

Authoritarianism, Digital Dissidence and Grassroots Media in the Middle East and North Africa region

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Abstract:

As an introduction to this special issue of CyberOrient, this text provides an insight into ongoing research in studies of digital layers of revolutions, digital communication, and dissidence in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. Providing a short overview of the latest developments of uprisings and street demonstrations in the region, the text reflects on similarities and differences between the various revolts currently taking place. Digital dissidence is part and parcel of these revolts. Zooming in on the Syrian case, this article assesses how the Syrian revolution and its digital components developed into the humanitarian crisis it has become after nine years of violence. The article then shortly reflects on the Sudanese revolution of 2019, which is seemingly the most successful uprising in the Arab world thanks to a strong digital component, as noted in the words of its own revolutionaries. This text then introduces two contributions to this special issue focused on, respectively, Egypt and the occupied Palestinian territories. The contest between what Layla Shereen Sakr calls “techies on the ground” and repressive regimes is compared to that of a race between a hare and a turtle, in which the techies continuously circumvent the attempts by the repressive regimes to curtail their means of digital communication and capacity for organizing collective action.

Keywords:

Digital Dissidence, MENA region, Arab Revolts, Syria, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine

Introduction

Just when the world was convinced that the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 were dead, the year 2019 experienced new and renewed, and surprisingly successful, mass protests in the MENA region. Emerging from Sudan to Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and most recently, Iran, there seems to be a cyclic

pattern of recurrence. In both Lebanon and Iran, street protests occurred prior to 2019, which indicates a growing ripple effect whereby these protests are not isolated instances of resistance but cyclic movements progressing in time (Wessels 2018a). Indeed, the revolts share some important recurring similarities. Austerity and moral outrage have brought the protesters on the streets, demanding a better life, dignity, and freedom. Internet communication technology has given them the tools to communicate, organize and debunk any type of propagandistic narrative provided by their repressive governments. In fact, authoritarianism and dictatorships in the MENA region are increasingly getting past their use-by date. Although rigid dictatorial regimes still try to hang on to their power structures by brutally crushing dissent, such as Sisi's Egypt and Assad's Russian and Iranian backed Syria, in the long-run these regimes eventually will not continue to fool the younger generations of their population. Ziccardi (2013, 3) succinctly described what is happening in these times:

Thousands of digital dissidents around the world risk their liberty to protest and oppose repressive forms of government and strategies aimed at controlling the behavior of the population. Relying on little else but their own quick thinking and, often, on obsolete technologies, they are threatened and detained for the opinions they express and the news they divulge; dedicated to the development of techniques to circumvent surveillance and filter technologies and to hide, encrypt, anonymize and disclose information, they are constantly tracked by the authorities of their countries. Using smartphones, cameras, laptops and handheld video cameras, they transmit in real-time the facts of the societies in which they live. They act to eradicate filters; they fight to tear down codes of silence and to elude censorship software; they refute the theory of secrecy surrounding matters of public interest while prizing it above all else in their own private lives; they aim to erode media monopolies and to disprove false state truths.

In Lebanon, protesters were fed up with the corruption of the political leaders. Ignited by another government raise in taxes and levies on social media applications such as WhatsApp, they filled the streets (Khneisser 2019). In Iran, people were angry with the continued strain on their livelihoods and the tripling of fuel taxes, while their government spends billions to fight wars in other countries such as Syria and Yemen and flexes its muscles in Iraq. The protesters filled the streets in November 2019 but were brutally attacked by the Iranian security forces, killing hundreds of protesters (Fassihi 2019). In Iraq, opposition protesters resented both the dominant Iranian influence, the American intervention and how the Iraqi government has not properly provided in any for the human needs of its populations since the Americans declared in 2011 an end to the war, which started with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Iraqi protesters want a fundamental change in the political and socio-economic systems including explicit demands for women's rights and they oppose authoritarianism, neoliberalism, poverty, inequality, exploitation, sectarianism, and religious fundamentalism.¹

Against a background of wider global protests that started with discontent with the global financial crisis in 2008, with the Occupy movement through to the current extinction movement and the Fridays for Future protests, these latest protests in the MENA region signify a crisis in political representation of the people and a rupture in both democratic and authoritarian contexts (Bray 2017; McGarry et al. *forthcoming*). One major characteristic that all these protests have in common is the resistance of presence (Tripp 2013), the protesters' visible physical presence in the parks, the squares and the streets as a statement of defiance, sometimes protected by numbers, but often risking detention or, in the case of authoritarian regimes, torture and disappearance. This physical aspect of the local runs parallel to a virtual realm, in which protesters act on a global level (Ziccardi 2013).

