

Beyond Egypt’s “Facebook Revolution” and Syria’s “YouTube Uprising:” Comparing Political Contexts, Actors and Communication Strategies

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Introduction

There is no doubt that social media has played, and are still playing, a crucial role in the calls for political change that have swept the Arab region. However, their role as catalysts for political change and mobilizers for political action must be contextualized within the broader political and social structure in each country, with all their respective complexities and unique qualities. Therefore, in comparing and contrasting the role of cyberactivism in the Egyptian revolution and in the Syrian uprising, one year since they began, it is important to compare and contrast the underlying nuanced social, political and communication structures unique to each country, as well as the different roles of their various political actors and the types of online and offline communication strategies they deployed.

This necessitates avoiding the technologically deterministic approach that privileges the tools of social change over the actors that employ them, thus inappropriately elevating social media above face-to-face mass action as agents for bringing about political change. We contend that social media may be necessary, but are not sufficient, tools for pursuing and achieving sociopolitical transformation. For example, describing the Egyptian revolution as the “Facebook Revolution” or calling the Syrian uprising the “YouTube uprising”, as some analysts and commentators have named them, glosses over the sheer material and moral force of millions of Egyptians and Syrians who took to the streets, risking injury, disability, or death, to fight for self-determination, basic human rights, dignity, and freedom.

We must also consider what revolutionary phase Egypt and Syria have reached, which dictates the role of social media, i.e. how and why they are being used, by whom, and for what purpose(s). For example, the fact that Egypt has crossed over to the post-revolutionary phase means that the role of social media in Egypt can be classified under three distinct phases,

namely: the mobilization role in the pre-revolutionary phase; the coordination and organization role in the revolutionary phase; and the nation-building and consensus-building role in the post-revolutionary phase. Only the first and second phases can be analyzed in the Syrian case so far.

In this article, we shed light on the communication struggle that accompanied the political struggle in both Egypt and Syria. On the one hand, we describe how political activists used new forms of communication, especially digital and online social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and the video-sharing portal YouTube, as tools for highlighting the regimes' abuses of their citizens, promoting citizen journalism, shaping public opinion, and organizing and mobilizing citizenry to combat repression. We show how activists integrated these online activities with offline activities, such as staging demonstrations and protests and launching on-the-ground campaigns. On the other hand, we also shed light on how the regimes in both Egypt and Syria used communication tools to protect their interests and to counter the political activists' efforts, whether via traditional, state-owned media avenues or new media tools. In doing so, we highlight the similarities and differences, or the overlaps and divergences, between the Egyptian and Syrian cases.

Cyberactivism and Political Transformation: The Case of Egypt

During the early 1950s in Egypt, and specifically between the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952 and the popular uprising of 2011, successive Egyptian presidents, namely Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, exercised tight control over media ownership and content, albeit to varying degrees, and used state-owned, national media to disseminate local and regional public opinion campaigns (Rugh, 2004; Boyd, 1999; Mellor, 2007).

The margin of media freedom allowed under these three leaders was constantly stretching and shrinking, leading to a highly ambiguous state-media relationship (Khamis, 2007, 2008). This resulted in a paradoxical situation whereby a relatively expanding margin of freedom granted to the opposition press, especially under Mubarak, was not matched by an equal margin of true democratic practice. This led some scholars, such as Seib (2007), to contend that the media were being used as "safety valves" to allow the public to vent their anger at dictatorship, corruption, and violations of human rights, without having to resort to more radical measures, such as protesting, demonstrating, or revolting.

More recently, despite barriers such as illiteracy, poverty, and infrastructural constraints, Internet penetration in Egypt has been increasing rapidly, especially among young people between 20 and 30, the fastest-growing population cohort in the nation and throughout the Arab region (Abdulla, 2007; Lim, 2011). Abdulla (2006) explains that "Although [the Internet was] off to a relatively slow start, in January 2002, the government started an ambitious plan to increase internet connectivity. Access to the network... became free for all users" (p. 94). The Internet penetration

rate in Egypt reached 24.3 percent in 2009 (International Telecommunication Union, 2011), and over 50 million Egyptians by that time owned cell phones, many of which are sold with the Facebook mobile web application (Nelson, 2008). By the year 2009, “five million Egyptians used Facebook among 17 million people in the Arab region” (Ghannam, 2011). After the 2011 revolution, the number of Facebook users jumped to over seven million. This number has increased to 9.4 million users in 2012, according to a report by allAfrica.com (2012). Also, according to a report by SBWire (2012), the number of Internet users in Egypt is expected to double in 2012, making Egypt “one of the leading Internet markets in Africa, in terms of users, international bandwidth, and services offered.”

The Egyptian government under Mubarak played an active role in facilitating and accelerating the spread of the Internet, allowing it to become a very effective weapon used by protesters and political activists to topple the regime in 2011. This is in line with Khamis and Sisler’s (2010) observation that even though many Internet websites and blogs are used to defy and resist autocratic governments and dictatorial regimes in the Arab world, a number of these governments took steps to encourage Internet proliferation and accessibility, mainly in order to boost economic development. The Egyptian government under Mubarak was no exception.

Widespread access to the Internet and the emerging concept of blogs (Atia, 2006; Iskandar, 2006) meant that a whole new arena became available to the public in general, and to political activists in particular, in which to express their views, ideas, and criticisms, to comment on everyday issues, and to discuss cultural, social, and religious topics. In brief, it meant a shift from a tightly controlled and monolithic media system to a much more pluralistic and diverse media arena.

A few years before the 2011 revolution, a small but influential group of urban, highly educated, middle-class, primarily young Egyptian activists, coordinating and operating through multiple social media platforms, formed an array of loosely affiliated grassroots activist networks throughout the country (Ishani, 2011). These networks developed and deployed strategies that, compared to conventional approaches, were (a) more diffuse than consolidated; (b) more divergent and adaptive than uniform; and (c) more interactive than monolithic.

Over time, these networks expanded in number, size, and location through snowballing recruitment of activists, thus preparing a foundation for credible mass action sufficient for regime overthrow at some future but unknown point in time. These Internet-savvy actors, comprising a very small proportion of the Egyptian population, went on to exert an outsized influence during an extremely brief period of time (18 days), succeeding in drawing millions of ordinary Egyptian citizens into a monumental grassroots revolt that brought down the Mubarak regime.

