

Social Movements and Social Media: the case of the Armenian ‘velvet’ revolution

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Abstract

Depending on the political environment, economic, cultural and social factors, the digital era provides new opportunities *and* constraints for mobilization of social movements.

The current research was focused on exploring how protest leaders and activists used and perceived social media as a tool for communication and organization during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”; a series of peaceful, anti-governmental protests which led to a shift of governmental power in Armenia.

Prior work dedicated to unpacking the relationship between social movements and social media have focused on a few empirical cases. Hence, a case study of a yet underexplored social movement can add to this strand of literature.

The methodological approach displayed in this study follows a mixed-method model. Interviews with activists of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” and content analysis of official social media accounts of leaders of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” were expected to provide a diverse perspective on social media tactics during the movement.

The results implied that social media were perceived as one of the main contributors to the fulfilment of objectives of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” in multiple ways: social media allowed for fast communication, decentralized organization, testimony of the non-violent nature of the movement, as well as validation of the movement through transparency of action (most importantly, in real-time). There was a strong indication that live video broadcasting function on Facebook was generally perceived as a tool with more capacities for contentious politics.

Meanwhile, the results suggest that the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” could be perceived as a continuity of previous social movements, the negative experience gained from which curbed the overall tactics of the movement, rather than a result of immediate grievances. Nonetheless, the role of human emotions, such as fear, hope and will, was at the centre of interpretations of how the activists experienced the movement.

Key words: social movement, social media, contentious politics, citizen video-journalism, collective grievance approach

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1 Introduction

After decades of tolerance towards the corrupted elites, hundreds of thousands of Armenians marched the streets of major cities and small villages in Armenia during April to May 2018 in a series of non-violent anti-government protests led by a charismatic oppositional leader, current PM Nikol Pashinyan. For a little over a month, the chant *'take a step, RejectSerzh'* echoed in every corner of capital Yerevan. Under dramatic public pressure, the unpopular leader eventually resigned, and snap elections were held. There it goes: the country of the year¹.

In an interview to the Russian service of German *Deutsche Welle* Pashinyan was highly appreciative of the opportunities that social media provided: "During my political activity, demonstrations and protests, television was factually closed for oppositional parties. As of now, my Facebook page has a huge auditorium, which can be compared to television audiences. It [Facebook] is a very effective means of carrying dialogue with citizens. Undoubtedly, Facebook played a massive role during our revolution"². Elsewhere, he has stated that "the revolution would have been impossible if the Internet was not so developed in Armenia"³. By then, that social media held one of the major roles for the success of the movement had already become common rhetoric that went uncontested.

This rhetoric has not been unpopular in the last decade or so. The neglect of the role played by social media in research on political protests has faded since the days of the Arab Spring and beyond, although there is no agreement on the precise role played. This work adds to the strand of literature interested in the relationship of social media with social movements. The objective of this study is to describe how social media was used and perceived in the context of the movement "*take a step, #RejectSerzh*" without aiming to establish a specific role of social media or attempting any unhelpful generalizations to other movements. The underlying argument which guides this study is that the role of social media in organization and mobilization of collective action should be placed *in relation to* the political environment in which media operate (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013).

With very few exceptions most of the recent literature on social media and social movements focus on specific empirical cases: Occupy movements, The Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter movement, Dakota Access Pipeline Protests and a few cases of environmental activism (Downing 2008, Murphy 2018). Furthermore, the scarcity of research concerning specifically democratic transitions under less democratic

¹ <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/12/18/the-economists-country-of-the-year-2018>

² <https://yerevan.today/all/politics/17789/facebook-y-mets-der-khaghac-haykakan-heghapokhutyan-mej-nikol-pashinyan>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/azatutyun/videos/536610356803756/>.

rule makes any broader generalization of the role of social media in protest movements under these political contexts difficult (Breuer 2012:2, Downing 2008). The analysis of the movements that have gained much scholarly attention is of utmost importance; however, a shift of focus towards underexplored movements with less visibility can provide a different angle and enrich previous theorizations (Tsatsou 2018, Breuer et al. 2012).

Thus, this study contributes to the strand of literature interested in the relationship of social media with social movements, as it concerns a largely *unexplored and novel social movement in a less democratic political environment*.

1.1 Research aim and research questions

This study is interested in how those directly involved in social movements appropriate the affordances of social media for communication and organization of political protest. Social movements are understood here as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities” (Diani 1992:1).

I find it indispensable to mention that the focus here is not on bare capacities and affordances of social media but rather how social movement leaders and activists engage with those capacities to serve it to their cause. Ultimately, it is about what people do with what the technology ‘affords’ them. (Bennet & Segerberg 2013:9).

The aim of this study is to explore the possible opportunities that social media provided for communication and organization during “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement, with a special focus on Facebook. To fulfill the aim of this research, the study attempts to answer the following research questions (RQs).

RQ1: How did activists *use* and *perceive* social media as a tool for communication and organization during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”?

RQ2: In the experience of activists, what were the positive and negative aspects of social media use for them during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”?

RQ3: How do activists view the relationship of ‘traditional media’ and ‘social media’ during “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement?

RQ1, RQ2, RQ3 are approached through in depth-interviewing of 6 activists. When referring to the activist during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”, someone who was directly involved with the movement and was present during demonstrations, rallies and other forms of political protests during the movement is implied. In order to represent a plurality of opinions while attempting to answer the above RQs, the activists chosen to participate in the study had different civil engagement backgrounds before the movement, as well

as displayed different levels of activity during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” itself. Civil engagement background refers to engagement in previous social movements before “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”. Different levels of activity during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” refers to how many days of the protests the activists participated in and what roles they took.

RQ4: How did the leaders of “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement use their social media official accounts as a tool for communication and organization of the series of protests?

RQ4 is mainly approached with content analysis of verified Facebook profiles of the leader of the movement and a key organizing member over the entire period of the movement. The views of the activists on social media use by the leaders of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” in the experience of activists are integrated with the results produced by content analysis, in order to provide depth of interpretations.

Together these research questions are expected to provide a broader descriptive perspective on social media use patterns of leaders and activists of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”, how and why social media were used during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” by leaders and activists, as well as general insights into tactics of the movement.

1.2 Outline of the paper

This introductory chapter is followed by a description of the political and media environment preceding and surrounding the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” as it is not possible to analyze any social movement from any angle outside of the political context that it inhabits. In the chapter concerning the political and media environment (chapter 2) previous mass demonstrations are briefly introduced with a trajectory of two decades, followed by a timeline of key events during the movement “*#take a step, RejectSerzh*”. Later in this chapter, brief notes on the state of media freedom during the movement are made. In the next chapter, the theoretical framework is established, and previous literature is presented and discussed. The literature review (chapter 3) is presented in three parts. First, I present the approach taken by this study towards the potential power of social media in the context of the movement. Here I draw mainly but not exclusively on the theory of the rise of the network society by Manuel Castells and culture of connectivity by Jose van Dijck. This is followed by a discussion of previous literature that examines the relationship between social media and social movements and how these works inform the current study. Here I mainly but not exclusively draw on the works of Manuel Castells, Lance Bennet & Alexandra Segerberg, and Courtney Radsch. The final part of the literature review is about media witnessing and citizen journalism, as a form of witnessing in the new media environment. Following this is a chapter on detailed methods, material, and analytical procedure of the study. This chapter (chapter 4) also discusses the validity of the study, as well as ethical considerations.

Immediately after comes analysis of results from interviewing and content analysis (chapter 5). Finally, concluding remarks are made with a reflection on RQs, methodology, and literature review (chapter 6). This is followed by references and appendix.

1.3 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that due to the small-scale nature of the study, the results are not prone to generalizability. This is due to limitations of space and time for this research.

Another limitation is that the research does not explore the aftermath of the movement, in order to determine the true scope of the revolutionary impact that it claims to have made. This is due to two reasons: the complete novelty of the movement which results in the impossibility of such research, and the scope of this thesis.

Finally, I firmly believe that any political outcome depends on a multiplicity of factors accumulative in nature and far-reaching than it is possible to explain within a single piece of research belonging to a single scientific field. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach, as well as case comparisons of different movements in similar political environments, would be a valuable asset.

2 The Political and Media Environment

While approaching any social movement from any angle, a preliminary focus should fall on politics both analytically and chronologically as “it is a mistake to attempt to understand the role of any media in any political process without thinking about the surrounding political environment” (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013:116). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that massive political destructions are almost never isolated, immediate events, rather, “[t]hey typically result from the groundwork laid by activists and grassroots organizers” (Radsch 2016:10). Hence, the aim of the first part of this chapter is to at least sketch out the political environment that preceded and surrounded the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”. First, the prior major protest movements are discussed with a special focus on post-election protests (2.1). This discussion starts with the second presidential elections in Armenia after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, since it started the ‘tradition’ of post-election protests conditioned by mistrust in the fairness of elections. Secondly, the beginning stage of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” is described to provide the context of the movement. This is followed by a timeline of key dates (2.1.1) during the movement in order to provide a brief description of how the events unfolded.

It is argued that the Internet can be used by social movements to bypass mainstream media gate-keepers and repressive governments (Stein 2011:148). The second part of this chapter (2.2) following the political environment offers a brief presentation on the state of media freedom in Armenia to situate the discussion within media environment.

2.1 Building the path towards the Armenian velvet revolution: previous protest movements

This section presents the public protests and social movements that preceded the movement ‘*take a step, #Reject Serzh*’ in order to give a necessary idea of how these movements were met by the ruling government generally and what attitude could generally be expected when ‘*take a step, #Reject Serzh*’ was in progress.

1996 presidential elections: The 1996 presidential election was the second presidential election in the Republic of Armenia since it gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. As Levon Ter-Petrosyan stepped into his second presidential term with about 53% vote at the elections⁴ amid mass discontent of his policy regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, voters and international observers were quick to accuse him of electoral fraud (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights: Armenian Presidential Elections September 24, 1996 Final Report). On September 23 almost 200.000 people led by the opposition leader Vazgen Manukyan who cast about 40% of the vote crowded the Freedom Square in Yerevan in an act of protesting the results elections. Ter-Petrosyan finally resigned in 1998 and was replaced by then PM Robert

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/23/world/armenians-cast-ballots-in-presidential-election.html>

Kocharyan, the former defence minister of Nagorno-Karabakh. This marked the beginning of popularly disapproved election results and the practice of mass protests following presidential elections.

2003 presidential elections: After opposition protests forced into the second round of 2003 presidential elections Robert Kocharyan was re-elected winning 67% of the vote, followed by claims of significant electoral frauds by international observers. On April 12-13 tens of thousands of protestors demanding Kocharyan's resignation clashed with police. About 200 protestors were detained, and at least 80 of them received prison terms⁵. Kocharyan firmly gripped to power.

2008 presidential elections and the tragedy of March 1: On 19 February 2008 PM Serzh Sargsyan was elected president holding about 53% of the vote. Having served two terms, Kocharyan was no longer eligible to stand for another term, and he strongly backed Sargsyan's candidacy. Even though international observers reported the elections themselves widely democratic, many were sure that the results were manipulated by governmental resources and corruption⁶. Mass protests against the election of Serzh Sargsyan were held for 11 days organized by the first president of the republic Levon Ter-Petrosyan (February 20-March 1). On March 1 violent clashes began. Riot police and army units beat those protestors that camped overnight in the Freedom Square. Kocharyan, with the approval of parliament, declared a 20-day state of emergency. All protests were banned. Any news associated with politics apart from those issued officially by the government were banned, and the protests ended. Serzh Sargsyan started his first presidential term⁷.

2013 presidential elections: During the presidential elections on February 18, 2013, Serzh Sargsyan was re-elected for his second term amid accusations of fraud elections from oppositional Raffi Hovhannisyán. Hovhannisyán led a series of mass rallies in Yerevan and other cities following the election while tens of thousands of people stood next to him. These rallies included peaceful marches, as well as hunger strikes. During Sargsyan's inauguration day on April 9 thousands of people gathered in Freedom square to oppose it. After months of protest, on September 20 which marked the 22nd year of independence of Republic of Armenia, Hovhannisyán decided to seize the rallies for reasons of national security⁸.

Protesting transportation fair increase: One July 20, 2013 mass protests emerged against the increased fair of public transportation by 50% in the capital of Yerevan. Alongside actions of civil disobedience by ordinary protestors, many celebrities joined the movement. Under public pressure, after 5 days of protests,

⁵ <https://epress.am/2014/03/01/Վարչապետի-1-հ-10-ը-զննվեց.html>

⁶ <https://www.aravot.am/2008/03/29/330362/>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/world/europe/02armenia.html>

⁸ <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/24906248.html>

victory was achieved as the city mayor announced that the new fair was cancelled. This was the first protest movement, the result of which satisfied the demands of the protestors⁹.

Electric Yerevan movement: The series of protest held between June 19 to the beginning of September came under the collective name *#Electric Yerevan*. Though it started with the demands against rising fairs of electricity the motives of the movement were far reaching as its unofficial name “*No Robbery*” suggests. The movement came to express the discontent of young and middle-age Armenians about the corrupted practises of political elites that deprived its own people. All it took for protests to kick off with even stronger power occupying other cities as well and more people was the counter-productive move of water-canon used on the protestors to disperse them. The protests were successful in its core demand, the problem of rising price of electricity was gone by the end of the protests. Many were presses charges for vandalism, hooliganism and other reasons.¹⁰

‘Sasna Tsrer’ and political crisis: July 17, 2017 started with a political crisis threatening national security. A group of volunteers, most of whom veterans of war (1994-1998) under the collective name Sasna Tsrer (*Daredevils of Sasun*) took over a police station and kept nine hostages as they demanded the resignation of president Sargsyan, as well as to free oppositional leader, political prisoner Jirair Sefilyan. People were divided in their feelings towards the move. 15-20000 people marched the streets calling for peaceful resolution of the situation and called their brothers and sisters to join in solidarity. During this riot police fired stun and flash grenades at the protestors and journalists. According to estimates, 60 people were injured. “Sasna Tsrer” surrendered on July 20 and were arrested.¹¹

The overall impression of the previous movements is that they were mostly accompanied by clashes with the police. All of the previous movements except the one protesting transportation fare increase, generally failed as not only the demands of the protestors were not met, but also some of them received prison terms. So far, the struggle of people against the regime continued. The most popular anti-government post-election movements seized as the leaders of these movements backed up.

2.1.2 Armenian velvet revolution: Inception

This section introduces the key details of the inception of the movement, followed by a description of key events in chronological order in order to provide the necessary context of the topic of this research.

