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Remixing the Spring!: Connective leadership and read-write practices in the 2011 Arab uprisings

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Abstract

This article discusses the connections between the unfolding of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the "culture of the net." Being far from overestimating the role that Internet has played in the uprisings, we propose to look at it not as an ensemble of tools, applications and technologies; but as a specific set of values, behaviors, skills and strategies that define the cultural dimension of the web. The article shows how linking, sharing and remixing have been among the core cultural practices behind the social movements that were successful in confronting Egypt and Tunisia's regimes. We also discuss how, despite the fact that the Syrian uprising has not achieved its political goal, yet it shares a similar cultural framework based on participation, peer-production, remix practices.

Keywords

Internet, Arab Spring, Egypt, activism, Middle East, Tunisia, social media, Syria, social networks

Web 2.0. culture and the Arab uprisings

This article examines[1] and discusses the connections between the unfolding of the Arab uprisings and the "culture of the net" (Castells 1996). The role of the Internet and social networks in the events that, starting from December 2010, shook and re-shaped the Arab region, has been extensively debated in articles, conferences, public meetings. Mainstream media have largely recurred to the "Facebook and Twitter revolutions" narrative to describe the grassroots process which led to the overthrown of Ben Ali and Mubarak's regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in the first months of 2011. A lot of emphasis has been put on the role played by social networks in organizing and

mobilizing the masses. It has even been argued whether the Arab awakening could ever have taken place without the Internet and social networks.

Far from overestimating the role that Internet has played in the Arab uprisings, we propose to look at it not as an *ensemble* of tools, applications and technologies; but as a specific set of values, behaviors, skills and strategies that define the cultural dimension of the web rather than its technological aspect. Our argument is that the Arab uprisings have been intrinsically a "web 2.0" phenomenon. By putting an emphasis on this web 2.0 dimension we do not want to suggest that the revolts were Internet-determined and Internet-driven, nor that Arabs have been mobilized exclusively through web-based platforms and tools. Here we propose to look back at the original meaning of web 2.0 as a "loosely defined intersection of web application features that facilitate participatory information sharing (...) and collaboration on the World Wide Web."[2]

Tim O'Reilly (2005) was the first to emphasize the social and participatory dimension of the web 2.0. He spoke of a "web of connections" supported by a "collective intelligence" (Levy 1994), i.e. users that have now turned into actual content-producers. World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee also attributed to web 2.0 applications and tools the potential to shape the Internet as "a collaborative medium, a place where we [could] all meet and read and write."[3] Here he suggested the dramatic shift on the client-side/web browser technologies used in web 2.0[4] that have significantly made the access to production and distribution tools easier, enabling every user to switch from simply consuming content to actually producing, editing, sharing, re-manipulating it.

Lawrence Lessig (2008) noticed that read-write (RW) culture – i.e. the possibility to produce content besides consuming it – had existed for centuries, far from being an Internet-generated phenomena. Communities and cultures are influenced by the underlying technology, yet "grow far beyond the technology itself," as Joichi Ito (1997) observed. Technology provides the tools that make the RW culture happen on a mass scale, yet the latter is not technology-determined. By providing easily accessible and cost-

effective production tools, the Internet only brings back on a mass scale a way of producing and understanding culture that had existed throughout the centuries with the exception of the 20th century, the only period in history when cultural production became professionalized and industrialized (something that Lessig has described as "read-only culture," RO). Thanks to web-based applications and accessible cost-effective tools, every user has now the possibility to self-generate content and to edit, change, re-package content produced by other users. "Remix" (Lessig 2008), peer-production and sharing are cultural practices implied by web 2.0 technologies, whose adoption at a mass scale the Internet contributes to spread and accelerate. They shape the core of web 2.0 culture as an ensamble of social mindsets, behaviors, attitudes whose adoption technology helps to emerge on a mass scale; but they have existed before it and outside of it.

We argue that this culture based on participation, peer-production, sharing and remix has formed the basic tissue of the Arab uprisings, both in online and offline contexts. By emphazising the distinction between an offline and online mode we do not pretend these two contexts to exist separately. Yet, it is only by considering both online and offline contexts as part of the same ecosystem that we can understand contemporary political activism, its practices and its culture(s). We will show in fact how linking, sharing, remixing – key features of the web 2.0 – have been among the core practices behind the social movements that were successful in confronting Egypt and Tunisia's regimes even when these movements were acting exclusively in an offline mode.

We will also discuss how, despite the fact that the Syrian uprising has not achieved its political goal to topple the regime at the time we draft this article, yet it shares the same cultural framework based on participation, peer-production, remix practices. We will also underline the role that a new Arab tech elite has played in the uprisings acting as social connectors and bridge leaders within social movements. We refer here to people commonly defined as "techies" or "tech-savvies," i.e. individuals who enjoy a high degree of familiarity with technology, being often early adopters of technologies.

