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# Social Media for Empowerment in Social Movements: The Case of Malaysia's Grassroots Activism

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## Social Media for Empowerment in Social Movements: The Case of Malaysia's Grassroots Activism

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### Abstract:

Social media plays an instrumental role in enabling and facilitating social movements. However, this role depends on the complex social issues in a civic community and dynamics of power in movement politics. Existing literature provides little insight into the formative role of social media in social movements; instead, it tends to focus on the informational role and episodic effect of social media in community activism. We present the case of Bersih, a social media-enabled social movement that pushed for electoral reform in Malaysia. The non-partisan community-driven movement exerted public pressure on institutions and gained formal recognition. In this study, we reveal the significant role social media plays in empowering citizens by enabling them to facilitate and coordinate collective action towards producing change in their community. This research is significant in articulating the precise nature of the role of ICT in addressing complex social problems.

**Keywords:** Social Movements, Social Media, Empowerment, Digital Activism.

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## 1 Introduction

*To enable consensus politics to develop we need to empower people where they live. This means devolving financial resources and political power down to the community level.*

—Mairead Corrigan Maguire, 1976 Nobel Peace Prize Winner

The evolution of the Internet has seen information and communication technologies (ICT) move from merely an “information retrieval and storage source to a platform for participation and collaboration” (McGrath, Elbanna, Hercheui, Panagiotopoulos, & Saad, 2011, p. 1). From contemporary community-driven uprisings including Occupy Wall Street (in 2011), Spanish Los Indignados (in 2011) and the Umbrella Movement (in 2014), many citizens have used social media and ICT as a facilitating means for collective action in their ongoing efforts to effect social and political change. In the absence of a formal system and when neither development nor policy interventions are effective (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003; Shigetomi, 2009; Sholkamy, 2013), social media serves as a non-institutional means and an indispensable alternative for marginalized and oppressed communities to challenge powerful establishments that possess control, authority, and influence over society (Hur, 2006). As a result, the social consequences that arise from using social media have attracted increasing attention from researchers (Majchrzak, Markus, & Wareham, 2013).

Despite the emergence of ICT and social media as a new means for engagement and “catalyst for collective action” (Cardoso, Boudreau, & Carvalho, 2013, pp. 3-4), we lack studies that capture the formative role that social media plays in facilitating the development and evolution of social movements. Present studies provide a view of social media that tends to be informational and episodic (Castells, 2001; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Juris, 2005) and focus on social media participation as a general outcome with no explicitly stated process that illustrates the evolving role of social media (Dolata & Schrape, 2015). A lack of understanding of the formative role of social media in social movements has profound implications on how we understand communities’ self-organizing potential, how they can change from being a follower to being a driver, and different levels of community engagement and collective empowered outcomes beyond individual participation (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2014; Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, 2013; Mora, 2014).

Against the above backdrop, we address the following research question:

**RQ:** How do social media empower a community in social movements?

To examine this process, we conducted a case study of the Bersih (which means “clean” in Malay) movement, a community-driven movement that campaigned for clean and fair elections through the reformation of Malaysia’s electoral processes. The movement represents one of Malaysia’s largest and most significant civil society social movements (Khoo, 2014). We draw on the theoretical notions of empowerment to investigate the movement’s unique and organic environment for grassroots, bottom-up collective action. In the investigation, we investigated how social media served as an enabler during the Bersih movement’s evolution to drive a community to develop an awareness of pertinent political issues, to mobilize others, and to exert influence on established institutions for social change.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Social Movements and Social Media

Social movements refer to informal networks between a plurality of individuals and groups who join them based on a distinctive collective identity and who purposefully engage in action geared towards social change (Diani, 1992; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2008). Social movements play an integral role in the progress of society because they provide the oppressed and marginalized with the opportunity to obtain acknowledgement in the public sphere (Weldon, 2002). Expressions of dissidence in social movements traditionally manifest from the protests that powerless actors collectively stage in opposition to the actions, decisions, and/or legitimacy of groups who have authority and influence over society, such as governments or large corporations (Diani, 2012; Jenkins & Perrow, 1977; Roberts, 1998). While earlier conceptualizations of social movements regarded their emergence as episodes of irrational and spontaneous action of individuals (Smelser, 2011), more recent research has offered explanations from various perspectives, including relative deprivation theory (social psychological; see Fuchs, 2006;

Hannigan, 1985), framing (social cognitive; see Snow & Benford, 1988), and social network (Diani & McAdam, 2003) and resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978).

ICT have begun to play an increasingly significant role in social movements in that they allow citizens to coordinate and produce change in their community through collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2007; Yuce, Agarwal, Wigand, Lim, & Robinson, 2014). The widespread influence of social media-enabled social movements in inspiring marginalized populations and the radical outcomes of these community-driven movements in transforming existing cultural and political norms not only demonstrate the role of social media as an alternative platform for the powerless to have their voices heard (Shirazi, 2013) but have also attracted the attention of academics, journalists, and practitioners from a range of disciplines (Enjolras et al., 2013; Mora, 2014; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Yuce et al., 2014).

From reviewing the existing literature, we found that researchers have significantly focused on understanding how ICT influence “the power relations institutionalized in society” (Castells, 2007, p. 249). Yet, few studies in the IS literature specifically address the fundamental change of the community’s role from a follower to a driver in social movements and how social media enables this transformation process (Leong, Pan, Ractham, & Kaewkitipong, 2015). While a handful of studies do mention grassroots activism and the notion that ICT have enabled the transformation of the dynamics of power in movement politics (e.g., de Wilde, Vermeulen, & Reithler, 2003), the majority of studies fail to examine the changes to contemporary mobilizing agencies with the rise of the powerless civic community. More specifically, these studies continue to focus on core IS issues, such as IT investment strategies and the challenges involved in managing ICT for developing countries (Brown & Grant, 2010 p. 100).

