

# Revolting from Abroad: The Formation of a Lebanese Transnational Public

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Nowadays social movements are driven by networks of people who resort to social media platforms to rally, self-organise and coordinate action around a shared cause, which can be referred to as the formation of publics. Due to years of political instability, conflicts, corruption, sectarianism, economic collapse and declining living conditions, in October 2019 Lebanon witnessed uprisings which transcended into a wider social movement. As the movement unfolded, Lebanese diaspora members living across the world formed their own publics in support of the Lebanese revolution that interfaced with the local Lebanon-based publics. As such, a broader transnational public emerged as a result of the coordinated online and offline efforts between diaspora actors and local actors, which had a crucial role in mitigating the aftermath of the compounded crises that hit Lebanon. In this paper, through observation and interviews with Lebanese diaspora members, we contribute a socio-technical understanding of the formation of a transnational public, with a particular focus on the underlying infrastructures that enabled its creation. Furthermore, we surface the challenges in relation to sustaining such a diaspora public and its interfacing with local publics in Lebanon. We contribute empirical insights that highlight how different technological tools and platforms, coupled with social processes built within diaspora groups and with local actors, led to the formation of such a multilayered transnational public.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing**; *Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing*

**Additional Key Words and Phrases:** diaspora; transnational publics; networked publics; infrastructuring; revolution; social movement

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Recent social movements and their underlying collective action are built on the interplay of social processes and digital platforms, leading to the formation of what are referred to as socio-technical infrastructures [72], which have been extensively researched within CSCW and HCI.



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Given their versatility and permeability, digital platforms – including social media platforms – often blur the boundaries of social movements and enable social movements to shift from localised scales to more transnational ones [38]. The transnational nature of social movements is further amplified by global migration movements, which have led to an increasing number of people leading transnational lives and who are digitally connected and influenced by global events. With a growing body of research around transnational HCI, a field directed at exploring design and use of technology both locally and abroad [64], more work is examining diaspora communities [15, 3, 32]. Such communities are often characterised as platform-mediated communities, due to their reliance on digital platforms to mobilise, organise and instigate collective action [16]. From this lens, research has yet to explore how such diasporic publics form and interface with local publics in their homeland, particularly when positioned within a wider social movement. Hence, the work presented in this paper explores the formation of a Lebanese transnational public and aims to respond to the following research questions: (1) How did the Lebanese diaspora self-organise, mobilise and structure itself into a transnational public? And (2) how did the transnational public interface with local actors as part of a wider social movement?

To respond to the aforementioned questions, we engaged the Lebanese diaspora using an embedded ethnographic method through which we conducted (1) online observational work by following certain social media accounts, enrolling in different WhatsApp groups and participating in events. We also (2) coupled our observational inquiry with interviews carried out with individual members and members of structured groups from within the Lebanese diaspora. Through our engagements, we explore (1) the involvement of the Lebanese diaspora, whether as collectives or at the individual level, with the Lebanese revolution and subsequent events and (2) the underlying socio-technical infrastructures that these diaspora communities employed to self-organise and engage in decision-making among themselves and with local actors in Lebanon. Our findings build on existing research on how technologies intersect with popular protests and uprisings to constitute socio-technical infrastructures and highlight how technologies were used to mobilise diaspora communities, raise funds and structure collective action. We show that diaspora members had to adopt a mix of technologies such as asynchronous messaging platforms (i.e. WhatsApp) and social media platforms and organisational tools (i.e. Zoom and Slack) in order to coordinate their work both internally and externally with local actors. Some of the diaspora members chose to act individually (e.g. collecting funds and in-kind donations) while others organised into structured groups and networks engaging in an array of activities with local actors. Consequently, this led to the formation of a wider transnational public. Our findings show how this public had to be flexible and adaptable to overcome infrastructural constraints pertaining to the local context in Lebanon (e.g. the banking system), and technological restrictions related to existing platforms (e.g. crowdfunding platforms). Moreover, in order to support the progress of an ongoing social movement, diaspora members had to work closely with local actors, which led to the emergence of tensions, particularly due to divergences in perception around the realities on the ground and in the values driving certain actions. Building on our findings, in our discussion, we bring these empirical insights in dialogue with work on social mobilisation and ‘publics’ in CSCW and HCI, while also relating these insights to Tufekci’s understanding of such social movements as transnational networked publics. More specifically, we argue that our empirical findings point to the formation of a transnational networked public that is constituted of two layers: the diasporic and the local layer. In relation to this, our findings contribute a better understanding of how self-organisation and decision-making are digitally mediated within and across these layers. We believe that our empirical

insights contribute to HCI and CSCW research aiming at designing technologies for the creation of effective transnational publics and social movements.

This research endeavour is part of a broader doctoral research project on design for social innovation within contested spaces. The project is motivated by the evolving circumstances in Lebanon and the first and second authors' positions as part of the Lebanese diaspora. Both authors have been involved in the evolving social movement and wanted to contribute to the wider movement through this research. In addition, the third author has been involved in research on solidarity movements and the design of technology within that space, which also fuelled the interest in our area of inquiry. It is important to note that while the events recounted in this paper can be theoretically described as uprisings that transcended into a wider social movement, we refer to the events as a revolution. In Arabic, the word *thawra* (ثورة) is used to refer to this movement and is derived from the concept of outburst, and in English the events are being referred to as a 'revolution'. To be faithful to the core meaning and narrative of this movement and to use the language of our participants, we use the word 'revolution' throughout the paper.

## 1.1 Context

In order to best situate our findings, we first provide a brief historical overview of Lebanese diasporic communities and their relationship with the homeland. Additionally, we present a brief account of the Lebanese revolution that is ongoing to this day.

*1.1.1 The Lebanese Diaspora.* Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary state with an estimated native population of 4.3 million individuals. The country hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees in addition to approximately 300,000 Palestinian refugees [31]. In 1975, the Lebanese civil war broke out, leading to many Lebanese migrating abroad. The war came about due to conflicting religious and political views around the governmental response to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, where some political parties were critical of the Palestinian factions moving to Lebanon to fight while others believed that Lebanon's involvement was inevitable. Additionally, the government's neoliberal economic policies contributed to civil unrest that also culminated in the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. The war was fought along religious sectarian lines between Christian and Muslim sects, which led to the division of the capital, Beirut, into two poles: the East side (predominantly controlled by Christian militias) and the West side (predominantly controlled by Muslim militias) [36]. In rural areas, the country also witnessed clashes in villages between Christian sects and Druze. The 14 years of bloodshed and violence resulted in around 100,000 deaths – including people who disappeared and were presumed dead – internal displacement and severe infrastructural destruction. The fighting ended with the formation of the Taif agreement, signed in 1989. However, the agreement did not lead to any post-war reconciliation among people [36]. The aim of the agreement was to end the conflict through political means, through which governmental quotas and roles were assigned to the political leaders of the different militias without any accountability for their acts [62]. To this day, the leaders of the militias have remained within the ruling political and business elite [62]. Additionally, the Taif agreement provided a timeframe for the withdrawal of Syrian armed forces that had entered the country and supported some factions in the war.

As a result of these events, Lebanon witnessed waves of forced migration that expanded the size and reach of the Lebanese diaspora [42]. Recent estimates of the size of the Lebanese diaspora population range between 12 and 14 million [65]. The migration of Lebanese to other countries has been attributed to the social, political and economic events previously mentioned [42] and is

considered to be an ongoing phenomenon, given the continuous waves of Lebanese immigration [69]. Dispersed across the world, the Lebanese diaspora have created and preserved networks with each other and with their home country [42]. Furthermore, they played a pivotal role over time in the development of Lebanon by contributing to multiple sectors and supporting the local economy through investments and philanthropy [42]. Additionally, the Lebanese diaspora send significant financial remittances back home to their families, thus making them one of the main sources of foreign currency in the country [42]. For the purposes of this work, we draw on Skulte-Ouaiss and Tabar's [65] characterisation of the Lebanese diasporic community as one of immigrants who maintain strong attachments to their Lebanese homeland, which is evidenced by their aforementioned economic investments in the country.

