

# **SPECIAL** REPORT no. 176

## *Can I speak to your leader?* **The Afterlife of Digitally Networked Protest Movements**

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# Abstract

A unique aspect of contemporary protest movements across the world is that they are, in fact, leaderless. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed an unprecedented mushrooming of “networked protests” fostered over the internet. In the early 2010s, the Arab Spring and Occupy movements showed that consensus over objectives and courses of action — key determinants of traditional people’s movements in the liberal-democratic world — had become virtually impossible, thus obfuscating the conventional understanding of intensity, time, and outcome in relation to protests. This report problematises the 2020 anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in India against the framework of networked protests. It argues that such movements are increasingly pushing for a reimagined ‘new power’ hermeneutics in which non-hierarchical leaderlessness is not intermediate or incidental, but often a deliberate structure of organisation.

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# Introduction

Many analysts agree that state power in liberal democracies such as the United States and India is going through a transformation, becoming increasingly centralised and autocratic with populist ‘strongman’ rulers at the helm. At the same time, “people’s power” — broadly explained by Walter Lippmann (1955) as the ability of the public to make or break governments — is becoming more decentralised and non-hierarchical.<sup>1</sup> People’s power can be exercised multifariously and is sometimes seen to eventually metamorphose into state power. In the digital age, people’s power is being reshaped by what has come to be known as ‘networked protests’,<sup>2</sup> on which there is a wealth of new scholarship. Perhaps one of the more simplistic but poetic characterisations of the digitally networked protest universe has come from authors Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms—neither of whom belongs to conventional academic circles. Heimans and Timms (2014) have defined “new power,” which situates contemporary digitally

networked protests within open, participatory and peer-driven power distribution.<sup>3</sup> Networked protests, as earlier explained by the sociologist Manuel Castells, defies structure and hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Heimans and Timms explain ‘new power’ thus: “It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it’s most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.”<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary people’s movements—such as iterations of Black Lives Matter in the United States and Europe—have already been situated in the canon of networked protests. The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in India too, have emerged as an expression of a networked movement, dispersing and occupying the space directly opposite to concentrated state power.

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Digitally networked protest movements today are typically, and sometimes consciously, leaderless.<sup>6</sup> Within them, some have democratically, and rather explicitly, positioned themselves against the idea of the dominance of the ‘few’ over the ‘many.’ There appears to be almost intentional, internal reasoning among some of these movements that could potentially point toward a larger shift in the manifestation of people’s power through digitally networked spaces. For the people to oppose and counter the state power concentrated in the ‘strongman’ rulers that have come to lead their countries, they desire to appear different in form and structure from the state’s forces, representatives, or institutions. As the autocratic state increasingly collects power through emerging technology, some contemporary protest movements disperse it, using the same technology. There is a method, therefore, to their ‘leaderlessness’.

During the first decade of the 21st century, unprecedented global internet connectivity led to public expression becoming increasingly democratised. In their 2020 book on what they call “#HashtagActivism”, Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles showed how social media aids the creation of a “counterpublic” in which citizens excluded from mainstream political discourse align and form “alternative networks of debate” digitally.<sup>7</sup>

Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have enabled a culture of real-time public sharing of information and opinion.<sup>8</sup> The 2010s saw rapid advancement in network technology. As a result, internet penetration increased and in countries such as India, costs decreased concomitantly.<sup>9</sup> Connections were fostered over the networked public sphere, leading to heightened engagement on civic and political issues and digitally coordinated action. This created what Castells (1996) has called “horizontal” social media-led movements within “network society.”<sup>5</sup>

# Networked Protests and 'New Power'

**L**eaderless networked protests first emerged in Mexico in the 1990s<sup>a</sup> and mushroomed soon after in the Middle East and North Africa with the Arab Spring, which unseated authoritarian leaders in numerous countries but failed to cause widespread democratic transformations. In the West, the global financial crisis of 2008 gave rise to Occupy and other similar anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberalist movements. Occupy intended to become a global movement against inequality. However, in contrast to previous movements of this kind, it made a conscious decision to not showcase individual leaders. Its de facto decision-making body was called the General Assembly, defined as “a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified-consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought.”<sup>10</sup>

