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*The Protest and The Recuperation*

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# *The Future of Protest in a Post-Digital Age*

On March 31, 1990, while living in Brixton in South London, my brother and I joined a march in nearby Kennington Park. Destined for Trafalgar Square in central London, the gathering had been organized as a protest against the widely despised Community Charge (also known as the “poll tax”). Introduced by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, this tax was levied on individuals, rather than property, and therefore disproportionately favored the wealthy.

The demonstration took place without much by way of incident until an ill-advised charge by mounted police in Trafalgar Square, toward the end of the rally, provoked a series of skirmishes that unleashed a full-scale riot that lasted for more than twelve hours. Resulting in numerous injuries to the public and the police alike, widespread arrests, and the setting alight of the South African Embassy (the government of South Africa had released Nelson Mandela the previous month but still upheld apartheid legislation), the “poll-tax riots,” as they became known, are now considered instrumental in Thatcher’s downfall.

In the ensuing melee, my brother and I got separated but later regrouped at a local pub in neighboring Soho. We followed

reports on the radio throughout the afternoon and eventually got a better sense of what was happening when we watched television news coverage of the scenes unfolding in Trafalgar Square, a few hundred yards away from where we were sitting. Debating whether to stay put or rejoin the protests, we eventually hunkered down for the evening and awaited a lull in what were to become the most serious civil disturbances in London in more than one hundred years.

I do not recount these events here merely to demonstrate the often nebulous distinction between reality and the mediation of reality—the event of a civil disturbance as opposed to the mediation of the event of civil disturbance—but, rather, to emphasize the sense of how much has changed when we consider how we perceive and understand protest in a post-digital age. The “poll-tax riots” took place before mobile phones, so it was by a process of admittedly not-very-difficult deduction that my brother and I knew where to meet if we got separated. There was no social media, so we also lacked the wherewithal to connect with others outside the immediate event—other than, of course, by means of a landline telephone. There was likewise no way for the organizers of the march to coordinate events on the ground other than through word of mouth or, rather quaintly in retrospect, handheld megaphones.

I cannot remember if television programming was interrupted to broadcast updates on the protests. The United Kingdom was still the preserve of a handful of broadcast channels, and

Sky and British Satellite Broadcasting would not launch until later that year (under the name British Sky Broadcasting, or BSkyB). The very idea of instantaneous minute-by-minute coverage of a protest by those participating in it was fanciful at best, as was the notion of simultaneously broadcasting the experience to a global audience.

All that has changed, changed utterly, to paraphrase W. B. Yeats. An event of the magnitude seen in Trafalgar Square in March 1990 would be actively relayed by protestors in a matter of seconds via social media, online news platforms, and other digital means. The incident would then be picked up by traditional news media and broadcast to a global online audience and, needless to say, back to the protestors who produced the images. In a post-digital age, when the idea of a digital revolution and emerging technologies has been replaced by a series of easily available, user-friendly online technologies and interfaces, events are not only fluidly relayed to a global audience, but those dispatches also inform, if not partially synchronize, events on the ground. The recursive feedback of images from a protest could, equally, fuel protest and thereafter potentially determine the future course of events. These digital communications, as we are becoming increasingly aware, can also be monitored by state and local police to preempt, control, and quash dissent. It is this mise en abyme of digital image transmission that has come to define—if not predefine—how protests begin and develop through the mechanics of online circulation, archiving, and image-data retrieval.

The production, circulation, and reception of images—through the popular social networking websites Facebook and Twitter, microblogging, and other applications such as YouTube—has effectively ensured that digitally networked images have become a constituent part of the process of organizing, provoking, and maintaining the momentum of protests. The attacks on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, and the reaction of companies such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter in subsequently suspending user accounts, should be evidence enough, if any were needed, that online platforms have a significant effect on real-world events.<sup>1</sup> The question that remains pertinent, as we will see below, is whether that effect is a deterministic or a contributing factor. Given the extent to which algorithms increasingly determine whether an incident is viewed as “newsworthy,” it is likely that an actual protest could result—inadvertently or otherwise—from the torquing of algorithmic settings.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the underlying algorithmic rationalization of what is deemed to be newsworthy—and,

indeed, what is considered un-newsworthy—could see a large-scale public disturbance go relatively unnoticed. In this scenario, the immaterial abstractions of machine learning, the product of algorithmic input, could also predicate an act of physical violence, knowingly or not, by inciting protests or spreading “fake news.”<sup>3</sup> These concerns give rise to admittedly capacious questions: What is the future of protest in a post-digital age? What impact do digital technologies have on contemporary protests? And, significantly, how will we come to experience and understand the event of protest as a material activity in the future?

