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Sudan's December revolution of 2018: the ecology of Youth Connective and Collective Activism

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ABSTRACT

Sudan experienced a nationwide nonviolent revolution between December 2018 and July 2019, which has remained underrepresented in communication studies literature. This study employs empirical data from personal interviews with Sudanese activists as well as a theoretical framework of social movements based on media ecologies. The study's theoretical framework considers social movements in terms of their historical contexts and as a whole consisting of communication networks and interaction between various forms of communication and actors, particularly the entanglement of online and offline elements of activism. The research contributes to the body of knowledge on social movements and communication, particularly in Sudan. The findings of the study show that the media ecology approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay and intertwinement of human actors in social revolution, collective agency, and technologies than the one-medium biased approach used in previous studies on social movements, particularly in the Arab world.

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Sudan's December revolution of 2018: Youth Connective and Collective Activism

Sudan's revolution began on December 18, 2018, with a series of protests in Damazine, the capital of the historically marginalized Blue Nile state. Others believe the revolution started in Atbara, northern Sudan, a historic center of the Sudanese labor movement, when schoolgirls marched into one of the city's major markets chanting anti-austerity slogans after the price of bread tripled.

Protests against rising bread prices in December 2018 morphed into a massive nationwide peaceful social movement calling for Omer El-Bashir's ouster, manifested by the eloquent slogan 'Tasqot bas,' translated to 'Just Fall,' and echoed by millions of Sudanese people peacefully marching in demonstrations in Sudan and the diaspora. The famous slogan was also turned into an online movement known as #JustFall. The slogan exemplifies the Sudanese people's loss of faith and trust in Sudan's former president Omer El-Bashir who was indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity in 2009. The slogan also epitomizes the Sudanese people's,

especially the youth, loss of trust in the political system as well as the economic system under which the Sudanese government operates. Sudanese revolutionaries successfully ended the 30-year dictatorship Islamist regime of Omer El-Bashir on April 11, 2019.

This article rejects claims about the technological determinism and narrow platform-focused approach in light of the success of numerous social movements, including the Occupy Movement (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015), the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement (Freelon et al., 2016), and the 'Arab Spring' movements (Abdulla, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Shirky, 2011). The 'Arab Spring' revolts have been labeled 'Facebook revolutions' due to the widespread use of Facebook and Twitter as indispensable platforms of political activism by Arab citizens (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Moreover, research on social media and its role in social movements, especially in 'Arab Spring' movements has sparked a huge debate on the democratic potential optimism based on social media's open and collaborative networking characteristics, which aid in engendering a 'public sphere' for creating public opinion. However, because income and education mediate access, the Internet's potential for democratization may be offset by its potential to widen inequality. Scholars have discussed the issues of the digital divide and the limited influence of virtual collective action (see e.g., Rucht, 2004; della Porta & Mosca, 2005). Governments' surveillance is another factor in impeding the democratization potential of the Internet and ICT.

The narrow platform – focused approach or one medium bias approach in some of previous literature on social movements extends to include research that prioritizes the content of one medium over the other. In this respect, some research focuses on the content of media produced by social movement activists often conceptualized as 'social movement media' or 'alternative media' that act as tools for disruption, documentation, or memorialization of social struggles (Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003). While other studies gave attention to mainstream media coverage of protests that has been identified as the 'protest paradigm' (Chan & Lee, 1984; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). The 'protest paradigm' serves to delegitimize protesters and their causes, portraying protestors as the 'other' and in the process, it supports the status quo.

To overcome the 'one-medium bias' in the preceding literature, I wish to focus upon three propositions. First, this article is in favor, instead, of an analysis that considers the ecology of social movements in terms of the historical context of social movements and the availability of different forms of communication to different actors involved in revolutionary processes at different points in time (Mohammed, 2019; Rinke & Röder, 2011). The Sudanese revolution, is thus, viewed in the article as an ongoing and evolving process rooted in the Sudanese people's political activism, which dates back to the 1930s national movement calling for Sudan's independence from British colonialism. Also, the December 2018 revolution is approached in this article as a continuation of Sudanese political activism in previous revolutions against other dictators in 1964 and 1985, as well as a culmination of the tenacity of sporadic revolts that occurred during Omer El – Bashir's 30 years in power. I would argue that the previous revolts by Sudanese people have produced a repertoire of resistance and political capital, which the current revolutionary youth have capitalized on and adapted to the changing new circumstances of the 2018 revolution.

