and domestications of these technologies. Assessing the impact or effect of ICTs, including mobile phones, seems often to be a case of either accentuating the positive potential or focusing on the limitations of such technologies. The discourse around ICTs for social change is therefore divided between so-called ‘cyber-optimists’ (e.g. Barlow, 1996; Dyson et al., 1994; Negroponte, 1995) and ‘cyber-pessimists’(e.g. Morozov, 2011; Roszak, 1986; Winner, 1996). However, part of the disagreement between these two extremes arises because of seeing the tools as somehow special or separate, instead of integrated into daily life. For example, there is a tendency to see social networking sites as *creating* social networks, whereas social networks exist with or without the internet. Social networking sites may enhance or detract from existing social networks, but activism through social networks is not a function of social networking sites alone.

So, for example, in Egypt when the government turned off the internet on 27 January 2011, it did not succeed in shutting down protest: instead it galvanised protestors to take

their protest off the social networking sites into their physical social networks, by protesting in the streets instead (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011). Many activists, in their non-internet social networks, had anticipated the internet shutdown and had organised their social networks to respond — thus even though the internet and social networking sites had assisted communication in networks, the networks were already highly organised — activists were not simply organised and mobilised by the internet (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011). At the same time, when the Egyptian government targeted *Al Jazeera*, making conventional reporting extremely difficult, much reporting was forced onto the internet instead, as conventional media were no longer available as a source of information, and the ubiquity of camera phones made it more possible for citizens to collect footage of the protests (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011).

In the early 1990s, ICTs were seen as heralding a new era for democracy in contexts such as Africa (Mudhai et al., 2009). This optimism was often based on technologically determinist assumptions that the introduction of new technologies would bring about social change and deepen democratic participation, by adding “the aspect of interaction, of debate, and of the give and take characteristic of a democratic setting” (Hassan et al., 2015, p.14). But it is an open question whether the use of ICTs makes a quantitative or qualitative difference to political action — in other words, do ICTs “merely reduce the costs or increase the efficiencies of political action” or do they “change the political game itself”? (Bennett, 2004). While some posit “a causal relationship ... among specific forms of technology, the expansion of rights, and other forms of economic and social development” (Christensen, 2011, p.237), the Egyptian example points to wider causes, which are only enhanced by technology. For example, preceding social networking technology, activism in Egypt was enhanced by new physical architectural and social organization in parts of Cairo which enabled “alternative visions of society to be articulated and debated, and collective action organized in greater freedom than wider society” (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p.1347). Another factor in the Egyptian revolution, outside of internet networks, was more blatant “vote-rigging and intimidation in the 2010 parliamentary elections” (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p.1346).

Also important is the notion that communication networks created through ICTs may amplify activism by individuals. Participation in activist groups might be changed through what Bennett (2004, p.124) calls “hyper-linked communication networks that enable individuals to find multiple points of entry into varieties of political action”. For example, in Egypt, activists inside the country with internet access were able to connect with activists in the Egyptian diaspora, who were then able to translate Arabic tweets and comment on media representations of the protests (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011), thus amplifying the global

spread of messages, activism and support for the Egyptian revolution. And indeed, “[r]eliance on Facebook/YouTube/Twitter and news websites as the main source of news on politics” (Hassan et al., 2015, p.12) positively impacted on pro-democracy views, while reliance on traditional news sources had no impact on Egyptians’ democracy views (with the democracy defined as the ability to make a choice between multiple political parties in a democracy).

On the negative side, ICTs may change the dynamics of activist organisations, making it more difficult to coordinate and control collective action and render organisations vulnerable to internal transformation and destabilisation (Bennett, 2004). It may also increase the ability of states to monitor and track activists “for the purposes of surveillance and repression” (Christensen, 2011, p.234). In Kenya, following the 2008 post-election violence, the mainstream media were shutdown, creating a “fertile ground for citizen journalism” (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008, p.330). However, not all such journalism was innocent some promoted peace and justice while others became “channels for biased information, tribal prejudices, and hate speech” (Mäkinen and Kuira, 2008, p.331). While SMSes delivered reports of events, they also became a tool to spread rumours, ethnic hatred and threats.

A further ongoing debate is whether these networked links are sustainable and can translate into substantive social change, or whether they are ‘thin ties’ or ‘weak links’ that will dissipate over time or under pressure. Couldry (2015) questions the contributions of digital networks to political change in the long run. He criticises the accounts of ICTs’ contributions to political change for providing thin accounts of the social context within which they operate, tending to make mythical claims about their value instead of showing conclusively that those networks can build “longer term political transformations” instead of merely accelerating action and establishing short-term loyalties. It is clear that these technologies, and their impact on political communication and mobilisation, cannot be studied in a technologically determinist fashion, outside of the social and political dynamics within which they operate. The “missing social” dimension (Couldry, 2015, p.610) has been a problem in much of the literature in this area. As shown in the Egyptian example, when the technologies are embedded in a social situation and social networks that are already agitated and primed for action by political circumstances, then ICTs enhance the ability to communicate about the protests, but they do not necessarily initiate the protests themselves.

