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Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East

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The Net Worth of the Arab Spring

Ines Braune

Keywords

Islam and civil society, Middle East, Arab Spring, information and communication technology, media studies, Middle Eastern studies, social networks

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.

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Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Iran's "Twitter Uprising"

Mohammed El-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis

Abstract

Social media, particularly blogging, Facebook and Twitter, have played a key role in instigating, accelerating and even organizing some of the uprisings and revolutions that have been taking place all over the Middle East. This role has been effective in galvanizing the youth and empowering them in their fights against repressive regimes and their plight for more freedom and independence. This study looks into the social media role in the so-called "Facebook revolution," which took place in Egypt in January 2011 and the so-called "Twitter uprising," which took place in Iran in June 2009. The Egyptian revolution did succeed in toppling the regime, while the Iranian uprising failed. Why did the calls for political change that started in the virtual world lead to actual change in the real world in Egypt but not in Iran? This study addresses this question by providing a critical analysis of the available literature and interviews with online activists in Egypt and Iran. The authors used the SPIN model (Segmentation, polycentrism, integration and networking) as a theoretical framework and concluded that the model helped social media succeed in Egypt, but not in Iran.

Keywords

public sphere, democracy, social networks, activism, Iran, Egypt, social media, information and communication technology

Introduction

The Middle East has been witnessing a tremendous growth in digital communication technologies in a way that has made it possible for political activists to get their message across through social media to different segments of the youth in a fast and efficient manner. "These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable" (Ghannam 2011:4).

The Internet has allowed large masses of Middle Easterners to solidify their efforts and organize protests in a short amount of time. "It also provided a platform for people to express their solidarity, both within...[their respective countries] and with others in the region and beyond" (The Arab Revolution and Social Media 2011).

According to *Time* magazine, close to one-third of the Middle Eastern people are under the age of thirty with high educational levels, but with no clear prospects for the future. Many of them turn to the Internet to express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with problems that they face on a daily basis, such as unemployment, tough economic conditions and government corruption. They have utilized the Internet "to rally the populace to their cause" (Tung 2011).

Thanks to the Internet, a new category of "online citizenry" or "netizens" has started to surface in the Middle East. This category of young and politically aware citizens, who are technology-savvy, has set a new vision and a more promising political map for the region (Kuebler 2011).

However, this optimism should be calculated rather than exaggerated, and there needs to be some caution in assessing the new technologies' abilities to initiate political transformation in a region like the Middle East, which has been subject to decades of suppression under various dictatorial regimes.

There is no question that different forms of social media have served as a venue for average Middle Easterners through which they joined efforts with human rights organizations and mobilized larger segments of the public (Tung 2011). But the outcome of utilizing social media for political purposes is not always going to favor the proponents of political freedoms. In fact, the impact of social media in this context is closely tied to the socio-political circumstances in individual countries.

This study compares the role of social media, or cyberactivism, which Philip Howard (2011:145) defines as: "the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline," in the so-called "Twitter

Uprising,” which took place in Iran in the aftermath of the controversial presidential elections in June 2009 and the so-called “Facebook Revolution,” which took place in Egypt on January 25, 2011 and led to the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak’s regime after approximately thirty years in power. Despite the fact that social media, particularly the forms of micro-blogging such as Twitter and Facebook, played an integral and visible role in both uprisings, their outcomes were completely different. Therefore, it is important to ask whether social media were “the key enabler of...[the Iranian uprising and the Egyptian revolution], or [were they] more of an accelerator?” (Himelfarb 2011).

The study addresses the abovementioned question using the SPIN model (Segmentation, polycentrism, integration and networking) as a theoretical framework for comparing the role of social media in Iran and Egypt. Kuebler (2011) argued that “the comparative method is...best suited [in these types of studies] to avoid the danger of conventional wisdom and instead acquire a systematic vision of the phenomenon by putting it into the concrete political context of the country in question.”

Social Media: Between Cyber-Utopianism and Political Realism

Social media, which rely on computer-generated content, can be defined as “the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others using network technologies” (Brussee and Hekman 2011). Since the introduction of social media, there has been a debate “between the polar opposites of cyber-utopian and cyber-skeptic-where one side hailed social media and the Internet as liberators, and the other as tools used increasingly by authoritarian regimes to attack and intimidate dissident voices” (Himelfarb 2011). However, the social media role in the recent uprisings in the Middle East has shifted the debate to “a more nuanced discussion around the characteristics of...[social media]: enabler or accelerator” (Himelfarb 2011).

Morozov (2011) calls the attempt to assign too much power to new media “cyber-utopianism” or “Google Doctrine,” which is based on the strong and

unquestionable belief that cyber technology has almost unlimited powers and that it can eventually liberate any people from state repression.

But the social media powers are not unlimited. Cyber-utopians tend to downplay the governments' role in censoring social media or even utilizing them to serve their purposes. The Internet's open nature allows governments to track down their opponents. "Governments create cyber-armies of hackers to discern possible enemies and send secret police to abduct these people during the night... Though many believe their comments online are safe since they are anonymous, what they do not realize is that the government has many ways of ripping off the 'protective' mask of anonymity to reveal the speaker of any comment" (Tung 2011). Many governments are trying to cope with the political dissidents' use of sophisticated cyber technology by developing new, advanced and up-to-date techniques to closely monitor and intercept the opposition's interaction and communication in the online world. In a way, social media have strengthened rather than weakened the status of several authoritarian regimes (Shirky 2011).

Morozov (2011) argued that it should not be a given or an automatic assumption that social media, in and by themselves, will eventually push for political changes, introduce transformations to societies and liberate them from repressive regimes. The belief in this deterministic scenario, according to Morozov, is a form of "cyber-naïveté" and "slacktivism," which exaggerates or overestimates the Internet power and ability to change at a time when this may not be the case in reality.

Echoing the same thought, Hands (2011:38) criticized technological determinism as a "fatalistic resignation to technology. Instead, he called for a more effective, non-deterministic approach to studying technology, which he described as a "critical theory of technology." According to this theory, Internet technology is "a product of human society and culture – as socially constructed" (Hands 2011:23). This social-constructivist theory highlights the continuous interaction and coordination between technology and society.

In this context, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009:55) argued that "the virtual community is an extension of the real community, and the meaning

and values of a virtual community are derived from the participants in that community. In other words, virtual communities do not function as isolated entities, but they are the reflections of human cultural and social values.”

Studying the environment in which social media operate is part of what can be described as “cyber-realism,” which rejects the notion that “radical shifts in the value system of the entire policy apparatus could or should happen under the pressure of the Internet alone” (Morozov 2011:319). Along the same lines, Shirky (2011) argued that the use of social media, such as blogs, SMS, Facebook and Twitter “does not have a single preordained outcome.” It depends on the political and social circumstances in each individual country. The potential of social media to initiate political change is dependent upon the activists’ motivation to utilize the conditions in their societies in a way that makes change viable (Bennett 2003).

The SPIN Model

The theoretical model that best explains the political movements’ ability to organize and initiate change on the ground is the SPIN model, which was introduced by Gerlach and Hine in 1968 and updated by Gerlach in 2001. This model explains the structure of organizations that are “segmented, polycentric, integrated, networks” (Bennett 2003:22).

Segmentation

Segmentation refers to the open boundaries between diverse civil society groups, “which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract.” (Gerlach 2001:289). Activists can be members in more than one group or segment simultaneously, and “may join and separate over different actions, yet remain available to future coordination” (Bennett 2003:22).

Polycentrism

Polycentrism means “having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centers of influence” (Gerlach 2001:289). The polycentric

groups are “many headed,” and they “are not organized in a hierarchy; they are ‘heterarchic.’ They do not have a commander in chief. There is no one person who can claim to speak for the movement as a whole, any more than there is one group that represents the movement” (Gerlach 2001:294).

Integration

Integration refers to “the horizontal structure of distributed activism...The integrative function is provided by personal ties, recognition of common threats, pragmatism about achieving goals, and the ease of finding associations and information through the Internet” (Bennett 2003:22). The awareness of a common enemy “helps diverse movement groups to unite and to expand...As ‘underdogs,’ they must put aside their differences and work together” (Gerlach 2001:299). Social media, with their openness and non-hierarchical structure, can give a boost to horizontalism within politically-oriented networks (Mason 2011).

Networks

And finally, networks are the natural consequence of the abovementioned aspects. These networks have “overlapping membership, joint activities... and shared ideals and opponents” (Gerlach 2001:290-291). “Networking enables movement participants to exchange information and ideas and to coordinate participation in joint action. Networks do not have a defined limit but rather expand or contract as groups interact or part ways” (Gerlach 2001:295-296). “Since the social network linkages are nonhierarchical, information exchange is relatively open” (Bennett 2003:22).

The movements that share the aspects included in the SPIN model have the ability to avoid government’s suppression, to stand strong in the face of opposition and adjust their strategies to cope with any changing conditions on the ground. Moreover, these movements, which emanate from the civil society, “will survive and even become more active...when others are removed, retired, or co-opted” (Gerlach 2001:303).

The SPIN model, which has the ability to generate and instigate socio-political change can help explain the course and outcomes of the Iranian uprising that took place in 2009 and the Egyptian revolution that took place in 2011. The political conditions and organizational structures in Iran are very different from those in Egypt. These differences can be highlighted and clarified in light of the SPIN model. In this context, it is worth highlighting the fact that the SPIN model itself cannot create political change. However, the model helps explain and contextualize the circumstances that lead to political change.

Assessing the SPIN Model in the so-called Iran's "Twitter Uprising"

In June 2009, major Iranian cities, particularly Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz, witnessed street protests to complain about the allegedly fraudulent presidential elections in which the incumbent candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad beat opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who served as Iran's prime minister from 1981 to 1989 (Kamalipour 2010). These demonstrations, which took place despite an official ban on political activism and public protests, "reflected a growing gap between what observers referred to as Iran's 'hardliners' headed by the current Iranian government and the 'reformists' led by Mousavi" (El-Nawawy 2010:4).

The protests, which were part of what was described as the "Green Movement," started out as peaceful, but became bloody after the regime opened fire on the demonstrators. These protests attracted the world media attention (Kamalipour 2010). The Iranian government imposed a media blackout after the elections' results were announced on June 12, 2009. Despite this blackout, social media particularly YouTube and Twitter, were flooded with amateur images and videos of the victims of police brutality on the Iranian streets (Sabety 2010). One such video was that of Neda Sultan, a young female Iranian activist, who was shot to death by the Iranian police. Videos of her bleeding to death overwhelmed social media, turning her "into one of the most well-known images of the [Iranian] regime's brutal repression" (Milani 2009). The killing of this young woman, who became a household

name inside and outside Iran, further galvanized the demonstrators who carried slogans such as “We are all Neda” (Afshar 2010:247).

Iranian officials tried to discredit the claim that Neda Sultan was shot by the police. Instead, the regime circulated another claim through social media that Neda was fatally shot by one of her fellow protesters (Malek 2010). This reflects the Iranian regime’s effective use of social media to counter the opposition’s online activism.

In general, social media mobilized the Iranian activists and provided them with a forum through which they could express their views. In this context, Fatemeh Keshavarz, an Iranian professor and activist who runs a blog called “Windows on Iran,” said (personal communication via e-mail, April 20, 2011) that “social media made the Iranian citizens feel empowered and in some way in control of their lives. It also helped the western world, particularly the United States, to see that the Iranian society was far from the machines of ideology blinded by faith and ready to blow up the world.”

The protests lasted for several months, and despite the graphic images of dead and injured protesters that were circulated through social media, the protests failed in achieving their objective [of changing the course of the elections and ending the rule of Ahmadinejad], and the regime “eventually regained control of the political sphere” (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011).

The increasing social media role in Iran is a reflection of the tremendous growth of the Internet, which was introduced in the country in 1993. Between 2001 and 2009, Internet usage in Iran saw a 48-percent annual increase. “Recent statistics indicate there are more than 33 million Internet users in Iran amounting to 43.2 percent of the population...Reports indicate that there are about 700,000 Iranian bloggers and that 60,000 blogs are updated routinely in Iran” (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011).

While Google and Yahoo are popular in Iran, Twitter was the medium of choice for covering the 2009 protests throughout the summer of 2009, and the hashtag “#IranElection” became very popular among Twitter users who

mostly came from the global community outside Iran. This could be attributed to Twitter's flexibility, simplicity, openness and ability to get around government censorship (Carreiro and Hirji 2009). "Hopes [in Twitter] were high to the extent that commentators were calling the uprising a "Twitter Revolution" despite the fact that the protests did not lead to a full-fledged revolution (Sohrabi-Haghighat 2011). The high expectations regarding Twitter role prompted the U.S. State Department to ask Twitter to postpone a scheduled upgrade in the server so that Iranian online activists can utilize Twitter without interruptions (Burns and Eltham 2009).

Despite its advantages, Twitter had a downside. "As an organization tool, it is far too public a forum to plan out protests or any anti-government activity." That is why, it was easy for Iranian officials to use it to spread fake information about the protests and to track down and arrest protesters through their Twitter accounts (Carreiro and Hirji 2009).

While it was hard for the Iranian government to completely block Twitter because of its "open-ended design" that allows access from various locations, the government blocked other forms of social media. It is known that "Iranian government operates what has been described as one of the most extensive filtering systems in the world" (Yigal 2009). In this context, Golnaz Esfandiari, an online Iranian activist and senior correspondent for Radio Free Europe based in Washington, D.C., said (personal communication, March 12, 2011, Doha, Qatar) that:

Iran has one of the world's toughest filtering techniques after China. Iranian government officials proudly announced that they filter tens of thousands of websites. Even blogs belonging to conservatives get filtered. If you look at Facebook, you will see some fake accounts that belong to government people who created these accounts to publicize for the government. They want to make friendships with the average Iranians through these pages to check what they are writing and who their other friends are. Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei has a Twitter account, and those people who work on his account are

really good. Whenever he has a speech, they start tweeting his speech very fast in three or four languages.

The Iranian officials also sent out text messages to the protesters to warn them against taking to the streets. In addition, the regime “formed a high-level twelve-member cybercrime team and tasked it with finding any false information – or, as they put it, ‘insults and lies’ – on Iranian websites. Those spreading false information were to be identified and arrested” (Morozov 2011:10).

The Iranian government’s sophisticated and organized efforts in utilizing the new media to its advantage and co-opting social media were complemented by the religious foundation in Iran, which relies on the *Shi’a* clerics’ rule, emanating from the “*Velayat-el faqih*” or the “Guardianship of Islamic Jurists” that controls most forms of Iranian politics and society. In his explanation of the religious foundation’s impact on the Iranian uprising, Mohammed Ali Mohtadi, a researcher at an independent think-tank called the Middle East Center for Strategic Studies in Tehran, said (personal communication, March 13, 2011, Doha, Qatar):

The religious foundation and ideology of the regime made this uprising seem against religion. In other words, it was easy for the Iranian regime to frame any such uprising as anti-religious and anti-Islamic. Most of the Iranian protesters were secular, and they were highly affected by Western culture. That’s why they failed to gain the sympathy of the rest of the Iranian society, which is mostly religious.

In Iran, “there is little independent basis of organized opposition that can emanate from within the state... [Any possible source of opposition is] heavily infiltrated by the secret police and monitored closely by the *Basij* militia [which are affiliated with the clerical regime]” (Acuff 2010:229). In 2010, Iran’s hard-line officials affiliated with the clerical regime launched a social networking site that included videos, images and cartoons making fun of the 2009 protests. “The site’s members seem to be united by little else than the highly ambitious goal of fighting ‘evil,’ although there is also space to

discuss more prosaic issues like ‘the rule of the supreme jurist’ and ‘women and family’” (Morozov 2011:134).

This clerical regime in Iran has succeeded in gaining public support because of its anti-Western message. “There is nothing that can rally people even behind unpopular governments more than the fear of a foreign threat... [This fear] has provided greater space for the [Iranian clerical] regime to consolidate its rule” (Telhami 2011).

This fear of Western hegemony might have worked against the process of cyberactivism (Howard 2011) associated with Iran’s “Twitter uprising.” This is because western support of the demonstrations tainted the uprising and gave the regime the opportunity to blame the protesters for conspiring against Iran’s national unity. Moreover, several pro-regime media accused the West of “trying to foment a revolution via the Internet” (Morozov 2011:12).

The censorship and scare tactics operated by the Iranian regime might not have been the only reason for the failure of Iran’s “Twitter uprising.” Several observers argued that the lack of planning on the ground had weakened the social media’s potential to mobilize the public. In this context, Morozov (2009) casted doubts on Twitter’s ability to create real political change on the ground in Iran. “To ascribe such great importance to Twitter is to disregard the fact that it is poorly suited to planning protests in a repressive environment like Iran’s” (Morozov 2009:12). According to Morozov, the technology-savvy, pro-Western Twitter users inside Iran, which he estimated at less than twenty thousand prior to the protests, failed at connecting with the Iranian public masses, because “The Iranian opposition did not seem to be well-organized, which might explain why it eventually fizzled” (Morozov 2011:16).

Echoing the same thought, Sohrabi-Haghighat (2011) argued that the Twitter uprising failed in generating “slogans and programs to attract the interest of low-income groups in urban areas. Apart from the vertical expansion through social classes...the movement could not extend its horizontal and geographic reach beyond big cities [in Iran].”

In this context, Slavash Abghari, an Iranian online activist who lives in Atlanta, GA, said (e-mail to the authors, April 15, 2011) that:

The weakness of the 2009 freedom movement in Iran could be attributed to the fact that the participants in the movement were mostly from the middle class and failed to connect with the working and lower classes by expressing and demanding their needs. The working-class members who are suffering from high unemployment and inflation rate, all of them living below poverty line, are first concerned about their survival not political freedom. To succeed, the movement should have engaged the working class too.

According to Abghari, who runs an English iblog titled “My Homeland” that was hacked by the Iranian regime in 2009, “the movement couldn’t achieve its immediate goal of freedom, due to the brutality of parallel security forces and lack of an independent leadership with a clear vision and strategy.”

Morozov’s concept of “slacktivism,” which was explained earlier in this study as a “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact,” was one of the main characteristics of the Iranian “Twitter uprising” (Heacock 2009). This “freedom to scream’ online may actually help regimes by providing a ‘political release valve” (Carafano 2009), which is what happened in the Iranian case.

The lack of organization on the ground in Iran did not meet the four characteristics of the SPIN model. The absence of a domestic Iranian civil society that would lead to the formation of segmented, polycentric and integrated networks of political activism played a critical role in the failure of the 2009 protests. Iran’s “Green Movement” lacked political groups that would act “in a strategic thought-out fashion or, at least [speak] with one voice...Iran’s Twitter Revolution may have drowned in its own tweets: There was just too much digital cacophony for anyone to take decisive action and lead the crowds” (Morozov 2011:197).

In this context, Golnaz Esfandiari, the Iranian activist who was quoted earlier, said in a personal interview with the authors:

The movement just had symbolic leadership, but it lacked real leadership. People needed guidance, but they did not find this guidance on the streets. There was complete chaos with no organized efforts. Also, protesters did not hold to their grounds on the streets. The symbolic leaders of that movement were themselves part of the establishment. They included a former prime minister and a former speaker of the parliament. So, they did not want to bring down the establishment. They just wanted to change the results of the elections. They were calling for a new election, but not for the fall of the Khamenei regime.

