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UNTANGLING THE SCHOLACTIVIST WEB

"What's on Your Mind?"

Any honest observer of contemporary activist struggles would be remiss to ignore the substantial influence of social media in bringing together disparate groups struggling to achieve a common goal. Contributions of social media activism to political discourse are numerous, ranging from gruesome images filtering out of occupied territories to raw footage of militarized police brutalizing nonviolent protestors. Undoubtedly, political agitation cannot be confined to the physical realm. Mass movements crucially depend on the rapid circulation of information and images, which more often than not occurs in cyberspace.

This adversarial spirit—the willfulness to present "challenges to mainstream news reports"[1]— is a thread that unites several of the most prominent social media campaigns, and is reflective of the public's desire to move away from the highly corporatized and anti-septic discourse of the establishment press toward more non-mediated and participatory forms of information sharing. Other defining traits of popular social media campaigns are that they multiply narratives of social issues, delink themselves from previous discourses, make activists legible to each other, and deploy social media platforms as tools for organizing on-ground actions.

When politically motivated activists bring an informed and relevant critique to an otherwise conventional opinion exchange on social media, they reinvent themselves as   scholar-activists— scholactivists. Broadening the role of Gramsci's organic intellectual, the scholactivist does not only speak on behalf of a certain class but parts ways with hegemonic order and positions herself at the intersection of race, class and identity. Scholactivism thrives on the principle that social and political struggles unfold within a framework of mutual support and solidarity rather than competition. Differing radically from the traditional meanings of the term "activist," which doesn't connote a political affiliation with right or left factions, scholactivists consciously situate themselves in opposition to concentrated power (state, corporate, and communitarian) in an effort to overturn existing regimes of truth. In a neoliberalized political sphere, where there's a clear separation between citizens and oligarchs, scholactivists demand a more egalitarian public sphere where participation is open to anyone regardless of socio-economic status or political ideology. With the privatization of media and the commodification of information, liberal democracy is an arena where voices are forced to compete for an ever-decreasing return for their labor. Localized groups feel divided and disempowered in the face of global capital. Scholactivists work to connect these disconnected groups to form transnational alliances that lead to the emergence of a collective project no matter how vaguely expressed.

Whether it's a battle for Internet freedom, the publication of humanizing representations of Palestinians or the fight for social and governmental policies that affirm the urgent, inspirational demand that #BlackLivesMatter, it's abundantly clear that the struggles currently underway cannot be reduced to petty ideological contests waged from the safety of our computers. These struggles raise profoundly consequential questions about the social, cultural, and political evolution of our societies. When one considers the unprecedented forms of solidarity that social media ecology is able to foster, scholactivism becomes a method, a process, and a discipline of global struggle against capitalism.

This paper grows out of a dialogue; reflecting on the diverse ways in which our way-of-inhabiting social media ecology engaged and disengaged with the interplay of larger historical forces, we weave our thoughts together into a paper but keep them separate as thematic fragments. One may call each fragment a composition of tweets and statuses. In these fragments, we continue each other's sentences and in doing so end up making the fragments multi-vocal. If the reader hears repetitions in these fragments, he or she may be hearing two voices resonating and merging. Although we are hopeful, we do not eulogize social media. Rather, we interrogate social media as to its limits and capacities. In the past five years of scholactivism, we've witnessed the dilution of social media campaigns and its cooptation into electoral popularity contests. We've seen power respond through regulations, surveillance, and re-categorization of scholactivism as slactivism. We saw successful online organizing leading to offline movement failure in the absence of critical friendships, rigorous thinking, and discipline that take material struggles forward. Arising out of all this is a critical perspective, which takes into account, though not fully, national, international, and legal dimensions in which scholactivists negotiate and relate with other inhabitants of cyberspace. The following fragments point at contradictions of dialogue making, tell stories of occupation, provide contexts for class power dynamics, and perhaps, in this way, produce a user review of social media platforms as tools in our toolbox.

Alarm

The social media activism that accompanied Israel's seven week assault on the Gaza Strip offers a paradigmatic illustration of the central role Internet users play in galvanizing mass support for marginalized populations. As journalist Yousef al-Helou stated in his assessment of the impact of social media websites like Facebook and Twitter in generating support for Palestinians fleeing in terror under Israeli bombs:

> "Citizen journalism from Palestine is especially valuable for those who are looking for information which has not been filtered through a Western agenda. Social media has definitely weakened the Israeli narrative, as Palestinians are able to connect directly with overseas audiences and tell the stories that they feel are important. Hundreds of thousands of tweets exchanged reports, opinions, and challenges to mainstream news reports and to each other."[2]

