New Research Unravels Intricacies of the Global Revolution

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Merlyna Lim, PhD
Carleton University's Canada Research Chair in Digital Media and Global Network Society
Merlyna Lim investigates agents of change in the modern revolutionary world

News reports in the Western world crowed about social media as a catalyst for speedy revolution in Tunisia, then Egypt and elsewhere as part of the Arab Spring beginning in 2010. Just how digital media – whether by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or any other facet of the World Wide Web – activated democratic uprisings that unfolded independently throughout Arab countries remains a subject of wide discussion.

Merlyna Lim investigates political and social change, principally in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, from the platform of digital communications. Her research casts a broad and very complex net while steering cleanly away from assumptions that might easily support Western trends in Internet use. Much research until now has focused on patterns adopted by Europeans and North Americans.

Lim examines digital media as an adjunct to essential traditional precursors of revolutionary activity: public meeting spaces and a sweeping tide of public discontent supported by strong leadership voices and public advocacy. Lim studies the intricate interplay of these elements and how they grow out of a distinctive society and culture, which also includes technological and scientific familiarity with such tools as digital media as part of daily life.

Lim’s work has been supported by international affiliations such as Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, the U.S. National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Her research stretches far beyond theoretical approaches by employing computational analyses that marry the social sciences with computer science. Lim and her collaborators have developed novel mathematical formulas (algorithms) to model and analyze community online activity enabling a more accurate portrayal of how social networking evolves in distinctive local settings each with their unique cultural, ethnic and community character.

_“There is a broader promise that the relationship between technology and society cannot be reduced to a single explanation from a single discipline. A multidisciplinary approach is a must to understand such relationship.”_