By using and mastering technologies, techies have become familiar with the cultural ecosystem that these technologies imply and help to nurture. Hence, their role as mediators has been crucial in maintaining an always-on connection between the already existing, strong but often isolated "offline" social networks (factories, universities, unions, mosques, families etc.) and the broader digital public.

Connective Leadership and Social Movements: Linking People, Curating Content

Before discussing the core examples of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, some literature on social movements should be briefly highlighted in respect to the leadership issue.[5] According to Melucci (1996), because contemporary social movements take the shape of segmented networks "it is difficult to identify once and for all a set of stable leadership functions, which would concentrate themselves into a single entity." If this decentralized and networked structure implies the segmentation of leadership functions and the multiplication of leaders, then individuals who act as "brokers" of connectivity within the movement will have to play a crucial role in it (Diani 2003).

Connective leadership is a very crucial concept when it comes to contemporary social movements, as it helps to avoid the misleading distinction between "leaders" (playing an active role) and "followers" (playing a passive role). According to the literature (e.g. McAdam, McCarty and Zald 1996; Melucci 1996; Della Porta and Diani 1999, Diani 2003; Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004), the main function this connective leadership should perform is toconnect people and information, framing the latter in ways that might generate support for the movement itself. Connecting people has a crucial meaning both inside the movement – where strong and weak ties coexist – and outside – where links are established with other activists of similar movements around the world, specifically "diasporic" activists, slacktivists, the mainstream media (Morris and Staggenbord 2004).

Framing information and managing the so-called "information politics" (Keck and Sikkink 1998) is also crucial for a social movement. "Information

politics" is the process of collecting information about issues of interest, the activity of the movement, the misbehaviors of the opponents; it consists in deploying such information in strategic ways in both national and transnational public arenas (Smith 2004). As Zlad (1996) writes: "Social movements exist in a larger societal context. They draw on the cultural stock of images for what is injustice, for what is a violation of what ought to be." This means that, while producing and sharing information (texts, pictures and videos), inventing slogan, engaging in a dialogue with the media and organizing performances, movements are involved in a symbolic bargain in order to generate consensus for their actions.

In a broadcast media-led context this process could be initiated only by those who have access to news outlets and information gatekeepers. On the contrary, in a web 2.0-led context such production of symbolic meaning can be managed at a broader level and turned into a peer-produced participative process. Since content production is now distributed among peers, the role of connective leaders is key in activating those framing devices that should order, tag, archive, organize and add context to the crowd-sourced material. Connective leaders within a social movement act a bit like curators do in editing raw material. They put content into context, turn information into communication, give sense and meaning to the chaotic richness brought by mass peer-production.

We will now analyze how a "tech elite" emerged in the Arab World prior to 2011; how it managed to take care of the curation function during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions; and, how it acted as a connective leadership within those social movements and in respect to the outside world. We will also discuss why this connective leadership did not emerge in the Syrian case and how the lack of curating and framing functions has actually weakened the effectiveness of the uprising. At the same time we will show how, even in the absence of this connective leadership, the Syrian uprising still contains many features that link it to the core of a broader web 2.0 culture.

Egypt and Tunisia: connecting people, bridging revolutions

Before discussing how the connective leadership's functions of connecting people and framing information have been performed during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, it is worthy to have a quick look at the professional backgrounds of the tech elites in both countries. Analyzing the biographies of the Tunisian and Egyptian activists who have played a connective leadership role within the uprisings, it is remarkable that the majority share a background – in many case a professional one – in the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) domain, both profit and not-for-profit. Many of them are web engineers, developers, ICT start-up entrepreneurs, online marketing strategists, web editors, tech-oriented NGOs people, open software advocates, community managers of web portals, bloggers. As indicated by previous research (Della Ratta and Valeriani 2011), whether coming from a profit or a non-for-profit background, they all share a vision of ICT as a main push for social change. In their views, ICT can strongly contribute to social change by developing new technological infrastructures that can facilitate connections among people and help them sharing ideas.

The passion for technology and the strong belief that it could empower individuals and drive social change were the common denominators that helped shaping a community of tech savvies elites in both Tunisia and Egypt.[6] During the 2000s, many tech-themed initiatives were organized in the whole Arab region, as geek fests, bar camps, net- conferences, open source and Creative Commons meet ups.[7] These events were not politically-oriented in their nature, as their immediate goal was to share views and tips about technology. But, given the authoritarian contexts where these meetings were hosted, talking about technology was to imply having discussions on freedom of expression and other related issues like censorship and cyber surveillance that tech tools would help to circumvent.

However, the meetings were mainly framed in the context of tech innovation and commitment to the open web. The cultural practices around which the participants gathered were those of sharing and remixing. This

common language helped connecting people with different degrees of political awareness, some of them being politicized activists, others being people with no political affiliation or ideology.