The creation and occupation, through global Internet communication networks, of a diverse, egalitarian and transnational virtual space facilitate communication between activists worldwide, directed at taking down

powerful elites in the neoliberal world. In his work on cosmopolitan publicity and public space, Bray (2017) discusses three main aspects of what is evident in the protests; (1) the presence of cross-cultural communication within and beyond the protests (2) physical occupation of public squares, parks, and streets for prolonged periods and consequence recurrences and finally (3) emerging transnational and global claims, values and practices, about corrupt leadership, political representation, dignity and human rights, the climate and environment, and a sustainable future, shared and translated across states and countries, beyond the control of the nation-states within the expanding virtual space. In the past decade, a global wave of protests has spread to both liberal democratic and authoritarian countries in which the representative claims of nation-states have been profoundly challenged. This article explores the extent to which these protest movements reflect cosmopolitan practices and possibilities. The central argument is that the protests created forms of “cosmopolitan publicity” in which people engaged in transnationally connected social criticism and political contestation directed at rupturing the representative authority of their state. The article first provides an account of cosmopolitan publicity, arguing that it is produced by interaction across territorial and cultural borders in which open and egalitarian publics are formed to deal with shared problems. It then argues that varying degrees of cosmopolitan publicity were generated in the recent global protests by examining the transnational communication, tactics, and claims of the Arab Spring and Occupy social movements. Finally, the article argues that these protests are indicative of ongoing crises of representation that plague many nation-states and create opportunities for new forms of cosmopolitan politics (Bray 2017). How protests and dissidence manifest in digital space, as a contested public space in which states try to exercise control, is an important focus for this Special Issue as the protesters in both the digital and material spaces, challenge the idea that the state alone has the power to determine how this public space is used (McGarry et al. *forthcoming*).

Digitization or digitalization?

It is important to make a distinction between the concepts of digitization and digitalization. Digitization and digitalization are two conceptual

terms that are closely associated and often used interchangeably in a broad range of literature. However, there is analytical value in explicitly making a clear distinction between these two terms. *Digitization* is making analog data available into a digital format, for example from a written letter into a word document or scanning a photograph. *Digitalization* is making sense of digitization, leading to a social “infrastructure that is changing under the influence of communication networks” (Castells 2009; Dijck 2007; Dijk 2006) and from this increasing digitalization, communication scholars identified that a “network society” has emerged.

Digitalization thus structures domains of social life around digital communication and media infrastructures and changes the manner in which individuals are engaged in civil society and politics, whereby forms and possibilities for collective action are also affected (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2012). Political participation using digital media has facilitated leaderless and decentralized forms of collective action that replace formal political leadership and organizational structures. Metadata and algorithms have become important aspects of digitalization, in contexts ranging from knowledge production and social scientific research to government surveillance (Mathes 2004). Within these digital landscapes, the distinction between the online and off line realms has effectively collapsed, because everything is now connected.

Besides helping digital dissidents communicate, organize street demonstrations and document human rights violations, digital technology also facilitates repression by authoritarian governments. It is like the race between a hare (digital dissidents) and a turtle (states and governments), whereby authoritarian governments are catching up with activists in their sophisticated use of digital technology and vice versa. This means states have increasingly enhanced capacities to censor expression, block or filter access to information, monitor online activity, and more effectively and efficiently control populations than they did in the pre-digital world (Donahue 2016). To better assess this race between the hare and the turtle, we can distinguish three major users of digitalization in a constellation of a networked digital space; (1) digital dissidents inside an authoritarian

country who communicate with each other, (2) the outside diasporas, and (3) the authoritarian regimes themselves and their response on the collective actions of the digital dissidents.