On December 6, 2016, a constitutional referendum was successfully held wherein Armenia would change from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary republic during electoral cycle 2017-2018. The move was

⁹ <https://www.aravot.am/tag/տրանսպորտի-թանկացում>

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/europe/2015/06/angry-armenians-electrify-yerevan-150626071654809.html>

¹¹ <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29767378.html>

seen as Serzh Sargsyan's project to hold onto power as now PM since he had already served two presidential terms and did not have the right for another one. In order to disperse these claims, Sargsyan officially announced that he would not be nominated a candidate for the position of PM. Despite this claim, he was later nominated, raising the discontent of the opposition as well as the general population¹². In the meantime, two movements opposing to Serzh Sargsyan's candidacy as PM emerged simultaneously: *#RejectSerzh* comprised mostly of the very active youth of the civil society and, *Take a step* (initially sometimes referred to as *My Step*) comprised of the Civil Contract political party members and its leader Nikol Pashinyan. *Take a step* movement started from a symbolic march from Gyumri to Yerevan during March 31-April 13 during which they chanted the anthem of the movement 'My step' that later became the symbol of the revolution. The march was accompanied only by a few people. At their arrival to Yerevan, *#RejectSerzh* initiative joint forces with *Take a step*. Initially, there was largely public disengagement with the movement. Only three days after the rallies had started, the numbers of participation increased dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians took to the streets in nation-wide peaceful anti-government protests calling for Serzh Sargsyan to resign¹³.

2.1.3 Armenia velvet revolution: Timeline of key events¹⁴

April 16: Acts of civil disobedience began in Yerevan. All major streets were shut down. The police set barbed wires to prevent thousands of people from moving forward to the building of National Assembly. Pashinyan climbed over the wire, severely wounding his hand. The image of him with banded hand later became one of the symbols of the revolution.

April 17: Pashinyan announced the beginning of the '*non-violent velvet revolution*' as Sargsyan was elected PM. The demonstrations held during the next few days were joint by thousands of people completely paralyzing city traffic.

April 21-22: Serzh Sargsyan called Pashinyan to meet and discuss the protesters' demands. The next day at 10am, Serzh Sargsyan and Nikol Pashinyan meet in the presence of the media. Sargsyan insisted to negotiate to demands of the protests. Pashinyan expressed his strong view that the only thing the movement was willing to discuss was Sargsyan's resignation. Sargsyan left in the midst of the meeting amid making some questionable remarks to the tragedy of March 1, 2008 presented earlier and the lesson that was not learnt from it, which triggered the anger of protesters.

¹² <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29109560.html>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/armenia-velvet-revolution-masterclass-socialism-180507093619273.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.civilnet.am/news/2018/05/05/Armenia's-Velvet-Revolution-A-Timeline-of-Key-Events/335970>

April 22: Pashinyan was detained in Freedom square in front of thousands of his supporters. In spite of this, the demonstrations did not cease to grow in number and force.

April 23: Pashinyan and his colleagues were released. Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan resigned the same day stating “Pashinyan was right. I was wrong.”. People celebrated the event all over the country.

April 24: A new demand of the movement was declared. The target was now the resignation of the ruling Republican party. Mass demonstrations continued as a result of which snap elections were scheduled to take place.

April 27-May 1: The public rallies moved from Yerevan to the major cities of the country for a short period of time in preparation for snap elections that follow. May 2 is declared a day of civil disobedience as Pashinyan did not receive the necessary votes from the Republican party.

May 2-May 3: Yerevan and many towns across Armenia were almost completely paralyzed. All acts of civil disobedience came to an end on May 3 as under growing public pressure the Republican party announced that they would back the people’s candidate.

May 8: Nikol Pashinyan was elected PM.

2.3 Media Environment

J. Downing (2008:44-45) argues that “unprecedented” levels of mobilization are now enabled by Internet use, especially when no alternative forms of media are available for the cause. Within this context, it is necessary to look at the state of press freedom and freedom of net in Armenia to establish what possible opportunities they offered for the movement.

According to Freedom House report (2017) on freedom of the press, the press in Armenia was *not free*¹⁵. In a more extensive review of press freedom in Armenia, Freedom House (2016) concluded the following:

- 1) despite the fact the freedoms of expression and press were at first glance protected by the constitution, these protections were not respected by political and business elites,
- 2) there was pervasive influence by the government on the content and views of public media doubled by self-censorship due to the relationship of media owners with Armenia’s political and business elites,
- 3) most of the dominant broadcast media were either directly controlled by the government or political and government-friendly business elites. Television and radio outfits required operating licenses obtained from

¹⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/armenia>

the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR)-8 members of which are appointed by the president, and the National Assembly-which hinders independent press further¹⁶.

On the contrary, there were no license requirements for online media. On Freedom of the Net index of Freedom House (Freedom House 2016 report) Armenia's position declined in comparison to the previous year. However, the Internet remained *free*. This decline in score was due to partial restrictions on Facebook access during the 'Sasna Tsrer' crisis, as well as obstacles for online broadcasting during Electric Yerevan social movement, discussed earlier in this chapter. Despite these very few incidents internet access was generally not restricted by the government, limits on online content or violations of user rights were not significant¹⁷.

Furthermore, the ICT was one of the fastest growing sectors of the country for the past decade, with little governmental control as the sector invited substantial foreign investment which might not have been possible had the government established opaque restrictions on internet access or content (State of Industry Report: Information and Telecommunication sector in Armenia 2017:12). In 2017, 2.2 million people had access to the Internet (including mobile and broadband) (ibid 2017:16), at a coverage rate of 70% of the population of 2.9 million¹⁸. Due to diversity, and accessibility of internet media, the dominance of television as the main source of information was challenged¹⁹. Because broadcasters were usually hesitant to cover oppositional activists and politicians²⁰, Armenian protest movements largely relied on social media to reach and gather participants²¹.

It is suggested that the Internet enables communication opportunities for direct communication with broader publics for social movements when little or none are available in mainstream media (Stein 2011:148). With the excessive restriction on 'traditional' media and increasing independence of online realm established above, it becomes clear that the media environment in Armenia provided ripe ground for social movements to take to social media in order to re-gain communication opportunities, which at times could have been the only available resource. Moreover, in this manner movement media can be conceptualized as alternative media as some research suggests (Stein 2011:149).

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/armenia>

¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/armenia>

¹⁸ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/armenia-population/>

¹⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/armenia>

²⁰ http://commonsplace.eu/index.php?m=23&news_id=3923

²¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/armenia>

3. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

This section presents the theoretical framework that guides the study. First, the approach taken by this study towards the potential empowerment of activists with the use of social media in the context of social movements is presented. Then comes a discussion of selectively chosen literature analyzing the relationship of social media with social movements. The literature is selected and presented as to how they inform the study. This is followed by a discussion on the theory of media witnessing in general, as well as a specific type of media witnessing with digital tools.

3.1 On the "Transformative" Nature of Digital Media

"We are passing from the industrial age into the information age" is a notorious claim made by Manuel Castells (2000:5). In this new information stage, a new type of society operates, that Castells (1997) calls "the network society" and defines as "[a] society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks". This means that although the network society is characterized by interconnected networks based on ICT, it nonetheless is not the direct result of technological advances. "Influences such as religion, cultural upbringing, political organizations, and social status all shape the network society"²². Nonetheless, networks not only have protruded to every domain of human activity, but also, have become the predominant organizational form of each domain (Castells 1997). A distinguishing factor that determines the network society, post-industrial in nature, from the industrial society is that time and space are transcended in the multi-directional and decentralized flows of information and communication. It is only within the concept of 'space of flow' that the network society envisaged by Castells becomes possible. The space of flows is described as "high-level cultural abstraction of space and time with dynamic interactions to the digital age society" (Castells, 1989: 23) which changes the nature of spatial arrangements within the new technological paradigm (Castells 1989: 146). The space of flows conditioning both consumption and production is composed of decentralized but intersecting hubs characterized by distant, instant, and immediate interaction, something that fundamentally changes spatial and temporal arrangements.

The space of flow is not bound to any physical location; hence, these spaces are primarily outside of national regulation, which increases the effectiveness of networks in challenging established hierarchical structures.

In the radical juxtaposition of the industrial society to the network society, there may be risks of overlooking the continuities that make one the extension of the other. In order to overcome the arguably present techno-deterministic account of Castells' theory of network society, the current study being informed by it,

²² Quotation retrieved from Essays, UK. (November 2018). Manuel Castells' theory of network society

nonetheless, this study refrains from such a critical understanding of the network society as a modern and unique development of the contemporary society. However, it is crucial to not fall into the trap of conceptualizing the impacts of technological advances in the society, or specific groups in the society, only within the paradigm of marketization and commodification of resources, as those who engage with technology do not merely consume it as it comes. This rhetoric can be found in the literature that challenges the idea that social media alter the nature of media power by redistributing it to marginalized actors. Media power here is understood as “a relationship between different interests engaged in struggles for a range of objectives that include legitimation, influence, control, status and, increasingly profit” (Freedman 2014:3). This definition being concerned with the interests of the empowered actors resonates well with Castells’ (2009:10) definition of power which is “the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actor's will, interest and values” (2009:10). Both of these understandings of power are crucial for this study as its primary interest lies in the way activists and leaders of the movement are empowered by social media, in a sense that through it they can disseminate information about the movement to wider publics, which otherwise may not have been possible. A negative attitude towards the empowering potential of social media is presented by Des Freedman, who, negates the very notion that social media offer a radical redistribution of power (Freedman 2014: chapter 4:114), even though he is careful to point out that “the internet has certainly facilitated the possibility of the broader circulation of marginal voices.”

“Why on earth would we expect any other outcome? After all, this is how capital – whether in the shape of the car industry, oil, pharmaceutical, or even social media – operates. The digital economy, like the ‘analogue’ one with which it is intimately connected, is marked by the same tendencies towards concentration and consolidation, towards enclosing and protecting private property”. (Freedman 2014:113)

Thus, in this understanding, digital media, including social media are based on the same market logic as other forms of media, and are merely a continuation of old practices of the commodification of informational and communicative resources. Accounts following these lines of argument may be right that a power shift from privileged to marginalized actors is not as radical as it seems, for not only new technologies shape contemporary power relations but are in their turn shaped by capitalist values and neo-liberal logic that reproduce inequalities. Nonetheless, this type of generalization takes for granted the non-linear nature of power. As Michelle Foucault puts it, “power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that *it comes from everywhere*.” (Foucault History of Sexuality, 1978, Vol. I:122 emphases added). The active audience paradigm that does not negate media effects but, nonetheless, views audiences as actively engaging with media in terms of decoding messages and using a medium creatively outside its designated use is what the theorization lacks (Kitzinger 1999, Moores 1993), as the economic and political aspect of new technologies

in Freedman's conceptualization come to dominate cultural and social aspect. The 'media logic' mimics 'market logic' that cuts through digital media (Altheide 2016).

Evgeny Morozov (2011) also treats the proclamation of power redistribution through social media from a skeptical perspective. He emphasizes the lack of 'the liberating potential of web 2.0' in repressive and authoritarian regimes that have established control over the online realm in order to suppress free speech, spread elite-favoring propaganda and for reasons of national surveillance. Furthermore, due to the low penetration rates of the Internet, and the unequal distribution of ICT, the possible political impact of connectivity is limited (Morozov 2011). Concerning Morozov's view on low internet penetration equalling low possible impact, it can be stated that it takes for granted the fact that "micropolitical changes taking place in the everyday practices of the younger generation and the empowering impact that practicing and invoking the right to freedom of expression can have. They also ignore[d] the cumulative effect such practices and expectations could have" (Radsch 2016:8). Thus, when small scale effects that freedom of speech can have on the development of a society span for a long period of time, these seemingly insignificant events accumulate and have the potential to trigger changes in the values of the society. The argument of repressive governments transferring offline control to the online realm is quite stable, and hardly possible to challenge in a significant way. Hence, once more, it should be emphasized that this study deals with a context wherein internet access or freedom of speech in the online realm was not restricted by government apparatus on the national level, so social media could be used for various democratic purposes of the movement.

This study benefits in two ways from a vital aspect of works that are sceptical towards the redistribution of power made possible with the help of social media. Firstly, similar accounts on social media come as a powerful reminder of digital divide and provide explicitly rich insights, the application of which helps overcome the technocratic, techno-deterministic views of technology that dominated the field in the days of the notorious Marshal McLuhan (1964), later revived as the grand narrative of the (arguably exaggerated) liberating potential of Web 2.0 (Wolfsfeld et al 2013:116, Freedman 2014:chapter 4). Secondly, it is essential to note that certain aspects are embedded in the codes, as well as rules and regulations, on which social media platforms are built and through which they function, and it is hard and sometimes impossible to bypass those inherent features that may be restrictive for purposes outside the designated use of the social media platforms. As in the case of Facebook, which is the focus of this study, its added features "have resulted mostly in invisible algorithms and protocols, that to a great degree control the visibility of friends, news, items, or ideas" (van Dijck 2013:49).

This study takes a more bilateral view of the co-shaped nature of social behavior and political and economic structure of social media platforms as "the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive" in so far as alongside the designated use of these very platforms users display creativity while

engaging in mediated sociality (van Dijk 2013, Bennet & Segerberg 2013:9). "Different affordances invite different kinds of actions, sometimes in ways that go beyond what the designers envisaged" (Bennet & Segerberg 2013:43). The power redistribution does not occur in a linear fashion, nor is it a static process where one variable is at all times superior over the other. "The initial values on which this technology was embedded are not a given but rather must be fought for and invoked" (Radsch 2016:35). Meanwhile, users "negotiate" whether and how to appropriate them [social media] in their quotidian habits" (van Dijk 2013). This argument resembles that of participatory and convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) where the media users are also prosumers-consumers and simultaneously producers and creators of content. Jose van Dijck (2013) proposes the conceptualization of 'a culture of connectivity' that chronologically followed the participatory culture. The transformation from participatory culture to a culture of connectivity took place as social media platforms, and the practices of their users evolved within the broader socio-economic conditions (van Dijck 2013: 3-6, 13). The connectivity is turned into a resource with ambivalent directions; it can be both empowering users for un/democratic purposes, at the same time exploiting the resource of connectivity within the marketization logic by the commodification of relationships.

"Social media services can be both intensely empowering and disturbingly exploitative; sociality is enjoyed and exercised through precisely the commercial platforms that also exploit online social activities for monetary gain." (Van Dijk 2013:18)

Thus, van Dijck's account on social media provides a more holistic perspective where both micro and macro developments are taken into account. The macro perspective on social media is left out of this study. However, this study is informed by van Dijck's work in as much as it recognizes the dual empowering and exploitative nature of social media so is more careful in terms of making generalizations outside of the subject of this study.

3.2 Social Media and Social Movements: Theoretical Perspectives and Previous Research

In this section various perspectives on the relationship between social media and social movements are considered. Instead of focusing on finding one overarching theory that would suit the case of the movement "*take a step, #RejectSerzh*", the focus here is on how each approach can inform the study.