It is important to notice how these tech savvy elites have managed to become connective leaders both within the Arab region and in respect to the broader international community long before 2011. At a regional level the tech meetings served as platforms for networking in order to forge inter-Arab connections, discuss common problems, brainstorm about possible solutions and start structuring Arab tech savvies as a loose, yet connected community of peers. In 2008 Arab tech savvies were already involved in developing a regional network of peers by organizing tech-themed meet-ups and workshops. The first editions of the "Arab techies"[8] and of the "Arab bloggers meeting" were both held in 2008, respectively in Cairo and in Beirut. Not by chance, in both events Tunisians and Egyptians techies[9] proved to have strong leadership skills in organizing the gatherings, selecting and inviting participants, facilitating debates and, after meetings were over, keeping people connected. At a global level, by developing relationships and connections with international activists and other techies, information were exchanged while practices and strategies were shared.

At the "Arab techies" and "Arab bloggers" meetings key international figures were present – like Jacob Applebaum, a well respected techie and the expert behind the *Wikileaks* security system. Arab expats were also key in establishing these links between the international activists' scene and the regional one; to this respect, Nasser Wedaddy, a Mauritanian Washington-based blogger and a leading figure of the American Islamic Congress (one of the organizations lobbying for American Muslims in Washington, DC) has provided the meetings' participants with his network of connections with the American mainstream media and officials.

Some have speculated whether during these tech meetings Arabs would be trained by international activists – and by Western powers behind them – to tactics and strategies aimed at overthrowing their authoritarian regimes,

exporting revolutionary models previously tested in Eastern Europe.[10] Although it is undeniable that, at some point, both Tunisian and Egyptian activists have been in touch with organizations like Canvas,[11] it is highly reductive to portray these exchanges of ideas and experiences as a pure taking process. We should rather speak about a global flow of ideas, strategies and tactics that have circulated and have been shared worldwide – and not only among US and Arab based techies; at least since the anti-globalization movement has gained ground at the end of the 1990s. The savvy way this global movement made use of the technology in general and the Internet in particular – not only to organize and spread the information but also to structure itself and set a network of relationships across the planet – is key to understand the cultural tissue shared by Arab tech savvy elites and their international colleagues prior to 2011.

Yet connective leadership is not only about nurturing international relationships and connecting the movement to the outside world. It is also very much about brokering connections within the movement itself by connecting activists that work in both online and offline contexts and creating bridges between traditional social networks (trade unions, mosques, etc) and the virtual ones (particularly Facebook, the most used platform in the Arab World). Tunisia offers an interesting case study to this respect. Tunisian Internet activism dates back at least to 2001, when Tunezine first appeared as one of the first opposition's websites. Created by economist Zohair Yahyaoui, it had a huge success for its satirical articles, written in Tunisian dialect under a nickname, denouncing censorship and violation of human rights perpetrated under Ben Ali's regime. In 2004 the blog platform Nawaat.org was launched by a group of Tunisian activists – some of them from the diaspora, like Sami Ben Gharbia, a political refugee in the Netherlands and Global Voices Advocacy director- to provide a forum for Tunisians to express themselves freely (and anonymously, in many cases). Nawaat has been leading a number of cyber protests and innovative projects on the Internet to denounce censorship and the lack of freedoms Tunisians were living in under Ben Ali.

In 2005, when the World Summit on the Information Society was hosted in Tunis, a group of Tunisian techies (among them, Nawaat's co-founder Ben Gharbia and Riad Guerfali) created the "Tunisian Association for the Defense of Cyberspace (ATPD- Cyberspace)."[12] The aim was to run a cyber protest, called *Yezzifock!* (Enough is enough), to draw national and international attention to the issue of web censorship and lack of basic freedoms in Tunisia. Some months before Riad Guerfali, under the pseudonymous of Astrubal, had posted online "*Dans la tete de Aziza*" (In Aziza's head), a video remix of the well-know Macintosh commercial which in 1984 launched Apple personal computer for the first time. The campaign, set in a dystopic setting, shows a humanity which is monitored and dominated by a Big Brother-like figure. A nameless runner throws her hammer on the TV screen where the dictator's image appears and finally succeeds in freeing people from slavery. Astrubal's remix features a little girl who dreams about the nameless runner waking up Tunisians from the eternal sleep induced by Ben Ali's regime whose image clearly appears on the TV screen. In 2010, a group of Tunisian activists were arrested while trying to organize "*Nhar 3ala 3ammar*" (Day against censorship), a rally against online censorship. After quick consultations, a back-up plan was set: a new call was circulated asking supporters to walk around or sit in Tunis' cafes simply wearing white. The "white clothes" rally was the first flash mob ever organized in Tunisia.

