networked security state rather than as a space that is more radically democratic. Perhaps such an outcome will be facilitated if hacktivists themselves shift their use of rhetoric and symbolism, stepping away from the increasingly ominous and threatening "macrosecuritizing" discourse – which situates their work in the language of global war (Fish 2017a). What we do know is that the future of the internet will be shaped through antagonistic relationships and assemblages between hacktivists and states.

3
Media Activism: Shaping Online and Offline Networks

From the introduction onward, this book has discussed the power of myths in relation to the internet. As "the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world...through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life" (Adelman 1989: 83), myths have fueled the mistaken treatment of the internet as static, singular, immersive, and transcendent. When we subscribe to such myths, we may in turn lose our ability to see the internet as an assemblage, inseparable from peoples, places, laws, and environments. The two previous chapters have been devoted to revealing the assemblages within which internet technology is interwoven, from our discussion of the belief systems and environments of indigenous and cross-cultural communities to the legal systems and policing practices that afflict hacktivists.

This chapter takes aim at the internet and its relationship to political activism and revolutions. It considers fieldwork conducted in Egypt and the Occupy movement, as well as the important protests of the Indignados of Spain and the Chilean student movement. Its primary focus on the Arab Spring is all the more important given how the Middle East continues to be a region of great concern and misunderstanding. By showing how the internet's networks are refracted alongside activist assemblages of offline tools and environments, this chapter argues that we must do away with a narrative where

Silicon Valley supplants Cairo in our understanding of political events in Egypt and the Middle East more largely. The insights we share speak to the power of creativity and intuition in the fight for social and political justice. What we propose here is that the internet and digital networks be seen as part of an assemblage that brings together *offline networks and spaces*, *"older" media* such as television and radio, *economic and political institutions*, and *physical bodies* in shaping political activism.

Facebook Revolution?

In June 2011, the shirt pictured in figure 3.1 was purchased in Tahrir Square. Around central Cairo, Ramesh Srinivasan asked Egyptians about the story that it told. "We thank Facebook for our revolution," a subsistence laborer from Giza told him while asking for him to let Facebook know that "we
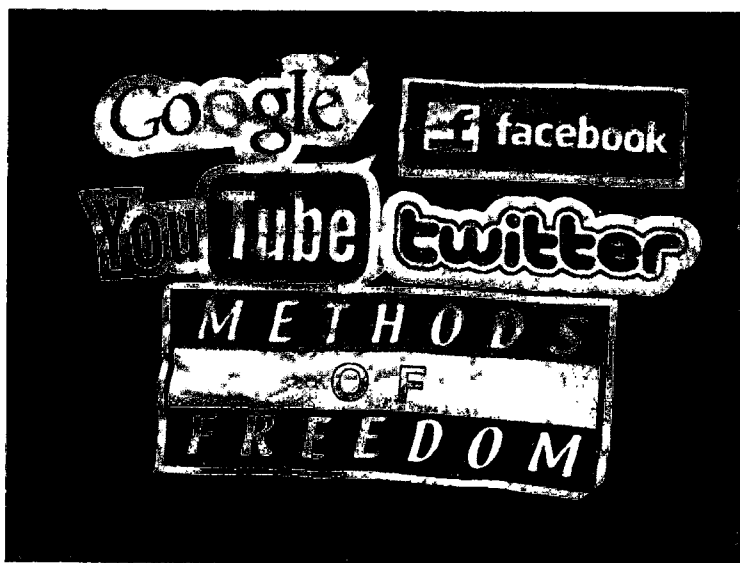

Figure 3.1   Social media revolution t-shirt
Source: Ramesh Srinivasan.

need their help to organize our next government." Ramesh then asked whether he or anyone in his family or neighborhood had internet access at the time of the 18 days of revolution in January/February 2011 and was given the simple answer of "nobody."

This photo reveals an internet-centric explanation of a revolution in action, one that sees technology as the cause of social and political events despite the reality that the Arab Spring revolutionaries alleged to be behind these were mostly disconnected from the internet. Our story of the t-shirt and Tahrir Square demonstrates how a technology-centric explanation of the Arab Spring had not only reached the Western world but also had implanted itself on the streets of Cairo. Yet how could such a narrative be possible given that social media technologies were accessed in fewer than 5 percent of Egyptian homes in early 2011? Would it not be absurd to assume such tools caused a revolution in a country of 85 million?

> They could not believe that we could [start a revolution] so the Western world had to pretend as if it was their tools that liberated us.

Surprisingly, these words were uttered not by a cyber-skeptic such as Malcolm Gladwell but by Gigi Ibrahim (personal conversation, 2015), an Egyptian activist who has over 140,000 Twitter followers, and at the age of 23 was featured on the cover of *Time* (in February 2012) and lionized in *Vanity Fair* (April 2011) as part of the "generation changing the world." These articles (among many others) praise Ibrahim's ability to reach the masses, to rally her fellow Egyptians, and to make democracy possible, supposedly thanks to the social media technologies of the day.

Yet Ibrahim, in conversations with us, defies the "social media revolutionary" label with which she has been identified. She has explained that this pigeonholed identity objectifies her agency and capacity. It emphasizes technology and views her as its accessory. It simplifies the struggles for social and economic justice for which people across the Arab world fight, and ignores the creativity, intuition, humanity, and history behind the social movements of the Arab Spring.

Fetishizing technology runs the risk of ignoring a great deal of research that has studied why and how people protest. It fails to consider the importance of existing political and media climates (McAdam 1982), and the role of symbolic, material, organizational, political, and cultural capacities in shaping protests (Meyer & Minkoff 2004). While prominent sociologists such as Charles Tilly (1990) have written about the importance of "political opportunity" in impacting the sustainability of a social movement, others (Emirbayer 1997; Goodwin & Jasper 1999) write about the power of emotions, agency, and political activism in shaping revolutions. These important factors may be erased from our understanding and appreciation of political movements if we only think about the internet in naïve isolation.