3.2.1 Social media and contentious politics

Digital technologies have increased the speed of political actions turning to political crisis situations such as anti-government mass demonstrations that may or may not result in political change. This trend, however, cannot merely be attributed causality of digitization, but rather should be viewed in the context of cultural shift with decline in trust towards political elites, party-politics and traditional sensationalistic journalism, the rise of individualized politics and many other factors (McNair 2016:61, Bennet & Segerber 2013:23-24). Thus, "the debate about the relationship of digital technology, communication, and political crisis falls into a familiar dichotomy of strong effects vs. weak effects" (McNair 2016:66-67). To put it in the context of social media use specifically for the purposes of protest movements, social media may accelerate, increase or amplify the possibility of social movements though not necessarily cause it or guarantee success (Boulianne 2015, Shirky 2008).

Ultimately, social media have certainly altered the nature of private and public communication (van Dijck 2013:7, Deuze 2011, Chadwick 2016, Radsch 2016) which holds implications for social movements unfolding within ultra-saturated media environment (Bennet & Segerberg 2013, Bimber et al. 2006, Boulianne 2015, Cammaerts 2012, Radsch 2016, Howard & Parks 2012, Shirky 2008).

"[S]pecific types of ICTs and social media facilitate and circumscribe—rather than determine—certain types of communication, sociopolitical organization, and collective action, which in turn enable the development of particular forms of contentious politics and public spheres" (Radsch 2016:7).

In line with this approach, a wide array of literature focuses on the notion of contentious politics to unpack its relationship with social media in contemporary social movements. An oft-cited definition of contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interest, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties (Tarrow et al. 2008). Generally, contentious politics are opposed to conventional politics (e.g., voting and attending electoral rallies). When engagement in conventional politics does not fulfill the demands of those engaged, they may turn to contentious politics (e.g., participation in demonstrations and signing petitions). In order for their claims to reach the claimants (here the government), the claimers (here activists) use different protest-related tools, tactics, and actions that are made possible within the given timeframe and political environment. These possibilities are referred to as repertoires of contentious politics (Cammaerts 2012). It is suggested that social and other media expand the repertoires of contentious politics; however, they do not in and of themselves determine the overall movements (Cammaerts 2012, Khazraee & Losey 2016, Rolfe 2005, Baragwanath 2016).

The view on social media as mere facilitators of contentious politics is also prevailing in the literature that adopts the resource-mobilization and social capital approach to social movements (Breuer 2012:6). Social

capital theory explains how media usage influences social networks and contributes to democracy as more extensive networks lead to increased social capital which can elicit civic engagement (Lin 2002 as cited in Kim & Lowrey 2015). The literature that adopts resource-mobilization approach mainly focuses on social media as a recourse for mobilization of large publics into a social movement without the high costs previously associated with professional communication (Breuer et al 2012).

In line with the above Courtney Radsch (2016:26) proposes the concept of technological amplification “as an independent and non-controllable mechanism inherent in the algorithms of Internet search engines and collaborative filtering technology.” Nonetheless, this presumed inherency of amplification in the algorithms raises many complexities as it is not yet possible to determine the precise way algorithms manipulate visibility of specific protest issues and actors , "nor is it possible to exactly pin down how different technologically enabled practices, such as hashtagging, retweeting, liking, following, and friending, promote particular types of connection and exchange between activists" (Poell & van Dijk 2018:8).

Radsch (2016:31) also argues that the radical juxtaposition of traditional activism and cyber-activism should be omitted altogether, as these two are intrinsically bound together, and "the offline and online are simply various modes in the process of a singular cause." In this view it is hardly ever possible to decide where the boundary between street activism and cyber-activism is redrawn. Street activism is specifically aimed at creating a spectacle to be recorded, posted, shared via social networks and "broaden the dissemination of an actor of political or social protest", whereas cyber-activism aims at getting people into participation on the streets (ibid). Although this study does not argue for such radical inseparability of traditional and cyber-activism, the approach taken here departs from the literature which argues that digital media within specific political contexts provides new opportunities to activists in times of political protest.

Another perspective though does not entirely negate that social media qualitatively affect (interestingly, both negatively and positively) some opportunities for contentious politics, nonetheless emphasizes that social media do not radically alter the nature of it (Gladwell 2010, Cohen 2015). However, this view risks mis-conceptualizing media “as technological message channels rather than as the complex sociotechnical institutions they actually are” (Downing 2008:41, emphasis removed). On the other side of the spectrum, it is essential not to fall into the other extreme of technocracy since “the network principles of the Internet and the sharing capacities of interactive technologies enable peer production, but they do not determine it” (Bennet & Segerberg 2013:35).

3.2.2 Collective grievance approach

A strand of literature on social movements try to explain what triggers social movements focusing on collective practices of grievance (Breuer et al. 2012:767, Wolfsfeld et al. 2013:117). The grievance approach to mobilization of political protest focuses on psychological factors and emotions that lead people to participation (Breuer et al. 2012:767). This study is informed by this approach, with particular focus on Manuel Castells (2015) "Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet age" in which he displays what resembles psychological and attitudinal approaches to understanding the motives of engagement in contentious politics with a particular focus on networking opportunities provided by the so-called Information Age (Castells 2015, Castells 1996, Breuer 2012:4).

Because Castells analyses different movements in different political contexts (such as the Tunisian revolution, Indignadas in Spain, the Occupy movements) within the same paradigm, this work has received a fair share of criticism. The main criticism is that Castells provides an account of so-called new social movements wherein all share so similar characteristics to the extent that they are all alike (Castells 2015, Fuchs 2014). These movements are triggered by a spark of indignation wherein collective anger peaks, which is in the initial stages, is suppressed by fear. The fear eventually vanishes as people connect and network, share, and identify with each other. These movements unfold both online and offline principally in a non-violent manner, are leaderless and do not have specifically formulated goals, although the motives are usually political aimed to change the values of the society (Castells 2015). These are inherently networked social movements, wherein the participation in a network through sharing and identifying transfers collective anger into hope towards the possibility of success of collectively taken action. When success is achieved in one case, the domino effect (again amplified by social media) starts actioning; and similar movements emerge. In sum, by comparing protest movements in drastically different political contexts, Castells is accused of not giving due attention to of the very different political arenas in which these movements unfold (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013:116), hence providing an overly simplistic account of the multiplicity of factors that work together to yield a certain kind of outcome (Howard & Parks 2012). Nonetheless, it is a compelling study that attempts at cross-comparison of qualitatively and quantitatively different movements in democratic and less democratic political contexts. Furthermore, the role that emotions play in the determination of people to participate in a specific movement shall not be overlooked.

On the contrary, Radsch (2016:10) argues although collective grievances do trigger contentious politics, nonetheless " revolutions and massive political disruptions are rarely the results of instantaneous organization or immediate grievances; rather, they typically result from the groundwork laid by activists and grassroots organizers."

It will be interesting to explore how these different approaches towards mobilization of social movements relate to the understanding by activists about the emergence of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”.

3.2.3 The logic of connective action

Another cross-case analysis (mostly comprised of cases of environmental activism) is provided by Lance Bennet and Alexandra Segerberg (2013). The main argument of the book is that a shift in the underpinning of contentious politics has happened associated with the rise of highly individualized politics, hence a distinction should be made between collective action and digitally networked connective action which adopts personalized action frames (Bennet and Segerberg 2013). The authors provide a tripartite typology of connective action wherein different types of social movements assign varying degrees of importance to their social media strategies. This paradigm distinguishes between:

- i) organizationally brokered collective action (barely instrumental role to digital media that does not change the overall logic of participation),
- ii) organizationally enabled connective action (relative harmony between online and offline spaced; online vs. face-to-face communicative action),
- iii) crowd-enabled connective action (the centrality of media platforms as organizational hubs) (ibid:13).

The latter two assign a more fundamental role to social media strategies, while the first type a more moderate one. This analytically ideal types are by no means mutually exclusive and can rarely if ever be found in reality, and most social movements would display hybridity of various kinds (Chadwick 2016). In fact, social movements, their overall strategies, and media strategies, in particular, are rarely static, in so far as they are altered in line with the political opportunities that arise in the process, which makes it resistant to strict theorizing (Downing 2008:42).

As the case examples in the book focus mostly on environmental activism and do not extend to cases of other social movements such as anti-governmental social movements, it is hard to envision the theory functioning within those. Critically, on placing a significant role on NGOs, connective action risks neglecting that mobility or even the very existence of NGOs with liberating missions is threatened in un-democratic and/or pseudo-democratic regimes. Criticism towards the theory of connective action is that “in avoiding the technological determinism of cruder accounts, Bennett and Segerberg may have veered too close to morphological determinism by presuming that network form begets contentious action type” (Postill 2015). Moreover, the lack of leadership of the movements that the authors emphasize in the logic of connective action, may not exist in reality as recent studies show (Gerbaudo 2012, Tsatsou 2018, Poell & van Dijk 2018).

Nonetheless, it will be interesting to see how the key concepts of the approach relate to the current case.

3.3 Media Witnessing and Citizen Video-Journalism

A perspective that places the individual using digital media as the center of agency has a lot to offer for this study which focuses on how leaders and activists appropriated social media affordances to serve their communication and organization needs in the context of the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh”. This section argues that the theory of media witnessing with an emphasis on citizen video journalism and audio-visual advocacy can provide such a perspective (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009 (ed), McLagan 2006, Gregory 2006, Bock 2011, Allan 2016). In this section first, the so-called logic of bearing witness in protest movements is touched upon, and then the notion of witnessing through media is unpacked.

While choosing within the available repertoires of contentious politics, activists ascribe certain logic to their actions (such as rallies, up-rising, riots, hunger-strikes, etc.). Three types of logics (mutually non-exclusive) are distinguished as:

- Logic of numbers: mass demonstrations;
- Logic of damage: property destruction or large-scale disruptions;
- Logic of bearing witness: public performance and civil disobedience. (della Porta and Diani 2006 as cited in Cammaerts 2012:121)

The third type of logic of bearing witness is of utmost importance to this study since bearing witness fosters the construction of collective identities while simultaneously personalizing the political (Cammaerts 2012:122). A typical tactic for bearing witness by activists is a non-violent form of civil disobedience; i.e. “knowingly breaking what is considered unjust laws,’ consumer ‘buycotts’ or tactics of ‘symbolic provocation” (della Porta and Diani 2006 in Cammaerts 2012:124).

In order to understand the logic of witnessing in the context of social movements, it is important to go back to the theory of media witnessing. Witnessing has an inherent tripartite structure that traditionally has defined the witness: i) the agent that bears witness, ii) the act of witnessing, iii) the utterance or text itself (Peters 2001 in Frosh & Pinchevski (ed.) 2009). In witnessing through technology the agent that bears witness can be both the one recording present at the moment during the event providing a distinct type of testimony (an active witness), and the one detached from the event in space and time but bearing witness to the testimony of the former (passive witness) where one is tied intrinsically to the interests and agency of the other (Guerin & Hallas 2010). In broadcast media there is a need for mediators (various agents and agencies that film, direct, edit, produce, archive, and broadcast testimonies) for the act of witnessing to count as such and it is

ultimately the mediators that decide who counts as a victim or a witness according to their own conventions, thus reproducing inequalities of whose voice gets to be heard (Ashuri 2009:138-139). In witnessing through social media, the lines between the witness and the mediator are blurred; anyone with a phone at hand can record live to their Facebook pages as the act unfolds or publish it later. The live recording bears more authenticity as it is unedited and arguably not framed. However, due to massive traffic, which fraction of the possible audience bears witness to the witnessing text is dependent on multiple structural factors such as algorithms (Poell & van Dijck 2018, van Dijck 2013). Ultimately, without the audience as spectators, the very act of first-hand media witnessing becomes nonsensical (Guerin & Hallas 2010, Andén-Papadopoulos 2014).

However, with the expansion of media technologies, it is hard to pinpoint what it means to be a witness (Ashuri 2009:133). Rather than looking for an abstract model of witnessing it is recommended to regard the ontology of witnessing as dependant on the event (Ashuri 2009:133-136).

With the affordances that digital tools, including the online, provide today, instead of challenging the frames of mainstream news media, social movement activists often choose to 'be the media' that is create their own frames by distributing counter-narratives using their preferred media channels, self-made or appropriated such as in the case of social media (Cammaerts 2012:125, 127). Besides being a mean of self-representation, this self-mediation tactics is also related to the production of protest artifacts. The production of a protest artifacts constitutes an act of media witnessing in the following way: meanwhile the activists film and photograph their experience of the events and subsequently post them on social media platforms in real-time or after recording, they produce an archive of protest events. "The material and permanent nature of these protest artifacts enable symbols and discourses embedded in them to be culturally transmitted on a long-term basis, feeding the struggle and contributing to the construction of a collective memory of protest." (Cammaerts 2012:127).

The age of camera-mediated mass self-publication creates new possibilities for and a distinct type of media witnessing and subsequently a performatively specific type of a witness; citizen camera-witness which refers to "camera-wielding political activists and dissidents who put their lives at risk to produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a critical bid to mobilize global solidarity through the affective power of the visual" (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014:754-755).

Some considerations as gate-watching of the elites through contemporary media witnessing is also necessary, wherein the witnessing activity serves a means of preventing violence before it happens rather than as it unfolds (Goode 2009, Bruns 2003). Within this context, the relative affordance of digital cameras and mobile phones enables sousveillance tactics, which is "bottom-up surveillance by the citizen/activist on the state or public figures." (Cammaerts 2012:127). With high internet connectivity, it becomes possible to enact this

sousveillance in real-time while simultaneously bearing witness to it and make it available for others to witness online in real time, as well as after the events, since these records can be stored online for a long period of time.

It is interesting to see how the interpretation of activists of their use of social media during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”, as well as their interpretation of social media tactics of the leaders of the movement, align with the ideas outlined in this section.

4. Methods and Material

With the theoretical framework established and literature on the topic reviewed, this section presents methods, material and analytical procedure of the study. Discussion of each method is followed by a brief consideration on ethics and validity.

4.1 Research Design

Due to the dual nature of the RQs (as concerned with social media tactics of both leaders and activist of the movement), the research comprises of two sets of material which are treated with two different methods in order to gain two-sided, diverse perspective on specific uses of social media and understanding of social media as a tool for communication and organization of series of protests.

The methods are chosen in line with the aim of this study. The research design is a mixed method study. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with 6 activists to answer RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3 and content analysis of official Facebook pages of 2 leaders of the movements during the entire series of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” to answer RQ4. The content analysis part followed interviewing in sequence as the data from interviews was used for the interpretation of the results of content analysis to provide depth of interpretations. Since the leaders of the movement were not directly available for interviewing as most all of them now hold high-rank positions in the office after the success of the movement, from methodological point of view, it was intriguing to see whether it was possible to provide a comprehensive account of social media tactics of the leaders of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” through examining their Facebook profiles and talking to activists who were directly targeted with their messages.