From a broader perspective, activist digital User Generated Content (UGC) also provides a means of circumventing the mainstream news media. Ordinary people at the grassroots – including local residents, holidaymakers, soldiers, democratic activists, insurgents, and terrorists – are now enabled to bypass established editorial and censorial filters and turn their personal record of an event into a public testimony that disrupts “official” perspectives carefully crafted and provided to the mainstream news media (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014, 754). While it is tempting to connect catchphrases such as “YouTube revolutions” or the “YouTubification of dissent” to such current political phenomena, it is important to remember that media have always played a central role in bringing about social change (Mercea et al. 2016; Snowden 2014; Thorson et al. 2013; Thurman 2008; Uldam and Askanius 2013, 1186). Video activism is a vital area on the interface of activism and digital platforms today but the production of videos on the ground also opens up discussions of various functions of activists’ bodies as a source of narrative. The proximity to protest violence makes these amateur recordings an extraordinary “resource for understanding the subjective experience of the ordinary people who find themselves on the front line of revolutionary struggle” (Snowden 2014, 401). Like the Egyptian Tank Man video, the majority of videos depicting the Arab Uprisings came from non-professional videographers (Westmoreland 2016, 254).

UGC and digital grassroots

UGC in the form of grassroots digital video activism in the Middle East has been around for well over a decade. The first impactful online videos in the run-up to the Egyptian uprisings in 2010 appeared on YouTube in 2007, when the video collective “Free Egypt” uploaded mobile phone UGC of severe police brutality, which solicited reactions such as “Fuck Hosni Mubarak and his family.” Eventually, these police brutality videos, in combination with other UGC, sparked street protests against state

police violence that spread all over Egypt, culminating in the 2010 massive street protests at Tahrir Square in Cairo that attracted the world's media attention.

Major studies on the digital layer to Middle Eastern politics have first been introduced in the context of the 2009 Persian Awakening and the 2010–11 Arab Spring, often framed within a revolutionary and even democratic notion linked to social media and mobile telephony (Alterman 2011; Aouragh 2014; Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Howard 2010; Kraidy 2016; 2013). Aouragh and Alexander (2011) in particular describe how the Internet creates digital spheres of dissidence and tools of revolution in the MENA region. Fielder (2012) and Ruijgrok (2017) demonstrate that through speed, distance, decentralization, and interaction, the Internet facilitates dissent within authoritarian states despite authoritarian attempts to control cyberspace. The Internet and all its connected tools for communication have become the center of attention for many surveillance scholars (Fuchs et al. 2012; Howard and Hussain 2011). That is, the politics of digital infrastructures *matters* – not the least in terms of control, surveillance and power – for the understanding of Middle Eastern politics (Howard 2010; Hussain and Shaikh 2015). We are at the start of a growing body of literature with respect to cyber ethnographies and the development of theories of digital anthropology related to the MENA region (Aouragh 2018).

The Web 2.0 social media facilitated crowd-sourcing in allowing activists to simultaneously be the audience and content creators (Lanzillo 2011). Twitter users sent tweets – short text messages posted using Twitter – marked with the “Iran Election” hashtag (i.e., labeled as being about the Iran election) at a rate of about thirty new tweets per minute in the days immediately following the election (Elson et al. 2012). In reaction to the protests, the Iranian government made tighten control over foreign websites and social networks deemed as a threat to national security, also thanks to the establishment of a cyber police (Rahimi and Faris 2016). This, in turn, impacted the technological and personal responses of the opposition. This pattern

is observed in all protests, from the first Arab uprisings to the 2019 revolts. In other words, the digital battle between the regime and the counterrevolutionaries is subjected to continuous change in which activists respond, anticipate and adapt to the limited media landscape shaped by the latest government restrictions.

“This is a shame! This is called a protest!”

Understanding intricacies of rapidly changing digital geographies and landscapes is increasingly important in Middle Eastern Studies. Over the past twenty years, the advancement of the digital age radically changed the manner in which social movements and non-violent protesters organized themselves and shared information about their protests against authoritarianism (Bray 2017; Tripp 2013; Webb 2015). Since the introduction of small handy cameras with high-quality 3CCD chips in the 2000s, the use of digital video and UGC uploaded on online video platforms was introduced in many different dissident movements such as the VJs of Burma and the Green Revolution movement in Iran.