Second, in terms of the role of media in social movements, I follow Dahlberg-Grundberg's (2015) definition of media ecology as:

overall, comprising networks of communication and interaction between various forms of communication technology, which actors are immersed within, whereas hybridity, in particular, refers to the entanglement of online and offline elements. [...] making the concept useful when attempting to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the interplay and intertwinement of human agents or movements and technologies. (p. 4)

Thus, the key question is not whether online activism is more important than street protests, or whether the rise of social media is the ‘cause’ of social movements, as was suggested by previous research on the 2011 Arab uprisings for instance. Instead, the focus here is on how the hybridity of online and offline activism, and the related communicational arrangements form an understanding of collective agency and the revolution’s organizational and mobilization strategies. By ‘agency’ I refer to Kabeer’s (1999) definition that agency ‘necessitates bargaining and negotiation, resistance, and more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis’ (p. 436).

Third, the article intends to address gaps in the literature as this research stands as a single study on the Sudanese revolution from the perspectives of communication and social movements.

The study provides an understanding of the December 2018 Sudanese revolution based on empirical data derived from personal interviews with ten Sudanese activists. The major goal of these interviews is to present activists’ descriptions of the revolution’s events and to provide an understanding of the interplay and entanglement of the revolution’s online and offline techniques from the activists’ perspectives. The interviews were held through Zoom online meetings with activists in Sudan, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and in the United States. The interviews were conducted between April 15th and June 15th, 2021. Each individual interview lasted between an hour and two hours. As a Sudanese citizen, I visited Sudan in July 2019 and participated in demonstrations calling for justice for those killed during the June 3rd, 2019 sit-in at *al-Qiyada* military headquarters in Khartoum. I also participated and observed online discussions via What’s App and Facebook on the revolution’s events unfolding.

In the literature and among Sudanese people, the 2018–2019 Sudanese revolution is referred to as the ‘December Revolution,’ or ‘The Glorious December Revolution,’ based on the English month in which it erupted. This is also true of Sudan’s previous revolutions, known as the ‘October Revolution’ in 1964 and the ‘April Uprising’ in 1985. The term ‘December Revolution’ is used in this article.

The ecology and context of the December revolution and Sudanese youth political activism

The December Revolution, I argue, is rooted in campus activism or the student movement which began in the 1930s as part of anticolonial political movements prior to Sudan’s independence in 1956. The Revolution is linked to the core of Sudanese contentious political issues such as civilian constitution vs. Islamic fundamentalist constitution, democratic rule vs military rule, Sudan’s unity vs. separatist movements, African vs. Arab identity politics which have persisted since Sudan’s independence and were expressed through two popular revolutions of October 1965 and April 1985.

The October Revolution of 1964 was Sudan’s first popular uprising against Ibrahim Abboud’s military regime, which deposed the country’s first elected democratic

government after independence. The Khartoum University Student Union met on October 21 to discuss the political unrest in southern¹ Sudan as a result of Abood's regime's rapid Arabization process, which established Arabic to replace English as the language of instruction in schools and Christian missionaries barred from establishing new schools. The students expressed their dissatisfaction with the regime and determined that the conflict would never be resolved as long as the military administration ruled (Hasan, 1967).

The military forces of Abbood stormed the university and the meeting, hurling tear gas and opening fire. Ahmad al-Qurashi, a student, was killed and several others were injured. The importance of October Revolution can be seen in its collective peaceful leaderless resistance. According Taha (1973) October revolution negated Karl Marx's notion that revolution can only be attained through the recourse to violence. According to Taha, October revolution demonstrated that power, not violence, drives social change.

During the second uprising against Nimeiri's military dictatorship rule in April 1985, professional associations and student unions at the University of Khartoum and other Sudanese campuses participated in the peaceful revolutionary strategies such as demonstrations, rallies, and strikes that led to the overthrow of Nimeiri's military regime on April 6, 1985 (Berridge, 2016).

Youth's connective action and collective agency

The Internet is an essential element of Sudan's media ecology and political communication. According to Zunes (2021), the Sudanese have one of the higher rates of internet connectivity in both Africa and the Arab world with nearly one out of every three Sudanese citizens being able to keep track of events as they unfold. When the 2005 peace agreement was signed between the Sudanese government and the Sudan's People Liberation Movement/Liberation Army (SPLM/SPLA) in southern Sudan, the margin of political freedom has expanded accompanied by optimism about the possibility of political change aided by the expansion of the Internet. As a result, during the period of 2005–2010, Sudanese youth turned to connective action and participatory politics, in which activism and political opinions were practiced, expressed and shared via social networks.