These are just few examples of the intense online creative activity carried on by Tunisian techies over the years in order to mobilize to the cause of freedom not only the international public, but the Tunisians themselves. In fact, as Ben Gharbia underlined in different public events,[13] the Tunisian Internet scene was divided between the tech savvies elites – who eventually turned into politically aware activists – and the general public, a critical mass of Tunisians that were using social networks in order to stay connected with friends and relatives without any political goals. Those would not believe that the Internet was heavily controlled and that the regime was harshly cracking down on cyber freedoms; at least until 2009, when Facebook was blocked. Even if just for 10 days, this was enough time – according to Ben Gharbia – to force them to realize that a common battle should be fought

with the politicized activists. Tightening censorship eventually led to the opposite result of uniting two very different Internet crowds and pushing them to study common solutions and strategies to circumvent censorship and surveillance.

At the same time, Tunisian tech savvies were able to reach out to offline movements as strikes and workers' mobilizations which were happening mostly in central Tunisia – e.g. the revolt of the Gafsa Mining Basin in 2008[14] and numerous protests in Sidi Bouzid, even few months before the actual Tunisian revolution broke out in December 17, 2010. Nawaat's co-founder Ben Gharbia has noted that one of the goals of the portal was "to bridge the gap between collective action through social media and more traditional protests movement tactics."[15]

This connection between offline traditional movements and the tech savvy elites involved in online activism is clear in the Egyptian case, too.[16] The origins of grassroots movement *Kifaya* (enough) can be tracked back to the solidarity committees that populated the Egyptian streets during the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and in the huge anti-war movement that mobilized thousands of Egyptian youths in 2003. *Kifaya* finally emerged in the summer of 2004 and gained momentum in 2005 at the time of the constitutional referendum and presidential election campaigns. The movement, which had asked Mubarak to step down, was eventually crushed; but it had turned into a milestone of Egyptian activism. The Egyptian tech activists' scene was growing in skills and organizational potential.

In 2005 Egyptian software developer and political activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, together with wife Manal Hassan who shared both a techie and a politicized background, founded the Egyptian blogs aggregator Manalaa.net which won the special Reporters Without Borders prize. Three years after, a group of Egyptian activists organized a Facebook protest in solidarity with the planned strike of El Mahalla el Kubra's workers. They called on cyber participants to blog, post pictures and videos to report about the workers' strike and mobilize the Internet to their cause. It was April 6, 2008 and the homonymous movement was born, being the first example of a synergy

between an online run campaign and an actual workers' struggle on the ground. Asmaa Mahfouz – the girl who lately became famous worldwide for posting the YouTube video calling upon the Egyptians to hit the streets on January 25, 2011 – was a co-founder of the 6th of April youth movement.

Two years later, in 2010, Khaled Said, a middle-class young man from Alexandria, was arrested in a cybercafe and beaten to death by the police. This episode sparked outrage among Egyptian youth and pushed Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google executive based in Dubai, to create the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page. The page soon attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters, becoming Egypt's biggest dissident Facebook page. Here the first call for a mass protest on January 25, 2011 was launched. The page was able to catalyse people's dissent and form a community which opposed the police's brutality and, more generally, Mubarak's regime, calling for its fall.

Framing the information: curation and remix practices

Besides connecting people inside and outside the movement, one of the most important tasks of a connective leadership should be to frame the information about the movement and its activities. Giving the information a specific framework and putting it into a context is a key factor in gaining national and international attention and credibility, as well as in raising awareness and media coverage for a certain cause. In the Egyptian and Tunisian cases these tasks were very effectively performed by a number of local and Arab activists, members of the above described tech savvy elites with powerful bridge connections outside the Arab World, too: people like Mauritanian US-based Nasser Wedaddy who, during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, had frequent exchanges with activists on the ground in order to verify the information, upload it in real time, and give it a context. The framing process was particularly useful to convey the American audience the idea of Tunisia and Egypt being peaceful revolutions led by a non-violent youth in search of dignity and freedom; and to gain the public opinion's support.

Curating the chaotic information that was coming out from Facebook, translating it, tagging and archiving for easy online queries were also tasks performed by tech savvy Arabs. Sami Ben Gharbia has underlined how, during the Tunisian revolution, curation platforms like Nawaat were taking care of these functions. The curators' language and editing skills were key features to dig raw material on Facebook;[17] select the most important pieces of news, videos, etc.; translate from Tunisian dialect into formal Arabic, French or English; archive it on other web platforms; tag with key words in order to make it easily researchable online; twit about it; write articles on international media where information would be placed into its context. Ben Gharbia's analysis on the "information cascade" (Dotey, Rom and Vaca, 2011) during the Tunisian revolution relies on a triangle where Facebook's user-generated content and curation platforms lie at the bottom; while mainstream media stay at the top, taking news feeds from the curators and not directly from end-users. The reputation and "clout" of the activists involved in the curation process are key to turn raw material generated by end-users into actual information that can be processed by mainstream media. The latter, too, is extremely relevant to broadcast the communication to the general public. In the Arab World in fact TV is still the main news provider; e.g. in the case of the Egyptian revolution a Gallup poll recently showed that 63 percent of the population was informed about the events by Al Jazeera channel.[18]

It should be underlined here that the Qatar based TV channel had established a relationship with Arab tech savvies long before the uprisings. The basis of this cooperation lied in a common vision that at least one part of the network – the New media team- shared with Arab techies. Leaders of the Al Jazeera new media team like Mohamed Nanahbay and Moeed Ahmad had pushed the channel's management to explore many pioneering web-based projects,[19] and the network itself had supported and joined many of the tech-meetings happening in the region and worldwide. Therefore, the virtuous circle between a mainstream media like Al Jazeera and the Arab tech elite was the result of both sides sharing the principles of web 2.0 culture, as defined in the first paragraph of this article.

