In his book *Talking Politics* (1992), William A. Gamson argues that the construction of the three collective action frames of injustice, identity, and agency are fundamental to building a social movement, as movement members use the frames to identify an unjust situation, develop a sense of collective identity, find an appropriate target, and take action—though not necessarily in that order. In this chapter, I use the theory of collective action frames to partially explain the success of one Facebook group in mobilizing its members to take continuous, targeted, collective action and the failure of another group to do the same. Kullena Khaled Said, the Egyptian group that eventually sparked off the Egyptian revolution, managed to mobilize members to organize and carry out political actions against Hosni Mubarak’s regime; Justice for Damini, a page started in protest of the brutal rape of a twenty-three-year-old woman in New Delhi in 2012, amassed 70,000 members in the space of a few weeks and then faded out in the next few weeks, ostensibly failing to make a lasting impact (though the larger movement that it was a part of did so). Although the concept of leadership is not a focal point of this essay, I hope that the reader will take note of the many ways in which this element differentiated Kullena Khaled Said from Justice for Damini.
Data used in the analysis of Justice for Damini was taken principally from the text and hyperlinks of the Facebook page itself, whose content was written in both English and Hindi, in both of which I am conversant. Data used in the analysis of Kullena Khaled Said is based in large part on the book Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power—A Memoir (2012), written by Wael Ghonim, the creator and administrator of the Egyptian group, as well as on news clippings of the event. Unfortunately, all of the content in Kullena Khaled Said is in Arabic, a language I cannot read. All of content from Kullena Khaled Said mentioned in this essay is thus taken from Ghonim’s book, which contains a large number of translated posts and comments. This biases the study somewhat, as it means that the analysis is based upon the posts and responses that Ghonim considered important or relevant enough to translate in presenting his story.

Unfortunately, only five members of Justice for Damini and two members of Kullena Khaled Said agreed to and went through with an interview or sent me back a questionnaire, despite repeated requests. My efforts to contact Kullena Khaled Said members in particular were severely hampered by the fact that the group’s administrators blocked both themselves and all the members of the page from posting any kind of content on it just as I began contacting people. I have thus chosen not to make any inferences from this data or to include it in my analysis. I have mentioned the responses I received at several points in the essay, however, for what they contribute in suggesting possible hypotheses for further study and verification. All names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

APPLICATION OF COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAME THEORY IN A DIGITAL CONTEXT

Gamson’s framework is easily applied to an online context, especially one in which the principal form of communication is publicly available (and understood by the author). This is because it is possible to track the development of each of the collective action frames through the neat, chronological, time- and date-stamped posts and conversations that occurred online. The danger is in the fact that there may be significant incoherence between what was written and expressed and what was felt, thought, and acted upon. However, the average member is privy to the same data as the researcher, thus making what is available online paramount. Access to private conversations, digital or otherwise, may bring out different information, pointing perhaps to a nucleus of actors with different or stronger collective action frames, but this does not take away
from whatever is discovered about the larger group. Nonetheless, the possibility of a gap remains, all the more so when dealing with offline actions. While communication among members before, during, and after the event is still available for the researcher to analyze, not everything that took place when disconnected will make it to the Internet. Personal interviews help to fill in both of these gaps in knowledge. Obstacles to personal contact in groups of this size can be overcome by travelling to the region where the movement took place.

BACKGROUND

At the beginning of June 2010, pictures of the deceased twenty-eight-year-old Khaled Said’s brutally disfigured face were posted online and went viral. Said had been tortured and killed by Egyptian police officers. After he saw the pictures of Said’s face, Wael Ghonim, the head of marketing for Google Middle East and North Africa and an Egyptian living in Dubai, started a Facebook group called Kullena Khaled Said (We are all Khaled Said). A total of 36,000 young Egyptians joined the group on the first day, and it continued to grow at a phenomenal rate over the next few weeks. During the first couple of months of its existence, the page organized both online and offline political actions and then went quiet for a period. Following the downfall of Tunisia’s dictatorship over six months later, Kullena Khaled Said decided to call for an Egyptian revolution. Ghonim created a Facebook event inviting Egyptians to begin the revolution on 25 January 2011, ten days later. Within two days, 27,000 people had RSVP’ed their participation. Many other movements, opposition parties, and activists worked together to promote, coordinate, and plan the event, which succeeded in ending Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year dictatorship within eighteen days. Though there were two administrators for Kullena Khaled Said, this essay focuses on Ghonim’s actions as he reports them.