From reviewing the existing literature, we also found a need to understand the formative role of social media in social movements (Dolata & Schrape, 2015). While social media has been cast as a platform from which individuals can “activate and act as catalysts of collective action” within their network (Cardoso et al., 2013, pp. 3-4), the majority of the studies continue to regard participation as the key, if not the only, outcome of collective action in a social movement and neglect other empowered collective actions such as influence and control (Baker, 1993). As such, we can see that existing studies demonstrate a predominantly narrow focus on the episodic effect of social media (Earl & Kimport, 2011) because they continue to emphasize a movement’s immediate consequences (i.e., participation) and short-term causes (such as the informational role of ICT in amplifying a movement’s size, speed, and reach) (Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005). As a result, we do not adequately understand what role social media plays in facilitating the development and evolution of social movements. While some studies do suggest the organizing potential of social media (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011), these studies remain primarily conceptual discussions because they lack detail on “how” the formation takes place (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2014; Enjolras et al., 2013)..

## 2.2 Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process from which communities gain mastery over their affairs (Hur, 2006; Rappaport, 1987). While certain studies view empowerment as a social process (e.g., Page & Czuba, 1999; Peterson, Lowe, Aquilino, & Schneider, 2005; Rappaport, 1987), others perceive empowerment as an outcome based on its measurability against initial expectations (e.g., Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2003). Additionally, a small number of studies focuses on empowerment as both a process and an outcome (Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

The existing literature has identified three underlying pillars of the empowerment process: the structural, psychological, and resource dimensions. Structural empowerment refers to the provision of facilitating environments and the removal of barriers to enable involvement and action (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). An example of structural empowerment is embodied in the availability of the Internet and social media to connect powerless but like-minded entities to seek social support (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015). Such a definition implicitly gives rise to the notion that power can be transferred and shared (Kreisberg, 1992) so much so that it may lead to the notion that a facilitating environment alone can effect empowerment. And yet, a facilitating environment alone may not effect empowerment because it does not necessarily cause individuals to feel empowered (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005). Instead, the feeling of empowerment stems from psychological empowerment, which refers to the enhancement of an individual’s subjective interpretation and perceived internal locus of control (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Examples of psychological empowerment include the provision of social support (Logan & Ganster, 2007), increased relational intimacy with organizations (Speer & Hughey, 1996), or the facilitation of others’ empowerment (Christens, 2012). Thus, we can see that the realization

of this cognitive sense of empowerment largely depends on those who possess the resources or the capability to provide them. Indeed, as the last dimension, resource empowerment refers to the process of cultivating a community's capability to acquire and mobilize resources (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). Ownership of, or the capacity to control, resources form the basis of resource empowerment as opposed to the mere ability to access resources because the former embodies true power. The former acknowledges the existence of local, but often latent, assets and social capital in a community (Van den Eynde & Veno, 1999).

While studies have established the notion that empowerment rests on these three pillars fairly well, most tend to examine empowerment from a single dimension, such as structural empowerment (e.g., Adamson, 2010; Bowen & Lawler, 1995) or psychological empowerment (e.g., Christens, 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Speer & Hughey, 1996), which fails to account for the three dimensions holistically (Ersing, 2003; Hur, 2006). To achieve a more integrative view of empowered outcomes in community involvement and engagement for our study, we also draw on the contributions of sociologist Patrick Heller to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, which focuses on understanding the different types of power that a community can gain in social movements. While stating that "civil society by definition has no power" (Heller, 2013, p. 6), Heller proposes three types of latent power that civil societies can attain: normative power, mobilizational power, and institutional power. Normative power refers to the ability to problematize and thematize neglected or repressed social issues in order to transform norms, systems, or criteria of valuation; mobilizational power refers to the ability to mobilize those who have failed to find redress for their grievances through the existing system; and institutional power represents the ability to organize and influence the decision making activities of the powerful (Heller, 2013).

### 3 Research Method

In this study, we adopt the case research method. Given the complex and multi-dimensional nature of social media-enabled social movements, an exploratory approach is especially appropriate because the approach allows for unexpected findings—free from expectations that may exist due to prior hypotheses—to emerge (Siggelkow, 2007). In particular, the approach allows one to discover underlying structures and processes (Gephart, 2004) in social media-enabled social movements. It also allows one to develop theory in research domains with relatively little prior research (Eisenhardt, 1991) through empirically rich and holistic accounts.

We used three criteria to select a case to examine: 1) the social movement needed to be a community-based movement that powerless civil members drove, 2) social media needed to have played a significant role in the social movement, and 3) the social movement needed to have precipitated some extent of community empowerment. Based on these criteria, we selected the Bersih movement as the case study for our research. First, it was a non-partisan movement that powerless civil members with no political affiliation drove; as such, it engendered a unique and organic environment for grassroots, bottom-up collective action. Second, social media was a critical enabler of the movement. The Malaysian diaspora has created at least 70 self-organizing communities on Facebook and Twitter, including around 40 groups and community pages, in more than 90 cities worldwide. Third, the Bersih movement exhibited community empowerment through successful self-organized actions, which led to individuals' increased awareness and participation over four major rallies. The movement also successfully exerted public pressure on the Malaysian Government, who has since established the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform. This committee comprises both members of government and opposition and focuses on improving the electoral system in Malaysia (Khoo, 2014).

