

Chapter 3

Social Media and Social Movements Around the World

Lessons and Theoretical Approaches

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Abstract Undoubtedly, the Internet has a multilevel impact on the everyday life of the humankind. In the age of web 2.0, social media have proven to be an essential tool for social movements; to spread their ideas, gain followers and go into action, showing to the world testimonies, pictures, and videos in real time. Using updated research evidence and diverse approaches, this study focuses on the social media role in nine social protests of the twenty-first century that are now part of the history and allowed important conclusions for the scientific and practical understanding of this issue. Social network participation is not isolated from the countries' characteristics and the media. For this reason, social, political, and communicational factors that contextualize these cases are presented, developing some theoretical models.

Keywords Internet and society • Social movements • Social media • Communication research • Politics

3.1 On Social Movements Theory

To place this paper into context, it is very important to present some viewpoints about social movements. First, one of the most quoted viewpoints Della Porta and Diani (1999) has identified four features of social movements:

1. Informal interaction networks;
2. Shared beliefs and solidarity;
3. Collective action;
4. Use of protest.

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Table 3.1 Four approaches: 1965–2010 Jasper (2010)

US	Materialist	Culturalist
Macrosocial	Mobilization or process: Tilly, Obserchall, Mc Carthy, Zaid, Ferrow, Mc Adamn, Tarrow	Programmed society: Touraine, Melucci. Castells
Microsocial	Rational-choice or game theory: Olson, Hechter, Coleman	Pragmatism, cultural-historical activity theory. Feminism queer theory, cultural-strategic or emotional approaches: Cefai, Emirbayer, Jasper, Krinsky and Barker. Taylor

After having studied several social movements, Gerlach (2001:289–290) developed the SPIN model and assumed that the most common type of organization structure has the following features:

- Segmentary: Integrate many different groups in diverse stages;
- Polycentric: Multiple leaders or centers of influence;
- Networked: Imply a reticulate network with multiple linkages.

From our viewpoint, one problem of traditional sociological studies was their tendency to focus their attention in macrosocial or microsocial phenomena without establishing connections between them. In practical terms, although they involve different levels of analysis they are interdependent part of the same reality. This traditional divergence of focus was used by Jasper (2010) to explain the diverse approaches to social movements formulated from 1965 to 2010 (Table 3.1)

García (2013) makes a very interesting review of the historical development of the theory of social movements. Starting from the description of classical viewpoints upon this issue, he explained the two major theoretical orientations that appeared in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the United States, the resource mobilization and the political process theories assumed one economic-political explanation while the European viewpoints of the New Social movements took the socio-psychological approach. From his viewpoint, the contemporary tendency is to complement both of them in the constructionist approach (Fig. 3.1).

3.2 Communication, Social Media, and Social Movements

Communication technologies and resources are very important tools for social movements as they report about the initiative and influence collective action. Now, in the digital age, social media and mobile phones with access to the Internet are very important resources used for social protests that can start as rapidly as the technology allows, in some cases in a few hours after the first motivational impulse was decided. The application of restrictive governmental practices usually comes late, when the messages are circulating without control in the cyberspace, have been read, and shared around the world by thousands of people on the screens of

