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## Social media and the Arab Spring

### How communication technology shapes socio-political change

#### I. Introduction

The Arab Spring, the set of upheavals and protest events across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that are often subsumed under this headline, were Twitter or Facebook revolutions, built on the emergent infrastructure of digital platform-based communications. That, at least, is one popular view. It is not a story steeped in local socio-historical context. Instead pundits have inserted demonstrations from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain and Syria into a larger meta-narrative of digital empowerment that begins with Moldova's 'Twitter revolution' and Iran's 'Green movement', continuing afterwards into the Ukrainian Euromaidan and Istanbul's Gezi Park protests.

The role of social media platforms and Internet-connected devices has been emphasised as key to these upheavals, and to wider socio-political change. Since the medium-term consequences of the Arab Spring have turned out to be much more inimical than early onlookers anticipated, this narrative of technology-driven solutions has been muted. Nevertheless, the idea of digital democratisation, that digital media can effect a redistribution of power by radically transforming the relationship between the public and centres of political authority, persists. Social media, so the story goes, empowers ordinary citizens to gain voice, debate, coordinate and mobilise, so that even autocratic power structures will be flattened.

Clay Shirky and Manuel Castells are firmly in this camp of cyber optimists,<sup>1</sup> whereas Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell are popular critics of this narrative of

empowerment.<sup>2</sup> The cyber-optimistic narrative relies heavily on a technological-determinist view of socio-political change, and is therefore somewhat reductionist. Nevertheless, this is an important narrative, not least because the idea of technologically-led solutions shapes policy priorities. During Iran's post-election protests the U.S. State Department requested that Twitter postpone platform maintenance in order to keep its service live. As Internet access was cut off during Egypt's Tahrir Square demonstrations, Google created a workaround that allowed people to tweet by phoning in and leaving a voicemail.<sup>3</sup> Twitter was perceived as crucial to the organisation and mobilisation of the protests.

For that reason it is just as important to understand how the impact and potential of communications technologies is commonly thought about or 'imagined' as it is to understand how changing technologies *actually* impact processes of socio-political change. Policies to monitor, limit access, disrupt, jam, or otherwise control flows of communication, just like programmes to support the adoption and resilience of new communication technologies or the so-called Islamic State's use of social media, are all informed by the belief that social media can radically augment the communicative capabilities of social actors, and can thus shift the distribution of power.

Clearly social media and digital communication technologies are important, but our understanding of their effects on social and political change is still nascent. The existence of social media and Internet connected devices alone is not enough to explain the Arab Spring. Institutional weakness and lack of legitimacy, demographic trends, and economic

<sup>1</sup> Castells, *Communication Power*, 2009; Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Gladwell, *Small Change*, 2010; Morozov, *Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution"*, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Oreskovic, *Google Launches Twitter Workaround for Egypt*, 2011.

malaise formed the fundamental backdrop to these events. The rise of Internet and social media use cannot discount the catalytic influence of these factors, on which other contributors to this issue are eminently better qualified to comment. Nonetheless, the media ecologies of MENA countries are crucial to understand changing flows of information, the communicative means at citizens' disposal, and consequently how public opinion may be shaped and mobilised.

Popular uprisings, in other words, would have been on the cards irrespective of social media, but social media is crucial in understanding exactly how the Arab Spring was communicated, and how it cascaded across swathes of the Arabic speaking world. What then does available evidence tell us about the role of communication technologies in the Arab Spring?

## II. The MENA's media ecology, satellite TV, and Internet penetration

In the decades preceding the Arab Spring the Arabic speaking world witnessed a notable proliferation of pan-Arab (and Persian) satellite TV channels. The all news Qatari Al Jazeera rose to prominence with its coverage of the September 11 attacks in 2001, and was joined in 2003 by the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya. These are just some amongst many transnational satellite channels, which include BBC Persian, BBC Arabic, VOA Persian and the VOA's Alhurra TV. Notably, the spread of satellite TV opened up a pan-Arab communications space.<sup>4</sup>