The visible street protests of the uprisings of 2010–11 in the MENA region, were preceded by decades of less visible forms of everyday digital resistance against oppression that created a subaltern counter-culture which prepares the ground for the outpour of protests (Tripp 2013). In Syria for example, everyday resistance was veiled by a behavior of people acting “as if” they were “ideal” followers towards the authoritarian Assad government (Wedeen 2015; 1998), but in private and through proxies, they would manage to circumvent the surveillance systems and express on line resistance. Until 2011, assembly of large groups on the streets was forbidden and controlled heavily by the Assad regime through an elaborate surveillance system of informers and secret police, But there was a significant, increasingly critical counter-culture found in the arts and documentary film cinema (Cécile Boëx 2011; Wessels 2019b). When YouTube became available in Syria in February 2011 (Wessels 2011), uploads of digital videos of the first dissident street protests started to emerge.

One of the first videos recorded was an extraordinary event of an unplanned protest in the Souk al Hamidiyeh, in the old city of Damascus. It was uploaded on February 17, 2011, by Misbar Syria and quickly went viral². In grainy mobile phone footage, the video shows thousands of Syrian protesters gathered in the street in a spontaneous protest against police violence whereby Syrian citizen Imad Nassab was violently beaten by four policemen. Hundreds of mobile phones are visible in the crowd, recording the protests. The protesters (all men) repeat slogans as “Thieves, thieves” and “the Syrian people do not take humiliation!” in front of the police station. After the police cars are surrounded, the crowd breaks out into shouting the Islamic phrase “There is no other God other than Allah!” At 01’56”, someone in the crowd starts shouting for the President, most probably a civilian clothes secret police. Police cars and other security cars are surrounded by the crowd when a door opens, tens of men start shouting “Our souls and blood, we will sacrifice for Bashar.” They also urge the crowd to salute the interior minister who is emerging from one of the cars. The shaky video records the minister hanging out of his car, trying to address the crowd, when one protester shouts “By God, they are slaughtering us. Robbing the people. The thieves!” At 03’41”, the minister shouts that “This is a shame! This is called a protest!” The crowd reacts, some protesters shout that they love the President, Nassab’s brother asks the protesters to end the protest, because the minister is now there to assure Nassab is treated well. He is afraid there will be retribution to his family. A spontaneous assembly on the street could mean severe consequences. The accusation that “this is a protest!” is enough for people present to act “s if” and deflect the accusation.

Less than a month later, the protests had spread, and the same channel uploaded an iconic video on March 15, 2011, which is remembered as the start of the Syrian Revolution. The video shows a major demonstration in the Souk Hamadiyyeh, where the protesters shout “God, Syria, and Freedom Only” a play on the normally shouted slogan “God, Syria, and Bashar Only.” The videographer mentions that the protesters are Sunni and Alawite together and this is the uprising (Intifada) against the regime. The crowd shouts “Peaceful, peaceful!” In another UGC video uploaded on March 16, 2011, by the channel freedomspark77, it is clear that the crowd

is morally outraged and against the Assad regime, when they shout: “He who kills his own people, is a traitor” and “Free Syria.” The demonstrators were protesting against the repressive measures of the Assad-regime, the threats of violence, including a tightening of Internet censorship, expanded use of travel bans, and the arrest of political prisoners (Flock 2011). But protesters were also particularly enraged by the brutal arrest and torture of 15 teenagers from Dera’a on March 6 for writing “The people want the fall of the regime” (“الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام”, “Ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam”) on the walls of the southern city of Dera’a. The upload of the funeral of Hamza Khateeb, one of the teenagers who was arrested and died under torture, then spiraled the Syrian revolution into an acceleration in a cycle of street demonstrations, state violence, and crackdown and funerals and a consequent rapid spread of UGC on YouTube (Wessels 2019a).

From digital grassroots to full out war

In Syria, the authoritarian state institutionalized and militarized the digital crackdown in the form of the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), consisting of Syrian cyber warriors trained to hack into the virtual space created by opposition groups and post disinformation, as a public relations tool for Assad’s government (Al-Rawi 2014; Aouragh 2014). The Syrian popular uprisings led to an explosion of digital content on video platforms like YouTube, which helped to establish new digital geography and media landscape (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013; Cécile Boëx 2013; Cecile Boëx 2012; Stinson 2017; Wessels 2011; Wessels 2019a; 2017). Over six hundred thousand digital YouTube clips have been uploaded from Syria since the outbreak of violence (Wessels 2019a). In the early pro-democracy protests, activists made clever use of social media, Facebook groups, Twitter, and Google maps to organize themselves and avoid government surveillance. In February 2011, the Syrian government allowed access to YouTube, which prior to this, had only been accessible through the use of proxies (Wessels 2011). The motivation for this move on the part of the government, however, was for closer surveillance of protesters.