In the few years prior to the 2011 revolution, Egyptian political activists specifically sought out strategies through new media tools to (a) educate citizens to recognize their unjust social

circumstances; (b) achieve consensus that the lack of justice must be redressed; (c) mobilize large groups of citizens to demand their rights and exercise their public will in street protests (Salmon, Fernandez, & Post, 2010); (d) achieve and maintain discipline during protests and to respond to police brutality with nonviolence; and (e) inform the international community about the regime's debasement and suppression of ordinary Egyptian citizens.

By 2008, activist groups had successfully coordinated complex and sophisticated operations, both virtually and on the street. For example, leaders of the Egyptian April 6 Youth Movement, an opposition group comprised of young tech-savvy activists who staged their first massive labor strike on April 6, 2008 in el-Mahalla el-Kubra, used cell phones, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to organize meetings and protests, document police brutality, and obtain legal representation for members arrested by security forces (Ishani, 2011; Nelson, 2008).

Another example is the *Kefaya* opposition movement (the name means "enough" in Arabic), which questioned and challenged the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime. This secular political group, like many others in Egypt, managed to have its views heard through Internet websites and blogging (Abdulla, 2006). A third example is that of the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Ikhwān*, who, according to Radsch (2012), created political alliances with its liberal counterparts, such as *Kefaya* and the April 6 Youth Movement, and thus became part of the general movement for change that swept through Egypt leading up to the revolution. Members of the Brotherhood participated actively in the protests and demonstrations that engulfed Egypt from 2004 to 2006, and adopted and adapted alternative media to their causes (Radsch, 2012).

Moreover, activists' abilities to orchestrate and synchronize such integrated online/offline activities enabled cells of activists to physically arrange and disperse themselves in order to evade disruptions and crackdowns by military and security forces. Their skills in organizing and mobilizing citizens increased sharply between 2008 and 2010, such that they were fully prepared to launch mass demonstrations on Egypt's annual "Police Day" on January 25, 2011, just weeks after watching Tunisia's citizens overthrow the Ben Ali regime (Baker, 2011).

It was not until the popular, nonviolent, grassroots revolution of 2011, however, that media activism translated into significant on-the-ground political activism in Egypt. This was largely achieved through new social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which served to accelerate political transformation, energize civil society, and catalyze public mobilization.

The 2011 revolution was thus characterized by the instrumental role played by new media in addition to text messaging through cell phones and photos via digital cameras. These new modes of communication enabled a form of cyberactivism, which is defined here as "the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline" (Howard, 2011, p.145). This cyberactivism paved the way for political change by becoming a major trigger for street activism; energizing civil society and encouraging civic engagement; aiding the mobilization and

organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism by which ordinary citizens were able to express themselves and document their own versions of reality (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

Interestingly, each of the new media tools was best suited to play a different role during the revolution. For example, Facebook was effective as a means of finding others with similar political views and planning street protests; YouTube was well suited to promoting citizen journalism by broadcasting activists' videos which were then picked up by satellite television channels and seen around the world; and Short Message Service (SMS) and Twitter enabled on-the-move coordination and communication. Twitter was also used for outreach to the international media and diasporic communities. Such widespread and easy access to these online communication tools posed new and threatening challenges to autocratic regimes and their censored media outlets. The simultaneous and coordinated utilization of all these different types of social media created a very strong communication network which became difficult to disrupt (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

In the year since the Egyptian revolution, a number of important developments have taken place both in the political and communication domain. In the few months that followed Mubarak's ouster from power, there was a short honeymoon between the interim military government (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces [SCAF]) and the protesters. This was reflected in the absence of the mobilization function of most online media platforms, many of which focused instead on issues such as nation-building, consensus-building and increasing international awareness of political developments in Egypt and other Arab countries witnessing political turmoil.

However, this honeymoon was short lived due to a series of clashes and escalating tension between activists and protesters and members of the armed forces and police. What follows is a brief review of these periodic clashes, all of which demonstrate the continuing impact of both cyberactivism and street activism in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Most recent is the violence that erupted at a soccer match in Port Said in February 2012, leading to the death of at least 74 people and the injury of hundreds. The deaths ignited marches and protests by angry citizens who claimed that the police at best neglected their job of providing security, and possibly caused the incident on purpose using infiltrators (Hussein, 2012). Most importantly, the Ahly team's fans (known as "Ultras" and who made up the majority of the casualties) had been front-line protesters in Cairo's largest clashes with the police and the military during the revolution (Chulov, 2012). To many commentators, SCAF had selected two parties historically antagonistic and violent toward each other—fans of two top soccer teams who had participated in the demonstrators to oust Mubarak—and set up a situation that would greatly increase the chances they would fight each other: the Port Said soccer stadium with many exits closed. The security forces watched the fighting passively, from the "sidelines." Many

observers interpreted the passivity as complicity in baiting activists to act violently, thereby delegitimizing them as credible opponents of SCAF.

The continuing effects of cyberactivism and street activism were seen during the July 2011 clashes that erupted in Tahrir Square between the families of killed or injured protesters, frustrated by the slow process of compensation and bringing those responsible to justice, and the security forces. When security forces resorted to tear gas, violence and arrests, all of it was recorded. Photos and videos were posted on Facebook, tweeted, and uploaded on YouTube by political activists. As a result of this online and offline pressure, the popularly chosen prime minister, Essam Sharaf, responded to the protesters' demands by dismissing all the security force officers accused of killing protesters (Amer, 2011). Later on, Sharaf himself and his cabinet had to resign under escalating popular pressure.

The clashes that took place between the army and protesters in Qasr al-Aini Street in December 2011 are a particularly important example of the continuity of street and cyberactivism and its effects. A report that first appeared in *Al Masry Al Youm* (Abdel Kouddous, 2012) stated that during these clashes the army attacked and arrested journalists, destroyed or took their equipment, and targeted news outlets. In a news conference soon afterwards, SCAF Major General Adel Emara denied any wrongdoing, claimed that the army had exercised self-restraint, blamed the clashes on provocateurs looking to bring down the government, and accused the media of sabotaging the state. He supported his claims with "video footage of people throwing Molotov cocktails and—in a surreal presentation—of children 'confessing' they were paid to attack the military" (Abdel Kouddous, 2012).

Activists responded to Emara's claims by launching the *Askar Kazeboon* ("Lying Officers") campaign, in which they set up portable screens in public places such as squares, sidewalks, and even the exterior wall of the Supreme Court, in order to air video footage clearly showing military forces beating and shooting protesters; the footage was "interlaced with the SCAF's denial of any wrongdoing" (Abdel Kouddous, 2012). Interestingly, the internationalization of the *Kazeboon* movement extended to the United States, where diasporic political activists also staged a "Liars" campaign protest in front of the office of the Egyptian defense attaché in the heart of Washington D.C.