The Delhi Rape Case involved the brutal gang rape of a twenty-three-year-old Indian woman who was given the pseudonym “Damini” by the Indian media. Damini was gang-raped repeatedly by six men in a moving bus on 16 December 2012. The nature of the crime was so violent that Damini had to have most of her intestines removed and would never have been able to eat or drink again had she survived. She passed away thirteen days after the incident, on 29 December. Over the course of these thirteen days and following her death, India held mass protests calling for the death of the accused and for better security for women, among a series of other demands. During this time, various Facebook groups
in support of Damini were created, the largest of which was and is Justice for Damini with over 70,000 members.

RATIONALE FOR COMPARISON

I chose Kullena Khaled Said because it was clearly a Facebook group that stood apart in terms of its mobilizing and acting power. I chose to compare it to Justice for Damini because, like Kullena Khaled Said, it was composed largely of young people and emerged in response to a crisis due to a situation of extreme injustice committed against another young urban educated person. Both groups increased extremely rapidly in membership and had anonymous administrators during the period studied in this essay. Both groups were also Facebook “pages.” This means that only the group’s administrator(s) could post content onto the “wall” or interface that is immediately visible upon accessing the page, giving the administrator significant control over the page’s immediately visible content. Furthermore, given Kullena Khaled Said members’ explicit desire not to associate themselves with political youth, as well as their rather negative view of the same, and Justice for Damini members’ lack of critical political discourse and action, both groups were likely composed largely of un politicized youth.

That said, the groups also had important differences. Khaled Said was attacked by employees of the state because he was perceived to be a threat against an autocratic regime, while Damini was targeted by members of civil society because she was a vulnerable female. The Egyptian group was thus responding to physical violence while living under a repressive regime and the Indian group was responding to sexual violence while living within a democracy. The degree to which Damini and Said’s suffering was focused on may have been different but their suffering was nonetheless a vital factor in spurring people on to action. In addition, although the link between Said’s death and systemic problems may have been far more obvious to the average citizen, Damini’s death has played a significant role in a movement toward safety and equality for women in India. As such, though the groups are not exactly the same, making a comparison between them is not unreasonable.

COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES: INJUSTICE

The collective action frame of injustice requires two elements: moral indignation and a motivated person or entity that is at least partially to blame for the
injustice. Turner and Killian argue that a social movement cannot exist without a sense of moral indignation and the belief that some “established practice or mode of thought is wrong and ought to be replaced.” Moral indignation is composed of “righteous anger” or an emotionally based understanding of “inequality,” as well as, but not necessarily entailing, an intellectual understanding of the same. The former component was very prominent in the creation of both Kullena Khaled Said and Justice for Damini (Gamson, 1992: 32).

**Righteous Anger**

In Wael Ghonim’s words, after he saw the pictures of Khaled’s brutally disfigured face and read what had happened to him he “felt miserable, frustrated, and outraged,” and was “unable to control the tears flowing from [his] eyes.” While other elements influenced Ghonim’s decision to create the group and dedicate large amounts of time to administering it, such as the fact that he was an Internet junkie and believed strongly in the power of technology to spark change, it was Ghonim’s emotional reaction to Khaled’s pictures that initiated his desire to create the page. It was also the element that regularly reignited his desire to fight against injustice in Egypt, once the group was underway (Ghonim, 2012: 51, 89).

If one visits Justice for Damini’s page on Facebook, there is a similar outpouring of emotion. The group’s description asks people to like the page “to show all the criminal bastards rapists [sic] that WE ARE ALL FOR ONE AND ONE FOR ALL” (capitals in original). The second post on the page is a letter full of rage and sorrow addressed to the rapist (at this point it was not yet known that there were six men involved), that calls him a murderer, thief, terrorist, and bloody dog, among other things. The majority of comments posted on the page express similar feelings of sadness and deep anger (Justice for Damini, 2012).

