While much research focuses on social media and urban movements, almost no research explores its potentially divergent effects in rural areas. Building on recent work emphasizing the multidimensional effects of online communication on vertical and horizontal information, we argue that while the Internet may facilitate large-scale urban movements, it inhibits large-scale rural movements. Because social media increases vertical information flows between government and citizens, the central government responds quickly to rural protests, preventing such protests from developing into a large-scale movement. By contrast, social media does less to change the vertical information flows in urban areas. We explore the plausibility of our argument by process tracing the evolution of protests in urban and rural areas in Vietnam in the pre-Internet and in the Internet eras.
What enables isolated protests to escalate into social movements in authoritarian regimes? How do the Internet and social media help or hinder these movements? Scholars of authoritarian regimes, democratic transitions, and social movements have long been concerned with the factors that lead to organized, anti-government resistance in authoritarian contexts. The theories emphasize a wide range of personal, social, institutional, geographic, and economic factors. With the increasing importance of the Internet in nearly all but the most isolated authoritarian countries, a wave of research examines the degree to which the Internet and social media inhibit or enables anti-regime collective action. However, most of this research focuses on the impact of the Internet on urban movements such as the Arab Spring or movements in other new democracies. Perhaps surprisingly, despite the traditional focus within social movement theory on agrarian protests, very little focuses on the impact of the Internet on rural movements.

This is an important oversight for two reasons. First, although data quality on rural protests in the pre-Internet era in rural areas in authoritarian regimes remains sparse and inconsistent, evidence from Vietnam and China suggests the size of rural protests has declined in rural areas as they have gained access to the Internet. Data from China shows that rural protests of more than 20,000 citizens occurred in Yuandu in 2000 and Hanyuan in 2004, but similarly large protests have not occurred since 2010 when more than 20% of rural population in China gained access to the Internet. While land protests remain frequent, they are smaller in size. Similar patterns exist in Vietnam. There were major protests in Thai Binh and Dong Nai in 1997 attracting more than 40,000 and 10,000 participants respectively. Similarly, in 2001 and 2004 more than 10,000 took to the streets in the Central Highlands protesting land acquisitions. Since 2010, despite the frequent small-scale uprisings, no rural protests on a similar scale have occurred.
Understanding the roots of these large rural movements is important because while not all movements will be directed against the regime, as other research shows, collective action of any kind can pose a threat. This is because seemingly non-threatening large movements might have adverse consequences for the legitimacy of autocratic governments.\textsuperscript{10} This explains why autocrats go to great lengths to pre-empt collective action that might otherwise seem harmless.\textsuperscript{11} For example, the Chinese government harshly suppressed the apolitical Falun Gong movement that focuses on stretching and mediation exercises, precisely because the government feared that the ability to engage in collective action could be turned against the party.\textsuperscript{12}

Given the importance of social movements, this paper provides a theory that may explain the lack of large-scale rural movements in the Internet age. We theorize that contrary to urban areas, where social media may facilitate sudden, large-scale anti-regime movements, the same technology may reduce the likelihood of seeing small protests escalate into large movements in the countryside through the ability of the regime to target “real time” repression and concessions. If social media disproportionately hinders the escalation of rural movements, this has important implications for the type of organizations that challenge authoritarian rule, shape autocratic politics, and possibly shape a post-transition environment.

The theory in this paper builds on existing work on the impact of the Internet on social movements. Consistent with recent work, we emphasize the multidimensional effects that the Internet can have on horizontal communication between citizens as well as vertical communication to and from the citizenry to the regime.\textsuperscript{13} Additionally, our theory emphasizes the difference between “virtual” and “conventional” civil society, where the Internet may facilitate spontaneous movements that can topple regimes without creating an organized infrastructure that can manage the post-transition order.\textsuperscript{14}
Where we differ is that we theorize that social media will have different effects in rural and urban areas. Our theory rests on key differences between urban and rural areas in terms of horizontal and vertical communication networks. We argue that prior to the Internet, both urban and rural areas faced challenges in developing horizontal communication between citizens to challenge regimes. However, rural areas had fewer vertical links to the state, thus allowing rural grievances to fester. Furthermore, the ability of local governments to block information from reaching the center kept central authorities in the dark about rural grievances, thus preventing a response. Therefore, the advent of the Internet more dramatically increases vertical communication between the center and citizens in rural areas than urban areas. Horizontally, the Internet facilitates greater communication between citizens in urban and rural areas. However, rural movements face a disadvantage in translating the increased horizontal communication into large scale collective action due to lower population density.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, social movements in rural areas still require conventional organization. The combined effect of these differences is that Internet access increases the likelihood of small protests escalating into large-scale anti-regime social movements in urban areas but decreases it in rural areas. While small-scale protests may continue to occur in rural areas, they are less likely to grow into large social movements.

Ideally, we would support our argument using data on the size of rural protests before and after the introduction of social media in rural areas under authoritarian rule. However, due to concerns about data reliability and reporting bias, initial examination of the theory requires deep case knowledge to access native language sources. This is because international accounts, even in the cases we examine, miss certain events entirely or dramatically underestimate their size.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, consistent with our theory, the Chinese government did somewhat successfully attempt to hide the massive but “hidden” Hanyuan protests from the international media.\(^\text{17}\) It is hard to imagine that in
today’s social media environment, a protest of more than 20,000 such as the Hanyuan “incident” would not generate widespread attention through images and videos sent over the Internet.

Because of these concerns with data reliability and because of the rare event nature of social movements, as an initial effort to support our argument, this paper engages in a process tracing exercise of two plausibly comparable instances of rural protests, where one grew into a large organized movement and the other did not. Specifically, using a little-known Vietnamese government postmortem report on protests from the 1990s, we examine two cases of rural protest in Vietnam: one occurring in the pre-Internet era in 1997 and the other occurring in the Internet era in 2017. As we discuss below, both of these rural protests started with grievances over land disputes with local officials. However, the 1997 Thai Binh protests ultimately grew in size and organization until the protests finally mobilized more than 40,000 participants engaging in large-scale, province-wide movement with developed organization networks. By contrast, in 2017, protests in a rural area of Hanoi dissipated when the central government moved in to immediately calm the situation and placate the protesters. Our analysis demonstrates how the increased vertical information flows facilitated by the Internet from the periphery to the center in 2017 compared to 1997 inhibited the growth of a movement in the former but not the latter.