More recently the MENA region has seen considerable gains in Internet bandwidth. The World Bank estimated that broadband penetration has reached around 27% of MENA

households, and mobile broadband around 30% of the population,<sup>5</sup> while the International Telecommunication Union estimates that 36% of Egyptians and 38% of Tunisians used the Internet in 2010.<sup>6</sup> A Pew survey carried out in March 2013 found that 88% of Egyptians and Tunisians own a mobile phone (and 23% of Egyptians and 12% of Tunisians own a smartphone), while 88% of Egyptian and 85% of Tunisian Internet users engage in social networking and 82 % of Egyptian and 66% of Tunisian Internet users are online daily.<sup>7</sup>

Blogs, online platforms for self-publishing, were hailed as a means for circumventing state-censorship and proliferated in the early 2000's, particularly in Egypt and Iran. At one point Persian ranked second only to English as most popular blogging language. Facebook started fully supporting Arabic in 2009, and by the end of 2009 900,000 Tunisians (just under 10% of the population, rising to 20% by the time President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled into Saudi exile) had Facebook accounts.<sup>8</sup> Mobile phones (increasingly smartphones), the use of social media, and other online services have become increasingly ubiquitous across the MENA region.

Satellite TV and the rise of social media were probably the two most important developments in the MENA region's media ecology leading up to the Arab Spring. They are of course fundamentally different kinds of media which afford very different kinds of communication. Satellite TV stations are in the business of producing content; they have hierarchically integrated production structures, with well-defined gatekeepers making choices about the content broadcast to a mass audience. But as satellite TV broadcasts transnationally, local authorities cannot exercise control over its content, giving citizens access to

<sup>4</sup> Elseewi, *Revolution of the Imagination*, 2011; Howard and Hussain, *The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia*, 2011; Robertson, *What's Going on?*, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Gelvanovska, Rogy, and Rossotto, *Broadband Networks in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2014; Seo and Thorson, *Networks of Networks*, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *Data Explorer*, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Centre, *Emerging Nations Embrace Internet, Mobile Technology*, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Rosen, So, *Was Facebook Responsible for the Arab Spring After All?*, 2011.

otherwise unavailable information. Al Jazeera has frequently been said to focus on issues that are at odds with the interests of regional elites, though its coverage of the Bahraini protests was considered to be more muted, as the broadcaster fell into line with Qatari foreign policy priorities.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, during both Iran's post-election protests and the Arab Spring, satellite signals were repeatedly jammed (deliberate interference with satellite uplinks and downlinks) in an effort to prevent people watching foreign TV – interfering signals appeared to originate from Iran and Syria.<sup>10</sup> Satellite TV is widely regarded as a crucial source of entertainment, news and information in the MENA region. Unlike social media, TV requires a lower level of literacy, and can be received in regions without Internet penetration.

Social media platforms are not in the business of content creation; it is their users who create social media content. Any user can post status updates, photos, videos, likes, and shares (i.e. content); indeed, they may share or curate content across different platforms. A video uploaded on YouTube can be shared on Facebook and Twitter, downloaded, edited and re-uploaded. Social media affords what Castells calls 'mass self-communication', enabling the diffusion of content through horizontal networked structures without hierarchically integrated production pipelines. Social media is also inherently transnational. Philip Howard and Malcolm Parks suggest that we think about it as the platforms on which users can interact and post content, including the technologies (e.g. smartphones) that they use to access these platforms. Social media also refers to the content users generate, be it images, text, video, shares, likes, or other traces of networked interactions, and lastly to the various activities through which users

generate and access the content that floods our social streams.<sup>11</sup>

The crucial difference thus lies in content production (horizontally distributed vs. vertically integrated), and the mechanisms and pathways of diffusion (linear and unidirectional vs. non-linear, multidirectional, and networked). It is because social media affords distributed self-communication, removing the gatekeepers of broadcast media, and because of its non-linear, multidirectional nature that it is often thought to flatten hierarchies, and liberate communication flows from centralised control. Likewise, satellite TV challenges the ability of local authorities to control the flow of communication.

### **III. The interaction between social and broadcast media in multi-media, multi-platform communication environments was key to the diffusion of information about the Arab Spring**

Even though much of the popular emphasis has been on the role of social media in enabling protests, one of its most important roles was in documenting the demonstrations. Most of the images through which audiences around the world, and indeed within the MENA region, witnessed these events were recorded by citizens and shared on the social web. This development was unprecedented, and began with Iran's post-election protests: When protests erupted after Iran's 2009 election results were announced, the government swiftly instituted a media blackout. Journalists who did not work for state-controlled media, including international correspondents that were in Tehran, were sent home or confined to their hotel rooms. But while journalists were unable to report from the streets themselves, thousands of citizens shared photos and videos of the protests across the social web, includ-

<sup>9</sup> Harb, *Arab Revolutions and the Social Media Effect*, 2011; Greenslade, *Tunisia Breaks Ties with Qatar over Al-Jazeera*, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Stanworth, *Interference Leaves Broadcasters in a Jam*, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Howard and Parks, *Social Media and Political Change*, 2012.

ing the infamous video of Neda Agha-Soltan dying of a bullet wound.

When protests erupted in Tunisia, news organisations as well as protestors learnt the lessons of the Iranian protests. Citizens documented protests avidly, and shared their material on social media, while journalists drew on this material to report the uprisings. International news organisations were quick to seize on social media content to reconstruct the story of protests and report ongoing events. Audiences around the world could see a video posted on YouTube or Facebook broadcast on the evening news.

As a consequence, the way much of the world witnessed the Arab Spring depended crucially on the content shared by ordinary people, and the ability of content to flow from the social web to newspapers and TV news. Never before was amateur content used to this extent, not only to illustrate an on-going story, but to determine the facts of the story from scratch without a correspondent in the field. One of the Arab Spring's legacies is that newsrooms around the world learned how to report the news relying almost exclusively on this kind of user-generated content.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in provincial Sidi Bouzid would have triggered the nationwide, and indeed regional, protests it did – after all self-immolation as an act of protest was not unprecedented – had a video of his mother leading a peaceful protest not been shared online, picked up by Al Jazeera and broadcast on the evening news.

The broader upheavals of the Arab Spring may well have happened without this multimedia, multi-platform confluence of social and broadcast media, but it is hard to imagine that

it would have happened in the same way and at the same pace had eyewitness media not been picked up and broadcast by pan-Arab satellite channels. The ubiquity of social media and satellite TV, and the way these media sources interfaced with each other, was key to the diffusion of images and videos of protests across the MENA region.<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. How did protestors communicate?

The big question, and the one on which we only have fragmentary evidence, is how those who participated in protests gained information about the protests, and whether social media was indeed such an important tool for the organisation of protests. The most substantive field research on media use during the protests was carried out by Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, who conducted a four day survey of 1,200 people on Tahrir Square in February 2011.<sup>13</sup> Of those surveyed almost half (48%) first heard about the Tahrir Square protests through face-to-face communication, followed by Facebook (28%) and telephone (13%), while only a minority (4%) first heard about the protests on satellite TV.

Nevertheless, more generally satellite TV was the most important source of information about protests (92% of respondents),<sup>14</sup> followed by telephone (82%), Facebook (51%), and Twitter (13%). Of those surveyed 80% reported having Internet access at home and over 50% had Internet access on their phone – compared with 42% of the general population who used the Internet.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, almost half of the respondents acted as citizen journalists, disseminating images or videos of the protest, Facebook being the most frequently used platform to do so. Tufekci and Wilson find that those who used broadcast media were less likely to attend the protest on

<sup>12</sup> Hänska, *Networked Communication and the Arab Spring*, 2016; Hänska and Shapour, *Who's Reporting the Protests?*, 2013; Howard and Hussain, *The Upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia*, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Tufekci & Wilson, *Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest*, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> See also: Aday et al., *New Media and Conflict after the Arab Spring*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> General population estimate taken from: ITU, *Data Explorer*, 2016. As ITU data is differently compiled, the comparison between the study's sample and the general population is merely suggestive.

the first day than those who used social media, telephone, or email.

It is not possible to untangle the impact of different media and communication technologies precisely because they are fused together both in usage and as information conduits. Someone may be tweeting about a protest while watching a video of it on Facebook or YouTube, while the same video may also be airing on satellite TV. She may then discuss the protests over Telegram or WhatsApp (instant messaging services), or on the telephone, and later meet-up on the street, at home, or in a coffee shop to continue the conversation. All these instances of communication are crucial to the way information flows, people are mobilised, and opinions are formed. We cannot understand this media ecology without social media, satellite TV, and telephones, and without recognising that in these multimedia, multi-platform environments people communicate across all of them. People, and the information they share, are not tied to one media source, or a single social media platform.

In autocratic regimes public communications always takes the path of least resistance, including platforms that offer end-to-end encryption, such as WhatsApp. In the lead-up to Iran's revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini's sermons were distributed on cassette tapes and played as people gathered around the pulpit – not because all revolutionaries were religious, but because expression in mosques remained fairly unconstrained under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, making religious conduits the path of least resistance for the revolutionary message. Similarly, in the Arab Spring people had a plethora of platforms to choose from, to combine, to draw upon. When one conduit closed, they chose another one. In fact, as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak discovered, shutting down communications can have adverse effects. His

government, lacking sophistication, simply pulled the plug on the Internet. Unable to communicate online, thousands flooded onto the street to meet up, augmenting the protests.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Outlook: Information flows in rapidly changing media ecologies

We should not be deterministic about technology. The Arab Spring did not happen because of social media, but this does not mean it was unimportant. Instead of singling out the role of social media, we must emphasise the complex ecological interaction between various communication technologies, platforms, and practices. The overall picture is one in which no single media stands out as most important to the protests. The information environment was shaped by inter-personal communication (face-to-face, over the telephone, email, and instant messenger), the diffusion of images and video across multiple social media platforms, and the broadcast of smartphone videos on the evening news. Without the interactions between social and broadcast media, without information flowing across and between these various conduits, it is hard to imagine the Arab Spring evolving the way it did. Much less is it possible to imagine upheavals cascading from Tunisia across the Maghreb and southern Levant.

It is true that as more and more people across the MENA region go online they become more connected. But the focus on the connected individual should not lead us to overlook the connections between interpersonal, social, and broadcast media. Information is not proprietary; it flows from a private conversation to a tweet and phone call, to a demonstration, to a YouTube video, to newsrooms across the world. Information was not broadcast through one channel, but diffused across multiple channels, and different platforms.

<sup>16</sup> Wolman, *Facebook, Twitter Help the Arab Spring Blossom*, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Tufekci, *Pepper-Spray and Penguins*, 2013.

It is noteworthy that protestors across the MENA region engaged so prolifically in documenting protests and disseminating this information across their social streams. It is crucial to understand that much of this material recorded by ordinary people shaped the news narratives that audiences witnessed around the world, as journalists drew heavily on this user-generated content in making the news. People across the MENA region would not have experienced the Arab Spring in the way they did had there not been a flood of images and videos recorded by protesters themselves, percolating their way across the social web and into the evening news.

The combination of satellite, social and other media meant that communication flows were distributed, and were not controlled by national media institutions, eroding the centralised control of communications that autocracies used to rely on. The experiences that people gathered from their media use, and the way information diffused during the Arab Spring, has come to inform the practices of contemporary actors across the region, from governments to journalists, refugees, and even IS. Activists learnt how to use social media to disseminate information about protests and coordinate collective actions, while journalists learnt how to use social media effectively in their reporting, to the extent that social media has become a routine part of contemporary newsrooms. Authorities from Cairo to Ankara are aware that Mubarak's cack-handed effort to control information flows by switching off the Internet may

have stoked the demonstrations. And it seems likely that the way social media images shaped international news informs IS's use of online videos.

The big question as to whether social media flattened power structures is yet to be settled.<sup>17</sup> Even though we can plausibly conclude that social media was key to how the uprisings were catalysed, it may also help explain why the Arab Spring failed in the medium term. Tufekci notes that in Gezi Park all kind of people – gays, lesbians and ultra-nationalists – marched against (then) Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>18</sup> Social media made it easy for anyone to join in, making it a resistance movement composed of people who decided to join individually. *But*, Gezi was not a coalition of movements with deep organisational structures and a common identity that coalesced around a well-defined common goal. This, ultimately, made the movement fragile. The absence of deep structures and strong ties may help to explain the speed and scale of the Arab Spring, but also why it was so unsuccessful in producing the kind of sustained, strategic coordination that political change requires. While multimedia, multi-platform, networked communications environments are good at supporting the kind of loose coordination required for tearing down one system of authority, they are not (yet) good at supporting the kind of deep and sustained coordination that constructing and maintaining new forms of political authority necessitate. This may yet prove to be the Arab Spring's most enduring lesson.

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