The Online/Offline Gap

The importance of this campaign lies in the fact that it links both online and on-the-ground political activism—arenas that have been largely separated. There has been a persistent gap between the young online political activists on the one hand and the broad offline Egyptian population on the other. One of the explanations for this gap is that although users of Facebook are very influential in Egyptian public discourse and culture, they are still a small minority of the entire population. Internet activity still depends on the availability of computers and Internet

access (expensive if one connects multiple times per day) and Egypt's illiteracy rate remains over 40 percent.

This gap was clearly exemplified in the referendum on amending the constitution, which took place in March 2011. While the youth of the revolution, who were more active online, largely favored rejecting the amendments and preferred drafting a new constitution, the majority of voters, influenced by religiously oriented groups who were more active on the ground, voted in favor of the amendments. Reacting to this point, Elizabeth Iskander (2011) observed that the results of the constitutional referendum showed that “the views and discourses that dominate Egyptian Facebook spaces do not necessarily represent the political voice of the majority of Egyptians” (pp.1234-5).

The disparity between online and offline spaces was also seen in the inability of young online political activists, who were the main inspirational force behind the revolution, to achieve any significant gains in the 2011 parliamentary elections, while the Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's *al-Hurriya wa al-Adala* (Freedom and Justice) party and the Salafi *al-Nour* (Light) party—both of which had relatively less online activism but much more on-the-ground organization—were able to win 70 percent of the seats. This is another clear indication that the trickle-down effect of online discourses and virtual brainstorming on Facebook pages still needs to expand to a broader base in Egyptian society before being able to change public opinion trends in a meaningful way or effectively shape the country's future.

The online/offline division is of special concern for activists, especially in light of evidence that online activity might not have much traction with public opinion. For example, a Gallup poll showed that only eight percent of the Egyptian population got their news from Facebook or Twitter during the protests in January and February 2011, and only 17 percent of the protesters had Internet connections in their home; indeed, 63 percent of Egyptians got their news of the protests from the satellite channel Al Jazeera (Hellyer, 2012). However, after Mubarak's fall, in March and April 2011, 81 percent of Egyptians reported that they got their news about Egypt's political transition from the state television channel, and, furthermore, 59 percent of Egyptians polled in December 2011 reported that they perceived state media as accurate (Hellyer, 2012).

According to Adel Iskandar (2011), SCAF's control over the media has steadily increased, beginning first with media silence during and after the military's violent expulsion of protesters from Tahrir Square on March 9, 2011, and followed by active complicity in the subsequent months. State media repeated the false evidence and counterclaims of SCAF after such incidents as the October 2011 incident in Maspero, where the military attacked Coptic Christian protesters, killing 29 and injuring many others; in that case, state media reported that it was the protesters who attacked the military police. Iskandar (2012) adds that state media again acted as a SCAF mouthpiece after two other incidents in 2011: in November when police killed 40 protesters near Tahrir Square and again in December when military forces attacked a sit-in at the Cabinet

building. When members of the state media do try to speak up or allow the other side of the story to be heard, Iskandar (2012) reports, they are “demoted, fired, or have had charges brought against them.”

A recent report suggests that increased media control is likely, as SCAF’s leader, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, has called for a new “National Military Media Committee” comprised of generals, to counteract what he calls “biased” media coverage and to provide the “military’s account of any future events that take the media spotlight, particularly those that involve armed forces personnel” (el Badry, 2012).

Political activists continue to plan, organize, and supervise massive demonstrations in Tahrir Square and elsewhere in Egypt, expressing anger and impatience at what they perceive to be SCAF’s excessively slow implementation of the promises it made in February 2011. By doing so, they constantly remind SCAF that it is accountable to the citizens. These material shows of strength, documented by video recordings disseminated through social media platforms, show the continued ability of mass demonstrations to pressure SCAF to follow through on promises it made early in 2011 to transfer power to citizens as quickly as possible (Strasser, 2011).

Moreover, as the first anniversary of the revolution approached, social media’s mobilization function, which had become largely absent following the fall of Mubarak, was restored with full vigor in many forms and via different avenues. For example, the Facebook page “January 25: Egypt’s True Revolution” started several online campaigns to gather electronic signatures from people in order to confirm their attendance at demonstrations planned to mark the first anniversary.

In response to planned anti-SCAF demonstrations on January 25, 2012, SCAF launched its own public relations campaign to “cement their place in their country’s history as ‘defenders’ of the 18 days of revolution that began in Tahrir Square,” planning fireworks displays, parades, and air force flyovers (Beaumont, 2012). Most significantly, they planned to drop prize certificates from planes in every province, a move activists alleged was “designed to persuade poor Egyptians to stay in their neighborhoods rather than gather in the squares” (Beaumont, 2012).

During the continuous war of ideas between the different political players in the Egyptian scene, each party uses its own set of new media tools. For example, in addition to its online presence, the Muslim Brotherhood now publishes a daily newspaper for its *al-Hurriya wa al-Adala* (Freedom and Justice) party, and it has acquired its own satellite channel (El-Hennawy, 2011). SCAF has been using a Facebook page since February 17, 2011 to disseminate official messages, totaling 93 by the end of 2011 (Naguib, 2011). These messages, which were prolific at first, have since dropped off in number, but they continue to provide a window on SCAF’s views, which have become increasingly critical of the protesters and have come over time to include conspiracy theories about foreign influence and interference in the revolution (Naguib, 2011). All

this makes clear that both political and media contests continue in Egypt one year after the 2011 revolution.

Cyberactivism and Political Transformation: The Case of Syria

In the case of Syria, the government, or businessmen deemed close to the government, own all media outlets; the state exercises vastly more control over the media than in Egypt, banning criticism of the president and his family and censoring both the domestic and foreign press (Bazzell, 2011; BBC, 2011) and the Internet.¹ In fact, “Decades of media control over Syria have helped the regime silence its people and maintain international legitimacy. The Syrian government owns the Syrian telecommunications market, the most regulated in the region” (Global Voices, 2012).

Although young Syrians have vented their anger and resentment in the blogosphere, the Syrian regime has severely censored Internet use, blocked access to global websites and social media platforms (especially Facebook and YouTube), and monitored bloggers, who face intimidation, arrest, and torture (Preston, 2011), all of which has sharply limited Internet access and use (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2010).