Research has shown that post-civil war, the Lebanese diaspora's fragmentation has mimicked the divides within the country, as sectarian and political divides have been maintained within their countries of emigration [65]. Along those divides, members of the diaspora are often targeted by mainstream political parties during national elections. Political parties have been known to approach diaspora members and provide them with tickets to fly home and vote for the parties in the elections [65]. Additionally, they are asked to participate in fundraising for the Lebanese political parties and religious groups that they are affiliated and/or identify with [65]. It was only recently (in 2018) that members of the diaspora were granted the right to vote from abroad in consulates and embassies. However, with the upcoming parliamentary elections of 2022, the conditions and mechanisms for diaspora voting are still a subject of debate by the current members of parliament, who have been arguing about whether the diaspora should be allowed to vote for all 128 members of parliament or only for six regional individuals that will represent the diaspora.

Overall, the Lebanese diaspora is quite fluid in its nature and cannot be lumped into one category. However, prior to the unprecedented events of the 2019 Lebanese revolution, diaspora members were never in direct friction with the prevailing system and the ruling parties within it. Therefore, it is key to build an understanding of the tools, processes and underlying challenges that the Lebanese diaspora engaged with internally and externally (i.e. with local actors), in order to situate themselves within the wider social movement that emerged from the revolution, which called for the dismantling of sectarian and political divides that remained after the Lebanese civil war.

*1.1.2 The Lebanese Revolution.* As previously mentioned, the Taif agreement was a power-sharing agreement reached among political warlords, which has morphed into institutionalised sectarianism within governmental entities [54, 62]. This has led to a less autonomous public sector that is characterised by clientelism and corruption [54, 62]. Therefore, as part of the post-war recovery and reconstruction efforts, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international aid organisations proliferated to bridge the gaps of a weak and fragmented public and welfare sector [1]. However, Lebanon's clientelism-based model, which made public resources subject to pre-established sectarian allocation [31], extended to NGOs and international aid organisations, which often ended up endorsing the existing sectarian and top-down political status quo [1, 41]. Aid provided by international donations such as food and cash are particularly heavily distributed by political parties for electoral purposes [55].

The assassination of the former prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, coupled with the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, was a turning point for the country [43]. At that time, several young people who were dissatisfied with the status quo and were critical of mainstream NGOs established their own NGOs as well as formal and informal groups and grassroots entities. The build-up of significant political events such as the 2008 sectarian street clashes between Shia and Sunni political

parties galvanised youth into building an ‘activist infrastructure’ that had an explicit political dimension [43]. This infrastructure predominantly encompassed various local groups that organised several protests over the years, including protests in 2015 in response to the waste management crisis. This crisis was a result of the exposure of the government’s corruption in deals in connection with a third-party company that was responsible for waste collection and management in the country. The mobilisation of the activist infrastructure in 2015 created momentum for the creation of opposition parties and coalitions that ran against the ruling parties in the 2016 municipal elections and the 2018 parliamentary elections. However, the opposition parties and coalitions did not manage to gain the desired success, while voter turnout was noted to be lower than in previous years. These disruptions and mobilisation seeded the ground for a growing sense of resentment towards the ruling parties.

The sustained failure of the post-civil war neoliberal policies to achieve socio-economic justice for the majority of residents of Lebanon [23, 49] and the deformed economic model were core issues that underpinned the revolution of 2019. The initial popular protests were triggered on 17 October 2019 by the deteriorating economy, a shortage of foreign currency, the depreciation of the Lebanese pound, a lack of governmental response to wildfires and suggestions by the government of tax increases, including a tax to be added to online messaging services such as WhatsApp [5]. This was accompanied by the breakdown of the Lebanese banking system, as commercial banks began withholding the savings of Lebanese citizens and restricting the withdrawal of cash.

Soon enough, the protests transitioned into an ongoing socio-political movement against the existing political elite and the governance systems that they had established. Protests centred around (1) the increase in unemployment; (2) corruption and the misuse of public finances; (3) links between commercial banks and the political elite; (4) the deterioration of state services (lack of electricity and garbage disposal); and (5) the increasing financial inaccessibility of healthcare and education. The protests crossed sectarian and partisan divides and protestors occupied public squares that had previously been privatised and major road intersections [39]. These spaces became places for debate in relation to the socio-political and economic systems, overcoming sectarian and partisan divides and improving gender equity [59] and the rights of refugees and migrant workers. Community kitchens [37] and medical stations were set up to provide food and health services for protestors and those in need. Such initiatives progressed, later on, to the delivery of food and aid parcels to households throughout the country as a means of offering an alternative to aid provided by the ruling political parties. The efforts of these grassroots initiatives were maintained throughout the compounded crises faced by the country in 2020, including the COVID-19 outbreak and the Beirut port explosion that devastated the capital. To this day, these initiatives are still active and identify themselves as initiatives of the revolution that offer support and services independent of the religious and political parties that have been in power since the end of the Lebanese civil war. As such, the 2019 popular uprisings turned into a larger social movement with multiple coordinated activities among grassroots and emerging opposition political parties that formed a local public that has developed over the last two years. In fact, under the umbrella of the revolution, people transitioned their efforts from street protests to rallying and campaigning for representatives from the revolution in student elections at universities and the elections of board members of trade unions. This was done in an attempt to reclaim these key decision-making bodies from the ruling parties [8, 71].

Relevant to this paper, it is important to note that the activities that took place within the revolution are similar to those in popular uprisings in Egypt and Turkey [73]. Similarly to previously documented ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, the Lebanese opposition publics used social media platforms

such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to mobilise and coordinate protests [73, 79, 70, 53], thus forming the local layer of what Tufekci [73] has termed a '*networked public*' (i.e. a public in which digital technologies become a core element of the public).

*1.1.2 Response of Lebanese diasporic communities.* In contrast to the 'Arab Spring' movements, which were mostly centred on protests and online activism, the Lebanese social movement relied on a constellation of collective actions resembling the solidarity movement in Greece [78]. Similarly to that movement, the Lebanese revolution endeavoured to reconfigure service delivery as a response to governmental services, which were fraught with nepotism, clientelism and corruption [22]. The local protests and emerging collective actions were accompanied by strong and coordinated participation and efforts of the Lebanese diaspora dispersed all over the globe. The engagement of the diaspora surpassed its traditional economic role, which previously encompassed sending remittances and financially supporting local organisations and political parties. Indeed, as part of the revolution, the diaspora started to play a pivotal role in supporting, coordinating and directing welfare, social relief, lobbying and, later on, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the diaspora took on even more pronounced roles after the Beirut port explosion of 4 August 2020, which left half the capital of Lebanon destroyed. In a recent study [20], Lebanese diaspora members indicated that this shift in roles can be attributed to donor fatigue, the lack of significant change in Lebanon over the years and to the revolution being a historic moment in which new cross-sectarian identities were being constructed among the diaspora population. It is within these more politically and civically engaged roles that the Lebanese diaspora began running advocacy campaigns in their countries of residence (e.g. the US, the UK, Arab Gulf countries) and organising into groups, collectives and initiatives with mandates and agendas. The 2019 Lebanese uprisings triggered a strong political involvement of diaspora communities, who for the first time organised and mobilised against the hegemony, systemic sectarianism and corruption of the Lebanese government. The diaspora actively tried to reclaim a more significant role in the country beyond its economic one, which had created an unsustainable economic dependency. The diaspora's mobilisation was notable because it was centred on a coordinated action across multiple countries and, as such, formed and structured a complex transnational public through the creation and maintenance of groups and events on multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter). However, little research has been conducted on how the activities of diaspora communities within a networked public intersect with local publics to form a transnational public. Our research builds on understandings of networked publics [56, 33, 73, 52] and explores how diasporic Lebanese communities formed publics that then interfaced with local action in Lebanon and the socio-technical infrastructures that were put into play.

## 2 RELATED WORK

Research has been conducted around the formation of publics and the use of technology to infrastructure such publics. Social movements often lead to the formation of publics based on the interplay of offline and online mediums, including social media and social networks. Therefore, we position this paper in the existing literature related to publics, social movements and transnational HCI in order to extend them through the contribution of the roles and uses of technology in sustaining such social movements, particularly from a transnational perspective.