Analysts marvelled at its novel organisational ethos while simultaneously predicting its failure due to that very lack of hierarchy and absence of central leadership.<sup>11</sup> Occupy’s actual failures or successes notwithstanding, the movement signalled the case for new power, where anonymity was a key attribute. Indeed, by the end of 2012, an internet-dwelling hackers group called Anonymous made *Time’s* list of most influential people.<sup>12</sup> In tune with the zeitgeist, Anonymous described itself thus: “You cannot join Anonymous. Nobody can join Anonymous. Anonymous is not an organization. It is not a club, a party or even a movement. There is no charter, no manifest, no membership fees. Anonymous has no leaders, no gurus, no ideologists. In fact, it does not even have a fixed ideology.”<sup>13</sup> Much later, during Hong Kong’s anti-extradition bill movement, protesters echoed this spirit, adopting as their rallying cry the martial artist Bruce Lee’s words, “Be formless, shapeless...like water.”<sup>14</sup>

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a The Zapatista uprising of Mexico has been characterized by Tufekci and others as an early example of a networked protest.

In each instance, gradations of leaderlessness could be seen. While Occupy did not feature an overarching, public-facing leader, ad hoc and local leadership emerged in the process of coordinating the localised series of events. In contrast, the individual(s) driving the work of Anonymous

remained entirely unidentified outside of the digital sphere. In Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, while recognisable figures emerged as moral leaders, they were hardly responsible for directing most of the protest action.

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# A New Hermeneutics of Protest

**A**s opposed to most networked protests, traditional social movements had brilliant, charismatic and often strict and patriarchal leadership at the top of the pyramid that built consensus over objectives via multiple means.<sup>15</sup> Traditional social movements also tended to have fixed objectives, like the repeal of a certain law or enacting a new one. There existed a recognisable hierarchy within the internal organisational structure of most of these movements. Unlike networked protests, which can be uniquely dispersed across time and geography, traditional social movements tended to be more finite and contained. Cases in point are the American civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and other influential figures such as Malcom X, and the anti-Apartheid movement of South Africa led by Nelson Mandela.

In the networked protests of today, building consensus over specific demands over time has become increasingly difficult.<sup>16</sup> The variety of individual grievances, ideas, and concerns gives

rise to a broad set of demands. Similar iterations are seen in political rhetoric, where a candidate or party is running as an agent of change aimed at the majority community. Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan or Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*" (Inclusive Representation, Inclusive Growth) are cases in point. Networked protest movements are spread across geographies and tend to ebb and flow, rather than proceed in a linear manner from a starting point to reach a specific goal. Most of these movements tend to not have a fixed goal in the first place. The present spectrum of the demands of Black Lives Matter (BLM), for instance, is varied across geographies: from specifics like defunding the police in Washington D.C.<sup>17</sup> and legalising cannabis in the Seacoast region of New Hampshire;<sup>18</sup> to more general ones such as reforming the criminal justice system and ending racism.

The BLM, which can be traced to 2013, was born from a Facebook post titled, “Black Lives Matter” sparked after George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American in Florida; Zimmerman was acquitted.<sup>19</sup> Martin’s murder was followed in quick succession by other killings of black men, mostly at the hands of uniformed policemen. Particularly crowd-pulling were the protests and riots that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson.

The movement spilled into the streets from one protest site to another, inviting allies globally. People using the hashtags #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter contributed issue-framing, prescriptions and analyses in the network that penetrated national and international discourse. Palestinian activists used #Ferguson to share with Ferguson protesters remedies for tear-gas exposure and the inhalation of smoke, as well as strategies for countering police escalation tactics. In 2014 and 2016, after the first wave of Black Lives Matter, many of the organisers splintered to form their own groups, all focusing on justice for the African-American community as well as larger reforms in policing and criminal justice.

The BLM displayed intersectionality, like other networked protests.<sup>20</sup> A BLM demonstration, for example, is likely to incorporate elements of the #MeToo movement<sup>21</sup> in a display of intersectional solidarity.