4.2 Interviewing: Procedure and Reflections

Method, Application, Reflections

An oft-cited definition of qualitative research interview is “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale 1996:5–6, emphasis removed). Most commonly, the interview as a research technique is classified into structured, unstructured, and semi-structured variants. Provided that this typology ranges on the continuum with rare ideal-type occurrence, the variant used in this research leans towards semi-structured. Despite having some formulated questions and a loose guideline to follow at the time of the interview, it was left to the moment to see what kind of information would be revealed and the follow-up questions depended heavily on the replies given (Rapport in Skinner 2012:56).

Follow-up questions (sometimes main questions also) suggest richness of answers, and while formulating them, I always attempted at depth, detail, vividness, and nuance (Rubin & Rubin 2005:129-134). None of

the 6 interviews were in entirely similar to one another and the follow-up questions mostly depended on the context so as to preserve the principles of depth, detail, vividness and nuance.

While employing this method, qualitative and descriptive in nature, the researcher seeks to understand a respondent's attitude, interpretations, meanings and narrations on a theme, so there is a presupposedness of curiosity and openness, or even naivety on the part of the researcher whose aim is to elicit and stimulate the respondent to engage in a conversation-like experience (Skinner(ed.)2012:9). However, because the researcher tries to put the respondents in their natural habitat, and the interview resembles ordinary conversation, nonetheless, it is not entirely interchangeable with the ordinary every-day conversation although in both cases the answers involve narratives (Rubin & Rubin 2005:109). Quite obviously, the interviews were recorded to then be transcribed for the convenience and credibility of research, and sometimes this proved intimidating to the respondents of this study. Although all the respondents gave their consent on being recorded, one participant felt uneasy with it, so the data collection was limited only to field notes in this case. Remaining 5 interviews were recorded, and transcribed, and field notes were taken. Some more qualitatively distinguishing factors are that qualitative interview tends to be more in-depth, more detailed and less balanced in terms of who is questioning/answering than in ordinary conversations (Rubin & Rubin 2005:108). Instead, "[a]n interview is a *nonroutine conversation*, with a purpose or *design which at least one of the talking-partners has previously determined*"(Rapport in Skinner 2012:55, original emphasis). Following this approach the interviews resembled a sort of guided conversation (Kvale 1996): during the interviews the researcher guided the process loosely by choice of the questions, however refraining from opinionated questions and straight-forward guidance. Short questions that would produce descriptive longer answers were preferred so the respondent dominated the duration of the interview. None of the interviews kicked off with immediate questions concerning social media use by the respondents, instead questions were asked on their experience of the social movement specifically and only when the respondent would mention social media in one way or another were she asked for clarification of what was meant (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009) and the conversation would follow naturally. Nonetheless, the interview design followed the logic of informed consent, as the respondents were completely made familiar with the aim of the study, it was possible that they could have thought that answers in the context of the aim of the study were encouraged and subsequently 'act out their self' or unleash one of their multiple identities to meet this expectation (Kvale 1996, Skinner (ed) 2012:11-12, Gubrium & Holstein 2001, Holstein & Gubrium 1995). For that, I made sure to warn the participants in the beginning that the focus should fall on their individual experiences and that the I was open to the idea that the respondents would not highlight any role to social media. Also, 'conversational repairs' such as clarifying meanings were not only used by the researcher but also encouraged on the part of the respondent (Rubin & Rubin 2005:109).

Sample Size

There is no gold standard of sample size for interviewing as research methods, and the recommendations range from 5-25 participants (Creswell 1998), to 2-10 participants (Boyd, 2001), etc. By the beginning of the research, there was no precise sample size identified, so the sample size depended on the so-called logic of theoretical saturation wherein the research continues so long as enough data is generated in line with the aim of the research (Gubrium & Holstein 2011:243). 6 interviews provided more data than anticipated in the beginning, and the data could be extended to a larger research project than the current one.

The respondents were selected through theoretical sampling partially carried out through “snowball” process; three of the participants fulfilling the theoretical criteria were selected initially, who later helped to locate the rest of the respondents through their personal networks (Gubrium & Holstein 2011:86). It was important that the respondents have different civil engagement background and levels in order to ensure qualitative diversity that would possibly reveal not only similarities of experiences but also differences to ensure plurality of opinions. The duration of the interviews extended from 45 minutes to 1 hour which was found to be sufficient.

The respondents

After getting settled with the aim of the study it became clear to me that I wanted to speak to people who directly participated in the movement as regular protestors, those that could provide inside voices into the organizational process of the movement, as well as those who did participate in the movement but less actively. Due to limited time for this research it was not possible to find equal participants for each category as I also wanted to talk to people I did not know in terms of their political views and who did not know me or my political views, however, I made sure to have at least one of each. All 6 of the respondents were meant to display various degrees of previous civil engagement from very passive to very active. I also chose respondents to be 20-35 years old as social media use among the youth is much higher in Armenia. Furthermore, the role of the youth was emphasized during the movement itself and after its success.

Participant 1 was one of the less actively engaged in civil society for political causes. She had never participated in any other previous protests. She started her active participation in the movement on April 17 and spent at least 5 days of the week at the sight of protest. Her candidacy was suggested to me by another participant during one pilot interview that I conducted (not included in this report). Her opinion was especially useful in learning what triggered her participation.

Participant 2 exemplified one of the core activists of the movement. She had high levels of civic engagement and had taken part in all the popular movement of the past years. She had affinities both to *Take a step* and *#RejectSerzh* initiative organizers before they were planned. I was familiar with her figure through a viral image from a previous social movement *#Electric Yerevan*. However, I did not personally know her, so she

fit with the demands of the study while providing an extremely useful inside look into the initiatives. She was one of the participants that I had chosen for the study.

Participant 3 was directly involved in politics as a member of an oppositional party '*Bright Armenia*'. He was a strong believer that such matters should be decided in the parliament and not on the streets. Because of his political views, he participated in the series of political protest only once for personal monitoring but was immediately detained. His views were extremely helpful in many regards: participant 3 provided a deeper understanding of the political context as he was actively situated within it, and, as a person who was not directly involved in the streets, key insights into how he followed the events. His candidacy was suggested to me by one of the participants who was not included in this research.

Participant 4 worked for multiple NGOs with political motives and at the time of the protests was coordinating a youth initiative which had centres throughout different regions of the country. She had taken part in most popular movements of the last decade. She was directly involved in the organization of one of the first activities by the #RejectSerzh initiative in Gyumri in late March, although it did not gain much attention at the time. Participant 4 also coordinated the actions in Gyumri. She made a big contribution to this study by providing details of her first-hand experience of the organizational process of individual actions within the movement. I learn about participant 4 from a documentary highlighting the role of women during the revolution, and she showed a willingness to participate in the study.

Participant 5 was the most media-savvy participant of this research as he worked in ICT. He was characterized by high levels of general civil engagement, and although he joined the mass protests three days in, he actively followed the events as they were unfolding. His candidacy was offered to me by another participant. Participant 5 contributed key insights into a semi-secret Telegram channel which was used for coordination of single action of which he was part of.

Participant 6, like participants 4 was engaged in many NGOs and had been an active part of the civil society for the previous 3-4 movements. She was sceptical towards the 'take a step, RejectSerzh' movement in the beginning stages but then took active coordinating role of actions in Gyumri. She provided key insights into the coordination of the movement.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done in 2 phases following data analysis technique of responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin 2005:201). The first phase included the preparation of transcripts, and mapping the emerging themes and concepts. The interviews recorded in MP3 format were transcribed using a program called ExpressScribe. During the second phase, after coding, themes and concepts were compared within the

interviews and elaborated on. As an extension to the second phase, the themes found in the literature were compared against the themes in the data to be presented in results and discussion section.

Credibility and Reflexivity

A usual critique of qualitative interviewing is that the analysis of generated data is always based on the personal bias of the researcher. However, the positivist paradigm of researcher objectivity of an ideal type has by now been shifted in qualitative social science research as researchers are no longer seen as “free-floating scientists, separate from their projects” (Payne & Payne 2004:193). This view emphasizes the notions of reflexivity on the part of the researcher and credibility of the research as a whole.

Credibility of interview research is achieved through careful sampling, constructing the interview questions and data-rooted interpretation of results (Rubin & Rubin 2005: chapter 4). It was since the beginning clear to me that my respondents should be people I did not know before, who had been there on the streets during the protests, had first-hand experience, were knowledgeable and provided a diversity of perspectives. All 6 of my interviewees had different levels of civil engagement in general, and during the specific movement under analysis. In order to make sure that I was not favouring certain narratives over others, in the final report, only those themes that were reoccurring at least in 2 interviews are used.

Reflexivity in qualitative research addresses researcher engagement in explicit self-aware reviews of several kinds (Drisko&Maschi 2015:78). The purpose of reflexivity is for the researcher to deploy self-reflection in order to identify any biases that may affect the design of the research and avoid those. I believe to have reflectively constructed, conducted the interviews, and interpreted the results. The results are justified by the responses of the participants and produced transcribed material.

Routed in social constructivism epistemology, the interviews were only concerned to delve deep into the personal experiences and interpretations of the respondents without aiming at generalizability of results to a larger population.

Ethics

While conducting the interviews, the principle of ‘informed consent’ was fully preserved. All 6 participants introduced in this report were comfortable about being named and gave permission to use all the data in their answers.

The translation of bits of the interviews from Armenian to English involved some ethical considerations. The direct quotes used in the report are my own translation, maximally accurate due to my command of the

languages and careful consultation of dictionaries if necessary. I firmly believe no one was exploited or harmed during the research.

4.3 Content analysis: Procedure and Reflections

Sample

The sample is comprised of 119 coded items taken from verified official Facebook profiles of the leader of the movement and an organizing member during a predetermined period of time. These items include all the timeline posts during the set period of time including all possible forms of communication on Facebook excluding feelings with no text: video, image, textual messages, URL links. All of the coded forms of communication were treated as text. Text is understood as “a wide range of communication media that can be stored in many different formats” including textual data, audio recording, and various forms of electronic data found on social media platforms such as Facebook (Drisco&Maschi 2015:7).

The choice of the particular characters whose Facebook profiles were put to scrutiny is justified as purposive sample, that is “texts or participants are selected to provide plentiful relevant information for the study. It is indeed important that such samples be maximally informative” (Drisco&Maschi 2015:124). This sampling technique is otherwise referred to as relevance sampling (Krippendorff 2004:118). Nikol Pashinyan is the proclaimed leader of the movement, while Alen Simonyan is a key organizing figure who played an important role especially while the former had been detained, hence the interest on these two figures specifically.

This research focuses primarily on Facebook as a site of analysis for 4 primary reasons:

- 1) By the time of the research and during the set period of data collection, Facebook remained the leading and most popular social media site in Armenia in terms of quantity of active users at 1200000. Almost half of the population held a Facebook profile and displayed moderate to high levels of activity. Instagram came second at exactly half the number of Facebook users. A novel rising trend was the use of Telegram, however, encompassing a small fraction of the population.²³
- 2) After almost a half year of stable number of new users without considerable increases, during the first month of the series of protest leading to the Armenian Velvet Revolution, the number of new Facebook users increased considerably by 100.000 and the trend remained upwards, although less dramatically.²⁴
- 3) After the Armenian velvet revolution, attributing certain role to Facebook during the movement became a common rhetoric articulated in numerous national and foreign analytical articles and by the leader

²³ <https://media.am/social-media-spring-2018-armenia>

²⁴ <https://media.am/social-media-spring-2018-armenia>

of the movement Nikol Pashinyan²⁵. Facebook is viewed to be symbolic to the series of protest as the leader of revolution Nikol Pashinyan recorded live on Facebook the symbolic march from Gyumri to capital Yerevan where the first mass protests were to be held and announced the inception of and information regarding the movement while there was almost total lack of other sources of information resulting from lack of any other media coverage. Even when news media broke out of silence and started covering the events, publications on Facebook profiles of the organizing members and the leader of the revolution still remained the primary source of information for the public and news media as the time and locations for demonstrations were kept secret and addressed in Facebook live videos on the very last minute to avoid police cluttering and consequences of it²⁶.

4) Facebook, as opposed to various other social networking sites, can function as a repository of information that can be referred back after the original time of publication. The communication occurring on Facebook timeline remains intact unless the user/admin deletes it herself. In this sense, it is an asset not only to regular users but also for a researcher to be able to go back at the events as happening on Facebook timeline months and even years after original publication.

The period of time for data collection is March 31-May 8 corresponding to the date of the first day of the march from Gyumri to capital Yerevan acclaiming the inception of the movement to the day when under public pressure the former government gave in to the final demand of the movement which was the election of Nikol Pashinyan as the new temporary PM.

Method, Application, Reflections

Drawing on the similarities found in various content analysis definitions of proponents of content analysis J. Drisco and T. Maschi come up with an agreed-upon definition of content analysis as “a structured research approach, using specified research designs and methods, to make replicable and valid inferences from texts and similar materials” (Drisco&Maschi 2015:6, emphasize removed). The authors nonetheless distinguish between 3 approaches to content analysis; i.e., basic content analysis, interpretive content analysis, and qualitative content analysis that differ from each other in their data collection and analysis technique. They also differ in their epistemological routings: basic content analysis is usually rooted in positivism, whereas interpretative content analysis in social constructivism. Nonetheless, basic and interpretive content analysis share many similarities, a difference being constructing the coding lists through inductive or deductive approaches and the allowance to code only manifest or both manifest and latent content (ibid: 2015). The

²⁵ <https://yerevan.today/all/politics/17789/facebook-y-mets-der-khaghac-haykakan-heghapokhutyanyan-mej-nikol-pashinyan>

²⁶ <https://hetq.am/hy/article/97693>

approach to content analysis in this research can best be described as a combination of basic and interpretive content analysis as it deploys a mixture of inductive and deductive techniques while constructing the codes with the surrounding context in mind. This approach resonates to a greater degree to a description of content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff 2013:24). The balancing of inductive and deductive techniques is highly recommended especially for purposes of case studies (Boréus & Bergström 2017). Although the application of the method to code the inferences does not focus on mere word counts as the aim is to code both latent, manifest and contextual communication data, nonetheless the data is quantified to make any patterns more visible and ease the analytical process to follow.

First and foremost, the items were coded according to “**related**” or “**not related**” to the movement in order to exclude the items that did not possess relevance for the study. Only 4 items were excluded in total from 2 profiles, resulting in **119 items** for further coding. After a pilot study on a small sample of 5 posts from each profile, the variables were identified. These variables were tested on another 5 posts from each profile and the final version established. The variables to examine the form of the content are as follows:

— **Form:** refers to the type of the form of the message on the timeline.

The code *form* includes:

-**Text:** refers to written textual message in the post on the timeline. Mostly but not always images and videos were usually accompanied with short 1-2 sentence text drawing the take-away message of the video/image. Very rarely, textual messages appeared in isolation.

-**Image:** refers to a picture published in the post on the timeline.

-**Video:** refers to video-recording with audio in the post on the timeline. A distinction is made between **live** and **pre-recorded** video messages. Live streaming function on Facebook lets broadcast videos straight from devices to a Facebook page. Facebook alerts that the video was broadcast live in real time on the top of the video, even if accessed after the broadcast has finished. Users can also upload videos after recording them.