#### 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The literature on empowerment formed the theoretical lens for our data-collection process. Further, by iteratively comparing the data we collected with this lens, we collected and analyzed the data concurrently (Walsham, 1995). Primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 26 interviewees across seven cities (Hong Kong, Toronto, Paris, San Francisco, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Sydney). We identified and selected interviewees for this study via two main processes. First, we sought active members of the Bersih movement by contacting core members of the Global Bersih group. Then we used a chain referral sampling approach (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) by means of interviewee referrals during each interview to identify additional potential interviewees. Second, we contacted the Facebook administrators of pages and groups related to the Bersih movement. We chose those who responded as interviewees for research. Such a method suited our research because, due to their role as administrators

of social media pages and groups, we could obtain unique “on the ground” accounts of the utility of social media in the Bersih movement. Furthermore, to ensure case representativeness, the interviewees we selected included a range of stakeholders involved in the Bersih movement, such as ordinary citizens, students, activists, academics, working professionals, administrators of Facebook groups affiliated with Bersih, and active members of Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih, the key non-government organizations (NGOs) associated with the movement that had, at the height of the movement, about 247,000 and 18,500 Facebook followers, respectively. The Appendix summarizes the profiles of these interviewees. By obtaining data from multiple primary sources, we could comprehensively understand the movement (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Given that many events of the social movement occurred prior to our collecting data on site, we used archival data from social media feeds to identify key events and processes that could facilitate our line of inquiry. We examined social media feeds generated on 25 groups and community pages across Facebook, 16 YouTube videos, and nine Twitter feeds that the self-organizing Malaysian diaspora across more than 90 cities worldwide created. Some notable Facebook groups included Bersih 2.0, Global Bersih, Mamas Bersih, Johor Yellow Flame, and the Bersih groups of various cities such as Bersih Sydney and Bersih New Zealand. We also collected secondary data from sources such as government websites, reports, news articles, books, journals, and conference papers to elicit further insights.

In terms of data analysis, we first developed narratives regarding the movement and its key events and outcomes according to the secondary data that we collected prior to conducting the interviewees. As a result, we developed an initial understanding of social media use in the Bersih social movement. We began our second round of analysis as we collected the data. Drawing on the theoretical notions of power (normative, mobilizational, and institutional) that we identified in the literature, we coded data related to the use of social media and community in tables. These theoretical notions are involved as part of an iterative process of data collection and analysis in addition to being applied to guide the design of data collection (Walsham, 1995). In other words, from the rich accounts of the movement, the use of social media, and community involvement that we documented (Langley, 1999), the analytic categories served as a filter that we used to develop an organized narrative. In turn, this narrative served as a base for subsequent analysis. At this point, we had created a case narrative and, more importantly, emergent themes that illustrate how social media empowers people.

Next, in the third round of analysis, we analyzed the emergent themes that describe social media empowerment and particularly those that pertain to the different empowerment dimensions (i.e., structural, psychological, and resource). At the same time, grounded in the principle of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we focused on the “abstraction” of the emergent themes to derive concepts that summarized the empowerment process. We constantly refined the concepts during this reiterative process in order to ensure that they were conceptually and empirically distinctive (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Building on the above analysis, we conducted a final round of analysis in which we focused on specifying the mechanisms of social media empowerment. To this end, we conducted selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We also consistently compared our findings with those of prior studies (Klein & Myers, 1999; Pan & Tan, 2011) until a comprehensive conceptual model emerged (see Figure 4). To ensure that our results were well developed and robust, we applied the principle of triangulation (Dubé & Paré, 2003; Klein & Myers, 1999); that is, we cross-referenced multiple data sources (interviews, focus groups, news reports, and archival data) to ensure the consistency of our data, and we had multiple analysts review the interpretive analysis to ensure its comprehensiveness (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). We collected and analyzed data concurrently and iteratively until we reached theoretical saturation—the point at which the additional data collected did not add to, or conflict with, our conceptual model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In Section 3.2, we describe the Bersih movement and, in Section 4, present our analysis.

### 3.2 Case Description: The Bersih Movement

Bersih movement was a community movement that non-partisan Malaysian citizens across the world drove to campaign for clean and fair elections in the country (Khoo, 2014). In 2007, public concerns with the state of the nation’s electoral system and particularly the Electoral Commission (EC), the administrative body responsible for Malaysia’s electoral procedures, heightened. Consequently, many prominent Malaysian political commentators began to harness social media blogs to cultivate awareness of the nation’s political state. Along with the involvement of opposition political members and civil society groups, this initial form of citizen mobilization resulted in the first Bersih rally (Bersih 1.0) on 10 November,



2007, with participants gathering around four public locations in the downtown area of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, an uncommon occurrence in the country's history (Khoo, 2014; Smeltzer & Paré, 2015). The heightened feelings of purpose, hope, and determination eventually led to the formation of the non-partisan group, Bersih 2.0, in 2010.

Facilitated by the widespread use of social media, the growing momentum that Bersih gathered in the lead up to its second rally gained the attention from the concerned Malaysian diaspora overseas and the international media, including the BBC, *The Economist*, and *The Wall Street Journal* (see BBC, 2011; The Economist, 2011; The Wall Street Journal, 2011). For the first time, the overseas Malaysian diaspora demonstrated their support for local Malaysians by organizing solidarity gatherings in more than 32 countries (e.g., Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and France) worldwide (Bersih, 2016). How this diaspora organized these gatherings highlights two key defining aspects of the Bersih movement: 1) the movement's widespread success in leveraging social media to mobilize supporters, and 2) the extent to which support for the movement transcended both geographical boundaries and societal demographics such as race and religion (Smeltzer & Paré, 2015). The sense of hope and determination from overseas supporters in the Bersih movement culminated in the formation of Global Bersih in April 2012. This community-driven NGO was based in Geneva, Switzerland, and comprised a network of Malaysians from around the world. Global Bersih contributed to the overall Bersih movement by providing international advocacy support.

## 4 Findings

Our findings provide insights into how social media served to enable the Bersih movement to progressively attain power to act in the interest of distributed civil communities (Heller, 2013).

