

Book Excerpt
Online Activism in the Middle East:
Political Power and Authoritarian Governments from Egypt to Kuwait

Jon Nordenson

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Does the Internet facilitate social and political change, or even democratization, in the Middle East? The subject of this inquiry is the use of online platforms among activists in the Middle East, and the importance of such platforms in effecting change. The topic has received wide attention over the past few years, not least following the so-called ‘Arab Spring.’ The story of a generation of young, tech-savvy activists utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms to bring Egypt’s dictator of 30 years to his knees is a powerful narrative, and one which to varying degrees has been embraced by the news media and others. As illustrated in the statement above, taken from a T-shirt sold in Cairo, the part played by social media has been celebrated in Egypt as well. Yet this view also has its critics. The Egyptian revolution had manifold causes, including corruption, police brutality, unemployment, low salaries, and poor prospects: realities faced by all Egyptians regardless of whether or not they had a Facebook account. Moreover, as Egyptian blogger Tarek Shalaby pointed out, ‘it all comes down to taking streets,’ and the over 800 people killed during the revolution did not die online.

The use of various online platforms was highly visible during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution, but visibility does not equal impact. Rather, it raises several crucial questions: Did people use social media, when available, during and before the revolution? If so, what did they do online? Was it online platforms that tilted the balance in favor of the revolution? And what about the other, less dramatic but still highly influential, campaigns that activists have led in the Middle East over the past few years in which the use of online platforms was also a very visible factor: How important were blogs to the successful campaign for electoral reform in Kuwait in 2006? Could police torture have been exposed as convincingly in Egypt without YouTube? Was the Iranian uprising in 2009 a ‘Twitter-revolution,’ or rather a revolution for Twitter? In short, what can and what cannot be attributed to the Internet, and what has the Internet introduced into the relationship between people and democratization in the Middle East?

Not only are these questions intriguing in their own right, the sheer volume of online production globally makes studies of these and similar questions a necessity: every month, more than 320 million people use Twitter in more than 35 languages. As for Facebook, the site had over 1 billion users daily as of December 2015, and 1.59 billion users every month. YouTube has about 1 billion users, who are watching hundreds of millions of hours of video every day. An enormous production takes place continuously online, the likes of which has never been seen before. Importantly, it is not mainly

produced in the US, as in the early days of commercially accessible Internet: for Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, usage outside the US accounts for 79 per cent, 83 per cent, and 80 per cent, respectively. Of course, most of the content is not related to the subject matter of this investigation, and Internet access is far from universal. Yet, the potential importance of these platforms is evident, and Internet access is not static. With a growth in Internet penetration of more than 3,500 per cent in the Middle East region over the past 15 years, online platforms demand—and have received—scholarly attention. Questions such as those posed above have been explored and debated by researchers and others for over two decades. They will also be examined in this investigation, through a detailed, empirical study of the actual, day-to-day usage of online platforms among activists in Egypt and Kuwait. By doing so, I seek to provide a new level of detail, and on a sound, empirical basis, contribute to a more comprehensive and tangible understanding of online activism.

Yet, it is not easy to articulate this subject as a question, nor is such a question, once articulated, easy to answer. Moreover, it is not obvious how we should go about answering such a question: that is, how we can best study online activism and its repercussions. We cannot simply investigate the influence of ‘the Internet’ per se. We have to pay attention to what we mean by ‘the Internet,’ that is, which platforms are used, and for what purposes. There is a clear difference between discussing corruption in an authoritarian state and organizing a revolution, though both may be important in bringing about the eventual downfall of a dictator. There certainly is a big difference between how much certain social media were used during, for instance, a revolution, and how much this usage influenced that revolution. These distinctions may be overlooked in the media and public debate, but they must be addressed from a research perspective.

Quite obviously, there are numerous relevant questions we could investigate, in many different ways, using different forms of material. However, we should not try to do so in one study. For one thing, the sheer amount of data gathered when studying online activism is usually so extensive that a clear focus is needed if one is to have manageable material to work with. Moreover, different questions demand different strategies and different material. If we are to investigate online discussion habits among, say, young Emiratis, we need to dig into the dialogues on the various platforms used. However, if we want to study the workings of a particular group or party, we might look at their work both online and offline, the strategy behind their online presence, and so on.

Furthermore, if we cast the net too wide, the ever-important task of properly contextualizing our study might become difficult. In addition to the online environment, factors such as geographical location, political system and social norms, the issues discussed and the groups involved from the context within which our online material is situated, and which may add meaning and importance to various aspects of the work studied. As Shani Orgad has argued, ‘It has become clear that the separation between the online and offline cannot be sustained. Researchers have consistently argued for the need to frame the online both in its own right and in relation to other contexts and realities.’ Orgad here underscored another important point: since we cannot separate the online from the offline, we have no reason to believe the online is less complex than the offline. That is, we can hardly expect to describe and understand online activism and politics in a single study, just as we cannot expect to explain activism and politics in general in a single study. It is better to think of it as a puzzle, where different studies build on each other to construct our understanding of various aspects of Internet usage and its implications in the Middle East, and elsewhere for that matter. In putting together this puzzle, we need to identify the pieces that are missing and, clearly, we do not start from scratch.

