Comment:

Tweeting like a Pigeon: The Internet in the Arab Revolutions

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Abstract

The extraordinary uprisings since December 2010 represented the long-prepared transformation from fatalism to people power. The online–offline dialectic allowed the revolution to be mediated with global ramifications - from Wisconsin to Barcelona to Athens. This techno-social nexus forms a crucial element of the overall push and pull factors and this contribution reassess the "Net Worth" from a critical perspective. The fetishizing flora and fauna labels from earlier hyped political-techno events —"Cedar," "Green," or "Orange" revolutions— that coincided with particular geo-political algorithms, were initially copied and pasted as emblematic solicitations. But whether Wikileaks or the Palestine Papers, and YouTube videos or blogs disclosing practices of torture and corruption—opinions have been shaped and decisions were mediated by online technologies. This piece demonstrates the overflow of YouTube music clips through the prism of the Tunisian revolution. I will look at these dynamics through the lens of Palestine as an informative ethnographic comparison because it helps indicate the power structure behind technology and allows me to assess the multiplicity of internet politics and argue that online activities and offline power structures do not exist in isolation and are unequally mediated.

> When Salah al-Din liberated Bait al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) he used pigeons to exchange information with his army leaders because it was the fastest means of communication. Today internet technology is.
>
> Mounir Maqda, Ein al-Hilwe-Lebanon, 2004.

The extraordinary uprisings throughout the Arab world since December 2010 represented the long-awaited and long-prepared transformation

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from reluctance, fear and fatalism to a profound people power in one voice demanding the downfall of the regime. As the struggles for dignity, equality and freedom intensified and reached a climax in January 2011 the notion of "revolution" became a reality. Although the tongue in cheek comparison was often heard it was not the same as the mass protests in Georgia, Lebanon, Ukraine and Iran a few years earlier. Those events were joined with selectively applied popular demarcation and became known as "Cedar," "Green," or "Orange" revolutions. The fetishizing flora and fauna labels were copied and pasted as emblematic solicitations that coincided with particular geo-political algorithms. What distinguished the epic events in Tunisia and Egypt was their strong *self*-determination. People across the world from Wisconsin to Barcelona were inspired by and adopted "Tahrir" dubbed sit-ins; its political importance explains the intense impact - if not global paradigm-shift. It is this transnational level, where the online-offline dialectic allowed the revolution to be mediated with global ramifications. This techno-social nexus forms a crucial element of the overall push and pull factors. The pigeon allegory in the opening quote is both a critique of the various cyber-utopian discourses and imposes a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of new and old media. The Arab political revolutionary episodes of the past and of the present remind us that the physical and the virtual are mutually reinforcing. The current protests introduced new and at the same time contributed to existing local and global modes of political preparation, expression and practice.

Much has been written about the role of digital, new, online or social media in the revolutions in the popular and academic press. The first anniversary of the Arab revolutions provides a good moment to reassess the "Net Worth" from a critical perspective. Evidence-based writings about the (effective) appropriation of technologies drown under the fast-changing realities. Nevertheless, critical work on how the revolutions exploded in multiple ways (cf. Hirschkind 2011, Marfleet 2011) and arranged on a variety of ways that *included* the internet (cf. El-Ghobashy 2011, Hererra 2011, Allagui and Kuebler 2011) are available and much more empirical studies is undoubtedly in the making.

In the meantime, approximately eighteen months after the protests captured the Arab world the general mood changed; from (pre) revolutionary optimism and relief to caution and *aprčs-revolution* anxiety. It is a shift strongly marked by doubts about foreign intervention and disappointing electoral schemes, in some sense losing sight of the original goals of the revolutions. A continuation of the revolution also meant that grass roots coalitions faced increasingly harsher divisions or faced interference by self-appointed "National Councils."[1]

This contribution hopes to recall previous shared political optimism for it helps to uphold the stamina amidst the on-going revolutions. But its overall aim is to revisit the place of the internet in the complex revolutionary transformation in its initial phase. I approach this in several ways but firstly by addressing the Arab revolutions through a comparative view from Palestine. Palestinian politics is clearly not detached from the materiality of the internet, but how does this open up new venues to recognise similar dynamics in other Arab contexts? The Palestinian context assumes important particularities. Apart from its core national liberation struggle it is a case characterised by fragmentation and ruled by a *multiple* occupation management. By this I mean an *external* occupying military; an *internal* settler force; a *self*-policing national (PNA) body. The comparison with Palestine helps indicate the power structure behind technology and allows me to assess the multiplicity of internet politics and argue that online activities and offline power structures do not exist in isolation and unequally mediated.

Furthermore, I will show how internet-paradigms plays into wider projections of the Arab revolutions in what became the celebratory hype about online activism. I wish to know this mattered for it is clear that-from Wikileaks and Palestine Papers, to YouTube videos disclosing practices of torture and corruption-opinions have been shaped and decisions were formed and mediated by new technologies. I demonstrate the overflow of YouTube music clips through the prism of the Tunisian revolution, and when I will look at those videos I shall link back to Palestine as my ethnographic comparison, making the circle round.

Palestinian internet politics

The Second Intifada has seen the outpour of political critique through the advent of digital media. Resilience, rather than "radicalism" as claimed stigmatising reports such as Schanzer and Dubowitz (2010), determines Palestinian online mediation.[2] Their incentive towards the internet was two-fold: to defend their cause in the public sphere or to overcome the impediments of closures and curfews (Aouragh 2008). The Palestinian comparison, although a unique colonial example on its own, reveals interesting insights. Palestine is a special case, it is after all one of the few remaining colonial examples in a (theoretically) postcolonial world and represents overlapping patterns of oppression as noted. Israel's geographic, military and political crackdown of Palestinian resistance was and still is aimed to mute dissent and to prevent the emergence of successful grassroots movements. It is important to acknowledge that despite their conventional character these forms of subjugation are not exempted from the internet but mutated with it. The combination of a century old methods of surveillance and warfare have fed into internet practices and therefore the offline contexts is greatly shaped by socio-political factors. Where political destruction is considered *Politicide* (Kimmerling 2003), the online extension should be considered *Cybercide.* By this I refer to techno-deployments of Israeli strategies of coercion: the destruction of the media by plundering internet cafes and bombing radio stations or by replacing Palestinian children programs with by German porn; the use of internet to prevent pro-Palestinian opinions; YouTube manipulations; instigating *hacktivism* (Allan and Brown 2010, Kuntsman and Stein 2010). The fact that the implications of neoliberalism and imperialism are so prevalent tells us that the internet being *related* to grassroots politics is not the same as being *equal* to activism.

A much-heard response during previous fieldwork in Palestine (2009-2010) among activists is that social media cannot provide the conviction or discipline so badly needed when recruiting activists, let alone protect them against (state and sectarian) violence. Internet engagement of the types like blog updates or collecting Facebook "likes" were often seen as trivial, some suggested that internet engagement may even compromise offline engagement. The activists' critique of the (false) effects of online engagement is not

far off but having stated this, their own practices which I witnessed and followed confirmed that there is no mass (offline) political activism in which the internet is absent: technology *is* an impetus of social transformations.

Thus the disempowering (capitalist, military, government) materiality of technology shape activists' realities, including their advantageous internet engagement, contradictions that are appear to be present in the Arab revolutions as well. But on an ordinary level, the contextualisation of the internet by Maqda in the opening quote is probably one of the most outstanding I have encountered. Mounir Maqda, in South Lebanon who I had interviewed in 2004, was a political character involved in Fatah affiliated factions such as at the time the al-Aqsa movement of which he was the leader in Ein al-Hilwe. Slightly surprised I listened to his intriguing analysis about the role of the internet. The historical reference helped me deconstruct the meaningful example of a pigeon so as to sort through the celebratory discourses and find an alternative to some of the a-historical claims. By referring to one of the most symbolical comparisons-Salah al-Din and the re-conquering of Jerusalem-the example of the pigeon in Maqda's reference speaks to the current debate. It sums up that one must seize the best possible means-that which is available in one's stage of technological development-because it is the goal that matters. If a pigeon was the tool to send and receive updates or decisions during Salah al-Din's revolutionary conquest, in the present revolutions a sparrow tweets the same kind of proclamations through cyberspace.

The pigeon delivers (on command and through training) messages and Palestine understood through this metaphor means the internet functions as a tool. And that means there are also important differences. The pigeon flies with the aim to reach a destination, it's not the journey-and all it encounters and accumulates on the way-that matters. The political consequence of the pigeon as the mediator exists by virtue of the message being received so as to decide or adapt a plan so it carries political significance in terms of the content (message) only indirectly. It is more like the predecessor of the SMS, or the tweet received on a mobile phone. Through its extre-

mity the Palestinian perspective forces a critical reflexive assessment of the potential role and dilemmas of the internet. What is so blatant in Palestine also occurs (in different shapes and levels) in other Arab states. It forces us to critically assess how the internet empowers the Arab revolutions and consider the risk of ascribing revolutionary characteristics to an overwhelmingly corporate tool.

How the Arab revolutions fuse with internet paradigms

When Maqda says he considers his laptop like Salah-al-Din's troops valued pigeons he basically treats it as a postman and Web 1.0 at best, hence it cannot be a *space* in itself. In other words the pigeon cannot harbour or deliver arousing multimedia (audio-visual-textual) content. It cannot be a liaison between separate geographic and demographic or reach masses of people simultaneously (it cannot network). It does not have the features possibilities to archive data (hence it cannot be a search engine or recount previous messages). To that should be added that compared to the straight-forward medium of a pigeon (which either arrives or doesn't) digitization made the possibility of sabotage, manipulation or interception multifarious.

A tendency to emphasize the influence of media and communication and overlook other dynamics that are shaping the revolutions underrates the crucial intervention of offline mobilisation, class struggle and physical resistance which (joined by online tools) have tipped the metaphorical scale. The announcement of strikes and overall involvement of the labour movement were a force to reckon with and what eventually broke the regime (Alexander and Aouragh 2011). Part of the reason is the habit of dominant cultures to project its own experience onto other phenomena, invigorated by the inability of many to understand what is discussed (especially "between the lines") in the local language. This was already noticeable during the 2009 uprisings in Iran dubbed the *Twitter Revolution* which resulted in the "misreading" of the voices from within (Esfandiari 2010). The result can be a one-dimensional image which overlooks the use of the internet by the oppressive regime (Morozov 2011) or does not also consider the impending political fragmentation caused by the decentralized nature of the internet (Rahimi 2011).

The alleged revolutionary role of the internet fused with popular narratives which became entangled with orientalist frameworks. Such discourses are marked by an insistence on new technology because it is this "exceptional" narrative that offers reporters a unique selling point about the Orient, a place/case which has always been lucrative (Aouragh 2012). Such a one-sided approach helps construct a peculiar circular analyses revolving around the internet. A comparative assessment that emphasizes certain and ignores other factors helps understand how such contentious arguments come to function. A crude experiment is one in which the internet functions as a prime causality to explain the success of a revolution matching with its opposite: the failure of revolution. Libya/Syria on one hand and Tunisia/Egypt on the other offers such a match and it helps that some of these countries are comparable in terms of long-term dictatorships and internet development. To establish the determining factors for success or failure we can hypothesise that the internet was far more superior in the successful examples of Tunisia and Egypt compared to Libya and Syria. In Tunisia and Egypt the non-violent popular uprising was steadfast and widespread while Libya and Syria saw a different trajectory as the popular revolts militarised fairly soon.

The internet-logic as a parameter assumes that the lack of online connectivity meant that different rebel groups couldn't coordinate effective cross-city resistance and that grassroots activists could not mobilize ordinary citizens from different religious sects isolated from each other. In the years preceding the mass uprisings, the movements were helped by the internet-the Arab blogosphere or organisational tools such as email and SMS-to sustain the bumpy road leading to the revolutionary stages. In Tunisia and Egypt the internet created a sense of "network community" and protesters could shape the debate by disseminating their views through SMS, blogs, YouTube and convince major societal sections, it gave them the confidence to (re)turn to the streets. This allowed the internet to mobilize a "critical mass" and built the non-violent social force that overthrew Ben Ali and Mubarak. In Libya or Syria there was no medium to build this "tipping point." And according to an internet-directed analysis the penetration rates could have predicted this

because the general internet penetration percentages were 26.4 for Egypt and a mere 5.9 for Libya; Facebook also shows stark differences: in 2011 it measured 1.94 for Syria and a phenomenal 22.49 percent for Tunisia.[3]

If we take this further: the armed revolt became reliant on military strength in due course dependent on external forces such as the USA and Saudi Arabia. Were Libya and later Syria a techno-related failures, as its penetration rate could have predicted? Only when zooming out from this techno-comfort zone there is space to note other dynamics and differences that need to be spelled out in this comparison. For instance: Tunisia does not have the kind of interests (natural resources, arms trade contracts) for western powers as Libya did; the defining factors for successful mass mobilisation in Egypt had already fermented with a growing civil society and grassroots politics since the Second Intifada (2000) and war on Iraq roiled the whole region, Kifaya coalitions were the seeds of unified resistance and for later guaranteeing political stamina. Meanwhile, the "national councils" joined by defectors and previously (older) exiled figures elsewhere did not represent all sections of the uprising in its mostly self-appointed leadership. Their lack of legitimacy on the ground made them subservient to the pressure of NATO or Gulf states and this had made it easy for Muammar Gadhafi and later Bashar al-Assad (and their defenders) to accuse the protesters and rebels of being "Western agents." State propaganda damaging the fragile unities and the cherry picking of representatives resulted in these uprisings losing part of the broad support and becoming increasingly entangled in internal conflicts.

Much has also been commented about the importance of the "youth" (Schmickle 2011, Coy 2011, Knickmeyer, 2011, Tanneeru 2011). Cogently, the younger are less bounded by family responsibilities, this explain why this segment (often students) are commonly featured as instigators of political upheavals. Yet, what happened in the process of narrative construction is that youth got conflated with wired and in turn easily interchangeable for the internet. Demography is an important factor of the motivations to elaborate on the role of technology but to some degree *all* countries had an increasing educated and younger class. When people thanked the Facebook

Youth in Tunisia and Egypt *(Figure 1)*, it is a reference to a new generation that dared, that did not give up. It addressed young men and women in the frontlines who gave their lives; it was a figurative bow to those from different religious and ideological backgrounds and took enormous risks, internet related allusions were the epithets of these youths; the social media labels were not placed between *Egyptian* and *Youth* (endowing it with agency) but after *Egyptian Youth*. Although this political-corporate branding of the internet is interesting to study on a symbolic level, it should not be elevated to a noun/adjective, no less as stones for Palestinian or punk rock for Russian youths are the agents of change.

Counter-posing critical assertions with knee-jerk judgements that the internet or social media had *no* effect on the revolutionary dynamic have become equally unsatisfactory; it also ignores a rich critical well-informed academic tradition.

Fig. 1. "Shukran shabaab Masr" [Thank you Egyptian youths] - Facebook.

There have been profound changed to Arab media with the introduction of the internet and satellite media over the years as many argued and these developments have influenced Arab-regional politics in several ways since the mid-1990s (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, Aouragh 2011, Howard

2010, Kraidy 2009, Sakr 2007, Zweiri and Murphy 2012). ICT was the sector with high capitalist revenues and hence the most attractive space for privatisation and speculation. A material understanding allows for a pragmatic contextualisation that neither indulges in ideological praising for the political-economy in which it is embedded, nor the celebratory (autonomous) power credited to it. Huge amounts of money were pumped in the sector to ripen it for further exploitation or engage it as a major site of international development loans. Paradoxically, the devastating neoliberal policies clearly present in the background have also introduced broader sections (such poor, youths, and children) to cheaper mass communication mediums. The Middle East region has amongst the highest growth rates reaching a phenomenal two thousand since 2005.[4] At the start of 2011 Facebook had almost 700 million users in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). When we leave out Israel and Turkey and focus on the Arab world and when we even exclude the unrepresentative Gulf countries; the region still represents the highest contributors of new users.[5] Statistics from the Arab Social Media Report (ASMR) in the first two quarters of 2011 suggests that the region contributes the largest quantity of social media growth, it even doubled in one year for Egypt. Despite these important changes, online mobilisation is far from a decisive actor in political transformations simply because it is not a key tool to reach the "critical mass," at the peak of the protests Twitter covered no more than 2 percent penetration, i.e. those "tweeting the revolution" were a small minority.[6] The follow-up figures give important evidence to the prospect that the revolution shaped ICT developments. Where Web 2.0 (especially social networking sites) penetration rates have raised in the year of the revolutions it is the result of the protests.

As noted before, the comparison of Maqda has become dated because we moved on since the mode of communication six centuries ago. But it is the synchronization of previous models and platforms-printing press; telegraph; radio broadcasting; television; satellite channels; mobile phones-into one medium that signifies the most important change in the recent evolution. Delivering messages happens at a much faster pace and across far greater distances, the very character of what the pigeon did has changed.

And so the fact the internet enables instantaneous transmittance is one of the most significant socio-political characteristics. A further difference is in the DNA of the metaphoric pigeon as a mediation tool. It is indeed a very important tool but not a multimedia *space* as some of the applications used in the new revolutions. And this has several implications and results in two related conclusions: the internet is neither a cause nor does it act on its own. And when scratching the surface the "real" empowering impact appears in the nexus of different angles of the revolutions, and in the offline-online synergy that presents, after all, the total sum of the revolutionary method.

YouTube represents different elements of the revolutionary practice: from mobilization and reporting to archiving and documenting witness accounts. I wish to explore one such synchronous example: user-generated media content recorded with and uploaded onto the internet which helped ensure that the revolutionary events were followed "live." But such aesthetic portrayals contributed to a more profound stimulus as I will argue with regards to Tunisian YouTube videos.

YouTube empowerment

As alluded to at the outset of this article, the most important characteristic marking the digital difference is the combined effect of speed and easy data-sharing. Via mass-media tools the global "outside" is able to tap into the local "inside," a kind of instant-transnationalism. Arab satellite channels absorbing online content had meant that the impact of the internet went far beyond its own weight. Showing a Facebook or YouTube video from Sidi Bouzid via virtual platforms, aired to the global and then reported back to the local, is a case in point.

The way such video instruments touch our visual and audio sensors and thus move us to tears, joy or fury make them become are part of the immaterial ingredients that generates a particular kind of mobilization. The internet is a more important space to archive the bravery and resolve of ordinary people than other mediators. The influence crosses gender and age, and through pri-

vate mobile phone-sharing the recorded (amateur) political performativity's also reaches those who are not online, rendering these recorded events valuable for other activists. Considering the role of youthful generations in revolutions and combining this with ICT demographics it is no surprise that the majority of online culture also reflects urban youth culture. It is here that many examples of the "revolutionary nexus" mentioned above are to be found. Tunisian rapper El General is the first example I wish to review.

Hamada Ben Amo from Sfax, who is better known as El General, ignited the youth of Tunisia and almost immediately the rest of the Arab world. Everyone understood the anger that he spat into the microphone. First he offered his phenomenal *Rais Leblad* [Leader of the Nation] in which he criticizes Ben Ali, the lyrics include the following:

> Mr President, you told me to speak without fear/ Here! I spoke,
> but I know that the results will be the palms [beatings]

Soon after, he recorded and disseminated *Tounes Bladna* [Tunisia is *our* Country] where he continuous the attack but now, much more furious. He is less poetic and more explicit and thus to those youths amidst (or closely anticipating) the turmoil the galvanizing shouts sounded like calls to revolution *(Figure 2)*. It could be said that El General helped break the spell of fear, signifying the power of someone saying what many felt but didn't dare say out-loud. It was that extra push to join the protests. For many disadvantaged young Arabs (whether in Tunis, Casablanca, Benghazi or Cairo) who had less to loose and more to gain and especially those not on the radar unions or hard to reach by experienced grassroots activists, El General's repertoire presented an anthem of the revolution. The rap-lyric includes the following shout-out:

> Tunisia is our country and her men will never surrender!
> Tunisia is our country and today we must find the solution!