-**URL link:** refers to a clickable active link that is placed in the message. It was coded to which websites the links led, however further content was not.

The items could contain one, some or all of the codes.

The variables to examine the **content** of the messages are as follows:

— **Addressee:** refers to mentioned addressee and designated receiver of the message through explicit words. The variables for this code were: **-protestor, -activist, -citizen, -people, -organizing member, -government member.**

— **Information type:** refers to the general theme in the message. The variables for the information type code are:

- **Time/Location:** refers to specific details of time and place of single demonstrations as part of the larger protest movement. Explicit words indicating such information are sought after. An example is: ***18.30 demonstration in Republic Square. Share, share, share!!!***

- **Call to action:** refers to a specified action which the addressee of the message is asked to take in the interest of the movement. Explicit verbs indicating such information are sought after. An example is: ***The only aim of this live video is to encourage your immense to transfer your activity from Facebook into joining us on the streets. Join us for the march now, or at least join the demonstration at 19.00 to make your voice heard.***

- **Advice:** refers to any information that contains advice for protestors. An example is: ***When the police detains you on the grounds of participating in the demonstration, deny your participation and identify as a passer-by who struggled to move to his location because of the extreme cluttering of the streets.***

- **Support/Solidarity:** refers to information about various figures, organizations, political parties, representatives of regions that have announced their support of and solidarity with the movement. An example is: ***Prosperous Armenia party has declared solidarity with the movement and the people, and I am having a meeting with the leader later tonight.***

- **About movement:** refers to information about motives, objectives, demands, outcomes of the movement. An example is: ***I have already made it clear before the meeting with Serzh Sargsyan that we will not be negotiating anything else than his stepping down as PM. The agenda has not changed, no other deal will be negotiated.***

- **Participation rates:** refers to any information about participation in the movement, usually rough numbers of current rates. An example is: ***Dear citizens, I now have received information that some hundred thousand people are protesting only in the Republic Square, and protests with a few hundred, sometimes a couple thousand people have emerged in various regions.*** (translated from live video)

The items could contain one, some or all of the codes. For content of each item a 1-3 sentence summary was included.

Validity and Reliability

“[W]hether a measure properly captures the meaning of the concept or the construct it represents” is indicative of validity of research (Jensen 2002:212). In this study the coding variables were defined based on the personal judgment and interpretation of the researcher as is usually expected in case of content analysis

leaning towards more interpretive variant. While developing the analytical themes the context of the movement was very important, however still validation of these themes in the text under analysis was a primary concern, thus the analytical categories are both context-based and grounded-in-data. As such the generated codes can best be described as “connotative codes [that] draw from the latent content [and] are arrived at by combining individual elements in a text to understand the meaning of the whole” (Ahuvia:2001 in Drisco&Maschi 2015:65).

The interplay of latent and manifest content in constructing some of the coding units also brings forth some questions of reliability. “*Reliability* addresses the question of whether different researchers categorize the data in the same way. It also addresses the question of whether the same person generates consistent results over time and different data” (Drisco&Maschi 2015:47). In this definition, the first refers to inter-coder reliability and the second to intra-coder reliability. Admittedly, the inter-coder reliability has not been tested as I found it hard to find people in possession of the language who could aid the coding process. Intra-coder reliability was assured by condign a pilot study and making the necessary changes in the coding scheme. In additional step, I tried to make the data collection easily replicable for myself (as the final codes were decided upon after 2 tries or some of the sample) and for further studies or checks by assigning a value to each coded post, as there were usually multiple posts in the same day. The assigned value includes the following:

- the profile the post is from: **1**-Nikol Pashinyan/Նիկոլ Փաշինյան, **2**-Alen Simonyan
- month of publication: **04**-April, **05**-May
- sequence in the day: (**A-I** in alphabetical order)
- E.g. the value **10401A** indicates that the item is from the first profile (**1**), the month of publication is April (**04**), the day of the publication is 1st (**01**), is it is the first post in the day (**A**).

Last thing to discuss in relation to validity and reliably is the sampling technique. A usual risk with purposive samples is that they can privilege certain views over others. This risk is minimal here since we are concerned with a movement which had only a few members in its leadership who shared political affinities, belongings and views, furthermore the movement had very-well articulated motives and objectives and so uniformity rather than plurality of voices is expected. Moreover, in representative or purposive sampling “the resulting units of text are not meant to be representative of a population of texts; rather, they are the population of relevant texts, excluding the textual units that do not possess relevant information” (Krippendorff 2004:119). Although, examining the profiles of all organizing member would have been an asset to this research, the selected two profile are the ones with considerably more followers assuming that their voices (on Facebook) were heard to larger publics. In this sense, the results can be generalized only in regards to individual Facebook profile use of protest leaders, however since there might have been other possible forms of

communication with the public on Facebook (groups, ads etc) during the protests the results of current research shall not be extrapolated to those.

Data Analysis

Content analysis serves as a toolkit for systematic and reliable sampling of media content; however, it does not in itself serve as a way to interpret the data generated through it which always depends on the personal skills of the researcher (Hansen & Machin 2013:113). In the final step the generated data is related to the wider context as well as the literature in order to make potent implications. In order to interpret the results produced by content analysis I relied heavily on the context as well as responses of the interviewees who were asked about their experience of the social media tactic of the protest movement leaders. Because the leaders of the movement were not directly available, it was interesting to see whether depth of interpretations was possible by such a combination.

Ethics

That content analysis makes use of data not specifically designed for research purposes is a methodological asset but an ethical challenge for researchers in online research. It is especially online that the boundaries between private and public are increasingly blurred.

Facebook allows its users to regulate the privacy of the posts they make, and the overall visibility of their personal profiles. Nonetheless, at times the users simply do not notice where the boundaries cross and may not be aware of possibilities of usage of the data they make public; certainly, research purposes among these possibilities. The profiles from which data were retrieved and presented in this report belong to *public figures* and are *verified public profiles* as politicians and the information found there is meant for the public and is clearly not meant for personal use. I have made the choice to use the usernames as indicated on the profiles in the best interest of the research. Meanwhile, I have practiced good ethics while engaging with the data, and I firmly believe that no data was abused and/or misused for the purposes of this research.

5 Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study and analytical discussion of the movement. It presents the results produced by interviews in 4 sections. The first section of interview results presents important themes that were recurring through the movement. The next three sections are organized thematically according to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. The results of content analysis is presented in a single section alongside a descriptive analysis.

5.1 Interview Results and Discussion

The interview results are presented in 5 parts. The interviews are discussed according to themes that help answer the RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. The first part (5.1.1) introduces the themes that were prevailing when participants discussed the mobilization process of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” in their experience. The second part outlines (5.1.2) how the activists gained information about the movement before it started and while it was in progress. The third part (5.1.3) concerns the use and perception of social media by activists for coordination and communication during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”. The fourth (5.1.4) part describes how activists perceived the relationship of traditional and social media during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”, as well as the positive and negative aspects of social media use during the movement in their experience “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”. It is important to mention, that throughout these parts I turn to only those themes that were present at least in interviews with 2 participants. However, due to reasons of space sometimes only one example is presented. This example is usually the one that describes the theme more vividly.

5.1.1 Themes: From scepticism to hope

The **skepticism** with which the movement was approached in the stages of its inception and how the feeling changed was a prevailing theme in all 6 of the interviews. In fact, usually that was the point from which the participants departed as they narrated their experience of the movement. “*As usual they [the public] didn’t believe in us. During the first activity of RejectSerzh there was only 20 participants of which 19 knew each other from other initiatives*” stated participant 2.

The main reason for this attitude in participants perceptions was the previous negative experience of the people with participation in protest movements. This included violence and police brutality during previous movements, as well as the feeling of **being deceived** when the leaders would simply seize the movement for various reasons, though it was growing in popularity. *Participant 4* summarized this statement very well; “*We’ve seen many protests that people have risen up, full of hope, but nothing happened. They felt deceived.*”

Participant 1 although did not experience any of the previous movements first-hand, emphasised that she had a sense of apathy towards the movement which changed into **optimism as the number of people started increasing** dramatically. She based her own scepticism on the general attitude that was in the public.

The activists themselves lacked **hope** towards the success of the movement, although they were there since day one, because it was their **duty** to display their discontent. This was especially protruding in the speeches of *participants 4 and 6*. The latter put it this way:

“We’ve seen many movements when we rose up but apart from being included in police reports, we’ve not gained much. After #electricYerevan it was the biggest lesson for me: when I was sure that we can change something, but in the end was left only frequent visits by the policemen to our house.. So, this time my parents were against my participation and I was increasingly feeling the same. Especially since I live in a small village and every time there was a letter addressed to me from the police, everyone would talk about it. So, I decided in the beginning not to take part at all.”

The activists also emphasised the **fear** in their hearts as they did not negate the idea of violence based on their previous experiences during #Electric Yerevan, and even worse the knowledge they had of tragedy of March 1 2008 from the older generation of protestors. *Participant 2* felt especially uneasy. She recalled the fear that she had gained through years of experience as a civil activist.

“All the nights that were spent on the streets, I was there. After #electricYerevan’ I was afraid to sleep during the protests. I was constantly thinking that if I go to sleep, they will come.”

The themes of **hope** and **will** were present in 5 interviews in both core activists and those who joined later. *Participant 4 and 6* that were active in the city Gyumri from where it all started, identified the same incident when they saw hope in younger generation which made them believe in the success this time. *Participant 6* recalled the event:

On 17th [of April] I was going to work and I saw children protesting and the police trying to send them off. I saw hope in this children who were aware of all their civil rights and duties, who could rise for a better country. You know, very young fraction of population, teenagers. And next to them I saw elderly people who were there not because they were willing to protest all along but for these children, to protect them from the police. It really touched me. I realized something had already changed and bigger change was coming.”

Regarding will of the people *participant 4* analysed in the retrospect:

“The third stage was the stage of demonstrating our will. Mass detentions of prominent figures were taking place already. That meant that the government started feeling uneasy already. We had to show them that we are united and determined for our cause. Even if we didn’t win we would show someone looking down on us that we don’t surrender and we don’t want him regardless. This was a historic moment. We showed our will”.

Participants 4, 5 and 6 emphasised **the unity of Take a step and #RejectSerzh** and how each initiative spoke to different publics, hence a larger number of protestors. *Participant 4* emphasised that the moment the two different initiatives joint forces was the transitional phase of the series of protests *“maybe if they didn’t network together we wouldn’t have this political outcome. They brought into one the political and the civic sphere. It was truly a process of critical importance that went very smoothly. I myself would never follow Pashinyan’s political team. But Reject Serzh was dear to me”*. Participant 6, too, was encouraged by *RejectSerzh*. Although participant 6 and 1 were not completely in line with either, *Take a step* spoke more to them. Like participant 4, participant 2 also emphasised how **civil and political realms** were brought into one.

According to the participants another factor that made people interested in the movement was the **leadership** and its tactics, **clarity of actions** and the **singularity of demands** (only when one demand was fulfilled they would pass onto the next one). **Decentralization** and **spontaneity** were also important part of the tactics in connection with which-as we shall see in the next section-the activists starting drawing links with social media. When it comes to the clarity of actions, it is what drew *participant 1* herself, whereas *participant 6* made the judgment that it drew most of the later joiners.

“First of all, there was high demand. People have had enough. Secondly, the objectives of the movement and the overall demand were clear all along. Lastly, singular actions and their sequence were presented very well: now the protestors who are gathered here go there and paralyze this street, the others go to some building and clutter the exits etc, this is what I mean. At each point, each person knew what he had to do, where and how. Before I joined there still weren’t any specific actions, and frankly just to go and sit in the square didn’t make sense to me. But when the specific activities of civil unrest and protests started I joint it. The messages of the leaders were very clear mostly transmitted via Facebook live videos, YouTube live videos of a few news websites. All of these ensured informativity as you know the public broadcasting has always been isolated, no coverage at all.”

Participant 2 strongly emphasised the role of the leader Pashinyan himself. Participant 2 puts it rather prosaically how she was almost sure that this time everything had changed and that they would succeed. Interestingly, she pictured this vividly by referring to social media, Facebook more specifically.

“Do you know why? Because during the previous cases if a protest had leaders, those were people without much public recognition. But Pashinyan has always been there as an oppositional politician. People knew him like that. That’s why the masses followed him. I remember, before the movement Pashinyan changed his profile picture on Facebook to the one where he breathes fresh air while looking up. That’s when I realized that he has changed. He was no longer oppositional political figure Nikol Pashinyan; he was like us- an oppositional civil activist. I commented under the post-I think it was one of the most liked comments- ‘I love your redeemed type’. My friends make fun of this up to this day.”

Participants 2, 3, 4, 5 were firm believers that the revolution was **a gradual process rather than an unexpected, immediate and isolated phenomenon**. This statement corresponds to that of Radsch. Participant 2 felt that the movement was the “*bouget*” of previous civic activities.

“I strongly believe that the revolution was born by previous civil activities and core activists. What I mean is that during a previous civil activity if 1 person learnt about it, we were able to make that 1 person join for the next one and so the network expanded. Although it didn’t seem anything substantial at the moment, over the years it had an impact. So was the case with the revolution. Without the struggles of core civic activists no one would have presented to us the revolution on a silver platter. Not even Pashinyan.”

Similarly, participant 4 would also attribute great importance to the knowledge gained from experience of previous movements. Here is an example of their tactics adopted from experience.

“What was decentralization for? We had learned from previous movements that if we clutter in masses in the same place the police will make us leave. So, instead we were smaller groups in different parts of the city. We would also predict where there will be more police and intentionally avoid these streets. All of this was spontaneous and unplanned-we would make new announcements on Facebook right before a move was planed- there was no way the police could track it.”

Finally, there was the theme that the **slogan** of the movement was very well-chosen: **#take a step, reject Serzh!** *Take a step*, emphasized the importance of **individual action**. As we shall see in the next section this was discussed in relation to social media. This trend generally corresponded to Bennet & Segerberg argument of the rise of individualized contentious politics. According to the participants RejectSerzh focusing on the persona of Serzh Sargsyan created the illusion of common **villain** which united the people against a common cause. According to the participants #RejectSerzh spoke to the average citizen who saw Serzh Sargsyan as an embodiment of the regime with which they were unhappy.

“With their joint slogan take a step, #rejectSerzh I think they had hit right in the target, despite the fact that in my opinion public discontent must have focused on more complex systematic changes in my opinion.

But probably majority of the population was not as politically aware to grasp more deep-rooted problems. And so I think they had adopted a good slogan, demands and tactics corresponding the current environment.”, said participant 5.

5.1.2 Information

In order to explore the role of social media during the movement, it was important to explore how the protestors and activists found out about the movement in the first place and how they gained information as the movement was already in progress.