The non-hierarchically organized networks that are part of a well-organized political activism – as called for by the SPIN model – were totally absent in the Iranian uprising. The Iranian opposition was so weak that it failed to “break away from the existing system and present a democratic alternative acceptable to the majority of the protesters who...[risked] their lives” (Acuff 2010:225). It seemed that the overall religio-political environment in Iran was not conducive for the success of the street protests that took place in 2009. The Iranian clerical regime was more organized than the opposition, and more effective in utilizing social media. That is why, the impact of the 2009 protests was hardly felt outside the major Iranian cities, and the pro-regime forces were more than enough to suppress street activism. In this context, Ali Afshari, an Iranian human rights and democracy activist living in Washington, D.C. said (personal communication, Washington, D.C., May 23, 2011):

There was a lack of organized leadership among the opposition movement, since it mainly emerged as a reaction to the election fraud that took place, but was not previously organized in a structured way. Therefore, it was shocked by the role of the revolutionary guard and the intervention of the supreme religious leader to change the elections’ results in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This, coupled with

the lack of a clear strategy and the excessive use of violence and suppression by the Iranian regime, led to ineffectiveness and chaos.

Assessing the SPIN Model in the so-called Egypt's "Facebook Revolution"

On January 25, 2011, Egypt witnessed a popular revolution that led to a historic outcome. On that day, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, demanding freedom, justice and an end to corruption. Then their demands were escalated to reach a point of calling for toppling President Hosni Mubarak who stayed in power for thirty years. The mass demonstrations started out in Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo, and then spread throughout various Egyptian governorates. Despite the fact that the protesters refrained from using violence, "armies of riot police took up positions on key thoroughfares around the capital, ready to beat back demonstrators," and using live ammunition and tear gas canisters against many unarmed civilians (Coker et al. 2011:A12).

After the failure of police forces to stop the increasing demonstrations, Mubarak ordered the army to take control of the situation and deploy throughout areas of tension in Egypt. In the meantime, Mubarak made several concessions by firing his cabinet and naming a vice president and a possible successor – a step that the Egyptian public had been calling on him to take for years (Coker et al. 2011).

Demonstrations continued despite Mubarak's concessions, and over the course of eighteen days, the masses defied a nationwide curfew and they were relentless in their demands in a way that stunned the Mubarak regime. Eventually, Mubarak had no choice but to step down on February 11, 2011, delegating his powers to the military and marking a new page in Egypt's history. The fall of Mubarak "was as swift as it was unexpected...[He] had inherited and shaped a system of patronage, nepotism and brutality that seemed beyond challenge" (Levinson et al. 2011:A8).

It was not a surprise that social media played a role in the Egyptian revolution given the fact that Egypt has been among the pioneering countries

in the Middle East in terms of Internet usage. “Egypt followed Tunisia by linking to the Internet in late 1993. This was done by the Information and Decision Making Support Center affiliated to the Egyptian Cabinet.” The number of Internet users in Egypt at the time of writing this paper is approximately 17 million, which is 21 percent of the population. “The usage growth was 3.691 percent between 2000 and 2010. All receive the service through 211 Internet Service Providers” (Rinnawi 2011:126). The number of Egyptian blogs has risen from 40 in 2004 to approximately 160,000 in July 2008 (Internet Filtering in Egypt, 2009). “Although Egypt’s Interior Ministry [under Mubarak] maintain[ed] a department of 45 people to monitor Facebook, nearly 5 million Egyptians use the social networking site” (Ghannam 2011:5). “That’s less than 7 percent of Egypt’s total population. In other words, less than 7 out of every 100 Egyptians are Facebook users” (Vijayan 2011).

Despite the small number of Egyptians on Facebook, activists used this social media tool to get their message across and to plan their meeting points on the streets. That led many observers to describe the Egyptian uprising as the “Facebook Revolution.” One Facebook page was launched before the revolution, and it played a key role in mobilizing the Egyptian public. This page revolved around a young Egyptian male – Khaled Said – who was beaten to death in June 2010 on the streets of Alexandria by two police officers after posting a YouTube video which allegedly revealed police corruption (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). The “We Are All Khaled Said” page attracted close to a half-a-million followers, and it “became a rallying point for a campaign against police brutality. For many Egyptians, it revealed details of the extent of torture in their country” (Profile: Egypt’s Wael Ghonim 2011).

The social media role in the Egyptian revolution was suspended on January 27, 2011, after the Egyptian regime’s unmatched step of shutting down the Internet service and cutting the mobile service in the whole country. Despite the fact that the Internet blackout lasted for six days, during which the country was totally isolated from the virtual world, “protest organizers

were able to bring out larger crowds than ever using flyers and leaflets, word of mouth, and mosques as centers for congregation” (Baiausu 2011).

The protesters’ ability to carry on with their activities on the ground during the height of the revolution without social media could be attributed to a well-organized Egyptian civil society that had been active for years before the revolution despite pressures from the Mubarak regime.

The Egyptian civil society under the Mubarak regime was subject to state laws that curtailed its functionality. Still, the decade that preceded the revolution had witnessed waves of protests and “cycle[s] of contestation,” that were instigated by “the continuing structural crises of the Egyptian economy and state system, which had long since alienated the mass of the population” (El-Mahdi 2009:96).

In 2000, the first wave of political activism was exemplified in a series of street protests that took place on many Egyptian university campuses in support of the second Palestinian uprising. Then, a second wave of protests took place in 2003 against the U.S. invasion of Iraq (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). In 2004, a third and massive-scale cycle of contestation started when activists from various political backgrounds and affiliations came together and formed “The Egyptian Movement for Change,” whose slogan was “*Kifaya*” (English for Enough). This movement, which included Islamists, Liberals, and Socialists, among others, called on Mubarak not to run for a fifth term and rejected the possibility of his son Gamal succeeding him.

During the months that preceded the 2005 presidential elections, *Kifaya* organized “a host of public activities – demonstrations, campus rallies, meetings and marches.” It came up with new ways to contest the authorities. (El-Mahdi 2009:89-90). The rise of *Kifaya* coincided with the emergence of a vibrant group of online activists and bloggers who documented the regime’s brutalities, particularly police torture and human rights’ violations (El-Mahdi 2009). *Kifaya* utilized the bloggers’ help to disseminate its message, but its main activities took place on the ground. It had a “horizontal structure” (El-Mahdi 2009:91) that invested in the talents and energies of

its members who belonged to different factions, yet they were united in a coalition movement that called for an end to the Mubarak regime.

This horizontal nature of *Kifaya*, that organically connected its members who held different ideologies, exemplified the SPIN model, where “multiple hubs” (Bennett 2003) of segmented, polycentric movements are collectively integrated into a network of “nonhierarchical social linkages” with shared understandings among the ideologically-diverse participants (Gerlach 2001:295).

Additionally, in 2006 a group of judges organized public sit-ins and protests to call for the independence of the judiciary system. This was “an unprecedented development in which dissent came from within the core structures of the state itself” (El-Mahdi 2009:99).

Furthermore, over the course of 2008, hundreds of thousands of workers collectively participated in huge strikes and protests. Then, a couple young activists started a Facebook group, calling for a general strike on April 6, 2008. As a result of this call, a massive strike took place and “drew in an unusually broad array of formal and informal opposition groups...[along with] state workers...independent journalists, and university professors” (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011). A movement known as “April 6” was formed in the immediate aftermath of this call, and it included activists and bloggers belonging to several ideological schools, thus exemplifying the same spirit that existed in *Kifaya*. Egypt continued to witness workers’ protests over the course of 2009 and 2010.

None of the abovementioned movements could “claim a decisive victory. But together they have succeeded in changing the agenda for political action under conditions of sustained authoritarianism” (El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009:10). Moreover, they were effective in mobilizing the Egyptian public and building up a strong momentum for the 2011 revolution. These movements were organized in a way that created “shared communities of protest” and revitalized “an environment of public dissent” (El-Mahdi 2009:96).

As mentioned earlier, the SPIN model was evident in most of the civil society movements in Egypt, but the best exemplification for it was wit-

nessed during the 2011 revolution. The revolution started out with small demonstrations that grew bigger. No particular group or movement led or claimed exclusive responsibility for these demonstrations. “Though small, [these] organizing groups were clearly effective in bringing people to the streets who had never engaged in political activity a day in their lives. While organizers did meet in person, social media was sometimes a safer way to interact and plan” (Baiausu 2011).

The SPIN model calls for collective action, group coordination and organized division of labor among members of various groups. All these characteristics were featured at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian revolution. Esraa Abdel-Fattah, a political activist and co-founder of the April 6 group, said (personal communication, February 13, 2011, Cairo, Egypt) right after Mubarak’s falling: “Members from all the youth political groups were protesting at Tahrir Square...It was a perfect division of labor among the protesters. It was a whole life at the square.”

The young activists whose organizations participated in the revolution formed the Coalition of the Revolution’s Youth. With approximately 50,000 members on its Facebook page, it served “as a forum for discussion and an umbrella movement that will try to crystallize specific demands...Suggestions made online [through Facebook] are taken up and discussed at face-to-face meetings, both in the capital and in the governorates” (Eissa 2011).

This coalition is an embodiment of the SPIN model at its best. The segmented and polycentric youth movements that formed this coalition overcame their differences and formed an organized network to channel the demands raised during the revolution. This coalition’s participants captured the core of Gerlach’s SPIN model in that they “are not only linked internally, but with other movements whose participants share attitudes and values. Through these links, a movement can draw material support, recruit new supporters, and expand coordination for joint action” (Gerlach 2001:296).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a critical role in the political upheavals that have been taking place in the Middle East, we cannot assume a relationship of causality between social media and political revolutions. This study shows that social media can potentially contribute to political revolution, but only under certain circumstances. There needs to be a complex network of events, forces, and people in order for social media to be effective in political change.

In considering the relationship between social media and political revolutions, we have to acknowledge the differences in content and capability among various forms of social media. For example, while Facebook allows for rich information and a high level of sustained interaction among its users, Twitter has the potential to reach a broader audience at a faster pace compared to Facebook. These differences between Facebook and Twitter were exemplified in their use by activists in Egypt and Iran.

The comparison between the Internet role in Egypt's 2011 revolution and Iran's 2009 uprising showed that political realism is more functional than cyber-utopianism in assessing the role of social media role in public mobilization. The Iranian protesters' inability to change the course of the 2009 elections, "let alone spark a revolution, should remind us that utopian interpretations of technology and social movements often run into a hard reality. Using the criteria of existing theories of revolution, it is clear that Iran was – and remains – far from reaching the requisite threshold of a political or social revolution" (Acuff 2010:226).

In the context of political realism, the SPIN model was more applicable to the Egyptian revolution than the Iranian uprising. This could be linked to four major differences between both cases. First, while the Iranian protesters were disorganized and failed to attract large numbers of people, the Egyptian segmented groups, which were part of civil society, were able to integrate, network and act in unison despite their polycentric nature and the disparities in their ideologies. Mohammed Ali Mohtadi, the Iranian thinker

quoted earlier, said in the same interview with the authors that: "The uprising that erupted in Iran was launched by certain and limited factions of the upper and middle classes of the Iranian society. This was very different from the Egyptian revolution, which involved all factions of the society, such as the elite, the youth and the laborers." The fact that the percentage of Internet users in Egypt is way less than that in Iran, as previously mentioned, yet the Egyptian revolution succeeded in toppling the regime, indicates that the social media need a strong civil society in order for them to function effectively. This is also important given the reality that the Internet service in Egypt was suspended by the Mubarak regime for more than a week during the 18-day revolution, yet political movements succeeded in mobilizing themselves on the streets without the use of social media during that time.

Second, a lot of the activists who were the mobilizing force behind the Iranian uprising were opposition groups operating in the diaspora outside of Iran, while this was not the case in Egypt, where the opposition groups were all active locally. This is closely related to the previous point, since local groups are more capable of on the ground organization and attracting a wide base of popular support.

Third, the level of sophistication of the Iranian government in combating the opposition's cyberactivism efforts was much more than the Egyptian government, since the Iranian regime was not only more technologically savvy than its Egyptian counterpart, but was also more prepared and more proactive, rather than reactive, in countering activism, both online and offline.

Fourth, in Egypt the struggle was against a clearly corrupt and visibly oppressive regime, but in Iran the regime acquires a large part of its legitimacy from the religious theocracy that is ruling the country, which makes it much harder to shake this regime or to fight against it, thus limiting the effectiveness of opposition movements, both online as well as on the streets.

Therefore, the authors can safely conclude that social media cannot automatically or single-handedly launch a revolution. "This is not to say that

social networks don't matter; they matter a lot. But they do not incarnate freedom, do not bring about some final, heaven-like stage of human history" (Rieff 2011). In order for social media to be effective in initiating change, they have to be complemented by an active civil society, with well-organized political groups and networks that fit the characteristics of the SPIN model. If these groups exist on the ground, social media can serve as tools for accelerating public mobilization. This well-organized civil society that is conducive for political change existed in Egypt, but not in Iran.

It must be acknowledged that not all protests can lead to revolution. The protests that took place in Egypt in January 2011 were of the confrontational, revolutionary nature that led to toppling the regime, but the protests that took place in Iran in 2009 were less confrontational with the regime, as they were not backed up by a strong support system of organizational networks in the real world. Therefore, we need to be cautious in our assessment of the role of social media in political mobilization to avoid falling in the trap of technological determinism or cyber-utopianism. Rather, we have to bear in mind that "Social media are often a useful compliment to the kinds of activism" that take place in the offline world" (Jones 2011), but they are not a decisive factor in determining the outcomes of uprisings and revolutions. In Egypt, unlike in Iran, the decisive factor was the on-the-ground organized networking that emulated the SPIN model. At the end of the day, the success or failure of political movements depends primarily on political activism in the real world, rather than merely cyberactivism in the virtual world.

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Al Jazeera's Framing of Social Media During the Arab Spring

Heidi A. Campbell and Diana Hawk

Abstract

This study investigates how Al Jazeera framed social media in relation to the revolutions and protests of the "Arab Spring" within its broadcast media coverage. A content analysis of Arabic language broadcasts appearing from January 25th through February 18th 2011, covering the protests in Tahrir Square, was conducted using the Broadcast Monitoring System (BMS) and Arab Spring Archive. Through this analysis we see a number of common narratives being used by Al Jazeera to frame social media and make claims about the influence they had on the protests and related social movements. By noting the frequency of social communications technologies referenced, ways in which these technologies were characterized and interpreting supporting themes with which they were identified helps illuminate the assumptions promoted by Al Jazeera regarding the role and impact of social communications technology on these events.

Keywords

information and communication technology, satellite TV, social media, Arab Spring, Internet, activism, public sphere, democracy, Egypt

Introduction

It has been argued that the Egyptian protests and associated Arab Spring uprisings, which spread throughout the Arab world in 2011, garnered the interest and attention of a worldwide audience largely due to digital and social media. The spread of information, via online media, was said to link protesters to a wider public. This coupled with the international press's attention made these regional events a global matter. Online and mass media coverage of events, such as the mid-January to February protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square where people gathered with the aim of bringing down the

reign of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, provided both professional and citizen journalist reports offering many different narratives of these events. While observers have argued over the past year of the importance social media played in the protests, scholars are still trying to unpack exactly what impact social media had and continues to have on revolutions in the region. Also, it is clear that the stories about the Arab Spring and the role played by social media differ depending on if they are told by social, governmental or different media institutions. However, little concrete evidence exists as to what stories were told by whom, and how specific institutions, truly perceived and framed social media in relation to these events. While scholars are beginning to unpack the range of stories that news outlets told about the Arab Spring, the question remains, “what story did the media tell about social media in relation to the Arab Spring?”

This article seeks to investigate the story told by one news source, Al Jazeera’s Arabic language news broadcast (henceforth “Al Jazeera”), the perceived role social media played in the Arab Spring according to this news organization and how it interpreted its impact on events in Egypt and ultimately the wider region. Al Jazeera functions as an independent satellite news network owned by the state of Qatar, which seeks to offer dedicated coverage of stories and issues of importance and interest to the Arab World. They played an important role in covering events, providing focused news commentary related to the Egyptian Protests and events later termed as the Arab Spring throughout 2011. This coverage is in line with an identity they have promoted which frequently seeks to, “question authority and challenges the common political discourse” within the region (Zayani 2005:2). Here we focus on coverage presented on the Al Jazeera 24-hour Arabic news channel and their portrayal and presentation of social media in relation to coverage of the Tahrir Square protests from January 25th through February 18th 2011. The dates cover the start of the protests and go one week past the public announcement of the resignation of President Mubarak. It has been argued that Al Jazeera played a defining role in galvanizing and promoting the Egyptian protests, as well as praising the role played by social media in these efforts (Mills 2011). It is the aim of this study to uncover how they

actually framed and discussed these technologies in these reports in order to learn the narratives about social media and the Arab Spring promoted in their news discourses.

This analysis was conducted through the aid of the Broadcast Monitoring System, a system that creates a transcript and archive of broadcasts from select international news channel using machine translation.¹ The analysis presented here outlines mediums of social communications that were described by Al Jazeera during this period, as well as the narratives this news organization generated about social media and its relationship to the revolutions and protests of the Arab Spring.

Methods

Data Collection via the BMS System

This study could not have been done without access to the Broadcast Monitoring System (BMS) and the Arab Spring Archive hosted at Texas A&M University. The BMS is a searchable archive of international television broadcasts. The system takes in satellite broadcast feeds in Arabic, Chinese and Spanish from six stations (Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, CCTV4, Phoenix InfoNews, TelSUR and Univision), automatically transcribes the streams of news broadcasts in the native script, and translates the transcripts into English. The transcripts and translations remain in sync with the broadcast when stored in the BMS. The video, transcription, and translation into English can be searched with text strings and are stored for one year on the system. Developed by Raytheon BBN for the intelligence community, with the support of people at Technical Support Working Group (TSWG), the aim of the system was to help analysts sift through vast collections of news content in other languages quickly and efficiently. It is now being developed as a language and media studies teaching and research tool. Texas A&M University is currently the only higher education institution hosting access to a BMS.

The transcription and archiving features of the BMS system make it a rich and vital resource. Many of the news channels on the system, such as Al

Jazeera, do not maintain their own archives of broadcasts, making it one of the only resources in the world for collecting and researching such content. It also makes it possible for non-language speakers of Arabic to study Al Jazeera news coverage. There are, however, challenges in working with the system transcripts due to some inaccuracies in the Arabic-to-English machine translation of some concepts, words and logic ordering of the sentences. Some of these research challenges are discussed below in the method and sample sub-section. Yet even with these limitations it provides the ability to conduct basic discourse and narrative analysis of news content not previously possible to non-native language speakers. Also, the system is upgraded on a regular basis so newer versions of transcription software are incorporated as they come available. Thus the system's Arabic-to-English translation is continuously refined over time.

Because of the possibilities offered by the BMS system and the perceived importance of the events surrounding the Arab Spring in December 2011, the Arab Spring Archive was established. This separate archive contains Arabic and English transcriptions and broadcast recordings of all news coverage on Al Jazeera from December 12, 2010 onwards, as well as content from the other five BMS news channels (such as Al Arabiya which was added to the BMS system in July 2011). The aim of the Arab Spring Archive was to capture and store all BMS content related to the Arab Spring events, as these and related events continues to have a lasting impact upon the region and be of continued interest to international scholars.

Method and Sample

Using the BMS, a search was done for all news clips appearing on the Al Jazeera channel from January 25th through February 18th, the time frame of the noted Tahrir Square protests related to social media. A search was made for references to specific social media (i.e., Facebook and Twitter), the Internet and several related terms including social communication, social media and social networks/networking. As mentioned above the BMS system is not entirely perfect with its Arabic to English translations, so initial

attempts to search for some key terms such as Facebook and Twitter were unsuccessful. It was through experimentation and careful observation it was learned that “social communication” was a more common phrase used by Al Jazeera than “social media” to describe the network and online technologies used by protest organizers. Also, due to the fact that words in English were treated as Arabic words in the transcription process they appeared as derivative words (e.g., Facebook appeared as Weiss Bok, Alves Bok, Elvis Bok and many other variations of Bok). Thus it required some time on the system to learn these trends in order to do a basic subject/word analysis. By doing a keyword search, for terms noted above twenty-five news clips were collected.