Connective action theory addresses the changes in shared forms of activism brought about by the enforcement of social media sites. In explaining the theory of connective action and youth activism, Loader et al. (2014) states that:

young people who are dissatisfied with traditional political institutions such as political parties would rather engage politically through networks, they form themselves, utilizing media that is more familiar to them. They conjure up images of 'networked young citizens,' who are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; and [whose] social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment. (p. 145)

Girifna is a prominent example of Sudanese youth connective action expressing dissatisfaction with El-Bashir's military regime. *Girifna* is a Sudanese colloquial Arabic word that means 'We are fed up.' *Girifna* is rooted in the earlier-mentioned student activism, as a pro-democracy movement was founded in October 2009 by three students from the University of Khartoum who worked clandestinely to mobilize college students to stand for regime change.

However, in order to comprehend the scope of online activism in Sudan, particularly in terms of mobilizing and organizing political action, we must first understand El-Bashir's government's moral and political control over information flow through the Internet. El-Bashir's Islamist regime enacted ideological policies to control and 'defend' Sudanese morality, particularly against Western values and everything Western. Sharia Islamic law and the Criminal Code of 1991 were used to intimidate young people from using social media, which the regime saw as a Western invention. Sudanese Ulamma religious leaders have condemned text messaging as a source of sexual immorality (Lamoureaux, 2011). As a result, the government portrayed new technology as morally repugnant, a narrative that was also used to demonize both political and apolitical movements.

Politically, according to Lamoureaux and Sureau (2019), the Sudanese government employed a multi-level strategy to maintain its legitimacy, aiming to obstruct the creation of an alternative vision by hindering communication and moral stigmatization through its access to surveillance technologies and its Cyber *Jihad* Unit. El-Bashir's government launched electronic *Jihad* (Cyber Holy war) a counter-political movement on Facebook. On January 30, 2011, the Cyber *Jihad* unit allegedly staged a bogus demonstration called 'Protesting Youth for Change.' An estimated 100 protestors were arrested before the event began, held for 10–20 days, and allegedly tortured (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019).

Activists in *Girifna* movement have been particularly targeted by the regime's National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), who have subjected them to increased surveillance and extrajudicial detention. Many male and female activists from the movement have been sexually assaulted and tortured by the NISS (Medani, 2013). Safiya Ishag, a *Girifna* activist was kidnapped and gang-raped by members of the (NISS) in Khartoum after participating in a political protest in January 2011. She became the subject of one of *Girifna*'s most successful Internet (Facebook) campaigns when *Girifna* members videotaped Ishag's rape testimony and posted it on YouTube with her permission (We are fed up, 2012). Safiya Ishag's testimony was an unprecedented act by a woman in a conservative Sudanese society to speak out publicly and defiantly about her own personal experience as a rape victim. While rape was notoriously used in 2004 by regime-backed militias known as *Janjaweed*² in Darfur, El-Bashir's regime has used it as a weapon to silence whoever the regime perceives as an enemy.

The aggregated sentiments of individuals are essential components of contemporary collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In Ghobadi and Clegg's (2015) analysis of the 2009 post-election crisis in Iran, the bravery of a few individuals broadcasting YouTube videos was found to greatly affect and shape the demonstrations of the broader public. In the same vein, Safiya Ishaq's YouTube video fueled Sudanese people's online and offline rage against El – Bashir's regime, as well as Sudanese women activists' determination to expose the regime's rape crimes against women.

Sudanese women's participation in civic organizations and movements opposing El-Bashir's regime enabled them to participate in large numbers on the frontlines of the December revolution. The revolution itself has been named the Kandakaat (plural of Kandaka) revolution. The term Kandaka refers to Kingdom of Kush's queens or sisters between 2000 BCE and 600 CE. During the 2012 protests and the December revolution, the term Kandaka emerged in a political context with the meaning of a 'strong, engaged woman' (Casciarri & Manfredi, 2020).

Parallel to their participatory politics networks, Sudanese youth became active in grassroots movements combining online and offline strategies, resulting in a number of initiatives such as '*Al Hawadith* Street Initiative.' HSI was founded in 2012 by a group of young college graduates and was named after the street on which it was founded, which translates indirectly to 'Accidents Lane.' Through this initiative, 'youth have used Facebook to present cases of people in need of medical assistance and provide access to donations to the needy in hospitals in Sudan' (Personal Communication, June 15, 2021). Other Initiatives also included the assistance provided to those affected by floods and natural disasters, such as the *Nafeer* initiative, which means 'trumpet' or 'call to work' in Arabic, all with an open and participatory model (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019).