Participants 1 and 5 were those respondents that joined the protests as it was already in progress, on April 17 and April 16, respectively. This implies that they would not have any first-hand information about the events as they unfolded during the days of their absence. This was indeed so. Both highlighted Pashinyan’s Facebook profile as their main source of credible information.

Participant 1 learned about the movement as Pashinyan reached Yerevan on April 13. *“Now that I look back at it, some posts popped out in my Facebook feed during the march from Gyumri to Yerevan, but I really didn’t pay attention, I wasn’t really engaged in what was happening in politics”. Since April 13 she started following the events “all day long-like most Armenians-via Nikol Pashinyans lives streams on Facebook, as well as the live streams of Liberty radio station (Azatutyun) on either Facebook or YouTube”.* She emphasized the role of personal ties that got her engaged in protesting on the streets. Participant 1 emphasized the role that this movement has had in her life, it led to *“revolution of the self”* as she finally gained political awareness and participation within the civil society. But because participant 1 was in the Freedom Square during the protests, she emphasized that she still had to follow live on Facebook as Pashinyan spoke out to the public, because the crowds were huge and it was really not possible to hear anything. *“I remember all these people including me staring at our phones and following Pashinyan’s live streams on Facebook. It was the only way to actually learn what he was saying.”*

Participant 5 was also interested in analytical discussion of the movement, so he followed the attitudes of key activists and politicians in online news or in their social media accounts. *“[I used my trusted very few news sources, mostly their Facebook channels, the pages of core civil activists, and live videos on Facebook to understand the scope of the movement.”*

Participants 2, 4, 6 used to be actively engaged in earlier protests movements and had personal ties with one of the initiative organizers. Because they had ties with the movement, it was expected that they knew about the movement prior to its inception. Still, it was important to learn how they collected information as

the movement grew in size. *Participant 4 and 6* also highlighted the role of live broadcasts on Pashinyan's Facebook account. *Participant 2* admitted that during the protests she would learn any information mostly first-hand or through her friends as she did not take out her phone during the protests due to her bad experience.

"I wouldn't take out my phone because I had learnt through my experience that they would break". She would briefly check the news on her Facebook timeline afterwards.

Participant 3 had very low engagement with the movement itself, thus posing a special interest in terms of how he followed the events. He had only been to the square ones *"for personal monitoring"* but was detained. It is due to mention that he did not directly take part in the protests because of his political views.

"At certain points I was experiencing a conflict of interest, me as a strong holder of the view that such matters should be decided in the parliament and not on the streets, that the struggle against political flaws should be in the parliament not the streets, that the struggle should be against the system and not persons, as was the context of the movement, you know it was personified struggle."

Nonetheless, it is also important to mention that participant 3 did have an active engagement with the issue itself.

"Our colleagues from WayOut alliance took their step against Serzh Sargsyan, however the central underpinning of Bright Armenia party is refraining from personified struggles against people-Serzh Sargsyan didn't constitute the system, instead we believe in the struggle against the system. But you know that the leader of our party Edmon Marukyan had stated that if there is bloodshell or any form of aggressive violence we would join in as well. We have always defended the rights of the revolutionary side, the leaders and the protestors. If you remember, when Nikol Pashinyan, Ararat Mirzoyan and Sasun Mikaelyan were detained or as the former ruling majority claimed, they were taken out from the epicentre, the first people who went for their protection were my colleagues."

Participant 3 provided some key insights about the reaction towards the movement by the then majoritarian Republican party.

"It had become a practice: after each election there were protests and clashes: 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013. There is no denial that the chances of violence were high. You know, "we all know that there was an extraordinary and special session to convene an emergency regime. That means that the Republican party and Armenian Revolutionary Federation political party had the gathering in that context, but why it wasn't ratified is a mystery."

Like the rest of participants his main source of information were live broadcasts on social media.

“I was following the events both as a person active in political life and as an individual. I watched the live broadcast of 1am, Azatutyun and of course followed rigorously Pashinyan’s Facebook page. The was refreshed information every minute there. Because I was not in the epicentre of the events, these live videos of Pashinyan and were my main source of information of what was happening exactly at the moment. It was a means to keep updated, not miss any important development, because things were constantly evolving”.

Overall, the activists that had ties to the formal leadership and organizers of the movement learnt about it through personal ties before the movement began. However, during the movement already they did rely on social media to be able to receive information. Whereas, the rest of the participants both learnt about the movement, as well as followed the unfolding events through Facebook live streams on Pashinyan’s Facebook account and sometimes the live streams of Azatutyun (Liberty radiostation).

5.1.3 Communication and coordination of action

This section describes the social media use of the participants and understanding of its use by the leaders of the movement during the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh”. One interview at a time is discussed. The data here provides answers to RQ1.

Participant 1 used her own social media account only a few times, mostly to post an image from the streets or a very short text. These few posts had 2 functions for Arusik: to signal her solidarity with the movement and as memory of it. When it comes to the use of social media in the context of the movement by the protest leader she highlighted its informative nature as discussed in the previous chapter. Participant 1 also expressed her view that Pashinyan used Facebook as a branding strategy, something that was accessible to everyone in walks of life, did not include high costs, to express that he was accountable to the people about his every step. This resonates with resource-mobilization approach towards the relationship of social media and social movements focusing on low costs and wide reach.

Participant 2 always used her social media profile to promote the political causes she had been fighting for. She was very active on her Facebook account during the movement and her Facebook followers had increased from a little over 3000 to 5000 over the period. Participant 2 found including the hashtag #RejectSerzh in her posts very helpful in terms of reaching more people. *“Such posts reached more people that you’d think. These posts were constantly being shared reaching far larger than ones follower list”.*

Participant 2 used her Facebook account to motivate people to take the streets. *Participant 2* also attributes an informational role to the tactics of social media use by the leader of the revolution.

“No matter how huge the public was protesting, still the majority of people was following the events through social media. Many were interested in the comments that were under the live videos. Diaspora Armenian communities were addresses with calls of action. The people outside Yerevan were kept accountant of what was happening in Yerevan and vice verse, to multiple people who could not be in the streets for various reasons. The leadership wanted the movement to echo louder. The more it was amplified the better.”

Because *participant 3* was not actively engaged in the protests, the content of his posts at the time expressed mostly his views about certain matters rather than directly related to protests on the streets. According to him, Pashinyan used his public profile mostly as live broadcasting tool in order to ensure accessibility of real-time information.

Participant 4 coordinated the protests that were taking place in Gyumri, so her use of social media platforms is especially important to this study. Most of the coordinating work was done using her personal Facebook profile. *Participant 4* speaks of the use of her personal profile in light of attributing it an important informational role for protestors to learn details about the current and upcoming events.

“Gyumri is a small city which comes with its implications. Being one of the few activists in the city (there were until recently very few civil activists throughout the whole country), I knew people came to my Facebook timeline to stay informed. It helped a lot during the protests. Sometimes, when we gathered in the morning to plan the organization of the day, I put the information on my Facebook wall and half of the city saw it. We didn’t use Twitter much, Facebook was the main tool.”

When it comes to live streaming on Facebook, she highlights 2 key roles: first, some legal assistants were meant to watch the events live and not participate so that they could provide any legal assistance if necessary, secondly, to keep the coordinators in Yerevan informed about the matters in Gyumri.

The live videos we made posted had multiple purposes. There were some lawyers who we didn’t let to protest, instead they knew which 4 people would be live and each lawyer constantly followed the events through that lenses, so that they see who is being detained, when people were met by lawless police etc and act immediately. Over the time we became so proficient that we had set out exactly who was broadcasting live on their Facebook page to ease the process of this monitoring. No one had taught us that, we had learned that it was a tool in our hands and we better use it. The other function is keeping Yerevan accountable of the events in Gyumri so that our friends in Yerevan were aware of what was happening. It was also a way to motivate them even more by constantly letting them know that they were supported everywhere.”

Participant 4 emphasised the informational role of Pashinyan's live videos on Facebook not only during the protests but to also to let them know about certain political developments so that they would be ready if the protests emerged spontaneously. She also used her Facebook profile to motivate people to join.

"It [social media use] acted like large interconnected networks whose aim was to keep each other informed to be able to help each other. This information was ever-floating. I was very impressed by one example. The night the first snap election that Pashinyan was expected to be elected as PM, Pashinyan posted a live video informing that he had information that the republicans plan to overturn the election. The next day the 4-5 hour long national assembly session results were cleared before it even started. But there was this extraordinary atmosphere, in the rain, tired and hungry a huge number of people was waiting at the Republic Square as they suspected that Pashinyan could go live any second calling them to action. Eventually, Pashinyan went live and asked to wait for him in the Square.

Participant 5 found the social media use of Pashinyan's Facebook profile was making good use of the only resource he had to signal the existence of the movement. He also emphasised how it was a tactics to give away transparency, that the leaders of the movement did not hide anything from the people who were struggling with them.

"First, it was their main maybe only means under the current circumstances to reach wider masses. Secondly, the main uncertainty of our people in such cases is being deceived again due to their previous experience. So, the aim of Facebook live videos was also to keep transparency, so that everyone knew they don't have anything to keep secret."

Participant 5 used his own Facebook account to signal solidarity with the movement, to motivate people. He also used Telegram quite a bit, where he was subscribed to a chat that coordinated some of the rallies.

"When it comes to my Facebook page, [I made] mostly semi-analytical posts where I presented my views and determination. I used the Telegram channel I told you about, to learn what we needed to do that day, I also did some coordination work myself. The point of my Facebook posts was that everyone could see that we were all united with the same determination. During the movement, there were times when I had doubts or felt uneasy, so I would go to Facebook and see all these posts were people expressed their fighting and I got motivated again. So I thought if I post similar content, I could also motivate someone."

Participant 6 used her Facebook profile to inform the upcoming actions, and also a way to learn information from elsewhere.

"During the protests Facebook was for me not a platform of communication, but an instrument with which I could inform the state of actions in Gyumri. Whatever was happening in Gyumri, was immediately

accessible on my Facebook page and people would come to it first. I was very active in broadcasting live videos all the time. And not only me. All of the organizing members and those who like I coordinated the actions also. Finally, it was for my family to be aware of what was happening with me, to know that I am fine.”

Participant 6 highlights the role that Facebook live broadcasts had for providing timely assistance to the detained protestors. This relates to the idea that citizen journalism can prevent violence before it happens.

“It’s a completely different story if we just took the streets in masses not knowing what to do. It would have been chaotic and the movement would have been more vulnerable. But on Facebook we constantly shared the activities of the day, advised what to do in certain situations etc. Some lawyers would leave their number on social media so that those whose rights are violated call them and these numbers were shared online to reach as many people as possible.”

Participant 6 had her own vision why the leaders and organizers of the revolution used live-video recording; for safety reasons in case the movement did not succeed.

“For their personal safety. Because when you have facts that you can more easily prove unguilty if needed. Frankly, there was no guarantee the movement would succeed. After electric Yerevan many were pressed charges and are still in trials. Both the members of RejectSerzh and MyStep had such experience. That’s why I think they had come up with the tactics.”

5.2.4 Traditional media and Social media, negative and positive experiences

In the section (2.2) on media environment surrounding the movement, it was established that social media could provide opportunities for communication when traditional media was restricted by the government. Thus, it is essential to explore the relationship of traditional media and social media during the movement in the experience of the activists. In this section the views of the respondents on the relationship of traditional media to social media in the context of the movement, and their general attitudes towards the affordances and constrains that social media provides for social movements as experienced by them are discussed.

Although *Participant 1* did not deny that social media had an impact on the developments of and within the movement, she attributed it a moderate role. To her, social media networking was just as important as the role of personal networks.

Participant 1 also highlighted some negative ways in which social media was used by various in the context of the movement: proliferation of hate speech, misuse of initial values set out by the movement, aggressive behaviour towards the government members being protested against.

She focused her discussion on traditional media in the context of the movement on public broadcasting which seemed completely ignorant of the events taking place with no coverage at all.

Participant 2 did not highlight any negative aspects in her understanding of social media as a tool in the context of protest movements. In fact, she saw it as an effective means to counter media framing and also to overcome barriers that the former regime imposed on public broadcasting services. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the current government does not have such restrictions the journalism field has already been weakened in her opinion.

“As a tool social media can be used to change and develop opinions in people. It can act as a tool to challenge the way media represents something. Before we could hold demonstrations for most peaceful and kind purposes but they would present us not as people walking towards change but as hooligans, accuse us of lawless behaviour. That was the tactics of the previous regime. The current political elites give complete freedom of speech, from Facebook to traditional media. It’s just there is no real journalism, no healthy media outlets these days, no critical thinking, just sensationalism or else they have all the freedom to do what journalism is about.”

Finally, *participant 2* highlighted the fact that traditional media never was effective for any of the movements, hence self-recording and social media use in the context developed as a practice.

“Before they wouldn’t cover our civic activities apart from maybe Liberty (radio station)but not always, if they made it to the demonstration before everyone was detained. Gradually, the ICT developed, alongside the practice of recording, filming for ourselves. But that has been only for a couple of years. Now it’s all being covered, the smallest protest. Before, we spoke and it died out in our circle, exploded in our own bubble. Now if there are more serious protests they can lead to serious consequences. The media sphere is open for journalists, but they don’t value it.”

Participant 3 had a more negative view on some aspects of social media use in the context of political use. First and foremost, from his own experience he highlights the fact that media literacy is not high in the way that people usually do not distinguish between someone’s political public profile and their personal profile as a regular person. He also emphasised a downside to the abundance of unofficial political information on social media:

“Nowadays it carries a perverted character. Nowadays, within the small population of Armenia, everyone who has a little over 2 thousand followers, becomes a source of information. It’s a catchphrase used a lot, especially by the elders. When you ask them where they learnt this or that information they reply that they have written it on Facebook. This they is mostly a non-official source you know. Social media has become toolkit in the hands of news media that belong to political elites with which they instantaneously share the information they want shared and that brings instantaneous results”.

He was also very vocal about social media use by certain groups protestors in the context of the movement focusing on the fact that it leads to weak ties with politics.

“That’s just a matter of personal popularity. Posting a picture during this or that event, with this or that politician or oppositional member, one wants to show that he was with that someone therefore he’s important. A short while ago I posted my thoughts on this one Facebook and I still hold the same view. It was about taking a step within the TakeAStep movement when many individuals posted images with the TakeAStep slogan, or pictures with this or that street revolutionary leader and talked about important state values within these posts. I believe that taking a picture, posting it online and contextualizing yet does not entail state-favouring mentality. Don’t get me wrong, in their personal profiles everyone can do what they want but to limit displays of state-oriented view only to social media representation of it is wrong in my opinion.”

Nonetheless, he argued that without social media nothing would have been possible as traditional journalism had worn itself out.