Not unlike other trends toward democratization, this blossoming in social media activism has elicited a fair amount of criticism from centers of privilege and power. Perhaps the most recent iteration of this elite backlash can be found in an article published in New York Magazine by former New Republic journalist Jonathan Chait. Decrying the rise of political correctness, a

"system of left-wing ideological repression," Chait targets social media and its broad influence as culpable in spreading this virus:

> "Political correctness is a style of politics in which the more radical members of the left attempt to regulate political discourse by defining opposing views as bigoted and illegitimate. Two decades ago, the only communities where the left could exert such hegemonic control lay within academia, which gave it an influence on intellectual life far out of proportion to its numeric size. Today's political correctness flourishes most consequentially on social media, where it enjoys a frisson of cool and vast new cultural reach."

Echoing such establishment manifestos like the Powell Memo, which infamously denounced the failure of "institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young" (i.e., higher education), Chait's criticism conveys a palpable sense of alarm, a fear that the hallowed corridors of "respectable" discourse are being intruded upon by less qualified and less enlightened commoners.

Jonathan Chait's criticism of political correctness operates as a veil to conceal certain ideological prejudices, many of them directed against millennials and those who have leveraged digital technology to strike against the radical imbalance of power that has typically prevailed in U.S. media culture. Nonetheless, this recognition should not be taken to suggest that Chait's claim that political correctness can work as an impediment to understanding is invalid in all contexts. In particular contexts political correctness can indeed encumber honest and open discourse. Take for example a recent initiative of the student senate at Kansas University to get the gender specific pronouns "his" and "her" banned from their Rules and Regulations document. The reasoning behind this decision was that the usage of these words constituted microaggressions against those students who do not subscribe to them. While the students certainly illuminate a serious problem in our discourse by revealing the male biases that exist in the pronouns we use, to invoke this argument in the context of a rules and regulations document—a document with marginal political or social force—risks trivializing this deeply rooted phenomenon of capitalist patriarchy. To not devolve into a demand for politeness, political correctness needs to be embedded in a broader strategy that aims to transform the political reality of wildly asymmetrical power balance in society.

Fundamentally, Chait's article conveyed, as Glenn Greenwald put it in a stinging critique, "anger over being criticized in less than civil and respectful tones by people who lack any credentials (and thus entitlement) to do so."[3] This is a sentiment that is as pernicious as it is pervasive and the elite response to scholactivism is just one of its more visceral manifestations.

Incidentally, similar objectives to stem the tide of scholactivism's "vast cultural reach" likely lay behind the concerted efforts on the part of the telecommunications industry to eliminate net neutrality, a campaign recently dealt a devastating defeat thanks to a grassroots movement of "guerrilla activism," much of it online, dedicated to preserving "the principle that all Internet traffic must be treated equally."[4] Responding to the FCC's decision to uphold these basic rules of net neutrality, the campaign director of Free Press stated, "this is probably the most important ruling in the history of the FCC." In these hard-won achievements we can discern the significance of social media, not only as a virtual public square where dialogue and reflection on

some of the most important issues of our time can flourish, but as a space whose mere existence constitutes a grave threat to those whose power relies on the erasure of these sites of democratic expression. The National Security Agency's regime of electronic surveillance, a legal monstrosity hauntingly portrayed in Laura Poitra's award winning documentary CitizenFour, is one of the more obvious opponents of Internet freedom in this respect.

Understandably, this is why "companies such as Comcast, Verizon, AT&T and Time Warner Cable, had lobbied furiously against [net neutrality], spending tens of millions on lobbying and on so-called 'astroturf' efforts to pay third party groups to support their position."[5] Faced with the inability to manage the formation of attitudes and opinion online, power systems have pursued the same tactic applied to the print media, namely exercising stricter control over the medium.

Sometimes this control rises to the level of law enforcement, as the D.O.J. under President Obama made clear in a recent announcement that they would be "willing to indict people who assist ISIS with its use and production of social media," a decision that "raises questions about where the government would draw the line between support for a terrorist group and legally protected free speech." Indeed, if pro-ISIS propaganda is criminalized why not criminalize other forms of propaganda?

For example, why not criminalize the Facebook administrators who created a fan page for Chapel Hill murderer Craig Stephen Hicks? If we accept that issuing indictments in response to social media propaganda is the proper course of action (one would hope we don't) then it probably would be more reasonable to indict these propagandists since gun related killings committed by non-Muslims vastly outnumber deaths associated with so-called Islamic terrorism. Or why not indict U.S. citizens who regurgitated Israeli hasbara manufactured in IDC Herzliya "war rooms"? How was this not apologetics for terrorism? Naturally, certain forms of propaganda, namely those types which conform to elite U.S. opinion, will pass under the D.O.J.'s radar more easily than other "anti-American" forms. Consequently, this decision risks converting policies with the ostensible purpose of combating "terrorism" into effective weapons against political opponents.