Online and offline grassroots activism by Sudanese youth played a significant role in undermining the regime's legitimacy by drawing attention to the regime's corruption and failure to provide necessary services and basic rights to Sudanese citizens, as well as raising the social costs of the regime's existence until it became unsupportable. Moreover, the significance of connective action by Sudanese youth as expressed by one of the activists interviewed in this study is that 'it created ties among various activist groups spreading all over Sudan which helped to sustain the collective action against El-Bashir's government over a long period of time' (Personal Communication, June 15, 2021). Sudanese youth's use of social media as connective action networks has expanded the repertoire of collective action tactics used in previous popular revolutions, aided in the formation of collective agency, and created spaces for political self-expression at micro-levels outside of formal governance structures in which the youth have lost trust.

Sudan has not been isolated from the events of the 'Arab Spring' revolutions, particularly given the widespread use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by Sudanese youth. In 2012, many demonstrations were organized and coordinated through the use of social media, fashioning the demonstrations organized during the 'Arab Spring' revolutions. Rallies were held after Friday prayers, and the youth who organized them adopted the transculturally dispersed labels of 'Arab spring' demonstrations, such as Friday of Freedom, Friday of Anger, and so on. The names of these protests, however, were given a cultural twist to brand them unique Sudanese names that appeal to the Sudanese populace, such as *Kattaha* (sandstorm) Friday and Elbow Licking Friday, in allusion to El-Bashir's associates calling demonstrators attempting to depose him elbow-lickers [those who attempt the impossible] (Elbow-lickers, 2012).

Insurgencies against El-Bashir's government persisted in 2013, and they were met with disproportionate violence from El-Bashir's forces. The events of 2013 conveyed a strong message to the Sudanese public that El-Bashir's regime is atrocious (Personal Communication, May 4, 2021). The images of young Sudanese killed in the 2013 demonstrations that flooded social media sites reawakened in the minds of many Sudanese people images of the regime's atrocities in Darfur in 2003–2004.

The novelty and leadership of the December revolution

The December revolution differs from the preceding Khartoum-grown uprisings of October 1964 and April 1985 in its prolonged nonviolent resistance, creativity, and ability to reclaim struggle and resistance repertoire created over many years by various actors. The novelty of the revolution also rests on its broad popular base that transcended

deeply entrenched ethnic, gendered, regional, and religious divides, resulting in a more inclusive national identity. As previously indicated, the revolution began in areas outside of Khartoum, spanning the divide between the center (Greater Khartoum) and the peripheries.

Unlike ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings and the previous revolts of October 1964 and April 1985, the December Revolution has a solid leadership. There are multiple actors that played different collaborative roles in the December Revolution. First, the Sudanese people, particularly the young, who gained experience as change agents through political involvement in campus movements, online civic engagement, and volunteer grassroots organizations.

The second actor is the Neighborhood Resistance Committees, a new player in Sudan’s long history of popular revolutions. These committees were formed to organize neighborhood-level opposition to El-Bashir’s regime. According to one of the Sudanese activists interviewed for this study, ‘Membership in Resistance Committees was dominated by students and recent college graduates. Those young people are notable for their audacity and commitment, both of which contributed significantly to the victory of the nonviolent December Revolution’ (Personal communication, 6 May 2021). Another interviewee mentions:

Members of these committees succeeded in organizing demonstrations that would take place at streets and alleys of multiple neighborhoods across Greater Khartoum at the same time, rendering Omer El – Bashir’s police and security forces logically incapable of dispersing the protests. (Personal Communication, April 20, 2021)

Members of the committees communicate and coordinate on a horizontal organizational level rather than a hierarchical level. ‘While the resistance committees had considerable decision-making autonomy, there was a high degree of coordination between the committees and the Sudanese Professionals Association SPA’ (Personal Communication, 15 June, 2021).

The Sudanese Professionals Association SPA is the third actor. SPA is an association of professional trade unions representing lawyers, engineers, teachers, journalists, and medical practitioners (Anderson, 2020). The SPA’s membership includes a number of seasoned activists who led and coordinated insurgent strategies to destabilize the regime of military dictator Nimeiri in April 1985. The Sudanese Professionals Association was instrumental in organizing rallies, mentoring revolutionary youth, and connecting activities with members of the Association in the diaspora. Because the Association usually lacked on-the-ground personnel, it relied on the Neighborhood Resistance Committees, which were at the heart of the revolution.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) believes that social networks will pave the way for more personalized, digitally mediated collective action, which will replace the organization dimension of collective action in traditional social movement protests, with identifiable membership organizations leading the way under common banners and collective identity frames. According to Castells (2012), social networking sites change the dynamic of activism by encouraging ‘cooperation and solidarity while undermining the need for formal leadership. They “create togetherness,” which everyone benefits from’ (p. 225).