Overview of the Field

First of all, defining the field within which this study should be seen is in itself problematic. As pointed out by Lynch, '[t]he spread and potential impact of these new social media is relevant to broader debates in political science, sociology, and media theory,' and to debates in other fields as well. In addition, the questions that one decides to explore will influence which fields might be relevant, and these in turn may dictate particular methodological choices. For instance, quantitative analysis of big data is quite different from a close study of one or more bloggers, perhaps both online and offline. Yet, even though there are different methodological and theoretical approaches, they have something in common: In studies concerned with the Internet, the material used is often obtained online, or at least concerned with activities taking place online. As such, there are many common challenges and problems to be dealt with, and much has been written on what is often referred to as Internet studies, or Internet research. The aim of this study is to gain further knowledge on the use and effect of online platforms as employed by activists in the Middle East. This inevitably involves engaging with challenging concepts, such as political and social change, democracy and democratization, and the relevant literature is not restricted either to Internet studies or to any particular geographical area. Accordingly, in discussing methodology, theoretical debates within the field, and later my own findings and analysis, a variety of sources from different fields will be used. Still, the focus throughout is on the use and effect of online platforms.

In her 2006 study of Internet usage in Kuwait, Wheeler writes that '[s]everal scholars of contemporary Middle Eastern studies have probed the relationship between the Internet and democratization in the Islamic world. Their findings are mixed.' Most would find it hard to argue with this statement. There is little consensus within the field, but rather a lively debate as to what we actually can observe, and how to interpret it. Wheeler, for her part, argues for the need to see the Internet and its use within its proper context, avoiding Western-centrism in order to understand its meaning within the local setting, both online and offline. Looking at the habits of Kuwaiti users, she finds that the Internet might offer new opportunities and more freedom to both young people and women, but that political views were not necessarily expressed widely online. At the same time, she also showed that the Internet provides an arena for bypassing traditional barriers separating men and women, and even to protest against formal barriers created for that very reason.

Online habits are also the subject of Hofheinz's 2005 study of Internet use in the wider Arab world. Based on an analysis of extensive online material, he identifies two characteristics of Internet use in the region: 'First, religion has a greater weight than anywhere else in the world, and secondly, Arab users are particularly eager to engage in discussion—not least of politics, religion, and sex.' This observation is further supported by a 2012 survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which found that '[e]xpressing opinions about politics, community issues and religion is particularly common in the Arab world.' The study shows that almost twice as many users are likely to discuss politics in the Arab countries included in the survey compared to the median of all countries surveyed. The mere fact that people are discussing sensitive topics online does not, in itself, necessarily lead to political change, but it may create important expectations and, no less important, practices, as argued by Zayani. This point is further developed by Dahlgren and Olsson, although their argument is based on a study of online habits among young Internet users in Sweden. In their view:

It can be argued that as the young, active citizens use the internet, they inevitably become involved in discussions and debates; even if this takes place largely on sites where they encounter like-minded participants, this tends to cultivate a loyalty towards democratic values and procedures.

Clearly, Sweden is a well-established democracy, and there are many factors that would predispose these users to favor ‘democratic values and procedures.’ Nevertheless, the effect of speaking one’s opinion and participating in discussions within authoritarian states can, as we shall see, hardly be disregarded although it is hard to assess.

In line with the studies mentioned above, the 2009 Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere project also found politics and religion to be important subjects. The comprehensive study identified a base of 35,000 blogs in the region, created a network map of 6,000 of them and hand-coded 4,000. On this firm empirical basis, the study observed that the Arabic blogosphere is predominantly organized around countries, with the Egyptian and Kuwaiti blogospheres being two of the largest. Within these country-specific spheres, they identify several sub-groups, which in Egypt are partly related to ideological orientation. They further argue that these countries contain two of the most engaged blogospheres, with Kuwaiti bloggers engaged in electoral politics and their Egyptian counterparts playing ‘roles in movement politics.’ of the two, the Egyptian blogosphere is by far the largest, comprising almost one-third of the blogs included in the study. Thus, it may not be surprising that there exists a—comparatively—extensive literature on bloggers and online activism in Egypt. For instance, a 2008 article by Radsch traces the development of the Egyptian blogosphere, arguing that, by the time of her writing, it had been through three distinct phases: An early experimentation phase an activist phase during the period 2005-6, followed by a phase of diversification and fragmentation from then on. She ties the rise of the Egyptian blogosphere closely to the beginning of the secular pro-democracy movement in the mid-2000s, part of which is known as *Kifaya*, and the diversification phase with the demise of this movement, along with the entry of new groups online, including young members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This chronology, as well as the centrality of the bloggers to the early pro-democracy movement and the importance of the discussions conducted online by young Brothers, is largely reiterated in other articles. Several important events have been attributed to bloggers, particularly connected to exposing malpractice or indifference on the part of the regime. Online debates have also been given great significance in and of themselves, although, as Eaton points out, it is not always clear why this is done: ‘Many political scientists have heralded the importance of freedom of expression through the Internet in the Middle East, though few tackle the specifics of how this may actually effect political change.’ This problem is also raised by Salvatore, who argues that the promises of the public sphere seem to be ‘fulfilled in unexpected ways’ by the Internet’s ability to ‘transform passive connectivity into active mobilization’ as seen in the so-called Arab Spring.