This is even more evident if we go back to the actual kick off of the Tunisian revolution, when Ali Bouazizi – a political activist from Sidi Bouzid – filmed the martyrdom of fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi and uploaded it on Facebook. Ali Bouazizi was the "traditional" activist with strong ties on the ground, who had taken part in many workers' protests in central Tunisia prior 2011. At the time when he filmed the video he had a Facebook account, opened in 2009 and left almost inactive.[20] But two processes worked on parallel to spread the video all over the Tunisian Internet – spreading the rage of the Tunisian people, too. Few hours after filming the video he made a live interview with Al Jazeera which draw the Arab public's attention on the event; on parallel, cyber activists[21] were engaging tech elites all over the world by sharing the information in foreign languages and putting it in its right context, i.e. the growing anger against Ben Ali's corrupted regime and the desire to topple it.[22]

The Egyptian case presents a similar virtuous circle between media (online and mainstream), protesters on the ground and curators. More than Tunisia, Egypt had a very visible and internationally well known elite of bloggers like Wael Abbas or Noura Younis that were able over the years to raise attention over sensitive issues and the lack of freedoms in Mubarak's Egypt (Faris 2010). When anti-Mubarak protests erupted on January 25, 2011, international media – and activists – had already a well-established relationship with many bloggers and techies in Egypt. When the Internet was shut down for few days by the regime, a group of regional and international techies – among them Habib Haddad, the Lebanese Boston-based founder of Yamli.com – was able to provide Egyptians with the voice-to-tweet service, a tool to keep information running on Twitter using ordinary voice calls.[23] Moreover, an alternative dial-up system to connect people to the Internet was set up by Alaa Abdel Fattah, his wife Manal Hassan and sister Mona Seif to keep communications alive during the three day shut down imposed by Mubarak. In this "geeky" project they were advised by Jacob Applebaum who was, as underlined before, in touch with the Arab techies' community since the 2009. As a reaction to the Internet shut-down, not only some alternative online paths were found; people reacted in the off-

line world, too, by hitting the streets even more in response to the lack of web coordination. As Adel Iskandar (2011) noted, Egyptians "became more determined [to revolt], because they refused the government's attempt to 'infantilize' them. Their message to the regime was 'Egypt can't be blocked and its people can't be unplugged.'"[24]

Together with curation, remix also played an important role in framing information on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings and, consequently, in gaining general public support. The practice of remixing, re-writing, manipulating content is associated with creativity, irony, fun: all key ingredients in the "tactical use of media." Geert Lovink (2002a, 2002b) defines the latter as a critical use and re-combination of mainstream media produced content (slogans, images, music, pop characters) through irony and parody, in order to mock power, demystify authority and gain public attention. The Egyptian and Tunisian Internet blossomed with these examples, prior to the revolutions (as pointed out in the case of Apple commercial's Tunisian remix or in "*Nhar 3ala 3Ammar*") and during the days of the uprisings. Midan Tahrir, the main square where the 18 days long protests were staged in Cairo, was a living example of these remix practices that involved art, music, graffiti, slogans, live performances.

Creative civil disobedience, artworks, guerrilla advertising, viral marketing have been widely employed by social movements during both the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions. According to the tech savvy elites of both countries, by involving the artistic community and having them generating politically-themed creative works, or remixes of existing ones, more media and public opinion's attention were provided to their cause.

The Syrian exception (yet...)

The Tunisian and Egyptian cases illustrate how a connective leadership made up of tech-savvies elites has successfully linked people and information within the movement and outside it, generating support and media attention; and how it has contributed to accomplish the political goals of

the uprisings. Syria is widely deemed as an exception: Bunce (2011) has stressed on the similarities between Egypt and Tunisia, two countries much less "balkanized" than Syria, where sectarian divisions are stronger and deeply affect social and political life (Owen 2004). Syria's ethnic, religious and cultural fragmentation is a factor that should be taken into account not only when analyzing the Syrian uprising on the ground. Even when looking at the "virtual" side of the Syrian revolution and at the online communities on the Syrian Internet, the fragmentation aspect is one of its most remarkable aspects.

