

# Revisiting the Emergent Norm Theory to Understand Protest Communication in Social Media: the Improvisation-Verification-Keynoting (IVK) Framework

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## Abstract

Twitter has been discussed as a collective social awareness system during social crises. We revisit the classical theory of collective behavior, called the emergent norm theory by Killian and Turner (1987), to introduce the analytic framework that highlights major genres of protest communication activities in social media. In particular, we adapt the concept of “milling” and “keynoting” of Emergent Norm Theory and suggest that protest communication in social media can be categorized into three types: improvisation, verification, and keynoting (IVK). Based on the analysis of Twitter usages during Jan 25<sup>th</sup> protest in Egypt, the validity of IVK framework is discussed in terms of the temporal and spatial differences of each communication genre.

## Keywords

Twitter; social media; protest; emergent norm theory, Egypt revolution

## Description of the Work

The current study introduces a content-analytic framework called “improvisation-verification-keynoting (IVK),” useful to explore systematically the spontaneous, instantaneous process of social media protest communication. Drawing upon Emergent Norm Theory (ENT) (Turner & Killian, 1987; Turner, 1995; Aguirre et al., 1998), one of the classical theories of collective behavior, we argue that three important concepts in ENT –“milling” (informal sharing of improvised information and knowledge), “keynoting” (construction of common vocabularies to shape collective identity), and the “diffuse crowd” (a special type of crowd that involves both physical interpersonal contacts and mass communication) –are relevant to contemporary social media context. In particular, ENT helps to articulate three characteristics of social media communication, manifest especially during political crises when the society is challenged by high-level of uncertainty and ambiguity of information: the hybridity of interpersonal conversations and factual news (Papacharizzi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012), the instantaneous and episodic flow of contents (Kwak et al., 2010), and the spontaneous communicative participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

After further discussing the relevance and challenges of adapting the ENT’s three concepts to social media context, this study introduces a modified framework called the Improvisation, Verification, and Keynoting (IVK), the three genres of social media communication during political protest. Improvisation refers to the exchange of situational information based on limited knowledge without previous planning. Verification refers to the clarification of improvised information via identification of credible sources. Lastly, keynoting refers to the voicing of collective awareness. As an empirical application of this framework, we content-analyzed Twitter activities during the January 25 protest in Egypt 2011. The study enriches theoretical explanation of recently emergent, technology-mediated self-organized political actions by revisiting the traditional collective behavior theory. The newly introduced theoretical framework helps understand the actual communication activities occurring on social media platform.

## Methods and Results

### *Research Questions*

Three research questions are posited.

RQ1. Are communication activities in Twitter shaped by personalized participation?

RQ2. How disproportionately do three genres of communication appear for the January 25<sup>th</sup> demonstration?

RQ3. Are there any association between the genres of communication and regional differences?

#### *IVS Framework Operationalization*

To answer the questions, we specified improvisation, verification, and solidification as such (inter-coder reliability *kappa alpha* = .734,  $p < .001$ ),

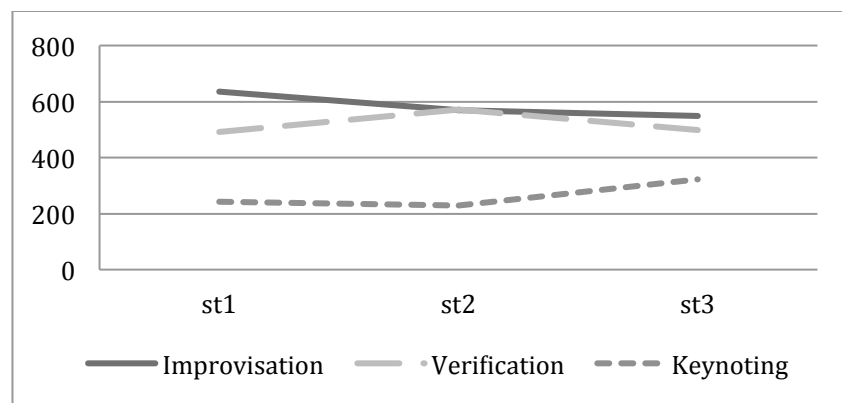
1. Improvisation: a firsthand statement without presenting supporting materials created by others, including (a) immediate communication such as question and situation updates without detailed source identification, (b) interpersonal communication between two or more users in a small group, (c) sharing personal knowhow about certain skills or activities.