Not surprisingly, the 2010/11 uprisings, and in particular the Egyptian revolution, and the role of online platforms in them have provoked much debate, as well as academic attention. Using an extensive data set covering several countries, Howard and Hussain argue that ‘[d]igital media had a causal role in the Arab Spring in that they provided the fundamental infrastructure for social movements and collective action.’ Rane and Salem, also looking at several countries, argue that social media played an important part in diffusing ideas across national boundaries and in facilitating communication among activists, but point out that success or failure largely depended on other factors. Similarly, in their study of the Egyptian uprising, Eltantawy and Wiest make use of resource mobilization theory, arguing that ‘[s]ocial media introduced a novel resource that provided swiftness in receiving and disseminating information; helped to build and strengthen ties among activists, and increased interaction among protesters and between protesters and the rest of the world.’ In another case study of the Egyptian revolution, Khamis and Vaughn argue that cyberactivism played a crucial

role in providing forums for ‘free speech and political networking opportunities.’ In their view, ‘these aggregate efforts resulted in tilting the political and communication balance in Egypt in favor of freedom-fighters and political activists.’ although they do caution that ‘new media were nothing more than powerful tools.’

Also concerned with Egypt, Tufekci and Wilson have investigated the role of social media in the decision to partake in protests, and argue that there was a positive connection between respondents’ social media use and whether or not they attended the first day of protests. The study is based on what the authors refer to as the ‘Tahrir Data Sets’, which include survey data from protesters, interviews with selected ‘power users’ and a sample gathered from Twitter based on the most used hashtag during the uprising. As such, it demonstrates both the possibilities inherent in combining quantitative and qualitative material, and the value of larger samples of material, as is also the case in some of the studies mentioned above. In a different study based on the same material, Wilson and Dunn come to a rather more ambivalent conclusion. They found that digital media was not ‘dominant in Egyptian protest activity’, although it was an ‘integral and driving component in the media landscape.’ Moreover, they argue that Twitter was used successfully to gain international attention, primarily due to a limited number of ‘power users’—influential activists online. The centrality of power users is reiterated by Faris, who conducted extensive fieldwork in Egypt both before and during the 2011 revolution. He argues that social media is key to gaining wider attention for any specific issue through links between power users and journalists.

Yet, while several studies agree that online platforms did play an important part during the uprisings, particularly due to their ability to connect people, to enable mobilization, and to document the situation and connect with the outside world, the conclusions drawn so far are relatively modest and somewhat tentative. For instance, in his study of the Egyptian revolution, Eaton also argues that the:

significance of Internet-based information and communication technologies (ICT) [...] was twofold: first, in their utility as a tool for activists to mobilize, organize and inspire Egyptians [...] and, second, in their use as a medium to document events in Egypt beyond the reach of the authorities.

However, he further argues that ‘while it may appear logical, even obvious, to suggest that WAAKS [We are all Khalid Said] increased the likelihood of its members participating in the demonstrations, there remains a lack of concrete evidence.’

Even so, it is well-established that there is a wide array of online political discussion taking place in the Arab world, more than in other regions. The Egyptian blogosphere is both dominant and, to a substantial degree, political: from the beginning it has been closely connected to activism. Yet, the precise effects of these online deliberations have been more difficult to establish. Furthermore, the studies discussed demonstrate clear differences in their methodological choices: whereas some studies are based on analysis of online material and/or other sources, others provide a broader overview using detached examples from various sources. Moreover, the case or field covered in each study varies greatly, as some seek to cover the Egyptian revolution as such, whereas other focus on particular sites or samples. Naturally, this has clear implications for the level of details that can be provided. In terms of theoretical approaches to the material, different sources are drawn upon, including social movements theory, diffusion theory and resource mobilization theory. By far the dominant framework, however, is that of the public sphere.

To some extent, this debate has produced two lines of inquiry. Some studies look at particular sites, places, campaigns, and so on, and discuss their findings within the framework of the public sphere. Other studies are more purely theoretically constructed and are often concerned with the structural features of the Internet itself, particularly with the advent of Web 2.0, and with whether or not the conditions provided encourage and/or have established one or more public spheres in a more or less Habermasian sense. Yet, as Richard Butsch points out, '[t]he debates have produced fewer answers and no consensus on what is a public sphere, or whether or in what form it exists. It has generated relatively less empirical investigation into actually existing public spheres.' Being a debate on Internet use as well as on Internet structure, it is concerned not only with how we are to understand Internet use, but also with its potential. As such, Papacharissi claims that '[r]esearch on the political potential of the Internet is frequently rapt in the dualities of determinism, utopian and dystopian.' A similar view is presented by Hofheinz, who argues that:

[i]n other words, we haven't come past the stage of hypothesis building. In the absence of more systematic research, cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics will continue to throw anecdotes at one another to demonstrate how effective or not social media is in bringing about revolutions.

For his part, Lynch argues that the recent events in the region and social media's role in them should 'push debates about the effects of new media away from stylized arguments between optimists and sceptics and towards more careful empirical testing of specific mechanisms and claims.' This, in his view, would entail using new tools of analysis, and empirically investigating more specific questions 'lurking behind sweeping arguments.' This view is echoed by Gerbaudo, who argues that we must abandon pessimistic or optimistic outlooks in favor of a more balanced view, 'considering how these forms of communication are adopted within specific social movements, rather than assessing their properties in the abstract.'

In a similar vein, Ben Moussa argues that '[e]xisting literature, however, is marked by numerous lacunas, chief among them an insufficient number of studies in the field, their overtly descriptive nature, and the excessive focus on religion-oriented political groups and discourses.' Here, he points to a crucial factor: namely, that the lack of empirical studies is connected to the vagueness both of the findings and of the theoretical debate. As argued by Coudry et al.: 'The decades-long debate on media and the public sphere has primarily been normative, rather than empirical, in character.' Theory is meant to help us understand what we observe. If it is too abstract or too normative, it does not necessarily describe what we observe. Through theory, we may identify and explain the crucial features of what we observe and the mechanisms through which what we observe works. Without this understanding we may overlook crucial parts and end up with vague and descriptive findings. Clearly, many studies conducted to date have provided extremely valuable insights but, in order to move on, we need to develop our theoretical understanding on the basis of empirical studies. Moreover, I argue that we need to do so on the basis of new cases and new material: Much of the focus so far has been either on well-known examples of successful activism in Egypt in the 2000s or on the Egyptian uprising in 2011. Clearly, such events demand and deserve academic attention. Still, we also need to study the use of online platforms beyond the established successful cases or extreme situations. If such instances are the only examples we can find of successful online activism, one might ask if we are, in fact, studying the benefits brought forth by online platforms, or rather cases of activism in which online platforms were used. Thus, I argue, we need to examine practice on a day-to-day basis.

Clearly, one could argue that some of the studies referred to above are concerned with everyday usage in the sense that they investigate, for instance, the Egyptian blogosphere in general. However, this inevitably involves enormous amounts of the material, and thus often ends up focusing on well-known examples. Similarly, while the studies mapping habits across the region are extremely valuable, the sheer amount of material involved prohibits highly detailed analysis. The devil may very well be in the details, and I argue that a detailed investigation into the day-to-day use of online platforms by groups and activists working in the region, and the contributions this usage provides, would produce new insights. By restricting the scope, and thus the amount of material, examples can be replaced by a comprehensive description of the analysis of Internet use and its benefits. Thus, in turn, can be used to identify how online platforms contribute, and thus help to generate a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of their importance. This study aims to provide such an investigation, which has implications for the research design, regarding both what to study and how to study it. I believe a qualitative, properly contextualized case study of a limited number of sites/groups offers the best approach to make possible the required level of detail. Importantly, as Stake points out, '[f]or a qualitative research community, case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and close attention to the influences of its social, political and other contexts.'

Inherent in this focus on contextualization is an expectation that the specific possibilities, needs, and limitations that a particular context provides influence the online behavior of the actors involved. That is not to say that online behavior depends on offline context alone: The online is also a context, and the technical possibilities which different platforms provide are common to all. Yet, as Zayani argues, there exists a 'pervasive tendency to homogenize the Arab digital experience,' which should be avoided. This, in turn, raises the issue of what is context-specific, and what is more general, when it comes to Internet use among activists in the Middle East.

Jon Nordenson is based at the University of Oslo, where he also completed his PhD at the Center for Islamic and Middle East Studies. He has published in The Middle East Journal and Babylon - Nordic Journal for the Middle East and North Africa for which he won the Babylon Award for best contribution by a young researcher. He is a former board member for The Nordic Society for Middle East Studies.

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