The same strong sentiments spill over into the interviews and questionnaires. Priyanka, for example, said that the group is good because it helped many people “feel the pain of Damini” (response to questionnaire, 12 August 2013), while Sumaiya wrote that she joined the group because “as a human you cannot ignore [the rape] and more[over], being a woman, you can imagine what was the situation at that moment of the attack [sic]” (Response to questionnaire, 9 August 2013). Bipen, who joined Justice for Damini and then created his own group in order to better express his opinions and views, said “when I read about the news of what had happened, I cried a lot coz I felt that it was the most painful way one could die. I felt terrible about what had happened” (Response to questionnaire, 4 August 2013).
Righteous anger is not enough to construct a collective action frame of injustice, however. A group of people must also be able to identify an actor, whether it is an individual, a corporation, a tradition, or a government policy, that is at least partially to blame for the act. This actor must be neither overly abstract nor excessively concrete. If the cause of an injustice is too abstract, or "actor-less," such as "the system, society, life, and human nature," it makes it difficult or impossible to understand how the situation of injustice can be changed, and can lead to people feeling powerless and/or accepting that the situation "is the way it is." At the other extreme, "in concretizing the targets of an injustice frame, there is a danger that people will miss the underlying structural conditions that produce hardship and inequality" (Gamson, 1992: 32–33).

From reading the page's posts in Justice for Damini one can easily and justifiably come to the conclusion that Justice for Damini was unable to identify a suitable motivated actor and that this left the group without an appropriate target to organize against. The administrator and commenters were, for the most part, overly specific when naming the enemy. Much of what they shared was brimming with anger, disgust, sadness, and a desire to see the rapists punished. This was not problematic in and of itself. However, once all the rapists had been apprehended, a judicial process begun against them, and a committee set up to review the country's rape laws, there was not much more that protesters could rally behind that specifically concerned these six rapists. They were, after all, six random men, unconnected to a larger organization, public or private, and acting of their own volition. But this does not mean that another motivated actor could not have been identified and targeted. Certainly, the media and street protests were offering up several possibilities. One of these was the aforementioned culture that has not yet managed to teach men that sexual violence against women is unacceptable. Another was the Delhi police themselves, who systematically and overtly contribute to victim blaming and impunity (Bhalla et al., 2012). There were a number of appropriate, motivated actors or "enemies" for the movement to target.

Those posts that did offer up an alternative target suffered from the malaise of generality. For example, two posts that brought up the concept of a culture of rape blamed the whole of society for the problem. One of them, entitled "Behind every rapist" (posted on 21 December 2012), listed everyone from the "father who treated his wife as a slave" to "a legal system which has a provision for rape victim to marry her rapist" to the very people protesting against Damini's rape as the culprits. Although it was an insightful, if not perfect, post, it was a potentially
fair critique, it was so all-encompassing that it ended up making the “actor-
less” entity of “society” responsible for violence against women. Predictably
perhaps, the comments that followed that post focused on changing oneself,
and included vague appraisals of the entire Indian culture and society. They say
things like “first we should change ourselves, and then our country,” “Indian
culture and society sucks,” “we all have to change our mentality first,” and “So,
all of [us] are indirectly responsible for this incident . . . from now on we must
be courageous enough to raise our voice and stand together against any kind
of injustice.” Only one comment was more focused, but no one, including the
administrator, made any attempt to encourage the person’s thoughts or to guide
the conversation in any way.

When posts related to root causes or taking collective action were posted,
they suffered from a lack of follow-through in pursuing the topic or action. For
example, on 20 January, the administrator asked members to organize events and
send in the links to events. This was an excellent if unfocused initiative, but, while
it is true that only a handful of the 197 posts that followed contained even a par-
tially formed idea of an event, none of these were commented on or reposted by
the administrator so as to encourage such thinking and/or to give the seeds of
ideas greater visibility. Not even one excellent initiative of a petition asking the
government to force those politicians who had been accused of rape to step down
was reposted. As such, the administrator as well as other members failed to play
the much-needed role of leader or coordinator within the group, and to identify
the “broader structure” in which the rapists were operating (Gamson, 1992: 33).
Doing so might have given followers of the page a target to organize themselves
around once the rapists had been apprehended and the judicial process against
them begun. But it would also have been an enormously time-consuming task.
Ghonim states that he dedicated so many hours to the page that he neglected
both his family and work to care for it (Ghonim, 2012: 110).