However, during the December Revolution, two leadership styles emerged. The first type is referred to by Della Ratta and Valeriani (2014) as connective leaders involved

in information politics. Members of the Neighborhood Resistance Committee served as connective leaders, According to Zunes (2021), the committees acted as the Sudanese Professional Association's grassroots foundation, transmitting SPA's messages received through social media to neighbors who did not have access to such communication technology. Indicating that significant synergies exist among the December Revolution actors. Members of the Resistance Committees have also served as collective action leaders, as they are building trust and fostering a sense of community through the process of informationally connecting people and coordinating collective action.

The other type of leadership prior to and during the revolution was provided by the hierarchically organized SPA, whose members remained anonymous during the early stages of the revolution. According to one activist interviewed for the study, the SPA was kept secret for two reasons: The first reason is to ensure everyone's safety. Members of the SPA must conceal their identities from the regime's security forces. The second reason was that 'SPA members thought to preserve the revolution's collective identity as a popular revolution without leaders or political affiliation. When members of the SPA reveal their political ties, there is always the risk that the Sudanese public will reject them.' (Personal communication, April 15 and 6, 2021.) Another activist mentions the following:

Prior to the December revolution, the Association had been in existence for many years. It began as an organization advocating for wage reform. However, the Association raised the bar on its demands when one of its members, M.D Muhammad Naji Al-Asam, appeared in a You Tube video stating several of the Association's demands, the most important of which is the overthrow of El-Bashir's regime. As one of the Association's leaders, the young doctor became a popular icon among Sudanese youth. (Personal Communication, May11, 2021)

With the help of the Sudanese Professionals Association, the demonstrations became more organized, with weekly protests centered on a single theme or slogan. For example, after Friday prayer, protesters would congregate inconspicuously at a predetermined location. Following a *zagħroodah* ululation signal from a female protestor at 1:00 pm Khartoum time, the protest was declared to have begun. The crowds then begin chanting, 'Freedom, Peace, and Justice ... Revolution is the people's choice.' When the security forces start attacking and dispersing protests with tear gas and live ammunition, protestors seek refuge in random homes in the neighborhoods they march through.

One of the innovative strategies used by Neighborhood Resistance Committees is the construction of barricades to prevent security forces vehicles from entering neighborhoods. Furthermore, the Committees instruct residents to keep their doors open in order to welcome and protect the protestors. (Personal Communication, June 1, 2021)

Women, particularly the elderly or those unable to join the protests, played an important role at home in assisting and protecting the stranger demonstrators, providing them with whatever means were available to alleviate the effect and damage caused by tear gas canisters. Committed to protecting the protestors, women would artfully deceive the National Intelligence and Security Service forces (NISS) when they raid their homes in search of the protestors. Sudanese revolutionary collective strategies adopted during the December revolution were coordinated in such a way that everyone has a role to play in the revolution to end El-Bashir's rule and bring about change.

Online/offline hybrid resistance strategies and the revolution's frames

According to the aforementioned literature, various studies show that social media or social networking sites (SNS) played a significant role in the success of social movements, particularly the 'Arab Spring' movements. Nonetheless, the media spectacle of these protests provided momentum to these insurgencies through worldwide image transmission and live coverage of events and news by major networks such as Aljazeera, BBC, and CNN, all of which are part of the MENA region's media ecology. Aljazeera network, for example, framed these events as 'The Arab Awakening,' (Kellner, 2016), implying that a new era of political struggle and insurgency was emerging in parts of the world. Kellner (2016) continues to state that

the often-saturated coverage on global TV networks, and especially on Al-Jazeera, made the struggle in Egypt a world-historical event of global interest, which in turn helped to incite people to pour into the street to take part in the momentous insurrection, as live TV footage and interviews were circulated through global media. (p. 41)

Sudan's December revolution flew under the radar of global and regional news organizations. In contrast, the revolution's events occurred independently of national, regional, and global media coverage, particularly in the early stages of the revolution. The Sudanese people's resistance was framed as riots by mobs of 'violent' 'looters' and 'foreign agents' in the 'protest paradigm' adopted by Sudan's state-controlled media. These official media frames of the protests were designed to mitigate the brutality of the regime's security forces in their continued attempts to repress the revolutionaries and to negate the transformative power of ordinary Sudanese organizing and coordinating revolutionary action outside the political space occupied by EL-Bashir's government.