What started in 2011 as a peaceful revolution has since developed into an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe involving different local, national and international actors. The involvement of Russia prompted an increase in the spread of fake-news and Internet trolling on twitter, social media and other digital intermediaries. This was particularly poignant during the information wars concerning the verification of digital images of chemical attacks in Ghouta in 2013, during the 2016 siege of Aleppo and during the 2018 siege of eastern Ghouta in Damascus. At the same time, Syrian pro-democracy activists both inside and outside of the country continued to work around the clock to organize themselves in on line and off line protests, verify images, use VPN, code and find new encrypted applications, communicate and share information within the wider activist community and international news agencies. They did this while avoiding being tracked by government surveillance agencies.

The experience and savviness of Syrian pro-democracy protesters had a history prior to the uprisings in 2011. For the past decade, Syrian youth had been creative about the use of proxies and VPN application to circumvent the Syrian intelligence on line. By the end of 2009, a Damascus-based scattered group of urban educated youth organized themselves in the informal Al Share' foundation (Wessels 2019b) and throughout 2010 they started to organize and bring humanitarian aid to the approximately 160 thousand internally displaced Syrian from the north-east of the country who camped around Damascus, having fled the prolonged drought in their home-area (DeChatel 2014). But in an authoritarian context, the Damascene activists in 2010 had to act secretly and could only clandestinely do their humanitarian effort. They did video record their efforts and uploaded this on line in 2010. Eventually, members of these secretive collectives of young Damascene urbanites became major media activist figures in the early phases of the Syrian popular uprisings, and those who survived continue to do so in the Syrian diaspora.

Authoritarian and oppressive regimes have taken great effort to silence these grassroots activists, including the video activists. In Syria, the Assad regime targeted and arrested leading young civil society activists early on in the protests, some of whom disappeared in the catacombs of the Syrian prisons,

as well as specifically targeted killings of known street protesters. Examples are the incarceration, torture and eventual execution of Bassel Safadi, a renowned Palestinian–Syrian open-source software developer and pro-free speech and pro-democracy activist (McKernan 2016; Wessels 2018b) and the targeted killing in Homs of Bassel Shehadeh, a well-known video activist and talented young filmmaker, in 2012 (Wessels 2019b).

The brutal early crackdown on these young, bright, and intelligent digital dissidents in Syria resulted in a void in the organizational capacities of the digital dissidents to coordinate and plan protests and gatherings. This crackdown went hand in hand with the use of live bullets to shoot and kill protesters at street demonstrations and the deployment of heavy army artillery, tanks, and rocket grenades, as means of crowd control. The violent regime response caused many soldiers of the Syrian regime army to defect and join the opposition, eventually forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The militarization of the Syrian uprisings eventually led to what is now a nine-year-long brutal war and humanitarian disaster, culminating in the mass displacement of people inside and outside Syria, entry of jihadi militants and extremist Islamic armed groups to fill up voids of armed resistance, the emergence of ISIS and long-term sieges, forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of Syrian civilians from many different places and the targeted bombardments of hospitals, markets, schools, and other civilian targets.

Successful Revolutions

In other parts of the Arab world, popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes were more successful. The Sudanese revolution of 2019 has had very little coverage in the Western press. However, compared to all other uprisings in the MENA region since 2011, the Sudanese popular revolution is one of the most successful non-violent revolutions in the Arab world. In April 2019, following months of massive protests in the capital Khartoum, Omar el-Bashir, Sudan's decade long dictator and autocratic ruler, was arrested, removed from office and put in jail. A transitional government was formed to lead to an eventual process of civilian governance and general elections in 2022.