We also discuss how the Internet plays a different role in urban movements. Using secondary sources, we show that strong vertical communications between urban dissidents and government elites as well as weak horizontal linkages prevented protests from forming prior to the Internet. However, using the case of urban protests in 2015 against a proposed scheme to cut trees, we show how these dynamics unleashed by social media have contrasting effects in urban environments. Consistent with findings from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the protests were not led by any particular civil society organization, but instead a loose network of connected citizens. However,
because of the sheer population density, these protests presented a greater challenge despite the lack of organization. While protests in Dong Tam and Thai Binh required conventional organization, protests in urban Hanoi took advantage of “virtual” civil society to mobilize large scale, spontaneous protests. In making our argument, we also consider how recent anti-China protests, which did spread to areas outside of the major urban centers, are consistent with our theory.

The theory and case studies contained in this paper should be of interest to scholars working in several lines of inquiry. First, they will be relevant to a vast literature on the importance of social media in authoritarian and democratic contexts. Our study coheres with recent work emphasizing the multidimensional effects of the Internet, while adding a critical neglected dimension of the divergent urban and rural effects. Additionally, our theory and findings have implications for the study of authoritarian and post-authoritarian successor regimes more broadly. If the patterns we theorize extend outside of Vietnam, it suggests that the composition of coalitions toppling autocrats will look different today than in the past. Whereas in the past, regimes may have faced revolts from organized groups with strong rural bases of support, today’s movements will largely build on loosely organized movements consisting of urban coalitions.

Social Movements and Social Media

Before proceeding, we should first clarify our primary outcome of interest. This paper focuses on the impact of social media on the escalation of small protests into large-scale rural movements challenging authoritarian elites. From the outset, we should distinguish this concept from revolution, which implies something of the substance of the social movement. Revolutions are social movements, but not all social movements are revolutionary. This is because social movements may or may not seek to upend social structures. We should also distinguish social movements from
protests. In this paper, we think of protests as small-scale events, where social movements are larger. Of course, a precise delineation between the two is impossible and not necessary for our argument. At a conceptual level, we are concerned with cases where small-scale protests encompassing only a few hundred people swell into the thousands and where coordination across participants’ villages and districts occurs. Social movements can only occur when participants sustain collective actions such as cycles of protests for a long period of time through some kind of organizational structure created specifically for the movement.\(^{19}\) Second, as noted above, these movements need not be explicitly aimed at overthrowing the regime, but should make some demands from either the local or central government. Finally, we should clarify that we are not explaining the number of protests, but rather whether protests escalate from small scale protests into large social movements. While small protests may continue to occur in rural areas, we are more concerned with whether or not these protests escalate into full-fledged movements.

What explains rural social movements? While most literature does not compare urban and rural areas, a large literature considers movements more generally. This work focuses on the nature of class consciousness and the nature of peasant rationality.\(^{20}\) Others focus on the presence of local community structures and the degree to which these underlying community norms are threatened by extra-communal elites.\(^{21}\) An underlying similarity shared in this work is that even when peasants have an economic self-interest in protesting, this can often be thwarted, either by impediments to collective action, false consciousness, or deference to community hierarchy.\(^{22}\) Research on civil wars may also help explain social movements. One prominent finding from civil war research is that civil wars are more likely in areas with rugged terrain.\(^{23}\) The underlying logic is that where citizens are harder to monitor, their ability to foment organized protests will increase. External political
opportunity structures can also affect the occurrence of peasant protests. This literature suggests that peasants exploit changes in formal institutional environment to form collective action.

How does social media impact the growth of protests into movements? Early work on social media and anti-regime resistance falls into two camps. One camp, the “liberation” theorists, suggests that Internet technology could imperil autocrats by undermining their ability to monopolize the distribution of information and facilitating collective action. Even those that are more suspicious of the democratizing aspects of the Internet suggest that the Internet does at least facilitate brief episodes of intense collective action. Techno-pessimists, on the other hand, argue that the Internet and social media provide the regime with formidable new tools with which to strengthen their rule. Several studies from China show how it uses the Internet to blunt collective action, flood the Internet it with pro-regime propaganda, and provide information to the regime.

Recent work on social media and protests takes a more nuanced approach. Invoking political communication theory, which stresses the distinction between horizontal information flows between the public and vertical information from the regime to citizens, this work suggests that the Internet may have multidimensional effects. On one hand, it can increase reciprocal information flows between citizens and regime elites. This may empower the regime vis-à-vis the population. However, it will also democratize horizontal information networks between citizens. This democratization can have multiple effects such as empowering extremist groups that neither the regime nor citizens approves of or increasing the centrality of more peripheral, dispassionate actors.

**Theory: “Real Time” Repression and Concessions**

While compelling, existing work does not consider the potentially divergent impact of social media on urban and rural movements. To develop our theory, we consider how social media impacts
political information flows. To do this we use existing literature to generate a stylized model of political communication that builds upon the idea that communication flows in different directions.\textsuperscript{35} Using this framework, we then show how social media will impact political communication flows in urban versus rural areas in authoritarian regimes in the pre-Internet age and in the Internet age.

Before proceeding, we should first note how we distinguish rural and urban areas. In his study of contentious politics in authoritarian regimes, Slater defines urban unrest as conflicts occurring in major urban centers that “upper groups called home.”\textsuperscript{36} Given the importance of regime leaders being embedded in society to our theory, we use a similar conceptualization. With this conceptualization, our theory builds on the idea that political information flows horizontally between citizens and vertically between citizens and the government.\textsuperscript{37} As Figure 1 depicts, vertical information from citizens to the central government takes place either directly or indirectly. Television and radio are potential channels through which the center can directly transmit information to the local level. Similarly, certain grassroots institutions can allow citizens to communicate directly such as petitions, access to the media, or in some cases travelling directly to the capital to present their opinions.