The Mode of Scholactivism

If we see an adversarial spirit among the online public that wants to move away from the highly corporatized and anti-septic discourse of the establishment press, we also see Israeli *hasbara* rooms where students are paid to produce rationalizations for war crimes and fan pages for murderers like the Chapel Hill shooter. If establishment journalists like Jonathan Chait are upset about the public's desire for more nuanced political analysis, a democratic and justice-desiring public also has much to worry about xenophobic, war-mongering organizers deploying social media to gather support and fuel hatred of others.

When so many actors lay claim to social media and use it in such diverse ways, how do we even begin to disentangle this knot? There isn't merely one kind of adversarial spirit. There are multiple adversarial spirits. Social media isn't used simply to share information and form emancipatory alliances. There are several other uses including forming anti-democratic subjectivities and mobilizing them to carry out localized fascist actions. How can we

conceptualize these various engagements as possible within social media so that we can position scholactivism in social media in such way as to give space to solidarity and counter the all-pervading fear of the neighbour, the *other*?

Michel de Certeau's differentiation between 'strategy' and 'tactic' provides a way into such a conceptualization. Strategy is the "calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.' A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*... and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with [an] exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clienteles,' 'targets,' or 'objects' of research)."[6] Seeing through de Certeau's definition of strategy, the Israeli hasbara 'war rooms' where paid student organizations sit at rows of computers and dissipate pro-war crime 'explanations' in social media is a state-backed institution that can be isolated from the environment. It's not merely young people sitting at their personal desktops, sharing thoughts and engaging in argumentation over the Internet. Through this social media strategy, Israel is able to generate a multivalent relation with its adversaries, supporters, and potential supporters. Israel, in this way, tilts the social media cognitive framework against its adversaries, provides its supporters with talking points, and surfs the Internet in a search for new ideological recruits. Similarly, the backlash facing social media activism from elite media institutions is a strategy that can be distinguished from the environment because through such criticisms elite media assumes for itself a place that is *proper* to itself. For instance, Chait's lamentation that "today's political correctness flourishes most consequentially on social media," outside the silos of intellectual and journalistic disciplines implicitly asserts to mainstream journalism a *place* that is not to be invaded by public participation. Elite journalist institutions have well defined clienteles, ideological targets, and objects of research. Consequently, their object when researching extremism is always ISIS, never the Obama administration or the Israeli state. Their method is to focus on specific individuals but never render visible the historical context of a subject's formation.

Scholactivism is a tactic that can counter these strategies. Unlike a state-sponsored 'war room' which is a spatial arrangement solely devoted to spreading institutional talking points, scholactivism in social media has no such institutional localization. Scholactivism is conducted from the transitory spaces of scholactivists, be that smartphones, laptops, in libraries, subways, or bedrooms. The place of social media scholactivism (let's say Facebook) belongs to the other, to corporate/technocrat business institutions. Someone higher up in the class ladder owns this space, which we make ours momentarily. Scholactivists can only ever take this place over fragmentarily, appear for an instant on the screen of another, comment by comment, perhaps a thread, perhaps a trending hashtag, or a bleep in the neverending news feed, open to the possibility that they could be avoided, reported, erased or banned and most certainly archived in a surveillance world. Scholactivists simultaneously generate revenue for the owners of the space and question, in their engagements, the very logic of privatization in which social media spaces are founded.

This is also what gives such a tactic agency unknown to other strategies. Since the scholactivist tactic doesn't have a defined place, it rather depends on time. We are always on watch for posts or comments that can be fertile grounds for a conversation, a dialogical encounter. The posts don't necessarily have to be about politics, sociology, economics, but we can turn one into that through inserting ourselves in a scenario, making the personal political, making the timeliness of a critique its force. Scholactivists bring together heterogeneous elements: videos, articles,

books, quotes, personal reflections, passion and poetry, but that's not all. Scholactivists also evaluate the tastes, appetites, and moods of their interlocutors. Bringing all these together, scholactivism in social media, as a tactic, does not produce a discourse like an academic discourse or an institutional discourse. Rather, scholactivism is the decision itself, the action and manner of inserting oneself into a fabric of multiple personalities with a hope that demands communal transformation.