2. Verification: the provision of access to detailed or evident information by hyperlinking or re-tweeting formal channels such as mass media, officials, governments, and advocacy organizations, or solid evidences such a photo, video, and interviews, etc.

3. Keynoting: an emotive expression of collective identity, which (a) reveals a sense of belonging to protester or supporter communities, (b) highlights the injustice of the current regime, or (c) wishes the victory of revolution.

#### *Results*

The IVS framework was applied to content-analyze a total of 4,108 tweets between Jan 23<sup>rd</sup> and Jan 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, collected in real time by the keyword “Egypt”. In response to RQ1, most of activities were sent out from personal profiles, implying that Twitter communication during the January 25<sup>th</sup> demonstration can be characterized as the public’s personalized activities. In response to RQ2, improvisation appeared the most, followed by verification and then keynoting. Interestingly, three types occur in a sequential order from improvisation to verification, and to keynoting (Figure 1). In response to RQ3, each genre of communication occurred significantly differently between Egypt and Non-Arab countries. Egypt-originating tweets contained the improvisation more frequently, while Non-Arab countries include more verification. Keynoting was evenly distributed across different regions.



**Figure 1:** The Sequential Occurrences of Improvisation, Verification, and Solidification. ST1, ST2, ST3 refers to the cut-off points that split the chronologically ordered tweets into three groups.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### *Personalization*

One of the noteworthy findings of this study is the prominence of personalized activities and the relative underrepresentation of formal organizational strategies in Twitter. Most of central actors' profiles described themselves as individual activists, public speakers/writers, or journalists, many of which included not only Egyptian protest-related tweets but also tweets about various other human rights issues. Therefore, the influential Twitter users should be understood as a subset of online public who are heavily committed to political discourses rather than general online public.

### *Sequential and Spatial Development of IVS*

Another finding is that protest communication in Twitter is developed sequentially from improvised sharing to information verification, and to solidification of collective awareness. In particular, it is noteworthy that the temporal stage of information verification was identified distinctively from the stage of improvisation. In addition, the verification occurred disproportionately in Non-Arabic countries, while improvisation occurred in Egypt. The verification stage included tweets that hyperlink reputed journalism sources or user-generated visual evidences. These informational sources contribute to authenticate and legitimize the improvised and informal contents shared during the earlier stage of improvisation. This result confirms how promptly Twitter was utilized as a crowd-sourced "awareness system" (Hermida, 2010: 300) that integrated impromptu local knowledge and transnationally verified and legitimized information into one stream of collective conversations.

### *Development of Globalized Collectivity*

Solidification was evenly spread out across different countries worldwide, implying the rapid emotional contagions across global borders. The worldwide emergence of solidification confirms that the Jan 25<sup>th</sup> demonstration was indeed a concern of global activist communities, reaffirming the impact of the globalization of local politics on social changes within less-democratic countries (Gorrido and Halavais, 2003). While the establishment of global allies and coalitions have always been an important element of social movements (McAdams, 1996), the mobilization process becomes much faster in the case of social-media blended protests, partly thanks to the increased amounts of lateral online communication among personal activists worldwide.

### *Implication of IVS Framework*

We conclude that the IVS framework represents the episodic process of information dissemination in the Twitter. However, the framework is still preliminary, given that only one particular incidence was explored. There were momentums of episodic events even within the cycle of the Egyptian Revolution 2011. While the IVS framework might be insightful to understand the outbreak of social media communication during crises events, we acknowledge that the study explores only a partial piece of a complicated phenomenon with a longer-period spectrum. Also, the study explores only one particular social media platform, Twitter, which is embedded in a more complex media environment. The application of micro-temporal perspective to a single communication channel does not provide the comprehensive understanding of a social change process. As McPhail (1993) asserts, however, understanding the phenomena of collective behaviors requires collective efforts with multilevel perspectives. Our study may complement the historical, reflexive, and macro-perspectives presented in extant literature on the relationship between social media and the Egyptian Revolution in general.

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