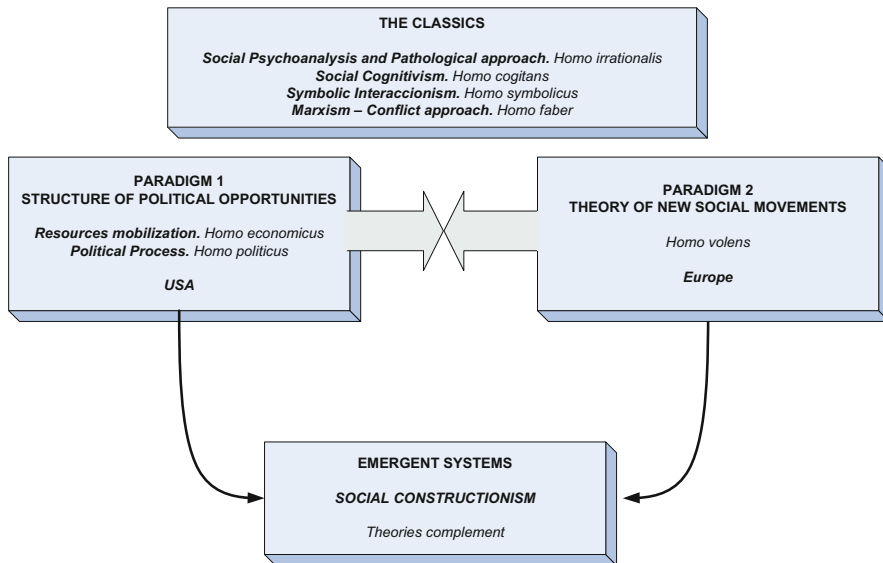


Fig. 3.1 From the classics to the constructionist approach. Reproduced from García (2013:87)

their computers or mobile phones. Some countries have applied restrictions for Internet and social media use, but the people always have made use of the networks to protest. Perhaps some pages, accounts, services, or resources could be hacked or blocked, but the traces of the social movement remains active in many places in the cyberspace and progress.

From Harlow’s (2012:229) viewpoint, scholars have two perceptions about the Internet and social movements:

- the Internet facilitates the traditional offline activity giving more resources for activists’ repertoire;
- the Internet creates new forms of activism improving social impact.

Sádaba (2012:784) formulates a historical approach considering the levels of dependency between technology and social movements, that we reformulate taking into consideration the evolution of the Internet (Table 3.2).

Garrett (2006) describes three mechanisms that potentially link technology and the social movements’ participation: reduction of costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community. How can we apply this viewpoint discussing the relationships between social movements and social media?

- Reduction of costs: considering the convergence of telecommunications, the cost to send messages is almost zero, because people could send SMS, SNS, Facebook posts, WhatsApps, videos, podcasts, photos, or tweets from their smart phones that are now multiplatform devices. These messages are directed to their all contacts or followers, with the advantage of the absence of national

Table 3.2 Social movements dependency of technology

Level	Context of technology action	Resources	Technology importance	Internet stage
1	Intra-group: Cohesion and sharing of identity	Listservs, E-mail	Movement use Technology as a tool	Web 1.0
2	Inter-group: Networks weaving and movements' formation	Organizations webpages, SMS	Technology as a part of movement spread	
3	Virtual movements: Net activism	Social media	Technology as one axis for movement	Web 2.0

Reproduced from Sádaba (2012):784

boundaries to obtain high impact in other societies. The costs of participation and engagement of people are drastically reduced in the circumstances when authoritarian regimes attempt to block the circulation of messages that convey the voice of social movements.

- Promotion of collective identity: People can share the same needs, concerns, viewpoints, and social goals with other significant people, in a growing community of thousands of dispersed members building one movement that proves their existence in the collective actions of people identified with the ideals.
- Creation of community: The participation in the virtual actions of diffusion for the social movement reinforces the perception of community and social ties with many people located in different places. Applying *mutatis mutandis* the principles of group dynamics to the virtual community in non-orthodox terms, we can talk about of a cohesion process within the social movement.

Van Laer and Van Aelst (2009:247) assumed that the Internet has changed the action repertoire of social movements in two ways:

1. by facilitating pre-existing actions forms: engaging more people, much easier than other previous resources, in a very short time span;
2. by creating new or adapted tools to motivate activism.

Cohen (1998) identifies some characteristics of social movements that, in our opinion, could be linked with social media:

- capacity to rapid mobilization: the real time of the connection is a guarantee for it;
- vision of an alternative and better existence. The words, pictures, or videos inform about one undesired situation and motivate people to think of the desirable future;
- use of unorthodox strategies to attract public support and confront institutions. The messages are transmitted by the new media that are attractive, interactive, and mobile.

Social movements imply social actors engaged in collective actions. Of course, the behaviors do not always have the same characteristics and do not obtain the same impact on society.