### 4.1 Development of Normative Power

Social media allowed many local Malaysians who could not physically join the Bersih rallies due to professional and personal commitments to participate in it movement. Two Bersih supporters created the Facebook group "Bersih 4.0 We Ready 400,000 Malaysians" in 2012, and it has since amassed over 17,000 members. In this group, many supporters have shared, posted, and engaged in discussions regarding pertinent Malaysian political issues. A civil servant explained:

*My husband went to the rally. I wish I could join the rally but I can't because one of us has to stay at home and take care of the kids. I seldom post in my Facebook, but when there is a movement, I would be active on social media.*

In the lead up to the upcoming general election (GE), many overseas Malaysians who hoped to help shape Malaysia's political narrative realized that only government-affiliated personnel (which included military groups, tertiary scholarship holders, and government liaisons) could vote from overseas. In order to vote, individuals who did not fall under any of those government-affiliated groups would need to fly back to their local constituency in Malaysia. However, for many of the 700,000 Malaysians located overseas (BFM VDO, 2013), the costs of doing so would be prohibitive. A Malaysian mother based in New Zealand explained: "I called the embassy up and that's when I found out that I wasn't allowed to vote. And I couldn't go back because I had a young child with me. I couldn't fly back.". The inability to participate in the voting process, which geographical restrictions and personal commitments exacerbated, created a sense of powerlessness in overseas Malaysians because many felt that they, as a Global Bersih steering committee member described, "couldn't do or say anything".

While unable to participate in voting, social media offered overseas Malaysians the ability to freely participate in the discourse of Malaysian politics. More specifically, overseas Malaysians could use social media to *emancipate* themselves from political discussions in only their social network, which included posting thought-provoking topics, "liking" or commenting on social media posts, and sharing articles and posts related to the latest Malaysian political issues. A steering committee member for the Bersih 2.0 group explained:

*The good thing [about social media] is that it allows people to become more active players, rather than passive recipients of information and knowledge.... You have more people speaking and more democratized in that sense and by participating, people feel empowered.... They no longer just pass on the message. They actively share the message. They produce and add additional messages to it and so on.*

While predominantly used for casual socializing, social media also provided individuals with an outlet to express their political opinions to their social network. That is, social media enabled the public to have their own voice as a member of the Global Bersih group described:

*Having a voice is very important and social media has allowed us to have that voice. Anyone can have that voice [and] that's the good thing.... Now you have the power to have your own audience. Anyone can have their own audience.*

Indeed, a former student activist supported the aforementioned view in explaining that how individuals use social media, particularly Facebook, demonstrates their confidence and lack of fear from figures of authority, such as the government: "If they put [a] caption [on a Facebook post], they are not afraid, because when you put your caption, you are commenting, you give your own comment".

Before social media appeared, Malaysians mostly depended on traditional media for the latest news regarding Malaysian political affairs. Social media enabled Malaysians to receive information that these predominantly state-controlled channels likely filtered out. Given the variety and amount of news that individuals could access on these social media platforms, social media became a convenient and *diverse* news resource for many Malaysians. An activist explains: "People they like to play [with] Instagram, Twitter, Facebook.... They get all the information from [social media], they get the news from Facebook."

## 4.2 Development of Mobilizational Power

Social media also facilitated connections between the Bersih community and other socio-political activism groups, such as an environmental society (Anti-Lynas), a student youth movement (Malaysia Youth and Students Democratic Movement), and a civil movement group (Johor Yellow Flame). In these groups, administrators and members shared posts from the Bersih 2.0's Facebook to spread awareness and, ultimately, launch their own initiatives to support and complement Bersih 2.0's efforts. In addition, to demonstrate support for the major Bersih 2.0 rally in Malaysia in 2011, many overseas supporters organized their own rallies in their local cities. Previously, these efforts were largely isolated and spontaneous, which made it difficult for the civil movement groups to harness the size and significance of the Bersih movement.

However, social media's networking capabilities, which allowed individuals to establish and maintain connections and to mobilize other participants, amplified the publicity effect of the overall movement. In the lead up to Bersih 3.0, city coordinators (community members who were responsible for coordinating the overseas rallies) sent the links of their city's Facebook rally event to the Global Bersih group (see Figure 1), which led to major Bersih rallies worldwide. According to the former president of Global Bersih:

*Global Bersih is really just a grouping of individuals and small groups in various cities across the world who keep in touch by email and on social media, and who, in many ways, come to real life whenever there is a big thing happening in Malaysia. So there is a rally in Malaysia, instinctively, everybody knows the same thing should be happening in San Francisco, Auckland, Sydney, Tokyo and Middle Eastern cities.... We just activate ourselves every time we think there is something that we can do to support the reform movement back home.*

Notwithstanding the efforts of a few prominent bloggers, the civil movement groups and activists found it difficult to raise awareness about the Bersih movement and its aims via ICT. Social media played a significant role in transforming community members from simply participating in the Bersih movement to influencing others outside their personal networks to also participate in it. Members who did not know about or could not *articulate ideas for themselves* or transfer these ideas to others found these influencers to be particularly valuable. A social media blogger explained:

*People feel that way [emotional], but they don't know how to express it, so when you can express it well for them, they love it. They will share it with all their friends and say, "this is exactly what I wanna say".*

Individuals' ability to act as influencers through groups ultimately helped them to *mobilize* others to join the Bersih rallies. Consequently, the number of supporters at the Bersih rallies increased exponentially from 30,000 participants for Bersih 1.0 to 500,000 participants for Bersih 4.0).