This decades-long repression by the Assad regime initially prevented Syrian activists from collaborating, whether in virtual space or in person, to develop expertise with new media technologies to the degree achieved by Egyptian political activists. It also denied them opportunities to experiment with planning, preparing and managing nonviolent protests against the regime.

During the first three months of the Syrian uprising (March to June 2011), activists and ordinary citizens inside the country, risking their lives, could muster little more than to produce a few video recordings of protests and of the disproportionately violent responses by the army and security forces against activists and innocent bystanders. Gradually, however, Syrian political activists in the diaspora smuggled cell phones, cameras, and laptops into Syria for documenting protests and violence. By July 2011, a steady flow of videos started to leak out of the country for global distribution, whether online through YouTube or through broadcasting on satellite television channels, especially Al Jazeera (Preston, 2011).

In response to these protests, the Assad regime, using tightly controlled state media, claimed there was a conspiracy against Syria involving the United States, western nations, Israel, Arab “agents” (led by Qatar), and at least 60 satellite television channels. Addounia TV, which is owned by Assad’s brother-in-law, most strongly promotes this narrative and has accused Al

¹ In 2009, Internet penetration in Syria was 20.4 percent (International Telecommunication Union, 2011).

Jazeera of “staging fake demonstrations in studio mock-ups of Syrian cities” (Black, 2012).

The Assad regime’s media tactics are sometimes exposed inadvertently: the crowd attending a speech given by Assad in January 2012 looked large on state television, but a leaked photo indicates that the numbers were far smaller, perhaps a few thousand; similarly, details surrounding a bomb blast in Midan in January point to a staged event: local reports of police cordons the night prior to the blast, the surprisingly speedy response on the part of state media and emergency services, and the swift appearance of pro-Assad demonstrators from outside the neighborhood and accompanied by bused-in journalists (Black, 2012).

According to Syrian political activist and regime opponent Radwan Ziadeh,² Syrian activists received help and training from the regime’s opponents in the diaspora through online workshops via Skype. In addition, international bloggers devoted a special day, June 24, 2011, to show their support for, and solidarity with, the Syrian people; and Syrian opposition movements held meetings in Turkey and Egypt. Hundreds of Syrian political activists, who were unable to attend those meetings in person, participated through video conferencing or live chatting, using new Internet-based applications such as Skype or Yahoo messenger. They were also inspired by, and able to learn from, the experiences of their fellow Tunisian and Egyptian protesters, who shared advice and exchanged information with them online.

An activist group calling itself “The Calendar of Freedom” has begun using nonviolent, creative means of protesting in the regime stronghold of Damascus, such as dyeing the water in seven of the city’s largest fountains red (to symbolize the blood of those killed by the regime); aiming a laser light at the presidential palace and posting a video of the event online; putting stickers on street signs with the names of people killed by security forces; gluing door locks at government buildings; sending freedom balloons into the skies over the city; spraying anti-regime graffiti on walls; printing and distributing newsletters; and creating training videos on nonviolent tactics (Atassi, 2011).

Another method Syrian activists used—stuffing cassette players with speakers into public trash cans, which subsequently began blaring a famous anti-Assad song—prompted an interesting response from the regime: it aired photos of the speakers, on television, paired with grenades and ammunition, and claimed that they were “seized from ‘terrorists’” (Atassi, 2011).

To thwart the online activities of activists, the Syrian government has been extracting IP addresses from user accounts to locate and arrest them. Upon threats of torture, the security forces have extracted from activists their social media accounts’ usernames and passwords in order to identify the users, post pro-regime misinformation on their accounts, and then infiltrate users’ offline activist networks. These activities reveal some of the dangers of Internet activism,

² Personal communication on June 24, 2011, Washington, D.C.

especially the use of Facebook, which “may be effective if the regime that you are campaigning against is insufficiently ruthless or powerful. If you win quickly, Facebook is the right tool to use. If not, it becomes much more dangerous” (Preston, 2011).

A case in point, according to Brumfield (2012), is the regime’s recent deployment of computer viruses able to spy on opposition activists. A U.S.-based antivirus software maker, which analyzed one of the viruses, reported that it was recently written for a specific cyber-espionage campaign and that it passes information robbed from computers to a server at a government-owned telecommunications company in Syria (Brumfield, 2012). Supporters of the regime first steal the identities of opposition activists, and then impersonate them in online chats. They gain the trust of other users, pass out Trojan horse viruses and encourage people to open them. Once on the victim’s computer, the malware sends information out to third parties (Brumfield, 2012). This is another example of the sophistication of the Assad regime’s “cyberwar” weapons.

The ongoing “cyberwar” in Syria took an interesting turn when international companies, whose surveillance software has been used by the Assad regime, claimed that the regime acquired their products without their knowledge (Watson, 2011). Meanwhile activists downloaded surveillance evasion software such as Psiphon (whose development was funded by the United States) in order to safely use communication services such as Skype (Watson, 2011). Activists also attempted to increase the credibility, if not the independent verifiability, of their videos, by first showing a card bearing the date and location to counter the regime’s claims that the footage was faked (Amnesty, 2012, p.26).

Overall, the picture emerging out of Syria is that of a harsh political struggle on the ground, in which dozens of people are killed and injured every day, matched by an equally harsh communications struggle in cyberspace between the regime and its opponents, most of whom are only armed with their computers, webcams, cell phones, and hand-held devices. These two parallel and interrelated struggles are still ongoing in Syria.

In a special report on Syria, titled “Syria: The struggle for freedom and the end of silence,” Global Voices (2012) cites examples of how the Syrian regime managed to silence many Syrian voices, whether the voices of protesters and activists, musicians and singers, cartoonists and artists, or journalists and bloggers, many of whom have been arrested, tortured, and/or killed. However, it also cites examples of how ordinary Syrian citizens have pushed back against this state repression in an attempt to break the wall of silence and to make their voices heard globally, mainly through the creative usage of social media.

One powerful example from the Global Voices report is the online picture of Syrian protesters wearing gags over their mouths to send a strong message from the “occupied city of Kafar Nabel,” as the banners and cards they held in their hands indicated. Interestingly, this shows how

the “occupy” movement went full circle from Egypt’s Tahrir Square to American and western cities and back to the Middle East region, as seen in the town of Kafar Nabel in Syria.