Government officials may also gain information directly with citizens through their embeddedness into social networks and society.\textsuperscript{38} In this case, the central government can directly observe citizens’ grievances.\textsuperscript{39} Vertical information may also travel indirectly through local government intermediaries. For instance, to disseminate information about a new policy, the central government may rely on local government agents. Similarly, central officials will often rely on local governments to obtain information about issues of concern to citizen, information on potential collective actions, and public opinions of policy implementation.\textsuperscript{40} As recent work shows, local governments may only selectively report such information upward.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, autocrats attempt to
establish alternative channels to address informational problems, such as allowing small-scale protests, partially free media, limited public communication and limited public participation.\textsuperscript{42}

Vertical information flows are critical to rural social movements. If the center lacks information on what is occurring at the local level, either because they cannot access the information directly or because the local government fails to provide it, this reduces the ability of the center to respond to movements with either concessions or repression. Furthermore, central governments may lack the ability to communicate directly to certain areas. As such, a lack of vertical communication should increase the possibility of movements due to of lack of response from the center or an inability to disseminate propaganda.

Alongside vertical communication, horizontal communication flows are also crucial to social movements. However, contrary to vertical communication, horizontal communication should increase the propensity for small protests to escalate into large movements. Constraints on collective action constitute a primary impediment to social movements in an authoritarian regime.\textsuperscript{43} Collective action ultimately depends on horizontal information flows, where citizens can communicate both that they share the same ideas and that they are willing to challenge the regime.\textsuperscript{44} Horizontal information can take the form of face-to-face contact, civil society groups, social media, or rumors.\textsuperscript{45}

Horizontal information flows are restricted in authoritarian regimes because of intense state intervention in public political spaces.\textsuperscript{46} Critically, the utility of these horizontal information flows depends on the expected number of other individuals that will respond within a given geographical area. With greater numbers, the risk to the individual is less. This has important implications for the rural-urban divide. As Wallace notes, in dense urban areas, a certain percentage of individuals (say 1 percent) within a certain geographical radius may coalesce into a larger crowd than the same
percentage in a rural area. This will create greater safety in numbers in an urban area, thus magnifying the effect of any increase in horizontal communication.

To summarize, stronger horizontal communication increases the chance of protests growing into a movement, while stronger vertical communication decreases the chance of such a progression. Furthermore, the impact of horizontal communication will be a function of the number of people that can be mobilized in large numbers spontaneously without organization or leadership.

**Figure 1: Stylized Model of Political Communication**

![Stylized Model of Political Communication](image)

**Hypotheses**

Applying this framework to urban and rural settings, we argue that the Internet will impact vertical information flows more than in rural areas than urban areas. Additionally, the Internet will increase horizontal information flows in both urban and rural areas. However, because of the increased population density in urban areas, this will allow protests to escalate to a greater degree in urban than rural areas. The net effect is that the Internet will facilitate the escalation of protests into movements in urban areas but inhibit such escalation in rural areas.
Starting with urban areas, given strong state interventions in political public space, horizontal communication networks in urban areas in the pre-Internet age were weak. As such, information spread between citizens largely through face-to-face communication. Mobilization strategies, therefore, relied heavily on face-to-face communication mechanisms such as rumors, pamphlets, manifests spread from person to person.\(^{48}\) Additionally, during the pre-Internet era, vertical communication was relatively strong because dissidents were more likely to be embedded into elite government societal networks compared to potential rural malcontents. Furthermore, government officials, living within the urban areas, could directly observe discontent.

The weak horizontal networks and relatively strong vertical networks placed two restraints on potential social movements. First, overcoming this horizontal information challenges requires strong organizations with identified leadership, clear strategies and high trust among members.\(^ {49}\) Furthermore, because of direct vertical communication, the central government was able to observe such an organization, thus pre-empting and quickly intervening in collective action. Given these features, the rise of social media should increase horizontal information flows in urban areas. First, in authoritarian regimes the interactive nature of social media undermines autocratic leaders’ conventional tools to intervene in political public space.\(^ {50}\) Second, social media can supplant traditional face-to-face communication in that it can connect people and can disseminate information to many people across a wide area in a short period of time.\(^ {51}\) We argue that these effects coupled with high population density in urban areas lead to spontaneous mobilization of a large number of people to the streets without a conventional organization. This is because the high density gives respondents confidence that coordination will lead to a critical mass of protesters, such that a movement can form. Wallace argues that protesters in Tehran in 2009 and Cairo in 2011 made up a
small percent of the population of the cities but autocrats found it extremely challenging to handle the
protests.  

*Hypothesis 1: Internet access increases the likelihood of protests escalating into large-scale social movements in urban areas by increasing horizontal communication without a similarly large increase in vertical information flows.*

Moving to rural areas, horizontal communication will be similarly weak in the pre-Internet area. However, in contrast to urban areas, vertical information flows were limited in the pre-Internet era because rural citizens and the central government did not communicate directly. This made local governments the main channel of policy implementation and information dissemination. Unfortunately for the central government, relying on the local government to spot collective action may not be a reliable tool. While local governments certainly have an incentive to quell the protests, if grievances result from misconduct by local authorities, they will likely attempt to falsely report information on protests or block information from reaching the center. However, this puts the local government in a dilemma. Once tensions occur, the local government will be reluctant to request assistance from the center for fear that they would be harshly punished. But, at the same time, their limited resources may inhibit their ability to respond to the protests. An ineffective attempt to respond either by concession or repression would afford small protests an opportunity to grow. Heurlin’s book supports this argument, showing that the scope and intensity of land dispute protests in rural China are more likely to escalate after the local government fails to provide satisfactory compensation or repress them. Because the center is misinformed, unaware of protests, or simply receives too much information, they are only likely to intervene when protests become large. For
these reasons, the central government may fail to intervene in rural protests at an early stage, even as the local government ineffectively attempts to squash them.

Delayed intervention from the central government is critical to the development of rural movements because this helps protesters to overcome weak horizontal information flows and incubate a large-scale movement. Similar to pre-Internet urban areas, horizontal networks of communication in rural areas were weak because of the state’s strong interventions in political public space. Lower population density in rural areas inhibited horizontal information flows further, placing a limit on the number of people mobilized through face-to-face communication. This means that strong organizations with identified leadership and mutual trust formed the basis for peasant protests.57 If the central government did not intervene in a timely fashion, such an organization could expand and gradually mobilize peasants to participate in protests.