To challenge the mainstream media's portrayal of the revolution, the Sudanese Professionals Association launched an independent Sudan Bukra (Sudan of Tomorrow) Arabic TV station on April 4, 2019. Based on my own extensive monitoring of the channel, I have noticed that the channel as an alternative media focuses on documentation and memorialization of social struggles. The content of the TV channel includes: announcements and information obtained from SPA's Facebook page on the movement's organizing steps, as well as live ground reporting of revolution events. The channel also aired old videos containing footage and revolutionary songs from earlier uprisings of 1964 and 1985, as well as footage from the current December Revolution. By combining new and old revolutionary content, the channel attempts to increase people's perceptions regarding the existence of political opportunities. The channel also contributed in filling the void made by local, regional, and international 'mainstream' media.

While social networking sites and applications (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) played an important role in disseminating up-to-date news and information about the revolution's unfolding events, they also enabled collective action participants to frame their own cause. Sudanese revolutionaries used live-stream videos, photos, and vlogs to demonstrate their unwavering resolve to protest peacefully in the face of El-Bashir's security forces' vicious brutality. Maintaining peaceful revolts across the country helped the revolution gain more popular support, broadening the base of collective action participation to include all ethnic groups in Sudan and the diaspora, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, and everyone.

Furthermore, social media networking sites, particularly Twitter and Instagram, served as platforms for creating emotional impetus for the revolution by connecting Sudanese in the diaspora with Sudanese at home. Castells (2012) demonstrates the organizing role of IT in forging a mediated emotional response to political events and then accelerating the formation of social movements. Sudanese activists living in the diaspora interviewed for this study explained that social media assisted them in transnationally disseminating the frame of the revolution as a peaceful revolution for freedom, peace, and justice, rather than a revolt against rising bread prices, as framed by the late sporadic coverage of the revolution by regional and international media.

Emotion is not a byproduct of activism, according to Juris (2008). Rather, organizers use emotion strategically to generate the commitment required to maintain participation. Activists put effort in ‘emotional management’ by forming affective attachments, conveying specific emotional states, or evoking specific emotions with the goal of motivating and sustaining action. For instance, the slogan ‘Freedom, Peace, and Justice, Revolution is a People’s Choice,’ according to one of the political activists interviewed for this study, is a verse borrowed from a poem by the late Sudanese poet Humaid whose nationalist poems speak for Sudan’s economically marginalized people (Personal Communication, April 4, 2021). Slogans elicit strong feelings of emotive unity among Sudanese people. Slogans connect the current revolution to previous successful revolutions, implying that victory is imminent.

Juris (2008) states that emotions play a particularly important role in fluid, network-based movements that rely on non-traditional modes of identification and commitment. For some Sudanese activists in the diaspora, the emotional and affective bonds formed as a result of the December Revolution shaped their sense of self. ‘The nonviolent revolution at home made me proud of my Sudanese identity. The Revolution made me feel that I was a part of something monumental’ (Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

The demands for freedom, peace, and justice became one of the most powerful slogans used by Sudanese at home and in the diaspora, fashioning a popular identity for the revolution. Furthermore, from its inception, the revolution framed itself as an anti-racist movement, which aided in thwarting the regime’s attempt to blame the revolts on Darfuris (people from the Darfur region in western Sudan) (Mohammed, 2019). Chants like ‘you arrogant racist [El-Bashir], the whole country is Darfur’ declared widespread public solidarity with a region that had long been the target of economic and political marginalization, discrimination, and ethnic cleansing campaigns by El-Bashir’s government and his *Janjaweed* forces. The chants highlight the Sudanese revolutionaries’ explicit rejection of ethnic polarization and divide-and-rule strategies, which the regime had relied on for 30 years to maintain power. In solidarity, protesters in Al Fashir, the capital of Darfur, chanted ‘We are all Khartoum!’ (Zunes, 2021)

The offline and online revolutionary techniques of the December Revolution worked in tandem. During the block out of Internet services by the government, Sudanese people relied on the groundwork of the Resistance Committees at the neighborhood level. According to a report by the New Arab English news website, one of the Sudanese activists explained:

We had to revert to very primitive and traditional techniques, such as door-to-door mobilization, leaflet distribution, and rallying, and this proved very effective, as the result was the

largest rally in Sudan's history on June 30, 2019. That was done without the use of social media. Tens of thousands marched on June 30, in what was named the 'millions march,' Sudan's largest pro-democracy demonstration. The large turnout demonstrated that, despite the importance of social media in the Sudan uprising, it was the people who drove the revolution forward. (Durie, 2019)

Another notable hybrid offline/online tactic that was widely used is the nation-wide civil disobedience, in which online networking sites, particularly Facebook, were widely used to mobilize and coordinate civil disobedience. 'The success of civil disobedience sent a clear message to Sudanese citizens that collective action is powerful and effective, and that the regime is not as strong as it claims' (Personal Communication, June 10, 2021).