Interestingly, one interviewee, Bipen, from Justice for Damini, specifically
complained that the group administrator did not identify the “actual causes of
“ and “main reasons” behind the rape, the latter of which he identified as the
Indian system of law and order. He felt that it was the administrator’s respon-
sibility to do this, and his/her failure to follow through with that responsibil-
ity had a negative impact on the group. He created his own group, in order to
“make at least the ppl of my country aware of wat wrong is going on ...” and felt
that “people’s awareness about injustice that exists in society against women”
was lacking (Response to questionnaire, 4 August 2013). Another interviewee,
Rohan, also felt that the group was ineffective, but blamed the medium of the Internet for this problem (Interview with author, 27 July 2013).

Wael Ghonim, on the other hand, immediately identified “the corrupt practices of the Ministry of Interior, our repressive regime’s evil right hand” as a concrete but not overly specific actor. This actor, and others that emerged, were not named explicitly in Ghonim’s earliest posts. Right from the beginning, however, justice for Said was framed within a larger discourse of justice and freedom for all group members. For example, the first post read, “Today they killed Khaled. If I don’t act for his sake, tomorrow they will kill me.” The second read, “People, we became 300 in two minutes. We want to be 100,000. We must unite against our oppressor.” Soon enough, Ghonim “began to focus on the notion that what had happened to Khaled was happening on a daily basis, in different ways, to people we never heard about.” It would not have been a stretch, by any means, for Justice for Damini’s administrator to make the same links between, for example, rape and a rape culture. This is not to say that Kullena Khaled Said did not also focus on justice for, specifically, Khaled Said, or that their chosen motivated actor was always coherent and stable; however, as an administrator Ghonim always returned to or included a broader vision of justice (Ghonim, 2012: 59–60). Zeeshan, a follower of Kullena Khaled Said, supported this idea in my interview with him. He stated that he learned to be political through the group (Interview with author, 14 August 2013).

COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES: IDENTITY

Moving on to collective identity, we find a slightly more complex situation. There are numerous measures of collective identity, and the consistent lack of high correlation between these measures shows that it is not “a unidimensional construct” but a multidimensional one (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004: 100). Therefore, it is not likely that any one group will display or report the existence of all the elements. Since the list of elements that are connected to collective identity is extensive, I have chosen to focus on six of the seven main elements that, according to Ashmore et al.’s in-depth analysis of two decades of collective identity studies, are considered basic to collective identity. Gamson’s definition of collective identity and Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani’s understanding of the production of identity and identification rituals also provide part of the theoretical framework in this section.
The list produced by Ashmore et al. (2004: 84–93) includes self-categorization, evaluation, importance, attachment and a sense of interdependence, social embeddedness, and behavioural involvement. Much of this is self-explanatory. Self-categorization refers to the action of identifying oneself as a member of a particular group. It is virtually impossible for any other form of collective identity to exist without self-categorization. Evaluation follows quickly on its heels and refers to the positive or negative way that one evaluates, or feels that other people evaluate, the group that one identifies oneself as being a part of. Importance refers to the “degree of importance, from low to high, of a particular group membership to the individual’s overall self-concept.” Attachment and a sense of interdependence refers either to “the affective involvement a person feels with a social category or the degree to which the fate of the group is perceived as overlapping with one’s personal fate.” Social embeddedness is concerned with just how important a collective identity is in terms of one’s social relationships. In other words, it refers to how many friends and family members belong to the same group that one is in. Behavioural involvement is concerned with “the degree to which the person engages in actions that directly [implicate] the collective identity category in question.” For Gamson,

The identity component refers to the process of defining this “we,” typically in opposition to some “they” who have different interests or values. . . . Collective action requires a consciousness of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed and a “we” who will help to bring the change about. (Gamson, 1992: 8)