The tracks went viral but soon removed from the internet by the government. With *Tounes Bladna* the unavoidable occurred and El General himself was traced and arrested, sparking even more protest. However, by the

time the tracks were taken down and El General literally silenced, both songs were being downloaded by thousands and copied to mobile phones, thus even when the internet was cut it was shared with others on street corners and in living rooms.[7]

Fig. 2. El General – "Tounes Bladna."

If El General was engaging in an electrifying way, Amal Mathlouthi's "Kelmti Hora" [My word is Free] reflects a more spiritual presence, though also marked by a magnificent set of revolutionary connotations *(Figure 3)*. The song-text includes the following beautiful paragraphs:

> I am those who are free and never fear;
> I am the secrets that will never die;
> I am the voice of those who would not give in;
> I am the meaning amid the chaos;
> I am free and my word is free.

The video clip accompanying the song features her as she slowly rises up from the boulevard pavement which she occupies together with thousands of other Tunisians. At first, her words are fused by mutters and movements and other sounds, and then dubbed by the studio-recording but with the raw

street footage still rolling. From the clips opening we know her transformative performativity is demonstrated as an active subject who contributes to the making of the revolution. Besides singing *about* it she is a participant *of* the demonstration with the masses through civil disobedient acts. This subtle difference shows how this song too, in a different way, carried a mobilizing message; as if she gestures, in a soft tone "I am here, you can be too." The accommodating video is a mash-up of many other scenes of protests in December and January, the video has become by now an online archive of some extraordinary scenes during those momentous days.

Fig. 3. Amel Mathlouthi – "Kelmti Hora."

El General and Mathlouthi are not only valuable examples "from within" but they also present what looks like an urge to *archive.* Anonymous is an "external" example which also demonstrates how the internet, the revolutions and the motive to narrate a historical event through sound and visuals all came together and become a form of archiving. This hacker collective is mostly known for hacking Tunisian government websites in solidarity with the revolutions. But it also inspired the production of (if it did not do so itself, but this can't be verified) several video clips and one such is "Time

for Revolution" *(Figure 4)* which uses samples of El General as part of its soundtrack. The fact that different versions of this video were viewed thousands of times suggests that online solidarity was a major drive in the outpouring of videos.

Fig. 4. Anonymous: Time for Revolution.

The novel forms of engagement do not have *direct* implications for the revolutionary strategies or survival of street-activism. But these revolutions happen in a time shaped by particular historical conditions of the media, not unlike revolutions in previous centuries (Briggs and Burke 2005), in the current media ecology conventional media and communication tools joined with satellite and mobile technology, leading to a *convergence* of old and new media (Jenkins 2006). The examples discussed here show us that such mediated expressions can deepen activists' determination and political perseverance; it channels the juxtaposition of empowerment and solidarity. Tunisians demonstrated this kind of solidarity beautifully in what seemed like the crystallization between their own and others' causes.

While having just celebrated their own victory on 14 January 2011, they poured into the streets on 11 February 2011, the day Egyptian president

Mubarak was ousted. Egyptians were cheering, in tears thanking Tunisians for having given them the courage, thousands of Tunisians for their part were chanting for Egypt, thanking them too- acknowledging the political impact Egypt has for the whole region. Then, in a rousing expression of transnational (Arab) solidarity Tunisians were also bringing Palestine into the narrative. Here we have reached the final factor of how Palestine is weaved in and through the Arab revolutions as this paper started off with. It was an extraordinary moment which many of us were able to witness via the internet. Defying what some argued: that the revolutions would relief us from the "distractive" obsession with Palestine.[8] In this Facebook video *(Figure 5)*, "shared" by many and "liked" by even more, one young man jumps on a car (others wave *kuffiye* or Palestinian flags) chanting "We shall liberate Palestine."[9] It is an important reminder that Palestine is often just underneath the surface of domestic politics in Arab protests (Abou-El-Fadl 2012).