**Figure 1. List of Bersih-related Facebook Groups on the Global Bersih Facebook Page**

Beyond enabling community members to act as influencers, social media also allowed them to share and replicate *informational resources*. Through their main Facebook page, the Global Bersih group shared instructions on how to organize rallies overseas. These instructions resonated with overseas supporters who had expressed interest in becoming more involved in the movement due to their inability to physically attend the Bersih rallies in Malaysia. The Global Bersih secretariat explained:

*People started coming and thought, "How can we join?". So it's really through Facebook event pages how we ran the whole process. For example, if you're sitting in Sydney and you want to organize an event, if you come to our website or our Facebook page, we provide the information. They know they are not alone.*

As a result, community members created more than 40 overseas-based Facebook pages. Assuming different forms of the Bersih signature, such as "Bersih Canada" and "Bersih 2.0 New Zealand", these Facebook pages served as a hub for coordinating and organizing local rallies. One Sydney-based city coordinator who used Global Bersih's informational resources, which included details of the event and the Bersih movement's aims, to organize a Sydney-based Bersih rally in 2015 described as much in saying:

*We use the same content basically. We just update [Global Bersih's message] in the newsfeed or [Facebook event] description and then at the end, we put our location, the time of the rally and contact email.*

Thus, one can see social media's utility in the Bersih movement it that it helped community members to increase the number of participants that physically supported the movement's rallies and to share and replicate information resources via an increasingly interconnected network.

### 4.3 Development of Institutional Power

In the lead up to Bersih 2.0, many overseas Malaysians decided to demonstrate their support by hosting rallies in their local cities. However, even though community members expressed interest in maintaining the Malaysian diaspora's engagement with the movement, the logistics in *coordinating* such a feat proved to be difficult due to these members' wide dispersion across the world, which adversely affected the community members' ability to effectively communicate with them through traditional means, such as face-to-face meetings. As one steering committee member for Global Bersih described:

*The nature of this group, this collective movement, is that [we're] in different cities, so it's very hard to meet in person. It's different if I'm here, and it's within a city and... everyone comes together. It's different when we all in different cities.*

Although members initially used Google email discussion groups, they eventually came to use social media to coordinate and communicate with each other in real time. As such, this communication sped up the decision making process when coordinating efforts, such as disseminating press releases, between the many Global Bersih's geographically dispersed members who had never met in person. In particular, the Global Bersih president as at 2016 described how members used WhatsApp for such communication:

*We started utilizing WhatsApp for our own internal communication for quick messages to each other like, "has somebody finished writing press release or not? Who should check [this]?" [This is a] very quick and dirty [form of] communication.*

As the Bersih movement mobilized the masses to partake in major rallies, community concerns regarding the public image of the movement began to develop over time. As the rallies began to attract increasing attention both on domestic and international platforms, community members expressed concern that the public would only regard Bersih as a rally movement. Indeed, one steering committee member of the Bersih 2.0 group mentioned as much in staying: "In people's mind, people still think that we are a protest movement. We only appear during a protest and then we disappear." Bersih and Global Bersih focused on highlighting the key aims and messages of the Bersih movement, including increasing the political awareness of Malaysians through advocacy and education. According to Global Bersih's president:

*We see our mandate and mission as much more than organizing rallies. Our mandate is really to focus on bringing institutional reform to Malaysia through international advocacy, so providing information first of all to Malaysians abroad, and bringing advocacy to international bodies and other countries and states to kind of put pressure on Malaysia externally...to make change happen.*

In partnership with another activist group, Bersih 2.0 created and released a series of videos known as "Voters Rights Education" on YouTube (see Figure 2) to educate the public on the fundamental rights of a Malaysian voter. Hence, social media soon afforded the Bersih 2.0 and Global Bersih groups the opportunity to raise advocacy awareness and educate the public on key political issues. Public information including instructions on how to vote via post and cautionary information regarding the current use of indelible ink and deliberate designs for polling stations helped the Bersih 2.0 group to *reticulate and steer* the public's growing opinion of Bersih as just a "rally-oriented" movement and channel their activism efforts. A Bersih member explained:

*[Social media] helped us in terms of engaging a crowd that may not support street rallies, street demonstrations.... I think it helps us a lot in terms of bringing advocacy. People start knowing basic rights, basic information, not only about electoral roles, electoral system, but [also about] the current issues.*

Due to these efforts, the Bersih 2.0 group won the international 2016 Gwanju Prize for Human Rights in recognition for their ongoing efforts and contribution in advancing human rights, democracy, and peace.

Besides facilitating advocacy activities, social media also enabled the Bersih community to *search, gather, and distribute* a variety of resources, such as knowledge, volunteers, and monetary donations, to help develop and strengthen movement campaigns (see Figure 3). One prominent example is the Jom Balik Undi (JBU) campaign, a crowd-funding initiative of Global Bersih. Translated as "Go Home and Vote", the social media-based campaign encouraged overseas Malaysians to travel back to Malaysia to vote in the 2013 elections. The campaign called on Malaysians to spread the word by submitting photos of themselves holding a message of change. Individuals collectively shared the photos over 60,000 times on Facebook. As the campaign's creator and former steering committee member of Global Bersih explained:

*The aim of JBU was multi-pronged: bring attention to the overseas voter disenfranchisement, empower Malaysians to make positive actions to make a difference...[and] not just whine on social media, [and] encourage the Malaysians living in Malaysia to take the elections seriously. Despite the substantial numbers of people feeling disgruntled, many were not registered voters or felt their vote didn't matter. We are all Malaysians. We can do something simple that would make a difference.*



**Figure 2. Excerpt of Voters Rights Education Video**

More significantly, the JBU campaign gained the attention and support of a number of airlines, which offered to provide discounted air tickets to enable Malaysians to return home to vote. As the creator of the JBU campaign explained:

*Eventually the campaign gained the attention of Azran Osman Rani, who was then CEO of AirAsiaX, and he made an announcement on our Facebook page that AirAsiaX would offer discounted tickets to Malaysians returning to vote. This was followed by an announcement by Aireen Omar, CEO of AirAsia, that the discount would be applied to domestic flights during the election period.*



**Figure 3. Image from Jom Balik Undi Campaign**

## 5 Discussion and Research Implications

We derived a conceptual model (see Figure 4 below) that illustrates the empowerment process of a community through social media-enabled social movements from synthesizing our research findings on the Bersih movement. Table 1 summarizes the key concepts in the model, which we discuss further in this section. A social movement occurs when a community is powerless and unable to understand and make sense of issues on their own accord—especially when formal groups with authority shape the meaning, consciousness, and belief systems that surround such issues (Freire, 1973; Heller, 2013; Kabeeer, 1999). From analyzing our case findings, we discovered that social media can serve as an independent platform and enable the community to voice their opinions and to receive a diverse range of information to understand and make sense of political issues. First, social media from an empowerment perspective promotes the development of normative power through *structural emancipation*, *idea expression*, and *resource diversification* in which civil society can problematize and thematize social issues that they felt those in power have neglected and/or repressed. Social media provides an alternative and extra-institutional channel for individuals to participate in civic movements and, thus, emancipates them from existing structural barriers (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003; Torbert, 1991) due to the range of involvement opportunities that social media affords them.

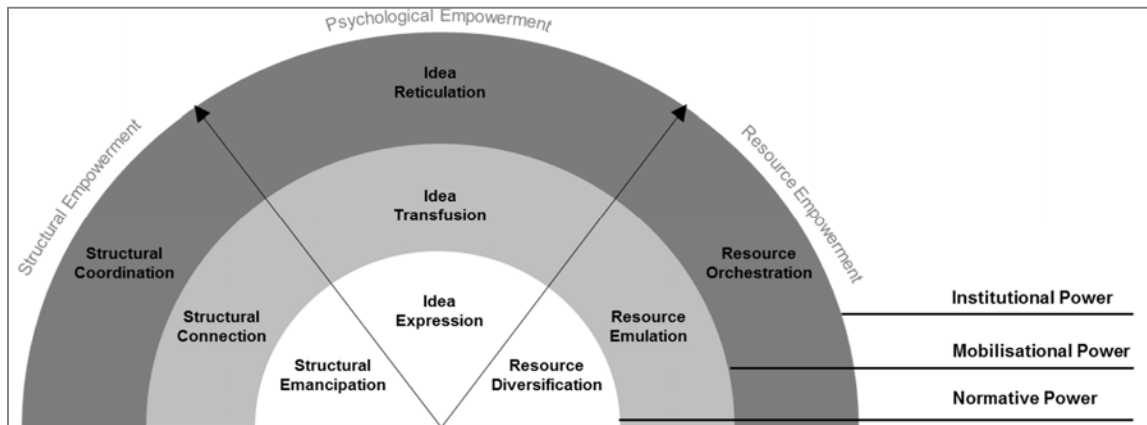
Beyond expanding the extent and scope of involvement in social movements, social media's affording structural emancipation also allows communities to develop the political knowledge they need to more effectively enact initiatives that focus on effecting social change (Gaventa, 1980; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). Because social media serves as a "multi-vocal platform through which silenced and marginalized groups can have their voices heard" (Shirazi, 2013, p. 43), they help individuals develop their sense of self-determination and form the foundation for the discourse of ideas towards socio-political change (Enjolras et al., 2013). Moreover, developing normative power involves developing the ability to acquire, control, and manage informational resources (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Hur, 2006). Due to their transparent and propagating nature, social media reduce individuals' dependency on traditional forms of media to "assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 198). As a result, individuals can become aware of their social powerlessness and understand their potential to change the circumstance (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2011).

Second, social media develops mobilizational power among communities through *structural connection*, *idea transfusion*, and *resource emulation* to mobilize those who cannot address their grievances through the existing political system. Such development occurs when a community assumes personal responsibility in order to address the root of their problems, prevent the recurrence of these problems, and drive change by acting as movement mobilizers (Gutierrez, 1990). From our findings, we saw that communities can build structural connections by searching and identifying individuals/groups of similar interests and by connecting with others to amplify their efforts. Social media not only serves as a structure to enhance the flexibility of connection and interaction between participants by providing an online space for the community but also strengthens the connection through developing transparency and interpersonal trust (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Social media allows community members to become influencers via transfusing ideas to others. Social media places individuals in the center of a "vast universe of dense networks" of influence (Cardoso et al., 2013, p. 3) and allows them to diffuse "information through multiple channels quickly and across vast spaces" (Krinsky & Crossley, 2014, p. 5). The use of social media in social movements challenges an existing assumption of previous studies that describe how community members can influence others only in their personal network of family and friends (Diani & McAdam, 2003). The transfusion of ideas through social media helps to motivate others to demonstrate their support for a social movement through emotional arousal and social persuasion (Bandura, 1986) as evident through our findings in which the use of social media in the Bersih movement saw an exponential increase in the number of supporters at the Bersih rallies.

Finally, developing mobilizational power requires key resources such as tactical knowledge on how to organize social movement events, which geographically dispersed social movement communities cannot easily obtain (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Social media platforms allow individuals to externalize, organize, and integrate tactical knowledge, such as instructional templates on organizing events, through community networks, including pages and groups that the community follows and creates. Moreover, social media's ability to serve as an electronic repository of instructional-based resources can serve as an archival record for community members to use and emulate in the future (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In other words, social media affords resource emulation to allow communities to harness the resources of



others as their own, and, as such, the community has access to the necessary tools to mobilize others for collective action (Weissberg, 1999).