Occupy Al-Qiada: the sit-in of the military headquarters

The most significant event that contributed to the December Revolution's success in toppling El-Bashir's regime occurred when protestors decided to occupy the space in front of the *al-Qeyada* (military headquarters) in Khartoum, forming the country's first mass sit-in in modern history. *Al-Qeyada* is Sudan's most heavily guarded compound, housing El-Bashir's former residence, the Defense Ministry and the powerful National Intelligence and Security Service all of which symbolized the power and control of the ousted regime. Occupy, according to Mitchell (2012),

is a demand in and of itself, a demand for presence, an insistence on being heard; a demand that the public be allowed to gather and remain in a public space. However, the demand for occupation is made with full knowledge that public space is already occupied by the state and the police. (p. 10)

The events that followed the occupation of the sit-in space gradually transformed the initially empty space into a space of presence and what Arendt (1958) refers to as a space of appearance, which occurs when people gather to speak and act together as equals. The sit-in, as an appearance space, was a place where protestors exercised their right to free speech and expression. As Bahreldin (2020) stated:

Protesters lived, learned, danced, sang, chanted, guarded access points and barricades, and created art and music. It essentially served as the protestors' front yard and living room, as well as a prism through which they saw and understood the revolution. (p. 8)

The sit-in redraws a mental map of Sudan within its borders. It envisioned a multi-ethnic and multicultural Sudan with peaceful coexistence. Sudan as a whole was present in a fluid and carnival sense, challenging the underlying typographic narratives.

The protests that led to the sit-in marked the 34th anniversary of the 1985 April uprising that deposed autocratic president Jaafar Nimeiri. Protesters urged the military to join them in their efforts to depose El-Bashir once more. El-Bashir was toppled on April 11, 2019 as a result of the sit-in and senior officers' intervention. Following El-Bashir's deposition, the Transitional Military Council was formed, consisting of a group of senior officers from the previous regime led by the former deputy minister and defense minister. However, the TMC leader resigned after only one day due to ongoing protests that continued to chant the famous slogan of the revolution: *Tasqot Bas* (Just fall) and *Tasqot Taany* (Fall Again). Protestors saw him as a continuation of the old regime and

demanded a full civilian government to rule the country until democratic elections could be held (Second Day of Sit-in, 2019). The sit-in continued even after the formation of Transitional Military Council was formed as demonstrators demanding full civilian government.

On the morning of Monday, June 3, 2019, Sudanese military, *Janjaweed* militias (also known as the Rapid Support Forces RSF), national security forces, and other militias violently disperse the *al-Qeyada* sit-in by murdering hundreds, raping, and throwing bodies into the Nile in what became known as the '*al-Qeyada* Massacre.' RSF forces also broke into the University of Khartoum – the symbol and birthplace of Sudanese student movements – which was adjacent to the sit-in, destroying valuable archives and stealing anything of monetary value (Anderson, 2020). The massacre in *al-Qeyada* was justified on the grounds that these combined forces were aiming for a neighborhood north of the occupied sit-in area that was home to drug dealers.

Following the *al-Qeyada* massacre, an online #BlueforSudan movement was launched. Mohamed Hashim Mattar's Twitter and Instagram profile pictures inspired the blue color. Mattar, 26, was one of more than 100 people killed in Khartoum on June 3, 2019. Those close to Mattar changed their profile pictures to the same shade of blue after learning of his death to pay tribute to him. Because social media connects both the personal and the political and has the ability to establish supportive communities, the color blue has evolved into a transnational symbol honoring and paying tribute to all Khartoum massacre martyrs. In solidarity with Sudan, many well-known international figures and pop culture icons have changed their profile pictures to blue, using the hashtags #BlueforSudan, #PaintSudanBlue, and #PrayForSudan.