Fig. 5. Transnational solidarity mediated online: from Tunis to Egypt for Palestine.

These examples are *visual venues* pointing at ways the dissemination of the revolution is marked by a *synchronisation* of separate media infrastructures that define the current media ecology. That is why the internet can only

really be assessed as part of a broader media and communication context. Thus the main reason Al Jazeera was able to air and share part of the Tunisian revolution is because it had taken account of Web 2.0 components. Online interactivity became part of the DNA of mainstream media and reporting the Tunisian revolution despite being blocked by Ben Ali's regime was an extremely important part of the sequence of events in Egypt. This was also the case in Alexandria and Cairo where Al Jazeera reporters were faced with harassment. The content recorded and uploaded onto the net by ordinary Tunisians and Egyptians and reaching unprecedented numbers of people, did not only mean that the revolution was "televised" but also that it was "live" in a style that matters for political struggle. It is at this stage and its peaking popularity that Hillary Clinton admitted "like it or hate it, it is really effective" regarding Al-Jazeera.[10] YouTube is an example of the remoulding of visual/textual/audio content as separate features into a single powerful mass disseminator. Here the revolution shows us a leap forward.

Conclusion

It is precisely because the tools referred in this article are also products of corporate companies or oppressive states as the examples from Palestine show that the (social) value of particular technological tools fluctuate. The Palestine comparison conveys that an answer to what constitutes the digital difference of recent political realities depends on the social-demographic condition in which it is embedded. In the context of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism internet activism or online resistance is marked by a strong relation with the ground, romanticised projections about a *Revolution 2.0* (Ghonim 2012) notwithstanding. Despite the fact that the internet plays an important role on the level of dissemination and mediation, there is a political and economic hierarchy that determines how cyber power is played out.

This article shows that this matters for the activists' self-confidence, but the opposite is also the case. In my recent interviews with Syrian revolutionaries I noticed that they are disappointed by some of the arm-chair anti-imperialist critiques about the Syrian revolution, and this is demoralising. Solida-

rity, support and sanctification are important components of the immaterial components of activism and so far the internet has shown to be a platform of these valuable ingredients. It plays a *relative* role, to some this means little and to others very much.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] At the time of finalizing this text (March-July 2012, the first election rounds in Egypt revealed the determination of remnants of the Mubarak regime (General Shafiq) to regroup; the revolutionary youth faced a new government lead by the Muslim Brotherhood who were previously a crucial actor of the revolution.

[2] The report is published by a division of the Washington security think tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Even though most public diplomacy projects don't live up to their promises as the authors acknowledge in disappointment, their report ends with recommending funding for precisely propaganda projects such as Digital Outreach.

[3] The statistics may have been somewhat different since in countries with high censorship or surveillance risks activists use proxy servers that are not detectable. The rates mentioned here are available in the ITU report of 2011 (Internet World Stats 2012)and in the ASMR of 2011 (for Facebook).

[4] See Middle East Telecommunications Reports 2011.

[5] The Gulf is unrepresentative because its ICT usage figures are dominated by expat.

[6] And only 20 percent of Twitter accounts are active users and so it functions more as a news-feed than as a social networking micro-blog.

[7] See for more on the role of music and urban hip-hop the following commentaries: Cultural revolution: How artists have been inspired by the Arab Spring 2011, LeVine 2011, The Rap Songs Of The Arab Spring 2011.

[8] See for instance Joffe 2011.

[9] See Farhat al-Tunisiyin bi rahil Mubarak [Mubarak is ousted and Tunisians celebrate] 2011.

[10] The press conference can be found here: <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/hillary-clinton-claims-al-jazeera-is-winning-an-information-war-that-america-is-losing>, last accessed December 2012.

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