

# New Research Unravels Intricacies of the Global Revolution

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# Merlyna Lim Investigates Agents of Change in the Modern Revolutionary World

News reports in the Western world crowded 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 portrait of how social networking evolves in distinctive local settings each with their unique cultural, ethnic and community character.

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**“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.”**

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Lim's political movement research encompasses more than the 'successful' upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt. Her work goes further to evaluate why revolution fails in situations such as Syria, for example, where widespread public discontent has been no less vocal but are absent of other common yet essential elements beyond social media.

Other aspects of Lim's research focus on women, specifically, in social movements that too are advancing in the non-Western world. As a former visiting scholar at Princeton University's Center for Information Technology, Lim is considered a leading authority on the progress of significant social and political movements around the world from the United States to Malaysia.

## THE RESEARCH

### What I do

Investigate and analyze the roles of social networking, digital media alongside other elements in the evolution of social and political movements.

### Why it matters

These insights are important for understanding unfolding events in democratizing nations worldwide and how new technologies influence society, especially in geopolitically complex areas of the world such as the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

### What it will change

Discovering and documenting the significant interplay involved political and social change can help policy makers, political leaders, journalists and other players understand the true impact of media technologies.

## THE RESEARCHER

2013-2014 Visiting Research Professor, Center for Information Technology Policy, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

2012-2014 Distinguished Scholar of Technology and Public Engagement, Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes & School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

2012 Visiting Fellow KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, Leiden (The Netherlands).

2011-2014 National Science Foundation, for research about female Muslim collective movements and digital media.

2009-2012 The Ford Foundation, for research involving public interest media in Indonesia.

2011 Kartini Awards, One of 100 Most Inspiring Indonesian Women, The Kartini Foundation.

## PARTNERS

Collaborations and affiliations around the world have included University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Arizona State University, the U.S. National Science Foundation, The Ford Foundation, and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies.

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“What we are learning will help prepare us to understand how technology shapes the evolution of society and how society shapes the evolution of technology.”