Relative to urban areas, social media significantly changes vertical information flows in rural areas. Vertically, social media facilitates direct communication between rural citizens and the central government, thus, weakening the role of the local government in supplying information.58 Therefore, if rural protests occur due to the local governments’ wrongdoing, social media will reduce the ability of local authorities to falsely report or block information from reaching the central leaders. Through social media, the central government becomes aware of the protests at an earlier stage, thus allowing them to deploy their more substantial resources in real time through either concession or repression.

The Internet can even afford the central government an opportunity to learn about rural protests in the most remote areas. With the assistance of cell phones, people in those areas can access the Internet more easily. The fact that many autocrats attempt to provide mobile Internet to the most remote areas of the country may indicate that autocratic governments are strengthening their capacity to monitor citizens in even the most rural regions. For example, the government of Vietnam supplies
mobile Internet to 95% of the population in diverse geographic conditions including remote islands and mountainous areas. Additionally, urban dissidents may also observe initial protests and publicize the issue, further increasing the possibility that the center will become aware of the issue.

These factors lead to early interventions from the central government, which reduces the ability for protesters to overcome horizontal networks of communication and incubate a large-scale movement. Additionally, as compared to urban areas, social media does not have the same transformative effects on rural horizontal information flows because of low population density. One percent of rural population taking to the streets results in much smaller number of protesters than one percent in urban areas, which should discourage people in rural areas from joining protests. Overcoming this challenge also requires a conventional organization. But early interventions from the central government may reduce the chances for such an organization to grow and mobilize protesters.

Hypothesis 2: Social media decreases the likelihood of small protests escalating into large movements in rural areas by increasing vertical information flows from the central government to citizens without a similarly large benefit from increased horizontal flows of information.

Research Design and Case Studies

To test our theory, ideally, we would seek perfectly comparable rural and urban environments, some with access to the Internet and some without. However, because access to the Internet is so dependent on time and space, it is difficult to find true counterfactuals. In this study, we are primarily concerned with theory building, saving a more rigorous test for future work. Instead, we demonstrate the
plausibility of our argument through the process tracing of actual and potential movements in urban and rural areas in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{60}

In order to keep the cases as comparable as possible, we turn to Vietnam and compare the rural Thai Binh peasant protest (see Appendix 1 for a timeline) and the Dong Tam land dispute protest (see Appendix 2 for a timeline), which took place in 1997 and 2017 respectively. Despite being one of the most developed agricultural provinces in Vietnam in 1997, Thai Binh witnessed large-scale riots centered on rural land and governance issues in 1997.\textsuperscript{61} At the heart of the unrest was a series of grievances concerning corruption, land seizures, and the massive wealth of local cadres.\textsuperscript{62} The summit of the crisis was an extremely violent clash between local authorities and villagers on June 26 and 27 in 1997, where thousands of villagers throughout the province converged on Quynh Phu district, attacked local authorities and policemen and destroyed and burned government buildings, local officials’ private houses, and party symbols. Over the course of the protests, more than 43,000 participated, thus indicating that the protests moved beyond a small-scale protest to a full-fledged movement.

In Dong Tam, villagers in rural Hanoi protested against the revocation of 59 acres of land covering three communes of Chuong My district, as well as the Dong Tam commune in My Duc District, rural Hanoi.\textsuperscript{63} In 2014, the local government cleared residents from the land, which was then allocated to Vietnam’s largest state-run telecommunication corporation. Some residents believed that local officials sold the land for an illegal profit and used the local budget to compensate households that were forced to leave.\textsuperscript{64} The first protest occurred on April 15, 2017, when Dong Tam villagers detained 38 local officials after local officials arrested four representatives of the village. Ultimately, the protests died down and did not grow beyond Dong Tam commune, even to the other affected areas in Chuong My district.
While the two events happened twenty years apart, both the Thai Binh and Dong Tam protests were rooted in dissatisfaction with corruption and land disputes at the local level. Additionally, because the two protests occurred in rural areas in northern Vietnam, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and political factors that could have affected the behavior of protesters and the response of the state are largely similar. Finally, although Dong Tam occurred in the Hanoi area, it is still a case of rural protest. My Duc used to be a district of Hay Tay, a rural province that merged with Hanoi in 2008. Therefore, the district is still classified as rural. We argue that the outcome of the protests diverged because of the timing of the central government’s interventions, and that the presence of social media affected this process.

To conclude our analysis, we also look at patterns of urban protest. First, we examine patterns of urban protest in pre-Internet Vietnam. Unfortunately, the lack of protests, potentially due to the dynamics we discuss, combined with less information does not allow us to discuss a case in particular. However, we do use secondary literature to discuss how linkages between the government and urban dissidents likely squashed the growth of any dissidence into a full-fledged movement. We then compare this with the Internet age and the tree movement that occurred in urban Hanoi in 2015 (see Appendix 3 for a timeline). The tree movement, which protested the felling of thousands of trees in Hanoi, was one of the largest urban movements in Vietnam. Consistent with the more robust literature on social movements in urban areas, our analysis of urban movements emphasizes how social media dramatically transformed horizontal information flows without impacting vertical networks in urban areas.

Thai Binh Unrest: From Small Peaceful Protests to a Social Movement
Turning to Thai Binh, to show how the lack of social media blocked information flows, we rely heavily on findings from a report delivered by a Prime Ministerial search team in the aftermath of the protest. The English analysis of the Vietnamese language report by Hai Hong Nguyen shows that consistent with recent work by Pan and Chen the local government might have restricted the dissemination of information on initial protests. First, when protests were small and peaceful, local authorities simply ignored the protesters’ demand by making shallow promises and refusing to take responsibility. For example, they told protesters that the corrupt local authorities were not typical of the government and that their concerns would be addressed in a short time. When failures to address villagers’ complaints led to increasingly violent and large protests in mid-May 1997, the local government deployed local police to suppress the protests, spread negative narratives about protests on Thai Binh television and prosecuted protest leaders.