“21st century is the century of ICT and without social platforms nothing is really possible. At least with great speed. Traditional journalism has worn itself out, at least for now. For example, the majority of official news are taken from the information provided in social media pages of politicians. Look ,I think if there is lack of information available on social media profiles of politicians there will be a need to find that information elsewhere. The journalist will need to officially ask the press speaker of the politician, that entails a somewhat long process because the press speaker will either reply or not or will reply late. Only then it will be possible to make an article out of it. People want immediate informativity.”

Participant 4 attributed strong role to social media for the outcome of events. She attributed the growing number of people joining in the protests due to a kind of domino effect, wherein by seeing the public protests elsewhere through social media, even the inhabitants of the smallest cities were encouraged to rise up.

“Social media played a big big role. Let me tell you an example. At the time I was working in ‘Asparez’ and was coordinating youth initiatives in 10 regions. As the coordinator of the project I obliged them to take the streets in their region instead of waiting to see what happens in Yerevan. Everything was posted on social media. A small number of people would protest in their town and everyone would see and realize they had rights and obligations as well and they could do the same. There was the effect of chain reaction cycle amplified by social media, especially on Facebook. Previously people couldn’t learn instantly what was happening in other cities, sometimes in smaller cities they did not know protests were happening as there was complete media blackout. But now it was easily accessible for people in smaller cities to get real-time knowledge of the protests and that encouraged them as they knew that this was widespread. And this tiniest hope that lit again. You know, we came to this mass protests after ‘electric Yerevan’ which was simply destroyed, but because people saw in real-time how the number of the protestors on the streets doubled and doubled day by day, they just couldn’t sit at home. A little bit of the hope was revived, even the habitants of the small villages self-coordinated and wanted to take the streets. Some rushed to the capital, others protested in their hometowns. everyone wanted to be part of it. As I said, social media and especially Facebook live videos played a massive role.”

Participant 2 viewed traditional media in light of public broadcasting as well and attributed it no role at all.

“Not any [role] at all. Traditional media by which I mean the public television the public television accessible to the whole country, it didn’t play an important agency, or any role. It was altogether clear to everyone that the public television and formal ties and served the elites. It was different with social media. There are no limits of expression on social media in our country”.

Despite some of the positive aspects, *Participant 5* also highlighted the informational voids that the protestors would experience when for periods of time there would be no new information available from any means while there was no news on traditional media at all simultaneously. He criticised that the leaders of the revolution did not have an official website that was constantly updated.

“Despite the fact that ICT was used much more and much better, somehow there still were informative voids. Sometimes, there was no new information at all for a short period of time, there was some sort of vacuum. If Pashinyan would not go live on Facebook for longer or the news channels did not have live broadcasting for longer, I do believe everyone would just go home. Other than those, there was no official source of information by the leaders. Or if there was it wasn’t well-publicized.”

In the opinion of *participant 5*, whether social media offers any affordances for social movements depends on the environment in which the movement is unfolding, as well as what the general technology of the time allows.

“History has seen more revolutions without social media than with and history shows you can carry out revolution by various means. It’s just critical to understand the current possibilities that the age, the context and environment provide. In countries with low internet penetration, I don’t think social media use would matter. But because in Armenia within the last 10 years the broadband was so developed and internet penetration so high, it was used in the interest of the movement.”

Participant 6 praised the coordinating and organizing work that was made possible by social media, however, she highlighted the fact that even unverified information could gain popularity instantly and create chaos. She was also cautious of governmental surveillance, despite the fact that there was no clear evidence of that.

“Some information would appear and people would share it and we had to change plans. So, we encouraged everyone to follow certain pages etc. We also used much of mobile calls in the beginning than stopped because they were rumoured to be surveillance. We started using Telegram for calls because it is encrypted.”

Participant 6 also mentioned that it was sometimes easy to manipulate Facebook algorithms.

“I have used both the hashtags a lot. I recall, that for a certain period of time there were difficulties with posting with the hashtag #RejectSerzh. Then it became accessible as well. Same happened when Pashinyan was detained. Any post that would tag his username were not posted. Then it cleared as well. I asked some of more media-savy friends, they explained that the hashtag was being constantly reported as hate speech so it would get blocked and then cleared when no evidence supported it”.

Overall, multiple key concepts touched upon in the section on theoretical background and literature review were prevailing in activists’ narration of their experience of the movement *“take a step, #RejectSerzh”*.

Emotional triggers (at heart of collective grievance approach to social movement mobilization) similar to the conceptualization of social movements in Castells’ theory of Networks of Outrage and Hope (2012), served as a device for the activists to unpack the movement since its beginning, in terms of how it emerged and magnification of its reach throughout the country. Some central emotions on which activists’ discussion focused were scepticism towards the success of the cause of the movement, as well fear of its failure and resulting consequences. These emotions eventually gave way to hope as the number of protestors was growing, alongside the will of the masses of protestors to go on with the mission of the movement when the leader was detained. Nonetheless, here hope was not sparked globally or transnationally by other movements around the world, as Castells noted, but instead more locally by seeing the example of very

young generation being the first to protest. However, more research of multitude of cases is required to reveal the extent to which this trend could indeed be transnational.

As opposed to Castells notion of non-specific demands on the part of the protestors, the specificity of demands set out by both *RejectSerzh* and *Take a Step* were seen as one of the main assets of the movement. Furthermore, the leaderless that was assumed as a characteristic of newer social movements by Castells (2012), as well as Bennet & Segerberg (2013) did not find their manifestation here either. Instead, the role of the leader of the revolution N. Pashinyan as someone who had been a political prisoner before, someone people already knew from previous struggles was very emphasized.

The tactics of decentralization facilitated by technologies and social media specifically present in both theories on ‘networks of outrage and hope’ (Castells 2012) and ‘connective action’ (Bennet & Segerberg 2013), was also emphasized by the activists of the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” as a key tactics of the movement. In the case of this movement, preference for decentralized forms of protest cannot be attributed casualty to mere social media tactics of the movement but should be viewed in relation to the history of previous social movements as decentralization was adopted due to negative experiences of previous movements related to police cluttering and brutality. The decentralization was made possible with the use of social media, however was not determined by it in the experience of the activists.

The amplified reach of the movement aided by social media use was viewed similar to Radsch’s (2016:26) account on amplification capacities inherent in algorithms. However, the activists did not always find it easy to navigate through structural constraints of social media as it was fairly easy to manipulate the algorithms against the advancement of the movements, such as in the case when the hashtag #RejectSerzh was blocked from use due to increased reporting of it as violent or hate content on Facebook. This leaves the open question of impossibility to determine the precise way algorithms manipulate visibility of specific protest issues (Poell & van Dijk 2018:8). Nonetheless, all activists experienced social media mostly in positive ways in relation to promotion and success of the movement.

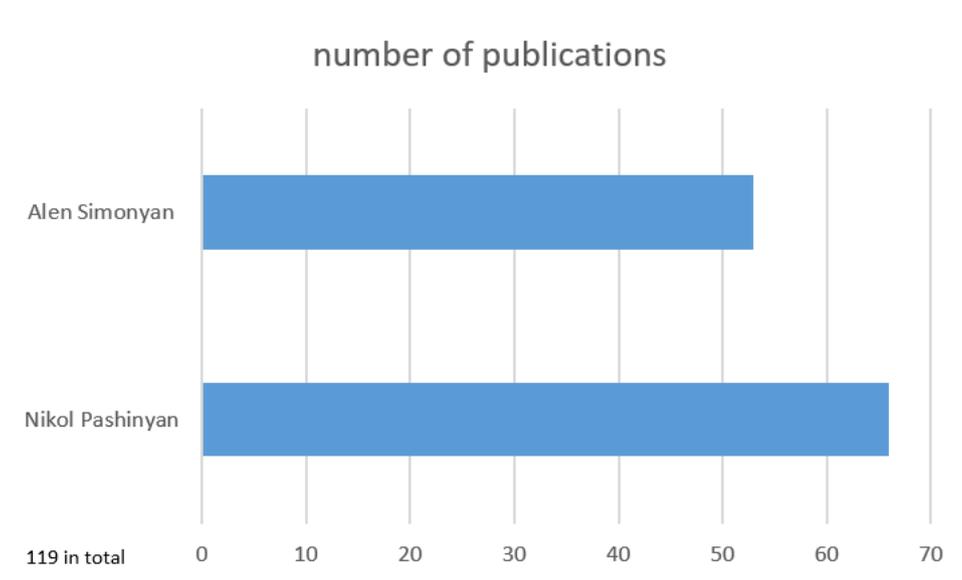
5.2 Content Analysis Results and Discussion

This section presents the data gained from content analysis. Content analysis revealed 119 posts in total in the accounts of Nikol Pashinyan and Alen Simonyan between March 31 and May 8. These data help answer RQ4. In a previous section focusing on the activists’ attitude towards gaining information during the movement (2.1.2) the Facebook account of the leader of the movement ‘take a step, #RejectSerzh’ was

occasionally cited as one of the main sources of important information as the movement was unfolding. The insights gained from activists' interpretation of Pashinyan's Facebook page as informational source complement this discussion.

Nikol Pashinyan's account was more active, despite the fact that while Pashinyan was detained there were only 3 posts that appeared during the days. One textual message urged to not back down apparently posted by some external actor, another one was Lena Nazaryan's pre-recorded speech encouraging people to go on as the victory was very close. Lastly, was the location to which Pashinyan was taken.

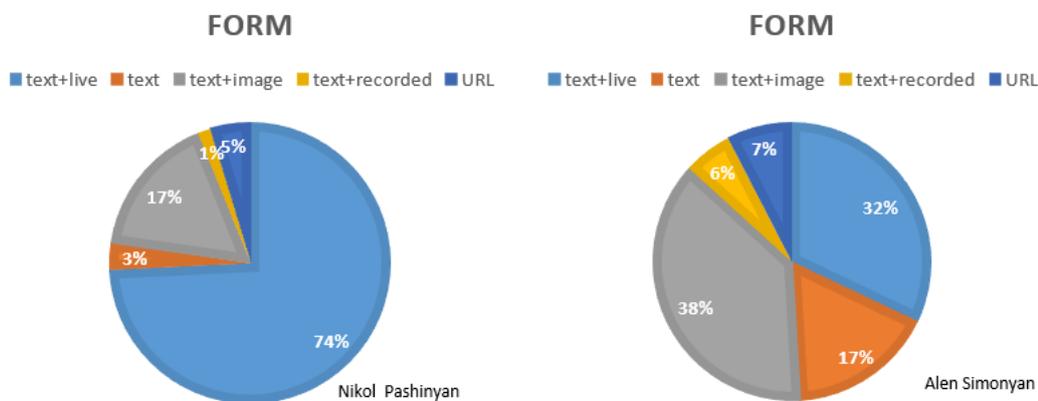
It was expected after the interviews for Pashinyan's account to be more active, as all the participants stressed that his Facebook profile was one of the very few credible sources at the time. No other organizing member including Alen Simonyan were explicitly mentioned as a source of information during the interviews.



The preferred form of communication differed within the accounts. 74% of communication occurring on Pashinyan's timeline were videos, broadcast in live format. This was also reflected in the results of the interviews. The interviewees stressed that Pashinyan's live videos on Facebook were at times the only available formal information, whereas they all referred to it as one the few credible sources of information at the time. It was also emphasised that the live videos were a powerful source of information as those were placed in real-time and could yield immediate response in terms of coordinating spontaneous action as this was mostly the case. The second thing that participants of the interviews emphasised in the tactic of live broadcasting adopted by the leaders of the movement, was that they used it to validate the movement and gain trust of the people showing them transparently exactly what was going on at the movement. Finally, it

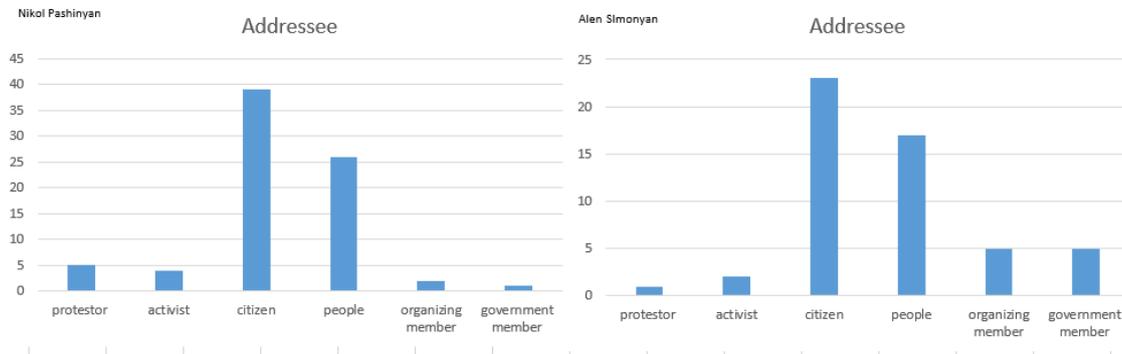
was a way to have factual evidence of their non-violent actions had the movement failed and the leaders detained, as to refer back to the interpretation of the activists again.

The second most used form of communication were images accompanied with a text providing the context. In Simonyan's account live broadcasted videos came only the second at only 32% of the total posts during the time period, while 38% of the posts comprised of images. That live videos were not Simonyan's preferred form of communication was not a surprise to me after the interviews, although I expected it to be initially. According to the participants, people knew that Pashinyan's live videos are their main source of immediate information should anything happen. So, it can be assumed that other organizing members would not go live so as to not create an informational chaos. In fact, in one of the few live videos Simonyan had, he directly stated that he would not have placed a live broadcast on his channel had it not been a matter of urgency. Surprisingly, URL links were used only very rarely, and if they did they led to separate news pieces rather than providing useful information in terms of coordination of actions. When images were posted they were mostly powerful shots from the Freedom square showing the masses of people. Mostly these would be images of the symbols of the revolution. Posts containing only textual data were very scarce constituting only 3% of the total of 66 posts. In contrary, it was the third most preferred form for Simonyan comprised of 17% of the total 53 posts. The textual posts mostly called for support/solidarity of the people.

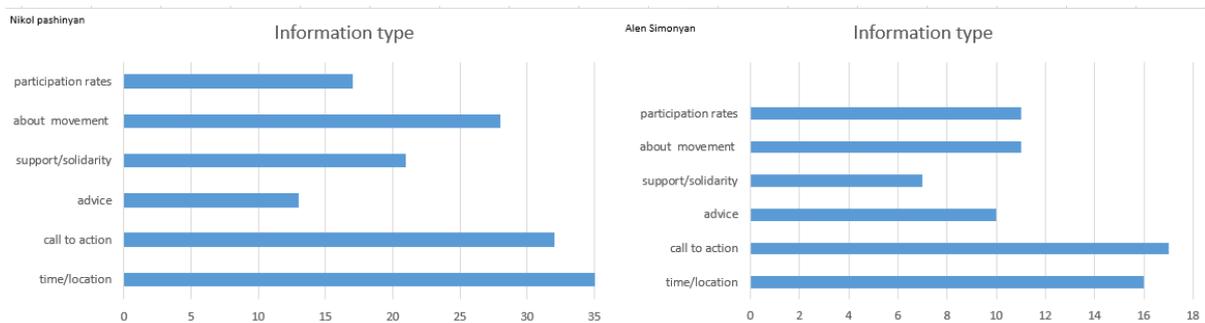


Both mostly addressed the 'citizen' of Armenia and the 'people' in general. Usually, the tone of voice and the addressee entailed the popularity of the movement, wherein Pashinyan and Simonyan would privilege referring to the collective of *people* rather than protestors. It is important to note that in Armenian *people* designates the whole of the nation, including diasporic communities. This suggests that building a collective identity as united people as opposed to specific groups was central to the rhetoric of the movement. This also signaled the popularity of the movement as if those protesting were representative of the whole people. Nonetheless, the role of the individual was also one of the highlights of the movement in general. That the

movement came to also be known under the name *My Step* was not accidental. Both the role of the individual as a citizen and also the collective identity of people were also very emphasised in the interviews.