**Figure 4. Conceptual Model of how Social Media Empowers the Community in the Bersih Movement**

Third, social media develops institutional power among communities through *structural coordination*, *idea reticulation*, and *resource orchestration* to influence the decision making process of the institutions that affect their social conditions (Wandersman, Heller, Price, Riger, & Reinbarz, 1984). In traditional social movements, coordination typically occurs through face-to-face meetings because such meetings facilitate the building of trust and friendship. Our findings reveal, however, that social media can enable a spatially dispersed group (e.g., Global Bersih) to coordinate and self-organize because social media operates as “organizing agents” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012 p. 752) but without the costly and complex organizational infrastructure that one can see in traditional and formal social movement organizations. The synchronous and transparent network connections that social media enable support community coordination and organization based on “self-selection and decentralization rather than coercion and hierarchically assigned tasks” (Benkler, 2006 p. 59). Our findings further reveal that social media can help communities develop a shared understanding of values and ideologies, which are critical to effective collective action that can significantly impact others, which includes authority figures (Drury & Reicher, 2009). From our study, social media not only affords accessibility and visibility to advocacy initiatives but also facilitates their continuity over time and develops the latent power embedded in the network (e.g., Bersih 2.0's voter's education videos, which focused on ensuring that everyone had the same understanding of voting rights and the ideologies of the Bersih movement).

Lastly, in relation to institutional power, our findings reveal that social media helps a community not only acquire resources but also develop the capability to aggregate and develop those resources. In traditional social movements, the ability to gather and aggregate the necessary resources typically lie in the hands of social movement organizations because their established nature provides the legitimacy to do so (Cardoso et al., 2013; Klandermans & Roggeband, 2007). Our study shows that social media can play this role as well by enabling individuals in a community to orchestrate resources, by diminishing the boundaries between individuals and groups, and by facilitating an organic flow and the assembly of resources between such parties (Mora, 2014). The use of social media enhances the flexibility and capacity of grassroots groups in designing their strategies and tactics (Majchrzak & More, 2011).

In summarizing, the conceptual model that we present in our study (see Figure 4 and Table 1 for accompanying descriptions of the key concepts) has several theoretical and practical implications. Complementing existing theories, our study elucidates social media's role in transforming a community from a follower to a driver. Moreover, we address the call for a fuller understanding of the formative role of social media in social movements and highlight their organizing potential. Our study also proposes a specific sequence of the different types of power that a community can attain from using social media. For practitioners, this study indicates the various types of social media-enabled community engagement and the range of community actions that are possible in the different power stages.



Table 1. Key Concepts

Key concepts	Description
<b>Normative power</b>	Refers to the ability to problematize and thematize social issues that those in power have neglected or repressed in order to transform norms, systems, or criteria of valuation (Heller 2013). We conceptualize the role of social media in social movements, from an empowerment perspective, as enabling a grassroots community to attain normative power through structural emancipation, idea expression, and resource diversification.
Structural emancipation	Refers to removing hindrances to participation (typically physical) and allowing community members to participate based on their capacity and interests.
Idea expression	Refers to a grassroots community's ability to openly express their ideas and opinions.
Resource diversification	Refers to the receiving of diverse information from both in and outside personal social networks (e.g., through mutual friends).
<b>Mobilizational power</b>	Refers to the ability to mobilize those who have failed to find redress for their grievances through the existing system (Heller, 2013). In this study, the notions of structural connection, idea transfusion, and resource emulation form the underlying mechanisms that enable a grassroots community to attain mobilizational power in social media-enabled social movements.
Structural connection	Refers to the establishment and maintenance of loose connections among a grassroots community.
Idea transfusion	Refers to the spreading of ideas to both personal social networks and indirect networks of a broader community.
Resource emulation	Refers to accessing and harnessing the resources of other community members as their own regardless of member geographical location.
<b>Institutional power</b>	Refers to the ability to organize and influence the decision making activities of the powerful (Heller, 2013). We conceptualize the role of social media in social movements as enabling a grassroots community to attain institutional power through structural coordination, idea reticulation, and resource orchestration.
Structural coordination	Refers to self-organization and coordination among a community regardless of geographical location.
Idea reticulation	Refers to the sustainment of shared values and ideologies among a grassroots community so it can drive and continue advocacy initiatives.
Resource orchestration	The acquisition, aggregation, and development of resources both material (e.g., money) and immaterial (e.g., legitimacy).

## 6 Conclusion

Our study has several limitations. The first one lies in its singular context. In particular, we conducted this study against the backdrop of a specific socio-political movement (i.e., a reformative social movement). As such, the findings and contributions of our study may not generalize to other types of movements—particularly those that entail radical changes or alter personal behavior, such as religious movements.

In addition, our study builds on data gathered from informants who lived in seven cities because we focused on selecting members of the Malaysian diaspora that were actively involved in the social movement as potential interviewees. However, we acknowledge the possibility that perspectives from the Malaysian diaspora based in other areas outside of the seven cities under study may vary due to differing geo-political contexts. As these perspectives may differ and, thus, may impact the findings, further research should determine the generalizability of the conceptual model to the Malaysian diaspora located outside of the seven cities included in this study.

Furthermore, we conducted this study in a Malaysian context. While many social movement actors lived around the world, these actors were nevertheless part of the Malaysian diaspora. As socio-political

conditions can differ widely between countries, further studies need to ascertain if the conceptual model we present in this paper generalizes beyond the context of Malaysia.