## 2.1 Social movements and networked publics

'Publics' are formed as a configuration of people driven by a common cause and shared interest seeking to address the set of conditions influencing this cause through collective action [28, 40]. In HCI, '*situated practices that connect everyday local practices with the larger, often global technological systems*' is what *infrastructuring* entails within publics [17]. Furthermore, it has been identified that the act of infrastructuring in itself not only enables and supports collective action but also leads to the formation of social relationships among members of those publics [27, 50]. These relationships are a mix of commitment, dependency and invested resources that enable us to have a better understanding of why conflicts might surface within a public as a result of the entanglements among different actors [50]. Furthermore, publics constitute infrastructures of civic engagement that are often built on mediated interactions [9, 18] that are reliant on information and communication technologies (ICTs), making them 'networked publics' in which technologies are embedded within the fabric of the public [14, 24, 73].

The aforementioned research highlights that social movements are a fertile ground for the creation of networked publics by bringing together multiple stakeholders who engage together though digitally mediated and/or live interactions around a common cause and to contest the conditions that led to the movement in the first instance [56]. Multiple contemporary social movements, whether big or small, have been characterised by their reliance on social media platforms and the roles that the latter have played in influencing the course of events related to those movements. HCI research has shown how social media facilitated and propagated protests by enabling people to voice their opinions, especially in contexts where mainstream media is tightly controlled by the government. [38] contend that such platforms have the power to organise political action and galvanise activists both locally and internationally, creating a 'revolutionary contagion'. Within multiple social movements – such as the Umbrella Movement [46], Occupy Wall Street [70] and the 15M/Indignados demonstrations [6] – people were able to connect, mobilise, access news and orchestrate multiple activities that were broadcast at a global level through social media platforms. In their work, [26] posit that the appropriation of Facebook for socio-political action can be strongly interlinked with the creation of a social movement. Furthermore, the permeability and versatility of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were found to be key attributes that helped sustain the momentum of the 'Arab Spring' social movements [53, 66, 70, 79]. Additionally, these platforms were deemed to have a transformative impact on politics and social relationships [4, 7] due to their high penetration and routine use in societies [12]. For instance, in the Arab context, it was found that social media platforms enabled women activists to articulate their identities in an unprecedented manner and actively participate in an emancipatory fashion [58]. In addition, WhatsApp has strongly positioned itself as a tool that goes beyond mere social interactions. With its high embeddedness in the Global South, it has become a core tool for political organising [75], circulation of news and coordination of collective action and activism in several social movements in different countries, such as Brazil [80], Hong Kong [45] and Ethiopia [57]. Its free access in such contexts made WhatsApp a basic need, especially as it relieves users from the pricey cost of telecoms [75].

Despite the increase in the formation of networked publics within social movements, the use of social media platforms within popular uprisings has been scrutinised and observed with scepticism. Sceptics have indicated that, in reality, social media platforms play a limited role in social movements and support existing political activities rather than bringing forward new types of activism [34, 19, 21, 68]. Furthermore, these platforms have been accused of undermining protest movements. According to Youmans and York [74], the policies adopted by social media companies

often complicate collective action and may possibly be complicit with governments that are trying to suppress social movements through data privacy breaches.

## 2.2 Diasporic communities as transnational publics

HCI and CSCW research around transnationalism is expanding. Research has explored the use of ICTs to preserve indigenous knowledge among Kenyan diaspora communities [11] and support the Afghan diaspora's self-expression in relation to various issues in their homeland [2]. Other work presented design engagements with Rwandan diaspora communities that aimed to surface insights around future information systems for a post-conflict transition in Rwanda [80]. The Ukrainian diaspora was also examined as an empirical case study for a 'digital diaspora'. The research has found that Ukrainian diaspora members used Facebook features to support the cessation of conflict in Ukrainian territory and to organise and provide resources to the Ukrainian armed forces between 2014 and 2016 [16]. The Ukrainian diaspora also organised several events in multiple cities during the EuroMaidan protests, emphasising the celebration of their culture and embracing an active role in the reform and reconstruction of their country [30].

Such mobilisation and collective action of diasporic communities often create transnational publics, which are those that cut across both national and international levels. Both social movements and transnational publics are networks, which differ based on identity, agency and space [56]. Social movements mostly revolve around a collective identity, which explains their long-lasting nature. As for transnational publics, they share similar dynamics but are not necessarily characterised by a collective identity [29]. Transnational publics have been referred to as temporary 'social spaces' that form within social movements with underlying social and technical infrastructures [56]. Indeed, research around the engagement of diaspora communities with digital technologies and activism bring to the forefront the unique construction of identity among diaspora communities, the tensions that arise due to transnational identities and transnational social relationships that are mediated through digital technology [2, 56]. Therefore, more research is needed to examine the development of socio-technical infrastructures by diaspora communities in order to engage in transnational activism that is anchored in wider social movements in their home countries.

## 3 METHODS

### 3.1 Methodology and Positionality

This work is part of a larger research project that uses embedded critical ethnography [47] conducted by the first author around the underlying socio-technical infrastructures of Lebanese grassroots organisations and self-organised groups, including those that emerged during the Lebanese revolution. Embedded critical ethnography aims to understand the values and behaviours of a particular group within a social and/or physical space and to eventually initiate action within that space [47]. Given the significant roles of the diaspora communities in the Lebanese social movement, it was important to explore these roles. Both the first and second authors are themselves members of the Lebanese diaspora community and are active within diaspora networks and groups that planned and organised activities geared towards supporting the revolution. Their socio-political alignment with the discourses of the revolution facilitated the building of a relationship of trust between them and interviewees and led to uncensored and insightful conversations with other diaspora members. However, the positionality of the two co-authors also entailed approaching this research with a politicised lens. Both authors were aware that they did not capture insights from



members of the diaspora who supported the ruling political parties. Therefore, it was pivotal to carefully navigate findings while being self-aware about biases and preserving criticality towards what was being witnessed, despite being aligned with the overall political premises behind the social movement. Therefore, both the co-authors continuously critically reflected with the non-Lebanese third author, who is considered impartial towards the events in Lebanon and has conducted research around social movements in southern Europe. We ensured that our analysis was critical of the diaspora’s efforts and highlighted spaces for improvement out of our own care for the cause. It was important to transparently share how our positionalities influenced the analysis of the data, as shown above, and to indicate which data arose from the authors’ own observations (i.e. personal perceptions and interpretations of observations) [48], as we detail in the rest of this section and Table 1.

**3.2 Recruitment and data collection**

In order to unpack the diaspora’s self-organisation and the formation of a transnational networked public, we engaged in online observation over the course of a year (from October 2019) of public diaspora engagements on social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook). This online observation entailed reading through posts of online social media groups and accounts while also taking notes that helped us to identify the different activities organised by the diaspora, such as protests, informational sessions, relief work, and advocacy and lobbying. Based on our own personal involvement in the social movement, we also attended talks, webinars and informational sessions related to the revolution and organised by diaspora groups. Additionally, the first author actively participated in the meetings and discussions of some of the diaspora groups of which she was a member as part of her research. Notes on observations were compiled, along with annotations of our own interpretations. Observations of online activities, meetings, webinars and informational sessions highlighted elements related to diaspora mobilisation and collective action, which informed our further exploration through semi-structured interviews. By observing and engaging in the activities organised by the diaspora, we were able to identify some of our interviewees and implemented snowball recruitment. We conducted semi-structured interviews with multiple members of the Lebanese diaspora located in different countries. As diaspora members acted both at the individual level and within groups and structured entities, we were interested in surfacing perspectives from both categories. An interview guide was developed to explore the connections between diaspora members and Lebanon, their engagement and collective action within the revolution and subsequent events, the use of technology in their activism and collective action, and the socio-technical challenges they encountered.