In 2010, twenty years after the “poll-tax riots” in London, respective events in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011—heralding as they did the advent of what was to become known as the Arab Uprisings—were widely understood to have been brought about by and maintained through social media and digital platforms. While this narrative continues to be generally accepted, there are a number of significant caveats that we need to consider if we want to more fully understand, a decade or so later, the affordances of today’s digital technologies in relation to contemporary protests. For many,

1. Writing about the events on Capitol Hill, one commentator observed how social media companies have become “systemic actors in our societies and democracies.” See Thierry Breton “Capitol Hill—the 9/11 Moment of Social Media,” *Politico*, January 10, 2021; <https://www.politico.eu/article/thierry-breton-social-media-capitol-hill-riot/>. Breton also argued that just “as 9/11 marked a paradigm shift for global security, 20 years later we are witnessing a before-and-after in the role of digital platforms in our democracy.”

2. In 2014 the National Academy of Sciences published a widely referenced article in which the authors observed, through an experiment on Facebook involving 689,003 users, how “emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness.” The authors demonstrated that such processes can occur “without direct interaction between people” and, crucially, through intentional manipulation of Facebook’s News Feed. See Adam D. I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111, no. 24 (June 17, 2014): 8788–90; <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/111/24/8788.full.pdf>.

3. One of the more egregious recent examples of “fake news” prompting an act of violence involved one Edgar M. Welch, a twenty-eight-year-old from North Carolina who fired a military-style rifle inside Comet pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C., following the online spread of a story claiming child slaves were being held there. See Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, and Cecilia Kang, “Dissecting the #PizzaGate Conspiracy Theories,” *New York Times*, December 10, 2016.

the event that triggered the region-wide revolts was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010. While Bouazizi's act of desperation was the catalyst for protests in his birthplace, Sidi Bouzid (a small town south of Tunis), it was the online amplification of those protests that produced further widespread dissent across the country. From the outset, local citizens in Sidi Bouzid mobilized their Facebook accounts and blogs to disseminate information about what was happening there. Stimulated by the authorities' attempts to crack down on them, the protests grew apace until they consumed the whole of the country and, thereafter, the region.<sup>4</sup> The vertiginous proximity of protest as an actual event and the fact of protest as a viral phenomenon provoked a collapse of sorts between the immaterial virtual realm of online protest—which had long been a feature of Tunisian politics—and the all-too-real incidence of tangible, on-the-streets protest. For many, it was this collapse between the two realms—the online and the public space—that maintained the social and political momentum that resulted in the subsequent downfall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the autocratic ruler of Tunisia, on January 14, 2011.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that the representational realm of digital images provoked actual protests, it is all the more important to reflect upon how digital platforms provided logistical support for protesters. Different forms of digital media operated in varying capacities: some were seen as effective tools for networking protest and its mobilization (Facebook); others for producing on-the-ground coordination between protesters (Twitter). For the discussion of tactics and opinions, however, blog-based discussion groups were favored. In retrospect, and perhaps most contentiously (given that their archiving system is contingent on an algorithmically defined process that often involves deleting images deemed “unsuitable”), protesters turned to YouTube for documenting human rights abuses.<sup>6</sup> Although not widely used in Tunisia, Instagram was favored in Egypt for instantaneous image-making and real-time dissemination of images. These platforms have since grown and others have been introduced, but what remains dominant in the narrative of social media usage and networked communication systems is the sense that they played a decisive role in not only promoting but also organizing revolutions across the region.

4. For a fuller account of how these protests developed, see Yasmine Ryan, “How Tunisia’s Revolution Began,” *Aljazeera*, January 26, 2011. The article recounts a conversation with Ali Bouazizi, a cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi, who posted a video of a peaceful protest that was later on *Aljazeera*’s Mubasher channel. Tunisian media, in contrast, ignored the growing uprising until Nessesma TV broke the silence on December 29, 2010; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/1/26/how-tunisia-revolution-began>.