Another example of how the Syrian opposition has not only attempted to break the silence imposed by the Assad regime, but also struggled to eradicate the regime’s existence, both in the “real world” and the “virtual world,” is the efforts by opposition activists to wipe the Assad name, as well as the names of his family members, off the map via Google. As Lynch (2012) explains:

“Among the first acts of victorious revolutionaries is to tear down signs bearing the names of the regimes they toppled. In Syria, the opposition is not waiting for President Bashar al-Assad to fall. Anti-government activists in recent weeks have used a Google crowdsourcing program, Map Maker, to rename key streets, bridges and boulevards after their revolutionary heroes, according to opposition figures and the Syrian government. The idea, activists say, has been to expunge the vestiges of the Assad family’s 40-year rule and to commemorate protesters who have fallen over the course of an 11-month-old uprising.”

One interesting point that deserves special attention is that the renaming campaign has not happened only online. On Syrian streets, members of the opposition have changed signs with their own hands (Lynch, 2012). This highlights the importance of synthesizing both online and offline political activism to achieve tangible results on the ground.

Similarities and Differences between the Egyptian and Syrian Cases

Similarities

One of the most remarkable similarities between the Egyptian and Syrian cases is the ongoing “cyberwar” between the regimes and their opponents, which can be defined as a “contestation in cyberspace among regime sympathizers, governments, and opposition movements” (Noman, 2011). In this online war, regimes communicate their messages through both state-owned media, and more recently through new social media. Regime opponents counter the spatial and temporal impact of regime misinformation by transmitting images and other evidence over the Internet and through satellite television channels.

An aspect which deserves special attention in analyzing these contestations is the attempts by the regimes in power not only to distort the facts and twist the narratives, but also to block the flow of information altogether. On January 28, 2011, in a desperate effort to halt public revolt, the Egyptian regime “flipped the kill switch,” shutting down the country’s mobile phone services and the Internet for one week (Ishani, 2011). However, young activists adapted their

online/offline maneuvers in two critically important ways. First, they continued operating in virtual space without Internet access, albeit with less efficiency, by sending and receiving instructions, news, and images using Twitter’s “Speak to Tweet” service (which converts spoken words into Twitter text messages), as well as by accessing foreign Internet service providers on older dial-up modems and satellite modems.

Second, to compensate for degraded online coordination, activists met in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in other city centers to organize, plan, rally, encourage, and direct their street networks toward achieving the next set of protest goals (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). In addition, the Internet and mobile phone service blackout prompted ordinary Egyptians—who, without news of their families and friends, began fearing imminent massacres by the security forces—to quickly leave their homes and surge into the streets and the city squares to protect each other (Maaty, 2011). The communication cutoffs also insulted many Egyptians, who, as Adel Iskandar explains, “became more determined [to revolt], because they refused the government’s attempt to ‘infantilize’ them. Their message to the regime was ‘Egypt can’t be blocked and its people can’t be unplugged.’”³

Interestingly, although the Syrian regime has also resorted to shutting down the Internet in an attempt to halt the protests, it has learned from the mistakes of its Egyptian counterpart, thus initially shutting down the Internet only on Fridays, weekends, and holidays, when protests and demonstrations are most likely to take place, but not during weekdays, in order to avoid grave economic losses such as those incurred by the Egyptian government. This is a clear indication that the Syrian regime was at an advantage, compared to its Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts who were completely taken by surprise and were thus less prepared to deal with the revolts and uprisings, both on the ground and in cyberspace.

Likewise, Syrian citizens also followed an enhanced learning curve in finding ways to get around the governmental restrictions on communication. Oula Alrifai, a Syrian activist, reported that along Syria’s borders, activists bypass Syrian Internet servers, which are frequently slow or unavailable, and access servers of neighboring countries, especially Turkey and Jordan (Saletan, 2011).

Another dimension to these heated “cyberwars” is hacking or “hacktivism.” In the Syrian context, the “Syrian Electronic Army” (SEA), a regime-supported computer-attack team, has been combating anti-regime messages in multiple ways. For example, the SEA has been (a) hacking, disrupting, defacing, and shutting down Syrian opposition websites and Western websites; (b) spamming popular Syrian opposition Facebook pages with pro-regime comments; (c) launching their own Facebook pages disguised and concealed under fake identities (Noman, 2011); and (d) uploading videos of fabricated scenes to YouTube to discredit protesters and foreign media, such as scenes of “authorities seizing drugs in bags branded with the Al-Jazeera

³ Personal communication on April 24, 2011, Washington, D.C.

logo allegedly distributed to citizens by Al-Jazeera journalists” (Libre, 2011).

In a technical feat in September 2011, the international hacker collective Telecomix rerouted Syria’s Internet, automatically redirecting users to a website telling them how and, more importantly, why to circumvent regime censorship and protect their anonymity and online communications (Gommes, 2011). When Telecomix diverted the local networks, it also enabled Syrian activists to remove images and information that could be used to identify them (Gommes, 2012). A team of 10 Telecomix hacktivists currently provides technical support for Syria’s opposition, with Arabic speakers available to help activists safely and securely exchange information and get photos and videos out of Syria. Telecomix has created a video portal to “recreate a video record of the Syrian revolution” that features “news from the ground” updated in real time (Gommes, 2012). However, members of the collective insist they are only playing a supporting role:

“Okhin, one of the French participants in the operation, says that the methods available to such collectives remain limited and that under no circumstances could they replace the revolutionaries on the ground: ‘We try to find new ways to help the Syrians, to find innovative ways to get news from the field, we try to do everything we’ve done so far. (But) we’ve just provided a technological infrastructure.’” (Gommes, 2012)

In the Egyptian context, activists and political figures have found their blogs and social media websites hacked, and on the other side of the political divide, anti-revolutionary figures have also had their websites targeted, including attacks by a group calling itself the “Egyptian Knights” (El Gundy, 2012). In addition, political parties and other organizations have also found their websites targeted, including the Muslim Brotherhood, whose Ikhwan Online web forum was attacked by the hacktivist group Anonymous. A Salafist party had its Facebook page defaced with photos of scantily clad women (El Gundy, 2012).

Over many decades, both the Egyptian and Syrian regimes have instilled fear and discouraged protests by leaking and distributing videos of citizens being tortured, abused, and humiliated by security forces. In Syria, victims of police violence, some of whom had been killed, including children and teenagers, were given back to their families by security forces, their bodies bearing the marks of severe torture and abuse. Images and videos of these victims were uploaded to the Internet by activists. Instead of quelling unrest, these images provoked outrage, drawing more ordinary citizens into defying the regime and calling for its removal (Seierstad, 2011).