Table 1. Type of data collection method and corresponding number of engagements

Type of data collection method	Number of engagements
Online observation of social media accounts	10 social media accounts for key diaspora groups on Facebook and Instagram
Joining and observing of WhatsApp groups	2 groups
Attendance of online webinars, talks and discussions	15 events
Interviews with diaspora members	8 members

Table 2. Profile of interviewed diaspora members: pseudonyms, country of residence, activities, and occupational background

Diaspora member (pseudonyms)	Country of residence	Main activities	Occupational background
Melissa	UK	Fundraising Awareness and activism Multi-sectoral activities: environment, politics, economy, employment, art, etc.	Business and Strategy
Imane	UAE	Fundraising Social and economic relief Education	Business operations
Rawane	Ireland	Fundraising Advocacy and activism Mobilisation of tech platforms	Technology industry
Mila	France/Lebanon	Conference with panels around sectors such as economy, politics, recovery	Development and humanitarian sector
Judy	Singapore	Conference with panels around sectors such as economy, politics, recovery	Global affairs and economics
Alex	France	Political activism Social relief Fundraising	Telecommunications
Jamila	USA	Fundraising Social relief Activism	Development and humanitarian sector
Alice	USA	Fundraising Social relief	Business consulting

Through snowball sampling, we conducted eight interviews (Table 2) over Zoom, which were 60–90 minutes long. We did not conduct further interviews, as we had reached data saturation and were no longer receiving or observing distinguished responses or patterns. The calls were recorded upon receiving the interviewees’ consent and were selectively transcribed verbatim with pseudonyms assigned to interviewees.

### 3.3 Analysis

*3.3.1 Methods of analysis.* Firstly, we analysed our data inductively through open coding, but as we progressed, we realised that this work resonated with Tufekci's [73] framing of networked publics, which led us to also code data deductively [25], paying special attention to issues centred around self-mobilisation, self-organisation and decision-making, which are termed 'network internalities' by Tufekci [73]. Our analytical approach enabled us to develop themes centred on the formation of the diaspora public, the use of technology within and across the diaspora public and the mediation that took place across the diaspora and local layers of the transnational public. Cutting across these themes, we highlight the network internalities of the diaspora in self-organising and decision-making, and within a transnational public and how technologies mediated/interplayed with these internalities.

The analysis process entailed the following steps:

1. Familiarisation: the first and second author read the transcripts and revisited notes taken during the interviews and observations.
2. Coding: at first, the first author resorted to manual open coding to code transcripts. Based on the scope of interest, codes were grouped into categories through axial coding.
3. Identifying possible themes: the first author organised the category codes under overarching thematic areas and discussed initial themes with the research team.
4. Reviewing themes: the research team collectively examined the codes and revised suggested themes to ensure an accurate representation of the data with relevant codes.
5. Defining and naming themes: the research team refined the final themes and supported their relevant description with illustrative quotes.
6. Writing up.

*3.3.2 Analytical lens.* We used Tufekci's [73, p.x] framing of networked publics as an analytical lens, where networked 'refers to the reconfiguration of publics and movements through assimilation of digital technologies into their fabric'. Based on research and observations of the formation of networked publics in the Middle East, Tufekci argued that while technologies can trigger immediate rallying and formation of protests, such an immediacy weakens a public's ability to develop collective decision-making mechanisms. Before the shift towards 'networked publics', the main activities that would occur entailed protests and planning activities, such as the design and printing of flyers [73]. Later on, efforts were channelled towards mediated political debate, self-organisation and decision-making mechanisms among different actors, which are referred to as 'network internalities'. She argued that such mechanisms are needed to sustain movements after the initial phase of uprisings and to avoid 'tactical freeze' – 'the inability of these movements to adjust tactics, negotiate demands, and push for tangible policy changes' – especially as it is through these mechanisms that revolutionary leaders are made visible and demands are negotiated [73, p.xvi]. However, networked publics often face the challenge of 'ad hococracy', which entails responding to issues as they appear by individuals that are active at the time, rather than over a prolonged period [73]. Her long-term analysis of networked publics stated that research should extend beyond analysing how technologies were used during protests. It has to extend to building an understanding of how the network internalities previously listed (self-organising, decision-making and political

debate) work towards changing narratives, impacting election outcomes, disrupting the status quo, and organising and making decisions.

However, due to the fact that we have yet to fully witness the impact of the revolution (e.g. Lebanese elections are due in 2022), our analysis focused on how the transnational networked public was formed and how they used technologies to build their network internalities of self-organisation and decision-making. We draw on Tufekci's work around networked publics to guide our analysis of: (1) the formation of the networked and transnational public and its multiple layers, (2) the assimilation of digital technologies and (3) the self-organisation and decision-making processes that developed within this public. We also highlight the challenges and tensions faced and the considerations that have to be accounted for when designing technologies that support the development of 'network internalities' within a transnational public.

#### 4 FINDINGS

Our findings indicate that, prior to the 2019 revolution, digital tools and platforms were already used by diaspora members to maintain a connection with Lebanon. Furthermore, our analysis shows how the efforts of diaspora members to support the Lebanese revolution resulted in decentralised publics (i.e. those that constituted multiple diaspora groups that had varying directions and areas of focus) that leveraged technologies to adapt to the social, economic and political changes on the ground. Additionally, our findings highlight the processes through which the diaspora public formed and the tensions that arose between diaspora entities and local actors in Lebanon, some of which were linked to the mix of technologies deployed.

Participants born and raised outside Lebanon reported that they maintained a strong sense of belonging to Lebanon that was tied to their historical and familial roots:

'I am attached to Lebanon because of family and history. My family is mixed and my grandparents have an old historical house. We were historically engaged' (Rawane).

'I mean, being Lebanese is a key part of my identity, when people ask ... even though I never actually got to live there and I was not born there. I feel an immense amount of connection' (Alice).

They also noted the significant role that social media platforms such as WhatsApp played in sustaining their connection to Lebanon:

'I am always on WhatsApp calls with my sisters [in Lebanon]. We have a family WhatsApp group ... I feel like WhatsApp is like part of Lebanon, part of the social scene ... but I also use Instagram and Twitter a lot to stay tuned to see how people are posting, what they're posting, to learn about their everyday life, just to keep track' (Jamila).

Given the above-mentioned connection to Lebanon, participants identified the 2019 revolution to be of particular concern to them:

'You know, although I'm not physically in Lebanon, the revolution, you know, affects my life every single day. And that allows me to think that there may be a possibility of returning or, you know, having my parents live a life that is a bit more acceptable, I would say. And so, I think it affects me every day' (Jamila).

Another interviewee described that while she used to support some NGOs back home remotely, but in a limited manner, the revolution came as a turning point that prompted more civic engagement: *'It was like a dream come true, we had goosebumps. People were [of] one voice against corruption'* (Imane). It is such responses that indicated a transition from being culturally, socially and historically connected to Lebanon to being connected to the political narrative of and with the revolution. Several interviewees described how social media platforms contributed to connecting them to the revolution and in turn encouraged them to become politically engaged and active. They indicated that they started following news of the revolution on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which incited them to plan activities in their own country of residence to support the revolution. Imane, one of the interviewees, recounted, *'We were watching the news through TV, social media [Facebook, Instagram] and through family and friends. We wanted to be part of this'*. For some, social media served as a means to cross-reference and compare and contrast multiple news sources in order to have a better understanding of the situation and to share news about the revolution with others. One of the interviewees recounted how she used her own Instagram account to share news about the situation in Lebanon by compiling information from sources she found to be trustworthy:

*'Being able to follow the people that you trust, who are in Lebanon and then watching their stories and then being able to, from America, collect that information and tell the story. So, like, if you go to my Instagram. I have a highlight on Lebanon. It goes on from the Lebanese revolution explaining in the best way that I was able to collect from all of my different sources. What it is, why it is happening, how to help and then all the way through to the blast [the Beirut port explosion]'* (Alice).

#### **4.1 The formation of the diaspora public: self-organisation of individual and collective efforts**

With the revolution bringing hope of a new direction for the country, Lebanese diaspora members started acting to support the revolution and the local Lebanese grassroots initiatives that were emerging from the revolution, both individually and collectively. Our observation of social media activities highlighted the role that individual diaspora members with dual citizenship played in lobbying multiple governments to turn international attention to the situation in Lebanon. For example, leveraging the mechanism within the UK that enables citizens to start petitions that are then discussed in parliament, a diaspora member based in the UK created a petition to denounce the corruption of the Lebanese ruling government. The aim was to prompt the UK members of parliament to discuss and act on the petition in parliament. Additionally, through personal initiative, some of the diaspora members started inviting their own social networks to mobilise in protests in their countries of residence. Protests were held in front of Lebanese embassies and other public spaces in London, San Diego, New York, Paris and other major cities, with meeting points and times disseminated through social media platforms. Livestreams and videos from the diaspora protests were shared through social media to show solidarity with those in Lebanon:

*'There were protests all over the United States, all over the UK, all over all of these other countries where Lebanese people are. Brazil for example ... it was a way to actually stand or show up in masses while being virtual'* (Alice).