To be sure, networked protests are hindered by both internal and external challenges emerging from the same trends that drive them. Although quick to rise, they can be quick to dissipate too, in what internet sociologists such as Zeynep Tufekci call a “tactical freeze.” Furthermore, in the absence of leadership, these movements have struggled to provide direction, order and protection to their constituents and keep dissenters from undermining the cause by sparking sporadic outbreaks of violence.

Rapidly increasing global internet and smartphone penetration have also given rise to new state surveillance apparatuses that can manipulate, or altogether break these movements—this was seen in Syria since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, as well as in Indian Kashmir in 2019.<sup>22</sup> Discourse in the digital sphere is challenged by hyper-partisanship, “trolling” and echo chambers. Social media companies can also either co-opt or censor these movements. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been used by activists for spreading their political messages but questions are being raised about their political neutrality. Facebook, for one, has been accused of hiding posts by Black Lives Matter organisers; in India, it is accused of freely allowing violently provocative content by right-wing groups and individuals.<sup>23</sup> In order to appropriately assess these movements as distinct from their forebears, it will be useful to adopt a ‘new power’ hermeneutics.



# The Anti-CAA Movement and Black Lives Matter

**M**ovements that are leaderless or those with non-hierarchical decentralised leadership may be here to stay, as can be seen in countries with working democracy. In fact, networked protests are not just a function of the left or liberal societies. Some groups on the extreme right, for instance, tend to view their decentralised and digitally networked nationalist or even partisan struggles as being part of a broader, faceless race war in the liberal West. In this regard, it is interesting to note how disparate nationalist groups on the extreme right are aligning globally while using the same tools to network, and that too in a typical leaderless fashion.<sup>24</sup>

It is no surprise then that in India, with its robust protest culture and long history of people's movements — starting from the mass movement for independence under towering leaders such

as Mohandas Gandhi — a typical networked protest raised its head under the recent anti-CAA struggle. Bolstered by an overwhelming electoral win in the general elections in 2019, Prime Minister Modi's BJP-majority government immediately enacted a series of policies that were largely seen as being discriminatory against the country's minority Muslim community, which constitutes 15 percent of the population. Initially, outside of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, there were no significant protests against these policies. This changed with the promulgation of the CAA in early December 2019. In Kashmir too, the protests were limited to dissenting against the amendment of Article 370 of the Constitution that accorded special status to Indian-administered Kashmir.

The CAA grants Indian citizenship to Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians belonging to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan — India’s Muslim-majority neighbours — if they seek refuge in India.<sup>25</sup> Given South Asia’s history of religious conflict, such a policy is provocative and viewed as hewing to the BJP’s Hindu nationalist posturings. Moreover, observers considered the CAA to be in violation of the Indian Constitution.<sup>26</sup>

The government appeared to have failed to predict the outpouring of people on the streets, given how the CAA was passed easily in parliament, where the BJP held the majority. The nationwide unrest raged in spurts for three months—until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, the government’s response was seen to be severe and invited censure from foreign observers; the protests, however, did not dim in intensity.<sup>27</sup>

The structure of the protests showed the far-reaching significance of leaderlessness or facelessness in building resistance. Anti-CAA protests first escalated in the eastern border state of Assam on 8 December 2019, even before the bill was tabled in Parliament. There, it was led by ethnolinguistic political organisations and unions that had supported the long-drawn National Register of Citizens process two months earlier, and

now organised state-wide resistance. The NRC stipulated that every Assamese would be required to prove their Indian citizenship through a process that many interpreted as designed to “weed out illegal immigrants” from the state.<sup>28</sup> This played into the already persistent, decades-long ethnolinguistic struggle in the state where Assamese-speaking groups rallied against speakers of the Bengali language. The BJP had promised to implement NRC nationwide.<sup>29</sup>

Anti-CAA resistance then quickly spread across university campuses, beginning with Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi, and in about a week, to hundreds of university campuses across the country. Demonstrations around New Delhi were organised by different student, political and civil society groups, some of which have been active in organising and protesting for decades such as the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union in Delhi. The anti-CAA protests, in several pockets such as the one at the iconic India Gate area of New Delhi, were joined and often spearheaded by non-Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