This bears a close resemblance to the case of Khaled Said, the young, middle-class Egyptian man who was beaten to death by two police officers after allegedly uploading a video on YouTube revealing police corruption, and whose deformed face became an icon that inspired and enflamed the Egyptian revolt against violations of human rights, emergency law, autocracy, and corruption (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). Likewise, the horrifying image of the 13-year-old Syrian boy, Hamza

el-Khateeb, who was tortured and murdered by police for protesting, became a symbol of the regime's brutality and ruthlessness. Such iconic symbols of martyrdom evoked intense emotional reactions, especially horror, outrage, disgust, and revulsion, and political activists have used them as powerful tools to arouse and provoke citizens, thus encouraging them to protest, defy, reject, and ultimately revolt against their regimes.

Both the Egyptian and Syrian regimes have broadcast denials of regime violence and have propagated conspiracy theories to account for the uprisings, using state-run media outlets, especially television. In Syria, state-owned media outlets routinely broadcast misinformation about "armed gangs" and "criminals" on the loose, terrorizing, beating, and killing citizens and policemen alike, while, in fact, these were no more than "thugs" and "agents" whom the regime had hired and paid. The regime did this while simultaneously accusing Al Jazeera and other satellite news channels of "peddling propaganda" about the justness of the uprisings and international condemnation of the regime's violent responses (Malik, Black, & Hassan, 2011).

In a speech delivered on June 20, 2011, Assad accused activists and protesters of being saboteurs and conspirators, "people who are well paid to carry video cameras, film and collaborate with the media. Some are paying money for those to participate in demonstrations and to do the video filming" (al-Assad, 2011). He added, "Peaceful demonstrations were used as a pretext under which armed men took cover." Syrian officials have been accusing manufactured "external elements" who are "paid [by] some people inside the country" to sow "chaos" and "unrest" throughout the country, and who represent an "unlawful minority that was serving a foreign agenda" as "agents" and "traitors," "conspiring against their country's best interest and welfare" (al-Assad, 2011).

A top official in Syria's Ministry of Information appeared on Al Jazeera in May 2011 attempting to shift responsibility for the death of children, such as the killing of el-Khateeb, on to their parents, away from regime security forces or the army. "The Syrian regime is deeply concerned about the safety and well-being of children," he said. "It is terribly wrong for parents to endanger their children and to put them in harm's way by making them join protests and demonstrations, when they should be at home watching cartoons" (Malik, Black, & Hassan, 2011). This assertion severely strained credulity, leading citizens to mock and deride the regime for treating them like naïve fools. The same tactic was carried out in Egypt, where the Egyptian government often used the state-controlled media to spread the "conspiracy" narrative which blamed a "deviant minority," "outside forces," "enemies of the nation," or "armed gangs" for the protests during the 18 days of the Egyptian uprising.

Moreover, while Al Jazeera broadcast live coverage 24/7 of protesters being beaten, tear-gassed, or shot at in Tahrir Square and other urban centers in Egypt during the revolution, Egyptian state-owned television was simultaneously broadcasting serene images of the Nile. In a similar attempt to deflect attention away from protests and to halt online political activism, while the Syrian

police shot and killed protesters, the Syrian intelligence apparatus set up Twitter robot accounts with links to pictures of tranquil Syrian landscapes, to crowd out opposition reports of real-time protests and violence (Libre, 2011). This “Lovely Syria” Twitter campaign, as it came to be known, was halted by the Syrian opposition and online activists, many of whom complained to Twitter about it, until it was stopped, in what was considered to be a victory for the Syrian online activists and regime opponents (York, 2011).

In Egypt, the Mubarak regime forced Vodafone, one of the country’s major cell phone service providers, to disseminate pro-regime text messages (AP, 2011), such as “Yes to Stability,” “Protect Egypt,” and “Let’s Work Together Against Unrest.” Likewise, the Syrian regime sent a mass text message: “People are setting themselves on fire to replace their leaders. We will set the world, ourselves, and our children on fire so that President Assad will stay” (Mozes, 2011).

While Egyptian activists posted footage and photos of mass demonstrations on social media sites during the revolution, which satellite television stations such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN (Ishani, 2011) picked up, the government tried to counter these efforts by broadcasting images of pro-Mubarak rallies on state-owned, national media channels. Likewise, the Syrian regime was also keen to broadcast images of “pro-Assad” rallies through state-owned media channels.

Both Egyptian and Syrian activists uploaded footage and photographs of protesters defacing or destroying the propagandistic images of their respective dictators. For example, Egyptian protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square threw shoes at live images of Mubarak projected against large buildings during his infamous February 10, 2011 speech in which he refused to step down. Across the Arab region, throwing shoes expresses profound contempt, insult, and resistance. Likewise, Syrian protesters threw shoes at live images of Bashar al-Assad after he gave his June 20, 2011, speech in which he promised reform and dialogue with opposition groups while simultaneously escalating violent crackdowns.

Both Egyptians and Syrians used humor and sarcasm against their dictatorial leaders. Many banners carried by Egyptian protesters in Tahrir Square during the revolution made fun of Mubarak and framed him as “a stubborn but not so smart leader,” who refuses to listen to the message his people are trying to convey to him, which was simply “leave!” This was echoed in online jokes and YouTube videos posted by Egyptian activists and which all mocked Mubarak, his family, and his close circle of affiliates.

Syrian activists have also shown a great deal of creativity and dark humor in their efforts to counter the regime’s messages, expressing their contempt for Assad in a variety of mediums, from online shows, such as the satirical puppet show “Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator” on YouTube, to banners and signs, such as: “Aleppo will not rise even if it took Viagra” (criticizing the city of Aleppo for its meager protests), to songs such as “Come on, leave Bashar” (*Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar*) (Karam, 2012). These activities have been lethal for some: Ali Ferzat, Syria’s most famous political cartoonist, was attacked by pro-regime thugs in August 2011, beaten, and

his fingers broken; Ibrahim Qashoush, who wrote and performed the song “Come on, leave Bashar,” was found murdered in July 2011, with his vocal cords cut out (Karam, 2012).