Furthermore, diaspora members began organising and attending online webinars and political debates, such as those observed by the first author, that centred around the Lebanese revolution. As such, according to Alice, for the first time this was an opportunity to discuss Lebanese politics

outside her own familial circles. As time progressed, diaspora members began to self-organise more collectively. Various diaspora members rallied around fundraisers and the purchase of medical, food and clothing assistance. One interviewee explained how people were using Amazon as a medium to compile shopping lists to gather items that were sent to Lebanon with people flying back there:

‘People would create Amazon shopping lists and had Amazon send items to their home, package them all up and then had different people fly them into Lebanon’ (Alice).

Moreover, town hall meetings were organised for those interested to be more involved in coordinated action. These meetings were unprecedented, because prior to the revolution, members of the Lebanese diaspora would meet up for social and cultural events, but this was the first time they gathered with the purpose of being actively engaged with the protests and mobilisation in Lebanon. These meetings were advertised through events created on Facebook and through posts on Instagram and WhatsApp. From those town hall meetings, some of which were held virtually and others physically, diaspora collectives and groups emerged, positioning themselves in the narrative of Lebanon’s revolution.

*4.1.1 Self-organisation across the diaspora public.* In an effort to become active actors within the revolution’s narrative, diaspora groups and collectives came together, with a few of them transitioning into structured legal entities. For example, ‘Impact Lebanon’ started as a meeting between a group of people who did not previously know each other but wanted to be more actively engaged with the events back in Lebanon. Such groups eventually progressed into more formal entities: ‘Impact came together as a group of random people. It started with the idea that the diaspora is disconnected, there was not a specific model ... On the 11th of December it was registered as a private limited company with guarantee’ (Melissa). Another of the groups also registered itself as an NGO in France under the name ‘Parlons Liban’ (Lebanon Talks). Their main scope was to set up and deliver a conference with different panels on 17 October 2020 (one year on from the revolution’s start date) to tackle different challenges pertaining to different sectors in Lebanon. While the aforementioned groups brought together diaspora members living in specific countries such as the UK and France, some diaspora groups came together across multiple countries to create collectives. For example, LEAN (Lebanese Expats Action Network) was formed, including members from the USA, Canada, the UAE and other Arab Gulf countries. From the interviews with participants, it was noted that transitioning into formal entities was motivated by the need to form a supportive and structured environment for civic engagement:

‘You need an enabling environment; the structure [prior to the formation of formal entities] is not supportive to maintain this civic engagement relationship with Lebanon’ (Melissa).

As such, we observed the formation of a decentralised public that consisted of multiple diaspora groups in different countries that had varying directions and areas of focus. Some were targeting the creation of employment opportunities for Lebanese people, some constituted smaller groups of individuals collectively supporting relief and some were more engaged in spreading awareness about the general situation in the country. The varying directions and focuses of the groups within the public facilitated its adaptability to changes happening in Lebanon. A similar plurality was observed for the internal organisation of these groups. Some of the entities were keen on a bottom-up approach within their decision-making process. This was attributed to the idea that the bottom-

up political reform they were advocating for in Lebanon should be reflected in the values and practices of the entities themselves, as noted by one of the interviewees:

‘We ask the [diaspora] members to suggest projects, gather people who are interested and they execute. We are willing to provide the needed support but the person who suggests the project takes the leadership as long as the project fits the set of values we have. We didn’t want it to be top-down and force our priorities on others’ (Melissa).

However, through our ethnographic work, and specifically by observing the dynamics in the WhatsApp groups coordinated by these groups, we noted two different realities. While some of these groups were actively trying to implement the bottom-up decision-making processes highlighted above, other groups, whether intentionally or unintentionally, were imposing a hierarchical structure in their decision-making. This was visible in our observation that in some of the groups, the founders were the ones dictating the course of action or priorities to be tackled without necessarily referring back to the rest of the members or by assigning specific tasks to members.

The decentralised nature of the public entailed that not all diasporic groups had a common social, political and economic agenda. From the posts shared on social media and WhatsApp groups, we found that while the revolution was a common cause that brought together diaspora groups and members, this did not necessarily imply that all collectives and groups shared a common value system. Some groups were more engaged politically, by using their accounts to recount events happening on the ground and endorsing new political parties that opposed the current ruling parties. Others chose to focus on social and health relief, with an attenuated political stance, because they were not convinced of the revolution’s political narrative developing on the ground. With such a diversity in values, ideologies and actions, an interviewee stated that it was important to build the roles of the diaspora as ‘*organised civically, economically, and ideologically*’ (Rawane). Consequently, in an effort to connect and coordinate multiple collectives, *Meghterbin Mejtemiin* (translated as United Diaspora Lebanon) was established as a global network that positioned itself as the overarching umbrella for these collectives and entities. Hence, this decentralised public encompassing all these diasporic entities is what we refer to as the diaspora layer of the wider transnational public.

#### 4.2 The use of technology within and across the diaspora public

Digital technologies played a key role in the diaspora coming together, organising, making decisions and executing them. WhatsApp’s role was significant, as it was being used to connect diaspora members interested in acting together and to support the coordination of action within diaspora groups and with local actors in Lebanon. However, the identity of the people coordinating or participating in these WhatsApp groups was not always known and people often found themselves added to such groups without knowing about their scope. *Meghterbin Mejtemiin*, which aimed to work across different diaspora groups, initially relied on digitally mediated interactions through WhatsApp groups established between different diaspora members and groups who were organising protests in their respective cities. Later on, they hosted Zoom meetings that were being held between the different members and groups, thus enabling individuals participating in the WhatsApp groups to meet remotely and put faces to the people with whom they were engaging.

Internally, formally structured groups – such as Impact Lebanon – also utilised organisational digital tools such as Slack to coordinate their activities. Such a tool supported the structuring efforts of groups because of its array of features that facilitate organisational tasks, including arranging

meetings, connecting multiple stakeholders together and project management. For example, one of the interviewees stated:

‘we used it [Slack] to pitch our last fundraising idea quite fast, we share documents and tag people [using it]’ (Melissa).

Diaspora groups within the public also relied on technologies to engage with members of the diaspora who were not necessarily part of an existing collective. Impact Lebanon decided to invest in a strong social media and digital presence by creating several project-specific online platforms. For example, they created platforms for specific projects related to: (1) the environment (an environmental academy in Lebanon to support local municipalities in issues such as waste management), (2) politics (creation of a platform to provide information and guidance around the upcoming 2022 parliamentary elections), (3) employment (creation of a mentorship programme), (4) heritage (a platform to highlight the cultural richness and heritage of Lebanon), (5) education (creation of an online tutoring programme to support teachers in Lebanon) and (6) e-commerce (creation of a platform on which Lebanese artists could sell their artwork). The platforms were linked to Instagram pages to make them more accessible to the public. In addition, the group launched an online website (<http://lebaneserevolution2019.org>), which is now inactive, in order to contribute to the political narrative of the revolution through the compilation of materials about the revolution and archiving events and artwork. They also advertised and ran frequent webinars and debates over Zoom that tackled an array of topics that were relevant to the revolution and webinars that focused on discussing and formulating the future directions for the country.

#### **4.3 Mediating between the diaspora and local actors: challenges to self-organisation and decision-making**

The engagement of the diaspora in the revolution across different sectors required working with local actors in Lebanon, which was primarily mediated through WhatsApp and complemented by other digital tools. WhatsApp groups were created to coordinate response efforts with local actors in Lebanon. One of the interviewees explained that their whole operational model, which includes local actors, was facilitated by WhatsApp.