The most consistent was the resistance inside Jamia Millia and the nearby residential colony of Shaheen Bagh, where Muslim women staged a sit-in in the cold weather to press for the revocation of the NRC. Muslims, particularly women, hit the streets after a six-year quiet in the face of what were largely perceived to be discriminatory policies and acts of communal violence.<sup>31</sup> The Shaheen Bagh sit-in attracted widespread media attention, and became a microcosm of the leaderless, digitally networked public sphere which shows the syncretic nature between grassroots organising and the digital sphere. In 2020, Bilkis Bano—the 82-year-old photographed at the Shaheen Bagh protest site—graced the list of *Time* magazine’s ‘100 Most Influential People’ and *BBC*’s ‘100 Women’ lists. For the mainstream media, it was Bilkis who became a symbol of the networked, faceless, leaderless protest that was the CAA-NRC movement.

To be sure, these protests were temporarily aided by some regional leaders of the political opposition, such as Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of the eastern border state of West Bengal, Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen in the southern city of Hyderabad, and Tejaswi Yadav of the Janta Dal (United) in Bihar who organised large political rallies and addressed equally large public gatherings. However, these politicians played a small role in the protests,

mostly by addressing public rallies and through party cadres participating in some of the ground protests. The bulk of the organising force seemed to have spontaneously emerged from several civil rights collectives and NGOs, students, and civic bodies.

For instance, the Indian Civil Liberties Union, a collective of lawyers and activists was informally revived by a motley group who worked on the ground, aiming to provide pro-bono legal representation to jailed protesters. About one hundred civil society organisations came together to form a joint forum called ‘We the People’ for coordinating the demonstrations. During many such instances, older institutions came together with new power networks.<sup>32</sup> The gatherings were layered, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural. In Muslim-dominated areas like Shaheen Bagh, Muslim-majority protesters pressed for not just their community’s demands to revoke the NRC but larger themes like the preservation of secular, constitutional values. In instances of communal solidarity, Hindus and Sikhs formed human chains around Muslims offering prayers in between protests. This kind of message diffusion was characteristic of a networked movement, where specific demands in localised contexts grow into broad, universal messages over time.

The leaderlessness and spontaneity of the geographically spread-out protest movement made it difficult for the government to quash it, despite numerous attempts, like internet shutdowns, police violence, and mass arrests of protesters.<sup>33</sup> It was only after the first wave of COVID-19 and a succession of pressing national concerns that the protests came to a halt. The government arrested several less-known local organisers and some recognisable student leaders and activists, several of whom are Muslim; many are still in jail.<sup>34</sup>

In the United States, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests took over the cities. The movement not just relies on new technological infrastructures and potentials, it was birthed into the public consciousness by them, claim Jackson, et al in their book on *#HashtagActivism*. It explains how through “counterpublic networks”, celebrities picked up the cause and widespread visibility was created by mainstream (often Black) celebrities, journalists, and politicians joining the network. “These networks centre, struggle with, and develop identity politics alongside social movement demands,” the authors write.

The BLM movement displayed the phenomenon of dispersing power. During the 2020 protests, the groups officially registered themselves as an international umbrella network, the Black Lives Matter Global Network. Chapters spread globally and massive protests were organised in countries across the world.<sup>35</sup> The protests were leaderless, and thrived with the support of like-minded institutions, celebrities, and corporations that involved Americans of other ethnicities who were similarly inclined towards reforming the criminal justice and policing systems, among other issues. Leaders of the Democratic Party embraced the slogan and played a small role in bolstering the protests. Here too, the multi-faceted, spontaneous, leaderless movement left then President Trump struggling to identify a political enemy. Trump settled on demonising Antifa — a group of left-leaning activists purportedly committed to “anti-fascist action” who constituted only a small portion of those protesting.<sup>36,37</sup>

At the same time, some sections of American society—including the academia and popular media—looked for a clearer “leadership”, in the traditional, hierarchical sense, in these movements. Many within the fold of the movement disagreed.<sup>38</sup> In response, they coined the word “leaderful”—i.e., that there were many unknown leaders of the protest.