In our introduction, we challenged the myth of the internet as a public space. In this chapter we take aim at another myth, that of the "social media revolution," a framing which reduces the creativity, practices, and imaginaries of protesters into an obsession with internet technologies. Retweeting does not necessarily shape social change, and clicking on an online petition may better represent disengagement rather than stand for a means of fighting injustice (Melber 2011; Morozov 2011). On top of this, Facebook, Twitter, and Google are hardly open – they are in reality slaves to their controlling algorithms and corporate political economies, and only operate on the networks and information that are part of users' lives. Our online friends may be more similar than not to ourselves in real life because of mutual friendship, the places where they live, the interests they have, and their political leanings. And in cases where activists learn from one another online, it is inappropriate to give the technology credit in lieu of understanding the actions of its users. It is all too easy to forget that activists learned from one another before social media existed.

That said, even in countries of the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia, Egypt, or Morocco, where internet access is limited (with numbers even smaller for social media accounts), the presence of digital technologies should not be completely discounted. A technology may be shaped, mediated, and modified. Social media technologies may thus be domesticated (Silverstone & Haddon 1996), appropriated (Jenkins 2006), subverted (Hebdige 1984), and reconstructed.

It is important to respect the dynamic assemblages produced by activists as they struggle to achieve change. The literature we review in this chapter, and the ethnographies we share from Egypt, reveal examples of how activists tactically use a range of different tools, including new technologies, to shape their agenda and reach a range of audiences. Thus while we cannot simply assume that YouTube is a democratizing technology, we can view it as one system amongst many that can assist a movement.

Philosopher Henri Bergson has written about the importance of recognizing and respecting the agency of peoples and communities, consistent with our argument to pay attention to the creativity of activists rather than naïvely praise existing tools and systems. Bergson writes persuasively about the power of intuition, which shapes the poetic experience of being alive:

> Men do not sufficiently realise that their future is in their own hands. Theirs is the task of determining first of all whether they want to go on living or not. Theirs is the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to make just the extra effort required for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods. (1932: 54)

This chapter emphasizes creativity in relation to activist *practice* as an important counterpoint to the inappropriate perspective that technologies make revolutions possible. Practice theory, influenced by the writings of social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Sherry Ortner (1978), and Anthony Giddens (1994), discusses how individual or collective actions impact social or political structures of power. We describe a number of creative actions that activists have taken worldwide to contest injustice, and focus on these creative practices in relation to media and technology to recognize that these tools, like any others, can be shaped to support a range of causes.

Technologies can thus be viewed as part of the process of "place-making," which examines how a tool is used in relation to places, times, practices, and peoples (Massey 2005). We wish to humanize activism and creativity rather than naïvely deify technologies. Media technologies have always been part of assemblages shaped and produced by activists. This is true whether we speak of the role of the video of Rodney King's

beating in relation to the Los Angeles riots or print within the French Revolution. And today it is true with respect to the internet.

Social Media Binaries

Clay Shirky's piece "The Political Power of Social Media" graced the cover of the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine in November 2011. Influential in United States diplomatic circles, his article argues for the synergy between networked technologies and mass protests. Its position is consistent with Shirky's famous statement that "when we change the way we communicate we change society" (2008:17), presuming that on its surface the mere use of the internet supports democracy.

Shirky's position is consistent with the findings of scholars such as Philip Howard, whose research team identified heightened online activity before the full break-out of the Arab Spring. Howard and colleagues have argued that social media were utilized to share information about on-the-ground activity within the Arab world (Howard 2010; Howard & Hussain 2013). This is consistent with Zeynep Tufekci's argument that for activists there exists a collective action "'problem" that may be overcome through the use of social media:

> The "how" of social organizing matters because the means of connectivity impact the nature of a movement, the chance for its success, the tactics it can adopt – which in turn, impact its character –, the roles it can play, and the measures the state can deploy against it. All of these shape the nature, outlook, and the reach of the movement. (Tufekci 2011)

The position that online activity correlates with early (or prior) stages of protest is unsurprising, as it makes sense that internet-connected activists would use these media to spread their perspectives, and gather support. Such a position is described in research around "citizen journalism," namely the use of technology and the blogosphere to facilitate revolutionary conversation during times of political turmoil (Al-Rawi 2014). Seungahn Nah and Deborah Chung (2016), for example,

have discussed how citizen journalism can work as a substitute for censored mainstream journalism in such periods of upheaval.

We recognize and respect such work. Indeed, it is unsurprising that online activity may circulate stories from the ground. Yet ending our analysis at this point would fail to consider the experiences of the majority of a population that may be technologically disconnected, as well as the other means by which they may protest or share information.

Revolutions and networks have existed long before Facebook or Twitter, and many have shaped the course of history as we know it. Moreover, the collective action problems of the past were clearly overcome in these cases. Indeed, technological connectivity may work against physical mobilization, particularly when it influences citizens to stay at home or more passively protest by merely remaining online. This is consistent with the position of Navid Hassanpour (2011), who points out that mobile phone and internet use was negatively correlated with physical protest during the Egyptian revolution. Yet when the Mubarak regime made the mistake of shutting down mobile phone and internet connectivity, it may have contributed to the spectacle of January 28, 2011, the largest day of protest.

Like the somewhat optimistic work we have presented, we note the work of several writers who presume that technologies may be incidental or even irrelevant in shaping political activism. For example, Evgeny Morozov (2011) has shared examples that demonstrate how regimes can subvert oppositional activity through using the internet. Consistent with this, Malcolm Gladwell, in his piece "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted" (2012), argues that social media technologies are useful for forming "weak ties," which assist the spreading of information during revolutions, yet fail to form "strong ties," which are needed to shape trust and leadership in a political movement.

Other writers, such as Nicholas Carr and Andrew Keen, have also weighed in with their doubts. Carr (2010) has argued that internet activity blocks one's ability to focus, process, and presumably reflect on information, which would seemingly stymie the capacity to protest effectively. Keen (2007), in turn, over-essentializes the internet to assume that it is nothing but a vehicle for narcissism and therefore "anti-social."