‘We rely on a WhatsApp model, [with] different [WhatsApp] groups for food, medication, projects post blast, long-term projects’ (Imane).

In light of shifting circumstances, WhatsApp was deemed particularly essential given the heavy reliance of people back in Lebanon on it as a core communication tool. This is attributed to the fact that telecoms in Lebanon are very expensive and people resort to WhatsApp, especially given that telecom companies provide relatively cheap WhatsApp-only data bundles. For example, with the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbating the already existing economic crisis, the diaspora organised with local actors through WhatsApp to shift their response from organising political protests to the coordination and delivery of medical supplies and food to those in need. More specifically, this was done through the creation of the ‘Covid-19 response taskforce’ WhatsApp group, of which the first author was a member. The group brought together different groups working on the response both in Lebanon and within the diaspora public. To avoid duplication of efforts, the WhatsApp group was linked to Google Sheets databases that encompassed mapping active initiatives and community needs that members of the WhatsApp groups could access and update. Indeed, as the situation was unfolding in Lebanon, diaspora groups also used other digital tools to organise their efforts. Through the support of diaspora members who were more tech savvy, having worked in the technology industry, diaspora groups were able to quickly set up and use Google Maps after the Beirut port



explosion. The maps provided up-to-date information on the housing and shelter options available for affected people.

In order to adequately support local actors, the diaspora had to secure the transfer of funding through technological means and focus on the formulation of common agendas, which we delve into in the following sections. Both areas led to challenges and tensions across both the diaspora layer and the local layer of the transnational public.

*4.3.1 Funding the revolution.* The sustained economic crisis, with the collapse of the Lebanese banking sector and subsequent financial hurdles, made it difficult for the diaspora to transfer money to local actors and for such actors to withdraw the money to fund activities. The commercial banks in Lebanon (1) stopped withdrawals of foreign currency (primarily US dollars) from existing bank accounts, (2) stopped opening bank accounts in foreign currencies and (3) maintained the pre-2019 USD to Lebanese pound conversion rate for withdrawals from bank accounts, which was significantly lower than the conversion rate in the local market in Lebanon. This caused the finances transferred by the diaspora public to be of a lower value due to inflation affecting the Lebanese currency. One of the interviewees explained that:

‘We brainstormed several ideas such as money muling and linking it to a platform, but it was risky and highly dependent on trust and had limitations in its legality ... but overall, we had a lot of issues related to the banking system and transferring money back to Lebanon’ (Melissa).

Therefore, it was imperative for the diaspora public to find different ways to send resources to Lebanon to support the local activities. To overcome the challenge of Lebanese banks prohibiting the opening of new accounts in foreign currencies, one of the diaspora collectives we interviewed detailed how they turned to digital banking in their countries of residence. They opened a few Revolut accounts, to which they transferred money for a preset list of organisations in Lebanon to use. These accounts were managed online by the diaspora through the Revolut banking app (<https://www.revolut.com>). The app enables the user to have an account to which a prepaid card is linked and can be used to make payments, thus allowing the user to engage in online banking. After creating the accounts, the diaspora group would send the Revolut banking cards with individuals flying to Lebanon, who would hand over the cards to the local actors with whom they were working. Other participants reported transferring money to a diaspora member in their country of residence who would then withdraw the money as cash in USD and carry the cash with them to Lebanon when travelling:

‘being able to take dollars to Lebanon was absolutely pivotal ... Flying into Lebanon [carrying the money in cash] was a way to quickly solve the problem’ (Alice).

Other diaspora groups avoided the transfer of money completely by purchasing items in their country of residence, such as clothing, and delivering them to another individual who was shortly scheduled to travel to Lebanon. The majority of these mechanisms that relied on a member of the diaspora travelling to Lebanon took place over the festive season of 2019/2020 (December–January), when many members of the diaspora community were flying to Lebanon for their holidays. However, such mechanisms became unsustainable as Lebanon and the diaspora’s countries of residence introduced travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Another mechanism employed to circumnavigate the Lebanese banking system and the inability to travel to Lebanon was to order items online to be directly delivered by businesses in Lebanon to those acting on the

ground. An interviewee mentioned how, initially, there was a call for the diaspora to purchase food for the protestors in Lebanon using Lebanese online food delivery platforms such as Zomato. However, when she attempted to do so, the platform did not work with her US debit card. Another interviewee elaborated that Lebanon lacked the digital financial and e-commerce infrastructure to directly support people on the ground:

‘I definitely wish that Lebanon had the infrastructure when it came to businesses so that a place like Amazon, but not Amazon, would serve as a materials delivery system. I could pay groups in Lebanon, who create these materials, pay Lebanese people for the goods and they are directly delivered to those individuals who are in need. That would be such a cool thing. And like from a trustworthy place’ (Alice).

Yet, when discussing such possibilities with another interviewee, the interviewee pointed out the need for governmental buy-in for such e-commerce infrastructures to be put in place, which was a big obstacle to overcome, especially in light of the existing political climate.

Other prominent finance-related technological platforms used were those specific to crowdfunding. GoFundMe and JustGiving were heavily used by the diaspora to raise funds to support activists in Lebanon and to respond to the needs of the population. The fundraising campaigns covered a plethora of issues such as the provision of food and resources to activists on the ground, medical equipment in response to the economic crisis and Covid-19, and relief and construction resources after the Beirut port explosion. Since Lebanon is not within the network of the prominent crowdfunding platforms, the diaspora public, rather than local Lebanese actors, had to launch the campaigns, justify to the platform administrators the need to transfer the money to Lebanon and then transfer the money to local actors at a loss due to the aforementioned banking situation. This interaction, as well as the need to provide accountability and transparency to the platform administrators and donors of the campaign, required that the diaspora public had to build trusted relationships with the local Lebanese actors that were making use of the finances and hold them accountable. One of the interviewees that was part of setting up a crowdfunding campaign highlighted that

‘the diaspora is providing money in an unclear landscape and we do need to see localised impact’ (Rawane).

Many of the participants expressed mistrust regarding some of the local Lebanese actors, more specifically Lebanese NGOs, since many have political and/or sectarian affiliations that are often hard to identify. One of the interviewees reported that she often found it challenging to support crowdfunding campaigns due to the aforementioned mistrust. Prior to supporting a campaign, she would conduct a thorough online search to identify that the NGO attached to the campaign was not connected to the ruling political parties and was authentic. She found that, usually, the online information about the NGOs was very limited and instead she would resort to trusted personal networks for recommendations, as evidenced by her quote:

‘There were many groups in Lebanon that I didn’t know and couldn’t be sure [about] so I had to ask cousins or close friends to be able to send money and make sure my money [was] going to the right place’ (Alice).

Similarly, another participant would look online to find more detailed information regarding NGOs before donating to the crowdfunding campaign:

‘And so I have seen on many different GoFundMe pages, but also on different like financial pages on NGO websites they sometimes have it like a description of how the money will be transferred ... So I feel like I have been given that information that otherwise I would usually ask like ... oh, I’m going to be sending dollars, but how is someone going to withdraw these dollars [in] Lebanon, what’s going to happen to the money’ (Jamila).

In response to these challenges pertaining to crowdfunding campaigns, collectives within the diaspora public devised and published online their own vetting processes that guided their decisions on which local actors and NGOs to work with and support financially.

*4.3.2 Formulating common agendas.* The interviews surfaced challenges in formulating common social, political and economic agendas between the diaspora public and local actors. Interviewees indicated that, as the political narrative of the revolution began developing, there was an increased need to formulate and formalise a common agenda within the decentralised diaspora public as well as with the local Lebanese actors. However, the process of formulating common agendas was found to be difficult to navigate, which can be attributed to the decentralised nature of the diaspora public as well as tensions between the diaspora and local actors.