On June 30, 2019 millions of Sudanese took to the streets in cities across the country to demand justice and accountability for those killed, as well as the transfer of power to a civilian-led government, in what could be one of the world's largest mass protests relative to a country's population (Anderson, 2020). The June 30 demonstration was planned in near-complete secrecy from the ground up. Instead of congregating in one place, which would have exposed them to immediate dispersal, these groups organized themselves as feeder marches departing from the homes of those killed on June 3 in order to honor them. 'Following the *al-Qeyada* massacre, there was a significant increase in the use of Twitter, particularly among Sudanese in the diaspora, which could indicate that the "monitoring" role of this medium became more apparent' (Personal Communication, June 15, 2021). The SPA, meanwhile, called on social media users to use the hashtag #IAmTheSudanRevolution to counteract the TMC's attempt to isolate the country from the rest of the world (12 Defining Moments, 2019).

As a result of the success of the offline tactics of civil disobedience and the June 30 demonstration, on July 5, 2019 a tentative agreement was reached between the TMC and the Freedom Forces for Change FFC – which was an umbrella force representing traditional Sudanese political parties and the Sudanese Professionals Association SPA – on the formation of a civilian-led government. On July 17, 2019 the agreement was finalized and formally signed. By the end of August 2019, the new government had taken power, led by a civilian Prime Minister and cabinet officials and comprised both civilian and military representatives (Hassam & Kadouda, 2019).

The revolution, however, is still ongoing. Since the formation of the transitional government three years ago, demonstrations and rallies organized by Neighborhood

Resistance Committees, who now refer to themselves as the guardians of the revolution, have continued to demand justice for those killed in *al-Qeyda* massacre. The author attended those rallies in person and witnessed the emotional power of collective subjectivity that a revolution would generate during those rallies. I concurred with Juris (2008) that such affective dynamics, rather than being incidental to political protest, provide a reservoir of emotional resources from which activists draw as they work to build grassroots movements for political and social change.

Conclusion

This study on Sudan's December Revolution and youth online and offline activism contributes to a burgeoning body of scholarship focusing on the ecology of social movements and the media to counterbalance research accounts that isolate revolts from their historical contexts and reduce the complexity of communication practices and actors involved in social movements to the power of social media. The framework provided a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of different actors' online and offline practices prior to and during December Revolution.

Activists interviewed for this study saw the power of social media in helping them create and disseminate the frame of peaceful revolution for freedom, peace, and justice. Images of peaceful revolutionaries being met with live munitions have provided the emotional impetus needed to garner regional and international support for the revolution and sustain its momentum. Interviewees also emphasized the power of offline peaceful collective actions, particularly the groundwork deployed by Neighborhood Resistance Committees to foster the sense of community required to sustain the resistance both offline and online.

The media ecology frame of this study created a theoretical space for the discussion of local cases of Sudanese youth online grassroots civic movements in the literature, which has mostly focused on large-scale mobilizations such as the 'Arab Spring' and the Occupy movements. Furthermore, the discussion of online grassroot movements in Sudan as a form of participatory politics demonstrated not only the critical role of connective action in undermining the legitimacy of the state, but also demonstrated the state's counter-online holy war and online surveillance practices to control activists' online communication. Thus, through this study, connective action has been reclaimed as a complex ecology that is part of the multifaceted negotiations between Sudanese citizens pushing for change and the state's political control.

This study is limited in that it is a 'case study' with conclusions that are not generalizable. Nonetheless, such study is essential for providing a nuanced understanding of an important event in time and in context. Finally, while the December Revolution's events and strategies are comparable to those of other social movements around the world and in various locations, they are also novel. The December Revolution was defined by the Sudanese people's unwavering nonviolence resistance methods against Sudan's most violent political dictatorship in its history. Writing about the revolution is a necessary task that must be accomplished for two reasons. The first purpose is to address gaps in the literature on Sudanese social movements and communication practices, while the second, and most essential, purpose is to make the narrative of the Sudan's December Revolution available to a global audience.

Notes

1. Sudan's civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005) served as a historical example of the policies used by successive regimes in northern Sudan to marginalize the south politically, religiously, culturally, and economically. Furthermore, following Omer El-Bashir's military coup in June 1989, and the spearhead of Sudan's Islamization process by El-Bashir's military government, the conflict transformed from a civil war to *Jihad* holy war against 'infidels.'
2. *Janjaweed*: Is a militia formed by the government of El-Bashir that originates from and mostly operates in western Sudan and eastern Chad. They are responsible for massacres in Darfur in 2004, Nuba Mountains, South Sudan and mostly recently, Khartoum in 2019. The term entered the broader political lexicon later, when members of these militias were restructured and reorganized into the so-called Rapid Support Forces (Casciarri & Manfredi, 2020)

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