Despite their wide-ranging demands, Black Lives Matter 2.0 has been able to achieve, tangibly and continuously, far more than its earlier iterations. Since May 2020, when George Floyd died in a chokehold by a police officer in Minneapolis, the city has cut billions of dollars from its police budget; other cities have followed suit. Calls for police reforms have grown at many levels, and draft bills are being tabled in Congress. In fact, Minneapolis voted in November 2021 on a charter amendment that would have let them dismantle the current police department and replace it with a Department of Public Safety, a proposal pushed by several City Council members and a Black-led coalition of activists. The residents of the city voted against the proposed reform, viewing it within the wider ambit of defunding the police.<sup>39</sup>

There are striking similarities, and a few key differences, between the Black Lives Matter and anti-CAA movements. The differences

settle around the fact that BLM has not been primarily protesting an actual law perceived to be discriminatory, the way the CAA/NRC movement has. At the same time, the CAA/NRC movement, while having raised a range of issues that touch upon ideological subjects, did not become a larger movement against a wider set of injustices against Indian Muslims. As proved by previous scholarship, BLM has grown to adopt within its umbrella a wider range of issues and demands, both tangible and intangible, systemic and ideological, and has taken much stronger identity-based tones than the CAA/NRC.

Participants and organisers of the various anti-CAA and anti-NRC protests in late 2019 and early 2020, in interviews with this author, expressed wariness over political leaders of an opposition party attempting to usurp the movement.<sup>b</sup> They were also not looking for any hierarchical leadership structure to emerge from within themselves. At the Shaheen Bagh protest site, for instance, the “committee” splintered when some organisers claimed that they were averse to political groups taking over the protests whereas others saw them as attempting to centralise power and take unilateral decisions on their behalf.<sup>40</sup>

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b This author reported on the anti-CAA and anti-NRC protests in Assam, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand between November 2019 and January 2020. From interactions with activists, organisers, and politicians, it was clear that their preferred way of organising was to remain diffused, non-hierarchical, and horizontal, i.e. without a singular leader.

# Postscript

The farmers' protests of India in 2020-21 became among the largest contemporary movements in terms of participation. It can be described as a hybrid protest movement that utilises both, the fluidity of the networked protest—as witnessed in expansive, internet-based international and diaspora group participation—as well as a traditional movement where structured, hierarchical power distribution was seen at the leadership and decision-making levels. Much of the organisational wind under its wings were provided by 32 farm unions and their entrenched leadership, and the detailed deliberative and consultative processes between them. Other leaders who grew to be important faces of the protest, like western UP's Rakesh Tikait and the late Chaudhary Ajit Singh, have also been entrenched in farm union organising and/or farm politics. Here again, most of the political opposition to the incumbent government coalesced around the movement, and did not usurp it.


The movement registered a definitive “win” as it got its most important demands accepted by the government, which had hitherto been seen as unbending. In this sense, the farmers' movement registered a public win, and the CAA-NRC movement which has managed to put a brake on the actual implementation of the policy without having led to public apology or the publicised withdrawal of the laws, are different. The CAA-NRC is an example of a networked protest and the farmers' movement is a traditional protest with hybrid networked components. While the former did not achieve its said goal in the traditional sense, the latter did. But iterations of the CAA-NRC movements have begun to be formed again—befitting a networked protest.

# Conclusion

**N**etworked protests are constantly evolving. It is imperative to redefine ideas and parameters of intensity, speed and outcome of the networked, non-hierarchical protest movements of today that increasingly embody characteristics of new power. Even when these movements are sometimes weakened by a lack of traditional hierarchy, they are often characterised by gradations of, rather than complete absence of leadership. Gradations of non-traditional, multi-layered and distributed forms of power-sharing within these movements often stand in conscious and deliberate opposition to traditional hierarchical power.

Neither of the CAA/NRC protests, the Black Lives Matter movement, or Occupy have entirely died. It would be wiser to acknowledge that they continue to be active, albeit in crests and troughs, across spaces, and after significant gaps in time. Indeed, networked protests spill into the real world,

evolving from the virtual to the real – movements like Black Lives Matter and anti-CAA use substructures of traditional people’s movements and end up sharing the space occupied by them.

Networked movements and their hermeneutics are demonstrating that they are here to trigger long-term changes and gradual shifts in perception, rather than topple governments or change policy abruptly. These movements might not be bringing about cataclysmic changes in the short term, but they are at their best, capable of birthing a new public consciousness that can disrupt social, state and parastate power structures that remain concentrated. For that to happen, they themselves should be seen as distributed and willing to share power. 