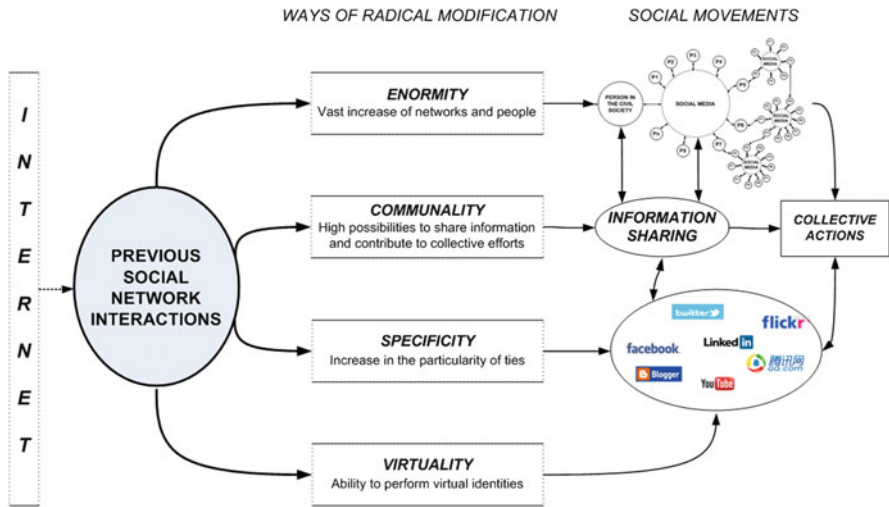


Fig. 3.2 Social media and social movements. Author’s elaboration based partially in Christakis and Fowler (2009)

From the perspective of Christakis and Fowler (2009), the Internet modifies in four ways the previous social network interactions: enormity, communality, specificity, and virtuality. Figure 3.2 presents their explanation and our viewpoint of the relationship between social media and social movements.

The increasing connections between people (P1, P2, etc.) and social media allow more possibilities of information sharing and, simultaneously, the improvement of collective actions to pursue common goals.

A consideration of the potential contribution of social media to social movements reinforces the conviction that it supposes different forms of communication, from official to informal and from those used in the closed circle to the public circle, with different conditions and requirements in each case. *The Cocktail Analysis* (2011:40) makes a depiction of these ideas taking into account the most important social media (Fig. 3.3).

After the study of three social movements, the Arab Spring, the Spanish Movement 15-M, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Hintler (2011) concluded that, in all of them, the social media and the SNS (social network sites) played a crucial role of. In the case of the Arab Spring, two protagonists led to the final act of the revolt: civil society and social media (Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos 2012:10)

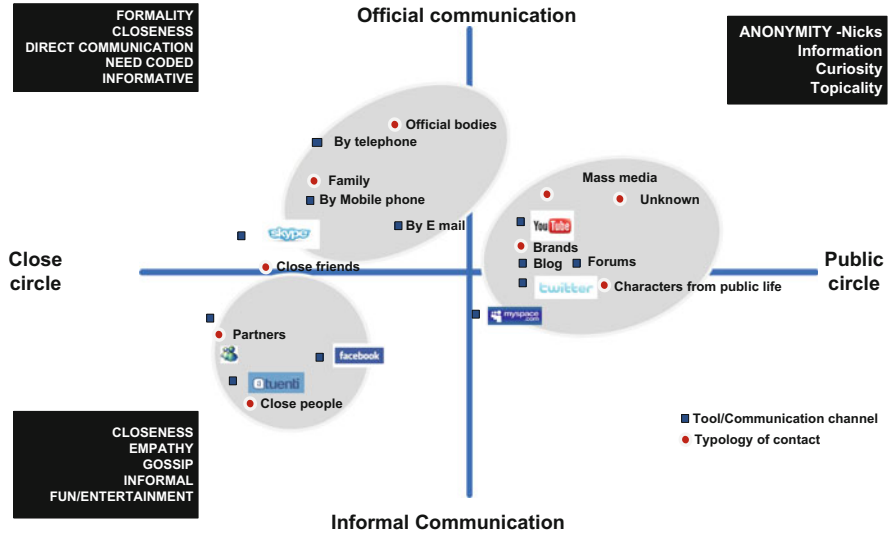


Fig. 3.3 Contacts and communication tools (Reproduced from *The Cocktail Analysis* (2011:40)

3.3 Social Media in Social Movements: Some Cases

Some social movements of the present century that have a very important impact around the world have one common feature: the use of social media as mobilization and diffusion resources. They are presented in chronological order.

