

The Net Worth of the Arab Spring

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When I was asked to be the guest editor of the current issue of CyberOrient, I realized this is a welcome opportunity to arrange and re-sort some aspects, points, and arguments about the role of the media during the Arab Spring. In the course of the events late in 2010 and early in 2011, I felt enthusiastic and overwhelmed – not primarily as a scholar with a background in Middle Eastern and media studies, but as someone who was part of the peaceful German revolution in 1989 as a young teenager. Upon reflection, I took up the role of a media researcher considering how the use of media shaped these events.

Though much has already been said and written about the media and Arab Spring, it would be worthwhile after a bit more than a year to reflect and reevaluate the relationship between the media and revolutions. Due to my involvement in this edition, and after numerous discussions with colleagues, and students in my media seminar in the summer term, I frequently came across the following three points: the significance of mediatization processes, the online-offline dichotomy, and various kinds of amnesia.

Mediatization

Without overemphasizing the role of the media, one must say that it does continue to play a crucial role, as our knowledge and perception are largely technically mediated. Since media are becoming more and more ubiquitous, mediatization refers to the interplay of communicative changes, both social and political. One can no longer simply ask how media influences different

social or political spheres, but rather how processes of mediatization change structures and power relations within very different sectors of society. In this point I follow the argumentation of media scholars like Andreas Hepp (2012), Friedrich Krotz (2009) and Sonja Livingstone (2009), who observe and theorize the ongoing media changes.

Online-offline dichotomy or what is a Facebook activist?

Another development is the technical convergence of media, mainly in the form of mobile phones and other mobile devices. Nevertheless, we can witness a strong emphasis on the online-offline-dichotomy. But when is something online, and when is it offline? Is there such a thing as an offline life without being online, or vice versa? Can it still be called a newspaper if one is reading it via Smartphone? How about when someone is printing leaflets while posting on Twitter? Or calling somebody, writing an SMS, and watching a YouTube clip, all simultaneously? I would argue that the division between the online and offline worlds is becoming ever more blurry. Might we better consider a new set of opportunities provided by different kinds of media, apart from the online-offline dichotomy? By suggesting to think about multiple forms of activities made available by different kinds of media, I indirectly refer to the often mentioned new type of “Facebook or online activist.” Is a political activist who uses Facebook or other online devices in addition to other forms of engagement, like for instance talking about his position, spreading leaflets and writing e-mails, primarily a Facebook activist? If an activist chooses another tool than Facebook as it seems to be more useful, is he or she still a Facebook activist? Or is it – like I suggested above – more helpful to consider a wide set of opportunities for civil engagement apart a separation into offline and online tools?

Kinds of amnesia

In addition, the strong focus on digital and social media in the ongoing discussions seems to neglect at first the existence of other kinds of media. Oral communication, newspapers, leaflets, and street art still exist, but in new interrelationships with each other.

Reflecting another form of amnesia seems is the fact that different kinds of media are also used by the ruling elite. Social media are not exclusively a tool for subversion or oppositional protests, nor are they secular, or even anonymous. On the contrary, social media open new possibilities for surveillance, intelligence gathering, and the dissemination of regime propaganda. To put it in a nutshell: it is not the very existence of media itself that triggers changes, rather the use of media by people who have tremendously different interests and aims.

And thirdly, it needs to be stated that the introduction of the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter did not lead to the outbreak of the revolution. Here, other factors –such as the socioeconomic and demographic situation, the existence of social movements and rise of civil society, disaffection of large sections of the population, breaking through fear and silence, as well as the momentum of historical coincidence – must also be taken into consideration.

Current issue

While discussions about social and digital media are often guided by what is either theoretically possible or politically desirable, the articles in this current issue of *CyberOrient* have a common thread: they all begin at a concrete starting point, in order to illuminate the media's role within the context of specific historical, political, and social conditions. This generates more profound empirical results than general claims about the media's potential.

The present articles discuss technical, structural, and cultural dimensions of the Web. They shed light on the role of Facebook and Al Jazeera as two major players, at both the local and global levels. *Beyond the Soapbox: Facebook and the Public Sphere in Egypt* by Anton Root draws attention to the question whether the concept of the public sphere can apply to social media. The article *Al Jazeera's Framing of Social Media During the Arab Spring* by Heidi Campbell and Diana Hawk sheds light on how Al Jazeera shaped the public perception and the understanding of this revolution. Mohammed El-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis discuss in *Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's "Facebook-Revolution" and Iran's "Twit-*

ter Uprising” why the so-called Facebook Revolution in Egypt achieved success, while Iran’s “Twitter Uprising” did not. The main focus here is on analysis of the structure of and interrelations among civil society, as well as examining political activism and social media in both countries. Donatella Della Ratta’s and Augusto Valeriani’s contribution *Remixing the Spring! Connective Leadership and Read-Write Practices in the 2011 Arab Uprisings* refers to Egypt, Tunisia and Syria and argues that web culture is mainly based on participation, peer production, sharing, and remix, both in online and offline contexts. The comment, written by Mervat Youssef and Anup Kumar, concentrates on the emergence of public sphere and the articulation of a new political identity in Egypt. Analyses of different countries – as well as comparative methods, content analysis and interviews with local actors – approach the broad topic of “Media and the Arab Spring” from very different angles. All contributions illustrate to what extent use of media shaped, influenced, and framed the events. Two reviews, one by Jon. W. Anderson on Phillip N. Howard’s *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* and the second by Marek Cejka on Jean-Pierre Filiu’s *The Arab Revolution* conclude this issue.

Many important points are discussed in the current edition of *CyberOrient*. At the same time, a number of questions remain open for debate, as these processes continue in different parts of the Arab world. This suggests not only a need for a second edition (which will be published this winter), but also highlights the necessity of ongoing research and discussion.

References

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