We appreciate the optimistic and skeptical positions taken by these writers. Yet what we believe is missing across these points is a relational analysis of the internet and social media that considers how it is mediated by the values, practices, contexts, and creativity of activists and citizens. What is missing is the consideration of assemblages that bring technologies into conversations with other factors in shaping political activism.

Participatory Politics

A positive step forward could be to think about the different manners by which internet use may shape "participation," or the engagement in political activism. With this approach, we can think about different types of participation and their implications. Our discussion of participation draws on the writings of media scholar Henry Jenkins, and considers the dimensions of "participatory politics."

A number of scholars, including this book's authors, had an online conversation on this topic in 2014, eventually published as a journal article (Couldry & Jenkins 2014). Within our discussion of participatory politics, Mirko Tobias Schaefer pointed out the distinction between explicit and implicit participation. *Implicit participation,* he argued, represents a mirage of civic engagement which in actuality may reinforce various structures of power. One's participation, from this perspective, just makes the rich richer. It assists advertising giants, technology corporations, and surveillance practices. This type of participation is myopic, personal, and occasionally self-indulgent. In contrast, Schafer claims that *explicit participation* reconceives digital platforms as allies in shaping a social or political cause. It is intentional appropriation in action.

Nico Carpentier and Natalie Fenton added to the conversation by observing that any discussion of participation must consider inequalities outside of the world of technology. No use of technology is in itself sufficient to overcome the structural and systemic inequalities that shape the "digital revolution". One can see this in the case of China, as noted by Jack Qiu, where passive participation around the internet is rampant

without affecting political inequality. Qiu pointed out that the use of the Weibo social media platform by labor activists was insufficient to defend themselves from an attack by the state against their movement.

We thus note the importance of analyzing new technologies within a context of other networks and practices of political participation. It is a reminder that we must neither privilege nor dismiss technology in a reactionary way but instead learn from the peoples, places, contexts, and environments that shape assemblages of activism.

A Contextual Turn

Our goal is to understand how technologies like Facebook and YouTube are included within assemblages by activists who may use such tools. Rather than present a dismissive conclusion which presumes that technology use turns one into a "slacktivist" rather than an engaged activist, we can instead think more contextually, from the ground up.

It is important to note that infrastructures and systems build upon one another. Thus, we must not make the mistake of over-privileging the social networks shaped by new technology while forgetting that social networks are formed and sustained in many non-digital ways. Assemblages of activism may work across these networks to shape new formations. Politically subversive networks may be created and sustained by different groups of activists over many years.

For example, in Egypt, oppositional political networks have existed for decades. The spectacle of Tahrir Square must thus be seen relative to histories associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had existed as an underground oppositional organization across rural Egypt since 1912 (Al-Anani 2008). Another important example from Egypt that shaped the revolution is its robust labor movement, which dates back dozens of years. In the case of neighboring Tunisia, it is easy to conclude that Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation in December 2010 gave rise to a "YouTube revolution." Yet such a presumption fails to recognize that Bouazizi had strong connections to an oppositional labor movement for many

years before his act of martyrdom seemingly ignited the Arab Spring.

Similarly, as Cesar Guzman-Concha notes in his analysis of the 2011 Chilean student movement, the movement "did not appear from nowhere. It built upon an organizational network students created for many years...within the boundaries of a well-known repertoire of conflict" (2012: 414). Gonzales further supports this conclusion, noting that "it is often the broader political climate that mobilizes [them] to action" (2008: 230). Thus, we see how networks brokered by "formal student organizations" were critical to the early days of this student movement (García, von Bülow, Ledezma, & Chauveau 2014).

Consistent with this, in the case of the Occupy movement, which eventually took on a transnational form, analysis shows that the original New York City-based Wall Street encampment can be traced to long-standing actions and campaigns led by housing activists from the Bronx. W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) point out how the micro-operations of Twitter use during Occupy connected different networks in a meaningful yet loosely knit manner. The authors argue that one must consider the role of formal organizations in shaping collective action, differentiating between "crowd-enabled networks," where organization is nearly completely decentralized, such as in the case of flash mobs, and "organizationally enabled and brokered networks", where existing organizations play a larger role in shaping online and offline activity.

It is remarkable how far and wide the video of Bouazizi's immolation in Tunisia has spread, or that of the killing of Neda Aghan-Soltan in 2009 in the midst of Iran's Green Revolution; or how extensively the video of Freddie Gray's assault in Baltimore, captured on mobile phone in 2015, has influenced protests in the United States (Rentz 2015) and shaped popular awareness of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Consistent with this, Indignado protesters in Spain recognized the role of technologies to shape connections between themselves and the wider population (Rainsford 2011). Social media groups that initially formed online in Spain evolved into offline collectives that reorganized themselves without

the use of these tools. Noting the problems with a surveillance-friendly Skype, new technologies such as Mumble were identified by activists to connect multiple encampments through real-time communications. The "Toque a bankia" Indignado campaign successfully incorporated a range of older and newer media technologies and tactics to shape the perception of the movement among various audiences both within Spain and worldwide. From its strategic use of hashtags to its use of a website to direct protesters to block various bank entrances across the nation, Toque a bankia revealed the power of working across media platforms to move past the limitations of each in shaping activism.

Additionally, within the Occupy movement, which, like the Chilean and Indignado case, was primarily based in parts of the world where internet access was more widespread, digital technologies helped connect occupations across the world using tools such as Live Stream (Costanza-Chock 2012). Occupiers recognized the potential of using Skype in connecting with and supporting those who had their bodies already in physical and public spaces. The famous "mic check" technique used at occupations, where messages would be repeated by groups of people so that everyone could hear, began to integrate the use of Skype, where voices would first be vocalized online, often from other Occupy encampments, and then be remediated via the "People's Mic" (Costanza-Chock 2012). This coordination between the mediation of voice and Skype, and technologies *between* physical encampments, is another example of how activists can reassemble tools and technologies to support their movements.

Thus, instead of simply assuming that in online actions lie a panacea for all offline protests, or of mistakenly assuming the opposite of this, scholars who look at information, networks, and social movements must consider the multiple stages, contexts, and factors that shape activism. Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011), for example, argue that we can view the role of technology in three different ways: *e-movements*, which limit action to the online world; *e-mobilization*, where online activity directly facilitates offline actions; and *e-tactics*, which include both online and offline components that in their best moments are effectively coordinated.

