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Boris Wille (Halle)

Face-to-Facebook Activism and the Politics of Proximity in the Maldives

The coup d'état in February 2012 triggered the thus far largest protest movement in the history of the Maldivian archipelago. For more than half a year the movement staged numerous rallies, demonstrations and gatherings on the streets while at the same time launching various online campaigns and activities. Like contemporary movements elsewhere, the Maldivian movement conflated digital and street activism in its protest activities. Yet unlike elsewhere its activism was situated in the context of a small-scale-society of approximately 350.000 inhabitants who reside on about 200 densely populated and widely dispersed small islands. This presentation considers how this configuration impacts political action.

While discussing the Maldivian protest movements' entanglements of digital and street activism I address the classic anthropological problem of the social ramifications of territorial and demographic smallness. In anthropology there has been a long discussion of the implications of size for social relationships and institutions that has revolved particularly around the notion of scale. The arrival of new digital communication technologies and the network society now poses theoretical challenges because the territorially determined sociality of communities is nowadays only one among many. Engaging with more recent debates on virtual activism and the digitization of social and political movements I develop a novel approach. I argue that small-scale-societies are characterized by a condition of multiple overlapping proximities that are subject to a politics of proximity. On the example of the Maldivian protest movement I demonstrate how activists utilize, conflate and unlink their proximity assets in service of their political activism.

Boris Wille is a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. He is currently preparing the publication of his ethnographic monograph on democracy and political culture in the Maldives. His research interests include political anthropology, anthropology of media, visual culture, postcolonial studies, ethnological methods, the globalization of epistemologies, maritime societies, and multi-species ethnography.

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