As noted by De Angelis (2011), "in a society divided between different ethnic groups and religions, a networked and dispersed information environment can have the effect of encouraging differences and of generating confusion and fear." De Angelis has showed to which extent in the Syrian case the scattered nature of the Internet had actually enhanced the fragmentation and the polarization already present on the ground. He has mentioned the existence of web "information cocoons" replacing "knowledge communities," with the immediate effect of reinforcing existing beliefs instead of opening up to different views; this would have pushed people to stay in a closed circle where similar opinions are shared, instead of engaging in a dialogue with the other side. This process would also be encouraged by the inner nature of Facebook, a closed network *par excellence* where sharing information with non-friends become extremely problematic. Moreover, in the Syrian case "Facebook is not integrated into a broader cyber-cascades management" (De Angelis 2011). Syrian activism completely lacks the virtuous process described by Sami Ben Gharbia for Tunisia, where curators take user-generated content out of Facebook and package it to cater other, more open, web-platforms and mainstream media. This is not the reason why the uprising has not succeed in achieving its political objectives. Yet, it is indeed one of the main causes of a media chaos perceived in the Syrian case, where none of the actors is able to generate a credible narrative of the events. As De Angelis (2011) has pointed out: "in Foucault's terms, we could say that no actor is by now capable of re-establishing any regime of truth."

The lack of curators-like figures in the Syrian context is indeed due to different reasons that can be ascribed mainly to political factors. The "decades-long repression by the Assad regime initially prevented Syrian activists from collaborating, whether in virtual space or in person, to develop expertise with new media technologies to the degree achieved by Egyptian political activists. It also denied them opportunities to experiment with planning, preparing and managing nonviolent protests against the regime" (Khamis, Gold and Vaughn 2012).

Few Syrians – most of them living and working abroad – attended the above described meetings happening in the region to push tech savvies elites to get together within a broader Pan-Arab framework. Prior to the March 2011 uprising, a scarce coordination between Arab tech savvies notably Tunisians and Egyptians – and Syrians existed.

Indeed, a strong tech culture element was present inside Syria – which was expressed in various small "geeky" events held mostly in Damascus starting from 2009[25] – but this never had the time and the opportunity to turn into something more politically or culturally organized than just a discussion about tools, applications, and tech frameworks. The same tight security control prevented a vibrant, politically aware blog scene from growing as it did in Egypt or Tunisia. Not only were online forms of self-expression heavily controlled and engineered; cooperation and mutual exchanges between peers were discouraged, too. But if Syria clearly lacks the connective leadership's functions of linking people and framing information described above, yet it still presents some very important features that could ascribe the Syrian uprising within the web 2.0 culture framework.

After almost one year and half of protests and unrest in Syria, Syrian Internet generated content still covers a very important function. If it only rarely frames the information, or mobilizes people to the Syrian cause; yet it does the crucial job of opening up citizens' forums and pushing forward the idea of an active citizenship. A good example is provided by the evolution of the "Raised hands" campaign (Della Ratta 2012 a, 2012 b), a government backed billboard series of ads that was launched in Syria a few weeks after

the uprising started in March 2011. The outdoor campaign, clearly aiming at restoring order in the streets and preventing people from protesting, featured a raised hand declaring: "whether progressive or conservative, I am with the law"; "whether girl or boy, I am with the law" and similar slogans, all matched with multi-colored, raised hands. At some point, with all these colored hands raised everywhere in public spaces, cities had a sort of Orwellian atmosphere, a sort of "Big Brother" watching citizens and reminding them to comply with the law. But soon thereafter, parodies of these posters started mushrooming in the cyberspace. Depicting the very same raised colored hand, each virtual poster carried a different slogan. "I am free," said one raised hand on a Facebook group. "I lost my shoes" echoed another – suggesting that the shoes had been thrown at the dictator in sign of protest. "I am not Indian," joked another poster, using an ironic – and slightly racist – popular expression as an answer to a regime that has exclusive control over the formal meaning of "law" and "lawlessness." "I am not Indian" was re-affirming the "Syrianness" of the citizens who wanted not be fooled by the regime as if they were stupid. At some point, the creative directors of the campaign changed the slogan with a more neutral "I am with Syria. My demands are your demands." Yet, even this accommodating campaign registered another new wave of user-generated responses over the Internet, and not only in virtual spaces. Armed with a marker and probably at nighttime, some citizens took the courage to descend from the virtual alleys of Facebook to the real streets of Syria. They deleted the second half of the slogan – "my demands are your demands" – and changed it into: "my demands are freedom."[26] Today, after an year and half since the uprising started, the campaign is still being remixed and shared, providing end-users with a sort of citizens' forum where active citizenship can be expressed and all sort of opinions or counter-opinions can find their way to become public, e.g. pro-regime people declaring their unconditioned support for the president.