Despite the efforts of groups such as *Meghterbin Mejtemiin*, which aimed to act as an umbrella organisation for the overall diaspora public, the decentralised and transnational nature of that public entailed that the political inclinations of different diaspora groups were often fragmented. The lack of clarity of diaspora groups’ political inclinations led to some interviewees disengaging with specific groups within the diaspora public. For example, one interviewee noted that she stopped engaging with a specific diaspora group after attending some of their events and finding that the group had a political inclination with which she did not agree. This scepticism regarding political agendas also extended to engaging with local actors. Interviewees emphasised that when wanting to work with and/or support local actors in formulating agendas, they started by ensuring that there was a shared value system. An interviewee explained that:

‘I look at their website, if they have one. I look at their posts, I scroll through many, if not all of their posts, depending on how many there are. I look at the language choice. I look at how they frame themselves, how they market themselves. I look at their discourse very closely when I have questions and when I am in doubt’ (Jamila).

The same interviewee recounted how at the beginning she was supporting one of the local active groups on Facebook that emerged during the revolution that aimed to facilitate the bartering of goods and services in Lebanon. However, she withdrew her support upon the realisation that the group was not inclusive of refugees, which conflicted with her value system.

Furthermore, our analysis identified further tensions between the diaspora public and local actors. One of the interviewees believed that the diaspora had the responsibility to formulate a common agenda across the layers because, according to him, diaspora members have a better understanding of:

‘Western notions such as freedom of speech, democracy, secularism, civic duties and civil society’ (Alex).

By attending online webinars and talks to observe the diaspora’s positioning and activities, we identified that a lot of the conversation was around reconfiguring the existing systems in Lebanon and proposing interventions to improve current efforts on the ground. Nonetheless, a lot of these conversations were mostly academic and technical and did not capture the plurality of voices of

local actors. These somewhat siloed conversations resulted in the need for substantial negotiations to bridge the political and ideological disconnect between the diaspora public and local actors. The perceived obscurity around the local actors' oppositional political agenda versus mainstream political parties that have been in power since the civil war left diaspora members sceptical about the capabilities of the opposition parties emerging from the revolution to change the political discourse in Lebanon with any impact, especially due to the entrenched sectarianism. This discrepancy in both discourses translated into a frustration by diaspora members regarding the performance of local actors and, in particular, activists. One of the interviewees stated:

'It is infuriating that up till now activists and opposition parties are unable to formulate a common agenda and work towards it. What are they still waiting for? What does it take to come together in one space and put [one's] ego aside and reach common ground?' (Melissa).

By observing one of the WhatsApp groups that represented a taskforce that brought together local actors and diaspora members, we noted the frustration of local actors concerning the diaspora's agenda. They were keen on highlighting that members of the diaspora lacked a proper understanding of the context.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Our findings point to the ways through which diaspora communities were able to self-organise, make decisions and act during such unprecedented times. Members of the diaspora created technologically mediated networks between each other and between themselves and local actors in Lebanon. In this section, we further discuss the formation of these diaspora publics, the internal processes that they devised and their relation with local actors in Lebanon. By doing so, we contribute an understanding of the social processes and technologies that created the conditions for the emergence of such a *multilayered transnational networked public* that influenced the course of the social movement.

### 5.1 The Lebanese 'revolution' as a multilayered, networked, transnational public

In this paper, building on Tufekci's [73] work, we contend that the formed public is notable, not only because of its transnational nature, but also because of its different layers created by the various diasporic communities, and the ways that these geographically disparate communities came together through a common motivation and communication technologies. As shown in Figure 1, the first layer is that which includes the multiple and diverse publics located in different countries where individuals from the diaspora mobilised to provide support for the revolution. Diaspora members came together (whether individually or at a collective level) in each country in which they were based through social networks and by using social media and instant messaging technologies; hence, creating multiple disparate groups, some of which were formally structured (e.g. Diaspora group 01 in Figure 1) and some that were informal (e.g. Diaspora group 02 in Figure 1). These publics developed their own internal socio-technical processes and devised their own ways to structure their support for people back in Lebanon. The second layer is the wider transnational public, which encompasses the different publics of diaspora members (individuals and groups) scattered all over the globe and local publics back in Lebanon (i.e. local actors in Figure 1) brought together under a common cause. It is at the intersection of these two layers that we observe the use of multiple technologies, which ranged from tailored platforms to social media and crowdfunding platforms. Each technology served different functionalities and configured the different diaspora groups and

local actors based on what they were attempting to achieve through the technologically mediated interactions. For example, social media tools were used to communicate and coordinate across the transnational public, whereas platforms such as Slack were used for internal organisational process by some diaspora groups. The technologies used mediated the development of social ties within and across the transnational public. According to [73], the development of these ties allows social movements to become effective (political) actors and move beyond initial disagreements. Through our work with the Lebanese diaspora, we saw the development of self-organisation and decision-making, which facilitated collective action within different diasporic groups and across the diasporic layer, and in negotiation with the local Lebanese layer within the wider transnational public.

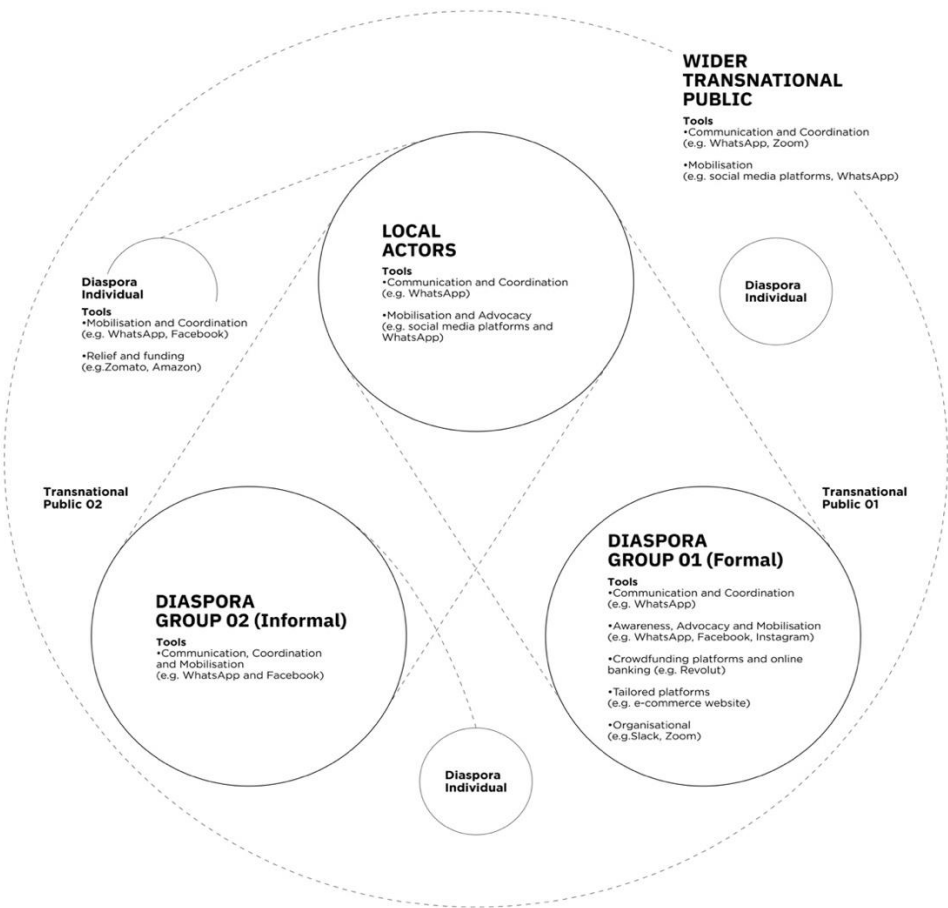


Figure 1. Infographic illustrating the multilayered transnational public.

In relation to the networked public’s structure, similarly to other work in this space [29], our work points to the lack of a specific (hierarchical or non-hierarchical) organisation, with both decentralised and centralised characteristics being evident within the different entities of the

diaspora. While there was a concerted effort by *Meghterbin Mejtemiin* to bring together the different groups that were forming the diaspora layer of the transnational public, the public largely functioned in a decentralised manner, as presented in section 4.1.1. Furthermore, the public

‘functioned without formal hierarchies or leaders and [used] a digitally supported, ad hoc approach to organizing infrastructure and tasks’ [73, p.xxiv].