In summary, this study sheds light on the role of social media as a mechanism for community empowerment in social movements. Our study reveals how social media can provide individuals the means to express long-suppressed views, organize unequally distributed resources, and mobilize bottom-up support. It also shows how social media can facilitate contemporary grassroots social movements and, thus, complements the existing knowledge on their proliferation in the digital age and the social consequences of the use of ICT.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Interviewee Profile

No.	Interviewee profile	Gender	Location (city, country)	Role	Affiliation / topics discussed
1	Participant of the Bersih 2.0 (2011), Bersih 3.0 (2012) and Bersih 4.0 (2015) rallies in Kuala Lumpur.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Rally participant	<b>Participant:</b> knowledge of Bersih movement, role of social media, participatory activities etc.
2	Participant of the Bersih 2.0 (2011), Bersih 3.0 (2012) and Bersih 4.0 (2015) rallies in Kuala Lumpur.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Rally participant	
3	Social media-based participant since 2011.	Female	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Social media-based participant	
4	Participant of the Bersih 4.0 (2015) rally in Toronto.	Female	Toronto, Canada	Rally participant	
5	Los Angeles-based city coordinator for Global Bersih. Responsible for coordinating solidarity gatherings in Los Angeles. Also an administrator for the "Bersih Los Angeles" Facebook page.	Male	Los Angeles, United States	City coordinator of the Global Bersih solidarity gatherings	<b>Activist:</b> coordination of resources, knowledge of Bersih movement, role of social media, participatory activities, networks with other groups, challenges of movement activities, etc.
6	Los Angeles-based city coordinator for Global Bersih. Responsible for coordinating solidarity gatherings in Los Angeles. Also an administrator for the "Bersih Los Angeles" Facebook page.	Female	Los Angeles, United States	City coordinator of the Global Bersih solidarity gatherings	
7	Student activist and long-term volunteer of five years. Has had previous activism experience with Malaysian youth movements.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Student activist collaborating with Bersih 2.0	
8	Long-term activist of six years. Has had previous experience with Malaysian youth movements and currently works for a socio-political NGO, which collaborates with the Bersih 2.0 group.	Female	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Activist and representative of an NGO collaborating with Bersih 2.0	
9	Student activist and long-term volunteer of five years. Has had previous activism experience with civil society groups.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Student activist collaborating with Bersih 2.0	
10	Kuala Lumpur-based administration and communications staff for Global Bersih. Responsible for the coordination and distribution of Global Bersih media releases through both online and offline means.	Female	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Administration and communications coordinator for Global Bersih	

No.	Interviewee profile	Gender	Location (city, country)	Role	Affiliation / topics discussed
11	Former student activist involved in Malaysian youth movements. Has had experience in mobilizing supporters to join rallies, including the Bersih 4.0 (2015) rally in Kuala Lumpur.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Former student activist collaborating with Bersih 2.0	
12	Hong Kong-based city coordinator for Global Bersih. Responsible for coordinating solidarity gatherings in Hong Kong. Has been involved in the movement since 2011. Has had previous experience working with international NGOs.	Male	Hong Kong, China	City coordinator of the Global Bersih solidarity gatherings	
13	Former Sydney-based city coordinator for Global Bersih. Responsible for coordinating solidarity gatherings in Sydney.	Male	Sydney, Australia	City coordinator of the Global Bersih solidarity gatherings	
14	Auckland-based city coordinator for Global Bersih. Responsible for coordinating solidarity gatherings in Auckland. Has been involved in the movement since 2011. Also an administrator of the "Bersih New Zealand" Facebook page.	Female	Auckland, New Zealand	City coordinator of the Global Bersih solidarity gatherings	
15	Founder of "Mama's Bersih", a Facebook-based civil society group consisting of mothers in support of the Bersih movement.	Female	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Founder and Facebook administrator of <i>Mama's Bersih</i>	
16	Administrator and long-term activist of four years for "Johor Yellow Flame", a Facebook-based civil society group in support of the Bersih movement. Has had previous activism experience with Malaysian NGOs.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Facebook administrator of <i>Johor Yellow Flame</i>	
17	Sydney-based steering committee member of Global Bersih since 2012. Responsible for the creative design of online Global Bersih campaigns.	Male	Sydney, Australia	Steering committee member of Global Bersih	<b>Emergent grassroots organizer:</b> origins of Bersih movement, membership information, coordination of resources, knowledge of Bersih movement, role of social media, participatory activities, networks with
18	Geneva-based secretary for Global Bersih. Has had previous activism experience with other international NGOs since 2007.	Male	Geneva, Switzerland	Secretariat for Global Bersih	
19	Former president of Global Bersih (until 2014). Involved in the movement since 2008. Has had previous experience in political journalism.	Male	Sydney, Australia	Former president of Global Bersih (until 2014)	

No.	Interviewee profile	Gender	Location (city, country)	Role	Affiliation / topics discussed
20	Treasurer of Bersih 2.0. Has been involved in the movement since 2012. Has had previous activism experience with other Malaysian NGOs.	Male	Johor Bahru, Malaysia	Treasurer of Bersih 2.0	other groups, challenges of movement activities, etc.
21	Paris-based steering committee member of Global Bersih. Has been involved in the movement since 2011 and has had previous activism experience with Malaysian society forums since 2003.	Female	Paris, France	Steering committee member of Global Bersih	
22	Current president of Global Bersih (since 2015). Has had previous activism experience in Malaysian youth movements and political discourse forums.	Male	San Francisco, United States	Current president of Global Bersih	
23	Secretariat manager of steering committee member of Bersih 2.0. Long-term activist involved in the movement since 2012. Involved in the organization of the major Bersih rallies in KL.	Male	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Secretariat Manager of Bersih 2.0	
24	Former steering committee member (until 2013), and current resource person for Bersih 2.0. Responsible for the development and articulation of Bersih 2.0 campaign strategies through both online and offline means.	Male	Penang, Malaysia	Resource person for Bersih 2.0	
25	Sydney-based steering committee member for Global Bersih. Has had previous experience in political journalism.	Male	Sydney, Australia	Steering committee member of Global Bersih	



## About the Authors

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