In November 2004, activists took to the streets of Ukraine peacefully protesting against the notorious fraud in the second round of elections in which Victor Yanukovich was proclaimed winner. International elections standards were not fulfilled as proven by observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). After days of people mobilizations and several rounds of negotiations, a new electoral process was decided by the Central Election Commission and Victor Yushenko, the massively supported candidate, becomes the winner. Younger people were usually involved in the protests; the majority of people that used mobile phones and Internet resources and were engaged in the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine were 30 years old or were younger (Goldstein 2007).

On January 4, 2008, Oscar Morales, a systems engineer from Barranquilla, created the Facebook group “Un millón de voces contra las FARC” (One million of voices against FARC) to protest on behalf of people kidnapped by the guerrilla. The successful campaign involving social media progressed with an accelerated rhythm in Colombia and became a massive international event that involved traditional media, civic society actions, and private support. Over ten million people in 20 cities of Colombia and other 45 million in many cities around the

world had protested in one month since the start of the initiative (Zuluaga 2012), and obtained a high impact in the world's public opinion.

Scenario: Moldova. Date: April 6, 2009. Reason: protest for the reelection of the Communist Party by means of fraudulent parliamentary elections. Thousands of tweets with the hashtag *#pman* invited people to participate in the protest at Piața Marii Adunări Naționale, the biggest square of the capital city Chișinău. By the use of LiveJournal, Facebook, blogs, E-mails, and SMSs the participation of 15,000 people in the street protests was obtained in a few hours (Cullum 2010). The national level mobilization, named as the *Twitter Revolution* or the *Grape Revolution* followed with disturbances that received international attention almost immediately.

vanNiekerk et al. (2011) depicted the use of ICTs in the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia that began in December 2010 with protests against the government, unemployment, and corruption. As a result of the magnitude of the protest, one month later the Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali resigned and fled the country. Using the information warfare lifecycle model, the study has proven that “offensive weapons” were the social media (especially in the early stages they were used to spread the idea, to coordinate social actions and to show videos of the protest), international mass media (Al Jazeera reported the uprising from the very beginning) and the massive human mobilizations.

Tufekci and Wilson (2012), subsequent to a survey of 1,200 participants in Tahrir Square protests, proved that mobile phones were the most important tool for information about the protests and that, in the social media, more than half of the participants used Facebook for this action. The majority used email for general purposes (Table 3.3).

From the viewpoint of Eltantawy and Wiest (2011:1212), social media technologies represent an important instrumental resource that contributed to the birth and sustainability of the January 25 protests. The resource mobilization theory makes it clear that both the availability of resources and the social actors' efficacy in using them effectively are essential. In the Arab Spring context, mobile phones, and social media were available resources intensively used and the Egyptian people, and especially the younger generation had enough competences to use their digital devices very efficiently.

Storck (2011: 24–25) analyzed tweets, journalistic articles, and academic journals to outline the role of social media in the Egyptian uprising, and identified three trends:

1. social media as organizational tool: the impulse of social media to strengthen online organizations for obtaining quick change;
2. social media as an alternative press and outlet for citizen journalism: social media act as another form of media as diffuser of information, with the supplementary advantage of the virtual interaction;
3. social media as a tool for generating awareness both regionally and internationally. The most important international TV networks discussed the issue for many hours and the newspapers devoted many covers and pages to it.

Table 3.3 Resources of information in Tahrir Square protests

Resource	General use	Communication about protests
Mobile phone	92 %	82 %
Facebook	52 %	51 %
Twitter	16 %	13 %
E-mail	83 %	27 %

Based on Tufekci and Wilson (2012)

Nevertheless, other communicational factors contribute to the promotion of social movements by means of social media. In the case of the Arab Spring, I share the viewpoint of Tufekci and Wilson (2012) who explained that, on the one hand, there are social, political and economic reasons linked with the maintenance of one authoritarian regime and, on the other, that a new system of political communication emerged, which they identified as the “complex ecology of connectivity” operating in close interaction and integrated by:

1. satellite TV channels such as Al Jazeera;
2. Internet resources, especially social media;
3. mobile phone technology:

The nature of these trends is outlined in Fig. 3.4.