Tactics function in spaces produced through strategies, tactics do not give in to the logic of strategies. Scholactivists in social media, therefore, do not follow the logic of capital. This is why although a scholactivist on social media is engaging in the everyday practice of tactic, organizers of Craig Stephen Hicks fan page are deploying substrategies dressed up as tactics. That is to say, practicing xenophobia, racism, and so on are not outside or opposed to capitalism but are constituents of it. This is precisely why the work of sub-strategists— xenophobes, racists, and sexists—superbly complements the institutional strategies like Israeli 'war rooms', evisceration of welfare policies, and demands of journalists who decry political correctness. Although certain characteristics of their work, such as not having a defined space, overlaps with the characteristics of scholactivists, the efforts of sub-strategists remain embedded within institutional strategies, unable to subvert them.

Eating #BlackLivesMatter

George Zimmerman is free. The dead Trayvon Martin is burdened with the responsibility of his own murder. Obama calms the world with these words: "And once the jury has spoken, that's how our system works."[7] The casual indifference towards anti-black racism at micro/macro scales is condensed into those eleven words.

At this precise moment, Alicia Garza, a community organizer, intervenes. She writes "a love note," a Facebook post, calling on all blacks to ensure "that black lives matter."[8] Garza's friend Patrisse Cullors, a Los Angeles based community organizer, introduces a hashtag to the love note. #BlackLivesMatter arrives on the horizon of public memory, fracturing this memory into injustices recorded, retold, and recoded into three words. When we search #BlackLivesMatter on Facebook, we have access to a living archive of how blacks are dehumanized as citizens and immigrants.

Tweeted, shared, printed on t-shirts, and appearing in marches, slogans, rallies, teach-ins, sit-ins, #BlackLivesMatter tears open the shrouds of legality with which structural racism is protected and perpetuated. In a jarring simplicity, these three words and a hashtag lay bare the complexities of social and economic inequality and police brutality in pointing to imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy's central precept: black lives *don't* matter. Three words and a hashtag against Obama's eleven words, three words and a hashtag countering the dominant narrative in eleven words, #BlackLivesMatter against "And once the jury has spoken, that's how our system works."

Since its appearance #BlackLivesMatter surpassed the boundaries of momentary dissent where dominant history is revealed as ruling class fairytale. At a more profound level, #BlackLivesMatter aided scholactivists to destabilize public memory and part ways with Black moderates—the Obamas and Capeharts—who are ensconced in the armchairs of respectability

politics. The black moderates are those who, for example in a Ferguson protest, were advising black youth to follow leadership and submit to authority. Their messages are filled with "Christian imagery, respectability politics, bad theology and a masculinist, patriarchal and heterosexist lens of what constitutes black liberation."[9] Looking through the lens of the #BlackLivesMatter movement we can yell back, as Professor Cooper does, "We've tried to save our lives by dressing right, talking right and never, ever fucking up since about 1977. That shit has not worked."[10]

In delinking with respectability politics, scholactivists use #BlackLivesMatter to relink us to each other, free from the indoctrinations of a system that is founded on illegalization, ghettoization, and incarceration. No matter who we are in terms of race, dress, sexuality, (non)religion, age, and ideology, under the umbrella of the #BlackLivesMatter movement—when we recognize the structural dimensions and quotidian practices of anti-black racism—we also recognize our compañeros in struggle for liberation. We find and invent multiple spaces on-street and off-street like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to connect, share actionable intelligence, and globally organize what Garza calls the "new iteration of a black freedom movement,"[11] a movement that re-humanizes the dehumanized among us.

As a social media meme, #BlackLivesMatter is edible material for mimesis, that is, borrowing the original and retouching it to further other objectives. We, therefore, witnessed a proliferation of # LivesMatter in the rivers, canals, and gutters of social media. #AllLivesMatter, #MigrantLivesMatter, #ChildrensLivesMatter, #WomensLivesMatter, #BrownLivesMatter, #MuslimLivesMatter so on and so forth. From organizations like Amnesty International circulating #WomensLivesMatter to individuals peddling stories about violence against whites under #WhiteLivesMatter, many mimicked the original work of queer women of color in hope to recreate the affective resonance of #BlackLivesMatter.

In some cases, mimicry went far beyond itself to consume #BlackLivesMatter. Garza recounts how organizers for an "Our Lives Matter" event requested #BlackLivesMatter organizers to submit materials for a curated exhibition. One of the promotionals for this event "completely erased the origins of their work".[12] With regards to mimesis, Walter Benjamin claimed that mimesis is not mere mimicry and rather it comes out of a "compulsion to become the Other."[13] Isn't this precisely what we see as "Our Lives Matter" organizers attempted to swallow #BlackLivesMatter? As each variation of #BlackLivesMatter attempted to capture for themselves the sublime solidarity inscribed in the proclamation #BlackLivesMatter, they began to dilute the call for black liberation movement. The danger of dilution via mimesis is a crucial tension for scholactivists while organizing and engaging in social media.