There are some important aspects in the "raised hands" viral campaign which signal that the cultural tissue at the basis of the Syrian uprising is indeed directly linked to the broader web 2.0 culture. First, this user-generated content (UGC) is the expression of a direct dialogue established between

citizens now turned into peer-creators. Syrians have realized their ability to respond to regime-generated messages and they're hitting back: the "raised hands" campaign shows their fluency in official rhetoric, their ability to challenge it and re-gain control over the symbolic meaning of words such as "law," "nationalism." Users, far from being passive receivers of a pre-packaged content, have finally become creators themselves. This is a process of re-appropriation of their ability and skills in mastering the read/write culture (R/W) Lessig was talking about.

Second, the "Raised hands" campaign is a very powerful example of remixing, where the original message gets manipulated and re-manipulated again, in an endless chain of viral messages. It becomes a *meme*, defined as a "unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices."[27] And, as Heylighen (1996) underlines: "the meme is useful for the group, without necessarily being useful for the individual." So why is this *meme* being shared and re-produced all over the places? What is the culture that it is expressing, the values it spreads? Why is it useful for the group rather than for invididuals? And to which group is it useful? Some considerations can be started from these questions. The idea carried on by the "raised hands" is that of an active citizenship, where everybody can express his views, build on others' views, and then re-adjust, re-shape, re-formulate. It is an open conversation that all Syrian citizens can join, despite their beliefs, even despite their political orientations, as the pro-regime people's participation to the remixes show. One of the campaign remixes features four hands instead of one. Two have managed to shake, the other two are in the process of doing it. The slogan says: "whether opposition or regime, you are still my brother. And the country is important for us." This remix shows how a regime-backed advertising campaign has eventually turned into a citizens' forum, an open-ended conversation where different kinds of Syrians are managing to speak to each other, without the mediation – and the surveillance – of the authority. Sharing this meme, re-producing and remixing it is indeed useful to all Syrians, rather than just to a defined ethnic or religious group.

Despite the above underlined differences with Tunisia and Egypt and the lack of a connective leadership, the "raised hands" campaign, as much as

many other UCG coming out from the Syrian uprising, underline how Syrians are fully enmeshed into the web 2.0 cultural fabric of remixing, sharing, peer-producing, actively participating in the making of culture.

Conclusions

This article has discussed how the Arab uprisings are linked to a global Internet culture based on certain features that are enabled by web 2.0 applications, platforms and tools. These features are related to the processes of sharing, peer-producing, remixing and actively participating in the making of culture that is now readable and writable by users. This attitude towards culture pushes a new idea of citizenship, too, which is grounded on active participation and on a non-mediated dialogue between citizens. These features are not the expression of a technological shift but of a cultural shift which is enabled by technology on a mass-scale.

The key shared factor in the cases analyzed above is not technology, but the culture that technology generates, which enables even "low-tech" activists to establish an ongoing, real-time dialogue with "high-tech" activists, both close to them and globally displaced. A shared web 2.0 culture is here at work, based on the principles of linking people and bridging information. However, as the Tunisian and Egyptian cases have underlined in comparison with the Syrian one, the role of a tech-élite performing connective leadership functions nationally, regionally and globally seems to be quite key in order to fully develop the disruptive potential of the web 2.0 cultural fabric.

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Notes

[1] A note about the methodology of this article. Field work and participant-observation at the major regional events mentioned were conducted from 2006 until 2012, as much as qualitative interviews and informal conversations with key participants and members of the Arab tech savvies. A monitoring of selected blogs as well as Facebook and Twitter profiles and of popular Twitter "hashtag streams" has been conducted, starting from 2009. This approach was not aimed at carrying a traditional content analysis, but at developing an ethnography based on online and offline activities, useful to track down relationships and common projects among participants. Such an ethnographic approach was primarily aimed at investigating the process of establishing relationships (at a local, national, regional and global level) among Arab tech savvies. Most of the stories, opinion and memoires were collected during informal conversations or gatherings attended by the two authors of this article as participant observers and, for this reason, direct quoting has been avoided. A reference to a specific interview is made in the context of this article only when the interviewee is a well known public person and the researcher had previously explicated the aim of the conversation.

[2] From the Wikipedia very popular and widely quoted definition http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0.

[3] Interview with Mark Lawson (2005).

[4] For a technical description of these technologies, and for a comparison with previous technologies used in web 1.0, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0#Technologies.

[5] The issue of leadership, social movements and tech-culture within the Egyptian and Tunisian uprising has been already addressed by Augusto Valeriani (2011). Some of the conclusions of that work are included and further developed here.

[6] No one can deny the scale of internet and mobile phone penetration in the Arab World. People in the region are becoming increasingly aware of the potentials offered by technology for social and political change." From the Arab Techies Gathering 2008 http://www.arabtechies.net/gathering_2008.

[7] Just to mention some of these events: the first Linux Install Fest in the Arab world was organized in 2004. Since 2007 the Software Freedom Days have been held in Tunisia and, since 2008, the Ubuntu Tunisian Team has been organizing Install Parties. The first Creative Commons Arab world meeting was held in Doha in 2009, while the Egyptian-based Arab Digital Expression Foundation has been organizing Youth Tech Camps since 2007.