5. The immediate and long-term effects of the 2011 Arab Uprisings continue to unfold across the region and globally. With the region, those effects have ranged from marginal protests (Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Mauritania, and Algeria), mass protests, and partial changes in government (Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Kuwait, Oman, and Jordan) to the toppling of governments (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya) and civil wars (Iraq, Libya, and Syria). On April 11, 2019, the Sudanese military ousted President Omar al-Bashir and dissolved the constitution.

6. In 2017, while attempting to purge extremist propaganda from its platform, YouTube inadvertently removed videos that could be used to document atrocities in Syria, potentially jeopardizing future war crimes prosecutions. See Malachy Browne, “YouTube Removes Videos Showing Atrocities in Syria,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/world/middleeast/syria-youtube-videos-isis.html>. Swathes of the Middle East—from Syria to Iraq, Kurdistan to Yemen, and Egypt to Lebanon—the repercussions of 2011 are still being felt on a daily basis.



Online images, in these contexts, undoubtedly have an operative impact: they cause things to happen. The iconic images of Bouazizi—both as a young man and, in one photograph, enjoying himself at a celebration—that were widely disseminated in the aftermath of his self-immolation ensured that he became, at least in part, a digitized martyr. However, for iconic images of protest to become instrumental in the development of events, they need an efficient infrastructure. By the time of Bouazizi's death in January 2011, Facebook had more than one million users in Tunisia, most of whom were concentrated in the capital, Tunis. This embedded infrastructure ensured that the foundations were in place to provide the virtual means to foment dissent in the lead up to December 2010.<sup>7</sup>

In the ongoing, agonistic contest of online images of protest, the state-sanctioned banning of traditional media also put further weight on online informal means of reporting protests. A further unintended consequence of banning traditional media outlets such as *Al Jazeera* in Tunisia was evident in the way in which government-approved images tended to be framed and produced with political stability in mind, with ministers giving assurances to the public about the strength and solidity of the state in the face of ostensible “terrorism” and international “interference.”

7. This level of access to online sources across Tunisian society should come as no surprise if we consider Tunisia was the first Arab country to connect to the Internet, in 1991.

These state-sanctioned narratives were in direct contrast to the images available online. Taken by protestors, often in the midst of a demonstration or a confrontation with state forces, the handheld, invariably unsteady footage of protests—in all its immediacy and perceived accuracy—served to further fuel a sense of crisis when viewed alongside the stage-managed “stable” and state-sponsored images of parliamentary representatives paying lip service to the apparent resolution and command of the government. In this context, the formal aesthetics of digital image-making by protestors and so-called citizen journalists, in conjunction with their production through the apparatus of networked systems of communication, implied an evidentiary counter-truth of sorts that shored up protestors and reinforced their calls for meaningful change.

Six months prior to Bouazizi's self-immolation another death was being publicized through social media for its “truthfulness” in the face of, in this case, a state-ordained murder. The images of Khaled Mohamed Saeed, an Egyptian citizen who was murdered by security forces in Alexandria on June 6, 2010, were circulated through Facebook accounts and other networked systems of communication, including the popular “We are all Khaled Said,” moderated by the Internet activist Wael Ghonim and, it later transpired, the Egyptian human rights activist Abdul Rahman Mansour. It was the stark evidence of Saeed's death, as represented in the online images of his battered and broken face, which were juxtaposed online with an image of him used for an Egyptian identity card,

that moved Ghonim to set up the Facebook page and draw attention to the injustice of his death.<sup>8</sup>