Surprisingly, even when local efforts to handle such highly violent protests failed, the central police force was not deployed. Only when the protest became a movement in June 26 and 27 1997, did the party send 1,200 police personnel to restore the order and several Politburo members to investigate the unrest in Thai Binh. Importantly, at this point, the center still perceived the unrest as an incident caused by rebellious citizens. It was not until the investigation was conducted that the central government became aware that local corruption and power abuse were the main causes of the movement, and that the movement involved many villages throughout the province. Similarly, Kerkvliet suggests that “the scale and nature” of the unrest led to the party’s decision to respond. While emphasizing on the party’s dialogue with farmers, he also finds that the reason that the Party sent its members to investigate the unrest was to know “what happened and why,” suggesting they lacked information before the protests became large.
Although we do not have access to documents confirming the lack of knowledge by the central authorities of the discontent at early stages, several additional pieces of evidence suggest the central government was largely unaware of the scale of the discontent until the protests grew into a movement. First, the Prime Minister’s research team reported that many facts “surprised” the central government regarding the protests’ organization and strategies. For example, only through in-depth interviews with protesters did the government know that on May 11, 1997 approximately 2,000 farmers rode bicycles to the provincial center to protest peacefully in front of the Provincial Peoples’ Committee. At the same time, 10,000 other farmers were demonstrating at the district level. Additionally, the report also professed to being “shocked” when finding out that 300 villagers had tied up the chairman and the party secretary of Quynh Hoa commune, and led them outside in the rain without raingear.

An additional piece of evidence that the center was not aware of was that in contrast to the following case of Dong Tam, none of the intellectual dissidents of the time within Hanoi such as Ha Si Phu, Le Hong Ha, Nguyen Kien Giang, Hoang Minh Chinh and Tran Do wrote contemporaneously about the protests. Most of their criticism at the time focused on the shortcomings of Marxism-Leninism ideology, the power abuse and corruption inside the one-party system. This was not due to lack of interest. After the center finally intervened, Tran Do, former Lieutenant General of the People’s Army of Vietnam, wrote a 13-page letter to the Party, “blaming” the Communist Party’s policies for the unrest in Thai Binh. Had these intellectuals known about the protest, they likely would have used it to challenge the party.

A final piece of evidence regarding the lack of information is that after Thai Binh protests, the central government adopted the Grass Root Democracy Decree, which included several components designed specifically to improve vertical information flows. The decree provides a mechanism
through which the central government can better monitor popular discontent and local governments’
performance. These measures were likely devised to avoid the information deficit that allowed the
protests to fester.

The delayed interventions from the central government, which we argue was impacted by the
lack of information, were crucial in allowing the unrest to grow into a social movement. This is
because seven months was sufficient for protesters to overcome limited horizontal networks. Facing
weak horizontal communication networks, Thai Binh villagers relied on face-to-face communication
to spread information, which only allowed information to be disseminated only within a limited
distance. Overcoming this challenge required a conventional organization with clear strategies and
leadership. Initial protests that took place in Quynh My commune in late 1996 were well-organized
and cohesive. On behalf of villagers, village leaders Pham Huu Hoanh, Pham Van Toi, Nguyen Van
Ty filed complaints and organized small peaceful sit-in protests in front of local government offices.
Because of the lack of response from the central government and the limited capacity of the local
government, the organization gradually reached out to other villagers both within the district and
across the province.

From late 1996 to May 1997, village protest leaders throughout the province cooperated to
learn from one another and share resistance strategies. For example, when initial protests in Quynh
Phu district began, leaders in other villages considered it a good model to fight against corruption at
local level, triggering many protests in other communes outside the district. Following Quynh Phu,
thousands of people in 120 out of 260 communes in the province participated in protests during the
period from January to mid-May 1997. The prime minister’s report concludes that the event on June
1997, which mobilized thousands of people throughout the province to Quynh Phu district at a
specific time, was the result of strong intra-communal organization and leadership.
Dong Tam: “Real time” Repression and Concessions

Turning to the Internet era in Dong Tam, on April 15, 2017, protesters adopted a similar strategy to Thai Binh, where they detained local authorities for the illegal arrest of their respected leader. However, in contrast to Thai Binh, villagers in Dong Tam commune spread news, pictures and videos of the protest on social media. The villagers also spread messages expressing their support for the party’s policies and leadership. By doing so, the protesters attempted to send the signal that their resistance centered on the misconduct of local authorities.

Because the protest involved local authorities’ wrongdoing, the local government might have attempted to block information from reaching the center. However, the local government’s efforts in blocking information failed because the interactive nature of social media spread the very first pieces of news horizontally and vertically in real-time. While it took seven months for the central government to intervene in Thai Binh protests, the party had the first unofficial intervention in the Dong Tam protest within one day! The government unofficially intervened by trying to shape the narrative about the protests on state media. On April 16, many leading state newspapers wrote about the incident and labeled the protesters as “extremists” who violated criminal laws and disrupted the social order. These articles also warned citizens in Dong Tam and nearby communes not to participate in the illegal protest.

On April 22, seven days after the protest, the Communist Party appointed Nguyen Duc Chung, the People’s Committee Chair of Hanoi, to meet with villagers to negotiate an agreement to end the dispute. This was the first official intervention from the central government. Chung promised that the state would not prosecute the villagers for detaining the local authorities and that the state would investigate the land use issue in Dong Tam. In return, the villagers were to discontinue their
protests. The compromise from the central government calmed down villagers and the protest dissolved on April 22. In short, while the center waited seven months to intervene in Thai Binh, in Dong Tam the center was involved nearly in real time with a mixture of real time repression and concessions.

Why did early interventions from the party prevent Dong Tam protesters from incubating a movement? This is because seven days was not sufficient for Dong Tam villagers to overcome horizontal information challenges and mobilize a large number of people. Despite the presence of social media, Dong Tam protesters faced horizontal information issues. The reason lies in the low population density in rural Hanoi. In 2017, rural Hanoi had average population density of below 1,000 persons per square kilometer compared to 11,220 persons per square kilometer in urban Hanoi. Lower population density coupled with very strong vertical information flows means that the central government identified the protesters and made it more likely that individual protesters would be exposed. In fact, the central government was so successful in locating and identifying individuals in Dong Tam unrest that six months after the protest, the police of Hanoi sent a letter to call on individual protesters to turn themselves in.