As far as theorising on the African digital public sphere is concerned, postulations of what ICTs might mean for African societies frequently drew on older modernisation paradigms of ‘development’: a universal, linear trajectory of progress was assumed to be facilitated through media, consisting of various stages that could be ‘leapfrogged’ by new

technologies. However, when this optimism proved to be exaggerated, questions about access, inequality, power, and quality of information returned (Mudhai et al., 2009, p.1).

A problem with these discourses seem to be that a central, cohesive theory for understanding the intersections of ICTS with older forms of media and other forms of communication, especially in transitional and developmental societies, still seems elusive. Much of the debate around ICTs and social change, whether celebratory or dismissive, seems to be based on a model of media transmission leading to direct effects. Such technologically determinist, transmission thinking bears resemblance to outdated 'communication for development' approaches that tend to see technology as a modernising force, rather than turning the attention to the ways in which these technologies are actively contextualised and domesticated by African users. Alternative approaches, based on a sociological and contextualised understanding of mobile phone use in Africa and its convergence with other forms of communication (see e.g. De Bruijn et al., 2009; Willems, 2010) and surveys from a demand side (e.g. Montez, 2010), are also emerging. It is important to bear in mind that ICTs are taken up by people in varied, heterogeneous contexts.

Where the transmission model of ICT use is particularly concerned with issues of distribution and access, ethnographic approaches are firstly interested in patterns of use and deployment. In other words, the technology-centred model is concerned with what happens to people when mobile phones are used to transmit information to them; the context-centred model is more interested in what happens to the technology when it is appropriated and adapted by people—people who use mobile phones to transgress the boundaries imposed by the state, the culture, the economy, and by the technology-capitalism complex itself. Approaches such as social constructivism or actor-network theory have suggested that neither technology nor society should be taken as over-determining but should be seen as mutually implicated (Goggin, 2012, p.11; Mabweazara, 2010, p.19). The domestication approach (Ling, 2004, p.26), which focuses on the adoption, adaptation, and integration of technology in everyday life as an ongoing process of negotiation, is perhaps the most suitable framework within which to think of the role of ICTs as “material objects with a particular social and economic embedding” (Hahn and Kibora, 2008, p.103).

It is also important to bear in mind that ICTs do not work in isolation, but in relation to other forms of communication. These can range from mainstream, traditional media, to interpersonal communication of the semiotics of clothing (cf. in South Africa the use of red berets by the EFF or caps and T-shirts worn by supporters of social movements, (Wasserman, 2007)). In Egypt, it was not just social networking via Facebook and Twitter that enhanced communication, but also access to satellite television and *Al Jazeera*, print

media, email, and cell phone text messaging (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). The challenge for understanding how activists use ICTs for mobilisation, activism and public debate is therefore to understand the context within which they operate – which includes the broader media landscape but also the social, economic and political environment more broadly.

## **8. Conclusion**

Given that the nature of civil society in different countries is different, and also often shifting in response to political changes, examining the relationship between civil society and media production (mainstream and alternative) in Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa involves being sensitive to both specificity and commonality. The types of civil society organisation across these country contexts are diverse, challenging the construction of a simple definition, with different types of activism emerging across time. Even as countries make shifts towards democracy, gains can be easily lost and recouped, as Egypt has shown in recent years. Unpacking the relationship between media and political activism is also complex, given that there are a range of activisms including social and political activism which also sometimes overlap.

The terrain is currently extremely dynamic: while the mainstream media may follow old routines of news gathering, and may be subjected to both state and self-censorship, the new media terrains open to possibility for dialogue and exchange, but also for the spread of dissent. New forms of activism also challenge the mainstream media routines, such that, for example, the media workers also monitor social media for story leads. And while conventional wisdom suggests that the media are hostile to civil society campaigns, the frames can change if there is a shift in society's attitudes. Because the media is a site of contestation, at times, activists can win the framing contest, winning space to put forward their vision of society in the mainstream media. Media created by activists themselves also contribute to this dynamic environment.

While the mainstream media may often try to shape our understanding of civil society, activism and protest, new technologies are disrupting simple narratives and, depending on context, this may enhance democracy. But it is not just the medium of communication that bring about changes: these are tools used by humans in society, and the shape of change is determined as much by the actions of the state, civil society actors and activists, with the nature of communications often shifting perceptions and engagement in the changing flux.

## 9. References

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