Aqueveque (2013) describes the role of the Internet in the young students’ social movement in Chile against the educational system that deserved global media coverage in 2011, especially because this country has been viewed for years as a model of development in Latin America (the so-called Chilean miracle). When the local television depicted the actions as terrorism, pictures and videos posted on the Internet and, then, massively distributed showed another reality.

Vicari (2013) used a mixed-method approach and analyzed over 8,000 tweets with hashtag#15ott, related with the Italian protest for global economic changes of 15 October 2011 (part of one transnational movement that took place in over 10,000 cities around the world). The results demonstrated a concentration phenomena: 80 % of the tweets were posted by 44 % of its twitterers and the most active twitterers had also been participants in similar mobilizations.

Not always have the social movements that used social media been successful as proven by the so-called *Green Revolution* of Iran. On June 2009, thousands of protesters walked peacefully in the streets of the major Iranian cities alleging fraud in the presidential elections that the candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won. The protests that became bloody after police intervention had lasted for months through the use of blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. The main objective failed (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012).

However, social media resources are also used by governments to alleviate the impact of social movements and manage offline and online relationships. On 14 February 2011, thousands of people protested in the streets of Bahrain against the political and social situation. The regime used social media to overcome the crisis and maintain social control. Diverse types of trolls were used to disqualify dissent messages, the Hareghum Twitter account disclosed information about the

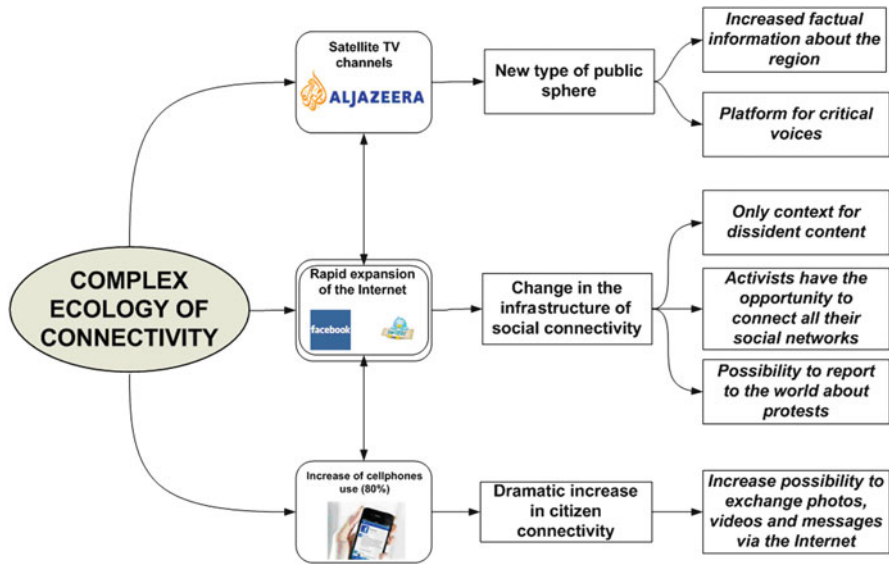


Fig. 3.4 The new complex ecology of connectivity (Based on Tufekci and Wilson 2012)

activists that were stereotyped as traitors provoking shame in the people (Jones 2013).

3.4 Some Lessons Explained from Diverse Theoretical Viewpoints

As a start point for this section, we can ask a question: are the ICTs alone the unique factor to start and make a social movement successful? Of course, we need to consider several factors:

- the prevalent situations that we can label *conditioning factors*;
- the motivational situation that stimulates the reaction of activists that we can term *trigger factor*;
- the specific conditions of society at the moment the mobilization starts;
- the people’s perception of the situation.

The psychosocial factors. In this respect, Flam (2005:28) considered the importance of emotional stimulus, and assumed that “at the theoretical level the recognition of anger as an emotion [is] necessary for mobilizing in protest”. She distinguished between the ambivalent role of anger in social movements’ activism in democratic systems and authoritarian regimes (Table 3.4)

Diffusion of ideas and especially actions are very rapid and in real time through the social media. Oral diffusion contributes to massive adhesion of behaviors in

Table 3.4 Anger in social movements

Type of society	Anger expression	Reason
Democratic	Open	Anger not punished and push change Great number of people enhance protests
Authoritarian	Limited Hope to manage fear	Avoid confrontation with power-holders and harm

Based on Flam (2005)

relatively short time. Viral videos viewed by the people impact on world public opinion. In the web 2.0 era, social media have changed the traditional agenda-setting model. In our opinion, using Toffler's words, prosumers receive and send messages that influence media agenda. Figure 3.5 shows how people, integrated in the social media exchange, share messages with other people but also with the media. In this sense, media agenda and public agenda are now constructed through collective participation via social media.