For fear of being identified by the government, villagers might have been reluctant to participate in the protest. Overcoming this challenge also required Dong Tam protesters to rely on a conventional organization. In 2012, Le Dinh Kinh, a respected former party member in Hoanh village, founded the Dong Thuan group to represent villagers to deal with local authorities on land issues. On behalf of the commune, the group filed complaints to require the authorities of My Duc district to address agricultural land issues and corruption. However, unlike in Thai Binh, the Dong Thuan group failed to reach to other communes and districts even though farmers throughout rural Hanoi share grievances about land grabbing. It is telling that even other neighboring communities
impacted by the same land issue failed to participate in the protests. Had the central government failed to intervene until seven months after the initial protest, the Dong Thuan group may have attracted discontented farmers throughout the surrounding areas.

While social media had a limited impact on horizontal networks within rural Hanoi, it informed urban intellectuals and dissenters of Dong Tam protest in real time. Utilizing Facebook, YouTube and similar social media channels, democratic activists, bloggers, independent journalists and political dissenters conveyed a completely different story about the incident. These “external actors” blamed the Communist Party’s policies for the Dong Tam unrest. This increase in horizontal networks between rural protesters and “external actors” may have also facilitated rapid interventions from the central government.

The Impact of Social Media on Urban Protests

Because the impact of social media on urban protests has received greater attention in existing research, we devote less attention to these cases. However, a brief examination of protest dynamics in the pre-Internet era and the Internet era suggests that in contrast to rural Vietnam, the Internet has impacted protests in urban areas in much the same way it has in other contexts that have already been studied. Prior to the Internet era, the Communist Party has faced urban political dissenters challenging the absolute power of the party. During the period 1997-2002, before the Internet was popular in Vietnam, several dozen political dissidents could be identified. However, they were largely isolated; they either acted alone or in small groups. When dissidents teamed up to advocate for changes, their efforts to organize were quickly spotted by the central government. We think that because those dissidents were geographically confined to major cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Hai Phong, the central government found it less challenging to monitor their activities. For
example, in 2001, Vu Cao Quan attempted to form a network of like-minded intellectuals in his hometown of Hai Phong, but his efforts were pre-empted by the party. In 2002, the central government arrested a network of more than a dozen political dissidents in Hanoi. This network was comprised of prominent figures such as Pham Que Duong, Hoang Minh Chinh, Nguyen Thanh Giang, and Tran Tien Dung, who attempted to advocate for an independent anti-corruption organization.

Unfortunately, perhaps due to our theory, there are few large-scale, urban social movements occurring in Vietnam in the era before the Internet was widespread. Perhaps the most well-known organization of dissidents was Bloc 8406, a network of over 100 pro-democracy activists concentrated in urban centers throughout Vietnam, which occurred as the Internet was just becoming relatively widespread in urban areas. However, this movement did not spread, possibly due to the sensitivity of the issues it raised. More important for our argument, however, is that prior to the widespread adoption of the Internet in Vietnam, we simply lack any examples of large-scale, urban movements. Dissidents were fragmented and other issues that might have caused movements were presumably dealt with quickly before they could spread.

In contrast with these early years, the example of the tree movement shows how the Internet changed the dynamics of urban protests. Consistent with the “virtual” civil society theory, which argues that social media can substitute a weak “conventional” civil society in challenging the authoritarian government, social media helped Hanoians overcome impediments to horizontal communication, allowing spontaneous mobilization of thousands of “tree lovers.” A closer look at the groups that fought against the “tree-felling” project reveals that they lacked a coherent leadership and organization. Nonetheless, a critical event coupled with online activism and population density allowed thousands to spill into the streets.
On March 16, 2015, after hundreds of trees were cut down, Tran Dang Tuan, a Hanoian, wrote an open letter requiring the chairman of Hanoi to reconsider the “tree-felling” project. Within a few hours, his letter was shared vigorously on the Internet, receiving 6,567 likes and 1,000 shares on social media. Thanks to social media, the letter also reached the government in real time. On March 17, 2015, the chairman of Hanoi replied on state media that the government did not need to consult citizens on every decision. This event immediately stirred up intense public debate on social media, triggering the spontaneous establishment of Facebook pages that advocated for the protection of trees. Among many online platforms, three Facebook pages, including “6,700 people for 6,700 trees,” “6,700 green trees,” and “For a green Hanoi” stood out.

While these groups attracted many members, they did not have an identified leadership and strategy. The page “6,700 people for 6,700 trees” was set up by a housewife who thought about creating an online forum after listening to statements from the chairman of Hanoi. Within 24 hours, without any efforts to mobilize people, the page attracted 10,000 members, well beyond the expectations of the founder. The “6,700 green trees” page had twenty-two administrators who never met and failed to reach an agreement on the objectives and content of the page, leading to the collapse of the page. The group “For a Green Hanoi” attracted 10,000 members, but its mandate and objectives changed when more people joined the group. Its coverage extended beyond the tree movement to include public debt and social issues both domestically and internationally.

Heeding the call of anonymous “virtual leaders,” thousands of people took to the streets. During March and April 2015, thousands of people spontaneously organized green walks and tree hug marches along Thien Quang and Hoan Kiem lakes in Hai Ba Trung and Hoan Kiem districts— the two most densely-populated in urban Hanoi. Why was the tree movement more successful in mobilizing large scale participation than in rural Vietnam? Along with Wallace, we argue that one
reason lies in different population densities. Even a small percentage of the population taking to urban streets would make it difficult for the central government to handle the protest. As such, compared to their counterparts in Dong Tam protest, Hanoians in the tree movement enjoyed much lower odds of being identified by the central government. Had the central government wanted to ask protesters in the tree movement to turn themselves in, identifying whom to send a letter to would have been extremely challenging! With lower chances of being spotted, tree protesters were more willing to participate in protests without a conventional organization.