From this sample, the frequency of different terms and themes related to claims made about social communication were enumerated. While specific details are discussed below, it is important to note here that due to the fact that the term “social communication” (n=8) was used at a higher frequency than “social media” (n=2) to describe these online mediums. Hence this phrase--social communication--will be used from here on out when discussing Al Jazeera’s framing and portrayal of social media. Thus this sample of clips was used as a microcosm to investigate Al Jazeera’s general response to and framing of social communication.

Categories of Analysis

The data set was analyzed under three categories. First, the frequency of social communication terms listed above (Facebook, Internet, social media, social communications, and social networks) was enumerated and common narratives about these terms were identified. Second, a discourse analysis of the clip transcripts was conducted to identify the common ways social communication was framed in Al Jazeera news coverage to identify the ways in which social communication was characterized by Al Jazeera and the actions or motivations they were associated with in regards to the protests. Through this process, three common characterizations were identified. Social communication was portrayed as (a) an initiator or cause of the protests,

(b) a resource for social networking spreading protests, and (c) a tool for social empowerment for users. Finally, common news topics which social communications were associated with were identified. Three themes stood out: (a) social communication and youth, (b) social communication and violence and (c) social communication and spread of information in the Arab World. The specific findings of these three categories are presented below.

Findings

The content analysis of a selection of Al Jazeera news stories, focused around Egyptian protests in Tahrir Square that eventually led to the overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, explores the data in light of three categories. They are the coverage of social communication in news reports, the framing of social communication and the narratives associated with social communication coverage.

Category 1: Coverage of Social Communication in News Reports

In the news stories surrounding the Tahrir Square protests of January and February 2011, the most common term used by Al Jazeera in their broadcasts related to social communications was “Internet” (n=31 mentions in 16 clips). It is described as a tool and site for communication between people involved in the protests. For example, a story airing 27 Jan 2011 at 16:24 states “...the Internet sites communication and social networks play a significant role in the need for people to participate in movements.”² Throughout these references the Internet is presented as a neutral technology leveraged by different groups for strategic purposes such as the “Internet a prominent role in the revolution of the People in Egypt was a tool for coordination” (10 Feb 2011 13:43:46). This clip also highlights a sub-theme found amongst about a quarter of these references, that is the linking to the Internet the notion of revolution or suggesting that the protests could be described as an “Internet revolution” (n=7 mentions in 5 clips). This Internet revolution highlights the use of the Internet for connecting people and drawing widespread attention to the protest. One story reported that the Internet revolu-

tion aids the spread of protest which seek to address social ills: "Movement started protests in Egypt at the invitation to Syria via the Internet revolution days on corruption and poverty, torture, a call which received a response from the parties to non-politicized by the Egyptian society." (28 Jan 2011 01:03:14).

Facebook was the second most common social communication reference by Al Jazeera (n=17 mentions in 15 clips). In 10 of these mentions, Al Jazeera highlighted that Facebook was specifically being used by protesters in Egypt as a means of communication with others about their cause, such as raising public awareness of human rights violation and the torture of prisoners (e.g., 18 Feb 2011 05:50:08). It was also noted that Facebook was not only a source for organizing protests in Tahrir Square, but a site itself in which the protest against Mubarak must be voiced and raised: "The battle in Egypt fought on the pages of Elvis Bok [Facebook]" (05 Feb 2011 05:54:18). Reports also mentioned that Facebook users in Egypt networked with friends in other countries to spread news of their activities and encourage other to join in, such as reporting that the February 7th protests in Libya were spurred on by Egyptian youth via Facebook (07 Feb 2011 07:36:15). It is also important to note that in over a third of the mentions, Facebook (6 of 17) was specifically connected with discussions of the role that young people played in the Egyptian protests. This point is discussed in more detail under category three. Overall, Facebook is presented as a tool which brings with it action and social change.

A number of general terms were also referenced in the data set including social communication (n=7 mentions in 7 clips), social networks (n=3 mentions in 2 clips) and social media (n=2 mentions in 2 clips). Social communication was used to describe the kinds of interactions taking place on the Internet, Facebook or social networks. It was also used to highlight the unique nature and potential of these new mediums, e.g., "proactive waging a war is in the language of traditional media a new ... warning of the use of the sites of social communication" (16 Feb 2011 14:16:27). Social communication seemed to also suggest the interconnectedness and interpersonal

nature of new media, e.g., “This comes in the wake of the appeal made by the Movement of the youth of 20 February to a network of social communication ... to get out in peaceful demonstrations for change.” Here we also see the referencing of social networks as connections created through these new media tools.

A number of other social communications terms were given single mentions in various stories including “websites” and “world wide web,” but due to this infrequency they were not given special consideration here. It is important to note that while, Twitter was mentioned twice verbally by Al Jazeera reporters in two broadcast clips, for some reason this was not picked up by the machine translation. However, due to the small numbers we see the terms social network and social media, Twitter play a less noteworthy role in the sample.

Overall these different references present social communications as a tool, a site, resource and channel for protestor’s communication and connection with others. Interesting claims also can be inferred or in some cases directly made about the impact, these seemingly simple actions, facilitated by social communications, had on the Tahrir Square protests. These are analyzed in more detail in the following category.

Category 2: Framing of Social Communication

In category two, we identify how Al Jazeera characterized the social communications described above in their coverage of protests related to Tahrir Square. Attention was paid to the frames or assumptions that shaped news report’s descriptions of these technologies and what specific outcomes or actions they were associated with. Careful reading of news story transcripts identified three themes related to how social communications were framed as the initiator of the protests, a resource for networking amongst protesters and a tool of empowerment for people to create social change.

First, social communications were presented as an initiator or instigator of the Tahrir Square uprising and the Arab Spring in general. This was the

most dominant of the three themes (noted in 13 of the 25 news stories). Here Al Jazeera used language to suggest that social communications were used not only to facilitate protests, but were also in some way responsible for the demonstrations and political revolutions. The language in the clips showed that social communications were often framed as an instigator or initiator, of the protests. The social communications website, Twitter, was never mentioned at all, while Facebook was mentioned frequently, as well as the term “Internet.” For example, a report on February 10th stated that millions of editorials and comments written on Facebook pages dedicated to the Tahrir Square demonstrations had “become an integral part of the mobility of young people” (10 Feb 2011 13:43:46). In the same report, Al Jazeera reported 3 million Egyptian Facebook subscribers had changed their profile pictures to images of slogans in support of the demonstrators or advocating their rights to protest. Social communications were framed as sites for sharing pictures and descriptions of what was really going on amongst “the people” in Egypt, and thus created a platform where people could demand Mubarak to step down, while other public or media forums were unavailable to them. By hosting these images, slogans, and citizen journalist video clips of the demonstrations, Al Jazeera seemed to argue that social communications, “linked to the revolution” provided vital fuel, enabling the movement to accomplish its goals. As one report noted, “the girls spoke about the role played by social communication networks such as Weiss Bok [Facebook] in the Organization of the revolution and achieving its objectives” (17 Feb 2011 07: 28:12). Thus social communications were framed as an integral part of the protest activities and outcomes.

Next, Al Jazeera presented social communications as a resource for social networking which led to the spread of protester’s vision and activities throughout the region. Here social communications were described in terms that emphasized that it offered users a resource for connecting and networking the people involved in or supporting the protests (n=7). This is exemplified by a story appearing on January 27th which stated that “in Egypt and Tunisia face bok [Facebook] invited to the needs in the street through the Internet sites, communication and social networks play a sig-

nificant role in the need for people to participate in movements” (27 Jan 2011 16:24:28). Here social communications (e.g., Facebook and web sites) were noted for both drawing attention to protest activities and encouraging people to participate in similar revolutions beyond Egypt. Al Jazeera further emphasized that the use of these mediums was wide spread, especially amongst key groups involved in various sectors of the protest. They stated such use “proved effective in political communication at least among young people have been able to speed up the winds of change in Tunisia has become green until the Arab peoples” (27 Jan 2011 16:24:28). Framing social communications as a networking device highlighted the technological affordances such mediums offer users, and consequently the potential to connect provided users with an ability to create common public through the sharing of images, videos, and stories online.

Finally, social communications were presented as a tool for social empowerment for its users (n=6). This social empowerment came in the form of support, encouragement and advice shared between people through social communications, with the aim of these interactions motivating each other to rise up and take action. Al Jazeera highlighted that social communications offered users social and interpersonal benefits not available to them through other contexts of mediums. For instance, an Al Jazeera report on February 6th stated that the Internet was being used by youth in both Tunisia and Egypt to coordinate demonstrations and generate support amongst the groups. Tunisian university students were described as “exchanging advice and experience with their brothers in Egypt” and the Internet as a “virtual operations rooms” where Egyptian youth were able to generate a “single voice” that “echoed by hundreds of Tunisian youth in a solidarity gathering” (6 Feb 2011 11:31:34). This emphasized that the Internet served as an important medium, where protester gained support for their activities, affirmation of their cause and a place to be inspired by other stories of the revolution. Social communications was framed as a forum enabling protesters to take the revolution beyond the street to the Arab world and beyond, as “the battle in Egypt fought on the pages of Elvis Bok [Facebook]” (5 Feb 2011 05:54:18) and leverage its affordances to “lead the revolution of

the Internet” (05 Feb 2011 09:47:47). Al Jazeera seems to stress that these mediums provide the youth especially with a vital forum for creating alliances and sharing a common vision that are shaping worldwide perception of the movement.

Overall, we see that stories from this sample illustrate that Al Jazeera used three noteworthy frames in their discussion of social communications. They highlight the ability of social communications to serve as a prime mover or even cause for the spread of the revolution to extend protester’s abilities of gathering and disseminating information regarding their activities and creating a space ground for building camaraderie and a common vision amongst people.

Category 3: Narratives Associated with Social Communication

Finally, three notable themes were associated with Al Jazeera’s discussion of social communications in stories told related to the Tahrir Square protests; these included making connecting discussions of social communications to the themes of youth, violence and the regional nature or spread of the conflict. First, over half of the news stories in the sample (n=15 of 25) made explicit connections between social communication and youth. Specifically many of these reports noted the role played by youth in the protests and how the Internet helps fuel and facilitates their involvement. Examples included phrases referencing the perceived solidarity amongst youth in relation to the revolutions/protests due to their use of various social communications technologies. The Internet was highlighted as a not only a helpmate enabling social networking, but as their friend and compatriot in the protests, e.g., “the friend of young people today is the Internet” (27 Jan 2011 16:24:28). It was also noted as a first port of call for many young people involved in protest activities providing them with a platform to draw global attention to their cause, “these young people who sat on the Internet holds talks with the youth of the world” (08 Feb 2011 19:33:09) and use the web to birth their dreams for change in their countries, e.g., “young people have been

able to speed up the winds of change in Tunisia” (27 Jan 2011 16:24:28). By framing the Internet as a young people’s medium and one integral to the work of young protesters also presented social communications as a new social sphere where they were able to reimagine the future of their respective countries. As stated in a February 13th report, revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia were described as result of online interaction “of how those young people to a new culture were exchanging through the Internet had led to these people’s image” (13 Feb 2011 16:41:21). Thus an overarching theme in these stories was that the Internet was not only used by youth to spur on protests, but they framed the protests as simultaneously a revolution of the youth and of the Internet. The social networking capabilities of the Internet thus extended the young people’s energies and vision, allowing them to shape the activities and nature of the protests happening in the streets from online.

Second, Al Jazeera associated discussions of social communications with both the news about violence and violent outcomes of the protests (n=9). Al Jazeera highlighted how Egyptians would post pictures, videos, and information from the protests via Facebook, to bring attention to brutalities by police and physical threats being faced by protesters. For example, one reporter noted the harsh conditions faced by young protesters on February 5th, “in the field of liberalization ... during the next few days will lead the revolution of the Internet, horrible scenes the completion of the system of human rights to face the system” (05 Feb 2011 09:47:47). Al Jazeera also noted that it was not the sharing of online images that instigated the violence, rather this sharing was a strategy used by protesters to raise public awareness of how their demonstrations were perceived and received by their respective governments; for example, one report on Libyan protests noted “what appeared a call on the Internet to demonstrate peacefully in Libya on Thursday against corruption and poverty also says the owners of the Initiative” (16 Feb 2011 08:02:23). Here news about violence was connected to discussion of how social communication networks assisted in the circulations of images and information about violence associated with the protest in Tahrir Square and beyond.

Third, and finally, mentions of social communication were also associated with stories focused on the spread of information about the protests of Tahrir Square outside of Egypt and the impact this had on the Arab World. Al Jazeera suggested that social communication expedited the spreading of the protests/revolution from one country to another which resulted in a transnational and regional impact. Phrases that described social communications as the conduit for spreading information and protests from one country to another (n=5) and to the Arab World in general (n=6) were identified. For instance, a February 10th broadcast asserted that the discussion of the Egyptian revolution online helped accelerate and “generated from fired [Facebook] pages invites uprisings in Iraq, Algeria, Yemen and other States” (10 Feb 2011 13:43:46). Emphasis was placed in these reports on that peoples use social communications to call for activism and support of protests in their own context, e.g., noting how coverage on Facebook of Egyptian and Tunisian demonstrations was used to “calls for the youth of Iraq to get out in a demonstration twenty-fifth of this month in Baghdad” (12 Feb 2011 11:47:53). Connections made by Al Jazeera between social communications to stories of the spread of protest throughout the Arab world seemed to emphasize how channels of communication facilitated by these mediums led to both greater awareness and actions throughout the region. For example, this is emphasized in a February 7th report stating, “we read in Al-Quds Al Arabi newspaper about the features of the uprising of electronic appearing on the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya is being influenced by what happened in Tunisia in Egypt Libyan [*sic*] opposers abroad” (07 Feb 2011 07:36:15). Here the dissemination of information about protest via social communications suggests actions have encouraged social connection and investment between people of different Arab nations due to their Internet interactions.

From this review we note Al Jazeera associated its discussion of social communications with stories on youth, violence and the regional spread of protests. Underlying their claims about these connections included the argument that the Tahrir Square protests were an Internet and youth driven revolution, and that the use of social media to share stories and images

about the violent outcomes of the protests helped raise regional and global awareness as well as be linked to the outgrowth of demonstrations in other countries.

Discussion of Findings

Overall we see several consistent claims regarding the role and perception of social communications being promoted within Al Jazeera coverage of the Tahrir Square protests and events of 25 January to 18 February 2011. First, social communications technology in general is presented in a positive light. Though this is never explicitly stated, we see that the Internet and Facebook and the role they play in the protests is never critiqued or framed as problematic. Second, social communications mediums are represented as tools, spaces and agents facilitating social and political change within Egypt and the Arab world, especially within the hands of young people. Third, discussions of events related to Tahrir Square are connected with the idea that the demonstrations were not only made possible by the use of social communication, but represented the advent of an Internet revolution. More than being a simple technological resource, the Internet was represented as an instigator allowing users to set the agenda and expanding the boundaries of the protests and its coverage. Thus Al Jazeera's coverage could be read as a narrative which argues that the Internet played a prominent role in the spreading of certain stories about the protests, empowering certain actors—namely young people—and benefiting the mobility and spread of the protest movements. These claims seem to echo claims that Al Jazeera promotes of an ideology of Arab nationalism and solidarity, as their coverage seemed to encourage the spread of information and sharing of support social communication amongst people across the Arab world (Oifi 2005:72).

These findings also potentially point to the role Al Jazeera played in shaping public perceptions of the Arab Spring and the role played by social media in these movements. Al Jazeera has often been quick to stress that it simply allows those who have traditionally not had a voice in the Middle East to be heard, and not to promote any particular agenda. However, data from

this study shows that Al Jazeera's framing of social media in this instance is one that attributes much of the influence in the Arab Spring movements to the Internet. The narrative ascribed to social media by Al Jazeera seems to closely mirror a dominant Arab identity narrative scholars identify with the network, one that seeks to cultivate "a sense of common destiny in the Arab world and is even encouraging Arab unity so much so that pan-Arabism is being reinvented" (Zayani 2005:8). While it is not possible to make hard and fast claims from a limited data sample, it is clear that their presentation here of social media as a positive tool creating a cross-regional collaborative platform for communication amongst people in the Arab world supports the claims that Al Jazeera broadcasts endorse a certain ideological view of the region. Thus wider exploration of the extent to which these claims are made and supported in Al Jazeera's general coverage of Arab Spring may be a fruitful area of further inquiry, helping unpack what specific ideological narratives their news coverage promotes about the region and their role in framing media perceptions.

It also is interesting that while social media is highlighted in a number of reports around the Tahrir Square protests, it is somewhat surprising that it was not discussed more during this period, especially given the prominence and attribution that social media was given as prime mover of the Arab Spring within US press coverage. This indicates a need for more detailed analysis of both Al Jazeera coverage on this issue, as one of the most influential broadcast outlets in the Arab region, as well as press coverage of social media and the Arab Spring in other international media contexts to access and compare the role it was perceived play in these events.

Conclusion

Much emphasis has been placed on the roles social media and networks played in the Arab Spring revolution, and the impact of these technologies on both protesters and media audiences. This content analysis study has sought to provide a more detailed analysis and identification of the stories told about social media by Al Jazeera, to identify the specific narratives used

to promote and frame the positive role social media played in these events. Overall, the purpose of this study has been to better understand how social communications was framed during a certain snapshot of the Arab Spring. This was done in order to better understand which narratives and claims were used by Al Jazeera to help promote the role played by social communications and discover how these framing were connected to the perceived outcomes of the protest movements in news coverage around the early Tahrir Square uprisings. What this study does well is reveal concrete examples of the narratives, employed by Al Jazeera in their coverage during this time period, to provide insights into the perceived the role and connection of social media to protest activities.

This study however does not provide a full explanation of how social media were used in the Arab Spring and how the affordances of these technologies impacted different actors. It is important to note that it was not only mass media coverage, but a variety of grassroots communication and social activism formats which empowered protesters and thus shaped international public opinion about the outcomes of the Arab Spring. This means studies of social media must not only consider the affordances offered, but their inherent limitations which may in some case equally impacted public perceptions and the story told about the Arab Spring. As Youmans and York argue (2012) many social media platforms actually limited the activities of protester due to architecture and legal infrastructure, limiting communication of certain message and forcing dissents to work outside formal media structures in some cases to get their message out. This mean, highlighting only the stories told about Tahrir Square and the Arab uprisings in relation to social media provide an incomplete representation. Therefore this study provides just one part of a larger picture about the role social and mass media played in facilitating and representing activities related to the Arab Spring.

There are other limits to this study, which should be noted. We are cautious about the claims which can be made from a content analysis study of a specific event and how they can be applied to the assessment of a larger media story such as the Arab Spring which entails multiple media events. Thus this study would benefit from further detailed and comparative work as to

the extent to which the narratives and frames highlighted here are consistent across other key stories within Al Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Spring throughout 2011. For instance, exploring in detail whether the framing youth as the prime users of social media and the main tool used by them for facilitating the social networking and information exchange occurring amongst protesters is a story in need of more detailed exploration, to see if such claims hold true and consistent within Al Jazeera's coverage over time in relation to Egypt and other Arab nations. We also acknowledge there are challenges when dealing with what could be perceived as secondary sources in the form of machine-translations of news content and non-native speakers doing such content analysis, as some nuances to news stories could be missed due to the process employed. We further recognize the need for more work to be done to distinguish how, the timing of specific news reports, the program slots in which a news story appeared and the specificity of the stories location or it being covered by certain reporters may have influenced the narratives or frames used in different stories. Yet even with these limitations, we argue this content analysis study provides an interesting and important insight into Al Jazeera's framing and interpretive process regarding the Arab Spring and highlights how broadcast media coverage may have played a role in shaping public understanding of the influence of social communications on the Arab Spring.

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Notes

¹ The Broadcast Monitoring System is part of the Media Monitoring System (MMS) found at: <http://mms.tamu.edu/html/summary.html>.

² All quotes taken from stories archived in the Arab Spring–Global Media Archive 2012, available at: <http://mms.tamu.edu>.

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

Donatella Della Ratta and Augusto Valeriani

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 examines¹ 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 overthrow 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 2.0⁴ 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 ensemble 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 emphasising 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 to connect 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 techies⁹ 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 "*Nbar 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 2008¹⁴ 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 Fat-tah, 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 activists²¹ 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 2009²⁵ – 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 night-time, 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 individuals? 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 memoirs 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 Netherlands 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 organizes 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 activists 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 Makhoulf was the first to cover the clashes in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010. Makhoulf 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 unjust 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>.

Beyond the Soapbox: Facebook and the Public Sphere in Egypt

Anton Root

Abstract

*The question of the internet as a forum for political debate is continuously contested. My research grows out of such scholarship but focuses specifically on Facebook as a virtual public sphere in Egypt. Based on an analysis of a note posted by Wael Ghonim during the January 25 uprising on the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' I discuss the structural and technological benefits of the platform, as well as user behavior and interaction with one another. Using Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* as the theoretical groundwork for my study, I make observations about the internet's ability to allow considered opinion, not just to record popular sentiment. I argue that while Facebook's structure has both drawbacks and advantages for promoting discussion, the new medium's biggest limitation in helping to produce a virtual public sphere is user inexperience with the platform.*

Keywords

Egypt, democracy, activism, Arab Spring, social media

Introduction

The events that took place in Egypt between January 25 and February 11, 2011 shocked the world, if only because of the veneer of stability created by ex-president Husni Mubarak's regime. When examined carefully, however, the Egyptian uprising that led to Mubarak's ousting and the dissolution of his National Democratic Party (NDP) reveals itself to have been a long-term project. As internet and social media usage rates increase worldwide, more groups and individuals will find themselves in the position of the Egyptians – a people with a newfound ability to express opinions contrary to those of a small ruling elite.

While the role of the media, specifically social media, in the Egyptian uprising has been hotly contested by pundits, the arguments have tended to be too general to accurately judge the value of new media in aiding the uprising. In my article, I wish to better understand the concept of the public sphere as it applies to the modern world. The media landscape has gone through a number of profound changes since the invention of the internet, and the current focus on interaction and participation in the media seems to fit well with the tenets of the public sphere. A society in which exist a healthy sphere for reasoned discussion and civil society can help to expand citizens' political role. If Facebook, along with other social media platforms, was able to expand the public sphere in Egypt, it would represent a crucial political development, as well as strengthen the public sphere theory.

In order to evaluate the role of social media in the Egyptian uprising, I attempt to mine the value of the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' analyzing the deliberation surrounding one note posted by Wael Ghonim before Mubarak's announcement of resignation. I will filter my analysis through the lens of the public sphere as constructed by sociologist and political scientist Jürgen Habermas in his monograph *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Focusing solely on the notion of the public sphere, I look through the comments posted on Facebook and seek out similarities between Egyptians' use of social media and the media Habermas wrote about in his analysis of social movements in Europe, as well as the updated, internet-specific model presented by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks*.

I argue that Facebook does have the necessary components of becoming a place for considered debate and a virtual public sphere, but that users' inexperience with the platform has severely limited this capability. Before looking at Facebook and the public sphere, however, I establish the political and social contexts of the uprising. I focus specifically on the past decade of flawed economic and political policies put in place by Mubarak and his ministers and how this atmosphere was able to make two previously unknown men – Khaled Said and Wael Ghonim – the symbols of the upri-

sing. I then turn to Habermas' conception of the public sphere as outlined in *The Structural Transformation*, comparing his historical narrative to the virtual public sphere (if it may be so called) created by the Egyptians on Facebook.

Egypt's Economic and Political Regression

The liberalization of Egypt's economy began in the late 1970s by Anwar Sadat in order to spur slowing economic growth rates (Africa News 2010). The next two and a half decades saw privatization of state assets and an abandonment of policies that had supported workers and peasants (Dahi 2010). While bread riots did erupt in Egypt on numerous occasions, as they did throughout the region, the authorities were able to subvert dissident activities by dividing the opposition and cracking down on radicals. Though liberalization and foreign investment in the mid-1980s and early 1990s did help the economy (and especially the military, which was the main beneficiary of foreign investment), the growth rates once again began to fall in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The economic liberalization decreased the power of NDP and the military. As more wealthy businessmen profited from the new economic policy, the state grip on the economy withered, becoming confined to "judicial, legislative and security – rather than economic – issues." (Africa News 2010)

In order to counter its diminishing influence over the economy, the Mubarak regime attempted to consolidate power in other ways. The November 2010 rigged parliamentary elections serve as an example of the NDP's falling legitimacy and the desperate measures the party had to resort to in order to stay in power. Traditionally, voting had been a way for NDP to retain its façade of popular approval. By giving the voters a choice – flawed though it may have been – the regime was able to sacrifice a small number of local seats without threatening the large parliamentary majority it had expected to enjoy. Though the rigging may have deepened Egyptians' disillusionment in previous elections, the blatantly fixed vote of late 2010 came alongside "rising food prices, growing economic disparity, a media crackdown, and a citizenry fed up with police brutality." (Topol 2010)

As the government became more and more detached from the population, cooperation among opposition groups – or, at least, tolerance of one another – grew. This made the state weaker: it became harder to exploit the differences among the secular and Islamist opposition groups. It also made the opposition stronger, as it presented a unified and coordinated front against the regime and made it clear that the stereotypes perpetuated by the regime were nothing but gross propaganda.

Much of this anti-government cooperation has taken place online. Internet usage in Egypt increased in 2002, when the government privatized the sector and ended its monopoly over internet service (Bahgat 2004). Blogging became a popular medium of voicing opinions around 2004 and 2005, and it helped to forge the Kifaya movement – an alliance of opposition groups which called on Mubarak to leave and was against the succession of Mubarak's son to the presidency (Hirschkind 2011). As Charles Hirschkind (2010) noted, “while many of those who write and within the blogosphere are involved in Islamist organizations, and identify themselves on their blogs as members of these organizations, the political language they are developing online departs radically from that used within these organizations.” Put simply, the Kifaya movement and the bloggers who supported it played an important part in creating a culture of unified resistance against an authoritarian government that had been able to impose emergency laws for almost three decades. It is little wonder that when the government declared January 25 a national holiday to honor the police – freeing up the population to voice its displeasure – tens of thousands of Egyptians marched in protest.

The protests continued across Egypt for over two weeks, making famous the names Khaled Said and Wael Ghonim. They also raised questions among commenters on the media about the power of social media, specifically Facebook, and communicative action in closed societies. Said's death became a rallying point for many Egyptians, who initially saw his case as a humanitarian (not political) issue that the government had to deal with, but failed. This was the sentiment that Ghonim captured in his posts as the administrator of the Facebook group ‘We are all Khaled Said.’

That ‘We are all Khaled Said,’ along with other Facebook groups and other forms of media, played an instrumental role by helping to organize, document, and publicize the uprising is clear. What my article examines is the role of Facebook beyond that, looking at its potential impact on the public sphere in a country that has experienced decades of political repression and media censorship, limiting critical debate and communicative action. By highlighting the relevant aspects of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, I establish a loose standard to which a forum should adhere, if it is to be considered a space for rational debate.

The Public Sphere, Then and Now

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the manuscript that helped to launch a new field of political theory. In his book, Habermas essentially “asks when and under what conditions the arguments of mixed companies could become authoritative bases for political action,” (Calhoun 1992:1). The private individual was a product of a new social order that became possible due to the “emergence of early finance and trade capitalism,” (Habermas 1989:14) which enabled a bourgeois class to separate itself from the individuals ruling the state and dominate certain parts of the economy. This eventually led to the development of civil society, which “came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority,” (Habermas 1989:19). Market forces helped to solidify the private realm by encouraging interactions outside of state control. They also helped to mold “news itself [into] a commodity,” (Habermas 1989:21) creating a way to popularize ideas that did not necessarily go along with (and in many cases went against) the agenda set by the ruling class.

As Habermas notes, the “medium” of the deliberation between the public and the state was “peculiar and without precedent: people’s public use of their reason,” (Habermas 1989:27). It was the best ideas – regardless of the identity of the speaker – were the ones that held the most clout. Opinion was considered, not common, and the participants scrutinized every proclamation. They attempted to distill from a plurality of selfish interests

those that were the most universal – “general, abstract [and] depersonalized,” (Calhoun 1992:14). Disagreement, skepticism and criticism were meant to improve the strength of the argument to make it palatable to even the most ardent disbelievers. Habermas goes on to say, however, that this does not mean the transformation of public discourse into a sort of market for ideas, which would imply that some were producers and others consumers, and that some had a disproportional wealth to promote certain ideas – the “laws of the market were suspended as were the laws of the state,” (Habermas 1989:36).

Forums for debate also presupposed “the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned,” (Habermas 1989:36). When information became, at least in theory, available to all, it also became available to all interpretations, not a single one formulated by the ruling class or the church, thus challenging the status quo. Related to this was the tenet establishing the public as “inclusive in principle,” (Calhoun 1992:13). Habermas does not mean to say that the public sphere was composed of all members of society, but that the availability of information via the market made it theoretically available to all, thus making inclusiveness a necessary (though elusive) condition of the public sphere.

Egypt’s public sphere and civil society were weak before the fall of Mubarak, but they were not hopeless. The factors that allowed for the creation of the private individual were present in Egypt, as well. Many people were able to make monetary transactions outside of the realm of the state, but the government still controlled a large part of the economy. Indeed, the most lucrative positions and the ones that offered the best way for advancements – the military and the bureaucracy – were still tied to the state. Only the entertainment industry offered as good of an opportunity for advancement for middle-class Egyptians (Khalil 2012). The class comparable to Habermas’ conception of the bourgeoisie was thus within the state, not outside it. Still, Egypt was developing a middle class that, in a way, leapfrogged the Egyptian economy and was establishing itself in the global market; Wael Ghonim typifies this demographic (National Public Radio 2011).

The role of the media in shaping the Egyptian public sphere was important even before the social media explosion. While Habermas ‘disapproved’ of the mass media, it is important to highlight it here to help understand the Egyptian context. Before the January 25 uprising, Egypt’s national channels and newspapers were not actively censored, providing an outlet for those dissatisfied with the regime. This enabled the administration to keep a semblance of legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, which would have condemned outright censorship. However, the regime subjected the media to more subtle pressure and censorship. In 2010, for example, the state-controlled Nilesat company stopped airing 12 private satellite channels that supported the opposition Muslim Brotherhood a month before parliamentary elections (Committee to Protect Journalists 2011). International channels like Al Jazeera (based in Qatar) and Al Arabiya (based in Dubai, owned by Saudi Arabia) are not directly affected by such censorship, though the government decided to black out Al Jazeera’s coverage in Egypt during the January 25 uprising (ABS-CBN News 2011).

Despite its seemingly rigid, one-to-many format of information dissemination, broadcast media actually helped to open up debate and promoted various viewpoints. Egypt is a regional broadcasting hub, and it has the highest number of households with televisions in the MENA region (Allam 2010). El Moustafa Lahlali (2011:66) writes, “the wide range of programmes offered by the Arab media has encouraged debate and rational criticism, which has been missing for so long in the Arab public sphere.” Hirschkind’s writings support this analysis. He writes that blogging, which emerged several years after Al Jazeera became popular, “allowed for the possibility of linkages, the articulation of shared interest and desires that otherwise would remain hidden, or at least fail to find institutional expression within existing forms of affiliation and political action.” (Hirschkind 2010)

The internet allowed for many more people to express their opinions, which often lay contrary to the opinions of the state, but it was not the first medium that allowed for the expansion of the public sphere. In addition to promoting publics and critical-rational debate, television also promoted

education and literacy. Habermas does not single either of these out as a positive contribution of mass media, though – especially for illiterate Egyptians – popular media was one of very few sources of education. Before the uprising, the internet and broadcast media, even if they were not acting as a space for rational debate, began to alter the practices of the opposition and invited more deliberation among the citizens.

Though Habermas provides a good starting point for discussing the public sphere, applying a theory that was originally conceived in the context of bourgeois European societies to today's Middle East does not come without a set of challenges. For one, "the terms 'public' and 'private' are conceptualized distinctly in the Western discourse and the Arabic discourse," (Zayani 2008:71). This is especially true in the case of religion, which Habermas assigned to the private realm, "denying it sufficient visibility within the public sphere," (el-Nawawy, Khamis 2011:236). Furthermore, though the public sphere theory "rests on a degree of tolerance for difference... the co-existence of different traditions and viewpoints does not always produce symmetrical relationships whereby the better argument prevails," (Zayani 2008:71). This is true in Egypt, a society marked by old traditions and drastic divides among its people. On top of that, it is unclear whether an Egyptian public with a stronger voice will necessarily demand democracy. As Zayani points out, "the emergence and consolidation of an Arab public sphere does not necessarily herald democracy."

While these are important critiques that the reader must be aware of, I do not deal with them directly in this article. My goal here is to determine whether and how the tenets of public sphere manifest themselves in the specific Facebook group I am examining. It is not inconceivable that a certain aspect of a country's public sphere behaves differently from the rest, and I wish to determine the traits of the public as it manifested itself on Facebook.

Public Sphere and Facebook

In many societies, Egypt included, citizens have been unable to build healthy civil society groups and to engage their peers in rational public debate.

Online media are only one aspect of a vibrant society, but they occupy an important place due to their appeal to the middle class and their emphasis on participation, not consumption. I analyze the discussions of the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' looking specifically for the factors that Habermas deemed to be crucial to the public sphere. Key among these are difference of opinion which leads to considered, not common, goals; a production of cultural as well as political commodities; a disregard of status among the participants and inclusiveness as basic tenets; common interest in truth or right policy; and an attempt to distill personal desires into abstract, universal ideals. I add to this list an important tenet of Yochai Benkler's, that the networked public sphere provides a way for readers and users to verify or refute claims made by their peers, what Benkler calls the "linking and 'see for yourself'" advantage of a virtual public sphere, (Benkler 2006:219).

In order to conduct my study, I have chosen to analyze a note written by Wael Ghonim and 100 comments to the note. I will begin by looking at the content of the note, moving to the comments thereafter. I decided to focus on the minutia and take a bottom-up approach, drawing cautious conclusions only after having analyzed a specific conversation on Facebook. Looking at a small sample of comments has its limitations, and my research is by no means conclusive. Yet focusing on the details and conversations is required to better answer questions about social media's effect on the public sphere.

Tension in Egypt had been brewing over the course of late January and early February. Ghonim wrote the note that I analyze at 3:00 p.m. on February 11, several hours before Omar Suleiman's brief statement announcing Mubarak's departure. The protesters' demeanor had begun to turn markedly sour after a speech made the night before by Mubarak, in which he announced his desire to stay in power, blamed the unrest on foreign elements, and called on the protesters to go home. The mood in Tahrir and elsewhere was "difficult to define – equal parts deflation, determination, and a mounting sense of pure rage," (Khalil 2012:259). The sense of blind defiance extended to the pages of 'We are all Khaled Said,' which by that point had evolved from

an apolitical call for the investigation of Said's beating to a more directly anti-regime movement; some users began to question Ghonim's allegiance to the revolution due to a misunderstanding.

A rumor began to circulate on the group's wall that Ghonim supported Mubarak staying on in an honorary figurehead position – anathema to those whose demands explicitly included Mubarak's resignation and a promise that Gamal would not succeed his father. This myth came about due to misreporting by the Middle East News Agency, which claimed that Ghonim called on the protesters to leave after Mubarak's speech, when Ghonim actually said this before the speech, thinking that Mubarak was announcing his resignation (Ghonim 2012:60, 284). The pressure being exerted on him, combined with the fact that he wrote many of his messages emotionally and spontaneously, resulted in a note that was raw and evocative, but also somewhat jumbled. It not only highlighted the divide between new and old forms of media – Ghonim did not clarify his statements in an interview, but chose instead to speak directly to his readers – but also bridged the gap between the virtual and 'real' worlds.

Ghonim (2011) begins by proclaiming that "Egypt is above all," affirming his patriotism, which was questioned by members of the group. He continues to highlight his fight for the revolution up to that point, reminding the readers of his activism for Egypt's freedom and the imprisonment he suffered because of it. His third point speaks directly to the publicness of the group and the concentrated effort of all Egyptians, not just one individual, in the success they protesters had had thus far: "the voice of the people is stronger than the voice of any one person... The people are stronger [than any leader] and the people are now in the streets fighting for their points of view regardless of the point of view of Wael Ghonim."

That Ghonim commends the collective over any individuals is encouraging, but he neglects to mention his readers and the users on 'We are all Khaled Said' as contributors to the revolution. While many Egyptians writing on the page's walls and commenting on each others' posts were also likely to be partaking in the street protests, it is clear that at least some of the people

were participating in the uprising solely by expressing their opinions online. This would have been the case with Egyptians (and other Arabic speakers) living abroad. Ghonim's neglecting to acknowledge the role of the individuals who are willing to express their opinion online speaks to the way their contributions are perceived vis-à-vis those actually partaking in the protests.

Ghonim is at once shaping opinion and stating that the opinions of others deserve to be respected, playing the role of the moderator that is reasonable but impartial. As the group's creator, he has the responsibility to encourage a plurality of ideas and establish the ideal that the group's publicness is inclusive in principle. That he promotes his own opinions while also encouraging others' is in itself not damaging to the freedom of the public sphere, as long as those who oppose him are able to voice their opinions. The note's visibility as the main text, however, allows for Ghonim's opinion to be buttressed by the structure of the forum itself. This is problematic but not entirely disqualifying the group from being a virtual public sphere – the pamphleteers and publishers that were important to Habermas were also acting as moderators and filterers of information while (either directly or indirectly) establishing their own opinions on the subjects they discussed.

Facebook's Structural Inhibitions and Benefits

By 3:30 p.m., only thirty minutes after Ghonim published his note, 3031 of the 6003 responses had already been appeared – a rate of around 100 comments per minute, or 1.67 comments per second. This is a huge response and it indicates the importance of the page as a forum. By default, Facebook shows the 50 most recent comments, though users can click and open up the 'pages' of older comments, 50 at a time. At such a rate, those whose comments take five minutes to formulate and type would be ten 'pages' – 500 comments – ahead of where they began typing. The commenters, thus, would have a hard time, 1) identifying where in the conversation they began typing and what was said before the comment that led to their idea; 2) finding any responses to their comments; 3) keeping up with the

ideas posted before during the time it took them to write the comment; and, thereby, 4) sustaining a back-and-forth conversation with (especially) one, or more, individuals. Keeping track of all the new comments – if that is what one intended to do – would be nearly impossible during the time the conversation was taking place, making it difficult for all opinions to surface and have a chance to be debated.

Of course, not all comments were analytical enough to take five minutes to compose, the seemingly most common being expressions, “Enough, Wael!” or “I am/we are all with you, Wael.” They offer no explanation as to why, or whether, the user either opposes Ghonim or supports him, nor do they reference any of Ghonim’s ten points, making it impossible to understand what exactly the commenter’s position is on the issues at hand. Those users looking to circumvent the speed issue reposted their messages several times into the comments. This made their viewpoints more prominent by appearing more frequently, which helped to mitigate the issue of speed, as well as the issues created by the overall number of comments, discussed below.

If speed is to be scrutinized, however, its benefits must also be mentioned. Never before in Egypt – or any other place, for that matter – could such a multitude of opinions be recorded in so little time. Had the regime chosen to censor or punish those spreading heretical opinions, the task would have proven Sisyphean. Its monitors would be lost not only in the high numbers of responders, but also at the speed with which the responses were coming in. Recording and deciding which comments were the most egregious requires time – this time may not be long, but it is certainly longer than the seconds it took for new comments to appear. Indeed, targeting the top echelons of online dissent, Ghonim and internet access itself, seems to be the only sensible (but, in hindsight, misguided) solution.

The sheer number of comments presents its own challenges, which are magnified by the speed at which they appear. This criticism is often described as the ‘Babel objection’ (Benkler 2006:10). Benkler pinpoints this criticism into three arguments, 1) that large sums of money will have to be spent in order to promote one’s opinion, despite the low entry costs to digital

publishing; 2) that the readers will fragment and “individuals will view the world through millions of personally customized windows that will offer no common ground for political discourse or action, except among groups of highly similar individuals who customize their windows to see similar things;” and 3) that discourse among these “highly similar individuals” will damage deliberation by polarizing the discourse (Benkler 2006:234–235). As Benkler shows, some scholars have responded to this criticism by highlighting the centralizing power of the internet, in which power law – the tendency for few sites to attract many visitors, and many sites to attract very few visitors – prevails in shaping and few sites are able to draw large numbers of readers. For a central group like ‘We are all Khaled Said,’ however, the problem of too many voices reemerges once again, on an individual-site scale, rather than internet-wide scale. Examining if and how the three points highlighted above surfaced in the comments of ‘We are all Khaled Said’ is important, as much of the scholarship pertaining to internet and the public sphere takes them into account.

Regarding the issue of money dominating discourse, the government was one entity with a budget large enough to shape the discourse. It is impossible to tell just how heavily the state monitored the internet, or how much resources the government spent on promoting its own point of view. However, the regime’s point of view was not highly prevalent on social media, creating a negligible effect, if any at all. Grassroots campaigns like ‘We are all Khaled Said’ were not commercially driven. While it takes some amount of time and money to create a group or participate in its discussion, throwing more money at the group’s comments would have had little effect on its discourse. If it became apparent that somebody was ‘spamming’ for his or her own commercial or political benefit, the other users would either oust the party responsible or move their conversation to another group. The readers of the group found the site, despite the fact that Ghonim spent very little money to promote the page and decided to contribute because of their solidarity with the group, not because of a commercial incentive.

The fact that Ghonim began his group as a civil and not political one allowed him to gather more followers than most of the overtly politicized

opposition groups. By focusing on a commonality among the Egyptians, Ghonim was able to at once deal with the two other problems proposed by the ‘Babel objection.’ The initially non-political nature of the group enabled it to recruit politicized individuals of different opinions. It brought them in contact with one another for a common cause, serving as important training that would unite the country during the January 25 uprising. As we will see, the range of opinions expressed on the page did not lessen as the uprising gained steam and Ghonim became more firmly anti-Mubarak. As the political situation in the country became more volatile, the group’s members began to express their opinions more clearly and unabashedly. With such a number of competing ideas, it would have been difficult for any user to become more polarized and radical in his or her thinking. Whether or not these ideas were actually ‘competing’ against each other and judged by the readers on their credibility and strength of argument is the topic of the next section.

Comment Analysis

The comments I have chosen to analyze for what they add to the public sphere are not an entirely random sample. Not knowing the content of the comments, I had no way of being prejudiced in order to support my hypothesis. However, I did decide to look at comments written over an hour after Ghonim’s initial post in order to mitigate the effects of the speed problem outlined above. The comments also passed the ‘eye test’ in terms of their length – there were a few long comments and not as many single-line, simplistic statements either affirming the commenter’s solidarity with Ghonim or saying “Enough!” to the protests. The average comment was around 50 words long, enough to formulate a measured response to either Ghonim’s note, or to an earlier comment. Of course, those who wanted to express their opinion in a fuller way had the option of doing so and did – the longest of the comments was by user ‘Sisters of Saudi Arabia,’ who voiced her frustration with Ghonim’s interview in 665 words.

The comments showed a wide range of opinions on a long list of issues, from Ghonim himself, to the Egyptian military, to foreign intervention. Of

the 100 comments, 35 supported Ghonim, 22 antagonized him, 17 referred to Ghonim but did not make clear whether the user was in support of him or not, and 26 did not address Ghonim at all. ‘Shehab Elgendy,’ for example, wrote, “The lives of those who are being harmed and those who will be killed in the coming days will be on your neck Wael. It is your fault that this sedition is being spread everywhere. Just stop this already.” Others were more specific and less malicious in their criticism. ‘Dr. K. Kamal,’ for example, wrote, “Wael you are playing with our minds. You need to pick a direction to follow, go either right, or left. But you cannot say one thing and then later on, say something else.” Others supported Ghonim. ‘Mohamed Nabil Ali,’ responding to one of the prevalent themes in the comments, wrote, “Wael, I urge you to ignore those idiots that say that America and Israel will enter our country because they are simply idiots who do not understand anything.”

These inflammatory phrases and name-calls, however, did not have an effect on the commenters as they continued to express a wide view of opinions. This is likely due to the detachment from the conversation caused by the medium. The difference between a mass media environment in which the vast majority participate by consuming and one in which they are also able to publish their opinion is stark. In pre-revolutionary Egypt, the detachment from the real world – unrepresentative and authoritarian – only served to encourage ideas and participation in the public debate. There was little government-sanctioned space for any dissent, so it had to move either out of the country, as demonstrated by satellite channels, or online.

Curiously, user ‘Rabab Farouk,’ after chiding those who claimed that the achievements of the protests to that point had achieved enough, wrote, “So please, if you are simply too lazy to go out and protest, leave it to the bravery of those out on the streets to get us our rights back.” The irony in him writing this statement on Facebook is unmistakable, but it is a significant proclamation as it distinguishes between the ‘brave’ protesters on the street who are calling for more reforms and those who are content with Mubarak’s concessions. Farouk, it seems, does not mean to say that all those on Facebook are ‘lazy.’ He is encouraging people to out to the streets, but his state-

ment makes it clear that it is possible to participate in both spheres, and as long as the message for Mubarak to step down is being promoted.

During the uprising itself, some, though certainly not all, users participated in the protests, creating a bridge between the real and the virtual worlds. The majority of protesters would likely have gone to the January 25 protests had they been active on social media or not. However, the group 'We are all Khaled Said' was instructive and inspired its readers to participate in real-world campaigns. Aside from educating its readers, it also helped to promote cultural production, which the Mubarak regime was previously a patron of. Ghonim often posted pictures of graffiti and cartoons on the group's wall, as well as short YouTube videos and songs. The group became not just a place for expressing opinions, but also a cultural center that resisted Mubarak's rule in its totality. This cultural and opinion production helped the group to have a closer immediacy to the real world than a public sphere shaped by mass media alone.

Calling someone a *khain* (traitor) seems to be one of the few ways of interaction among the Facebook group's commenters. Indeed, for Habermas a key tenet of the public sphere is that it does "not merely [promote] sharing what people already think or know but [that it is] also a process of potential transformation in which reason is advanced by debate itself," (Calhoun 1992:29). I found few signs of furthering of ideas and deliberation in the comments I analyzed. Structurally, Facebook's continuous stream of comments – unlike threaded commenting that is prevalent on news websites and blogs – makes it hard to organize and pacify the speed and number problems outlined above. It also makes it nearly impossible to understand who a user is referring to.

The users' online skill level and understanding of Facebook's commenting platform also undermined the potential for a coherent discussion forming. One commenter, 'Aisha Gamal Ibrahim,' for example, wrote simply, "I agree with the opinion you wrote to Wael, but not the comment," apparently referring to another commenter. A more advanced user decided to copy and paste the name of the person to whom he was responding in English, which

would theoretically make it easy to find both the original commenter and any subsequent follow-ups. The substance of his reply, however, left much to be desired: “Mohamed Faisal, You are an ignoramus.” Faisal did not comment again on Ghonim’s note, despite having initially written a relatively lengthy post praising the administrator.

Indeed, the disappearing persona seems to be a recurring theme in Facebook comments. One of the first responses to Ghonim’s note was by a man named Sofien. The comment must have been either extremely insightful or inflammatory, as it prompted a number of responses that voiced support for the Egyptian military. As one of the few comments that incited such commotion, I was anxious to read it; unfortunately, it was not there. Perhaps, Sofien did not like the attention he was getting and deleted it; perhaps, he deleted his Facebook account altogether – or was kicked off the website. Another comment, a relatively harmless one written by ‘Dr. K. Kamal’ had disappeared over the course of my study. Another user, who originally went by ‘Tarek Mohamed,’ had since changed his name to the more ambiguous ‘Commandos Force,’ and began toting Gamal Abdel Nasser’s photograph as his profile picture.

The group’s commenters were also not very keen in returning to the conversation – 477 users contributed more than one comment. The vast majority of those posted only two different comments. Only five individuals posted ten or more unique comments. Overall, of 6003 comments, 79.7% were by users who posted only one unique response (some users copied and pasted the same comment, which increased the comment’s visibility but did very little to advance discussion). I do not mean to imply that there were no comments that responded to someone else. The majority of comments that did refer to someone directly, however, were targeted at Ghonim.

Some users did decide to post their opinions to things other than Ghonim’s statement, leading to at least the potential for debate of these tangents. While very few people responded to specific users, many more responded to categories of users at a time – “Whoever says that Wael will take the first flight out of Egypt if Israel attacks us...,” “To all those who took part in this

revolution for the sake of change and for the sake of bringing down corruption...,” “How interesting it is that all of sudden people are asking others to calm down...” Due to the large number of comments, the users appear to be keen on targeting strands of ideas and multiple individuals at once. Thus, one user responds to many, in a way replicating the mass media model of the public sphere. Of course, on Facebook, the ‘many’ can respond, though there seems to be little desire among the commenters of ‘We are all Khaled Said’ to have back-and-forth conversations. While some did attempt to spur discussion, such efforts were mostly futile, as most readers only posted once and the number and speed of the comments made it difficult to keep up with the conversation.

One way to encourage discussion amid the commenters would be ‘electing’ representatives who argue on behalf of the masses. This would allow for ideas to be deliberated among few individuals, representing large groups of followers; this structure is the backbone of representative democracies worldwide. While Facebook as a platform does enable ‘Likes’ – a simple voting tool that does not reveal any insight, but could be used to single out the authors of the top comments – these were not used effectively and tended to favor the earliest comments to Ghonim’s note. As the frequency of the comments increased, it became simply too time-consuming to look back into the comments, as the new comments were coming at torrential speeds. Had there been a feature to sort the comments by the number of ‘Likes,’ it may have been possible to sort out the best arguments and establish the several users whose input was valued the most by his/her peers. Since no such function exists, however, the most liked comments to Ghonim’s note are currently hidden among several thousand others.

Complicating the idea of an elected representative is the fact that few people seemed willing to distill their comments to the most basic and agreeable tenets in order to help the discussion. While some did distinguish between personal beliefs and the best course of action for the country, the majority of comments either reflected personal opinions or collective opinions not necessarily backed by the reality of the wide range of viewpoints represented

in the group's comments. There is a distinct difference between forming an opinion based on personal experience that can be discussed among many people and assuming that one's opinion applies to all; the overwhelming majority of the 100 comments I analyzed fell into the latter group. Supporting one's opinion with an argument based on established facts – what Benkler called “linking and ‘seeing for yourself’” – did take place, but was also underdeveloped.

While linking is theoretically possible in Facebook comments, the practical use of the feature has not kept up to its potential. Ideally, it should provide evidence for arguments, move the discussion forward, establish writers' credibility, and protect against fragmentation. There are only 150 links in the 6003 comments to Ghonim's note, and many of those are the same links 'advertising' other Facebook groups and pages, and YouTube videos. In fact, there were only eight unique links that referred readers to sites other than Facebook and YouTube. Of these eight, five linked users to blogs or forums. Those looking to provide support for their arguments or to educate their peers, therefore, only linked to six articles published in three established organizations, The Guardian, Al Masry Al Yaum, and Al Yaum As Saba'. Few links were used in context, as many of them were posted on their own or with only a sentence or two – hardly enough space for a genuine critique of the contents.

Conclusion

Egypt's economic, communicative, and political developments over the past decade created conditions in which an alternate, underground political sphere would not only thrive, but would be essential for expressing opinions in a non-violent matter. The brutal beating of Khaled Said stood in stark contract with Egyptians' non-violent calls for change in the country and enabled Wael Ghonim to create a virtual space in which people of various political affiliations could unite for a humanitarian, not political cause. As the Egyptians' conditions deteriorated, the group became more politicized – not necessarily backing a specific candidate (even though Ghonim was a

supporter of El Baradei), but opposing the current regime. Ghonim's marketing prowess, as well as the structure and the comments on the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said,' have shown that while some problems of the mass-media public sphere are scaled back in a networked environment, new ones arise.

As constructed in the comments to Ghonim's note, the most significant benefits of the virtual public sphere that I examined are: 1) the inclusive atmosphere which is impersonal and anonymous enough to encourage responses; 2) the creation of a virtual 'community' that generates not only educational but also cultural products; 3) the ability to use various forms of media to support one's argument, including pictures and video; 4) the ability to see others' opinions on a mass scale; 5) the capability to push a story into the mainstream; and therefore 6) the feeling of contribution to a national dialogue that, in the past, had been limited to only a few individuals.

However, serious drawbacks are also apparent: 1) the speed (as well as the number) of the comments makes it nearly impossible to sort out any continuous thread of ideas; 2) the difference in the level of understanding of the medium makes less advanced commenters incapable of using the platform's full range of tools; 3) the contentious nature of the topic made various personal opinions hard to distill into relatable similarities among the Egyptians, which, while did not fragment the users, made the vast majority of comments too specific or too presumptuous to encourage reasoned debate; 4) the benefit of relative anonymity, which encouraged comments, also made commenters likely to not follow the discussion or read reactions to their post; and 5) the ideal of linked, fact-backed discussion was hardly apparent, as the few commenters that used outside sources linked only to several places.

The benefits and drawbacks outlined above do not fit neatly into the Habermasian tenets of the public sphere. To be sure, there was a considerable variety of opinion expressed among users posting in the comments, both regarding Ghonim and the uprising itself; cultural as well as political ideas were expressed; there was an interest in doing what was best for Egypt and

its citizens, though the course of action varied differently; and inclusiveness was a well-established fact, though some users certainly did not express the utmost respect toward those whose ideas were drastically different. On the other hand, there were few attempts to distill personal opinions and desires into universal goals; few used the linking feature and the links that did appear were homogeneous; ideas were rarely debated; and very few people trying to engage their peers into a conversation.

Structurally, Facebook can be an apt platform for a virtual public sphere, but it is not without its limitations. Linking is easy, which gives users the potential to buttress their opinions with credible sources. Facebook also enables readers to vote for the best arguments by 'Liking' them, giving any comment the potential to stand out. However, the problem of the 'disappearing persona' is a keen one. It reduces the amount of trust the users have toward each other and damages the inclusiveness aspect of the public sphere. While the tools for publishing an opinion are relatively cheap and accessible to many Egyptians, the fact that every user is able to delete his or her comment, instead of attempting to support or elaborate it when it is questioned by others, undermines any chance for a coherent debate taking place. This is especially true if the deleted comment was a controversial one, which seemed to be the case with 'Sofien's' missing post. Another structural flaw the constant stream of comments makes it nearly impossible to engage someone in a structured debate. There are ways to circumvent this problem (by copying and pasting someone's name into the comment, for example) and several users did use the platform to its fullest advantage in order to stimulate discussion. The vast majority, however, did not. The detachment from the chaos of Tahrir could have been beneficial to the users; for most, however, it was not, as their (understandably) emotional and rash comments hurt the prospect of deliberation in the comments.

User indifference was hardly an issue, as a range of opinions was expressed and at times quite forcefully. The main issue inhibiting the commenters, I believe, was their inexperience with the medium. While some users left comments that encouraged responses or themselves responded to opposing

viewpoints, the atmosphere in the comments was hardly one in which “reason is advanced by debate itself,” (Calhoun 1992: 29). The conversations that took place were largely stuck in several simple narratives, with users mainly avoiding confrontation with others’ ideas, choosing instead to label them traitors if their opinions were too unorthodox. This atmosphere may have been encouraged by both the violence on the streets of Egypt, as well as the decades of seeing government libel against its opponents in the mass media. It seemed, ultimately, as if the users were looking to broadcast their messages to the greatest number of people, instead of standing behind each comment and attempting to advance the debate by resorting to a rational discourse. It should not come as a surprise that Ghonim – a marketing executive at Google, after all – was perhaps the ideal internet user in engaging the virtual Egyptian public sphere. The way he and co-administrator Abdel Rahman Mansour moderated the page, filtering the news and cultivating a culture of disbelief of the status quo, allowed it to become a virtual community.

But Ghonim can also be criticized for not doing more to shape the community into a sphere for deliberation and for not responding to the users in order to set an example of a back-and-forth conversation. Ghonim’s prominence as the note’s writer of the certainly allowed his viewpoints and opinions to be the most visible; however, the same was true of the writers and pamphleteers 250 years ago. The difference between the Facebook administrator and the European writers is the medium that they use to spread their ideas and beliefs. Ghonim did encourage some participation, through voting or commenting, and repeatedly stated that his opinion is not the opinion of every protester. He may have been more effective, however, by using Facebook’s tools to interact with his readers in a back-and-forth manner, not just creating more lively debate, but also providing an example to the other users.

How Egyptian public sphere will adapt to the post-Mubarak era remains to be seen. While Facebook is a promising tool that may be used for genuine deliberation, it is not yet widespread or familiar enough to influence

the country's public sphere at large. It does, however, provide a unique set of tools to the few individuals who are interested in encouraging political discussion. If these individuals can lead by example and promote rational critical debate, Facebook's effect on the public sphere at large, in Egypt and elsewhere, will become more pronounced.

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Comment:

Egyptian uprising: Redefining Egyptian political community and reclaiming the public space

Mervat Youssef and Anup Kumar

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to understand and explain the emergence of a public sphere and the articulation of a new Egyptian identity. We argue that the Egyptian revolution, catalyzed by the social media, was possible because the young men and women succeeded in reclaiming the public space from the apparatuses of the post-colonial state. There was a contest between the protesters and the regime over the meaning of Egyptian identity and what it means to be an Egyptian. The protesters were able to redefine the Egyptian public sphere and redraw its contour. Through a semiotic and discourse analysis of the repertoires of protest, the symbols, the slogans and the images at Tahrir Square and on social media sites, we hope to show how the youth-led massive social mobilization redefined and reconstructed the civil society and the Egyptian national political community (identity).

Keywords

activism, public sphere, social networks, Egypt, social media, Arab Spring

“We will not be silenced; whether you are a Christian, a Muslim or an atheist, you will get back your god’ dam rights. And we will have our rights. One way or the other, we will never be silent.”

A protestor shouting into the TV cameras at Tahrir Square, Jan 25, 2011 (Sha’aban 2011).

In 2011, largely non-violent popular protests in Tunisia and Egypt toppled two oppressive rulers. Protest in both countries served as a precipitating factor and inspiration for the people in other countries in the MENA region. The protest in Tunisia, and more so in Egypt, had a “spill-over effect”

(Meyer & Whittier 1994) inspiring peoples in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria to rise up. In a way, the sequenced spread of uprisings reminded of the 1989 events of the fall of the Eastern Bloc. Moreover, strategic use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter in Tunisia and Egypt reminds us of how democracy movements in the Eastern Bloc utilized the *samizdat* and Radio Liberty to mobilize. Not surprisingly, the news media coined the upheavals in the Arab world using the overarching frame of “Arab Spring.”

Because of the widespread use of social media websites there was a tendency to coin these protests as Facebook Revolution or Revolution Web 2.0 (Ghonim 2011). Such an overarching frame suggests a sort of technological determinism, which obfuscates the roots of the uprising that lie in the socio-political contexts and the contingencies of place and time. The communication media technologies are not only instrumental factors, but to some extent they produce their own social context (Castells 2007, Meyrowitz 1985). However, the larger socio-political context out of which the uprising burst on to the scene should not be only seen through the prism of technological determinism, and as Morozov (2005) has compellingly argued, we should be cautious of falling into “internet-centrism” or “cyber-utopianism.”

Although the use of social media appears to be a common thread in the so-called Arab Spring, the social logics that propelled the various popular uprisings in the MENA are different and rooted in the multilayered and complex nature of the social in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain.

The case of Egypt

It appears that we are witnessing the makings of a long revolution in Egypt. More than one year after the 18 days that quivered Cairo, Alexandria and Suez mainly, the off-and-on popular uprising has been only a relative success, and is still unraveling. Not surprisingly, some observers of Egyptian politics reject defining the popular movement that toppled Mubarak as

a “revolution,” and are wondering if the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) has actually succeeded in co-opting the uprising and turning “the revolution” into a mere “uprising” (Abd al-Fattah 2011). Unlike Tunisia, the impediments for the uprising in Egypt were many. The Egyptian society is much more diverse and complex. Egypt has a larger middle class, but it also has had a well-entrenched state security apparatus. The quasi-military regime has been the lynchpin of geopolitical status quo in the region. Following the “victory” in the 1973 war in Sinai, the Egyptian military has enjoyed a sacrosanct place in the national imagination. However, the discontent against the civilian face of the regime was simmering and building up throughout the last decade, and reached a tipping point in 2010-11.

Thus, it is most important to take note of the impediments for the uprising in Egypt, and in other places, and the socio-political context of the protests that were in the making for a long time. To reach the tipping point, the activists required building the civil society and an alliance between the working class and the middle class. We argue that the uprising in Egypt was in the making as “submerged social networks” of activists evolved from series of smaller protests since the Iraq War. We are calling them “submerged social networks” as they functioned under the radar of government surveillance and the perpetual “gaze” of the state that had virtually penetrated all segments of society (Kumar 2011a). These submerged networks masked themselves in innocuous sounding social ties built in mosque groups, soccer fan clubs, women’s groups, coffee houses, musical concert circuits and the more recent miscellaneous Facebook groups. Additionally, the submerged network of the Muslim Brotherhood thrived in the Islamic underground and in social welfare organizations that operated relatively free from the state.

The submerged networks were building the civil society, recovering and re-imagining the Egyptian identity and constituting political communities from grounds-up in a society that was effectively depoliticized since the 1954 coup. The networks of activists, who were baptized in the repertoire of civil street action in the series of social protest since 2001, became the

nucleus of the 2011 uprising. Additionally, since the late 1990s, in Egypt and the wider Arab world, the public sphere was expanding with the proliferation in private satellite news channels, the Internet and recently social media. The expansion of the public sphere created more avenues to communicate within the country and with the world outside. Later, we will see that the social media was used as an extension of a face-to-face submerged social network of activists. We hope to show that, for the uprising, mobilization had to move beyond “liking and writing on the wall” and the activists had to actually show up on the street to claim the public space and pass the “town square test” (Kumar 2001b, Sharansky 2005).

Claiming the public space

As Nathan Sharansky (2005) argues, all popular movements have to pass what he calls the “town square test.” A successful mass uprising starts with ordinary people mustering the courage to converge in the city center to claim the public space in order to be seen and heard in their country and world over (Mitchell 1995, Kumar 2011b, Sharansky 2005). Don Mitchell (1995:115) articulated public space as “... a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be *seen*.” He argued that “[b]y claiming space in public by creating spaces, social groups themselves become public.” Claiming the public space, at the physical and cognitive levels, leads to the social production of a new consciousness. Eyerman and Jamison (1991:4) argued, “Social movements are best conceived of as temporary public spaces, a movements of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities and even ideals.” As the public space claimed by social protests is often temporary, it is important to understand that the state apparatuses can co-opt and re-colonize the public space.

To be seen and heard beyond the locality of the protests, the activists require support from the communication media. The asymmetrical nature of news media, Facebook and Twitter, gave the protesters a megaphone to overcome the constraints of space and time, but to successfully claim the public space, the protesters need to be seen and heard in the corridors of power, and that

requires witnessing and legitimation from the news media. This makes the media -including social media and traditional news media- in any large-scale mediated and networked society, the terrain for political contestation for the voice of the protesters to acquire transformative power (Atton & Hamilton 2008, Castells 2007, Dahlgren 2005, Kumar 2009, Langman 2005).

This was evident in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and more recently in Pearl Square in Bahrain. In Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese state quickly re-colonized the fledgling public space that the protesters had claimed. The Chinese state was able to re-colonize the space because there were: internal conflicts in the fragile civil society that had emerged in Beijing, there was a blackout in the national media, and the protesters could not communicate with the outside world as the international media had restricted access (Calhoun 1994). Arguably, the lukewarm coverage of the democracy protests in Bahrain received from the media (*Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya*, *CNN*, *BBC* and others) enabled the government to crush the protests assisted by neighboring Saudi Arabia. In the case of Egypt, we propose that without the support from the news media it would have not been possible for the protesters to succeed in claiming the public space in Egypt. However, the uprising was successful in recalling a collective identity around which the mobilizing happened-an element lacking in Bahrain.

We suggest here that the protesters succeeded in claiming the public space, although temporarily, because of articulation of social alignment across differential communities that led to constructing a unified political community. Yet, this alignment was a temporary phenomenon and gave rise to competing political communities within a national public space. Dina Shihatah (2010) has described this as the “return of politics,” which has been progressively moving forward since 2004, and the uprising has given it a quantum jump. To understand this “return to politics” we need to look at the period of de-politicization following the 1954 coup and transformations in the Egyptian public sphere since the late 1990s.

The Egyptian state and depoliticized “public”

The Egyptian public was depoliticized for decades. Meaningful participation in political life had been declining since Nasser overthrew Naguib in 1954. The percentage of people, especially the young, participating in politics was very low. According to a study in 2004, 67 percent of young men and women of voting age were not registered to vote. More than 80 percent had never engaged in any kind of political activity (Zohny 2010). In the 30 years of the quasi-military dictatorship, Mubarak's regime had given the people a Faustian choice- stability of the regime or the strict Islamic code of the Muslim Brotherhood (Osman 2010).

While Nasser kept a sense of cohesion in the society through his nationalist narrative, he debilitated political life and installed a one-party rule of the Socialist Union and persecuted his political opponents (Marfleet 2009, Osman 2010). Nasser purged the Communists and Islamists and forced them to go underground. Even when his successor Sadat reinstated political parties, they remained marginalized. After the Islamists opposed the treaty with Israel and assassinated Sadat in 1981, Mubarak took away whatever minimalist liberties remained. Mubarak's regime promulgated a strong Emergency Law, which gave the state immense powers to spy on the people, indefinitely detain them without trial, and proscribe anything that it perceived as a threat to national security. Resentment to Emergency Law did not run very high among the people after the assassination of a president. Furthermore, facing the Islamist violence, Egyptians seemed to willingly choose familial safety over liberty. Even when the Islamists renounced violence in the 1990s, Mubarak's regime still managed to renew the Emergency Law regardless (Osman 2010, Naguib 2009). The grip of the state on both the public and private spheres was so tight that it was not possible for the people to conceive of a social life without the government having some sort of presence in it. The government was like the benevolent parent who knew best what was good for the people. This relationship was perpetuated by the image Sadat¹ adopted as the family patriarch-an image Mubarak inherited and continued to foster (Osman 2010).

Thus, the Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak regimes further and further depoliticized the Egyptian society by keeping it divided along religious, class and rural/urban lines. During the Mubarak regime, the neoliberal economic policies led to concentration of wealth and created social policies that deepened the gap between classes and encouraged the creation of gated communities isolated from the misery of ordinary Egyptians (El-Naggar 2009, Marfleet 2009). The fragmentation of the society ensured that the civil society remained weak and dependent on the state. At the same time, the regime managed to maintain a strong grip of the society through the state security apparatuses and co-opting the opposition. Those who could not be co-opted were either imprisoned or forced to go underground like the Muslim Brotherhood. State Security and thugs (*baltajiyyah*) were state instruments on the streets and had shuttered the public sphere. In *Al-Mas-ri al-yawm* (now, *Egypt Independent*) Nur al-Din (2011) reported that the Interior Ministry employed 165,250 “collaborators” who are mainly convicted felons and registered thugs to intimidate and terrorize citizens when needed. Their services are in particular demand during elections. Thugs were used to terrorize the protesters during the famous standoff between the protesters in Tahrir Square² and *baltajiyyah* following the run-in by the camels (also known as the Battle of the Camel). After Mubarak was removed thugs were still employed and attacked demonstrators along side with security forces in Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2011.

The state had ensured that the vast majority of the people of Egypt did not see themselves as one national political community or even diverse political communities in one polity. It assumed the role of the patriarch and the citizens were assigned the role of infants who needed the state’s parenting to survive (Osman 2010). The Emergency Law also maintained the public space divided and fragmented and suppressed public participation in political life. The law ensured that all civil and religious associations (syndicates/unions) were under the control of the government. Under that law, print media was closely controlled and no rally without the approval and supervision of the Interior Ministry could take place.

The transformation of the Egyptian public sphere

Until recently, the news media was mostly government owned and aligned with the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Editors of national newspapers functioned under the patronage of the state, and in effect were controlled by the NDP. They were handpicked and appointed for their loyalty to the regime rather than their professionalism or competence. Broadcast journalists were not members of the journalist syndicate, neither were they protected under journalism laws that gave relative freedom to print journalists. The Commission for Investment controls licensing independent radio and TV stations and revoked licenses when editorial lines did not appeal to the state.

The diversity in voices was restricted to the limited range within the ruling party-NDP. Furthermore, the press operated under an unwritten agreement that proscribed criticism of Mubarak or his family. The press was co-opted to support the regime. The infamous case of the head of Al-Wafd Party – Elsayyed Elbadawy – acquiring the independent *Al-Dostour* and firing its award-winning editor Ibrahim Eissa, is a case in point (Kenner 2010). Eissa was a vocal critic of Mubarak and released information about his ailing health, an action that angered Mubarak. Eissa was jailed (El Deeb 2008). Elbadawy's buying *Al-Dostour* and firing Eissa, was seen as a token of goodwill towards Mubarak and his regime. Launching *Al-Jazeera* in 1996 stirred up change. But, *Al-Jazeera* mostly focused on international news and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It did not interfere much in the internal politics of other Arab states, although, it did critically cover specific events and boldly criticized the Egyptian government's impotent-almost serving Israel stance on Gaza.

Al-Jazeera's policy changed after September 11, 2001. It slowly started advocating democratization in the Arab states and reported ferment on the Arab street. Interestingly, perhaps realizing the imperatives of globalization and advancement in communication, the Mubarak regime chose to paint its reign as the “golden age for freedoms” [*sic*]. This translated into accessi-

bility to the Internet and an explosion in accessibility to satellite television. Privately owned Egyptian satellite television *Dream TV* launched in 2001 followed by *al-mihwar* in 2002 (although the latter is closely connected to the NDP).

Still, the state had control over the news content. The government patronized businessmen and the Egyptian Radio and Television Union owned significant equity in these private media organizations. Later, a few more Arab satellite channels were started: *Al-Arabiya* in 2003 (Saudi owned) and a host of Lebanese news and entertainment channels. Despite the presence of privately owned and international news channels, news remained circumscribed by many restrictive laws in the Arab world, including Egypt. Even in the case of a few privately owned media (i.e. *ONTV*, *Dream TV*) the reporting and the commentary operated under self-censorship and were filtered through the gate keeping norms established under the Emergency Law. In this environment of tightly controlled public sphere, religious speakers emerged as television stars. Egypt got its own televangelists.

In the last decade, there was a rise in religious media in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East. Traditional Islamic televangelists have always been present, especially on Egyptian and Gulf states TV and radio (Moll 2011). To fulfill part of the media “social responsibility” goal, these broadcasting entities carried religious pronouncements programming on day-to-day material consumption and social conduct, and modernity. Interestingly, these televangelists did not shy away from criticizing some practices as not complying with Islam. This indirectly implicated that the governments were not Islamic enough. After years of absolute censorship in the public sphere, this was perhaps a first. However, initially, the religious rhetoric was an illusion of freedom. The mosques and the Coptic churches functioned under the state supervision. Nasser had already controlled al-Azhar (Bayoumi 2010, Qissat al-Azhar 2012), and the Coptic Church had chosen to align with the state during the Mubarak years after its experience under Sadat. The head of al-Azhar and the Coptic Patriarch were co-opted by the state through special privileges granted to them to maintain social control over

their respective flocks (Tadros 2009).

A major shift in Egyptian televangelist scene happened in 2002. Young modern looking *du'aah*, callers to Islam, were becoming more popular among the middle and upper middle class (Mahmood 2005). They showed that there was no conflict between modernity and Islam and paved their way to TV shows, mainly on channels funded by Saudi Arabia (Majid 2011).

The first major sensation among the young in Egypt was Amr Khalid, a rich accountant-turned-preacher. He attracted tens of thousands of followers who listened to his sermons in public auditoriums and large mosques. A few years later, the Mubarak regime forced him into exile. However, this only increased his popularity on satellite television. Sales of his shows on CDs and DVDs also increased. In the virtual world, Khalid was able to sustain a presence on his website. Like Khalid, there were other young *du'aah*. The large assemblies of people that gathered to listen to preachers such as Khalid were punching a dent in the tightly controlled public sphere and public space in Egypt.

In this media mix, there were also websites, blogs and instant chat technologies along with a few publications targeted to young teenagers. *Teen Stuff* magazine targeted the young generation. In its effort to engage them as citizens, the magazine even organized a “youth parliament” to give the youth opportunity to speak out about their issues. The opening up of the public sphere was enabling the young to dream about a different sort of Egypt, but the expectations were also leading to frustrations among the young.³ News media avenues opened up new communication channels for the young, that were free from the gaze of the parents and the government, the super parent of all. Yet, these spaces were still defined along class lines. A commentator writing about the changes said that the new media had “put youth on the cultural and political map, though divided.”⁴

The changes in the media in the last decade not only laid the groundwork for the transformation of the public sphere in Egypt, but also set the stage for Egyptians to utilize social media for political deliberation. Interestingly,

Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif, the champion of the E-government, seemed to have encouraged connectivity only for it to become a contributing means for his downfall. The sheer number of people who are either on Facebook or connected to the Internet is far ahead of many developing nations. In 2011, there were over 9 million users of Facebook, which constitutes about 52 percent of the total Internet users (over 20 percent of Egyptian population use the Internet [Internet users 2012]). This is more than 10 percent in a country of over 80 million. If one excludes the Egyptian population living in rural areas (56.5 percent according to the CIA World Factbook), the number of Facebookers becomes more significant.

The social media not only served as an alternative public sphere for exchanging information and views, but also produced new social, religious and political consciousness. It emerged as a place where the youth constructed their own public space free from the controls of their parents and state surveillance. Very soon, the young formed many social and cultural groups on Facebook. Most politically oriented Facebook groups and blogs were initially about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. But soon fledgling political parties such as Kefaya and workers' unions saw an opening and used social media to carry their struggle, despite the Emergency Law, to better the living conditions of Egyptian people and reform the political system dominated by one party.

Recovering the political community and Kefaya

The Mubarak regime had relaxed control over the media in hopes to construct an image that would be appealing to foreign investors (El-Mahdi 2010). Concurrently, the fledgling civil society in Egypt was becoming more confident that if they exposed corruption and failures of the government, their voices would be heard in some quarters before the state would make attempts to muzzle the protests. *Dream TV* had already started venturing into relatively free coverage of local politics in early years of the 2000s. In 2005, *Dream TV*'s, Wael Al-Ibrashi and journalists of *Sawat al-Ummah*, were put on trial by the state for their coverage of the electoral fraud and

exposing how the government was purging judges who would not toe the government line. However, some commentators on the private TV channel were not deterred and continued to air their views on corruption in the government, with relative freedom. The independent avenue for citizen journalism on websites and blogs also bolstered the confidence of civil society groups and smaller political parties such as al-Ghad, led by Ayman Nour, and al-Wafd party, led by Munir Fakhri Abd al-Nur. Between 2004 and 2011, more than 1.7 million workers in Egyptian industries engaged in some sort of social protest and strikes under leadership of various labor organizations (Lee & Weinthal 2011).

The protesters have time and again staged sit-ins in front of the Egyptian parliament, claiming sidewalks as public space for registering their protests and airing their views. In all those years, the Egyptian government was very successful in not allowing these smaller protests from coalescing and transforming into a massive tidal wave like it did January 2011. The first active political group in which many young people joined was Kefaya (Enough!).

Established in 2004, it posed itself as a trans-ideological movement—members of different political convictions came together in hopes of creating an Egyptian mainstream (al-Shurbaji 2010). It provided a middle ground for activists and intellectuals along the political spectrum to work together.

Kefaya was modeled after the Popular Committee to Support the Intifada (PCSI). The latter was formed gathering members from rival political factions around a common goal: supporting the second Palestinian Intifada. The Iraq war provided another polarizing and galvanizing moment, and instigated mass protest against the Egyptian government's silence (El-Mahdi 2009). Kefaya maintained its integrity by refusing to receive any foreign funding. It required that members interested in joining the movement do so in their capacity as individuals, not representing any of their political affiliations. What unified the group were plans inside the ruling NDP to anoint Gamal Mubarak to succeed his father Hosni Mubarak. The group was successful in generating consciousness about the constitutional referen-

dum, political reforms, and the corruption in the electoral process. Kefaya set up a website, Egyptian Awareness, in 2005 to publicize and inform its members about its activities. Yet, Kefaya was criticized for being “elitists” and not suggesting solutions (al-Shurbaji 2010:115, Osman 2010).

The activities of Kefaya, in a way contributed to the formation of al-Ghad, in 2004, a liberal political party that mustered the will and courage to contest the 2005 election. Al-Ghad presidential candidate, Amyan Nour, challenged Mubarak in the elections. Despite massive electoral fraud Nour got 7 percent vote.⁵ The government panicked. Nour was arrested and jailed on what was seen as trumped-up and politically motivated charges (after the fall of Mubarak he was granted amnesty) (“Egypt restores” 2012). The experience of working for al-Ghad during the elections built a submerged social network of young activists. These activists started experimenting with social media in 2005 to communicate and organize small meetings. These submerged social networks brought together differential social groups such as democracy activists, labor, and urban middle class youths.

Social media and submerged social networks

Earlier political functions and activism were conducted within the boundaries of political parties’ headquarters and did not really reach the populace. The impotence and internal divisions in parties and in parliamentary life, disenchanted the younger generations in political parties (Shihatah 2010). The Internet was an important means and outlet for the disenchanted. They utilized it to communicate and mobilize away from the boundaries of traditional political life. Videos of citizens being tortured in police stations were means for mobilizing support for rejecting brutal police practices. Protesters were able to plan and communicate via social media and get the news out. The youth who were computer savvy understood the power of social media, but also its limitations (Frais 2008).

Face-to-face social network is essential to eventually come out on the street and claim the public space. Revolutions in the end do not happen in the media, they take place in the public square. The communicative processes of

recovering and reimagining a collective identity, and constructing a political community that helped claim the public space did not start with Facebook or the Jan 25 protests, yet they were amplified in social media. Changes in Egyptian society and a counter-wind were mitigating the effects of concerted efforts for depoliticization that had taken place over the years.

A submerged social network of political activists was getting organized and eventually was able to muster the mobilization required to claim the public space, and garner enough mobilization to pass the “town square test” during the uprising. But for ordinary Egyptian people to pass the “town square test,” they had to mitigate the impact of de-politicization of the Egyptian society and state. To understand, we briefly recap the lessons of the 6th of April Youth Movement.

The lessons of 6th of April Youth Movement

In Dec 2006, labor movements crested and created a new set of social ties between the labor activists in the Egyptian textile industry and middle class urban youth. The textile workers in al-Mahallah al-Kubrah went on strike demanding their promised bonus. The strike was a success; their demands were met. On April 6, 2008, the workers had planned for another strike. In 2008, 323 significant protests and strikes swept across the country⁶ and university professors demonstrated in Cairo against the presence of the so-called campus security. It was basically State Security agents controlling academic and student life on university campuses. The April strike was also called for at the time to tap into the discontent among the people over “bread riots” because of shortage of subsidized bread. *Al-Ahram Weekly* described the year of 2008 as the “season of protest.”

A group of young activists picked up the call for the 2008 textile workers’ strike and wanted to support it. They called for a general strike and a protest in support of industrial workers near Tahrir Square and set up an April 6 Strike Facebook page. The activists tried to suggest a common link in the series of issues behind the discontent. On the Facebook page, they explai-

ned what they wanted: decent wages, education, a humane transportation system, a functional and independent judiciary, safety and security. They wanted freedom and dignity, and housing for newly weds. They were against price increases, torture in police stations, corruption, bribery, [arbitrary] detentions and manipulation of the judiciary. Many of these same issues came to the fore and were the main rallying cries in Tahrir Square. These issues constituted the glue that linked the grievances in a series of discontents and claims, which is a characteristic feature of massive populist social mobilization (Laclau 2005, Kumar 2011a).

The state came to know about the general strike and managed to abort it. The textile workers' strike failed too. Labor leaders even blamed the failure of their strike on the 6th of April Movement's call for general strike (El-Mahdi 2010). The casualties were not limited to the failure of the strikes. Isra Abd al-Fattah, one of the callers for the protest, was arrested and shortly after, another was arrested (Shihatah 2010). A "Free Isra" campaign on Facebook was launched. She was released, but after being forced to recant her views and opposition to the government. Isra's arrest had a chilling effect frizzling out a Mubarak birthday protest the following month (Faris 2008). However, this propelled the 6th of April Youth Movement as one of the leading voices of political change and a submerged social network of activists. The 6th of April Youth Movement came to realize that in the end, social media provides "complimentary and logistical support to whatever we do ON THE GROUND" (Faris 2008:9, emphasis in original).

In June the 6th of April Youth Movement (6th of April hereafter) was turned from a mere Facebook group into a political movement. It was composed of a group of young men and women who previously worked under the umbrella of different political entities such as: Kefaya, al-Ghad party, the PCSI and some independents. It appealed to many as it capitalized on the fact that 60 percent of the population is young and thus have a stake in the future of Egypt (Osman 2010, Shihatah 2010). The movement was structured around work groups that members could join as they see fit to their skills, interests, background, etc. and utilized different means of com-

munication including grass root street campaigns. At the event of getting arrested, 6th of April supported the detained member providing both legal aid and provisions. They also organized media campaigns to support and call for freeing the detained.

Groups such as Kefaya and the 6th of April emerged as the most well organized opposition groups in Egypt in 2010. Members of these groups later became leading actors in the mobilization. They met regularly and planned to occupy the public space in Cairo and other major cities in Egypt. A member of the group travelled to Serbia to learn tactics to organize large protests and deal with the police using non-violent means. They had come to realize, like in other similar movements, they would have to claim the public space and ensure that they are witnessed across the world. Their plans for the uprising were overtaken by a number of important events.

On June 6, 2010, a young man was brutally beaten and killed in Alexandria. Pictures of his brutalized body were published and many were moved by his violent death. A new Facebook group – “We are all Khaled Said” emerged – that by then, had more than 400 thousand members (at the time of this writing, members exceeded 2 million). As if that was not enough, the 2010 parliamentary elections were scandalously rigged. On New Year’s Eve, the Saints Church was bombed. The explosion rocked Alexandria and killed innocent Egyptians and angered and mobilized them. Rather than taking on each other (Christians vs. Muslims), citizens demonstrated in solidarity. Shortly after, another Alexandrian was brutally killed by the police who beat him to death while trying to extract a confession that he was behind the church explosion. Finally, in neighboring Tunisia, following the self-immolation of a young street vendor, Ben Ali was toppled.

It was time to construct and claim the public space and take the “town square test” after the margins of the controlled public space had been breached through the work of submerged social networks (Kefaya, PCSI, April 6th, labor workers). To rally differential social identities, protesters used symbols, images and slogans to achieve the goal of constructing and temporarily clai-

ming a public space that became a prelude to the hoped-for new Egyptian Republic. The following section discusses how the social media enabled a submerged network of social activists to temporarily claim the public space, recover Egyptian identity, and construct a political community in the winter and spring of 2010-2011.

“Kullina Khaled Said”: Reclaiming a narrative

For the purposes of the argument here, the “who” and “how” behind the Kullina Khaled Said Facebook page⁷ is not as important as the “what.” Shortly after it was started, the page went viral and the numbers of its members increased rapidly. To protest what had happened to Khaled, which is nothing but another episode of an ongoing systemic culture of torture and police brutality, the page called for silent “stands.” Members were invited to wear black-in mourning, to express sadness, and to symbolize the darkness of injustice that has been wrought unto all Egyptians for so long and was exemplified in the brutal killing and torture of Khaled Said; something that could happen to any of them under the current regime.

The page called for the stands and gave out a number of instructions. Cognizant of the constraints imposed on citizens by the Emergency Law, the page called participants to stand five meters apart to avoid being persecuted. Participants were also invited to stand along waterfronts carrying the pictures of Khaled Said, banners renouncing the Emergency Law, or an Egyptian flag (in no particular order). Khaled became an icon for what happens as a result of police brutality. Months later, demonstrators will cry out in Tahrir and other squares in Egypt, “Khaled Said ya walad dammak beyharrar balad” (praised are you Khaled Said; your blood is freeing an entire country). The idea of a silent stand appealed to many Egyptians-- silence was a means of protest. In a personal communication with one of the protesters, he passionately talked about how these silent stands were the beginning of his participation in protest and ultimately in the 2011 Tahrir Square sit-in.

After each stand, the page posted news of the protest: stories of protesters

who were able to defy the police or were subjected to police intimidation. The page provided an alternative space for people—a virtual one (call for stands) until it could become a public one (the stands themselves) then they went back to the virtual to discuss their real space and plan some more. We call this the virtual-real-virtual cycle that preceded the extended occupation of public space.

The first call for a stand was limited to Alexandria and Cairo; later calls were extended to different cities in Egypt. By the middle of October, membership hit 300 thousand. Commemorating this milestone, the page posted a poster explaining the significance of the number: “our number exceeds the capacity of Cairo Stadium 5 folds.” But most powerful was the spatial visualization that the text on the poster provided: “if all the members formed a human chain by holding hands, they could connect the cities of Cairo and Alexandria (two of the biggest cities in Egypt) with their own bodies.” Using the significance of the number, the page was moving to assign “real” life meaning to the “virtual” community and affirm the importance of unity and its potential for re-claiming ownership of the Egyptian terrain.

The very title of the Khaled Said page inherently calls for unity by highlighting the power it could bring: Khaled Said’s case is not isolated. The sole citizen under such a regime is fragile and the perils of fragmentation are increasing; each could end up like Khaled. If his death is left unaccounted for, we would be all susceptible to the same fate. The same poster further went to challenge the state control over the media space. At 300 thousand, “we could communicate with 3 million people and that could trump the voice of *al-Akhbar*, *al-Jumhuriyyah* and *Al-Masri al-yawm*.”⁸ The page was consistently redefining the source and balance of power; it is within the ability of the people to unite and move between the virtual and the real. Later, the page, along with the 6th of April page, will join forces in exposing the “national” newspapers and TV complacency with the regime, claiming the media space virtually. The campaign continues after the removal of Mubarak.

The Khaled Said page also revived a sense of national belonging. To combat feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement, it and the 6th of April page

called on Egyptians to restore their sense of belonging mainly through action. A picture of Khaled Said had the caption: *al-balad baladna* – the country is ours. The “real” space was reassigned to Egyptians on the page before demonstrators participated in the silent stands. It was a call to “reclaim” the country and affirm belonging by participating in silent demonstrations and later in the Jan 25 demonstration. This feeling that “the country is ours” will prove to be most important to revive, especially when it was used to call on demonstrators to refrain from vandalism, engaging in fights and never to use any religious, party or sectarian slogans.

During the stands, all the slogans had to be “Egyptian.” Interestingly, participants were invited to take something to read if they wanted (the Bible or the Quran or any book) or something to listen to. The “rules” of conduct in the “real” public space were being set and agreed upon in the virtual public space. This is seen in both the 6th of April and Khaled Said pages. They clearly state that their goal is to “awaken” the Egyptian people by creating a space for Egyptians to engage in discussions and end injustice and tyranny. Both pages list the guidelines for conversations and participation. The two pages engaged members in discussions but constantly reminded them that the virtual space is a starting point and actual participation in the public space is the goal. Moving between the virtual and the real also was evident in the use of symbols. While the virtual space is a-religious, the real space is drafted along lines of religion.

When the Khaled Said page suggested reading a book and listed the “holy books” among the options, it was bridging realities between the virtual and the actual. Perhaps it was co-opting the largely accepted religious “norms” of Christianity and Islam. However, it was a unifying moment where both religious texts were equally Egyptian, diffusing any sectarianism and simultaneously, it was iconizing Khaled Said as an all-Egyptian, a-religious symbol. The Egyptianization of Islam and Christianity will become evident and reinforced by images. We do not claim that it was Internet pages that instructed people to behave in a specific way. Yet, cues in the virtual space were later “realized” in the square. Pictures of Christians and Muslims providing safe prayer spaces for each other in Tahrir during the sit-in were shared

on Facebook. Similarly, images of Muslims with beards (sign of religiosity) holding crosses as they cried for freedom along side Christian clergy were equally shared and celebrated. These images recalled a collective memory held dear in the Egyptian national memory. During the 1919 revolution Egyptians chanted, “Long live the crescent and the cross.” Crowds cried out loud the same chants while demonstrations passed by churches on January 25 (not a single church was attacked from Jan 25 – Feb 11 despite the complete absence of police).

From the virtual space to Tahrir Square, and back

We examined pictures posted on the photo albums of the Khaled Said and the 6th of April Facebook pages in their entirety. We chose the two pages because they were pivotal in mobilizing for the Jan 25 demonstrations and engaged page members in discussions and solicited suggestions, feedback and opinions. One of the two authors is a participant observer in these two pages, the demonstrations, and did interview protest and sit-in participants and/or activists. It is important to note that many demonstrators and participants did not know about the demonstrations through technology (online, text messages, emails, tweets). An activist narrated how a female street vegetable vendor literally ordered her son to take her merchandize home as she spontaneously decided to join the demonstration when the crowds passed by her.

We all matter: A main challenge that mobilization faced is a sense of helplessness and valueless that individuals and the society as a whole had developed under Mubarak. To combat these feelings, the pages at hand invoked the commonly cherished national/patriotic symbols; i.e. the flag and torture victims. Interestingly, the significance of the flag has been kind of fresh since it has been used in the All Africa soccer games.⁹ At times, the flag was used simply as is. Other times, the flag was creatively combined with other symbols to mobilize people participation and revive their sense of belonging. Using the flag as the basic component/background of banners, the pages called for everyone to participate in planned demonstrations.

While the Khaled Said page reminded of the power of all, the 6th of April page was blunt in reminding individuals of their responsibility: “you think nothing will change, not enough people will participate, this will only happen if you do not participate. I will.” Using the flag in the virtual will later move to the real when even women with scarves will wear flag-colored scarves. Notably, Tunisia became one of the symbols appropriated for mobilization. It became a symbol of what a community is capable of doing once it has moved from the virtual to the real and from the one to the collective.

Somehow, Tunisia symbolized the desire and aspiration for freedom that the participants in the virtual space are seeking. The Tunisian flag was also appropriated. It is all red with a crescent embracing a star in the middle. The Egyptian flag is red, white and black. Banners calling for the demonstrations on Jan 25 carried an Egyptian flag where the red stripe was stained with the crescent and the star (miniature Tunisian flag). The Tunisian flag was appropriated for mobilizing and as inspiration for reviving the dream of Arab solidarity and unity (planted in the collective memory during the zenith of Nasser’s Arab nationalism). Ironically, the very flags that were divisive tools between the two nations during soccer games became symbols of shared aspiration for freedom. Flags occupied the backgrounds for banners where “Egypt” itself called on the Egyptians to participate in the demonstrations. The banners reminded people that Tunisia was able to “do it” on Jan 14 and “we,” real Egyptians, will participate and follow the steps of Tunisia. Along with the flag, the “martyr” was another symbol appropriated in the pages, and later in the square.

The Martyr: Khaled Said’s picture was iconized as the “martyr.” This was affirmed in using the word *shahid* (martyr) to refer to him and was the user name for the page email address. Khaled’s mother was referred to as the mother of the martyr. Other victims of police brutalities were assigned the “shahid” title as well. The martyr addressed page members, inviting them to participate in demonstrations. A poster was composed of a collection of pictures showing the following: Khaled Said, a pack of hyenas preying on an animal, then a pack of policemen beating a citizen, and another of a

shot from the video because of which Khaled Said was allegedly killed. The captions on the poster read:

This is a jungle (pack of hyenas praying on a dead animal). And this is a jungle too (pack of policemen beating a person). And this is a prey (Khaled Said) and those are wolves (policemen in the video shot). On my own, I am not sufficient, but together we are stronger and it is the stronger that survives. After all... we live in a jungle.

Khaled Said was the icon but other victims were not dismissed. Pictures of others who were killed, disappeared or tortured were posted, enforcing the idea that “we all matter”: victims and citizens who will not remain silent in the face of injustice.

The Saints Church bombing was also a moment that symbolized national unity. And two more icons were added: Sayyid Bilal and Mariam Fikri. Bilal was brutally killed by the police. Fikri was killed in the explosion. On Jan 7 (Coptic Orthodox Christmas), another demonstration was planned to express solidarity and unity against terrorism that fueled the blowing up of the church.¹⁰ The magnitude of the event called for using a different slogan: we are all Egyptians. The national crisis united Egyptians; the state could not oppress the physical occupation of public space. Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, were appalled from the gravity of the event and they wanted to unite in solidarity. Images were used to affirm that unity. A picture of a secular, a bearded man (to connote Islamists) and a woman were imposed on an Egyptian flag.

“Egypt” was used in slogans inviting citizens to participate in demonstration using captions as: “I will be a real Egyptian. I will participate.” Or “Egypt is waiting for you; come participate.” Later, when the demonstrations move from the virtual to the real space, demonstrators will call on people to join them: “our folks/people, come join us.” This sense of belonging and fraternity was fostered as the pages pressed the idea that every citizen matters.

The word Egypt (mistr) was also used as a unifying word. A banner used the word mistr with the first letter composed of a crescent and a cross-another

symbol recalled from the 1919 revolution- and called for Egyptians, Muslims and Christians, to reclaim their own country and not let anger (for the blowing up of the church) “drown” the country. Citizens were called on to focus on those who subjected them to injustice. It was an attempt at turning a moment of potential division (especially that the state wanted to frame Islamists for the church bombing) into a moment of unity.

This unity was evident in images that showed the suffering of Egyptians. In addition to pictures of Khaled Said’s brutalized face contrasted to pictures taken before his death, both the 6th of April and Khalid Said pages showed images of ordinary citizens contrasted to the images that the police circulated of them claiming they are thugs. The pages posted images of everyday citizens suffering: women carrying propane cylinders while the government exports Egyptian natural gas to Israel below market price. Citizens in line for bread were shown with the slogan: “bread, freedom, social justice.” This slogan would prove most effective in mobilizing the “real/physical” space, as the demonstrations took off from different mosques and churches. The Khaled Said page posted images of silent demonstrations and invited discussions from page members. An album for photos of police brutality was also posted.

Images depicting Egypt as a matriarch calling her children (Egyptians) to help her were posted. As the protesters moved from the virtual to the real space, they used martyr pictures. Other powerful images included an older woman motherly kissing a central security policeman on the cheek. Reviving matriarchy combated the family patriarch narrative that Mubarak had used as an organizing myth to support his regime. This counter narrative resonated in the Egyptian collective memory and activated an identity of independence that seemed to be dormant during the Mubarak years. The state had bet on the “silent majority”—citizens who had been indoctrinated in the idea that the president is the “father” and that removing him constitutes a violation of cultural norms and mores.

Conclusion: Holding on to the ideals of reclaimed public space

When the Egyptians took to the streets on Jan 25, they were united around the slogan: bread, freedom, social justice/human dignity. Members of submerged social networks had been working on overcoming divisions in the society. The Khaled Said page's call for those who live in buildings overseeing silent stands' locations not to participate in "stands" and take as many pictures/videos as possible to document what is happening in the events, was an invitation for citizens to put the state under *their* gaze. The citizen protesters *reversed* the gaze on the state. Neutralizing the role of state surveillance by countering that surveillance was not an innovation of the Khaled Said page. The civil society and human rights activists had already used YouTube as an outlet for exposing police brutality and the Imad al-Kabir¹¹ torture is a case in point. Reversing the gaze on the state is evident in posting a video of the kidnapping of one of the administrators of Khaled Said page (Wael Ghonim). In a way, reversing the gaze also restored the Egyptian sense of their capability to be active social actors who expose corruption. It was a moment of restoring citizen agency and sense of empowerment.

With the move to the virtual space again, the Khaled Said and 6th of April pages collaborated to expose regime propagandists. They published the history of journalists/publications that paid lip service to the regime. The pages reclaimed political consciousness by creating archives: publishing newspaper clipping and documents to show parallels between present and past in an effort to prevent history from repeating itself.¹² They revived the temporal mode of interpretation for people to restore a collective national identity that is not as fragmented or divided. Invoking collective memory was a means to maintain a common spatial and temporal locale: they functioned as a place where time and space for participants collapsed some would share this collapsed time to invite more people to the reclaimed public space.

Unlike the Tiananmen Square in China in 1989, or the Pearl Square in Bahrain in 2011, the Egyptian protesters and democracy activists succeeded in holding on to the public space because the uprising was rooted in submerged social networks that were built over many years. Movements

such as industrial workers' protests, Kefaya and the 6th of April were able to recall a common identity that can cut across divisions and fragmentation (unlike in Bahrain). And the national public sphere in Egypt had opened up significantly in the last decade. Activists in the Egyptian case operated on two levels of space: virtual and real. In either case, activists used techniques with which the weak became stronger than the oppressor by moving fast across the physical and virtual (Garcia as cited in Renzi 2008:71). However, the public space claimed in the uprising remains temporary. The remnant of Mubarak's regime, the SCAF, is making new moves to re-colonize the public space by sowing internal conflicts in a fragile civil society.

The October Maspiro Massacre marked a new turn in the struggle for freedom in Egypt. The SCAF adopted a new tactic to defeat the spirit of the revolution. Civilians have been summoned before military courts since the beginning of the uprising. However, after Maspiro, when the SCAF started summoning activists to military investigations, activists, in turn, pushed back and refused to answer the investigators' questions, stating that they are civilians and do not fall under the jurisdictions of military investigators ("Egypt: new" 2011). Activists and citizens are challenging the SCAF authority and making a point to emphasize citizenship in a civil state; a concept the SCAF has been undermining.¹³ On the other hand, the uprising has constructed a new political community and revived the political consciousness of Egyptians-citizens. This is evident, in the citizens' awareness of the importance of occupying not only the physical space but also the "media space." The SCAF has managed to polarize the society along the ideological lines of liberal vs. Islamist with the media machine of state radio and television under total SCAF control. In a way, SCAF managed to occupy the media space with its own narratives and propaganda. In an effort to combat the SCAF occupation of the media space, activists and ordinary citizens organized a campaign called *Kazeboon* (liars). Acknowledging that as long as the SCAF controls the media, it also controls the dissemination of information and the defining of issues, activists decided to go to the people in streets and squares (again to the public space to temporarily occupy it). Armed with projectors and monitors, they show videos that combat propaganda by playing the contradicting SCAF statements and use of violence.

In the short term, it may seem that the uprising has failed to bring about a real transformation and democracy in Egypt, and even unleashed reactionary forces that won the parliamentary and presidential elections. However, like most social movements and popular protests, the impact of the uprising will be felt in the decades to come. In addition to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi groups, the new social networks and civic society groups that emerged from the uprising will shape the making of a new Egypt. Egyptians left the square, but the social networks persist and they are not submerged anymore. Although, the military has failed to make clear its intentions regarding the future of democracy in Egypt, the future still looks hopeful because even though occupying the physical public space can only be temporary, from a cognitive perspective the space created for relatively free deliberation among social networks of Egyptians will prevent the return to Mubarak years.

The citizen agents who showed up in Tahrir Square and forced Mubarak have tasted the power of showing up in the public space. This will shape and influence the rebuilding of the nation and the emergence of new political communities that will compete in the democratic space. The number times since January–February 2011 the people have converged on the Tahrir Square suggests that the ordinary person in Egypt has overcome fear of the state. The ideas, identity and the ideals of the uprising are now part of the Egyptian new national consciousness and form the basis for a long revolution in Egypt. In the last year, the reclaimed Egyptian identity and unified political community turned to be a temporary phenomenon with multiple communities (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, progressives and Copts) competing for political power. Yet, we contend that democratic political competition among different groups is better than a depoliticized society living under the perpetual gaze of the state.

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Notes

¹ Sadat was notorious of coining himself the head of the family and addressing his critics or referring to them by walad (boy). This rhetorical ploy is still used by SCAF.

² Arrested thugs on the Battle of the Camel testified they were hired to attack the demonstrators. The case is still before the courts at the time of writing this. See Shalabi and Abu-Shanab (2011) and Al-Qaranshawi (2011).

³ See "Frustrated dreams of Young Egyptians," by Christian Fraser, BBC News.

⁴ See "A divide way of life' by Hadil Ghoneim, in Al Ahram Weekly, April 17–23, 2008, Issue No. 893.

⁵ See "Ghad Al-Thawra Party" in ahramonline, Dec 3, 2011 online: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/33/104/26694/Elections-/Political-Parties/Ghad-AlThawra-Party-.aspx>

⁶ See "Seasons of Protest: 2008, when demonstrators and strikes became a norm," in Al-Ahram Weekly, January 1–6, 2009, Issue No. 928.

⁷ For more details please visit <http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk> (English) and <http://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed> (Arabic).

⁸ Some leading newspapers of Egypt.

⁹ It is widely believed that soccer was a means by the Mubarak regime to distract people from political participation; see al-Jiddawi (2010) and Abu-Arab (2009)

¹⁰ To date, no serious investigation was conducted in the Saints Church bombing.

¹¹ Citizen sodomized in a police station. The officer convicted of his torture was sentenced to jail time only to return to the service after finishing his sentence.

¹² After the 1952 revolution, Egypt spiraled in an authoritarian form of governance because the military refused to deliver its promise to transition to a democratic state.

¹³ SCAF has repeatedly resorted to “solving” religious tensions and conflict under common law-a practice that undermines the rule of law and citizenship and is anti-theoretical to the principles of a modern state and the uprising.

Review:

The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam

Jon W. Anderson

Keywords

Internet, activism, democracy, information and communication technology, Islam

Philip N. Howard. The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN-13: 978-0199736423, ISBN-10: 0199736421, 285 pages.

A besetting weakness in writing about the Internet in the Muslim world has been sampling on the dependent variable. Interested in democratization? How does the Internet promote democracy? Civil Society? How does the Internet foster civil society? New media literacies, broader intellectual horizons, online activism: How does the Internet break old molds and bring liberation? To be fair, elementary failures to distinguish between sample and universe are not entirely the fault of analysts. Engineers who developed the Internet consistently promoted it as a liberating technology, since that is what it was to them, which Ithiel da Sola Pool, observing the early development of networking at MIT and writing at the tail-end of the generation, and project, that produced Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1965), passed into political science thinking about information and communication technologies (ICTs) as technologies of freedom (1984). But analysts do have to answer for meager empirical grounds on which they cast such interpretations – actually, speculations that generalize from premises more than reasoning from findings – and then, of course, the inevitable counterarguments about how ITCs either don't matter so much after all or don't have enough dynamic inertia to overcome the

static inertias attributed to Muslim and Middle Eastern politics. *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* effectively closes this chapter by systematically putting speculations and arguments from single cases to the test – actually, to a quite rigorous test of modern comparative political analysis.

Howard, who is author of the prize-winning *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen* (2006), and his colleagues on the World Information Access Project assembled a database of indicators (for Internet availability, access, policy, ownership, structures and uses) cross-referenced to common standard measures of democratization and development for 75 countries with substantial Muslim populations. Against this, he is able to test common claims, and presents some uncommon findings, about relations between the spread of the Internet and political Islam, both broadly defined to include the infrastructure of the Internet (in what he calls the “informational infrastructures” of these countries) and all the politics of Islam, not just the oppositional, much less just radical, ones. This is how he first establishes the universe, which he then proceeds to stratify into political types (transitional democratization, entrenched democratization, constitutional monarchies, authoritarian states, crisis states) for comparing features of the Internet from its settings in telecoms policy, to its physical implementations and locations, as media and other uses that, appearing on the screen, are what “the Internet” means to most people. The introduction of rigor is striking, not just for putting popular ideas and common observations to comparative test but also for rooting comparison in frames from which theory-driven, rather than participant-generalized, hypotheses may be generated.

Howard is careful to provide fully functional definitions of his variables, most of the time. So, he breaks down democratization into several areas of theory for conceptualizing it: policy formation, political parties, political communication, civil society, cultural politics. Addressing each in turn, he begins with an idealized image of what these look like in political theory – not to measure Muslim examples by Western ideals but to identify the variable features of policy formation, political parties, political communication, civil society, and cultural politics that link to features of the Internet

as “informational infrastructure.” In other words, as additional dimensions. It would be hard to overemphasize how much this departs from the common approach that sets out to test vernacular conceptions and, in effect, to translate them selectively into social science. The downside of the strong functionalism of a rigorous comparative approach is that its characterizations will often seem a little “off” to specialists immersed in more ethnographic realities, somewhat monochromatic, suspiciously “western.” But this is always the case with comparative study, the test of which is whether it identifies patterns across a universe of cases. The gain is precision, both empirical and in locating propositions in proper, and properly established, middle range theories that can give equal weight to all cases.

The results, if not spectacular, are thus well grounded and, in some cases, unexpected. For instance, no one, except a few engineers, discussing diffusion and uptake of Internet technologies, has previously noticed how the difference between in-country hosting of Web and Internet services and hosting those outside the country distributes differentially across regime types, varies with the legal status and social depth of parties, with monopolies in print/broadcast media, or with who constitutes civil society. Howard is able to tease this out because in almost no case is the Internet treated as an independent variable; where it is, his discussions are no more sophisticated than those he displaces, which alone demonstrates the value of his rigorous comparative approach. It also indicates clearly openings for further research and where data need to be collected.

The payoff comes in his discussion of how political parties behave online. Starting from the observation that the “political web sphere, even in countries where political parties are banned, is increasingly vibrant and competitive” and the proposition that “Parties compete for the attention of journalists and voters,” he advances “a nuanced argument ... about the connection between democratization and technology diffusion. In these countries [with the most political content online] the pressure to include Islamists in national political life is very high, and ICTs have allowed the political system to accommodate competing interests and discordant voices in a way that

allowed for stability in the democratic institutions they do have” (p. 96). Variations on this finding recur when looking at political communication – opening the “informational infrastructure” to Islamic politics produces a majority that is mainstream, not radical or even oppositional – or at civil society, at changing news cultures, at cultural politics pursued online, where extremists, by comparison, drive their news and views not into a public but across affinity groups. Quasi-parties are comparatively quicker to take up the Internet, actually to move from other forms to something more like parties when the Internet is their primary outlet, making it a space of ideological diversity.

Giving such propositions – or others, such as that state dominance of traditional media drives journalism online, in effect drives demand for online news – proper theoretical framing makes them testable across a broader range of experience and treating all (including our own) within the same frame instead of privileging one, implicitly or explicitly, as the standard of comparison. So, in effect, Howard is able to identify “political Islam” not by its outliers but by its central tendencies. Students of political Islam as ideology (theological or cultural) or, more sociologically, as movements may find this unsatisfying, but the point is not to measure what is political about Islam online but to locate it with respect to what else is political and online.

When this rigor flags, the effect is noticeable. In chapters on political journalism and civil society, his indicators are less precise and more are proxies. Here, argument tends to stay conceptual, in the realm of ideals, particularly about journalism, whose “theory” tends to be a set of value propositions that define it as what it should be/do (e.g., objective, critical, speaking truth to power). Or with civil society: although he defines it functionally, as non-state voluntary associations, he does not go so far as to include as “non-state actors” terrorists, like al-Qaeda, in civil society which by functional logic he should and could benefit his analysis. Are they not also voluntary associations, a “self-generating and self-supporting community of people who share a normative order and volunteer to organize political, economic, or cultural

activities that are independent from the state” in the definition of civil society that he adopts from Lawrence Diamond (“Rethinking Civil Society: I. Toward Democratic Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 1994)? Not, apparently, if one also requires a value commitment to pluralism. Actually, what his analyses show is that is not necessary when the “informational infrastructure” in which they operate is in practice pluralistic.

There is much to praise in this study. It should provide a goldmine for students, both to stimulate more critical thinking and for generating theoretically-grounded hypotheses; but it is really more a capstone than a point of departure. It is the matured version of a line of thinking, largely speculative, some of which it puts to rest, other it regrounds in theories that in first rushes of enthusiasm were neglected. Some has roots in the old modernization theory with which Ithiel da Sola Pool worked over a generation ago and in which the prime – very nearly the sole – mobility of technology is that it diffuses and that diffusion widens worlds. The notion of “diffusion of technology” is part of the analysis that does not measure up to the rest. The result of thinking in terms of “diffusion of technology” is, if not to render its mechanisms invisible, to equate them with functions that analytically define technology in terms of use. We do not learn, because the methodology of comparison of functionally-identified entities does not retrieve, how news cultures are changing (other than opening to additional information, moving to additional sites), cultural politics are expanding (beyond that they are), policies are devised and implemented (beyond identifying structures that promote the former and impede the latter). Comparison, at least this comparison, does leave us one remove from the action.

But it also leaves us with a more comprehensive view of the field of action. Among the more interesting and, looking forward, more useful conceptual innovations in this study is to shift from thinking about “the Internet” as a thing ontologically or methodologically as a variable, to thinking about how ICTs constitute variable “informational infrastructures.” An innovative feature of this study is its adoption from the engineers of trace route and other Internet mapping technologies (also used by the OpenNet Initiative and in

tech-savvy Berkman Center studies of the Iranian and Arabic blogospheres, but here better integrated into social theory) to identify where Internet sites are actually kept and what they actually are connected to – in other words, the structure of what’s behind the screen as something as variable as regime type. This opens up two lines of analysis. First is analysis of what Howard calls “digital transitions,” the accumulating changes in both informational and political infrastructures by which “a country goes from a condition in which very few [politically] active citizens are on line to one in which most active citizens have internet access” (p. 140), and so how those roll out in different kinds of regimes, parties, policy and informational environments. Second, where arguments for democratization have proceeded by treating the Internet as an independent variable and arguments against it have proceeded by treating the Internet as a dependent variable, treating both as sets of variables and on the same level (where neither is prior) leads to Howard’s most aggressive claim with respect to democratization, that the spread of ICTs is not driven by technological or by economic factors but by civil society – in other words, by users specifically situated in different policy, infrastructural and informational environments.

What this means becomes clearer and more discriminating when turned into comparisons. Civil society, he argues, learns online – in authoritarian polities to use ICTs to attract international media attention and strengthen ties to diasporas, in “transition” states where civil disobedience is possible then to use ICTs to mobilize protest in addition to rallying foreign support, and in “entrenched” democracies to deepen democratic practices such as tracking corruption, publishing opinion pieces and position papers, addressing and widening local readership, proposing policy options. Key here is shifting comparison from one-off and modular (authoritarian vs. democratic, developing-to-developed, Western vs. Muslim) to a typology that includes all cases.

In the end, Howard affirms democratizing effects or association of emergent or partial democratic features of polities with Internet spread. His comparisons show the key intervening variable in transitional democracies is “having

a comparatively active online civil society.” Being a small country helps, but just “having a large civil society” does not. It is a “relatively large Internet and mobile phone user base – a wired civil society – that consistently serves as a causal condition across multiple democratization recipes” (p. 194). By comparison, “democratic entrenchment” is shown (again) associated with economies not dominated by oil exports regardless of other variables, while “having an active online civil society is both a necessary and a sufficient cause of transitions out of authoritarianism” (p. 197). So ICT diffusion has measurable democratizing effect in conjunction with how large and educated the population is, which also has an effect on democratic processes in which ICTs enter.

In this way – functional definitions, systematic comparison of infrastructures of politics and of ICTs, and rigid focus on “observed outcomes of political actors” – this work caps the first generation of analyses placing the Internet in Muslim societies, polities, and contemporary discourses of political Islam. The execution draws a line under use of aggregate statistics and gross comparisons of Muslim to other (or to degrees of approximating other) composite actors and of mere correlation that henceforth should belong to the past. A consistent concern throughout is to establish comparability. Along the way, he has redefined political Islam as a set of practices or functions describable information ally as a broader range of political actions than as essential types of action (i.e., as resistance, a movement, extremism).

Appendices on methodology, references, and a topical index comprise over a third of the book. The appendix explains the sample, how it is stratified, and key pieces of literature on the countries in the sample. The bibliography is fairly comprehensive as a guide to the literature the study uses, with one caveat: some names are reversed, some misspelled, and other errors are introduced into a significant number of entries, which can make them hard to find. Finally, it provides a link to databases that Howard and his associates constructed as downloadable Excel spreadsheets (www.pitpi.org; or in the data repository of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and

Social Research at the University of Michigan, <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/23562/version/1> in SAS and SPSS datasets), so the curious may test their own hypotheses about relations of information technology and political Islam, regime change, or growth of civil society.

Review:

The Arab Revolution: The Lessons from the Democratic Uprising

Marek Cejka

Keywords

Arab Spring, Libya, social media, Tunisia, Middle East, public sphere, democracy, Egypt

Jean-Pierre Filiu: The Arab Revolution: The Lessons from the Democratic Uprising. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2011. ISBN-10: 1849041598, ISBN-13: 978-1849041591, 256 pages.

The so-called “Arab Spring” is a political phenomenon that is difficult to evaluate in a short interval of time. Any current book about it is doomed to a very rapid obsolescence. The book *The Arab Revolution* by the French professor Jean-Pierre Filiu from Sciences Po Paris was published in summer 2011, so logically it could include only the period of revolutionary changes in Tunisia and Egypt, but not, for example, the outcome of the bloody phase of the Libyan revolution and the overthrow and death of Muammar Qaddafi. The book also marginally deals with the situations in Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and some other countries. Nevertheless, the book is certainly worth reading because it is not just a summary of the actual facts, but due to Filiu’s erudition it also helps to explain not only the specific events of the Arab Spring, but also the wider logic of the policies in the Arab world and the Middle East in general.

Filiu knows very well what the problems of the subject he is surveying are. His main aim was to approach the Arab Spring comprehensively and in a broader context. He divides the text into several clearly defined chapters,

and in them he methodically goes through important events and the actors of the revolutionary events. Perhaps the only flaw here is that the names of some chapters, like “The Islamists have to choose,” “Palestine is still the mantra,” or “The alternative of democracy is chaos,” come off as too categorical.

Mohammed Bouazizi as Jan Palach

In his book Filiu appreciates the civil aspect of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the countries’ ability to achieve success in this respect even without the presence of strong personalities and virtually without violence. He distinguishes those revolutions from the revolution in Libya, where civil protests came under the repression of the Qaddafi regime and quickly gained a violent character. An interesting point is the differentiation between the different backgrounds of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. While in Tunisia the anti-government unrest began in the periphery, in the provincial cities such as Sidi Bouzid, where Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself, in Egypt the strong support for the revolution came mainly from large cities like Cairo and Alexandria, and its main focal point became Tahrir Square in Cairo. As a Czech writer I must also mention an interesting analogy used by Filiu in relation to the self-immolation of the Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi: In Filiu’s opinion Bouazizi became a kind of Arabic version of the Czechoslovak student Jan Palach, who immolated himself in protest of the communist regime and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. But Bouazizi’s immolation was closer in time to the overthrow of the hated regime that he protested against than the Prague student’s immolation was to the overthrow of the Czechoslovak communist regime.

The role of social networks

In one chapter the author analyzes in detail the role of Internet social networks in the revolution. Social networks have been often associated with the Arab Spring, and especially in the West it became a very “fashionable” and probably also overvalued topic. Filiu concludes that social networks

played an important role especially in the early stages of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. He clearly summarizes the situation as follows: “Social networks contributed to subvert the ubiquitous security control in Tunisia, and they constituted the spark of the January 25th’ revolution in Egypt. In both instances, they were crucial in nurturing a community feeling of shared grief and aspirations, mainly among the educated and urban youth. By exposing the lies and crimes of the ruling regime, they helped to bring down the wall of fear. Once this was done, their real importance in the revolutionary process became secondary.”

In connection with the frequently discussed role of Islamists (and radical Islamists) in the Arab Spring, Filiu highlights the partly surprising inability of Islamist radicals and al-Qaeda to adequately exploit the situation to their advantage and their impotence in this regard. Filiu also mentions the decline of al-Qaeda in general and briefly mentions the death of Osama Bin Laden in connection with this matter.

It is interesting to compare the author’s optimism (which in 2011 was shared by perhaps all who were interested in the political reality in the Arab world) and the current situation of the Middle East. Filiu quite realistically considers the events of 2011 as only the beginning of the process of broader changes throughout the Arab world. Even though today it is still too early to assess the processes in the Arab world – a true evaluation of the consequences of the Arab Spring will have to wait at least several years – we can already see some differences between the expectations and the reality, which in many cases does not match the optimistic predictions of many Arab revolutionaries and commentators.

Bottom line

Filiu’s book is, in my opinion, a very comprehensive work and it summarizes very skilfully the limited amount of information about the developments in the Arab world. The book also has an added value due to the additional information it provides (e.g. the selection of interesting documents and

lyrics of protest songs in the appendix). The book will also probably gain a wider circle of readers because while it uses some scientific vocabulary words and expressions, it is generally written in a more popular style. In several places the author also does not hesitate to display his sense of humor. But none of this is in any way diminishes the professionalism with which the whole book is written.

Some might criticize the book on the grounds that it does not evaluate the behavior of foreign players and the world superpowers. After all, the popular saying “The world is interested in the Middle East only when it comes to oil and natural gas.” is still being used. Although the book is directed more toward the internal developments of the Arab countries and assumes that the key impetus for the Arab Spring came directly from the interior (i.e. their citizens), it would be interesting if Filiu’s book said more about the foreign and superpower influences on the Arab Spring. At least in the case of Libya, it was apparent already when Filiu wrote the related chapters of his book that the motives for the involvement of superpowers or states such as France and Italy were not just purely humanitarian.

The strength of the book lies in its complexity – at least in some very important respects: The book provides an excellent overview of the context of the indirect circumstances of the Arab Spring and also takes into account the related sociological and psychological factors. This method serves to make the book more interdisciplinary. The book is not some “dry” scientific evaluation of the circumstances of the Arab Spring, but it is also not merely a journalistic work on the subject. The book is very successful in managing to combine a number of approaches, and the result is that both the expert and the “common” man who knows about what happens in the Middle East only from television and other forms of popular media must feel that after reading Filiu’s book, they know much more about the Arab Spring and the Middle East than before.