Assembling and Disassembling

The examples we share across this chapter reveal that activist assemblages involving technology are neither inherently smooth, nor do they always translate into sustained effective political movements. Oppositional networks do not always come together to make revolutions possible, nor do historical movements necessarily give rise to newer inflections. Thinking about this relative to the case of social media raises interesting questions that encourage us to look at bridges between different forms of mediation. We can think about questions such as the following. How do Facebook groups shape existing activist networks? How may either of these shape international or domestic journalism, which in turn may influence those disconnected from internet technologies? How may hitting the "kill switch" on internet access shape other forms of network formation and activism? How are the invisible filters encoded into the recommendation and search algorithms within Facebook or Google connecting particular technology users with or disconnecting them from others? And how can online petitions shape offline strategies?

Paolo Gerbaudo argues that we must consider the "why" and "who" of protest without reducing a movement to a specific technology or networked system, such as the internet. Gerbaudo's book *Tweets and the Streets* (2012) argues for the importance of "choreography of assembly" and "choreographic leadership" to describe the mediation between technological and physical space, including online and offline worlds.

Like Gerbaudo, we work with the concept of assemblage across this book's chapters as a means of doing away with the myth of the internet as immaterial or fixed, instead arguing that it is not only socially and culturally constructed but also inclusive of personal, material, social, environmental, and institutional elements,.

The second half of this chapter considers many of these themes by telling the story and struggles of Mosireen, a Cairo-based activist collective dedicated to serving as the "media wing" of the Egyptian revolution. The collective's actions reveal the power of thinking past the limits of any singular

technological assemblage to instead embrace the fluidity of improvisation, organization, and networking. This section will build on ethnography conducted in Egypt between 2011 and 2014 in revolutionary Cairo (Srinivasan 2010, 2013, 2014).

Intuition and Media Activism: Stories from the Mosireen Collective

> We tried to think about how we were using technology and when it was useful and when it was not…we would not have gotten by without technology, but again [activism] dissolves back down to politics. Whether we would have won or lost – it would have happened on political terms and not technological terms.
>
> (Sherief Gaber, April 2015)

These words, stated by activist Sherief Gaber, speak to an approach taken by the Mosireen collective that viewed the internet as one tool or platform amongst many in shaping the principles of the Egyptian revolution. With the goal of exceeding the boundaries of the computer, street, or any other single

Figure 3.2 The Tweet-Nadwa (or "Tweet up") bringing activists together with real-time conversations online in Cairo, June 2011
Source: Ramesh Srinivasan

form of mediation, Mosireen was born out of the unstable political environment of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. As a group of mostly artists and filmmakers, Mosireen recognized its expertise in creating, curating, remixing, and distributing media in support of the revolution. Yet the activism of most came out of an intuitive response to the events of January 2011, out of the need to "document something, shoot something, make something out of what we saw and could not believe...it was just an explosion of expression" (Salma Shamel, April 2015).

In this sense, the majority of collective members with whom we spoke saw themselves first and foremost as activists dedicated to the causes of "bread, freedom, and social justice" that served as the motto by protesters during the Egyptian uprising. They note in conversations with us that each of these causes speak to different facets of the Egyptian population and that to support them they would have to create, document, and share media that were similarly inclusive.

Collective members described their expertise in working with media as a means of sharing content within and across demographic boundaries within the nation. Yet as they posted pieces online, they recognized the shortcomings of relying on an internet laden with protocols and political and economic interests far removed from their own concerns. In that sense, the internet was no panacea for activists relative to Egyptian state and private media.

> We recognized that while social media bubbles are a hegemonic assemblage so too are the worlds of mainstream media networks in Egypt.... We thought about how we could generate our own assemblages by working with both of these and whatever else we could get our hands on. (Sherief Gaber, April 2015)

Despite these concerns, Mosireen members also explained to us that as of 2011 the internet was the most open media space in an Egyptian environment where "old" television and newspaper platforms represented the interests of the state or private corporations. The internet was neither highly censored nor policed space. Activists considered different media and technology platforms as part of a larger distribution strategy

with a sense neither of what success would look like nor of its feasibility.

Meeting in Tahrir Square in January and February 2011, activists who formed the collective were attacked by state security forces and noticed how occupiers of the square responded with the chant "Look at what the army is doing." They were concerned that their fellow Egyptians outside of the square would remain unaware of such brutality from the regime, and would continue to be manipulated by powerful state and corporate media narratives.

> We had no way of expanding outside of the moment and activity of our chants of "Look at what the army is doing to us."...Until we became a marriage between the needs we all shared to generate change, to re-envision and provide tools of re-imagining our nation. We all met as filmmakers, activists, and individuals working within digital communities as bloggers and hackers. Yet importantly, we also convened together in-person, in [Tahrir] square. (Khalid Abdalla, May 2015)

Mosireen members recognized that their contributions lay in shaping the imagination of their fellow Egyptians in defending the objectives of their revolution. To do such, they needed to develop a coherent identity and trust one another. They would also have to create a physical space to meet while recruiting others, and recognized that they could not fight for their revolutionary aims merely by remaining online. Members began to learn why certain media pieces they would create might resonate with their fellow citizens. The goal became to shift the ecology of what stories were told to what audiences. This could not be achieved solely through online information-sharing, but in relation to an assemblage of spaces, infrastructures, and a reliable "brand." Activists would need to "build on existing pulses" (Omar Hamilton, April 2015), and create and distribute content accordingly.

Mosireen found its home in a historic building space in downtown Cairo because it no longer was needed in another media project that involved collective founder Khalid Abdalla, a well-known British-Egyptian actor who has starred in multiple international films, including *The Kite Runner* (2007). Having a space provided Mosireen a visible identity, not just allowing it to serve as a public symbol of the revolution,

Figure 3.3 Mosireen space
Source: Khalid Abdalla, Mosireen

but also supporting in-person sharing of stories and tactics. Over time, a range of activist communities made Mosireen's space temporarily their home, including graffiti artists and the organizers of the largely successful "No to Military Trials" campaign.