Other factors certainly mattered. For example, the felling of the trees in Hanoi was certainly a salient, visible event. Additionally, Hanoians likely had greater Internet access than was the case in Dong Tam. At the same time, land seizures in rural areas are also a salient, visible issue for farmers. Furthermore, the speed with which the world became aware of the Dong Tam protest suggests that the Dong Tam denizens were not unable to access the Internet. Therefore, we think it likely that the changing social media environment also facilitated the protests.

**Applying the Theory to Anti-China Protests**

Our theory suggests that large-scale rural uprisings are less likely to occur with the presence of the Internet. Does our theory travel outside of these cases? Since early 2000s, Vietnam has not witnessed large-scale, regime-threatening rural movements even though contemporary farmers still experience similar problems. Wells-Dang notes: “While no wide-ranging rural uprisings have taken place in the past several years, localized episodes of land protests have become a common feature of the Vietnamese landscape.” Written in 2004, Wells-Dang’s observation holds today. While land protests remain frequent, none have grown to the same size of Thai Binh or Dong Nai. When farmers protest, the central government rapidly intervenes. For example, in January 2012, a few farmers and
100 local authorities clashed violently over the withdrawal of land from fish farmer Doan Van Vuon in a rural district near Hai Phong.\textsuperscript{102} The violence triggered immediate interventions from the central government, resulting in the punishment of both farmers and local authorities. Similarly, in April 2014, the government sent 1,000 troops to suppress farmers in Duong Noi, a rural district in Ha Noi, who were protesting against the local government land grab.\textsuperscript{103} It is important to note that the Duong Noi residents have protested for many years, suggesting that the center does not always intervene if the protests are sufficiently small. However, important for us is that the center is now able to monitor Duong Noi in real time and intervene before such protests explode in size.

While rural uprisings regarding rural issues have not grown in size, a few large-scale nationalist protests have spread to rural areas in recent years. The most prominent protests against China in rural areas occurred in three central provinces including Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Binh Thuan in early June 2018. During the first two weeks of June 2018, thousands of rural denizens in each province protested against the National Assembly’s proposal on Special Economic Zone, granting a 99-year land lease to Chinese companies.\textsuperscript{104} The largest and most violent protest took place in Binh Thuan, a coastal province, on June 10 and 11, 2017 where thousands of people violently attacked local government’s offices.\textsuperscript{105} These protests could potentially challenge our theory.

However, while portions of these protests occurred in rural areas, we do not consider these nationalist protests rural movements. Rather than rural movements, these protests were urban-led protests that spread to rural areas. Because of their links to urban protests, and because of the fact that such protests involve nationalism, the central government faces greater challenges in repressing them. In contrast to Thai Binh, during the most recent anti-China protests, the central government was informed of such nationalist protest at a very early phase, even a few days before the protest occurred but the government was hesitant to repress it immediately.\textsuperscript{106} This is because repressing nationalist
protests might appear to be unpatriotic.\textsuperscript{107} Delayed interventions from the central government allowed this nationalist protest to grow large across the nation, including rural areas.

However, perhaps interestingly, the protests also reveal the difficulty farmers have in generating a movement during periods when nationalism is not activated. When farmers in such provinces protest rural issues such as coastal environmental pollution, the central government intervenes in rapidly, making it unlikely to attract a large number of people. For example, on April 14, 2015, hundreds of farmers in Tuy Phong district, Binh Thuan province protested against the Vinh Tan thermo-power electricity plant.\textsuperscript{108} On April 15, the \textit{central government} intervened by making Binh Thuan authorities and EVN (Electricity of Vietnam) promise to address environmental problems caused by the factory in state media. On April 16, the protest dissolved. Some argue that because protests against environmental pollution were heavily repressed, farmers in Binh Thuan took advantage of the nationalist protest to pressure local governments to address environmental issues.\textsuperscript{109} In short, due to the constraints of the Internet environment, rural protesters have to take advantage of \textit{urban-led} nationalist movements to make explicitly rural claims.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Our paper provides a unique theory explaining the impact of the Internet on the escalation of small protests into large-scale rural movements in authoritarian regimes. We argue that the timing of interventions by the central government is crucial in turning small-scale rural collective action into a social movement. We emphasize that social media transforms political communications in rural areas in a way that hinders the development of rural movements. Because social media has dramatically transformed vertical information flows, the central government intervenes in rural protests at an early stage, reducing the chance for rural protesters to incubate a large-scale movement.
Our theory has important implications for theories of democratization that rely on societal forces and movements. Many scholars emphasize that mass uprisings, which can sustain collective action towards authoritarian regimes, are critical for democratic transitions.\(^{110}\) We suggest that social media undermines such well-organized groups that can sustain threats on autocratic leaders. It is not that in the Internet age, well-organized opposition groups cannot form. It is more because once they are formed, autocratic leaders intervene at an earlier phase. This suggests that rural areas, which are more dependent on organization, will be less likely to form large groups capable of challenging the autocrat than in the past.

This has important implications for the types of movements we are likely to see challenge autocrats in the future and the types of claims they will make. In short, where some groups representing rural interests may have challenged the regime in the past, future challenges are likely to come from urban areas. Additionally, it may impact the types of tactics used by rural interests. Seeing the degree to which urban protests are facilitated, potential rural protesters may attach themselves to urban-led movements to make their claims.