[8] A spin-off for geek girls only, called the 'Arab techies women," was organized in Beirut in 2010. One of the key people behind the organization of this meeting and the selection of participants was Egyptian activist Manal Hassan, married to well known activist Alaa Abdel Fattah and co-founder of the blogger aggregator Manaala.net. From the 'Arab Techies Woman" website: "while their social role is not always recognized by their communities and sometimes even by the techies themselves, they play a pivotal role, they are builders of communities, facilitators of communication between communities, they offer support, hand holding and transfer of skills and knowledge and they are transforming into gatekeepers to an increasing diversity of voices and information. Hence the need for an event to bring those isolated techies together and build a regional community, to share experiences and knowledge, learn from each other and collaborate on solving common problems." See http://www.arabtechies.net/node/5.

[9] A key figure in the organization of the three Arab bloggers meetings – Beirut, 2008; Beirut, 2009; Tunis 2011 – was Sami Ben Gharbia, a Tunisian activist, blogger and political refugee in the Nethederlands who is the Advocacy Director for Global Voices and the co-founder of Tunisian blogger platform Nawaat.org.

The latter had a key role in the spreading information about the Tunisian uprising and was awarded the Netizen Prize in 2011 by international organization Reporters Without Borders. As for the 'Arab techies" group, a prominent figure here was Egyptian blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah – a young leader of the Egyptian revolution who was also imprisoned for protesting the military council rule in post-Mubarak Egypt. Alaa, together with his wife Manal, was the founder of Egyptian blogger aggregator Manaala.net

[10] See as an example the article "Egyptians and Tunisians collaborated to shake History" (Kirkpatrick and Sanger 2011). While acknowledging the importance of a cooperation across countries which started well before the uprisings, the article exaggerates the "Otpor! Effect." Otpor! is the Serbian movement which opposed Milosevic's regime in 2000. in 2002, some of its former members founded Canvas (Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies), an NGO which organiizes workshops around the world to coach pro-democracy activists to non-violent tactics. Canvas' funds mostly come from US foundations and organizations, like the US Institute for Peace, Freedom House and the International Republican Institute.

[11] See previous note.

[12] http://tounis.blogspot.com/.

[13] Like at the 3rd Creative Commons Arab World meeting, Tunis, June 29–July 2, 2011, and at the 3rd Arab Bloggers meeting, Tunis, 3–6 October 2011.

[14] See Eric Gobe (2011) "The Gafsa Mining Basin between riots and a social movement:meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia" retrieved from http://arabuprising2011.wordpress.com/2011/03/28/revolt-of-the-gafsa-mining-basin-tunisia-2008/.

[15] Quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nawaat#Other_Support_to_Revolution.

[16] Also see Khamis, Gold and Vaughn 2012.

[17] Before the uprising, most of the social networks were blocked in Tunisia, with the only significant exception of Facebook. Thus it became, for a lack of an alternative, the only online place where everybody would store any sort of information, including the politically relevant ones. But Facebook is designed as a closed social network, meaning that access to pages is restricted to friends, not to the general

public. That is why the Tunisian activitists were extracting the relevant information from Facebook profiles and uploading it on open web platforms like posterous.com.

[18] According to the poll, only 8 percent of the Egyptians got their news from Facebook or Twitter during the protests in January and February 2011, and only 17 percent of the protesters had Internet connections in their homes (quoted in Hellyer 2012).

[19] For example, Al Jazeera was the first professional news organization to launch in 2008 a footage repository licensed under the most open Creative Commons license, which allowed users – and competitors – to share the material, remix it, translate it and even re-sell it under the only condition of attribution (see Lee 2009).

[20] Donatella Della Ratta, personal interview with Ali Bouazizi, Sidi Bouzid, January 2012.

[21] According to our interview (Tunis, June 2011) with Nawaat's Malek Khadraoui, blogger Zouhair Makhlouf was the first to cover the clashes in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010. Makhlouf is a well known Tunisian opposition journalist who has been collaborating with Nawaat's team.

[22] Official media in Tunisia were trying to play down the Sidi Bouzid events, portraying them as a riot against local police's injust treatment, and not as a popular uprising. Here the framing function provided by Internet activists and the role of curators is even more crucial in delivering a non-censored message to the international media and providing a more balanced context to understand local events.

[23] See as example http://alive.in/egypt/blog/2011/02/01/voice-to-tweet-from-inside-egypt-httpbit-lyhuuwjh/.

[24] Personal communication quoted in Khamis, Gold and Vaughn (2012).

[25] Mostly tweet-up meetings, Creative Commons meetings, Geek fests. Some tech talks and parties were hosted by Aikilab.org, the first hackerspace opened in Damascus in summer 2010.

[26] Donatella Della Ratta (2012 b).

[27] From the Wikipedia very popular and widely quoted definition http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme.