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Cyberactivists Paving the Way for the Arab Spring: Voices from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya

Mohammed El-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis

Abstract

The wave of Arab revolutions and uprisings that has been shaking all corners of the Arab Middle East since 2011 and that has come to be known as the Arab Spring owed a major portion of its success to online activism. The spark that ignited these revolutions in the offline world was ignited by the Arab cyberactivists' well-coordinated campaigns, calling for the toppling of corrupt regimes in their home countries. These campaigns were launched through various forms of social media, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Flicker with the goal of introducing drastic political changes and allowing for a higher margin of freedom in a region that has often been associated with autocracy and dictatorship. Three Arab countries in particular – Egypt, Tunisia and Libya – have witnessed sweeping transformations, leading to the ousting and court trials of members of their old regimes and the holding of democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. This study utilizes qualitative, on-the-field interviews with cyberactivists in these three countries to provide a unique perspective into how they have paved the way for a new era of openness and democratic reform in their respective countries.

Keywords

blogs, citizen journalism, civic engagement, cyberactivism, democracy, public sphere, authority, Libya, politics, Tunisia, activism, Egypt, Arab Spring

Introduction

The revolutions that swept all corners of the Arab Middle East were characterized by the instrumental use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and text messaging by protesters, to achieve a number of pragmatic goals, such as group networking, on-the-ground organizing, and offering practical advice on how to confront police brutality or how to avoid arrest. Arab cyberactivists created online platforms that served as important

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venues for the exchange of ideas and the formulation of collective public opinion.

Arab cyberactivists also created virtual forums for citizen journalism trough enabling ordinary citizens to document not only the protests, but, most importantly, the underlying causes that led to the eruption of these protests in the first place, such as governmental brutality, limitations on freedom of expression, flaws in the political system, official corruption, and violations of human rights, as well as allowing them to disseminate words and images to each other, and, most importantly, to the outside world.

This study contributes to understanding how cyberactivism in the Arab world has become an effective "mobilization tool," through conducting on-the-field qualitative interviews with several cyberactivists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya - where former dictators were toppled and reform is underway - to provide an insight into how they have played a critical role in paving the road for the popular revolutions in their respective countries. This role was exemplified through encouraging civic engagement and public participation by launching online forums for free speech and political networking opportunities and providing a virtual space for assembly, which allowed for the exchange of civic discourse, deliberation, and articulation that went beyond simply supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests on the ground. Our interviews with the cyberactivists were conducted during the period from 2009 until 2011.

Literature Review

Cyberactivism: Energizing Civic Engagement?

Online activism can actually enable the creation of a vibrant and active civil society, through encouraging civic engagement and boosting political participation. Citizens' access to information and their ability to utilize this information for the purpose of enhancing civil society have been affected by the Internet and other communication technologies. Therefore, we need to map some of the scholarly views that hailed the potential implications of

the Internet and its multiple applications in terms of bringing about actual political involvement and citizen participation, as well as those that were skeptical of such possibilities.

Today, several civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are utilizing the Internet to get their voices across to as many citizens as possible. Moreover, "many people connect to established social groups through the Internet as they receive e-newsletters from their groups or visit group websites. In addition, cyber associations have expanded rapidly as individuals interact through online forums, chat rooms and personal pages that are separate from the traditional social groups. This has led to the development of a 'virtual civil society'" (Kittilson 2008:3). Moreover, "The dynamic and changing nature of the ... [Internet] and its promise of inexpensive and universal access to information and communication suggest rich potential for civic uses." (Schuler 2004:363)

Thanks to the Internet, civic engagement has expanded due to the fact that the average individual has a bigger say in the day-to-day issues of public concern. "Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and a place of assembly" (Rheingold 2004:272). This expansion of civic engagement due to the Internet was clearly manifested in the role played by cyberactivism in mobilizing, energizing, and improvising the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

"Civil society actors are increasingly using the Internet to document and share reality" and this can "lead to a profound shift in how politicians go about doing campaigning and interacting with the general public. This has the potential for an inverted 'panopticon' where citizens constantly monitor the state and document the practices of the state and those aspiring to become a part of the state" (Vatrapu 2008:16).

The Internet has taken civil society to another level: "Today's [electronic] forms of civil society suggest that lives are increasingly lived in fluid rela-

tions where electronic information flows, material and virtual bodies, and physical locations are intersecting and integrating in more prolific, engaging and interesting ways ... Social relations ... [engulfed in civil society] are becoming increasingly informed through emerging technologies that allow for distributed connectivity and information sharing and cooperation (Dennis 2007:32).

Brauer (2008:229) argued that "the Internet seems to provide current social movements with new opportunities for restructuring their internal communication activities as well as their external media use in order to enhance their strategic potential." According to Fuchs (2006:5), the Internet has paved the way for a self-administered "grassroots digital democracy" that relies on a bottom-up "e-participation," and this "self-organized democracy is a process of self-determination and self-management that maximizes the involvement of affected humans in political discourse and decision taking and avoids the formation of political elites that constitute ... [hierarchical] political systems that are alienated from the direct involvement of citizens."

Echoing the abovementioned views, Perez (2004:89) argued that the Internet, as a transparent and multidirectional, rather than a unidirectional, form of communication, can allow for a simultaneous presentation of "multiple forms of deliberation and decision-making structures, which could cater to different individual profiles and utilize varied discursive frameworks." Witschge (2004:110) referred to the Internet's role in promoting deliberative democracy, particularly in the political arena: "Not only could the Internet encourage more people to discuss politics by freeing them of psychological barriers, but it could do so by offering a (partial) solution to the problems that deliberative democracy is confronted with-problems previously seen as insurmountable. The Internet makes manageable large-scale, many-to-many discussion and deliberation."

It also offers "netizens," defined as people who are active users of the Internet, "platforms and tools to exchange the views and information needed in order to realize freedom and self-government" (Deuze 2003:211). Accord-

ing to Agre (2004:63), the Internet, "By providing a general mechanism for moving digital information and a general platform for constructing digital information utilities," can allow for new opportunities and venues through which political interactions can be crystallized."

Moreover, some scholars argued that the Internet, and its related applications, such as blogging, Facebook and Twitter, can play a critical role in enhancing social capital, which was defined by Putnam (2000:19) as "connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Dahlgren (2009:159) states that "The more and better connected one is, the more likely one is to participate as an effective citizen-[this] captures the importance of networks." Social capital enhances the feeling of social accountability and trust. "Together social capital and social trust foster norms of reciprocity and of shared responsibility for the greater good" (Lerner, et al. 2007:5). The Internet can strengthen social capital by "[drawing] people into contact with others to create shared resources and communal concerns" (Katz 2002:337).

One could not think of a better example than the role of Internet-based activism in instigating, covering and organizing the sweeping wave of popular revolutions in the Arab world, which led to unprecedented political transformations. It was new online media avenues, such as blogs, Facebook, and Twitter-which were extensively used by members of civil society, especially youth-that revealed the true faces of their regimes and exposed their flaws to the international community at large, i.e., to the "global civil society."

Studying social media's potential impact on public participation and civic engagement requires making a distinction between online media that serve as forums for political expression and those that are venues for political participation (Wallsten 2005). In this context, Su (2005:4) argued that "in the popular media, blogging [as a form of social media] is perhaps most recognized as an enabler for collective action. Thus, some bloggers seek to influence events in their world through blogs."

However, Keren (2006) argued that online media alone cannot lead to concrete political action on the ground, because online activists could be "help-

less *vis a vis* the evil they experience or observe, and their helplessness is only marginally relieved by the sense of community that is emerging online … Feelings such as fear of oppression, resentment toward authority and vulnerability … are not easily reduced by online … writing" (Keren 2006:151).

One of the main reasons behind the skepticism around the ability of cyber-activists to bring about actual political change or transformation has been that bloggers have been widely perceived as a disjointed group varying in purpose and motivation, and therefore their ability to organize around a singular cause or impetus is likewise perceived to be weak. In fact, Gharbeia (2007:52) points out that even as "the media now portrays…[online activists] as cyber-dissent and it has become a synonym for activism," nonetheless, cyberactivists "generally shy away from public affairs," or, at best, they do not have the necessary connections and tools to link their online political activism with real-life political practices that could bring about change at the decision-making level.

Echoing a similar opinion, Dahlgren (2009:163-165) indicates that there are now thousands of discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism sites, blogs, civic organizations, NGOs, and grassroots issue-advocacy sites that are active in the political realm, both locally and globally. He argues that "These 'agonistic public spheres' or 'cyberghettos' can be a strong sign for a healthy democratic environment that is 'based on contestation rather than consensus'…However, they can be a hindrance to democracy if there are no structural connections and procedures between these communicative spaces and the processes of decision-making."

Some scholars, such as Keren (2006:16), have argued that online activism "has made political discourse interactive and abolished etiquettes that have previously served as a means to silence legitimate voices on the edges. It has allowed private or group needs … to become matters of public concern and to expand the range of issues that require political attention." However, the fact remains that online media forums do not necessarily serve as automatic venues for enhancing civic engagement and political participation. They may just have a "cathartic role" in the sense that "people would sit in front

of their computers and mistake typing at each other for political action" (Rheingold, 2008:103). In order for the social media to serve as an ideal environment for democratic practice and civic engagement, cyberactivists have to grasp "the connection between their power to publish online, their power to influence the circumstances of their own lives, and the health of democracy" (Rheingold 2008:104).

Along the same lines, Dahlgren (2001:53) argued that the Internet has the ability to energize and augment the public sphere, but he questioned the transformative nature of the Internet, and its related applications, when it comes to revitalizing political environments and energizing political mobilization offline. He contends that "The Internet clearly offers opportunities for the motivated. The questions today are not so much how the Internet will change political life, but rather, what might motivate more people to see themselves as citizens of a democracy [and] to engage in ... political [life]." He rightly claims that while some of the answers to these questions may be found online, "most reside in our real social circumstances" (Dahlgren 2001:53).

This is especially true since Internet technology, in and of itself, may not be the only answer to the problems facing civil society activists. "The Internet will always be a supplement to, not a replacement for, other connections. Those who already have power can make more effective immediate use of the technology-so those with less power have to work harder to make it effective on their side" (Calhoun 2004:241). Moreover, the Internet complements, rather than replaces, face-to-face communication. "It empowers local activists who would otherwise find it harder to reach others with similar concerns in remote locations. It enables both lateral sharing of information and better access to information" (Calhoun 2004:243).

In this context, Rheingold (2004:275) posed a very critical question: "Will worldwide Usenet discussions ... World Wide Web pages, and email chain-letter petitions add to civic life, or remove people from it?" To put it differently: "Will the Internet strengthen civic life, community, and

democracy, or will it weaken them?" (Rheingold 2004:273). According to Rheingold (2004:276):

> Electronic communications do not offer a utopia, but they do offer a unique channel for publishing and communicating, and the power to publish and communicate is fundamental to democracy. Communication media are necessary, but not sufficient, for self-governance and healthy societies. The important stuff still requires turning off the computer and braving the uncertainties of the offline world.

This last point is certainly applicable in the case of the successful revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. If it wasn't for the willingness of political activists in the real world to risk their own lives, through having the moral courage to take out to the streets in large numbers, at great personal costs to themselves, no form of cyberactivism in the virtual world alone could have brought about the desired political transformation and the historical outcome that marveled the world.

Salter (2004), as cited in Lunat (2008:6), argued that "the Internet is not passive but rather shaped by … 'forms of use.' To suggest that the Internet has a positive or detrimental impact on communication and discourse ignores the fact that the Internet does nothing without people doing something with it." In other words, as Bohman (2004:132) rightly points out, "electronic and computer-mediated network communication may well expand the scope of certain features of communicative interaction across space and time … [However], it is the software rather than hardware that constructs how communication occurs over the network."

Therefore, without taking into account the overall political, social, economic, and cultural contexts in each society, and the accompanying factors that might either mobilize and activate the public(s) or restrict and limit the level of political activism, any discussion of online modes of communication and their ability to bring about political change will not be sufficient to provide answers or solutions for the lack of political involvement and civic engagement.

In brief, we can contend that cyberactivism can influence our discussions of current events and public affairs. However, the implications of these blogs on actual political engagement are still largely controversial. While a lot of scholarship on the issue are empirical studies of whether or not the Internet increases or decreases outside political engagement (such as voting, campaigning, or other "tangible" forms of political engagement), we can argue that the very act of engaging in cyberactivism could also be considered a form of political action in and of itself. This could be attributed to the fact that a large part of the purpose behind political actions, such as gathering in rallies and protests, is to garner saliency.

Therefore, the act of writing on a topic or an event, commenting on it, and interacting with it, as is the case with cyberactivism, could also lead to the same result of increasing saliency and drawing attention to that topic or event.

Cyberactivism: Reconstructing citizen journalism?

Citizen journalism "wants citizens to be conscious of themselves, informed on the issues, and ready to act on their conclusions" (Leonard 1999:85). It attempts to enhance citizens' ability to discuss the problems that are covered in the news and to contemplate solutions for these problems (Nip 2006). In a way, the citizen press's role in this type of journalism is "not just to inform a public that may or may not emerge, but to improve the chances that it will emerge" (Rosen 1999:19). In that sense, citizen, or public, journalism, as it is sometimes called, is closely tied to Habermas' notion of the "deliberating public," where there is "a focus on topics of common concern to all citizens" (Haas 2007:39).

The Internet has helped in crystallizing and reformulating the concept of citizen journalism. Online media have blurred "the boundary between professional and non-professional journalists by co-opting their consumers into the process of message production. Casting their lot with consumers-turned-producers, they abolish the hierarchical boundary between production and consumption of messages. The result may be

communications that faithfully reflect the reactions and needs of the users" (Woo-Young 2005:926).

In referring to the Internet's role in citizen journalism, Paulussen (2008:28) states that it is not realistic to exaggerate the power of online journalism in a way that reflects "technological determinism," which "falls short in considering the social, cultural and economic contextual factors that influence how and to what extent journalists use new technologies." Paulussen (2008:28) also points out that recently, "technological deterministic accounts of online journalism have become outnumbered by social constructivist approaches in which the adoption of online journalism practices ... is no longer seen as the result of a technology-driven process, but as the outcome of the complex interaction between professional, organizational, economic and social factors."

The resemblance between the role played by cyberactivists and that played by citizen journalists led some scholars to contend that virtual activism is a new form of (citizen) journalism that is free of the disciplinary practices of journalism and, therefore, tends to be more authentic and independent. Thanks to online activism, regular people feel that they have their own voice and that they can set the political news agenda. "[Cyberactivism] today has become an alternative platform that offers voice and contact to those outside the mainstream media ... This new phenomenon of Citizen-Generated Media...which includes uncensored information and unmediated conversation, is considered to be the greatest strength of the...[virtual sphere]" (Hall 2006:6).

Along the same lines, Keren (2006:9) argued that "the channels opened up by the Internet to individual self-expression have raised hopes for a reinvigoration of a public sphere worn off in an age of centralized mass media ... The current diversification of communication channels ... is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority."

Similarly, Ford (2001) highlighted that the Internet can play an important role as an alternative medium. "As an interconnected infrastructure

for multiple forms of communications, [the Internet] facilitates an era of convergence of media technologies. By providing for the easy transmittal of simple texts as well as the means to combine and re-combine a range of media formats and social actors, it allows for an unprecedented distribution of knowledge and resources to virtually anywhere in the globe" (Ford 2001:202).

Egypt, Tunisia and Libya: Voices from the Field

Several cyberactivists from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya have paved the way for the launching of revolutions in their respective countries by enhancing public awareness about corruption, nepotism and human rights violations. We conducted in-depth interviews with several cyberactivists from the three countries under study. The process of selecting which cyberactivists to interview varied from one country to the other. We spent time in Egypt before, during and after the January 25 revolution, and we utilized our connections and networking with cyberactivists there to schedule and conduct interviews with them. We could not travel to Tunisia and Libya, but we interviewed several cyberactivists from these two countries during the course of Al-Jazeera forum, which was held in Doha, Qatar in March 2011. At that time, Tunisia was finished with its revolution, which started on December 18, 2010 and led to the resignation and escape of the Tunisian President Zein el Abedeen Bin Ali on January 14, 2011. However, the Libyan revolution, which erupted on February 17, 2011, was still ongoing. This revolution led to the capturing and killing of the Libyan President Moammar Qadhafi on October 20, 2011. Throughout the process of interviewing cyberactivists in all three countries, we made sure to have a balance between male and female activists.

Among the cyberactivists we interviewed in Egypt was Noha Atef. A prominent female Egyptian blogger, Atef's blog titled "Torture in Egypt" helped make Egyptians aware of torture cases in some Egyptian prisons under the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted on February 11, 2011, 18 days after the launching of the January 25 revolution. In a

personal interview with Atef in 2009, she said: "I started to contact human rights organizations, lawyers and NGOs to send me reports of torture cases so that I could post them on my blog. I also received witnesses' reports. When I read about torture cases in the newspapers, I conduct my own investigation through trying to talk to the victims and lawyers and track down the cases, and then I provide an analysis of these on my blog." Atef believes that her blog has revitalized civic engagement in Egypt through increasing people's awareness of such as sensitive topic as torture. "At least my blog makes people aware of the fact that torture exists in Egypt. Also, a number of NGOs are interested in making sure that these torture cases are posted on my blog so that people can become aware of it. My blog is also inspiring to victims of torture. In fact, my blog has encouraged some torture victims to start blogging about their experiences."

Another Egyptian female cyberactivist - Dalia Ziada - has been trying to enhance public awareness about different issues, which are women's rights. Ziada, who has been blogging since 2006, told the authors in 2009: "I have joined other cyberactivists in collaborative efforts to spread the word about sexual harassment in Egypt, and we were able to increase the public's awareness about this critical problem. So, women started to take precautions to defend themselves on the street. I believe that political change will not result from changing laws. We have been doing that for decades now, but with no obvious result. I believe that the best way to change is through changing people's culture and mentalities. And that is what I have been encouraging through my blog."

Addressing the importance of raising public awareness through cyberactivism, Ibrahim El-Hodeiby, a male Egyptian cyberactivist and the grandson of Ma'amoun El-Hodeiby, the late General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood group, told the authors in 2009: "Those who are not aware usually come from the elitist socio-economic classes, and they will soon be holding leadership positions and that would mean that they might be leading the country politically or economically without being aware of the political challenges facing the country or the challenges facing the people. It is our

role as cyberactivists to help the average person become more knowledgeable of his/her political rights because knowledge is power."

Similar to the Egyptian cyberactivists' efforts in enhancing people's awareness about critical issues, their Tunisian counterparts have been engaged in the same efforts, despite the tough circumstances that they have been facing. A case in point is Lina Ben Mhenni, a female Tunisian online activist whose blog was blocked and Facebook account was suspended by the regime of ousted President Bin Ali. "I think this was because I was dealing with human rights issues. I continued to use my blog using proxies outside the country to get around the government's censorship. We had been living with online censorship for a long time, and so we learned how to get around it by using other technological means," said Ben Mhenni in a personal interview with the authors in 2011. Ben Mhenni actively participated in enhancing the Tunisian people's awareness about the atrocities of Bin Ali's regime during the buildup to the Tunisian revolution, which took place in December, 2010. In this context, Ben Mhenni told the authors:

> I have been denouncing all the injustices in Tunisia for more than two years through my blog. At the beginning of the revolution, I started covering what was going on in the capital city, Tunis. I took photos and videos of the lawyers' and students' demonstration, and I shared them online. And then one day I decided to go to Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine to be on the ground and to see what was going on. On the same day that I traveled to Sidi Bouzid, some friends whom I met on Facebook called me from the city of Regueb to say that the police had just killed five people. So, I went there to cover the incidents. There were no other media, and I took pictures of the bodies of these people and posted them on my blog. I also put a link to Twitter and I posted the link on Facebook, along with the pictures. And on January 14, I took part in the big demonstrations that led to the escape of Bin Ali. I was tweeting through my mobile phone, and I took live video through my mobile phone as well."

Compared to Tunisia and Egypt, Internet use for political purposes was more limited in Libya, particularly since the start of the Libyan revolution

on February 17, 2011. There were very few Libyans on Facebook, and many of them were not involved in politics. Despite the strong clampdown of the regime of the now dead Libyan President Qadhafi on the Internet, several Libyan cyberactivists managed to enhance the Libyan public awareness of country's political events during the prelude to the Libyan Revolution. A case in point is Faraj Saad Faraj, a male Libyan cyberactivist who had been using social media, particularly Facebook, for political purposes and for calling for change before the revolution. In a personal interview with the authors in 2011 before the ousting of Qadhafi, Faraj said: "I had been trying to post political messages on Facebook without risking my own life. There have been many cases of online activists who were arrested by the regime in the course of the revolution. Several Internet thugs were employed by the regime to monitor online activists and to launch Facebook pages and online campaigns to publicize for the regime. Several online activists were arrested in Benghazi [a Libyan town] before the revolution, and we don't know anything about their fate. This has instilled some fear among the other online activists."

The cyberactivists' efforts in enhancing public political awareness can lead to a boost in the general public morale, which can eventually create a feeling of self-assurance in the possibility of change. In this context, Hofheinz (2005:92-93) argued that Cyberactivists "in the Arab world tend to develop an increase in self confidence and belief in one's own potential. Arab Internet users become aware of their own individuality," in a way that can lead to real change on the ground.

So, a natural outcome of the increase in Arabs' political awareness through online media platforms was public motivation and citizen journalism with the help of cyberactivists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, who did provide platforms through which ordinary citizens could express their frustrations with the ousted regimes. Cyberactivists' efforts in these three countries had led to motivating the members of the general public through engaging them in the online public sphere. The average citizen in these three countries had felt that their voice counted and that they could make a real difference in their communities. In this context, Radsch (2011) argued that the contours

of the information society have made citizen journalism, social networking and other forms of digital activism one of the most potent and politically charged manifestations of power in societies where citizens lack access to the political arena and the media sphere is dominated by state interests.

Echoing this thought, Hussam El-Hamalawy, a prominent male Egyptian cyberactivist who blogs on the rights of laborers and labor unions, told the authors in 2009: "My blog is in English. When I know that there is news at any Egyptian factory that would have never seen the light had it not been for my blog, I perceive this as a success. When I find that it is via my blog that the solidarity messages of the labor movement or other activists in Europe and in America have moved in solidarity with the strikers or detainees because they read the news on my blog, then I know that it had made a difference. Egypt has just witnessed the birth of the first independent labor union in the modern history of the country. I was part of this fight, meaning that I was working with the free union leadership to get international labor unions to intervene on their behalf."

A prominent female political activist, Esraa Abdel-Fattah, started a Facebook group that epitomized political mobilization in Egypt. She told the authors in 2010:

> "I wanted to do something positive for my country, and I thought of using Facebook because I got tired of participating in the civil society in the physical world given the restrictions that were put on it by the Mubarak regime. So, I thought the virtual world was more open and more conducive for political activism. I started a Facebook group on April 6, 2008, and I was calling for a general one-day strike as a sign of complaint about the high prices of basic goods. My idea coincided with the laborers' strike to complain about their poor living conditions. I joined efforts with Ahmed Maher, another political activist, and we formed the Facebook group that called for the strike. We chose April 6 because there was another strike that was organized by the laborers on December 6 of the previous year, and it was successful, and so we chose the sixth of the month as a good omen. Through

> the group, I called on people not to go to work on April 6 and to stay at home. I also called on people to do other things on that day, such as wearing black, hanging the Egyptian flag on their balconies and abstain from buying products."

More than 77 thousand followers joined the group that Abdel-Fattah called for online between March 23 and April 6 2008. On April 6, many streets were empty despite the announcement by the Ministry of Interior that warned people against joining the strike and encouraged them to go out to their work on that day. Abdel-Fattah came to be known as the "Facebook girl." As a result of organizing this event, and under the auspices of the Emergency Law, Abdel-Fattah was arrested while sitting at a café and wearing black with a few other activists. She was accused of disrupting public life, and she spent 18 days in jail. A movement came out of the Facebook group under the same name.

Another female Egyptian cyberactivist, Asmaa Mahfouz, posted a video on Facebook that was believed to have played a critical role in the launching of the January 25 revolution in Egypt. Mahfouz told the authors in 2011:

> "The idea of the video originated when four Egyptians set themselves on fire on January 18, 2011 to complain about their deteriorating economic situations. And when one of them died, several people started calling on taking action to change the situation on the ground and break the political status quo. So, I announced on my Facebook page that I was going out to Tahrir Square to demonstrate and I called on people to join me and posted my cellphone number. Then, I went out to Tahrir Square on January 18, 2011, and I was joined by just three of my friends. I carried a banner saying: 'Four Egyptians set themselves on fire because of poverty, humiliation and hunger.' And I started yelling at people and saying: 'Come on Egyptians, join me and demonstrate against the suppression. When will you move? When will you take action?' Then, the state security started chasing and harassing me and they threatened to lock me up. In the course of all this action, I had to leave and headed straight to a human rights

> center in downtown Cairo. Over there, I took my video camera out and said the same things that I was saying at Tahrir Square on the video. Then, I uploaded the video on Facebook and it started to get so much public attention, which I did not expect. On the video, I also called on people to protest on January 25, 2011. On the video, I did not specify demands, but I made it general by calling on people to go out asking for their rights and to regain their dignity. Since I posted the video, my mobile phone did not stop ringing. I posted my cellphone number in the video as well. I was also surprised that pamphlets were disseminated on the streets using my slogan of 'Go out and ask for your rights.'
>
> On the evening of January 24, 2011, I posted another video on Facebook to remind people to go out on January 25. More than 20 thousand people watched that video overnight in less than 24 hours. This video was also posted on several other pages.
>
> Then I went out on January 25 to protest with the people. I feel that I invented a new tool to fight and resist the state security in a way that the authorities did not expect, and that is the use of social media and Facebook for political purposes."

Similar to their Egyptian counterparts, cyberactivists in both Tunisia and Libya were highly successful in motivating their followers in a way that enhanced civic engagement. A case in point is Malek Khadrawi, a male Tunisian blogger and director of Nawaat, which is a group of Tunisian blogs that have been covering the political situation in Tunisia. Nawaat also served as a platform for the leaders of banned political parties and civil society pioneers in Tunisia during the ousted regime of Bin Ali. When blogging developed in Tunisia, Nawaat has become a center where political bloggers share and exchange ideas about the Tunisian politics. The site includes more than three hundred posters and fifty active bloggers. The Nawaat site is an exemplification of the concept of citizen journalism in Tunisia.

Khadrawi used to live and blog in France before he returned to his home country after the revolution. In a personal interview with the authors in

2011, Khadrawi said: "During the revolution, I worked on transmitting and sharing information about what was happening inside Tunisia through collaboration with the Tunisian people who were uploading videos about the revolution. We used a blogging platform on Nawaat that used auto-post and cross-posting of these videos on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. I was also double-checking the validity and authenticity of these videos."

Omar Boshah, a male Libyan activist who played a role that was similar to that of Khadrawi, but used different techniques, was also able to mobilize the Libyan public in the prelude to the revolution that ousted the Qadhafi regime. Boshah told the authors in 2011:

> "Before the revolution, I had been using social media to cover the political and social life, particularly in my city Al Baida'a, which is 1,200 kilometers east of Tripoli, the capital. I had been using social media to criticize negative aspects of life in Al-Baida'a through posting pictures and comments. For example, I would post a photo of a place that was run down in the city or had poor infrastructure. I would also post pictures of people who were tortured by the regime. In doing so, I was using fake names rather than my real name to avoid being arrested. The regime had its own Facebook groups to publicize for its policies, and to target figures who were opposed to it. A few weeks before the revolution, the regime kidnapped and arrested several Libyan online activists, and several Facebook groups were formed to call for their freedom. Even the people who were afraid to voice their opinions in public joined these groups. All this has contributed to the day of rage in Libya on February 17, 2011, which was called for through a Facebook group. This page attracted many people."

According to Boshah, the barrier of fear was broken online and that encouraged him to take to the streets to protest against the Qadhafi regime. "I stayed active online until the Internet was cut on the second day of the revolution. The fact that the Internet was cut was positive because it encouraged every online activist like myself to leave their computer screens and go out to the streets. We set up tents in the main streets and squares in Benghazi

and Al Baida'a and we organized a cultural carnival showcasing Qadhafi's crimes against the Libyan people. It was very similar to the situation at Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provided a unique insight, through the eyes of cyberactivists in three Arab countries that have gone through political transformation in the context of the Arab Spring, about the Internet potential for being a venue for online democracy and, thus, a catalyst for democratization. While there is a significant amount of debate as to whether cyberactivism currently has an influential role in promoting actual change and boosting political transformation, even the critics and skeptics agree that cyberactivism does have a great deal of potential to influence meaningful social and political change in the future. This potential was clearly manifested through the words and actions of the cyberactivists who we interviewed in this study. The continuity and consistence of the cyberactivists' potential to bring about political change will largely depend on their ability to successfully organize and debate controversial and complicated issues. During the course of the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, almost all cyberactivists were united around one goal: toppling the regimes. However, the complexities of the issues that have started to surface after the revolutions, such as writing a new Constitution, reframing the role of parliaments and revising the President's authorities, have posted new challenges that have created some ideological divisions among the cyberactivists in these three countries. "When the message was simple and negative-'The people want to bring down the regime'-unity among the opposition groups was simple. When the message becomes complex and positive, it becomes harder to sustain both unity and participation" (Alterman 2011:42).

It is quite helpful to consider the fact that not all platforms of cyberactivism will be equally successful as catalysts for political change. Rather, it makes more sense to consider each cyberactivistic environment as a separate entity and a unique case that should be better analyzed within its own contextualized setting and intertwined variables.

It is certainly useful to avoid a "technologically deterministic" approach that privileges the medium over the context within which it functions, through reminding ourselves that the Internet, just like any other communication tool, is whatever the cyberactivists make of it. Therefore, we have to always bear in mind that social media tools can only be effective when used by successful actors within suitable contexts to achieve attainable goals. The level of sophistication and potential of civil society, along with the degree of government suppression of social media and the Internet penetration levels were among the factors that helped or curtailed the social media role in the Arab Spring.

In this context, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya had witnessed a different set of circumstances that paved the way for the toppling of their regimes. In Egypt, the civil society was relatively active and well-established despite the political restrictions set by the regime of the ousted President Hosni Mubarak. Adding to that, Internet penetration in Egypt is close to 20 percent. That was why, the Egyptian revolutionaries and cyberactivists were able to bring down the strong Mubarak regime over a course of 18 days. In Tunisia, it was the strong tradition of online activism that had led the overly frustrated Tunisian youth onto the streets, leading to the fall of President Bin Ali's powerful regime over a course of 28 days. As for Libya, it had one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the Arab world (close to 5.5 percent). Adding to that, the Libyan civil society was being totally suffocated by the Qadhafi regime to the point where there was a total absence of cadres of grassroot movements that had the ability to mobilize the Libyan streets. That was why the Libyan revolution needed the help of NATO air strikes to end the regime of Qadhafi, who was killed after close to nine months of bloody protests.

Despite the above-mentioned circumstances under which the cyberactivists operated in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, the dictatorial regimes in all three countries were toppled. The efforts of the online activists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya would not have been successful in contributing to the drastic political transformation in these three countries, however, had it not been for

the will and determination of the offline revolutionaries, who risked their lives to gain their freedom and attain their dignity.

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Mythical Roots, Phantasmic Realities and Transnational Migrants: Yemenis Across the Gulf of Aden

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between transnational migration, state-based religious cosmologies and new electronic media. It illustrates the way mythical realities and a Christian cosmology have structured the existence of the Yemeni diaspora. In analyzing the way mythical realities have been deployed, I seek to understand how old ways of creating boundaries have been redeployed in electronic landscapes. Much has been written regarding the interface between religion and media. Yet little attention has been paid to the phantasmic element that exists in digital-based transnational discourses. Drawing on the Lacanian concept of jouissance in this article, I pinpoint how mythical realities, important for creating boundaries, also operate at the phantasmic level. In doing so, I ultimately aim to show how transnational migration across borders operates within a field that is dotted with religious mythology and phantasmic realities that are increasingly expressed in the electronic landscape. I also show how the changing relationship between Muslims and Christians should be explained by taking more factors into account than concrete human reality. Explanations should also be sought in the distant past and in the domain of fantasy, which has so far proved to be uncomfortable ground for most scholars studying religious dynamics in the Horn of Africa.

Keywords

ethnography, Ethiopia, cosmology, migration, identity, Internet, study of religion, conflict, Yemen, Muslim minorities, Christianity, media studies, Islam

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Writing in the thirteenth century, the Arab traveler Ibn al-Mujawir related to his readers an extraordinary deed that Dhu al-Qarnayn undertook to separate the warring people of southern Arabia from the Ethiopians. Dhu al-Qarnayn, the Qur'anic mythical figure whom, we are told, Islamic schol-

ars often identify with Alexander the Great, turned a small river located in present-day southern Yemen into the Red Sea. He allegedly did this, so that the Ethiopians would no longer be able to fight with the southern Yemenis. His efforts, however, proved futile; the Ethiopians crossed the newly created sea and continued to fight in Yemen (Ibn al-Mujawir 2008:169).

In the present-day Horn of Africa, the effects of Dhu al-Qarnayn's miraculous act are imperceptible. A river has not been turned into a sea, nor are there any mythical beings that attempt to separate warring parties through miraculous acts. One can, however, see the continuation of conflict and tension between Ethiopians and Arabs, who happen to have been settling in the major cites of Ethiopia since the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly, and in spite of the absence of miraculous acts, the tension and conflicts are rooted in mythical realities and the phantasmic realm, which are increasingly being expressed using new electronic media.

Drawing on my ethnographic research carried out in Ethiopia and analysis of online cyber materials, I would like to show in this article that mythical realities and fantasy have structured the Yemenis' existence. With a focus on inter-religious interaction, I would particularly like to explore the role played by mythologies and fantasy in the interaction between the Yemenis, who are Muslim, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, who have traditionally dominated the Ethiopian state. The Yemenis I write about in this article migrated from the region of present day Yemen to Ethiopia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. In Ethiopia they mostly settled in urban areas and engaged in trading activities. So far there is only limited research regarding this group.[1] There is no single study that has tried to document how the Yemenis' existence in Ethiopia has been structured by fantasy and state cosmology in an increasingly digitalized world. This article, through such analysis, aims to redress this research gap. In so doing, the article looks to offer a theoretical reflection on the relationship between transnational migration and religion. Below, before presenting the empirical material, I will discuss recent theorization that has attempted to tie together transnationalism and religion.

Religion and the Transnational Social Field

In social science, the transnational crossing of borders by immigrant groups has gained greater attention in recent years. Through the very act of mobility, it is frequently affirmed, immigrant groups have become part and parcel of a process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Immigrant groups are often thought of as vehicles for cultural hybridity. We are also told that transnational migrants contribute to the waning of national sovereignty. Simultaneously, immigrant groups are viewed as bringers of cosmopolitanism, of flow and of a perpetual post-modern mixing.

Although not often taken into account in debates about transnationalism, religion is also viewed in terms of the connectivity that it provides. We are told that religion has become an important source for the definition and redefinition of spaces. It also serves to re-attach cultures, dislocated from their traditional reference point, within new space-time configurations (Vasquez and Marquardt 2003). As religion is important in the life of immigrants, it is also affirmed as enabling the emergence of an alternative cartography of belonging (Vasquez and Marquardt 2003). Religion, this argument maintains, helps create inter-personal connections and helps migrants in the various phases of migration (see, for example, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Hirschman 2004; Richman 2005). Transnational migrants find routes and ways to build cultural bridges through religion. Within the transnational discourse, religion is seen as a form of civil society that occupies an intermediate position between sovereignties (see Rudolf and Piscatori 1997). Relegating religion to an institutional framework, such as established churches, works on transnationalism to date have examined only the functional value of religion for migrants (see Orsi 1985; Tweed 1997; Ebauch and Chafez 2000). In current, emerging social science discourses on the relationship between religion and globalization, scholars have been mainly interested in the globalization of religion (see for example Beyer,1994; Van der Veer, 1996; Vasquez,2003; Wolffe,2002; Hefner,1998; Casanova,2001; Rudolf and Piscatori,1997).

In these studies migrants are conceived as means through which the globalization of religion occurs (see for example Csordas, 2007). However, trans-

nationalism and the transnational religious experience need not be linked to a globalization scenario, in which religion retains a functional and at best intermediate position. Borders are not only zones of contact, but also points of regulation. Thus, transnational groups can become enmeshed in the assimilation processes that operate through the exclusion of people. Within this situation, religion can and indeed does act as part of the state's assimilation process. This holds increasingly true, as states are not only secular legal entities, but also religious entities; based on what Kapferer (1988:84) has termed cosmological ontologies. That is, "the fundamental principles of being in the world and the orientation of such being toward the horizon of its experience."

In light of this, we should, as Schiller (2005) argues, bring power dynamics into transnational studies. In analyzing state hegemony, Schiller (2005) examines ways in which religion as part of a hegemonic network serves as a tool of domination. Although this perspective is interesting, I contend that a research agenda focused on domination and the ways in which religious ideologies contribute to the hegemonic agenda may miss the nuances of state power. It runs this risk because any domination in which religion acts as a key component does not only work through the act of governance. As Schiller (2005) notes, migrants contribute to imperialistic rule not only through self-induced participation, but also through an active process of exclusion. In this process of exclusion, the cosmologies of the state hold an important place.

This article will contend, then, that state cosmologies do not only operate at the intuitional level, but also at a social level. What we need is not only an understanding of institutional set up operations, but also an understanding of the broader, more diffuse, social imaginaries that are linked with state cosmology. In agreement with Charles Taylor (2002:106), I see social imaginaries as "ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline expectations." The people's imagination creates moral hierarchies, which swing between complementarities and

egalitarianism. In looking at social imaginaries, however, I am not only interested in the operation of moral hierarchies; I am also fascinated by the concept of fantasy. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1997) relates fantasy to the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*, which Lacan employed to mean enjoyment. He argued that fantasies about "the other" emanate from perceiving the racial or ethnic other as having a strange or privileged access to *jouissance* - as the result of perceiving the other as being in a process of stealing one's *jouissance*. Beyond being entangled in social imaginaries that are linked to the state, transnational migrants are assimilated by phantasmic narratives that are intrinsically linked to both the State and religion.

Beyond being entangled in social imaginaries that are linked to the state, transnational migrants are assimilated by phantasmic narratives that are intrinsically linked to state and religion. By associating fantasy with state and its cosmology, I subscribe to the argument that Jacqueline Rose (1996) made in her now famous book, *States of Fantasy*. Rose (1996) argued that fantasy is not, as in popular thought, a private matter; i.e. one that is asocial and divorced from the public sphere. Relying on Freudian analysis, she argues that fantasy forms part of the social, for it is instrumental in forging the collective will or the creation of a bond among people. In light of this, she argues that conflict and political identities can only be understood in the modern world of states and nations, if we allow room for the analysis of fantasy. For Rose (1996) the concept of fantasy, however, is not only something that exists within the social field: it is deeply interconnected with state. As fantasy stretches itself from the private realm to that of the social, the state - she argues - has a set of meanings which move back from public being into the heart of the individual. The focus of her argument is on the mechanism through which the state operates. Despite their sovereignty and monopoly on physical power, states "need to pass straight off the edge of the graspable, immediately knowable world" and utilize fantasy. She notes that the modern state "enacts its authority as ghostly, phantasmic authority." In this light I argue that transnational migrants are embedded in the phantasmic discourses, which are generated and linked to the state. Unlike Rose (1996), however, I do not distinguish between modern and ancient states.

The ancient becomes very much active in the modern. Here I document how the seemingly ancient currently structures the life of transnational migrants, who exist within a modern state framework purported to be secular.

Ethiopian State Cosmology

Ethiopian state cosmology relates in a number of ways to Judeo-Christian traditions and intrinsically links Ethiopia with the ancient land of Israel. Accounts of this traditional cosmology start with the journey of Queen Makeda of Ethiopia, which is recorded in a medieval Ethiopian text, the *Kebre Negest*.[2] The story tells us that the queen's journey took place after she heard of the wisdom of King Solomon of Israel from her merchant, Tamrin. In the cosmology of the Ethiopian state, the core story of the legend begins on the night before the queen departs for Ethiopia. On this night Makeda slept with Solomon. Afterwards, in his dreams, Solomon saw a bright sun that came to shine on Israel. As it shone, however, it suddenly withdrew itself from Israel and flew to the country of Ethiopia, where it shone forever. Solomon waited in his sleep to see if the sun would come back, but it never did. In his dream the Israelites threatened to destroy it.

On the day of her departure, Solomon gave the queen a ring that he had been wearing on his little finger, so that she would not forget him. It was also intended as a means by which to identify a male child that might have been conceived between them. Afterwards, Makeda travelled for nine months and five days. She reached Ethiopia and gave birth to a son whom she named Bayna Lehkem. Bayna Lehkem grew up to become a strong man. When he reached twenty years of age he started asking his mother about his father. Makeda was at first angry, as she did not want to tell him who his father was - she did not want him to travel to Jerusalem. But eventually she told him and asked Tamrin to take him to Jerusalem to see his father.

Bayna Lehkem and his retinue travelled until they reached Gaza, which, according to the legend, was given to Makeda by King Solomon. They later proceeded to Jerusalem in Judea. Bayna Lehkem stayed with his father for

approximately three years, learning all the wisdom of his father. Eventually, however, he was eager to return to his mother. Although Solomon did not wish to part from his son, he accepted his wishes and agreed to send him back to Ethiopia accompanied by all the first-born sons of the nobles of Israel. In doing so, Solomon envisioned rule through his son, who according to legend was to be the first born of a virgin of whom God had spoken prophetically to David. However, the people of Israel, and particularly the first born of the Israelis, were not happy to leave Zion behind. So they conspired to take with them the Ark of the Covenant, which in the legend was referred to as Zion. The God of Israel did not oppose their plans as the Israelites had angered Him. With the assistance of an angel, they removed Zion in the twinkling of the eye. After making a short stop in Gaza, they travelled to Ethiopia using a swift wagon that flew in the air.

This story in the state cosmology suggests God's preference for Ethiopia over Israel and the fulfillment of the dream that Solomon had on the day he slept with Makeda. It was Zion, the sun, which was taken from Israel and given to the Ethiopians. God's preference in the story is signified by the removal of Zion from Israel; making Ethiopia the new Israel. As Zion is simply a covenant given to the children of Israel, its removal made Ethiopians the children of God: the new Israelites with a special covenant with God. Bayna Lehkem was likened to the first son who ruled (in Christian theology this is the figure of Jesus Christ). According to Ethiopian state cosmology, Bayna Lehkem is considered to be the precursor of Christ. Bayna Lehkem's mother, who had been a virgin until the night she conceived her son, is thus linked with the Virgin Mary, who was to give birth to Christ.

Yemenis within Hierarchical Social Existence

Within Ethiopian state cosmology it is not only Makeda, who is associated with Mary, but also Zion - the tabernacle taken by Bayna Lehkem. Like Mary, the tabernacle holds God's law: Jesus Christ. As Mary chose to reside in Ethiopia with the first born of the Israelites, Ethiopia is thus linked intrinsically to Mary. In day-to-day interactions, this association is demon-

strated in the way Ethiopians associate their national flag - the green, yellow and red tricolor - with Noah's covenant. In the Bible, God made a covenant with Noah, promising that he would never again destroy the earth with water. As a sign of this promise, God gave Noah the symbol of the rainbow. In Ethiopia, the rainbow (which, when seen with the naked eye, is green, yellow and red) is not only perceived as God's promise, but also as Mary's belt. Therefore, the Ethiopian national flag symbolically brings together the promise of God and the fact that Ethiopia is intrinsically linked to Mary.

The story surrounding Makeda's journey was primarily used by the state to legitimize the rule of Ethiopia's imperial house - the Solomonic dynasty. Beyond this, the state cosmology created a hierarchy of different religious communities. As the state was affiliated with Orthodox Christianity, members of the Orthodox Christian church were regarded as being the proper subjects of the state by virtue of having a covenant with God. On the other hand, Muslims, animists and (since the state accepted Christianity in the fourth century) Jews were regarded as being outside God's covenant; hence, they were not perceived as proper Ethiopians.

Within the traditional Ethiopian framework, the presence of this state cosmology has had an effect on the social existence of Ethiopian Muslims and on foreigners, who moved to Ethiopia, such as the Yemenis. In traditional Ethiopian cities, Muslims lived segregated lives and existed outside the city. In addition to this physical segregation, they were considered - politically speaking - inferior to the Christians and unworthy of holding office or owning significant properties such as land. Beyond the physical and political exclusion, the presence of a state cosmology, which likened Ethiopia to Israel and presented the Orthodox subjects of the state as the chosen people of God, also entailed the presence of a social imaginary that worked on a hierarchical principle. In traditional Ethiopian society, Yemenis, as they were Muslims, were ranked lower than Christians. The Yemenis were outside the category of the chosen people. To enforce this hierarchy, an actual boundary mechanism existed between Christian Ethiopians and Yemeni Muslims. Orthodox Christians refrained from marrying Yemenis and Yemenis were not allowed to take a spouse from the Orthodox community. The

social imaginaries of these traditional societies also presented the Yemeni Muslim communities as being impure: or at best as pollutants. Yemenis were considered to be unclean. This imaginary was especially concretized through Islamic ritual, which demanded that members of the Islamic faith should perform a five-times-per-day cleansing ritual that involved washing the genitalia. For the Orthodox Christian community, the presence of this ritual portrayed Yemenis and other Muslims as unclean and unworthy of association.[3]

In addition to considering the social persons of Yemenis to be unclean, the social imaginaries of the traditionally dominant Orthodox community also considered Yemeni food unclean. This was particularly true of food made from animals slaughtered by Yemenis. As animals are slaughtered while the butcher calls the name of Allah, rather than the Christian God, such food was considered unclean; as was the container holding the food. In extreme cases, even a container from which a Yemeni had been drinking was considered unclean. The impurity thus created required a cleansing ritual that usually involved the sprinkling of holy water by an Orthodox priest; specifically one familiar with the rituals considered necessary to undo the pollution. If someone ate Yemeni food, especially meat slaughtered by a Yemeni, that man or woman also required a cleansing ritual. A person, who had eaten meat slaughtered by Yemenis, often had to be re-baptized in the Orthodox Church because they were considered to have become Muslims.

Unlike the situation in earlier times, however, the current link between social imaginaries and the cosmology of the state does not just operate in terms of everyday, face-to-face interactions; it is also to be found in the more informal and impersonal context of media. Since the overthrow of the Derg regime, the EPRDF has followed a more liberal policy towards the media. The government has allowed the operation of new, privately-owned newspapers and the broadcast of satellite television. Since the 1990s, a number of Ethiopian websites have also emerged. In this new environment, traditional state cosmology and the accompanying social imaginaries are reproduced and accentuated. Within the current Ethiopian context, one method by which traditional cosmology and its imaginaries are reproduced

is to be found in a series of books written by Nibur Id Ermiyas Kebede Welde Selassie, a former parliamentarian with a close affinity to the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Currently residing in the United States, he also runs a website entitled "Ethiopia: The Kingdom of God Services" [*sic*].

In both his books[4] and on the website, Nibur Id affirms the intricate association between being Ethiopian and being a Christian, who has a covenant with God. The author argues that God has given seven covenants to His chosen children: namely, the covenant of Adam, which established marriage; the covenant of Noah, signified by the rainbow; the covenant of Malke Tsedake, signified by Holy Communion; the covenant of Abraham, signified by circumcision; the covenant of Moses, signified by the Ark of the Covenant; the covenant of David, signified by kingship; and the new covenant, signified by the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary. The author affirms that these seven covenants

> ...are seven characteristics which have given Ethiopians their sovereignty, life and identity. Ethiopia or being Ethiopian are these seven covenants. Yes these seven covenants mean Ethiopia and being Ethiopian. Without these seven covenants there is no country called Ethiopia. There cannot also be a being or a people called Ethiopian. As a result of these covenants this Ethiopia is not only the true Ethiopia but she is also the true Israel. And this Ethiopian is not only the true Ethiopian but the true Israelis... (Welde Selassie, 2001).

In the current Ethiopian context, the holiness of Ethiopia and the covenant that the people have with God are also affirmed in modern Orthodox religious songs recorded on cassettes, video and DVD. Within the Orthodox Christian church, these new songs are sources of controversy as they deviate from the traditional way of singing hymns. Religious singers in the Orthodox Church did not previously record hymns for mass consumption. Despite their newness, these hymns express the deep relationship that the church has with the state and its cosmology. The latter has been guiding

the Ethiopian state. One such hymn entitled *Kestedamena* (Rainbow) is by a renowned gospel singer, Mirtinesh. The song tells about the tradition of associating Mary, God's covenant with Noah and the Ethiopian state. The refrain expresses this as follows:

> Rainbow
> The covenant of Noah and our confidence
> He has promised not to destroy us through you
> You who have become the joy of the world by giving birth to the savior
> You are our flag whom we indicate to the world[5]

There have also been recent incidents in which traditional Ethiopian state cosmology has been forcefully and perhaps more explicitly demonstrated. One such incident was the Epiphany ceremony celebrated in 2009. The Ethiopian Epiphany ceremony commemorates the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan. To commemorate this, an Orthodox Christian priest takes replicas of the Ark of the Covenant to a water source for an overnight stay. On the following day, the priest prays over the water and sprinkles the thousands of people, who have gathered for the ceremony, with this water. Finally, the replicas of the Ark of the Covenant are ceremoniously taken back to the church.

In 2009, the Epiphany ceremony was celebrated as it had been in the past. The 2009 Epiphany, however, was a special occasion, as Orthodox Christians used it to dramatically declare the intractable relationship between Christianity and Ethiopia. Orthodox youth published a number of t-shirts declaring that "Ethiopia is a Christian island." They also came up with a number of slogans, such as, "Ethiopia, Christianity, and Baptism," "One baptism, one religion, one country."

Phantasmic Realities

At this juncture it is important to understand the reason that Orthodox Christians felt they needed to proclaim an affinity between Christianity

and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox church has many followers and is one of the biggest churches in Ethiopia. According to official statistics, its members far outnumber both other Christian faiths and Muslims. Despite this, Orthodox Christians feel threatened.

A significant factor that explains the Orthodox Church's reaction is the liberal policy followed by the EPRD regime since 1990. Since the EPRDF came to power, a considerable number of mosques have been built; numerous books and audio materials critical of Christianity have also been published. These developments, as I have indicated elsewhere, have been a source of tension. Orthodox concern can be explained, in part, by these developments. However, it cannot be fully explained by them. In addition to the rise of the new, critical media, the traditional movement of people across the Ethiopian border has also played an important role here.

Since the 1990s, the EPRDF regime has liberalized the movement of people across the border. In contrast to the previous socialist regime, which had attempted to curb it, the EPRDF made this movement a constitutional right. This sudden freedom of mobility within a post-socialist state led to the migration of thousands of Ethiopian women as domestic workers to Arab countries; particularly the Gulf States. Simultaneously, the opening up of borders and the liberalization of the Ethiopian economy has led to the arrival of many Arabs in Ethiopia; particularly Yemenis, who - during the pre-Derg period - had left Ethiopia. The Yemenis, who returned, as well as other Arabs, engaged extensively in investment activities and small trade. As they are Muslim, they also assisted the local Muslim community in building mosques.

A notable example in this regard is the world's 61st wealthiest billionaire[6], Sheik Mohammed Hussein Ali Al-Amoudi, a Hadrami born of an Ethiopian mother. Al-Amoudi invested massively in Ethiopia. When state-owned companies were privatized as part of an IMF and World Bank economic reform package, Al-Amoudi acquired 96 percent of the companies. Al-Amoudi currently owns a luxury hotel, the Sheraton Addis. His company, MIDROC Ethiopia, is active in the construction sector and in gold mining in addition to other activities. Recently Al-Amoudi's Saudi Start Agricul-

tural Development PLC acquired 10 thousand hectares of land for growing rice; mainly for export to Middle Eastern countries.

These activities have led Orthodox Christians to perceive Muslims, and Arabs in particular, as a threat to the Ethiopian state. They are increasingly considered to be Islamizing the Christian nation of Ethiopia. An interesting example that demonstrates this perceived threat is the sermon of a man, who converted to the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. The speaker, who claimed to be the son of a high-ranking Muslim cleric in Ethiopia, said that while a Muslim he had been actively working with evil spirits in order to destroy Ethiopian Christianity. In a video recording that has since been uploaded onto YouTube, he claims that in consultation with malevolent spirits he tattooed his body with the signs of an elephant, a snake and a map. This tattooing, he says, was undertaken deliberately to dismantle the Ethiopian faith and state.[7]

In the perception that sees Muslims as a malevolent force intent on Islamizing the Ethiopian state, transnational migrants groups, particularly Arabs, are regarded as the chief culprits. This is particularly apparent in online responses to news items that focus on the investments of Arabs in the country. One such news item was a piece posted on February 8, 2008 on the well-known Ethiopian blog, *Ethiopian Review*. Entitled "Millionaire Sheiks Turning Ethiopia in to Their Personal Brothel," the blog posts details about a plan to build a tourist resort on an 8 thousand hectare piece of land. The blog post sparked a huge debate both for and against the investment. What is interesting is that, although the news item did not mention the name of Al-Amoudi or any other covert plan, a number of responses interpreted investment by Arabs (in particular the presence of Al-Amoudi in Ethiopia) as having a covert intent of Islamizing Ethiopia. One of the commentators who gave his name as Assta B. Getu wrote:

> …The Arabs die for the Ethiopian girls, and this new building could serve as a brothel that would hire over one-thousand young Ethiopian girls, so that the Arabs don't have to go from one motel to another in Addis to get these lovely and attrac-

> tive Ethiopian girls; they can easily get them huddled together and exploit them now in one place, at this tourist resort, thanks to Al-Amoudi. Does the Ethiopian Orthodox Church leader, Abune Paulos, know Al-Amoudi's hidden agenda to convert the Oromo into Islam? Even if he does, there is nothing he could do, for he is the slave of Meles Zenawi. He has to follow and do what his master, Meles the evil commands him to do. He is not the servant of God; he is the servant of Meles, the evil. After this project is over, Al-Amoudi would ask Meles to build a second Mecca somewhere in Ethiopia so that the Ethiopian Muslims don't have to make a *hajj* every year to Saudi Arabia and spend their money there; instead they would spend it here in Ethiopia. This is a noble idea, I think; King Lalibela did it; why not Al-Amoudi?[8]

A similar reaction could also be observed when the *WikiLeaks* files dealing with the situation of Islam in Ethiopia were reproduced in an Ethiopian blog. The commentator tells us that:

> Ethiopia was closed for Arab Wahhabis for a long time. I heard the golden Emperor Haile Selassie (Man of the Millennium) deported every single Arab out of Ethiopia for spreading sexually transmitted diseases and encouraging prostitution & homosexuality. He also closed many corrupt Indian shops and deported a lot of Indians out of Ethiopia for manipulating and mistreating Ethiopians just like what they are currently doing in Kenya, Zambia, Zanzibar, etc.
>
> Ethiopians owned businesses in Ethiopia and ruled their own destiny. Now, the two parasites (Indians & Arabs) along with other foreigners are back in action, in full force in the name of leasing land and investment. As long as they throw dollars and grain at Meles, he will gladly lick their hairy behinds. He evidently doesn't give a damn about Tigray Chris-

> tians or any other Ethiopians for that matter. Arab Wahhabis and Indian parasite's dreams finally came true thanks to the morally, mentally and economically challenged trashes from that cursed barren land. It is as if they haven't seen money or food for an eternity the way they are selling everything. Ethiopia before Arab and Indian investment was much better off. At least people ate food, could afford basic items, and were dignified and respectable. We all know Ethiopia has become in the past two decades.
>
> Now, they are trying their very best to create tension between Muslims and Christians by importing radical Wahhabis to Ethiopia but as we read on a previous cable, Ethiopian Muslims refused to be used as Arab tools. I suggest we should learn a crucial lesson from Ethiopian Muslims and stop being used and trampled on by everybody with dollars, barley and wheat to spare.[9]

In the discourse of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Arabs and Muslims - who are viewed interchangeably - are affecting not only religious structures and the very existence of the country, but also Ethiopian women. In this regard, Arab investors are seen as the chief culprit. As we saw in the above-mentioned reaction, the commentator affirms not only the Islamization of Ethiopia, but also the theft of Ethiopian women by Arab capitalists. The context for such a reaction, however, is not just the flow of Arabs and their capital into Ethiopia. It also involves the movement of Ethiopians, especially Ethiopian women, to Arab countries. In Ethiopian-owned blogs, the movement of Ethiopians has drawn much attention as some of them are violently mistreated by their patrons. Such news both in everyday conversations and in Ethiopian blogs often leads to the assertion that Arabs plan to steal Ethiopian women. When the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce demanded that the relevant Ethiopian authority adopt a more efficient recruitment system, one comment expressed resentment toward the EPRDF government and toward Arabs, who are seen as being favorably treated by the EPRDF:

> Why Melese does not hand the whole nation to the Arabs all in all? Is it not better? Slave trade in the 21 century in Ethiopia? ... The Arabs has got new way of making Ethiopia and Islamic state. They take Ethiopian girls and send them with Arab boys and girls and is an advance way of advancing Islam [*sic*].[10]

In short, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians perceive Muslim and Arabs as having taken their *jouissance*; namely the privilege of being a Christian nation and taking Ethiopian women. They also perceive Muslim and Arabs as having particular access to a certain *jouissance*; namely the privilege of being favorably viewed by the EPRDF regime. The regime in collaboration with Arab capitalists are said to be working to dismantle Ethiopia.

Digital Conflicts

The orthodox fantasy, made known both in everyday life as well as via web blogs and audio video materials, has resulted in a strong reaction among Muslims, especially by Yemenis living in Ethiopia. One web commentator tells us, for example, that:

> I don't know how these Orthodox people say they have a religion. They are slaves to Israel and they should exist for what they want to die for. These people are so barbaric that they love their *tabot* and their master Israel more than they love their closest relatives the Muslims of Ethiopia. We should never sleep until we find an antidote to this poisonous church ... Ethiopian Muslims let us get united and don't let this barbaric church lead us into ruin in the age [*sic*].[11]

Muslim reaction is not only apparent in this comment, but it is also noticeable in Muslim Ethiopian chat rooms hosted on Paltalk. One such chat room discussion, which was later posted on YouTube, tells its Muslim participants to defend themselves against the Christians:

We are not afraid. If they want war we will respond with war. Negotiation does not work. In the first place to which government are we referring when we talk about negotiation? There is no government. If there is government why don't the security apparatus exercise their duties? Is the government established so that mosques can be destroyed? In the future you should know that they will slaughter us. In the future they will demolish the Anwar Mosque (the main mosque in Addis Ababa). In the future they will destroy the Benin Mosque, which is located in the area of Sumaletera. Who is going to forbid them? We will not go out for demonstration by taking oranges in our hand. Even if we want, from where are we going to get the oranges? It is from them that we buy the oranges! We have to be aware of things. How can we only focus on worldly affairs! There should be a limit to that ... Haven't Abubaker Sidiki said that I have given allowed everything? He has declared so for the sake of Muslim right...for the sake of Islam. Today what are we doing? We should organize ourselves to bring a lasting solution for Muslims. We need power. Without power we can't do anything. It is impossible. We can't establish a Muslims state in Ethiopia without power. We can't ...what did Allah said to us in Sura Al-Anfal. He told us to be ready by all means. It means with all our power financially, economically and in terms of having a skilled human resources. If we have to make missiles we have to make missiles. We should not buy it from Russia or from Florida. We have to be able to do it. We have to explore the science of Chemistry. We should not just memorize the periodic table. We should know about periodic table. We should know the use of potassium. We have to know! Let's not just exchange our *jelebias*. Let's not just waste water of ablution...it is better to save these resources to our families. They are mocking on us. From where did Melse Zenawi (the current Prime Minister) and his colleagues organized themselves. They organized themselves from Muslims countries.

They took power (from the Socialist regime) by basing themselves in Sudan and Somalia...We are not weaker than them. Inshallah. We should not be afraid...Allah is with us. But we should organize ourselves. We should develop a strategy. In the Ethiopian defense force 50 percent of the soldiers should be Muslims...If there are 50 Generals 25 should be Muslims. If there are twenty Ministers in Ethiopia eleven of them should be Muslims. It is only then that we are going to get right... we should not wait until Christians bring justices to us. Hasn't Mussa (Moses) fought with the Pharos? Hasn't the Prophet Mohamed (Peace be Upon him) waged war with the Quraish. The religion has not spread just like that. In Islam it is not a crime to slap a person back. It is not a sin. It is a right... We should not be afraid. We should wake up. If Muslim makes demonstration they will imprison them. I know where they will imprison them. I know which prison they will send them ... They are torturing us. We are in detention...We are called immigrants in our own land. And they are showing us how we are immigrants. In the Ethiopian army who are the decision makers. Do you want me to mention their name? There are no Muslims in there. May be you will say General Smoray Yenus. Him alone will not do anything... I feel that we should bring a lasting solution. I feel that me King Nejashi I should bring a lasting solution ...If it is necessary to start guerrilla warfare we should do so. ...If we need to go to Somalia we should be able to do so. I can go. I can do it for the sake of Allah. If we need to start from Sudan we need to be able to do that. We have to declare war for the sake of Ethiopian Muslims right...We should bring a lasting solution and the solution wellahi will not come out from the negotiation table. We should not loose hope... Freedom and right is not obtained just like that ...The only solution is war. We should declare a strategic war. Until Ethiopia become a freedom land. Until both Muslims and Christians get equal right...We should exchange information.

> The Christians do not have any program other than destroying us. They always conspire about destroying us. They are all politicians. What they study in church is politics. Do you think that they go to pray? They are teaching those politics. They tell them that Muslims are going to destroy you and that they go to heaven by killing you. They are funny. If it was possible to go to paradise by just killing a Christians it is would have been easy. Let alone one I would have killed ten Christians. But it is not like that. We should not be afraid…It is only Allah that we should be afraid off… We don't know when the war will be declared so let's get ready [*sic*]…[12]

In the above quotation what the speaker call for is for an outright attack which should be orchestrated through the employment of scientific knowledge which would help the so called Muslim camp build missile and bombs. The call for violence, however, has not only been made by Muslims, but also by Orthodox Christians:

> What happen to the Christians in Ethiopia. The minority Muslims are killing innocent people in that country for sometime now. It is not right. You Christians have to defend yourself. Don't listen the stupid dictator communist group. They don't believe in any form of God. They are pagans. Please defend yourself. If they kill in Muslim dominated area, you have to attack in a different area. Muslims don't understand tolerance. Take action before they kill you all. Respect comes that way. Not just by begging Muslims. God Bless Ethiopia [*sic*].[13]

Needless to say the Orthodox reaction is not only made by Orthodox Christians on the net. Numerous books and journals published by the Church's Sunday School Department also present a strong reaction to the Muslim presence. One such book is by Ephrem Eshete (2008) and is entitled *Akrari eslemena be Ethiopia*. Ephrem began his book by aptly outlining the threat that the Christian country faces and calling for an awakening within the Orthodox community. Like Ephrem, Abba Samuel, who at some point was

part of the higher echelon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, presents a frontal attack on Islam and Muslims in his book entitled *Ewen be Ethiopia Ye haymanot mechachal alene*. The various writings in *Hamere Tewehado*,[14] a journal run by the Sunday School Department, and various Orthodox sermons also put forward a strong challenge to Muslims; especially Yemeni Arabs.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I discussed the coming together and the separation of people; as well as the formation of the mythical account given by Ibn al-Mujawir. I then described a number of border crossings: one of which was the journey of Queen Makeda to Israel. In social science parlance, border crossings are usually associated with people coming together to both share and mix their cultures. Without a doubt, social mixing in this region has been apparent throughout its history. Border crossings, however, need not only be associated with such mixing. This article, I believe, has shown how the act of crossing borders can be linked to exclusion and conflict. Within the Ethiopian context, the exclusion of people is deeply rooted in the mythical reality that transported Makeda to Israel. Serving as a focal point of state cosmology, this mythical crossing has been instrumental in influencing the social imaginaries of the people of this region. Migrants coming to the Horn of Africa have been viewed as inferior in the social hierarchy and in this state cosmology.

In the post-Cold War era, the mobility of people, ideas and investment in the form of capital have intensified; the mythical realties that traditionally structured the Ethiopian polity have gained new vitality. Rather than declining, with the multiple movements of commodities, people and ideas, they have been used and deployed by traditionally dominant groups linked to the state. In the post-socialist context, this involves the proliferation of fantasies increasingly expressed in cyberspace.

Taken in its entirety within the Ethiopian context, the transnational migration of people has been deeply influenced by religion, which nevertheless intersects with the state format. In transnational studies, religion is often

looked at as part of the migrant context. Meanwhile, a state is often considered a secular entity. A similar position is maintained in relation to the broader social discussion: the state is perceived as secular, while religions are viewed as operating within the social sphere. Such a disjuncture between a secular state entity and migrants, who are the seat of religion, is clearly untenable. As Talal Asad (1999:231) has observed, even in the United States, “religion continues to be important despite the constitutional separation of state and religion.” This, as we have seen, holds true in the context of Ethiopia. In light of this, migrants should be viewed both as a barrier to and a catalyst for the globalization of religion, as Csordas (2007) points out. In addition to seeking to determine how religion is spreading across the global terrain, we should also seek to understand how migrant groups are structured by religion while travelling across state borders. This calls for a detailed analysis of the interface between religion and media in the new digitalized age.

For transnational migrants the intersection of religion with the state means existence in a condition that does not limit itself to formal law. In the field of transnational migration studies, the majority of the material tries to place the local transnational migrant within a legalistic discourse - and it often proves to be a bad fit. This focus tends to lead to the emergence of a number of terminologies that try to classify migrants in terms of legality and illegality. This is because migrants’ exclusion is often associated with the presence or absence of state documents. Although a legalistic explanation of transnational migrating is a valid undertaking, it is equally important and necessary to examine the social dimension: especially mythical realities and fantasies expressed in everyday life and in cyberspace since they are part of the game in which transnational migrants are embedded.

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Notes

[1] On Yemenis in Ethiopia, see Bezabeh (2008, 2010, 2012) and Manger (2010).

[2] For a translation of the Kebre Negest and a detailed account of the story, see Budge (1922).

[3] For further reading on the way the traditional social imaginaries affected the Yemenis, see Bezabeh (2010).

[4] See Welde Selassie (2001, 2004, 2005, 2006).

[5] A video of the hymn can be seen on YouTube (see Zemarit mirtnesh 2009). Accessed December 4, 2011.

[6] Mohammed Al-Amoudi, Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/profile/mohammed-al-amoudi/, accessed April 3, 2012.

[7] See Ethiopia a Muslim converted to Christian 2009. Accessed May 4, 2012.

[8] Kifle 2008.

[9] WikiLeaks: Allah in Ethiopia: mostly quiet on the Islamic front 2011.

[10] Ethiopia Asked to Expedite Maids Recruitment 2011.

[11] Comments to article Ethiopian woman arrested for alleged stabbing of man and his son in UAE 2010.

[12] Islamist vision for Ethiopia 2010.

[13] Comment on Ethiopia Charges 130 in Church Burning Incidents 2011.

[14] See, for example, the writings of Atantewos (2001).

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The Time of Concluding the Contract in E-Commerce from Islamic Legal Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of when a contract between face-to-face parties is deemed to be concluded presents no legal difficulty to deal with in conventional dealings. However, the borderless nature of the Internet presents questions as to when a contract is deemed to be irrevocably formed and therefore raises questions regarding contract validity. As a general rule, a contract is formed when there is an exchange of offer and acceptance between the parties. However, in online contracts the contracting parties are not in face-to-face meeting and thus the exchange of offer and acceptance involves the possibility that such correspondence may not reach its intended recipient because of technical errors or other technological complexities. As a result, this article tends to engage in a critical study to determine the time when a contract formed in the cyberspace is concluded in the light of Islamic contracting principles with reference to a number of International legal frameworks.

Keywords

Islamic law, Internet, legal science, electronic contract, e-commerce, economic studies, e-mail, Internet studies

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the valid conclusion of electronic contract in light of the time the contract is deemed to be concluded. As a general rule, the contract becomes legally binding when there is unconditional correspondence between the offer and acceptance (Al-Oboodi 1997:154). However, in online contracts the exchange of offer and acceptance involves the possibility that such correspondence may not reach its intended recipient. It is also possible that a message sent via the Internet may be altered en route and reaches its final destination either incomprehensible or with a different meaning to the one intended. That is to say, when an acceptance is communicated over the Internet it may be illegible when it reaches the

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offeror or it may never arrive at all. Consequently, it is questionable as to whether there is a valid conclusion of contract. Determining the time at which a contract is deemed to be formed is essential in order to establish whether the contracting parties can withdraw their communication before the contract becomes legally binding. There are other legal effects resulting from determining the time of a contract being formed, to name; setting the time of transferring the ownership of the purchased item to the buyer and thus in the case the item suddenly loses its value, who shall be legally responsible for such loss, either the buyer or the purchaser (Al-Dobaiyyan 2005:106-107).

The difficulty arises in determining when a contract is deemed to be formed when the contracting process is communicated between parties as absentees. In such contracts, a time delay occurs between the sending and receipt of offer and acceptance between the parties involved. Thus, it is disputable in such cases to determine the moment during which a contract is deemed to be binding. Legally, there are four main theories which jurists refer to when establishing the time at which a contract is formed between parties in absentees - the declaration, the mailbox, reception or information. Note that there are other legal theories, such as the formulation theory which considers a contract legally effective at the moment the offeree begins to formulate its communication for the acceptance. Accordingly, it is usually used in conjunction with the mailbox theory to prevent the offeror from withdrawing his offer once the other party has started to respond to that communication (Eiselen 1999). The position of Islamic law in this regard will be analytically explored next in the light of Internet communication.

The Time of Concluding Online Contracts: An Analysis

A typical example may be considered in Internet communication when a party communicates his offer via email to another one offering to sell a particular good and enclosing its terms and conditions. The latter party accepts the offer and communicates his acceptance back via email. In this example, it is difficult to determine the exact point at which the contract is deemed

to be formed. Is it at the time when the offeree accepts the offer? The time when the acceptance is communicated back to the offeror? Or is it when the acceptance reaches the offeror, regardless of whether he is aware of the acceptance or not? Or maybe it is at the point that the acceptance comes to the notice of the offeror? (Alzaagy 2011:158)

Establishing the time at which a contract is deemed to be formed is essential in order to determine whether the contracting parties can withdraw their communication before the contract becomes legally binding. That is to say, if a contract is deemed to be formed as soon as the offer is accepted, the offer cannot be withdrawn when the acceptance has already been made, whereas, if the contract is deemed to be formed when the acceptance comes to the knowledge of the offeror, it is legally possible for the offer to be withdrawn so long as the offeror has not received the acceptance. Likewise, the offeree can revoke his acceptance before it comes to the notice of the offeror.

In the scenario given above an offer of withdrawal or acceptance withdrawal is likely to come to the notice of the recipient before the offer or acceptance is communicated despite it being sent and received earlier. To clarify this case, consider that a party, who lives in a country different from the offeree, sends his offer by email to the other recipient party and it was received say at 10:00 a.m. Several hours later, the offeror changes his mind and sends another email withdrawing his offer which arrives at the offeree's inbox at 1:00 p.m. Provided that the recipient party checks his inbox once a day at 4:00 p.m. the withdrawal of the offer should come to his attention before the offer itself despite the offer being sent and received earlier. The same is likely to occur when revoking an acceptance by email; sending a notice of an acceptance's revocation after an earlier acceptance is emailed earlier may come to the attention of the offeror before the acceptance itself. In this regard, article 22 of the United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) (see Eiselen 1999) states that an acceptance may be withdrawn if the withdrawal reaches the offeror before, or at the same time as, the acceptance would have become effective.

Thus, it becomes essential to determine the time when a contract becomes legally binding in order to avoid potential disputes. In face-to-face transac-

tions this does not present a problem. Accordingly, the contract is formed at the moment the acceptance comes to the knowledge of the offeror, which usually occurs as soon as the acceptance is expressed. (Al-Ebraheem 1986:421). Similarly, this general rule should be applied in contracts formed via direct forms of communication, such as on the telephone, when there is no time delay in the communication of offer and acceptance between the contracting parties (Alzaagy 2011:160).

It is worth mentioning the comment made by Denning LJ in the case of *Entores Ltd v. Miles Far East Corporation* [1955] 2 All ER 493) which indicated that;

> "...where two people make a contract by telephone; Suppose, for instance, that I make an offer to a man by telephone and, in the middle of his reply, the line goes dead so that I do not hear his words of acceptance. There is no contract at that moment ... If he wishes to make a contract; he must therefore get through again so as to make sure that I hear. Suppose next that the line does not go dead, but it is nevertheless so indistinct that I do not catch what he says and I ask him to repeat it. He then repeats it and I hear his acceptance. The contact is made, not the first time when I do not hear, but only the second time when I do hear."

That is to say, when parties use a telephone, or other direct forms of communication, to form a contract, this contract is deemed comparable to a face-to-face contract and therefore comes into legal force when the offeror becomes fully aware of the acceptance.

However, the difficulty arises in determining when the contracting parties enter into a binding transaction using non-instantaneous forms of communication. In such contracts, a time delay occurs between the sending and receipt of offer and acceptance between the contracting parties. Thus, it is disputable in such cases to determine the moment during which a contract is deemed to be binding. Legally, there are four main theories which jurists

refer to when establishing the time at which a contract is formed between parties in absentees - the declaration, the mailbox, reception or information.

The Legal Theories Addressing When a Contract Inter Absentees is Concluded

In Islamic jurisprudence the issue of when a contract is considered to come into legal effect in contracting inter absentees is a matter of discussion. According to the declaration theory, a contract between absent parties is formed when the acceptance of an offer is expressed, regardless of whether the acceptance is brought to the mind of the offeror or not (Al-Sanhoori 1953:56). This theory is based on the understanding that a contract is formed when there is a correspondence between the parties' intention to enter into a binding deal. Therefore, when the offeree declares his acceptance of the received offer, the contract becomes legally effective. It is argued that the declaration theory is suitable to the nature of commercial activities since they require the prompt formation of transactions. Therefore, the offeree can ensure the valid conclusion of the contract and enjoy instantly the use of the purchased item as soon as the acceptance is expressed without unreasonable delay (Al-Oboodi 1997:157). A number of legal texts are referred to, which imply, accordingly, that Islamic law follows the declaration theory in determining the time of forming a contract inter absentees (Al-Kasani 1997:540). Amongst others, (Al-Bahooti 1997:169) stated that "when a seller sends a letter or correspondence through a messenger to a prospective buyer, who is absent from the 'meeting place,' [1] offering to sell a certain article with certain value, then when the offer reaches the buyer, he unequivocally accepts that, at this time, the contract is considered to be validly formed." Therefore, this indicates that the contract is deemed to be formed at the time the offeree declares his acceptance to the offer.

However, this theory has been criticised as being biased towards the offeree since the contract is deemed to be formed without the offeror being aware of this conclusion. Thus, no one except for the offeree can ascertain that an acceptance has been made; yet the contract becomes legally binding and

furthermore he can deny declaring the acceptance, if he wishes to do so and perhaps with no way to establish the fact (Marqass 1956:133). This may lead to uncertainty and confusion for the offeror as the contract is formed entirely at the wish of the offeree, either to ratify his acceptance or to deny it if he wants to change his mind. Established by some classical jurists, the declaration rule may have been appropriate and relevant in days gone by, since it would have hastened the formation of contracts, but its relevance today is questionable. Previously, communications between parties may have taken days or even months but today's modern methods of communication facilitate keeping distant contracting parties in contact within considerably shorter time periods (Alzaagy 2011:162-163). Further, the aforementioned text given by early Islamic scholars was not meant to determine the time when a contract is considered to be formed, rather, it was based on clarifying the validity of forming a contract between absentees' parties who are not together in one 'meeting place' (Al-Sanhoori 1953:54-56).

Under the information rule, acceptance becomes effective and thus a contract comes into existence at the moment the acceptance comes to the notice of the offeror. As with face-to-face transaction, this theory takes into account that the acceptance is an expression of the offeree's consent and this expression cannot take legal effect unless it is brought to the attention of the offeror. Thus, only at this time can it be said there is a correspondence between the parties' consent (in the form of offer and acceptance) and therefore the contract is deemed validly formed (Al-Sanhoori 1966:242). Accordingly, the offeror can withdraw the offer at any time before the expressed acceptance by the other party (offeree) comes to his knowledge. Paradoxically, it is important to note that, and in contrast to the declaration theory, the offeree may suffer under the information theory as it is difficult for him to determine when the acceptance comes to the notice of the offeror. Implementing the information theory may also lead to unreasonable delay in the formation of transactions. As we can observe here, the legal position in Islamic law toward this issue is not so settled and hence the legal stance in Saudi Arabia, as a country which constitutionally implements Islamic Law, is unclear. From online transactions perspective, the enacted Saudi Electronic

Transaction Rule (2007) failed to address this controversial matter which is central in contracts formed between parties in absentees. It seems that it is unclear when an electronic contract is deemed to be formed under the judicial system in the country. Thus, determining the courts' interpretation of the issue in the light of electronic contract is problematic.

The Time of Concluding the Contract via Email Communication

It is worth discussing that in the case that the parties use a non-instantaneous means of communication, like that of email, it is questionable as to which of those aforementioned theories provide an appropriate approach to the issue of when a contract should come into legal existence.

Neither the information nor the declaration theory appear to provide a suitable framework for contracting via email since the information theory makes it difficult to determine when a message comes to the notice of the offeror and the declaration rule presents uncertainties in determining when an acceptance is declared, as discussed above.

Under the mailbox theory, also known as the postal rule, it is not legally sufficient for the acceptance to be only declared in order for a contract to be formed, rather, the acceptance is legally effective and thus a contract becomes legally binding at the time when it is sent or posted to the offeror (Jones 2000). The postal rule has its origins in common-law jurisdiction and is applied in delayed forms of communication, such as ordinary mail, as an exception to the general rule. The courts have yet to consider whether to apply the postal rule in email communication. The fundamental difference between the two systems relates to recipient timing. Posted items typically take days or even weeks to arrive whereas email communication, when it works properly, takes considerably less time to reach its intended destination (Stott 1999). In light of modern communication systems, the general rule which accepts that a contract is effective at the time of the receipt of acceptance is applied in instantaneous forms of communication, like that of telex (See, *Entros v. Miles Far East Corporation Ltd* [1955] 2 Q.B. 327).

However, email communication may be delayed for hours or even days due to

server breakdown or other technical faults. Therefore, it has been suggested that the postal rule be applied in email communication since it presents similarities to traditional mail (Al-Ibrahim et al. 2007). Accordingly, as with traditional mail, the risk of substantial delay or possible non-delivery of the email should lie with the offeror. Nevertheless, a possible delay in the transmission of telex messages is contemplated, similar to email communication, and yet the courts did not find it justifiable to apply the postal rule and negate the general rule (Poyton 2004:183). However, the rapid development of technology may soon be able to eliminate existing problems with email communication and instead, deliver a service that guarantees instantaneous connection between users. Already technology allows email users set up an immediate confirmation of receipt. This ability to confirm the receipt of an offer and an acceptance almost instantaneously deprives the postal rule of much of its utility (Bernachi 1997). Moreover, like the declaration rule, it seems that solely the convenience of the offeree is protected under the mailbox rule. Accordingly, a contract is formed at the time that the acceptance letter is handed to a post-office representative or put in the post box irrespective of whether the letter is delayed, destroyed or lost en-route and not even reaches the offeror (Belgum 1999). Therefore, the application of the postal rule in email transactions appears to be questionable.

In contrast to the declaration and mailbox rules, the reception rule states that a contract is not completely formed until the acceptance is actually received by the offeror or at least made available for him, regardless of whether the content of the acceptance is read by the offeror. The actual receipt of acceptance by the offeror is treated as an inference of his knowledge as to its content. The reception theory appears to provide a more reasonable approach for both of the parties. The binding conclusion of the contract starts at the time of receiving the acceptance, regardless of whether it comes to the attention of the offeror or not since he is ultimately responsible for the prompt handling of letters received in his mailbox. At the same time, the theory ensures that the contract should not validly be formed in the case that the acceptance gets lost on the way since the offeror has not yet had any control of the acceptance. That is to say, the reception theory is based

on dividing the risk of communicating the acceptance equally between the parties so that the communication of acceptance can only be held effective at the time the acceptance arrives in the offeror's mailbox, unlike the postal rule where the offeror bears the risk when the communicated acceptance does not find its way to him. As a result, the parties should, in due time, address in details the issue of contract formation in order to prevent any potential uncertainty and conflict (Niemann 2000).

Determining the Conclusion of Electronic Contracts: An International Attempt

Due to the importance of establishing when an electronic contract is deemed to be legally effective, an international attempt has been recently made by various legal systems to establish a uniform framework. It is worth noting that there is a tendency at the international level to adopt the time of receipt as the time when communication of messages becomes legally effective (Nimmer 1996). The 1980 United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) provides in this regard that "an acceptance of an offer becomes effective at the moment the indication of assent reaches the offeror." It is relatively important to note that the word "reach" provided in the Convention is clarified in article 24 as when the message is communicated orally to the addressee, or delivered by any other means to him personally, to his place of business or mailing address or, if he does not have a place of business or mailing address, to his habitual residence. Likewise, in the United States, the 2004 Uniform Commercial Code article 2-213(a) provides that an electronic communication bears legal effect when it is received even if no individual is aware of its receipt. As an attempt to determine the point of time when the sending and the receiving of electronic message have taken place, article 15 of the UNCITRAL (United Nation Commission on International Trade Law) Model Law provides important guidelines. Accordingly, an electronic message is deemed to be sent at the time when it enters an information system outside the control of the originator, while, the receipt of the electronic message occurs at the time when it has arrived at the recipient email's inbox.

Therefore, it can be said, based on the above provisions, that there is neither subjective requirement for the recipient' awareness of the content of the message nor deeming the message to become legally effective as soon as it is posted. However, the electronic message is rationally deemed effective as soon as it is readably delivered to the recipient. And, this appears to be an objective and fair approach for both contracting parties. In light of this provision, it seems that an acceptance sent by email would be legally effective and thus the contract becomes legally binding, at the time it safely arrives in the intended recipient's mailbox.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that in the context of email communication it is quite unclear as to when the acceptance message is deemed to be received. When the acceptance sent via an email is converted into a digital format and broken into a number of separate packets before arriving at its intended recipient thus determining the time when the acceptance has been received is problematic. An email may also travel via several different servers before reaching its intended recipient. In this case, it is uncertain at which server the emailed acceptance is deemed to be handled. Is the timing based on when the Internet server receives it, bearing in mind that an email may travel through a number of servers, or when the acceptance message is delivered into the recipient's mailbox? It should be taken into account that in email communication, a data message, even after it is delivered into the recipient's mailbox, may still become corrupted or destroyed before the recipient accesses it. In fact, no universal rule can cover all situations. It is worth referencing Lord Wilberforce's comment that "…no universal rule can cover all such cases; they must be resolved by reference to the intentions of the parties, by sound business practice and in some cases a judgment where the risks should lie." (See, Brinkibon Ltd v Stahag Stahl und Stahlwarenhandel GmbH [1983] 2 A.C. 34)

As a result, for the purpose of contract formation, is there any contract that can be validly formed by a mere receipt of the electronic message even if the message is destroyed before the recipient reads it or even knows of its existence? Consequently, it seems that further clarification is needed on the issue of receipt in the context of email communication in order to provi-

de greater certainty and prevent any ambiguity regarding the formation of electronic transaction (Murray 2000:26-27).

As suggested, when an email is used to form a contract an acceptance should be deemed effective when the communicated acceptance becomes available for the recipient to read in his mailbox. That is to say, neither the postal rule, which states that a contract is formed when the acceptance in the form of email is sent, nor the information rule where the acceptance becomes effective when it comes to the attention of the offeror, provides a suitable approach to email communication. In that regard, it is inequitable to deem a contract formed when the communicated acceptance via email is vividly read by the offeror. He may not regularly check his in-tray or may delete emails, intentionally or by mistake, without reading their contents. As a result, if it is upheld that the contract is formed at the time when the offeror reads the acceptance, the offeree, accordingly, will be deprived from forming the contract even though he may have made every effort to communicate the acceptance. In addition, it should also be noted that the offeree might miss the opportunity to form other transactions relying on the complete forming of the contract by ensuring the accurate communication of his acceptance to the offeror.

Therefore, based on the understanding that it is the responsibility of the offeror to check his mailbox for correspondence, the contract should be legally effective at the time when the communicated acceptance arrives at his inbox in a clear and readable form (Alzaagy 2011:170). It is worth referring to a comment made by Lord Fraser regarding a telex communication in which it is observed that "once a message has been received on the offeror's telex machine, it is not unreasonable to treat it as delivered to the principal offeror, because it is his responsibility to arrange for prompt handling of messages within his own office." (Brinkibon Ltd v. Stahag Stahl und Stahlwarenhandelsgesellschaft M.B.H. Respondents, House of Lords [1983] 2 A.C. 34) In this regard, it seems reasonable to suggest that in the case that the emailed acceptance enters into the offeror's mailbox but, due to some technical errors, is impossible to read, the offeror, should, without undue delay, request the acceptance to be resent. With email communication, an

automatic response of receipt of acceptance may imply the successful delivery of acceptance and thus the contract is formed. It is worth mentioning the definition of 'receipt' within the context of electronic communication in the UCC Article 2B according to which it is stated that

> "...a contract is formed when: (1) the response is received by the initiating party or its intermediary, if the response consists of furnishing digital information or access to it and the record initiated by that party invited such a response; or (2) the initiating party or its intermediary receives a message signifying or a acknowledging acceptance..."

The Time of Concluding the Contract in Web Transactions

The question of timing in web transactions depends on the nature of individual websites and the procedures they follow in forming transactions with customers. Some websites operate purely in a passive format and function merely as a shop-window to their traditional business. Such a website would typically display the company name and provide information relating to its trading products or services, including the company's contact details for further communication via offline means (Rothchild:1999). These websites present no opportunity for forming online contracts; therefore determining when a contract is formed will be based on another means of communication. Assuming in this regard that a client accesses the website and subsequently contacts the company via telephone, using the provided contact details, he offers to buy some of the company's products and his offer is accepted during the telephone conversation. In this regard the contract is deemed to be formed at the time when the client hears the acceptance, thus applying the information theory.

Conversely, there are websites with far greater interactivity that include the option to complete transactions entirely online. Suppose that the display of product information is deemed as an offer, and this offer is accepted by a website client and his acceptance is communicated online via the same website, the communication between the client and the website owner is

likely to be carried out instantaneously. In this situation, the parties in web transactions are simultaneously connected between computers rather than humans (Todd 2008:41). That is to say, orders placed via a website may be processed by programmed software and not involve a human participating in any way. Thus, the application of the information theory that requires the offeror to be made aware of the acceptance appears to be impractical to apply in these circumstances. However, the fact remains that the software only acts based on what it is programmed to do so and thus it represents the party as it works on its behalf. Therefore, when the acceptance is communicated via the website by the client, the contract is complete when the client proceeds with the order providing his bank details and confirming his or her purchase by clicking on the acceptance button.

Conclusion

The Internet's structure has the ability to foster human interaction in considerably short time frames and without respect to physical boundaries. With regards to the time when a contract becomes legally binding, the nature and means of communication used to form the contract play an essential part in determining when a communicated message is deemed to take legal effect. That is to say, when an instantaneous means of communication is used to exchange the offer and the acceptance between the contracting parties, like the telephone, the contract is deemed to become legally effective at the time when the acceptance is brought to the attention of the offeror. However, when there is no direct form of communication between the parties, and no simultaneous exchange of offer and acceptance, a number of different legal theories have been established to determine when a contract is deemed to be formed.

In cyberspace, it is not clear when a contract is deemed to be formed. In this regard, neither the declaration theory which deems that a contract is formed at the time when the acceptance is expressed, nor the information theory which considers the contract legally binding when the acceptance is brought to the mind of the offeror seem to be appropriate for application. Consequently, the contract should be legally formed upon receipt of the

communicated acceptance. This approach provides greater objectivity and equality to both parties. It is accepted that upon receipt of the illegible email, the offeror, if he wishes to finalise the contract, should without undue delay inform the offeree of the problem and request the email to be resent.

It should be mentioned however that due to the legal uncertainty involved with the time of when an electronic contract shall be legally effective, the parties should clearly address this issue in their contract's terms and conditions in order to prevent any potential dispute. For example, they can stipulate that the contract can only be legally formed when the acceptance is read by the offeror, or when the acceptance is received. To recall, automatic confirmation of receipt established in electronic communication may provide certainty in that regard.

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Notes

[1] It is the place within which the contracting parties physically meet and engage to form a deal.

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Comment:

Tweeting like a Pigeon: The Internet in the Arab Revolutions

Miriyam Aouragh

Abstract

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

Keywords

music, Arab Spring, social media, communication studies, censorship, Tunisia, public sphere, cyberactivism, civic engagement, activism, Palestine, Egypt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Palestinian internet politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

How the Arab revolutions fuse with internet paradigms

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YouTube empowerment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fig. 2. El General – ”Tounes Bladna.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fig. 4. Anonymous: Time for Revolution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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Notes

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

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

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

[4] See Middle East Telecommunications Reports 2011.

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

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

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

[8] See for instance Joffe 2011.

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

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

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Review:

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive

Göran Larsson

Keywords

Egypt, Internet studies, Islam and civil society, Germany, Afghanistan, Morocco, Internet, fatwas, communication studies, blogs, dawah, social media

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive, (eds.) Matthias Brückner and Johanna Pink. Ergon Verlag: Würzburg, 2009. ISBN 978-3-89913-632-6, 215 pages.

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive, edited by Matthias Brückner and Johanna Pink, consists of a foreword and eight chapters that focus on different aspects of the Islamic and Muslim presence on the Internet. Contrary to most other volumes that could be counted as belonging to the genre of media and religion studies, this compilation has been produced by German-speaking scholars in Germany. From this perspective, it is a contribution that has the potential to supplement the overwhelming number of similar studies that have been produced in English.

The eight chapters in the volume are divided into three subsections. The first focuses on Internet use in the Islamic world, the second on trans-locality and the Internet, and the third on global Islam. Before I turn to the book‘s contents, it is important to pause and stress that the editors say very little about what they mean by the unclear concepts "the Islamic world" and "global Islam." Without discussing how the material in the book has been selected, the reader is mainly presented with separate case studies relating to Morocco, Afghanistan, Egypt, Germany - and more generally - North America and Europe. The chapters deal specifically with Internet use among

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Moroccan youth, bloggers in Afghanistan and Egypt, the interpretation of Islam on the Internet, Shia groups in Germany, online fatwas that deal with political participation, a so-called jihadi online library and Internet-based missionary work by Muslims. However, like many edited volumes, this book suffers from a lack of clear focus. The contributors do not, for example, refer to a common question, theory or method.

For example, whilst Ines Braune's chapter on Internet use among Moroccan youth is based on fieldwork, interviews and participant observation, the great majority of texts in Brückner and Pink's volume are based on an analysis of materials (for example, texts, images, photos) posted on the Internet. Even though it is common to describe the content of web pages and blogs in earlier studies, most chapters in the volume do not pay attention to or raise media theory questions. Ultimately the outcome is descriptive and not analytical. For example, in the chapters by Jens Kutscher and Rüdiger Lohlker, the reader is given an interesting and informed description of online fatwas and texts that deal with the concept of *jihad* in both historical and contemporary periods. However, it is not possible to say to what extent Muslims in Germany or in other places make use of these texts. And more importantly, what is the connection between new media and texts produced online? To put it differently, to what extent are the texts posted online dissimilar from the answers found in printed collections of fatwas or juridical and theological discussions about the concept of *jihad*? Even though some of these questions are partly addressed by Alev Inan (especially on p. 91) and Floriam Harms, who deals with missionary work (*da'wa*) on the Internet and the rise of new interpreters of Islam, it is difficult to find texts dealing with how Muslims actually make use of the material published on the Internet. We are mainly presented with the material found online. However, this problem is not unique to Brückner and Pink's edited volume, as many studies of religion on the Internet also suffer from being descriptive rather than analytical. This is a reminder of the fact that we still lack methods and empirical studies aimed at finding out how new media are being used by, for example, Muslims and other believers. It is very difficult to study possible connections between online and offline activities. This lacuna is a serious

problem in the study of religion and media. I believe that more studies could benefit and gain inspiration from Ines Braune's attempt to talk to people about how they actually make use of new media.

Contrary to Brückner and Pink, who seem to argue for the necessity of developing an "islamwissenschaftlichen Internetforschung" (Internet research on Islamic studies), I believe that the study of how Muslims make use of and relate to new media should be situated in a much larger context. How "believers" or followers of a specific religious tradition make use of new media is not unique to Muslims. I believe it would be much more fruitful to make cross comparisons between followers of several religious and non-religious traditions. It is also necessary to raise historical questions and consider if, how and to what extent the Internet is revolutionizing the world and to what extent this revolution is different from, say, the print revolution or the development of written language. These questions are not the focus of Brückner and Pink's book. Therefore, it would be unfair to criticise the authors for not dealing with them. Yet, by addressing these and similar questions, it would have been much easier for the contributors to move away from mere descriptions and push toward a much deeper analysis.

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Review:

Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran

Zuzana Krihova

Keywords

censorship, Internet, social media, information and communication technology, media studies, Middle Eastern studies, Iran, public sphere, blogs

Annabelle Sreberny, Gholam Khiabany. Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran. I.B. Tauris, 2010. ISBN: 9781845116064, 232 pages.

Often being credited with having a huge impact on facilitating the recent wave of protests in Iran, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, new social media - mainly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are being celebrated as successful tools of mass mobilization in so called "Twitter revolutions." Despite these claims, Iranian journalist Golnaz Esfandiari renames the Iranian Twitter revolution "the Twitter devolution," criticizing Western media for misreading the role that social media played during the Iranian post-election protests in the summer 2009. Mainstream Western media misconceptions and stereotypes about the way new media challenge the political power in the Middle East draw us closer to Evgeny Morozov's concept of cyber-utopianism, referring to the current excitement about the Internet and its democratizing potential being a cure and remedy for autocratic governments' mistreatments of its citizens.

Expectation of the free flow of information in unlimited digital sphere being a powerful tool of democratization, or - in Morozov's words: "let them tweet their way to freedom"-, stems according to Morozov from selective and incorrect readings of history. Revealing misconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions about the development of new media in the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.R.I.), Annabelle Sreberny and Mohammad Khiabany deal in *Blogistan* with various paradoxes and contradictions of Iranian policy towards the information and communication technologies (ICTs). Placing

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the Iranian blogosphere within the rapidly modernized telecommunication sector and looking at the democratic potentials of the Internet being suppressed by Iranian state policies, *Blogistan* reveals how the contradictions between the development of ICTs and its state's control as well as tension between market interests and revolutionary claims create a contradictory blogosphere in Iran.

Considering that weblogs became the most significant area of Internet growth in I.R.I. (estimated 700 000 blogs, 70 000 active blogs in 2009), the authors demonstrate its potential for empowerment of people as well as its limits in dealing with various issues in such a strictly controlled environment. Through eight chapters, *Blogistan* provides an analysis of the expansion of ICTs in Iran against a background of socio-economic and political development in the I.R.I. and examines the construction of the vibrant and frequently critical public forum in Iran, exposing its comments on various issues omitted by traditional media due to the censorship and government restrictions.

Although in terms of digital divides Iran is lagging behind its richer regional neighbors (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar), Persian ranks among the leading languages in the world's blogosphere. *Blogistan* thus attempts to shed more light on this fascinating phenomenon, rightly pointing out that the question of repressive tendencies of the state (often mentioned among prevailing causes behind the growth of weblogs in Iran) doesn't explain the Iranian phenomenon in its whole complexity: "If repressive state control alone were a sufficient cause then, for example, Chinese and Arab bloggers, and citizens of many other strong states, could and should proportionally outnumber Iranians." Setting blogging's rapid growth in Iran into the broader context of various technological, socio-economical and political factors, the authors discuss its alternative role in diffusing personal and private comments into a public space constrained by severe restrictions and surveillance by the Iranian regime. What is lacking, however, is a more extensive explanation of the blogging phenomenon in Iran, considering the fact that most of the mentioned factors can be found in other countries as well. A "complex set of reasons for the rapid emergence of a Persian blogosphere" in Chapter 2 is therefore rather incomplete.

Exploring the issue of why are so many Iranians blogging brings to the fore the examination of what actually constitutes an Iranian blog and how could it be categorized within a frame of its content, language and identity of the writers. Chapter 6 thus describes the relation and tension between Iranians and their compatriots in diaspora, examines the expatriates' weblogs, and points to the return migration and its impact on the virtual public forum in Iran. Special attention is dedicated also to women and their contributions to the Persian blogosphere, focusing on their articulation of many private issues never discussed before so openly in public.

Blogistan has been written mainly before the 2009 presidential election, therefore only the last chapter deals with the post-election protests and its impact on the blogosphere (and vice versa). Although the authors emphasize the level of politicization and civil activism of the Persian blogosphere and agree that new communications technologies serve as effective tools for popular social mobilization, they also argue that the Twitter functioned in the post-election protests of 2009 mainly "as a huge echo chamber of solidarity messages from global voices" that couldn't substitute for neither sufficient political strategy nor civil activism: "It illustrates that claims about the necessary and simple impact of the Internet on prosperity and democracy in developing countries are illusory and naive."

The blogosphere in the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.R.I.) provides a useful framework of analysis about the virtual citizen media trying to evade the control of the state. As Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany have shown, the blogosphere in Iran doesn't lack the potential to influence and strengthen the Iranian civil society. *Blogistan* provides a remarkable contribution to comparative media studies, and it makes an excellent introduction to the problematic of new media research in Iran. Beside the blogosphere itself, it focuses on various other issues from a new, not-traditional perspective. The authors also aspire to open up the new debate about intellectualism in Iran and suggest some inspiring topics to discuss in the fields of gender, culture and traditional media.