Let us begin by tracing the emergence of this sense of “we-ness” within Kullena Khaled Said through the group’s participation in collective actions. Using Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani’s understanding of the production of identity and identification rituals, I argue that, when organizing and taking part in collective actions, group members adopted specific “models of behaviour” that built up and reinforced the movement’s identity. These models of behaviour included objects such as an identifier, “that enable[s] supporters of a particular cause to be instantly recognizable,” and a character, Khaled Said, who “played an important role . . . in the development of [the movement’s] ideology.” By using these “objects” in collective actions, group members were clearly differentiated from “ordinary people” and “their adversaries” (della Porta et al., 1999: 97–98).
The first action that Ghonim urged group members to participate in was a public funeral for Khaled Said, organized by another youth movement, and other groups and activists. It is impossible for me to say whether or not group members attended the funeral, which was attacked by police. However, their participation appeared to have little or no effect on collective identity within Kullena Khaled Said. Then Ghonim suggested an action that “belonged” to the group. That is to say, the administrator of Kullena Khaled Said thought of the idea and asked those who belonged to the group to participate. The idea was for members to change their profile pictures to “an anonymously designed banner of Khaled Said, featuring him against the backdrop of the Egyptian flag, with the caption “Egypt’s Martyr.” Ghonim reports that “thousands responded positively.” It was a low-risk and easy action to participate in, which was and still is common in the world of Facebook. The action asked members of Kullena Khaled Said to somewhat publicly identify themselves with the group by changing their online “clothing”—their profile pictures. In doing so, they simultaneously asserted their difference from those who had killed “Egypt’s Martyr” as well as from those who had not, or had not yet, joined the group. By using a character of the movement, Khaled Said, within the logo, those who participated in the campaign were reinforcing their identity as a movement concerned with the death of Khaled Said (Ghonim, 2012: 63, 67).

In the second action, Ghonim asked members to photograph themselves holding up a paper sign that said Kullena Khaled Said:

Hundreds did so, and we began to publish their pictures on the page. The images created an impact many times stronger than any words posted on the page. Males and females of all backgrounds, aged between fourteen and forty, now personified the movement. (2012: 68)

Again, members adopted an identifier, the name of their group, which set them apart from their adversary and from other people, in a situation of risk, and thus strengthened their sense of “we-ness.” After these two actions, the movement virtually flowed.

The third action the group organized and participated in was the Silent Stand, an offline action that was a group member’s suggestion. The idea was for members to wear black t-shirts, another identifier, and stand along the coast in Alexandria for an hour, five feet apart from each other, silently expressing their “disapproval of the injustice inflicted upon Khaled Said.” Preparing for the action involved a great deal of collaboration among group members and
ultimately required them to demonstrate their disagreement with the regime in public. Even before the action took place, it is possible to see the group’s collective identity gaining form and strength. For example, members decided that they wanted to “send out a clear message that although we were both sad and angry, we were nevertheless nonviolent” (Ghonim, 2012: 70, 72).

Ghonim takes these desires and feelings being expressed by group members and reinforces them in a post that boldly asserts who the group is and is not, even giving group members the collective identity of the Facebook youth: “We are not an organization and we are not a political party; we have no motive other than to express our opinion in a civilized manner. . . . I swear the whole world will marvel at the Facebook youth” (2012: 72). In my interview with Zeeshan, he proudly asserts that he as well identified himself as the Facebook youth (August 14, 2013).

When the group was attacked by the government and state-owned newspapers for organizing the Silent Stand, the group’s digital identity was further strengthened, as it articulated and defended its identity in the face of those who were trying to give it another, less honorable, one:

Do you know why the media are attacking Facebook? Because it does not receive bribes to publish false stories and it does not succumb to security pressure and delete a story. . . . Facebook became our means to express our opinions, ambitions, and dreams without pressure from anyone. . . . Now our message reaches as far as their biased newspapers . . . but our message is our own. . . . We are Egyptian youth who love one another, care for one another, and have a voice. (Ghonim, 2012: 74)

After the event took place, a number of people criticized it, arguing that it had done nothing to change reality and was, furthermore, foolish. Here Ghonim’s post in response to these criticisms marks a clear line between the group’s members and a “them” that is not the motivated actor against whom they are collectively taking action. He wrote “many people will think, ‘So what? What have you gained?’ . . . these are the same people who said Egyptians were cowards and no one would show up at the Silent Stand.” He goes on to state what they have gained, such as “a strong message that we are a united group of Egyptians who care for one another . . . who are not passive.” The post ends with the words “thank-you, Facebook youth.” Ghonim reports that after the Silent Stand “feelings of solidarity overwhelmed the participants and turned the stand into a new social environment.” Three more Silent Stands were held before the
group experienced an “invisible” period that is common in social movements (Ghonim, 2012: 80).