It is interesting to see the desire to be publicly visible in Mosireen's actions, and how this directly contrasts with the arguments that support anonymity in online-only activism. Despite creating a great deal of online content, there was value for Mosireen members coming together in person, connecting with those who "could come upstairs [to our office] in the middle of clashes downstairs on the street" (Khalid Abdalla, May 2015). The creative actions taken by Mosireen members required being mindful and aware of the volatile climate within Cairo and around the nation. The collective's goal was to activate their fellow citizens at catalytic moments, developing assemblages that juxtaposed technological and non-technological components to keep the revolution alive.

A critical moment for Mosireen arose with the Maspero massacre of October 9, 2011, less than nine months after the initial 18 days of revolution, which began on January 25, 2011. The massacre occurred via an attack by state security forces on protesters from Egypt's Coptic Christian minority. It was spun by the state media (via television and radio) as an attack by Christians on the army and by the international media as Muslim-on-Christian violence. Islamophobia was a sentiment that the military regime had long exploited under the ruse of maintaining security against "extreme elements" within Egypt. It also emboldened the military regime to maintain its longstanding assault on Egypt's 10 percent Christian minority.

Amidst the frenzy of Maspero, Mosireen members saw an opportunity to intervene by using low-cost video-capture and editing technology to "rip" content from state and corporate media networks and remix it with footage that they had physically shot. They focused on a clip they captured of a soldier shooting a civilian in the back.

The Maspero massacre was thus retold in a video produced by Mosireen that slowed down the frame rate of the footage of this brutal killing. Collective media makers edited this video by highlighting the soldier's gun with a red circle. Quickly posting this new piece on YouTube, the clip was viewed over 100,000 times on the night it was uploaded.

The example we share here from Maspero reveals intuition and creativity in action, where Mosireen members recognized their need to act in the moment, while also working to manipulate, appropriate, and remix content produced by their adversaries in the state and corporate media. By taking fragments from different television networks and their own footage to create a new assemblage, Mosireen could tell an authentic story of bravery and brutality that could influence the public's imagination. With this in mind, collective members Salma Shamel and Danya Nadar spoke with us about the power of manipulating images, drawing on tools and techniques from the history of cinema, citing examples from Russian montage and German propaganda films. These cinematic techniques could hold power in shaping the visceral, psychological, and emotional experiences of those who viewed Mosireen-produced content.

Mosireen's goal became to confront Egyptians with images, videos, and narratives they had not seen. They distributed content they believed to be authentic to the causes and voices behind the revolution yet painfully absent in mainstream media. Collective leaders saw that to do so they would need to construct an alternative media network and collaborate with various journalists, even those who worked for organizations who had misrepresented the revolutionary cause. They could not simply trust the internet "as is," nor could they trust existing Egyptian media networks. They would have to "reassemble" a network of online and offline connections to fight for their cause. This would require overcoming technological and demographic bubbles.

Overcoming Bubbles

We all saw how different the world was outside of our computers, whether we were in a cab or on the street.... We realized that extending access to the internet just extended complacency, and that there is a shallowness to technology.

(Omar Hamilton, April 2015)

As activist Omar Hamilton points out, Mosireen collective members were aware of the limitations of simply spreading the content they produced via the internet. Despite their use of YouTube to post videos, Twitter to engage with international journalists, and Facebook groups to share images and information, they recognized the shortcomings of these media. They thus strategically reassembled a system of information generation and propagation that connected the "street" and the "online network."

Sherief Gaber described to us how collective members viewed social media as the "mirror of Narcissus," citing Richard Sennett's important text *The Fall of Public Man* (1977). Sennett's argument is that the modernist legacies of the Enlightenment have transformed public consciousness into selfish myopia. Gaber explained that one could view our social media "filter bubbles" and their associated opaque algorithms accordingly.

This, however, did not mean that the internet was meaningless for collective members; instead it was but part of an assemblage of grassroots activism. We note that several Mosireen members described the internet as a "circuit," a dual-purpose metaphor that refers not only to electronic hardware but also to a self-referential closed space. Collective members recognized that they would have to create content that was captivating, digestible, and "modular" in its focus on specific subjects and topics. They would also need to devise mechanisms of distributing content to overcome the "closed circuit" of the Egyptian social media audience, which was demographically homogeneous and already likely splintered by filters and personalization algorithms. One means of overcoming this could be to create and project revolutionary stories into public spaces across the nation. So came the birth of Tahrir Cinema.

Tahrir Cinema became a conduit for the Mosireen collective to distribute its stories to offline audiences in the square that had marked the birth of Egypt's revolution. Tahrir Cinema also represented an assemblage in which digital technologies collided with bed sheets, projectors, cement, tents, bodies, and chairs. The effort shifted revolutionary narratives out of siloed online environments and into collective spaces of viewing. The cinema screenings included pieces from a media archive that Mosireen had been assembling since February 2011.

Figure 3.4   Tahrir Cinema
Source: Sherief Gaber, Mosireen

The story of Tahrir Cinema reveals how activists can resist the filters and constraints of a single form of mediation to move *between and across* platforms. Mosireen's media practices shifted between video cameras, online environments, archives, and public spaces. They recognized that none of these are sufficient in isolation but all have something to contribute when viewed as part of an assemblage.

During the sit-in of July 8, 2011, a first screening occurred in the square where protesters had gathered intermittently since that January. Mosireen members recognized that they would have to carefully curate the videos they showed, and that their collective viewing could activate their fellow citizens in the square.

The footage we showed that night was no longer stuck online or on our cameras. The voices taken away from every person in Egypt could be brought back to them through these screenings. It was extraordinary to see the audience come to us, ask questions about screenings, borrow USB sticks to copy content from us, start clapping and performing with the footage they would see. (Khalid Abdalla, May 2015)

Nina Mollerup and collective member Sherief Gaber (2015) have recently co-authored a paper reflecting on the street screenings of Tahrir Cinema. Discussing Tim Ingold's discussion of knowledge as situated, embodied, and interactional (2007), they argue that the collective viewing of the screenings speaks to the importance of *knowing with* rather than *knowing from* the videos that were shown. The interactivity between people, the screen, time periods, and places in which the screenings occurred cannot be reduced simply to the media object or platform itself. Screenings were as different as they were similar, contingent on the political climate, time, place, and content. No media piece could be understood without seeing it as an assemblage that also featured people, places, and environments.