One of the major elements that Sudanese young revolutionaries pointed out themselves as crucial in the success of the revolution is the velocity of communication technology, the use of Facebook to organize the meetings and demonstrations and the response in large numbers of protesters that came to Khartoum. The trade unions, united in the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), led the revolution and prepared themselves through the use of Internet technology. Their WhatsApp groups organized swift meetings and reactions to government reprisals for their dissidence.³ Another major element of success was the documentation of the protests on mobile phone video clips that were shared rapidly and went viral. What emerged was a rapidly growing mass popular and non-violent movement, where mainly the youth joined the protests. Although often warning their children not to join, when the protests seemed to be making a difference, the older generations also joined the Sudanese revolution. The calls for the regime to step down became louder and although the regime tried to crush the rebellion, the size and the large numbers of protesters were instrumental to instill fear into the regime supporters. Millions went out on the streets. Thousands arrived from the far corners of Sudan into Khartoum to join the street protests. When the dictator was arrested, the protesters celebrated with a mass gathering at the Green Square, immediately baptized into the “Liberation Square.”

The Sudanese Revolution did not succeed without a heavy price. On the June 3, 2019, Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commonly called Janjaweed, flooded the city of Khartoum and killed more than one hundred protesters who were participating in a mass sit-in in front of the military air force headquarters (Akram Boshar and Bean 2019; Diab 2019). Tens of bodies were thrown in the Nile River and reports of rapes and sexual abuse emerged. Two members of the previous regime, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (General Hemedti) and General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al Burhan, are still in leading positions of the transitional government and supporters of the previous dictatorship are active in stalling the democratization process, although keeping a low-profile during this transitional period which should end in 2022. Hemedti as leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is wielding a lot of power. The government institutions in Sudan still

include many members of the previous regime and the SPA is continuously working, day and night, to make the transformation succeed, despite the resistance from the old regime supporters. However, on the ground, there is a noticeable change in the new Sudan, such as the visible freedom of speech and the near-total absence of censorship. The Ministry of Information is not monitoring journalists anymore, people are free to speak, to demonstrate and there is no active secret police presence nor Internet surveillance by the state. This is felt as a big relief for many Sudanese civilians. In Sudan, the race between the hare and the turtle seems to have been won by the young Internet generation.

Between a hare and a turtle

In the race between the hare and the turtle, an Internet savvy young generation of activists from the MENA region continuously tries to keep up and stay in front of the authoritarian states and other repressive actors. Every day, the activists need to change tactics to communicate with each other, crossing geographical boundaries, often in collaboration with other Arab and non-Arab activists outside the region. Creative dissidence is also seen in the digital memorialization of conflict and digital geographies. These developments beg deeper reflection on how memories of conflict have become publicly and collectively owned, shared and mediated in the digital space. How is scholarly research conducted into these digital developments? How we should define the virtual? Where is the boundary between a physical, off line reality in material space and a digital online reality in cyberspace?

The purpose of this Special Issue of CyberOrient is to present state-of-the-art research on digital dissidence and creative resistance in the MENA region. Digital dissidence has forged a parallel on line universe. Digital dissidence and creative resistance went hand in hand with the rise and fall of Arab blogospheres, grassroot media centers and hacker's collectives that popped all over the MENA region, opposing authoritarian state structures and oppressive groups. Anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian digital resistance can be found in the contexts of Israel–Palestine, Iran,

Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Sudan, against autocratic governments, colonial occupiers and extremist Islamic groups.

In the article “Techies on the Ground: Revisiting Egypt 2011,” Laila Shereen Sakr (VJ Um Amel) describes the experience of the Egyptian revolution and counterrevolution on social media by analyzing tweets, posts, and blogs to describe the political culture in the virtual realm. She argues that the Egyptian experience of revolution and counterrevolution reveals the indispensability, the promises, and the limits of digital communication across borders and languages. She calls the Egyptian cyber revolutionaries “techies on the ground or grassroots technological innovators.” These techies were active long before the popular uprisings in 2010–11. When Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook in 2004 and Twitter was launched in March 2006, scholars quickly observed the emerging Arab blogosphere and mapped it out through the Internet and Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, which investigates the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and democratic processes (Etling et al. 2014). Between 2004 and 2011, the rise of the Arab blogosphere gained scholarly attention. In particular, the work of Egyptian blogger and software developer Alaa Abd al Fattah ushered in a new generation of digital activists in the Arab World. This movement sought to destabilize the existing structure to pave the way for revolutionary content

Under the guise of the Arabic-speaking cyborg named VJ Um Amel, Sakr finds a disconnect and a widening gap between academics and cyber activists, the Arab techies on the ground, which seem to run parallel to each other rather than converging. Therefore R-Shief was developed and conceived at the intersection of art, technology, and scholarship. R-Shief was a software application built to attend to critical gaps in computational and textual analysis on social media, addressing emerging shifts in cultural productions. By providing both tools and analysis through R-Shief, such as twitter data analytics, R-shief brings the two worlds of activists and scholars closer together.

Fabio Cristiano carries out a study on the Palestinian dissident cyber realm in his article “Deterritorializing Cyber Security and Warfare in Palestine: Hackers, Sovereignty, and the National Cyberspace as Normative.” In the context of profound territorial and complex geographical fragmentation, such as in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), cyberspace has become a field of contestation, digital resistance, and dissidence. The question is how territorial boundaries off line run parallel with on line boundaries. Exploring how Israeli and Palestinian strategies intersect, enact, and disrupt territorial control over cyberspace, Cristiano assesses whether these strategies are consistent with the current geographical fragmentation of Palestinian territory. The article critically questions what the boundaries and linkages are between off line realities and on line limitations and restrictions and how does this affect the effectiveness of dissident cyber activism.

Cristiano argues that the off line security cooperation between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the occupying state of Israel is replicated in cyberspace by imposing severe limitations on user mobility and data circulation. This makes the race between Palestinian techies on the ground and the repressive Israeli and Palestinian government systems, both off line and on line, a complicated and tough battle. Faced with extremely efficient Israeli dominated high-tech and a well-developed Internet ecology that occupies Palestinian cyberspace, Palestinian hacker collectives in Gaza and the occupied West Bank wage a sophisticated, and sometimes highly effective, cyber warfare to disrupt and contest territorial occupation of Palestinian land. These include both intrusive strategies for gathering intelligence as well as disruption of Israeli services. The hackers’ collectives continue to find and improve their ability to circumvent territorial blocks, by making use of servers outside of its territory (in Germany for example). Despite the seemingly uphill battle that Palestinian hackers face, Cristiano sees a new form of spatial imaginary and de-territorialization in cyberspace that occurs primarily through the ordering, and disordering, of data circulation and user mobility.

Conclusion

This introduction to the special issue of CyberOrient on Digital Dissidence in the MENA region has aimed to put the two articles that follow in a wider scholarly and geographic context of revolutionary movements that are currently waging throughout the MENA region. Reflecting on the latest waves of street demonstrations and anti-government protests in 2019, the special issue is focused on the role of digitalization and the opportunities that grassroots techies on the ground take to disrupt, contest, and take down repressive systems of government. The off line realities and online battles go hand in hand. Compared to a race between the hare and the turtle, younger generations in the MENA region have a distinct advantage over the older generation representatives and members of authoritarian governments.

Comparing the uprisings against authoritarianism in Syria with the successful revolution in Sudan, the first article shows that the early brutal crackdown on protesters, digital dissidents and the disappearance of bright grassroots techies from the cyberspace, combined with an eventual militarization of the uprisings, caused a humanitarian catastrophe in which the authoritarian forces became even more brutal. In Sudan, where activists and protesters dedicate most of their success to the use of social media and Internet technology, the regime also employed a crackdown, but this was not successful and eventually conceded power.

There are vast differences between MENA countries and other political contexts in which to place digital dissidence and whether it is successful. Two articles that follow in this Special Issue highlight the respective political contexts and complexities of Egypt and the occupied Palestinian territories. The fact that rapid developments are ongoing, the streets are still being filled with Internet savvy protesters in Lebanon, Iran, and Iraq with the skills and capacity of these techies on the ground increasing by the day, means that the MENA region finds itself in the middle of a major era of transformation both online and off line. The race between the hare and the turtle is thus by far not finished yet.

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Notes

¹ Available on-line, see Alliance of MENA Socialists (2019).

² See Misbar Syria(2011)

³ Personal communication board members Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), Khartoum, Sudan. Their declaration is available on-line, see Sudanese Professionals Association (2019).