In such tightly controlled political environments, citizen journalists can function as a proxy free press, a medium that can uncover and challenge falsehoods and misinformation, and force regimes to be more accountable to their citizens and to the international community at large. For example, Egyptian activists challenged claims made on state television that attendance at Cairo’s Tahrir Square demonstrations never exceeded several hundred by uploading footage of the protests to the Internet, verifying the presence of several hundred thousand people. Alerted by citizen videos, satellite television stations with an international audience, especially Al Jazeera English, sent large journalist teams across Egypt to broadcast live around the clock. With the “whole world watching,” the Mubarak regime’s preposterous claims, such as that Tahrir Square was under the “control...of the Muslim Brotherhood and that each protester in Tahrir got one KFC meal and €50 a day to stay and sit-in” (Osama, 2011) could not enjoy any credibility.

Moreover, in both Egypt and Syria, the “Twittersphere” proved useful to activists both during and after the uprisings in Egypt, and currently in Syria, for more than just disseminating information and on-the-ground coordination. It has also been used to mobilize both local and international assistance for distressed activists. For example, when she was arrested during protests in Cairo in November 2011, Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian-American journalist and activist, tweeted “Beaten arrested in interior ministry.” Fellow activists, friends, journalists from Cairo and around the world immediately lobbied for her release on Twitter, using the hashtag “#freemona.” Although it cannot be conclusively attributed to the Twitter campaign, she was released just 12 hours later (Tufekci, 2011).

Other jailed Egyptian activists, such as Alaa Abd El Fattah and Maged Butter (who was arrested alongside Eltahawy), have also benefited from Twitter campaigns and were later released. Similarly, activist and blogger Asmaa Mahfouz, who posted a famous video on YouTube in January 2011 urging people to demonstrate in Tahrir Square on January 25, was arrested for calling the SCAF a “council of dogs.” Her arrest triggered an outcry on Twitter as well as Facebook, and she was released in August 2011. Egyptians refer to the incident as “released with a hashtag” (Sistek, 2011).

The responses to the Twitter campaigns in the examples above track well with findings by Lotan et al. (2011) who found that in countries affected by the wave of political upheaval in the Arab world, “journalists—perhaps by virtue of expertise in media dissemination—were able to generate response levels comparable to bloggers, bots, activists, researchers, and others. Digerati were capable of generating the highest response rates—other than MSM [mainstream media]—despite their raw number of responses being fairly low.”

Differences

The ethnic, religious, political, and communication fabric of Egypt and Syria differ in several important ways. Syrian society is characterized by a highly diverse and heterogeneous set of religious and ethnic groups, in contrast to the relatively homogeneous Egyptian society. This is reflected, in turn, in the multiethnic Syrian opposition movement, consisting of Kurds, Arabs, communists, Christians, Islamists, tribal leaders, youth, and exiled intellectuals. The opposition is further divided by what some activists characterize as a “generational rift” between the older, established activists and the newly active youth (Mouterde, 2011).

In the context of the political landscape, the role of the army in each country deserves special attention. Does it present itself as a protector of the *state*, rather than a regime, which refuses to shoot at citizens in order to protect the state, or as an agent of the *regime*, which sacrifices citizens in order to protect the regime (Anderson, 2011)? In Egypt, the army had been viewed somewhat naively over several decades by the general population an “agent of the *state*” (i.e. protecting the interests of the entire citizenry); in Syria, the army is an “agent of the *regime*” (i.e. serving the interests only of the ruling Assad family), and the difference in these loyalties played out in dramatically different ways during the uprisings in Egypt and Syria. In Egypt, the army initially refrained from harming citizens and appeared to have directly hastened Mubarak’s departure. However, not long after the revolution, activists and protesters began accusing the army of violations of human rights, abuses of power, and corruption. This became the case especially after the repeated clashes between protesters and army and police forces in late 2011 and early 2012.

In contrast, the Syrian army, strongly allied to the Assad family and the Alawite sect, has exercised lethal force against citizens from the beginning of the uprising. In the following months, however, the Free Syrian Army, formed of soldiers who refused to shoot citizens and their fellow soldiers, defected from the Syrian army, joined the ranks of the protesters, and then sought to topple the autocratic Assad regime. The interesting comparison here is the reversal in the roles of the armies in each of these cases: from supporter to opponent, as in the case of SCAF, and vice versa in the case of the Free Syrian Army.

Also, in the context of the political landscape, Syria’s being a police state contributed to the inability of activists and citizens to achieve a quick, nonviolent regime or to bring about the rapid overthrow of the leader, as in the case of Egypt. As Syrian political activist Radwan Ziadeh (2011) explains:

“The model of Tahrir Square, with over a million people gathered in one place protesting, chanting, striking, and even sleeping for many days in the same place...could not be replicated in Syria, due to the military checkpoints, which [prevent people from assembling]...and the brutality of the army and the police apparatuses that use maximum force against citizens.”

Moreover, the Syrian police state’s practice of suppressing public criticism and protest with force

demonstrates that virtual social networks cannot, in and of themselves, substitute for organized street networks with a clear plan and disciplined action. Online activism most likely acts as a catalyst that magnifies the impact of protests, but it cannot overcome a police state's forceful prevention of mass assembly at key locales, such as the country's capital (Damascus), its business hub (Aleppo), and other cities and towns (Alterman, 2011).

Nevertheless, the Syrian citizenry has achieved extraordinary victories, including: (a) large protests in many urban and rural settings, despite "shoot-to-kill" orders from the Assad regime; (b) export of an increasing number of citizen-produced photos and footage of mass protests and regime murders to a global audience (Caldwell, 2011; Somaskanda, 2011); (c) rejection of regime propaganda calling for amnesty, dialogue, and reconciliation; and (d) sharp rebukes of the regime by some of Syria's international associates (e.g., Turkey and Qatar) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2011).

Other significant differences in the political context between the two countries include the degree of pressure and interference from the international community, which in the case of Syria was exemplified by the February 2012 UN Security Council veto by Russia and China of a plan to end the violence in Syria, and which was met with widespread outrage, both internationally and in Syria. There were worldwide protests at Syrian embassies, with those in Germany, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt attacked by enraged protesters, while Syria's ambassador to Tunisia was expelled (MacFarquhar & Shadid, 2012). The Assad regime had already begun shelling Homs before the vote, and after the veto, it intensified its bombardment. The regime's response to the condemnation of its actions was to use state media to blame "frenetic media campaigns against Syria disseminating false information about the Syrian army's shelling of civilians," and declaring that "life is normal in the Damascus countryside, Hama and Homs" (MacFarquhar & Shadid, 2012).