Mosireen members explained their vision that Tahrir Cinema could "go viral." Not only did they hope for the media they screened to travel far and wide, but they hoped that what could emerge were multiple Mosireen collectives, only loosely tied to their original Cairo origins. Shifting away from the single place of Tahrir square or city of Cairo to multiple streets and regions around the nation became a strategy around the same time as Tahrir Cinema began to take hold. Using connections with various political organizations, such as the Revolutionary Youth coalition, media activism workshops were co-organized by Mosireen in the Sinai region and in Aswan, one of the largest cities in southern Egypt. The workshops focused on citizen journalism, including training participants to use their mobile phones to document and share their experiences in the midst of the changing political landscape. The goal was for Mosireen to rhizomatically mutate into multiple forms in many locations, decentralized from Cairo and reconstituted within working-class and rural communities nationwide. Members hoped that as the concept of Mosireen traveled it would take on a local life of its own, reassembled in relation to people, objects, places, and practices that were most meaningful to support the revolution across the nation.

Khalid Abdalla explained to us that Mosireen's "loose infrastructure" allowed it to function as a network, adapting to varying contexts and defying the formal structure of institutions that hold defined leadership roles, governance practices,

and hierarchies. This is consistent with the culture of the collective, where members are empowered to act autonomously, and only loosely needing to follow the actions of one another. Mosireen's lack of history and its general mission of "serving the revolution" gave it the space to dynamically adapt, "shifting our meanings, identities, and strategies as we went along, with the simple goal of lighting as many wildfires as possible" (Khalid Abdalla, May 2015).

That said, while in many ways Mosireen was able to escape the barriers of hierarchy and centralization, it must also be seen as *situated*, in relation to particular places, people, and activities. How, then, could it successfully reach larger numbers in a country of 85 million?

Viral Media

"There was no shortage of footage, but it wasn't reaching people," says Sally Toma (2015), "We had to bring the revolution back to the people." When online dissemination also proved not to be effective enough to change public opinion, in the spirit of Tahrir Cinema the idea was hatched to reach people by utilizing public space as a medium of political expression and information dissemination.

The street screenings of the Aaskar Kazeboon project further decentralized the activities of Mosireen to transform any community or square in Egypt into a hub for media activism. It took the specificity of Tahrir Cinema while providing for the opportunity for it to recombine itself across the nation. In doing so, Kazeboon, like Tahrir Cinema, reassembled digital narratives alongside non-digital components to empower the Egyptian activist imagination.

Kazeboon, Arabic for "The Military are Liars," countered the stories of the military by asking citizens to share videos that captured the lies of the regime and screen these in their own communities (Eskander 2013). Initially devised by friends of the Mosireen collective, the effort helped produce a viral and decentralized set of counter-narratives to those of the military regime (Abaza 2013; Khamis, Gold & Vaughn 2012) and later to the Muslim Brotherhood presidency. Like Tahrir

Cinema, Kazeboon became a mechanism of empowering people without internet or social media access to create and share their stories and experiences (Austin-Holmes forthcoming).

It is important to note that like Tahrir Cinema, Kazeboon functions without the need for any connective infrastructure, instead only requiring bed sheets, the rental of a projector, and a device that can capture image or video, such as a low-cost mobile phone. It is an assemblage that can take on the qualities of a decentralized network without relying on any internet technology. It resembles an internet without any wires or connective infrastructure.

Organizers of the idea explained to us that they had no control over how far the initiative would spread. Rumors are that there were over 600 screenings in the nation at its peak in July 2012, and in at least eight countries abroad. Over 10,000 volunteers supposedly screened videos in every governorate within Egypt. The unhinging of this campaign from Cairo allowed it to spread far and wide. By covering topics such as the absence of food, healthcare, and housing, the circulated videos began to speak to the local concerns shared by a far wider range of citizens who could create and share videos within their communities based on the concerns they held.

It is important to point out that both the Kazeboon and Mosireen actions are challenged by the factors that make them potent: their abilities to scale. Offline revolutionary activities supported by each were often restricted to specific places and times. While these particularities represent in part the strength of an activist assemblage, they suffer from the absence of scalability, searchability, persistence, and other affordances that characterize the internet and social media platforms in their best moments. The internet is a decentralized network, but it is also at times easy to bring nodes of this network into conversation with one another.

Where Assemblages Cannot Tread

The Kazeboon campaign was at its height of popularity during the worst public moments of the governing regimes, whether

in late 2011, when the economy was suffering, or in much of 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood regime had made a number of significant economic and political miscalculations.

It was in these moments that the creative and improvisatory media practices of Mosireen and Kazeboon were most successful. Their exploits of disassembly used overlapping networks of technology, community, and urban infrastructure. At these times, they were able to tap into counter-narratives that were easy to find given the unpopularity of the state. These counter-narratives brought together the causes of the revolution ("bread, freedom, and social justice") to shape popular mobilization and political consciousness.

Yet, due to their grassroots basis, on their own such campaigns could not transform a traumatized political and economic environment, much less confront the "deep state" (Moyers 2014) that has controlled Egyptian institutional, economic, and political resources for decades. Revolutions, present and past, often produce political institutions to respond to the concerns raised through these activist movements. Yet if these causes became fodder for creative manipulation, a schism could be constructed that could fragment precarious activist coalitions.