Let us try to explain our subject matter through the intermediary of the basic features of symbolic interactionist approach.

Social life is a constant process of interaction: in the social media age people are always interconnected, especially in the case of digital natives.

- As we have explained in another article (La Rosa 2012), there is a feeling of isolation when people do not have temporary possibilities to establish connections with the others. Usually, people could be talking with another but are attentive to the messages that are coming to their mobile phones from the social media, SMS, WhatsApp, or emails.
- Interaction is building and is adjusted on the go: it is not possible to identify in each case the person who begins the chain of transmission of messages or contributes with the diffusion of messages. Everyone builds the interaction and adjusts it to their needs, possibilities, and technological competences.
- Interaction is one symbolic process: all the social movements use symbolic resources to report or motivate the action like: #pman, No more FARC, Indignados, We are all Khaled Said, etc.

The dissonance cognitive theory assumes that people need to have congruence among their concepts. When some stimulus is not in concordance with the others, individuals experiment a state of dissonance, i.e., an aversive motivational state that implies the need to recover the lost congruence. In the case of social movements "social media has helped spread cognitive dissonance connecting opinion leaders and activists to regular citizens, which quickly expanded the network of anti-regime protestors" (Chebib and Sohail 2011:152)

Thinking in terms of the traditional spiral of silence theory of Noelle Neumann, people fear isolation and adopt the viewpoint of the majority of the public opinion. But what about the case of the social movements linked with social media? This theory fails because, in many cases, there are minority groups that disseminate the information using social media and other technological resources and go forward

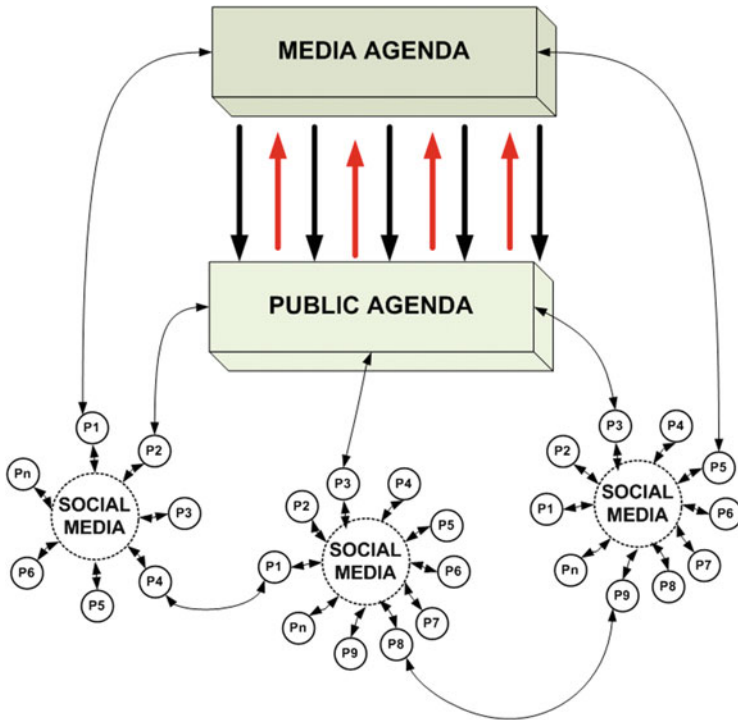


Fig. 3.5 Agenda setting in the web 2.0 era

with their goals which are subsequently adopted by many people who are motivated to support them or take part in collective actions.

Finally, we outline some operative conclusions from our theoretical review:

- social media could activate social movements, but there are other previous social, political and communicational conditions for their emergence;
- the same social media do not always have the same impact in all of the social movements.
- social media allow social movements to use short time spans between planning and implementing the social actions and protests, before actions to prevent or stop them could be launched.

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