While the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page became a potent example for many of the apparent ascendancy of social media as an inspirational and organizational means to effect political transformation, it is important to contextualize this view if we are to more fully understand how protests are mediated (and managed) in a post-digital age. The focus on digital networks and contemporary forms of image capture, throughout 2010 and 2011, tended to reduce seismic historical events to a series of convenient catchphrases such as the “Twitter Revolution” or the “Facebook Revolution” or, more specifically but no less reductively, “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution,” “Tunisia’s Twitter Uprising,” or “Syria’s YouTube Uprising.” While the effusive nature of such phrases could perhaps be credited to the historical sense of change and the generalized utopic sentiment that underwrote social media in the lead-up to 2010, these views came to overdetermine digital technologies as the defining factor in revolutionary events. The advocacy of such views tends to disregard the degree to which technological determinism can reductively foreground the role of social media and digital platforms rather than the actual agents—namely, the citizens who took to the streets to protest in the first place—of political protest. The issue of revolutionary action and political transformation,

when viewed through the lens of technological determinism, presents protests as if they were an inevitable outcome of the technologies in use at the time. The danger here is that the agency of the political subject, the protestor, is sublimated within and through the agency of technology.

In the wake of 2011, as activists and human rights organizations observed, the very systems used to organize protest in Egypt were being deployed to effect the spread of targeted disinformation, the deployment of online surveillance, and the institutionalization of digital authoritarianism within the country. An early example of the spread of disinformation includes the fact that the Electronic Committee of the then-ruling National Democratic party in Egypt, despite its apparently anachronistic title, was instrumental in spreading comments through Facebook to the effect that Khaled Saeed was a smalltime drug dealer, an addict, and, to use their phrase, the “Martyr of Marijuana.” The unbound freedom to communicate, share, and “like” protest and the calls for change came with a cost, as we now know all too well, that was evidenced in how scrutiny of online platforms was used to monitor dissent—an activity that has become crucial to the quashing of contemporary protests in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Involving

9. As of 2019, and alongside the deployment of militarized forms of policing, the Egyptian government has censored more than five hundred websites belonging to, among others, foreign and local news outlets, opposition organizations, activist blogs, and leading international rights groups. See Hossam el-Hamalawy, “Egypt’s Dirty War (Part II): Surveillance for All,” <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/Comment/2019/01/english-dirty-war-part-II-Surveillance-for-all>.

8. See Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of People Is Stronger Than the People in Power, A Memoir* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), 58 passim.

as they did the then-relatively nascent global mechanics of targeted disinformation and digital forms of total surveillance, such activities—online surveillance, biometric profiling, and data scraping, for example—were not restricted to Egypt or the region. The apparatus of digital media has been and continues to be actively employed by authoritarian and elected governments alike to manage, control, target, and quell dissent. The immediate impact of the revolution in Egypt on its citizens and the level of state-sponsored surveillance that was deployed against political opponents does, nevertheless, expose a practice that has become a key tool of oppression for authoritarian states across the region.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of Edward Snowden's disclosures in 2013, moreover, the use of online surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA) of the United States, which predates the events of 2011, revealed the remarkable extent to which state-sponsored surveillance has been historically and covertly directed toward citizens and non-citizens alike.<sup>11</sup>

A further concern involves the degree to which the claims that social and digital media promote revolutionary acts have been largely encouraged, if not forged, through the venture-capital model of Big Tech companies such as Facebook. Before it was implicated in the election of an American president in 2016 and for allowing calls for the genocide of the Rohingya population in Myanmar to proliferate on its platform throughout 2017 and 2018, Facebook once revelled in the motto “move fast and break things.”<sup>12</sup> Based primarily in the United States, specifically the global center for social media that is Silicon Valley, the displacement of political agency—even in part—onto companies such as Facebook or Twitter and YouTube at the expense of those actually involved in revolutionary protest has unfortunate echoes of an imperial attitude that has historically figured the so-called West as the engineer in chief (or “puppet master”) controlling social and political events across the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> The facilitative elements of social media and networked systems of communication are emphatically not the direct causes of a revolution—in fact, they may have had a stymying influence on protests, nowhere more so than in the Middle East, where the use of Western-generated surveillance systems has long

10. Apart from online surveillance to effect scrutiny of dissent, the Egyptian state apparatus was increasingly using the accusation of spreading “fake news” as a tool of oppression. See <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/27/fake-news-becomes-tool-of-repression-after-egypt-passes-new-law>.