There's also the danger of dilution for the sake of marketability, which can reduce complex processes, such as the relational (re)production of race, gender and sexuality, into reified categories ossified in identity politics. Although scholactivism promises increased visibility of an issue, it doesn't guarantee an equally expanding support base. More viewers may be reached through social media, and crucial information may be spread through scholactivism, but the messages may very well be taken away and reinscribed into a counter narrative. Such reinscriptions modify the objectives and uses of the memes as intended in scholactivist circles. Quick visibility, especially when mainstream media features emerging movements, can also engender a rapid opposition that works to preempt a movement before it gains momentum. Furthermore,

scholactivism provides state and non-state actors with a trackable origin of political currents and therefore the possibility to witness the maturation of a movement.

Multiple Narratives and Class(y) Media

Media scholarship has been particularly informative in revealing how institutional models of newsgathering organizations either impede or facilitate public participation in how information is disseminated. The end result of this is the emergence of a dual narrative: one that serves centers of privilege and power and another that speaks to the struggles of the public. In his 1986 study *Inventing Reality,* author and activist Michael Parenti observes that there is "nothing mysterious about who controls the ideological direction and political content of the news," adding, "the links that bind reporter to editor to news executive to corporate executive to board members to banker are not just work relationships but class power relationships."

This class power relationship, embodied most powerfully in the corporate newsroom, has long exerted hegemonic control within media culture around the world. Naturally, this class structure privileges certain narratives above others, namely those which serve its interests. Narratives that conflict with these interests are either downplayed, trivialized, or outright ignored.

Nonetheless, cracks in these dominant narratives can be found in the realm of social media. The rapid proliferation of images of bombed out homes and civilians killed or wounded by U.S. manufactured weapons radically alter how an otherwise completely uncritical media responds to international atrocities. Likewise, the posting of cellphone videos showing phalanxes of militarized police officers launching tear gas canisters at peaceful protesters and journalists in Ferguson and Baltimore or a raging police officer manhandling a bikini-clad teenager in McKinney sparks new discussions about the plague of police brutality and the horrific history of racism in America that it highlights.

With the class power relationship between media owners, editors, and journalists competing with the more participatory model of social media activism, citizens are provided with a more diverse range of perspectives and are therefore more empowered to discern fact from fiction, their socioeconomic realities from corporate propaganda.

Nevertheless, social media is not without its drawbacks. Beyond the binary of corporate media vs. citizen-produced media, there are also deep contradictions within the public sphere in terms of information sharing. With the mass of information, much of it unverified, available on the Internet the likelihood that citizens will subscribe to conspiratorial worldviews is heightened considerably. Take for example the reports of Alex Jones and the InfoWars websites. Despite the fact that these outlets present an alternative to the standard, status quo narratives of the establishment press, they often reinforce the hegemony of ruling elites. When scholactivists encounter such ersatz cognitive frameworks, their energies are pulled into countering speculation and fear.

According to an August 2014 *MIT Technology Review* study on the consumption patterns of conspiracy theories on Facebook, conspiracy theories exercise influence within online communities in ways that are, in some respects, quantifiably greater than that of mainstream scientific news. Reviewing 270,000 posts on 73 separate Facebook pages the researchers "found

that around 60,000 involved mainstream scientific news and over 200,000 involved alternative conspiracy news." The "alternative conspiracy news" received 6.5 million likes. Meanwhile, the scientific news received 2.5 million likes.

Moreover, "readers of conspiracy news are more likely to both share and like a post than readers of mainstream science news." That these conspiracy theories achieve a greater level of visibility within social media platforms signals how scholactivists are being challenged to devise a methodology able to overcome not only the hegemonic discourse of corporate media, but also conspiratorial narratives which function to erode the base of public support necessary to progress from constructive dialogue to grassroots action.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to addressing the popularity of conspiracy theories in social media can be detected in the fact that those who espouse these theories rarely, if ever, interact with those who subscribe to a more empirically grounded and rational worldview. As the researchers observe, "both types of reader are much more likely to interact with people of the same polarity. The groups tend not to overlap." In this reality we can decipher how the democratic modes of discourse that scholactivism champions will not survive unless there is a critical engagement with this phenomenon of conspiracy theories from both a tactical and ideological perspective.