Moving forward, future work could test our theory that the timing of interventions from the central government in rural protests reduces the odds of such protests becoming a social movement. One possibility would be to measure the time it takes for central governments to intervene after an initial round of protests. To test whether social media impacts such processes, future work can collect tags, Facebook posts and relevant articles about protests and other sources which provide the central government with initial information on protests. Rural movements can be operationalized through the existence of an identified organization, numbers of participants, the purpose of the protests, the target of the protests, and the existence of intra-communal coordination.\(^{111}\) Because of censorship in autocracies, collecting such information on rural protests in the pre-Internet age requires careful
investigation of domestic archival documents. While we have taken a first step to understanding the differences in the effects of social media on urban and rural movements, advancing this research will be critical to understanding the dynamics of social movements and democratization in the information age.
Appendix 1: Timeline of the 1997 Thai Binh Protests

1. Initial peaceful sit-in protests
2. Around dozens of protesters
3. Started in Quynh My commune, Quynh Phu district
4. The local government ignored
5. The local government blocked information to the center

LATE 1996

1. Increasing violent protests
2. Around hundreds and thousands of protesters
3. Mostly in Quynh Phu and Thai Thinh districts
4. 120 commune protests and 40 provincial protests had occurred
5. The local government repressed but failed

MAY 1997

1. An extremely violent protest
2. People throughout Thai Binh province protested at Quynh Phu district
3. 242 out of 260 communes had protested, mobilizing 43,000 people
4. The local government repressed but failed

JUNE 26-27, 1997

1. The Communist Party adopted Grass Root Democracy (Decree 22)
2. The Communist Party punished over 1500 local government officials

EARLY 1998

NO INTERVENTION FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

SEVEN MONTHS
Appendix 2: Timeline of the 2017 Dong Tam Protests

1. Local police arrested representatives of Dong Thuan group
2. Villagers protested against this illegal arrest by detaining 38 local authorities
3. Started in Hoanh district, Dong Tam commune
4. The local government tried to block information to the center

1. Hundreds of protesters from Dong Tam commune
2. The chairman of Hanoi visited protest site and negotiated with villagers
3. The chairman promised not to prosecute protesters and considered land issues
4. The protest ended in peace

1. The government decided that the disputed land did not belong to Dong Tam residents
2. Complaints against corrupt local authorities were baseless
3. Forced households out of the land
4. No more protests

APRIL 15, 2017

APRIL 22, 2017

SEVEN DAYS

FIRST OFFICIAL INTERVENTION FROM THE CENTRAL

JULY 2017

1. Protesters were required to turn themselves in to the police
2. No more protests

OCTOBER 2017
Appendix 3: Timeline of the 2015 Hanoi Tree Movement

1. The People’s Committee of Hanoi signed Decision No19/2010/QD-UBND. The Decision specified the regulations on the management of urban trees, parks, and zoos.

2. Hanoi Department of Construction proposed a project to renovate the landscape of Hanoi. The government of Hanoi approved the project, replacing 6708 green trees on 190 streets of urban Hanoi.

Thousands of Hanoians protested against the “tree-felling” project.

The central government required the Hanoi People’s Committee to suspend the project, and punish a few low-ranking local government officials.

NOTES


8 We relied on the Mass Mobilization (MM) dataset (see Clark, David and Patrick Regan, “MM_Users_0515.pdf.” *Mass Mobilization Protest Data*. 2016. Manual Download the data set at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MMdata ) as evidence for China. Since 2010s, cell phones have become widely used in China villages; the Chinese government and international organizations such as World Bank have implemented many programs to bring Internet access to villagers (A World Bank study “Information and Communications in Chinese Countryside” by Minges, Kimura, Beschorner, Davies and Zhang). Internet penetration rate in rural China increased from 7% in 2007 to 35% in 2017. (China Internet Report 2018, at https://www.abacusnews.com/china-internet-report/china-internet-2018.pdf). For Vietnam, we relied on the MM data combined with Vietnamese language documents.
While the MM dataset codes the Thai Binh protests as having only 1,000 participants, the Vietnamese language sources we use below provide these higher estimates.


As we discuss below, while there is most certainly reporting bias in the cross-national datasets, the bias should not affect our argument. Indeed, if anything, there should be a greater likelihood of discovering large, rural protests today than in the past, where the central and local governments had a greater capacity to hide them. That we see so few large-scale land protests in Vietnam and China after 2010, when the Internet becomes widespread in rural areas, gives us greater confidence that our observed pattern is not the result of reporting bias.


18 Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Charles Tilly, European Revolutions, 1492-1992 (Making of Europe) (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1996); Tarrow, 2011.

19 Tarrow, 2011.


28 King et al., 2013


43 Olson, 1971.


49 Beissinger, 2017; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011.

50 Beissinger, 2017.


52 Wallace, 2014.


56 Christopher Heurlin, Responsive Authoritarianism in China (Cambridge University Press, 2016)


61 Hai H. Nguyen, Political Dynamics of Grassroots Democracy in Vietnam (Sydney: Springer, 2017), 87-88

62 Zachary Abuza, Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 83

63 See “Criminal Liability Probe Begins in Dong Tam Land Dispute,” Vietnam News, June. 14, 2017, at http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/378288/criminal-liability-probe-begins-in-dong-tam-land-dispute.html#F1XZo2Or2Dt6SGQ.99 [accessed on 5/18/2018]. In 1980, the land was allocated to the Ministry of Defense to build an airport, which was never built. After the project was cancelled, the local government allowed residents to build houses and grow crops on the land. Also see: Toan

64 Ibid.


71 Ibid. Also see Tuong Lai, 1997.


73 Ibid


75 Ibid.


78 We think that the local governments ignored protesters’ concerns because the authorities underestimated the severity of the protest.

79 See the report “Preliminary report on the sociological survey in Thai Bình late June, early July 1997.”

80 Toan Le, The Diplomat, 2017.

81 Villagers created a board with the message: “Nhân dân Đồng Tâm tuyệt đối tin tưởng vào chính sách và đường lối của Đảng và nhà nước” (Dong Tam people completely believe in the Communist Party’s policies).

82 Toan Le, The Diplomat, 2017.


86 “Dong Thuan” means consensus or agreement. The group consists of Kinh, his sons and a few retired communal officials.


The connection between rural protesters and urban intellectuals might undermine “Rightful Resistance” by rural citizens. We will explore this topic in more detail in future research.

Thayer, 2010


Ibid.

Beissinger, 2017.


97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.


101 Wells-Dang, 2010, 100


104 See “Hàng vạn người biểu tình khắp Việt Nam chống ‘Luật Đặc Khu’ và ‘An Ninh Mạng’,”  

105 See Đức Trọng, “Đoàn người quá khích tran vào trụ sở UBND tỉnh Bình Thuận,” Tuổi Trẻ Online,  

106 There were calls for protests against the Special Economic Zone a few days before the protests occurred on 10 June. Protests first occurred in big cities such as Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh cities, and then spread to rural provinces.


Tarrow, 2011; Beissinger, 2013.