This is best illustrated in the unfortunate events starting at the end of June 2013 in the midst of the Tamarod activist campaign (which only peripherally involved Mosireen), which also maintained online and offline components. Tamarod, the Arabic word for "Rebel," was initiated as an online petition at the moment when the Muslim Brotherhood regime, which had cut a deal with the "deep state" military, was least popular. The movement quickly shifted offline as activists recognized that signing paper petitions and letting photocopiers do their work could reach far more in Egypt than a webpage, tweet, or Facebook group. Activists estimated that over 25 million Egyptians signed the Tamarod petition asking for then President Morsi to step down. Yet as protests erupted to challenge the legitimacy of one unfair regime, another quickly emerged to cement its power. The military regime, which continued to control many aspects of Egypt even with the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in elections, exploited the protests in a coup to topple the government, and imprison and kill numerous activists.

Standing in Tahrir Square with hundreds of thousands of other Egyptians in the days after June 30, 2013, Mosireen members have explained to us that they noticed one significant difference compared to their protest activities in January 2011. This was the appearance of a military helicopter above their heads. Instead of attacking the protesters, however, the helicopter dropped Egyptian flags on them (figure 3.5), symbolically articulating the military's kinship with the Tamarod movement. And as this happened, activists recognized that their causes had been stolen from them, and their revolutionary energies had been co-opted by the face of the deep state.

Subverting the protests through these symbolic acts, the military took power via coup in the days that followed, claiming allegiance with the Egyptian protesters, and deposing the Muslim Brotherhood regime. All of a sudden the gas shortages that drove so many protesters into the streets and squares of Egypt went away and the inflated prices of food dropped to more acceptable levels. For many in Egypt these events seemed incredible, reaffirming what was once a blind faith in the military before 2011. Unfortunately most within the nation either failed to see the ruse or had grown weary
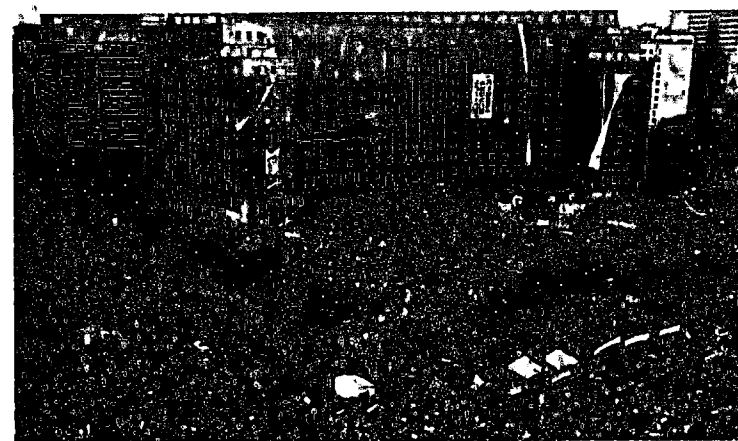

Figure 3.5 Military helicopter dropping flags on protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, early July 2013
Source: Ramesh Srinivasan

of the instability that came after a revolution that was just three years old.

The military regime's control of capital, industry, and land across Egypt meant it could manipulate factors that shaped discontent. Although activists derisively referred to the "Macaroni Military," owing to its ownership of macaroni factories, most working-class Egyptians still embraced the retaking of power by the armed forces as they knew that this might bring about economic "stability." Tapping into the reserves of money and commodities it controlled, the military complemented the symbolic intervention of dropping Egyptian flags on protesters by funding a series of manipulative subsidies to temporarily transform the economic climate and shape public opinion. Mosireen was in trouble.

> We got stuck in a position where our videos no longer mattered, our street actions would mean our death, and no one cared about our workshops any longer.... What do we do? We can't just keep posting videos that no one cares about, that no one watches. We are now back [to] where we were, stuck in the middle of the circuit. But today no one cares. (Sherief Gaber, April 2015)

Sherief Gaber's words illustrate the crisis that faced Mosireen in July 2013 and in the years since. While the collective's activities were unhinged from the existing limitations of social media and internet platforms, they no longer had a clear mechanism by which they could organize or a set of principles that they could follow that could help sustain their movement with fellow Egyptians. They had lost their control over the narrative of the revolution.

This partially describes Egypt into the early months of 2017. Many members of the Mosireen collective have told us of the depression they have felt in the years since July 2013, and others have shared their bewilderment as their fellow Egyptians re-embrace an oppressive military that has strangled democracy and social justice for decades.

> We are now stuck in the games of popular culture, stuck in spaces of slacktivism, where clicking poses as acting. We're stuck trying to make more captivating videos online in a world where no one sees these. The time will come where we are

able to stand up yet again to the limiting discourses of social media. (Sherief Gaber, April 2016)

Despite the creativity and potency of the assemblages they produced in 2011 and after, Mosireen members recognize that today they must return to the traditional internet where in many ways they were most familiar, an environment where they can vent, comment, and reflect. Yet, as we have described, these environments and their filters make them hardly "social."

At its peak, Mosireen-produced content was popular online, but as we have explained throughout this chapter, this had little to do solely with the online world. Mosireen's popularity on YouTube had a great deal to do with the climate on the street and the connections made with other spaces and actors. Yet no matter how many creative tactics one may use, to permanently overthrow an institution of power, the basis of its power must be overcome.

Activist Assemblages Onward

This chapter has taken aim at a myth of the internet as a singular, unified space that fuels democracy and grassroots activism. Our goal was not to dismiss the existence and potential meaning of digitally networked platforms but to anchor our understanding of these relative to how they are accessed, by whom, and with what filters and constraints. Situating technologies within this complex matrix of factors may not give rise to easy buzzwords such as "Net Delusion," "Small Change," or "Here Comes Everybody," but it does allow us to learn from powerful stories of political and social struggle in today's world.

Mosireen activists have expressed a range of sentiments about how they have evolved since their movement was halted in 2013. Some have gone back to the drawing board, thinking about a way to develop and deploy technologies that would be more internally aligned with the activities of future social movements. These individuals have recognized that merely making more videos is not sufficient at this time, as the content they create can easily be used to subvert rather than support

their political intentions. Other collective members have gone back to work in the creative and artistic industries. Some have resolved to not think too much about the sad political turn Egypt has taken, where activists have been jailed and tortured and Muslim Brotherhood members have been assassinated.