Occupying Social Media

The paradox of scholactivism is that the more visible its memes and techniques become, the greater the probability that they are recycled into other uses, making originary memes invisible and scholactivist techniques reconfigured to counter scholactivism. Take the example of Palestinian youths organizing an anti-colonial movement through social media. According to Hanin Taha, a social media specialist, the number of Palestinian Twitter users increased at an incredible rate of 232 percent during 2012-13.[14] Palestinian activists generated Facebook and Twitter content, documenting the killings, bombings, snipings, injuries, and arrests made by the Israeli occupying forces. Social media campaigns exposing Israeli war crimes and daily settler violence gained popularity. For instance, the "Campaign for Exposing Israeli Crimes via Social Media" Facebook page has a current following of 55k from all over the digital globe. Such grassroots witness accounts subverted the mainstream media narrative about the world's "most moral army."

Prior to social media, introducing critical perspectives into news media would require a resourceful public relations arm to challenge entrenched ideologies of state-capitalist media. Ample financial resources would be necessary for recording and circulating evidence of atrocities. Scholactivists like Abir Kopty, Lina Al-Saafin, and Jalal Abu Khatir bypass these requirements in resorting to social media activism. In 2012, when Yotam Ronen, a photographer for a Facebook group called Activestills, was arrested, an Israeli soldier explained: "A commander or an officer sees a camera and becomes a diplomat, calculating every rubber bullet, every step. It's intolerable, we're left utterly exposed. The cameras are our kryptonite."[15] Unfortunately, we don't live in a universe where Israel resorts to diplomacy in the face of Instagram shots of war crimes. Even with social media archives teeming with evidence of Israeli atrocities, there's no legal architecture at present that can hold the Israeli state responsible.

In fact, the Israeli war machine has accepted social media as yet another space to occupy. Israel funds student groups that spread state propaganda on social media. Israeli soldiers post #sexy selfies to sanitize, through eroticizing, a bloody military campaign. What Ilan Pappe calls an 'incremental genocide' is reframed as a meme to 'like' and 'share'. Tracking the contours of Israeli occupation in social media during 2008-14 and Israel's rise to one of "the world's biggest users of social media," Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein term the phenomenon "digital militarism" and defines it as a "process by which digital communication platforms and consumer practices have, over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, become militarized tools in the hands of state and non-state actors, both in the field of military operations and in civilian frameworks."[16] The researchers meticulously analyze Israel's digital militarism and highlight two salient aspects of this phenomenon: 1) as social media users read, like, share, and generate content to perpetuate 'Brand Israel,' they are being "conscripted into the state's military project," and 2) as the "spectacle of state violence" seeps into everyday online activities, Israeli occupation is banalized and obscured. The crimes of the Israeli state becomes "at once palpable and out of reach, both visible and invisible."

Despite the state's use of social media as a possible early-warning system, surveillance mechanism, and conscripting service to spread its propaganda, it is unlikely that organizers and activists will abandon social media. Pointing to the disconnect between Palestinians in Palestine and the international solidarity movement, Palestinian scholactivist Abir Kopty proposes that "Palestinians should do more to reach out to each other and to communicate, and what can be effective in that sense is using social media more effectively, because this is one of the tools that we have as Palestinians that is not subject to the barriers of the occupation or separation."[17] Another Palestinian youth movement activist Fadi Quran writes, "social media provides an excellent way to disseminate information or plan quick get-togethers," and adds cautiously, "but it does not foster the types of relationships necessary for the expansion of popular resistance movements."[18] This is the same caveat we experience across the social media activism spectrum. Although social media makes us legible to each other, brings us closer in comprehending the intersectionality of our struggles as activists, and acts as a conduit to share actionable intelligence, social media does not lead to the formation of critical friendships.

Critical Friendships

In our distinction between strategy and tactic, our point is not to privilege tactics over strategy. Instead, we articulate the distinction only to show that while scholactivism in social media is a tactic to subvert the well-established strategies and sub-strategies of white supremacist imperialist capitalist patriarchy, it is certainly not a strategy that counters the self-professed universality of capital. In fact, the risk inherent in scholactivism is precisely that it may be limited to scintillating engagements among individuals who then go on with their neoliberal lifestyles with the surplus pleasure of having had an anti-capitalist conversation. Therefore, when scholactivism momentarily subverts dominant modes of engagement, it is crucial that an alternative strategy is planted and watered in that space. We are tempted to invoke critical friendship as one possible alternative strategy that may be given the space that scholactivism opens.

Critical friendships determine the number of people who are willing to show up at events, take the risk of being arrested or shot, and spend countless hours in background preparation and study to sustain a movement. Social media is unable to foster such bonds of trust and mutual support. For

example, while 74% of Americans use social media as of January 2014[19], in a national friendship survey 75% of Americans claimed to be dissatisfied with their everyday friendships. Furthermore, the 2013 national friendship survey concluded that social media is not a determining factor "in the quality of one's friendships or one's overall friendship satisfaction."[20] Part of the reason could be that social media lacks physical interaction. Communication is often taking place without the benefits of geographic proximity.