As the reader can see, Kullena Khaled Said was very successful in developing a sense of “we-ness,” an identity. The reader may also have noticed the presence of some of the elements that Ashmore et al. include as indicators of collective identity. Perhaps the most obvious sign is behavioural involvement, which members showed by participating in actions organized by the group in the hundreds and thousands. When it comes to membership, 75 percent of respondents to a survey Ghonim posted on the page said that “they felt they owned the page” and that “the causes the page promoted were their own causes.” Many members also had a very positive evaluation of the page. For example, a number said that Kullena Khaled Said had changed their life. Clearly, there were strong signs of collective identity present in the group (Ghonim, 2012: 108, 80).

When looking at Justice for Damini, at first no specific identity emerges from the page’s posts and comments, and the strong statements that we see in Kullena Khaled Said are not present. Before interviewing group members, I concluded that the group had failed to develop any form of collective identity. Until over a month had passed, there was no indication that the group or administrator agreed upon or even suggested a model of behaviour or objectives that would have differentiated them from the thousands of others of Indians who had taken to the streets, nor did the posts and comments on the page reveal any pattern of identity. On the surface, the group looks like it failed in this respect. However, in interviews, I discovered an admittedly low but detectable level of collective identity extant. While these interviewees’ answers cannot be understood to be representative of the whole group, it is interesting that such feelings are present, especially considering that none of them had actually participated in the events organized by the group.

The most basic requisite of collective identity was assumed by three of the five interviewees, as they stated that they considered themselves members of the group. Two of the members also had a generally positive evaluation of the group, a second requirement of collective identity. The third member was more mixed in his criticism but all three felt that the page raised awareness about the incident and provided important updates. One person argued that it did much more. Furthermore, a clear distinction was made between the values the group upheld and the values held by those who were not welcome in the group. This became apparent in an interview with Rohan, who said he was upset with the administrator and the “boys and girls,” as he referred to them, of Justice for
Damini because they were “trying to destroy Indian culture” and were demon- 
izing men. He did not agree with a lot of what was said on the page. He argued 
that women should not be “going against our culture” by going to places that 
are “not near” their homes and going out after dark. They should, instead, be 
“behaving normally.”

Rohan’s remarks were in stark contrast to Priyanka’s, who said that she 
respected the administrator’s views and had considerable angst over the double 
standards, inequality, and oppression faced by Indian women. She also expressed 
great annoyance with people who “make foolish questions about Damini that 
why she was out of home after evening? What was she doing with her friend 
who was a boy?” (Response to questionnaire, 12 August 2013). Given their differ-
ent views, it is not surprising that Rohan did not feel as strongly and confidently 
a part of Justice for Damini as Priyanka did. He shifted between using “us” and 
“them” to refer to the group, using the first person when he was voicing his sup-
port for stopping violence against women and the third person when he was 
objecting to the content of the page. Clearly, despite failing to identify a clear 
and appropriate “enemy,” the page did draw a line between those who belonged 
(us) and those who did not (them).

When asked how they would feel if the group disappeared overnight, several 
interviewees said they would feel a sense of loss or sadness, an indication of 
affective attachment to the group and of collective identity. Priyanka was par-
ticularly sad: “I must felt very bad/shocked because it’s my companion in the 
fight for Damini. Even now I am feeling bad when the group is not that active as 
it was in beginning” (Response to questionnaire, 12 August 2013).

Priyanka even made a few friends through the group, demonstrating social 
embeddedness, and asserted that, though she was not able to personally attend 
any of the events hosted or organized by the group, she “made best efforts to 
encourage them by the help of Facebook” and felt that this meant she “par-
ticipated from home,” demonstrating a strong desire on her part to assert her 
behavioural involvement. Given the responses above, my hypothesis is that, if 
the administrator became active again and if he or she had the time, energy, and 
expertise required, it would be possible to remobilize the members of this page 
around a different target or goal, for the seeds of collective identity could very 
well be extant (Response to questionnaire, 12 August 2013).
COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES: AGENCY

The third component of collective action frames is agency: “Agency refers to the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action. Collective action frames imply some sense of collective efficacy and deny the immutability of some undesirable situation. They empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history. They suggest not merely that something can be done but that ‘we’ can do something” (Gamson, 1992: 7).

The first Silent Stand was a powerful moment for Kullena Khaled Said, since those who had “met” and organized themselves on the Internet saw their work spilling over into the offline world in the form of thousands of young Egyptians standing silently in solidarity against an oppressive regime. This innovative, nonviolent, and nonconfrontational idea came from one of the group members, and not from Ghonim himself. Ghonim posted the idea sent to Kullena Khaled Said’s e-mail account onto the page’s wall along with the date and time of the event, and asked “for all suggestions that would help bring the idea to fruition.” He recounted, “Scores of e-mails flowed in to develop the idea. The most important comment was that the effort should not turn into a typical political demonstration. . . . Following a suggestion from one of the members, participants were asked to bring along a copy of the Qur’an or Bible to read in peace.”

Within an hour of the first e-mail, Ghonim created a Facebook event called “A Silent Stand of Prayer for the Martyr Khaled Said Along the Alexandria Corniche.” It was Wednesday when he posted the suggestion, and the Silent Stand was to take place on Friday at 5 PM. Over the next two days the group’s members collaborated to write and distribute a press release, design logos and banners, invite national and international media to cover the event, make contact with the mother of Khaled Said to ask her to participate, and even to produce a video promoting the event. Members invited so many people that the group quickly grew to over 100,000. As mentioned above, the event became so big that “state-owned newspapers began to attack Facebook by claiming it was owned by the CIA and that a lot of spies and enemies anonymously used it to brainwash Egyptian youth.” All of this was accomplished by a group that had been formed just a week earlier, in a space in which the principal coordinator was anonymous, and, very likely, through the collaboration of a lot of people that had not met one another, or coordinated their actions, in person (Ghonim, 2012: 70, 74).
Ghonim writes that, while he felt the actual numbers were lower, “a Reuter’s news report said that eight thousand people took part in the Silent Stand.” Pictures of the stand were posted online and newspapers around the world covered the story. Members stated that the group was life-changing in its effect on them, and that they had never participated in anything like it before. In response to a poll held by Ghonim, 64 percent of participants stated that the Silent Stand had been very effective or satisfactorily effective and 72 percent said they would attend the next one. A collective action frame of agency had been built up and strengthened. Nothing captures this feeling more than one of Ghonim’s posts following the Silent Stand:

Last Friday this page was launched . . . on Tuesday Mohamed sent his suggestion and it was announced to everyone. . . . On Friday more than 100,000 members had joined the group and thousands went out in Cairo and Alexandria implementing an idea that was never done before in Egypt. . . . So can we do just about anything or what?!

While the group was never undivided or unanimous in its sense of agency, and though it went through a period in which it lacked action and focus, the same strong sense of agency is apparent in other actions that the group organized, such as the Revolution of Silence and, of course, the 25 January revolution (Ghonim, 2012: 79, 81, 84, 103).

This kind of discourse and focus is starkly different from what we find in Justice for Damini, where a heavy sense of frustration and lack of agency hangs in the air. This is because, first, as you saw above in the section on injustice frames, the administrator and group members did not develop an appropriate motivated actor to fight against. They failed to place what could be seen as a random act of sexual violence by a group of unaffiliated youth into the broader structure in which they were acting (Gamson, 1992: 33). Without the right “enemy” and goal, it is hard to feel that one can change anything or that what one is seeking to change will truly make a difference. As such, just a couple of weeks to a month after the rape, “likers” of the page constantly posted messages of frustration and anger that the rapists had not been brought to justice yet. While possible, this was largely an unrealistic expectation given the time and effort it takes to prepare such cases, particularly a case being scrutinized, analyzed, and torn apart by journalists, scholars, and citizens from all over the world. It would have been ideal to have an administrator like Ghonim present at this moment, to help turn the conversation toward the broader structures of
injustice that allowed a crime like the one committed against Damini to take place and identify the ways in which the group could bring about structural and long-lasting change.

There were also unrealistic and vigilantist expectations around what punishment the rapists would and should get, one of the most popular being castration. Unfortunately, these were encouraged by the administrator. For example, he/she posted a picture of a man accused of rape being dragged through the streets of Lebanon by a hook placed under his chin with the caption “This is what the Lebanon officials publicly do with a RAPlIST! What is India up to? SHARE this till it reaches Indian Government!!” Obviously, for a democratic government dealing with a highly publicized case, this kind of punishment, being extra-judicial and illegal, would be out of the question. Neither is it the norm in Lebanon. A moderate voice that allowed for both anger and rationality would have been more useful, as it would have celebrated the fact that street protests had ensured that all the rapists were immediately apprehended and charged and that rape laws were being reviewed, moved followers away from the idea that getting the rapists castrated and hanged immediately was in their hands, and pushed them toward a more appropriate outlet for their anger that involved them seeing their actions have an effect on decreasing violence against women. Unfortunately, this did not happen and the page moved from having comments like “ths time . . . there will be a change! a major change!”, “i also want to join dis . . . nd do smthng for this girl . . .”, and “the power of people of protest . . . should cntinue . . . then only something will come” to apologies for having “failed” Damini and complaints and sighs of resignation of how nothing was going to change (Justice for Damini, posted on 20 December 2012, spelling errors in original).

Aside from the frustration of failing to achieve unrealistic and vigilantist goals or to celebrate that which was accomplished, the page also failed to use events to help members see the results of their online micro-activism. Earlier on in the movement, Justice for Damini promoted and created events for two protests that were initiated by other groups and individuals. People were to gather at India Gate in the days before Christmas to demand justice. But members of Justice for Damini were not asked to wear or carry anything that might identify them as belonging to the page. Since there were thousands of people at the protest it is unlikely that Justice for Damini members had an opportunity to meet and talk to fellow page members and, in doing so, see that it was possible to move off of the Internet and onto the streets to demand and get results.
When the page finally did organize a protest and ask people to wear black to identify themselves, over a month had passed since the rape, members were already feeling frustrated and unmotivated, and the page had lost much of its steam. According to Dinesh, another interviewee, only around ten people showed up for this event, out of over 250 who RSVP’ed and around 70,000 page “likers” (20 July 2013). It is possible that something came out of this; however, no update on the event was posted on Facebook and Dinesh did not mention any outcomes from the gathering.

In general, however, without any evidence of a collaborative effort to engage in collective action, or a target adversary, the group appears to have been left with neither a goal nor a means to get to it. These elements would have been a major obstacle for constructing agency.

IN ADDITION

Just before wrapping up this essay, I would like to take note of two elements that do not fit comfortably within collective action frames but which are relevant when considering micro-activism’s impact. The first is the fact that, regardless of their success at mobilization and action, Justice for Damini and Kullena Khaled Said fulfilled the function of providing important updates on the case to followers of the page. Second, even though Justice for Damini failed to develop and focus in on a motivated actor that the group could mobilize against, by simply declaring from time to time that there was no excuse for Damini’s rape the page was taking a stance against victim blaming and victim shaming in front of an audience of thousands and thousands of followers.

CONCLUSION

Three of the elements that set Kullena Khaled Said apart from Justice for Damini and contributed to its success in engaging in collective action were the group’s ability to build the three collective action frames of injustice, agency, and identity. When it came to the frame of injustice, Kullena Khaled Said was able to direct a strong sense of moral indignation among Egyptian youth against an “enemy” that was specific enough to feel as if it could be defeated or at least attacked, and abstract enough to feel as if long-term structural changes could be made. The group also used creative collective action and certain symbolic elements to develop a sense of collective identity and built up a strong sense of
agency by nurturing the feeling that their efforts were not in vain, through successfully bringing Egyptian youth together in protest. All of this was made possible with the help of an involved and purposeful leader and group administrator. Unfortunately, Justice for Damini appears to have failed in all three of these arenas, though preliminary interviews with members of the group suggest that the seeds of collective identity might have grown within the group, despite its inability to come up with an appropriate target and organize around that target.

There are many more elements that must be considered when attempting to understand why one group succeeded where another one failed. The construction of collective action frames is just one of them. However, my hope is that this essay will contribute to the ongoing process of understanding and demystifying digital activism and that it will provide digital and other activists an example of how one can make informed use of social media and online tools to promote social change.

REFERENCES