# Endnotes

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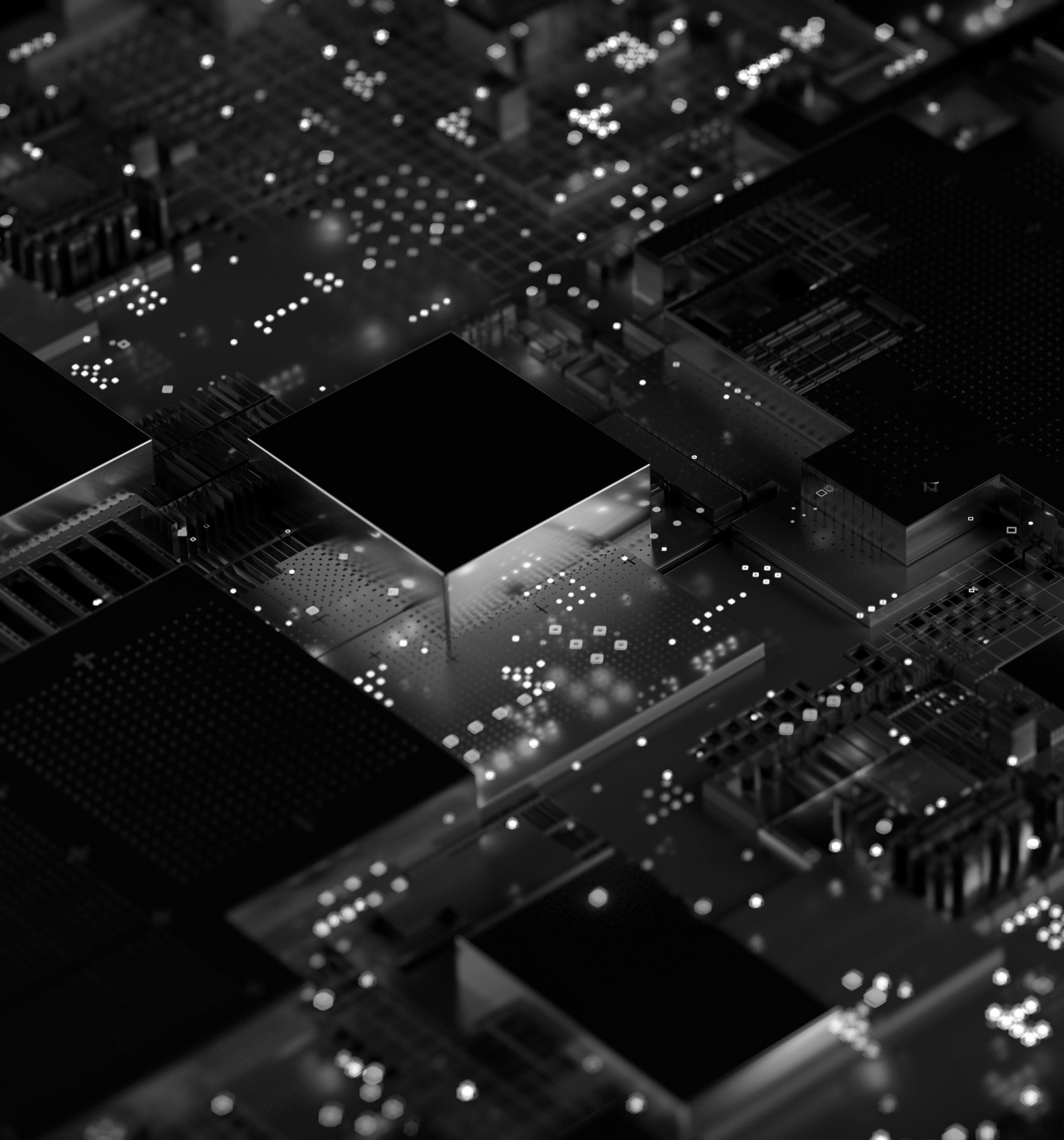
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## **About the Author**

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