Impact Lebanon, for example, adopted a wide range of technologies to organise and respond to changing needs. Their initiatives included the crowdsourcing of project ideas, creating new ways for the diaspora to mobilise, and devising new tactics to contribute to the political, social and economic life of Lebanon. Such initiatives were made possible due to the plethora of the ICT available (e.g. Slack, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram) that enabled horizontal interactions between members of the diaspora. As such, these technological tools became ‘networking agents’ that facilitated the propagation of knowledge, the connecting of people and the instigating of action [63]. Furthermore, the decentralised nature of the diaspora layer of the transnational public, in terms of organisational structures and aims, enabled a level of flexibility and adaptability that responded to the changing needs in-country. Our findings show that the underlying structures of the Lebanese transnational public were adaptable and responsive to the dynamic situation on the ground (also referred to as adhocracy [73]). This was demonstrated by their ability to initiate and maintain varying activities in response to the social, political and economic changes in the country as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. Their openness to diverse opinions led to the undertaking of multiple and eclectic actions.

In addition, the efforts of *Meghterbin Mejtemiin* to bring together diaspora groups working to support the revolution echoes transnational HCI and diaspora studies that indicate that diaspora groups often join together around a constructed social identity, which reflects a strong sense of commitment and connection and by identifying as a member of a group [76]. While there is a strong sense of cultural and heritage-based identity [16] among the Lebanese diaspora (see section 4), our findings show that through self-organisation and decision-making, the diaspora layer of the transnational public was centred around an identity of transnational activism, rather than just of culture and heritage.

## 5.2 Tensions within and across layers

The use of digital technology was key in facilitating the creation of such a transnational public. However, through the observation of the use of technologies and the interactions they mediated, our study surfaced some of the tensions within and across the multiple layers of the transnational public. While members of the diaspora were active online by organising and coordinating participation and crowdfunding (see section 4.2), our findings show that local actors perceived the diaspora to be not entirely aware of the complexity of the situation of people on the ground in Lebanon (see section 4.3). Equally, although social media platforms played an essential role in creating and propagating collective action, there was an expectation from the diaspora that this online activity would be met by offline practices in Lebanon. It is here where we contend that while diaspora members were able to be actively engaged digitally and remotely, this was often not mirrored in similar engagements nor in a similar value system in-country, which led to the formation of silos that were detached from issues on the ground. Such tensions between online civic engagement on social media [67] and offline action has been well studied in HCI and CSCW [19]. As such, our work builds on such already existing research on social movements and CSCW and provides further empirical data that highlights the risk of creating silos for political participation

online (in our case, for the diaspora) and results in a disconnect with the reality of social movements and political action in the country.

According to Segerberg and Bennett [63], networked publics might pose threats to civic engagement efforts as they might grow out of control, decrease in productivity or lose perspective in comparison with more organised structures. Our findings show that this is especially true in the context of a transnational public, where we observed tensions in finding common ground between members of the diaspora and local actors (see section 4.3.2). The issues that created tensions between local and diasporic communities were many, from lack of transparency and trust to a lack of understanding of contextual realities. Despite being continuously digitally connected in WhatsApp groups, negotiating a shared understanding between the diaspora layer and local actors proved to be difficult. In addition, as our interviews showed, the diaspora's views may be perceived as trying to impose unrealistic Western notions of democracy and freedom [77]. While this stems from a good intention of transforming the political narrative in Lebanon, it remains problematic, as these values might not align with the contextual realities on the ground and could rather lead to a value colonisation of the Lebanese social movement.

Therefore, within transnational networked publics, there is a need for design work to facilitate the negotiation of political values between the two layers of the transnational public in order to construct a narrative that is inclusive and representative of all the actors. Our findings show that while technologically mediated political debates were organised (e.g. through webinars), they were not necessarily successful, as evidenced by the aforementioned disconnect. Designing for such multilayered transnational publics requires surfacing the underlying value systems of the multiple actors within the transnational public, while taking into consideration the power dynamics and facilitating negotiations between local actors and the diaspora. In doing so, we would be considerate of the power relations that may come about and that contrast with the values and goals of the revolution.

### **5.3 Technologies for networked transnational publics**

The use of already existing digital technologies for self-organisation and decision-making surfaced socio-technical challenges that CSCW is uniquely positioned to contribute to and support the creation of transnational networked publics around issues of concern. As highlighted in our findings, diaspora members created their own socio-technical infrastructures to guide their efforts and deal with the compounded crises in Lebanon. However, the type of digital technologies and platforms used and the ways in which these were configured were dependent on the various context-specific challenges and the events that were unfolding on the ground (see section 4.3.1). One of the key challenges that we identified was the use of crowdfunding platforms to financially resource relief efforts in-country. Already existing platforms had disadvantages when diaspora members tried to resource the revolution, due to the banking system being effectively inoperable and other bureaucratic concerns. For example, GoFundMe, which is a very common crowdfunding platform, is not supported in Lebanon, which forced diaspora members to create crowdfunding campaigns on behalf of local organisations in their countries of residence. This opened the space for scrutiny, as justification had to be provided to the platform's operators about why the money was being transferred to Lebanon, and again diaspora members had to find alternative means to ensure the funding raised reached its target in light of the banking restrictions in the country. This constraint created an additional need of accountability and raised trust issues regarding campaigns, as people needed to know how the money would eventually reach those in need.

Our findings point to how such complex socio-technical configurations, even though necessary, make local actors accountable to members of the diaspora and thus further reinforce power asymmetries between them. In the case of the use of Revolut accounts, while the debit cards were given to local actors, the management of the accounts through the mobile app remained within the control of the diaspora members. CSCW and HCI research have explored issues of trust that pose barriers for individuals when participating in crowdfunding campaigns [35], and others have highlighted the potential for smart contracts to enable trusted, conditional and timely donations in support of a cause [13, 72]. The use of crowdfunding platforms in such contexts have also been critiqued as ways in which digital inequalities between Western contexts and developing ones may be perpetuated [10]. Our work points to the need to design crowdfunding technologies that support the crowdfunding process beyond the collection of funds into a single account; for example, through supporting the distribution of such funds (technically or even legally) to the eligible organisations or individuals, or through being more transparent about how the funds are used, even in such complex and messy contexts.

We argue that while diaspora publics were trying to bypass local infrastructures through other digitally mediated alternatives, whether financial (using online banks such as Revolut) or in kind (creating Amazon shopping lists), they still had to capitalise on social relationships built on trust to ensure that resources reached local actors. Thus, this socio-technical bricolage that took place by the reappropriation of existing technologies could enable, sustain and propagate political action with and for the revolution. Nonetheless, such a bricolage still brings to the fore issues of power and control that need to be accounted for [61] – for example, the control over data (e.g. conversations, financial transactions) that are exchanged on commercial platforms (such as WhatsApp [44]) lies with the corporation that owns them, effectively exposing people to a number of risks or even persecution from oppressive organisations. This raises questions about how such transnational political mobilisation can be supported through such platforms (as also reported in other contexts where social media were used widely [51, 78, 69, 52]) and how these platforms should be designed to embody the values of networked transnational publics. Decentralisation and flexibility are two of the characteristics that we surfaced in our findings, yet further research is needed to contribute more specific technology design implications to support the formation of multiple diasporic publics, the cooperation across them, and the coordination with on-the-ground political and relief efforts, all within a transnational networked public.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The social movement started in Lebanon in October 2019, and subsequent events have led to an exceptional positioning of the Lebanese diaspora as a key player in the politics of the country, stretching out beyond its previous social and economic roles. A significant feature of the mobilisation of the Lebanese diaspora was its ability to form a multilayered transnational public constituted of individual publics (scattered across Lebanon and abroad) and a wider networked public. Such a public was formed by engaging in socio-technical infrastructuring for engagement and collaboration between various diaspora groups across the globe, activists and NGOs in Lebanon. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while sharing a strong social identity, many challenges are encountered by such transnational publics, particularly when exploring digital mediums to support coordinated and collective action. A discrepancy is salient between online and offline mediums and between local publics and those abroad. Future work is needed to develop solid socio-technical processes that can potentially overcome challenges and make more contextualised technology available to respond to such shortcomings. In addition, supporting the formation and



infrastructuring efforts underlying such transnational publics may be used as inspiration for the formation of global networked publics, not only related to diaspora activities, but also to address global challenges (e.g. climate change).

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