But more importantly, capital thrives on speed, rapidity, instantaneous circulation, individual consumption, and so does social media. The trappings of social media are designed to inculcate consumerist ideologies and therefore modes of consumption are incentivized in ways that undermine the production of fulfilling relations among citizens. Contrary to social media's inherent logic of identity-based consumption, critical friendships rely heavily on slow accumulation of ideas through collective reflection. Instead of preference-based algorithms, friends embody surprises and produce encounters that we do not plan beforehand, and in not predetermining these encounters, we receive them in a way that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. While social media issues are changing, identities are disintegrating, anonymity is proliferating, hashtags are trending, critical friendships are about sustaining reciprocity among people who know each other over a long stretch of time. This reciprocity is based on practicing responsibility towards the other, with whom we are in a face-to-face dialogue.

Within social media, we can troll and be trolled. If there's the impatient posturing of down to earth personas who just want to be part of anti-intellectual 'practical' conversations, there's also the too-intellectual interlocutors who dismantle every utterance with no intention to bridge bodies and form new assemblages of being together. The social media scene can often resemble the sectarianism on the left, characterized by lack of good faith towards comrades and self-righteousness about minute details that break up organizations rather than get tested through praxis.

Also, in social media imaginary narratives of political villainy and nefarious motives acquire a legitimacy which all but drowns out real and documented examples of criminality. Scholactivism opens a path to refute these fallacious arguments and separate unverifiable accusations from incontrovertible facts. But scholactivism functions in a rigid mode of logical argumentation, unable to engage in the politics of emotions. This translates to responses devoid of empathy. This apparent lack of responsiveness may appear, though, not on account of a scholactivist's intention but rather the limitation of the medium itself, that is, having to engage people who one has never met in issues of serious concern to the globe. The very urgency with which we are pushed to confront others makes us take political relations for granted and, therefore, not form any relation whatsoever. But in critical friendships, rigid responses or shallow pullbacks are precluded by our sense of accountability to each other. To produce critical friendship requires decelerating acknowledgements and agreements, making each other's intricate thoughts legible, and digging ourselves into a mutually shared position, while continuing to explore and construct pathways within that positioning. Cyberspace is too ephemeral for this digging, settling, reworking desires, making roots into each other, and having a deep hangout.

In other words, social media scholactivism is not an alternative to face-to-face movement building. We also learn this from the Arab Spring, which, in hindsight, was mischaracterized as

"Twitter revolutions." Analyzing about 7.48 million #egypt tweets from over 445,000 unique users and about 5.27 million #libya tweets from over 476,000 users in 2011, researchers at the Queensland University of Technology concluded that an empirical investigation of social media usage does not support the popular narrative of social media revolution.[21]

The President Has a Twitter Account

Apart from using the law as an instrument to guide social media culture in their preferred direction, the powerful have also sought to insert themselves into the medium, presenting the possibility that these forums of dissent will be converted into virtual campaign rallies. Top political officials from Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush to President Obama have made their presence known on social media in an attempt to reach out to their supporters. While their presence certainly demonstrates just how integral a role social media plays in molding public opinion, it also presents new challenges in how we, as scholactivists, address counter-narratives *within* our sphere of influence.

According to Pew Research, an increasing number of American citizens are using social media to communicate with politicians. Latest figures reveal, "16% of registered voters follow candidates for office, political parties, or elected officials on a social networking site." Furthermore, of that 16% those between the ages of 18 and 29 follow political figures at the highest percentage (24%). Reasons cited for this increase in social media usage include that it helps users "find out political news before others do," that it makes users "feel more personally connected to the political groups" being followed, and the view that the information received via social media "is more reliable than the information" received from "traditional news organizations."

Approximately a quarter of respondents (26%) have gravitated toward the social media accounts of political officials out of a distrust for "traditional media organizations." Yet the shift from traditional news organizations like CNN and Fox News to political officials themselves doesn't necessarily yield a more accurate presentation of the facts. Indeed, seeking information directly from political officials absent the critical analysis of an adversarial journalist or informed citizen is likely to produce a *less* accurate and *more* distorted picture of reality.

In this respect, the entry of high profile political officials using social media as a campaigning tool represents one of the ways that concentrated power can undermine movements from below, without resorting to naked coercion or the force of the law. Ultimately, it will be up to scholactivists to amplify their messages of dissent to counteract the growing influence of the political establishment in the realm of cyberspace.

It should be noted that this counter narrative does not necessarily weaken or interfere with the objectives of the political establishment in a linear fashion. Scholactivism in social media creates the appearance of widespread dissent, which then may create a widespread resistance on ground, insofar as scholactivists' dissent is connected to a broader grassroots movement that is able to disrupt and unsettle material processes of oppression.