Mosireen members have shared with us their continued goal of keeping the history of the revolution alive via the digital archive they have assembled. Their goal is not to be an "instant nostalgia machine for a very depressed Egypt" (Sherief Gaber, April 2015) but eventually to be part of an evolving future. There is a belief amongst some collective members that there will be a time when activist networks and practices will be reassembled in new forms, but when that time is and what this new assemblage will look like remain unclear. Despite the spectacular events of January 2011, activists recognize that the impacts of their actions may not be always measurable nor result in short-term change. Instead of seeing this as reason for resignation, there may be great power in respecting and affirming the sadness they feel. Depression is often seen as a pathology to be rid of, rather than an emotional, psychological, and material state to inhabit and be mindful of.

Our goal has been neither to deify nor to exoticize the example of Mosireen but to ask readers to think about what we can learn from their story. Khalid Abdalla has expressed his belief that the Egyptian narrative of revolution will continue to unfold. Citing Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004), Abdalla has explained to us his hope that Egypt will now enter a moment of fiction, of "long-form narrative," where its current depression can give rise to a new imaginary. Activists may find a perspective, through fiction and narrative, of a new "horizon" that defies existing ideological constraints.

A revolution, for Abdalla and others within Mosireen, is better understood as a process rather than a specific outcome or state. The process is one of "radical becoming" rather than "radical actualization." Radical becoming, in the spirit of assemblage theory, represents a "horizon" that respects and embraces complexity and difference. Explicitly discussing Deleuze's seminal *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Abdalla explained that in today's Egypt there is a myth that activist causes will be perpetually oppressed. Mosireen and others must do away with this form of thinking and instead embrace

indeterminacy to allow the "splinters" of their causes to give way to new formations. Patchwork constructs such as creating new political parties in today's Egypt may do little to cultivate a new imagination that will challenge and overcome the military regime down the line. Abdalla concludes:

> Building a political party during a revolution is equivalent to building a house during an earthquake. A revolutionary period is confused as radical actualization but I believe it is a period of radical becoming. Over time our cause will evolve and ultimately overcome the organs of the deep state. (Khalid Abdalla, May 2015)

In the same spirit, Mosireen and future activist collectives across the world can continue to embrace a creative optimism that resists the dualism of "success"/"failure" dialectics. Deleuze stated that "I make, remake and unmake my concepts along a moving horizon, from an always decentered center, from a displaced periphery which repeats and differentiates them" (1994: xx–xxi). We note that what Deleuze (and Abdalla) ask for here is an affirmation of undecidability amongst activists. This story rings true within Egypt and other parts of the world that have witnessed recent social and political movements.

Activists in Egypt can embrace the long form, continuing to intuitively and creatively view their nation to imagine new futures. Mosireen members' epiphanic moments came about when they shifted away from a pre-set plan, fixed identity, or any attached form of mediation and trusted their improvised and creative abilities to act upon their environment. They recognized the shortcomings of the assemblage of the internet as it stood and moved past this by working across technologies, peoples, and places to fight for a democratic Egypt. A new space was opened up when Mosireen, like other activist groups we have described in this chapter, resisted the manufactured identities produced by mainstream media that described its members as a "Facebook generation" or failed revolutionaries. Deleuze has argued that when life appears standardized and stereotyped, it is all the more important to inject art and imagination into its habitual processes, to become "the poet, who speaks in the name of a creative power, capable of overturning all orders and representations in order to affirm difference" (1968: 53).

The examples we have shared in this chapter encourage us to disengage from an attachment to specific platforms, tools, or modes of mediation. They ask us to think "after the internet" to see activism that includes and builds upon existing technologies and infrastructures. Just as it is shortsighted to view the effects of a movement simply by looking at the short-term changes it effects, it is also incomplete to limit one's understanding of that movement by looking at a single point or mode of mediation. The value of thinking across multiple assemblages is in how it empowers an understanding of the creative and intuitive ways by which activists fight for social change. This, we believe, is what Deleuze speaks about when he asks us to take a poetic turn in our thinking of voice and power, in resisting the constraints of habituation to affirm difference. Just as we cannot or should not homogenize the distinctive movements from Chile, Spain, Occupy, and Egypt, we must not judge the success or failure of a revolution based on the misnomer of "Facebook Revolution." As Wael Eskandar, an ally of Mosireen and organizer of Kazeboon, wrote to the authors:

> But just so that I'm not talking about a dream that may never come true, there's value in enduring nevertheless, and even if we are all to vanish, we should not vanish without a fight. And just so we're clear, it's not about going out to protest and fight a losing battle, it's about the battle within you…do not let your ideas and ideals vanish without a fight. (Wael Eskandar, June 2015)

The causes of social, economic, and environmental justice so admirably pursued by activists in our world most likely will continue to involve the internet and digital networks as part of an assemblage, yet never in isolation. As we reflect on the relationships between the internet and activism, we must think "after the (existing) internet" and instead learn from its potentially powerful relationship with institutions, places, and peoples.

4

After the Cloud: Do Silk Roads Lead to Data Havens?

This book has described assemblages "after the internet" that speak to grassroots voices of diverse global and indigenous communities, hacktivists, and revolutionaries and protesters in Egypt and across the world. In this chapter we will discuss a central feature associated with the internet and digitally networked communications, that of *personal data*. The destiny of user data – where it is stored and how it is exploited is at the heart of struggles around what the internet is or may be.

As we described in this book's introduction, both metaphors and myths can obscure as much as they illuminate. The current metaphor that seems to be uncritically accepted to describe corporate and governmental practices around data is the *cloud* (but see counter-examples: Cubitt 2016; Holt & Vonderau 2015; Mosco 2014).

We must ask the question: where does data go when it goes into the "cloud"? The answer has increasingly become data centers, large corporate warehouses with computers, air conditioners, offices, and engineers. These centers are developed to store and process immense amounts of data. Described as the "nucleus of the digital universe" (Nasdaq 2013), data centers rent storage space to major companies, governments, and civil society actors to process the present-day "data deluge" (*The Economist* 2010). These centers require robust interconnectivity provided by fiber-optic cables that run through cities and the countryside, are underground and under the sea, and form