11. The use of surveillance equipment by the United States government in the Middle East is beyond the scope of this essay, but a recent report has observed that the United States military is currently buying up the data of people around the world, including users of a Muslim prayer and Quran app that has more than ninety-eight million downloads worldwide. The report outlines how the United States military is purchasing access to sensitive data that can be used to geolocate individuals without their prior knowledge or consent. See Joseph Cox, “How the U.S. Military Buys Location Data from Ordinary Apps,” *Vice*, November 16, 2020; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqm5x/us-military-location-data-xmode-locate-x>.

12. In 2018 a United Nations investigator reported that Facebook had been used to incite hatred against the Rohingya. A subsequent Reuters report, published in March 2018, found more than one thousand examples of posts, comments, and pornographic images attacking the Rohingya, including hate speech calling for their genocide. See Steve Stecklow, “Hatebook,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2018; <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>.

13. In his otherwise unstinting promotion of digital platforms and social media as agents in protest, Ghonim raises a number of asides querying their efficacy. In one passage, he notes how he was concerned whether online momentum was only an Internet phenomenon. “One artist expressed this notion in a painting that said, ‘this is a street, and this is Facebook and not a street.’ She was implying that the revolution had to be street bound, and that revolution on Facebook did not matter.” See Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0*, 153.

been deployed to quash dissent.<sup>14</sup> While digital platforms may offer a logistical context for communicating grievance and organizing events, revolutionary protests stem from manifold complex social, political, economic, and historical occurrences. Social media usage does not automatically equal political engagement, let alone political transformation. It can, on the contrary, promote a false sense of solidarity and engagement and reduce the complexity of the Middle East to a series of reductive neocolonial interpretive frameworks.

These issues are further compounded when we consider how contemporary protests are organized and thereafter understood in historical terms. Online platforms, including social networking websites, microblogging and networking services, and video-sharing platforms, selectively edit and purge images over time through the actions of human operators and opaque algorithms, leaving us with at best a partial view of events and, more insidiously, an algorithmically curated series of images. As we move toward newer post-digital means of mediating realities and storing information as well as the proliferation of mass surveillance, we need to critically examine how we understand the impact of digital

14. In 2017, following a yearlong investigation by BBC Arabic and Dagbladet Information newspaper in Denmark, it was reported the United Kingdom defense company BAE Systems made numerous sales of sophisticated surveillance technology across the Middle East, including to repressive governments. One of the companies involved was ETI Holdings, based in Denmark, which was bought by BAE and became part of BAE Systems Applied Intelligence. Prior to that, ETI had developed a system called Evident, which gave governments the digital means to conduct mass

surveillance of their citizens, their communications, and, crucially, their contacts. An earlier customer for Evident was Zinedine Ben Ali. The BBC report, quoting a former Tunisian intelligence official who operated Evident for Ben Ali, observed: "ETI installed it and engineers came for training sessions. . . . [It] works with keywords. You put in an opponent's name and you will see all the sites, blogs, social networks related to that user." See "How BAE Sold Cyber-Surveillance Tools to Arab States"; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40276568>.

archiving in particular and how it has come to define our understanding of historical events. How, we need to ask, will the digital define future understandings of social protest and political unrest?

The event of protest in a post-digital age is an all-too-timely reminder of how we need to redefine the critical frameworks through which we understand the production, reception, and dissemination of images from zones of conflict. Who, we may want to ask, ultimately benefits from the production, reception, and storage of these images? And how will we account for such entanglements in the future? The widespread use of digital surveillance equipment targeting civilian populations, activists, opposition members of political parties, and dissent across the Middle East is unprecedented, but before we see it as a one-way process, we should also reflect upon a further issue. The application of surveillance equipment—including Wide Area Aerial Surveillance (WAAS) and Wide Area Motion Imaging (WAMI)—throughout the Middle East has been actively encouraged by military-industrial partnerships within the United States that effectively secure such technologies for use across American cities.<sup>15</sup> Long seen as a testing ground for the racially deterministic discourses of colonial ideology, the Middle East

15. For a detailed analysis of how WAAS and WAMI systems are being deployed for training purposes in the Middle East before being used in the United States, see Arthur Holland Michel, *Eyes in the Sky: The Secret Rise of Gorgon Stare and How It Will Watch Us All* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019). The *New York Times* reported how the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt,

effectively reinvented himself as the point of liaison between Silicon Valley and the military-industrial complex within the Pentagon. See Kate Conger and Cade Metz, "I Could Solve Most of Your Problems: Eric Schmidt's Pentagon Offensive," *New York Times*, May 2, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/technology/eric-schmidt-pentagon-google.html/>.

would also appear to have become the laboratory for the future development of global surveillance systems.<sup>16</sup>

Given that protests before widespread digital-media usage were often autochthonous, mostly localized affairs (I vaguely recall how, in 1990, in the run up to the “poll-tax riots,” I found out about the planned assembly in Kennington Park from a flyer posted to a shutter outside Brixton Tube Station), it is all the more important to question what digital technologies will afford us when it comes to future acts of protesting. How, we need to ask, do those affordances define our interaction with events and our subsequent understanding of protest? In November 1990, eight months after the “poll-tax riots,” Margaret Thatcher resigned. Her departure was anticipated, in part, by her insistence upon, and subsequent mishandling of, the “poll-tax” debate. From the vantage point of now, it is worth considering whether or not her downfall could have been brought about sooner had social media—rather than state broadcasters—been available in 1990. Conversely, we could surmise that, had such technologies existed, they undoubtedly would have been deployed—as they are today—through state-sanctioned models of surveillance that strategically disrupt calls for political change and popular claims for justice. This is all

16. For an extended discussion of how the Middle East became a means to develop Western surveillance systems, see Anthony Downey, “There’s Always Someone Looking at You: Performative Research and the Techno-Aesthetics of Drone Surveillance,” in Downey, ed., *Heba Y. Amin: The General’s Stark* (Sternberg Press, 2020), 8–30.

mere speculation, of course; it is, however, worth weighing the extent to which calls for political transformation and change are being articulated and managed through online platforms that are controlled and owned by unaccountable privatized companies with significant links to military-industrial complexes across Europe and North America.<sup>17</sup> The calculated extrusion of data from images, effected by largely unaccountable private companies through data harvesting and algorithmic means, will continue to determine, if not overdetermine, our relationship to social and political realities. The post-digital subject and future forms of protest will be formulated in the shadow of these systems, and we will need to identify and distinguish, as a matter of urgency, the impact of digital networks—an immaterial entity—the material realities of everyday life. These questions,

17. There are multiple connections between social media companies such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft to the United States military-industrial complex, none of which should come as a surprise given that the precursor to the Internet was Arpanet, a communication system developed in the United States in the 1960s as an early-warning system for the nuclear age. For a review of Google’s involvement in drone surveillance technology, see Lee Fang, “Google Hired Gig Economy Workers to Improve Artificial Intelligence in Controversial Drone-Targeting Project,” *Intercept*, March 6, 2018; <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/06/google-is-quietly-providing-ai-technology-for-drone-strike-targeting-project/>. For details of the United States government’s Maven Project and Google’s role in its development, see <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/04/google-ai-project-maven-figure-eight/>. For an overview of Amazon’s concerted efforts to enter into the national security market contracts of the United States, see Sharon Weinberger, “The Everything War,” *MIT Technology Review* 22, no. 6 (November–December, 2019): 26–29.

Amazon’s cloud-based software program Rekognition is also used for facial recognition by a number of United States government agencies, including ICE (Immigration and Enforcement Agency). More recently, it was announced that the venture capitalist and Facebook board member Peter Thiel, who founded the company Palantir in 2004 and developed its profile working for the Pentagon and the CIA in Afghanistan and Iraq, was one of the financial backers of Clearview AI, a privately owned facial recognition app that has been deployed, without any public scrutiny as to potential misuse and its future weaponization by authoritarian governments, by more than six hundred law enforcement agencies across the United States. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/technology/clearview-privacy-facial-recognition.html>. See also Peter Waldman, Lizette Chapman, and Jordan Robertson, “Palantir Knows Everything About You,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, April 23, 2018; <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2018-palantir-peter-thiel/>.

in our current era of supposedly unending emergency (a convenient clarion call for unremitting forms of surveillance), are far from regional. They underscore questions about global protest movements, digital activism, political agency, social transformation, and, finally if not fatally, the impact of digital technologies on the very substance of truth and historical fact.