When it comes to the messages that were disseminated there were many similarities.



In case of the live videos there was a diversity of messages in both accounts. Overall, the majority of the posts in both accounts contained information on *time and location* of specific protests, as well as *specific calls of action*. Those specific calls of action would mostly be decentralized, for example when the citizens were encouraged to clutter as much of the city as possible. These calls of actions apart from being addressed to the *citizen*, sometimes referred to specific groups of activists. The call of action that was addressed to the individual was one of the main things the activists in the interviews when referring to their reception of posts on Pashinyan’s Facebook account.

Calling people to transfer their online activity onto the streets was also present in the beginning and by the end of the movement signalling that offline protests on the streets were entirely encouraged and preferred from online activity. In this way social media tactics of the movement could be viewed to serve for mobilization of the publics onto the streets. The motives, objectives, and demands of the movements that occurred significant times represented under the *about movement category* always referred to the non-violence and peacefulness of the movement. So did the advice category, which was mostly about how to avoid police brutality and what actions to take when being detained. Support/solidarity were more protruding during the initial stages of the movement, the march from Gyumri to Yerevan as each singular

person was welcomed with joy and presented. These types of messages began to appear again towards the ending week of the movement when mostly political figures would express their solidarity of the movement. Information on participation rates was present on both accounts which could be related to the leaders trying to validate the movement, and signal of its popularity within the logic of number, and to show people that they were collectively united.

Overall, the data retrieved from content analysis support the activists' view that live broadcasting to ensure immediacy and transparency of communication, as well as of the movement, was the leading social media tactic of the leader of the movement. The activists touched upon multiple key concepts guiding the theory of citizen journalism and related to media witnessing when interpreting the social media tactic adopted by the leaders of the movement. Prevailing were the themes of gate-watching to secure evidence for lawless actions had the government acted as such, bottom-up surveillance (Goode 2009, Bruns 2003) as well as ensuring transparency of the movement for its heightened credibility in the eyes of the followers.

The tactic of non-violence as a form of civil disobedience which derives from the logic of bearing witness to social movements was reflected in examined Facebook accounts (Cammaerts 2012:124). The production of artifacts of the revolution such as images and videos which continues a form of witnessing was also touched upon by the activists and was reflected in social media posts examined (Cammaerts 2012:127).

It is interesting that the activists did not mention any other member of the movement as a source of information throughout the movement. Simonyan's Facebook account was less active in terms of live video broadcasting, which the activists claimed as a social media tactics key for the heightened reach of the movement. Simonyan's Facebook account featured comparatively few direct calls of action and live videos which could be connected to the note made by activists in the interviews, that the general public knew that they need to turn directly to Pashinyan's Facebook page to learn credible information. Hence, it is likely that other organizing members refrained from a similar social media tactic in order to focus the flow of people looking for information into a single source for heightened efficacy and less chaotic modes of information. However, in order to explore this possibility for generalization, it is necessary to study social media accounts of the rest of the key organizing figures and leaders of the movement 'take a step, #RejectSerzh', which due to the scope and time limits of this study was not possible.

6 Drawing conclusions

This section is comprised of four parts. Looking back, this section summarizes the results in relation to the research questions that served as the backbone of this research (6.1). Then, evaluation of the sustainability of the chosen methodology is made (6.2). Last but not least, key findings are touched upon alongside reflection on this study as a whole (6.3).

6.1 Answering research questions

The results presented in the previous parts of this report are summarized below, according to RQs. It is important to note that a more detailed account of results was provided in the preceding chapter.

RQ1: How did activists *use* and *perceive* social media as a tool for communication and organization during the movement “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*”?

The activists highlighted multiple purposes for which they used their social media accounts. All the activists but one focused only on their use of Facebook during the movement, whereas one activist referred to Telegram as well. Overall, the activists that were relatively more passive participants of the movement referred to social media as a source of gaining information about the events. Those activists that took up coordinating roles referred to social media both as a source of gaining information and disseminating it for protestors and other coordinating members, as well as to motivate people to participate in the movement. Finally, the activists that took part in this study also used social media to signal of any lawlessness that took place during the protests.

RQ2: In the experience of activists, what were the positive and negative aspects of social media use for them during “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement?

Overall, the positive aspects of social media use according to the activists were the following: wide reach and easy access to information regarding the developments concerning the movement, opportunities for decentralized organization of the series of protests, and opportunities for sousveillance or bottom-up surveillance.

Overall, the negative aspects of social media use according to the activists, were the following: wide reach of unverified information, restrictions by algorithms, informational gaps, and creation of weak political affinities.

The multi-directional flows of information facilitated by social media were seen largely as a positive phenomenon, although at times it created chaotic modes of information wherein unverified information would spread and stir public debate.

RQ3: How do activists view the relationship of ‘traditional media’ and ‘social media’ during “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement?

Generally, the activists did not point out to a direct link between traditional media and social media during the movement. Furthermore, the activists highlighted the decline in trust towards the journalistic field.

RQ4: How did the leaders of “*take a step, #RejectSerzh*” movement use their social media official accounts as a tool for communication and organization of the series of protests?

The approach towards answering this research question was experimental trying to combine the results of content analysis with the results of the interviews. The combination of results indicates that the leaders of the movement primarily used social media for disseminating vital information about the movement such as time and location of actions, for making direct calls of action to mobilize publics and to validate the movement through the transparency of actions and a large number of participators. Finally, the results also indicate that the leaders of the movement used social media, especially live broadcasting, as testimony and evidence of the non-violent nature of their actions in case the movement failed, and they were held responsible.

6.3 Reflection on methodology

In-depth interviews with activists provided rich insights into social media use tactic of the activists, and the leaders of the movement, as well as key insights into the organization of the movement at large. This was expected at the beginning of the research. As it was set out in the previous chapters, since the leaders of the movement were not directly available for similar interviews, an experimental approach was developed to gain understanding into their social media strategy. In this approach, the results of interpretive content analysis of social media posts of protests leaders were combined with how the activists, direct addresses of such messages, interpreted them in their experience. I found this approach sufficient for the purposes of this study, which does not attempt at generalizations. However, for a large-scale study, it may not provide as exhaustive insights to be generalized. It would be interesting to test this approach more extensively on this case with a larger sample at hand and during further research into the topic.

6.3 Findings

The results of this research align in significant ways to the approach towards the relationship of social media with social movements, wherein the former facilitate and amplify the possibility of contentious politics.

The results indicate that in the case of lack of other means to disseminate information regarding the movement, provided there were no governmental restrictions on the online realm on the national level; social media had the potential to serve as alternative media for the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh.” During the times when the movement ‘*take a step, #RejectSerzh*’ was not receiving any substantial news coverage due to the strict control established by the government on more traditional forms of journalism, the leaders and activists of the movement chose ‘to be the media’ through practices of citizen journalism. Live broadcasting function of social media was connected not only with disseminating instantaneous, real-time information but also with fundamental notions of citizen journalism such as sousveillance or bottom-up surveillance, gate-watching, preventing violence before it happens, as well as testimony regarding the non-violent nature of actions which related to the so-called logic of bearing witness (Cammaerts 2012). Decline of trust in traditional journalism was also a prevailing theme, hence ‘being the media’ through self-recording, live broadcasting and in other ways was preferred. Overall, the angle of a specific type of media witnessing, namely citizen journalism with emphasis on live video-recording practices of activists and the leaders of the movement provided an excellent device to explore the opportunities that social media provided for the movement ‘take a step, #RejectSerzh’.

The result indicated that during the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh” social media played important organizational role to coordinate actions. Furthermore, it had the potential to facilitate decentralization of the movement. Recent conceptualizations (Castells 2012, Bennet&Seegerberg 2013) of contemporary social movements as leaderless, as well as addressing a multiplicity of issues calling for social change was not supported by this research concerned with the case of the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh”. On the contrary, the leader of the movement, as well as the tactics of addressing singular issues at a time were seen as one of the most important tactics of the movement that led to mobilization of large publics.

The role of personal networks was very well articulated throughout the research, alongside the networking opportunities that social media provided. Overall, the results indicate that even though social media were seen as one of the main contributors to the fulfilment of objectives of the movement “take a step, #RejectSerzh”, paramount importance was attributed to the role of previous social movements in curbing the tactics of the current movement. In the eyes of the activists, there was an apparent continuity between previous social movements in the country and ‘take a step. #RejectSerzh’

Finally, emotional triggers were devices through which the activists unpacked their experience of the movement ‘take a step, #RejectSerzh’ throughout its every step, so it leaves this research positive that collective grievance approach has an abundance of possibilities to give insights into mobilization of protest movements.

Looking back, with the case study of ‘*take a step, #RejectSerzh*’ movement, this study has shown that adopting a bilateral perspective on capabilities of social media in relation to promotion of causes of social movements, wherein it depends on the political and media environment whether social media provide opportunities or constrains for social movements is a fruitful path to follow. Ultimately, human agency in terms of how the affordances of social media can be manipulated to serve the cause of social movements is an important factor not to be neglected alongside the inherent structure of social media platforms which at times can provide restrictions. Indisputably, case-comparison with social movements in similar political and media contexts would add rich insights into this research to identify similar and unique patterns.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

General

- 1) What is your general level of civic engagement? Do you belong to any political affinity? Have you participated in any other series of protests other than the ones during April-May?
- 2) How actively have you participated in the series of protests in April-May? Roughly, of almost 40 days of protests, how many days have you been active? When did you join the protests? E.g. in the beginning, when it already gained momentum, during the final week.
- 3) Please highlight overall positive and negative aspects of your experience.
- 4) What do you think; how well did the issues raised by the RejectSerzh and Take A Step resonate with the opinion of general public? Where did these issues lie in terms of importance for the average Armenian citizen?
- 5) Who or what do you think were the game-changers in this series of protests? What would you say made this movement qualitatively different from others preceding, in the end it gained country-wide massive engagement and was decentralised?
- 6) Do you believe it was a general feeling among the people that if they took their boots onto the streets they would be taken seriously by the previous government, the public and media nationally and globally? Why did you decide to step out on the streets yourself?

Media Specific

- 1) What is your social media use pattern? Which social media are you most active on? What do you use it for?
- 2) When did you learn about the movement? E.g. as the movement was being promoted on social media, when it started, after it started
- 3) How did you learn about the movement? Please go in detail.
- 4) Do you follow Pashinyan, Simonyan and other organizers of the protests on social media now? When did you start following them? For what purpose?
- 5) Speak briefly about your current understanding of social media as one of the tools implemented by protestors and activists today.
- 6) In what ways did you use social media in the context of the movement? E.g. for communication, for information gathering, visual aspect (video's images) etc
- 7) In what ways did you experience the use of traditional media in terms of reporting on the movement?
- 8) In your opinion, can social media be used as a tool to ensure a stronger civil society?

- 9) In your opinion, could you say that social media alone was what popularized the movement. Or was it just the message that was raised by the movement that made it popular? What is the relationship between these two in your opinion?
- 10) How would you say social media affected and shaped your experience if in any way?
- 11) What did you post on social media during your participation? Why did you post what you posted? Why did you document the events? Who was it about? Who did you think you were addressing?
- 12) Of what importance do you think your specific role was for the events? Of what importance do you think your social media posts were?
- 13) Why do you think the leaders documented the events?

Appendix 2

Interview TimeTable

	Name	Date	Location
Participant 1	Arusik Ghambaryan	22/03/2019	Personal conversation
Participant 2	Vika Harutyunyan	27/03/2019	Personal conversation
Participant 3	Hrant Sarkisov	28/03/2019	Personal conversation
Participant 4	Emma Baghdasaryan	01/04/2019	Personal conversation
Participant 5	Davit Kyarunts	03/04/2019	Personal conversation
Participant 6	Nelli Vardanyan	15/04/2019	Personal conversation

Appendix 3

Code Book

Unit of Data Collection: A post on Facebook verified public profile timeline

Link to Facebook profile of Nikol Pashinyan: <https://web.facebook.com/nikol.pashinyan/>

Link to Facebook profile of Alen Simonyan: <https://web.facebook.com/simonyanalen>

Item ID: Assign Item ID to the coded item. The assigned ID includes the following:

- the profile the post is from: **1**-Nikol Pashinyan/Նիկոլ Փաշինյան, **2**-Alen Simonyan
- month of publication: **04**-April, **05**-May
- sequence in the day: (**A-I** in alphabetical order)
- E.g. the value **10401A** indicates that the item is from the first profile (**1**), the month of publication is April (**04**), the day of the publication is 1st (**01**), is it is the first post in the day (**A**).

Summary: Summarize the main content of the post

Metrics: fill in the number of **reactions**, **comments**, **shares**, **views** (if video) of the post

Form

1. textual data
2. image
3. live video
4. pre-recorded video
5. URL link

(can contain one, several or all of these codes)

Addressee

1. protestor
2. activist
3. citizen
4. people
5. organizing member
6. current government official

(a post can contain none, one, several or all of these codes)

Information type

1. time/location
2. call to action
3. advice
4. support/solidarity
5. about movement
6. participation rates

(a post can contain none, one, several or all of these codes)

Appendix 4

Coding Sheet

An example of one coded item from each account

Item ID	Summary	Metrics	Form	Addressee	Information type
1 10401A	<p>#ԻմՔայլը Քայլարշավ օր 1 Չափունից զնում ենք Ազատության հր.</p> <p><i>Ինտերնետային ակտիվությունը տասնել փոփոց</i></p> <p>միանալ քայլարշավին, 13/04 18:30 Ազատության հր՝ հանրահավաքին</p> <p>ինչքան մարդ է միացել/անունդ փոխանցել</p>	<p>Reaction N 1.3K</p> <p>Share N 212</p> <p>Comment N 453</p> <p>Views N 39K</p>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 6
69 20407A	<p>Բերման են ենթարկվել ՔՊ կուսակցության անդամները</p>	<p>Reaction N 86</p> <p>Share N 27</p> <p>Comment N 17</p> <p>Views N 4.1K</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 4 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6