"Sniff it all, collect it all, know it all, process it all and exploit it all."[22]

In an effort to undermine popular opposition, power systems have historically resorted to mass surveillance as a tool of social control. By monitoring the interactions between dissidents, states

and their partners in the corporate world are able to more effectively target and eliminate threats to their authority. Predictably, this reliance on mass surveillance continues to play a role in the digital age where vast amounts of data and information are transmitted over the Internet.

After whistleblower Edward Snowden unveiled secret documents detailing the extent of NSA state surveillance, governments around the world reacted in one of two ways: intensifying their policies of bulk collection of metadata or passing "reforms" to curtail it. Shortly after the passage of the USA Freedom Act, a piece of legislation purportedly passed to limit the reach of NSA phone surveillance, Snowden published an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* drawing attention to this global shift. "The United Nations declared mass surveillance an unambiguous violation of human rights," observed Snowden. He went on to add, "In Latin America, the efforts of citizens in Brazil led to the Marco Civil, an Internet Bill of Rights. Recognizing the critical role of informed citizens in correcting the excesses of government, the Council of Europe called for new laws to protect whistle-blowers." Advances of this kind will be integral in creating the kind of legal architecture that makes the Internet a space where social media activism can flourish free from the oppressive force of state/corporate power.

The necessity for such a legal architecture is underscored by the fact that "the National Security Agency and the FBI are tapping directly into the central servers of nine leading U.S. Internet companies, extracting audio and video chats, photographs, e-mails, documents, and connection logs that enable analysts to track foreign targets." Referred to as the PRISM program within the NSA, this operation poses a serious challenge to social media activists who are working to organize grassroots struggles to combat various global crises from police brutality and environmental degradation to economic injustice.

Furthermore, the capabilities of state power and corporate power largely overlap with regard to surveilling online activity. As Muhlenberg College professor John L. Sullivan states in his study on Internet surveillance, "the Snowden leaks have revealed that the wall between corporate and government data mining is paper thin."[23] These institutional realities reveal how Internet surveillance, like virtually every other form of repression, constitutes both a political and economic expression of class power or as Sullivan notes, "for the first time, these companies may have both a legal and *financial* interest in handing over sensitive personal information to government agencies."

Character 140

Scholactivism, at its core, represents a democratic way of engaging with the world. Through constant information sharing, citizens are civically empowered to make their voices heard and affect public policy in multiple domains. In fact, cyberspace today is more accessible than the formal proceedings of electoral politics. The broadening of democratic culture is essential if we wish to surmount the institutional and ideological obstacles imposed by capital, the propaganda system, and those who benefit the most from wealth inequality.

However, the rational discourse of scholactivism does not guarantee decisive political experiments on the ground. There's much room for developing ways to transition from witnessing struggles to transforming the world, from sharing and liking to striking and agitating. For this, changes have to be made at two layers. First, scholactivism has to be protected from the threat of surveillance

and repression. Fundamental to this radical rethinking of the legal culture that scholactivists inhabit is a reorganization of the relationship between concentrations of power and the public. At the forefront of this conflict are digital agitators who uphold principles of net neutrality, user privacy, and free expression. Faced with the combined force of state surveillance, commercial complicity, and the class-power relationship that this symbiosis exemplifies, we are tasked with sketching out and eventually constructing a legal architecture that insulates scholactivists from these external threats.

Second, social media platforms have to be re-designed for making critical friendships possible. Such platforms will not simply facilitate forming coalitions based on mutual interests under an economic logic. A reconceived social media will have to create spaces and times where interlocutors will mutate, extend, become in some ways like the others they are engaging, and identify common threats that jeopardize their interdependent existence. In this manner, along with deepening our sense of civic responsibility, scholactivism can fortify bonds of solidarity between populations independent of geographic proximity or historical development. This overcoming of physical impediments to interaction, what can be understood as the conquest of time over space within the information economy, offers benefits and challenges.

In terms of benefits, this coming together of minds expands the possibilities of democratic victories by defying rigid categories of nationality and culture to achieve a common goal through shared struggles. On the other hand, the entanglement between the instantaneous consumer-identity logic prevalent within social media ecology and the equally instantaneous consumer-identity logic of neoliberalism poses severe difficulties for those who aim to construct new models of dialogue free from the coercion of the state, the ubiquitous "marketplace," and strictures of identity politics. Scholactivism is only a step away from the social and political binds in which we find ourselves, and a step towards realizing a global commons. The decision itself to step, given these hard times, is an act of subversion.

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