However, in Egypt, the overthrow of Mubarak turned out to be an internal affair. No external parties meddled in the battle between the regime and citizens, and no internal parties in the uprising invited external parties to aid their cause. Thus, compared to Syria, the absence of external intervention on behalf of the regime may have increased the chances of citizens' goals for regime change.

This could be considered a double-edged sword. It is not yet clear how the diversity and divisions in the Syrian opposition will affect the outcome of the struggle. For example, some argue that diversity leads to embracing competing goals and strategies that might lead to infighting and paralysis (e.g., Mouterde, 2011). Others argue, for example, that the diversity of the Syrian opposition movement gives it strength and provides it with more resources and energy (Sadiki, 2012). The fact that the Syrian resistance movement is composed of young and old, male and female dissidents from many different sects and religions is an added advantage which facilitated its effective organization under three main functions, namely: 1) "mobilization and

organization” provided primarily by local activists; 2) “press and propaganda” carried out by volunteer cameramen, analysts, and reporters on the ground in coordination with volunteers in a “quasi ‘operations room’ where the news is received and disseminated”; and 3) “political activism” which is mainly carried out by the Syrian National Council (SNC) “through a combination of diplomacy, advocacy, lobbying and negotiation” (Sadiki, 2012).

As for the communications context, there are a number of important differences between the Egyptian and Syrian case. First, foreign journalists were allowed into Egypt, and despite the fact that some of them were harassed and arrested by the Mubarak regime, the fact remains that many were able to carry on their media coverage before, during and after the revolution. This meant that the narrative of what was going on inside the country was told by multiple sources, including international media, political activists, and the authorities in power.

This has not been the case in Syria, where foreign journalists have, with few exceptions, been banned from entering the country and covering the events. Under these circumstances, activists in neighboring Lebanon compile firsthand reports from activists within Syria and disseminate them via Twitter and YouTube; they maintain credibility by insisting on video evidence or at least multiple accounts by dependable sources, and they try to get reports of attacks by both regime and opposition forces (Hersh, 2012). One activist in Beirut said, “The YouTube video has become as important as the demonstration itself,” adding that some activists within Syria have become sophisticated in their approach to filming and disseminating videos, including using multiple people in the process and, where possible, getting a cameraman into position days before the protest (Hersh, 2012). The slant towards the opposition in reports coming out of Syria is a result of the regime’s “media blackout.” As one activist states, “Because of them, we’re completely in control of the narrative” (Hersh, 2012). In other words, it can safely be concluded that this “blackout” policy has backfired on the Syrian regime, due to the over-reliance of international media on the Syrian activists’ citizen journalism efforts, especially their YouTube videos.

Another distinction is that the role of activists in the diaspora was much greater in the Syrian case than in the Egyptian case, whether in the realm of on-the-ground or online political activism. Sadiki (2012) points out that much of the professionalism of the Syrian revolution stems from the Syrian diaspora’s “rich mosaic of talents and resources across all continents,” especially in London and Paris, such that it is able to coordinate and organize many activities, including:

“[M]edia, lobbying, [demonstrations] outside Syrian embassies, advocacy and human rights activism especially, documentation of violations by the regime, relief work and fund-raising, multimedia and Syrian Revolution’s Homepage, arts and film production, including the Ramadan series ‘*huriyya wa bas*’ (Only Freedom), YouTube and international media monitoring units, and finally political

work through the SNC [Syrian National Council] and other NGOs in the Diaspora” (Sadiki, 2012).

Concluding Remarks

In the seesawing battles between the rulers and the ruled that have taken place in the Arab world since December 2010, the balance of both political power and media power has shifted unpredictably and will continue to do so. However, we can make some observations about the Egyptian and Syrian cases.

First, the will and determination of Arab people to implement change in their countries were the main driving forces behind the revolutions and uprisings. However, this will was augmented and accelerated by the deployment of new media, which acted as catalysts, mobilizers and organizers of political actions on the ground. The findings in this article suggest that “technology does not cause political change...but it does provide new capacities and impose new constraints on political actors” (Howard, 2011, p.12). In other words, it is the political actors who bring about actual political change, aided by the deployment of new media tools and effective communication strategies.

Second, widespread coverage by citizen journalists not only increases awareness about a regime’s brutality, corruption, and violations of human rights, but also encourages hesitant or undecided citizens to come out and protest. As Freeland (2011) explains, “opponents of a dictator need to feel that their views are widely shared and that enough of their fellow citizens are willing to join them.” The marriage between satellite television channels and social networking sites made it easier to let individuals know that his/her views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile, if not safe (Freeland, 2011).

Additionally, as a result of citizen journalism, there has been a notable impact on the content and quality of media coverage in mainstream Arab media. The bold, open and controversial nature of the reporting by citizen journalists has forced some government-owned media outlets to change their policy—to cross some of the red lines, and to break some of the conventional taboos—in an effort to catch up. However, the degree and form of this impact has varied from one Arab country to another, based on the underlying political and communication contexts.

Third, we can conclude that there has been a two-way, parallel impact between politics and the press in the context of ongoing Arab revolutions. On the one hand, the media revolutionized the political landscape in the Arab world by acting as catalysts, mobilizers, and boosters of change. On the other hand, the Arab media itself has been revolutionized by the drastic changes in the political landscape, which not only pushed the boundaries of political freedom, but also raised expectations for press freedom. Here again, the extent, form, and speed of this impact varies

from one Arab country to another and depends on many factors.

Fourth, for Egypt, Syria, and other Arab nations, the interaction between internal interests (citizen groups opposing regimes) and external interests (e.g., activists in the diaspora; organized resistance movements; and other sympathetic activists) have directly aided (e.g., Serbian activists' online and offline experiences in overthrowing Milosevic), and/or have indirectly provided moral support to the Arab awakening. Likewise, activists worldwide have drawn inspiration from the hard-won efforts and victories of the Arab world, and have also received practical advice (e.g., training abroad on how to use new media as a tool for political transformation) for challenging the status quo in their own nations (e.g. Greece, Italy, Israel, Russia, Occupy Wall Street).

Fifth, an important role played by new media in these revolutions has been promoting civic engagement, which refers to the process through which civil society is invited to participate in ongoing political, economic, and social efforts meant to bring about positive change (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). This played an important function in terms of awakening the largely dormant, unengaged, and marginalized civil societies in the Arab world, thus facilitating a shift in the role of new media from being “safety valves” to becoming effective “mobilization tools.” This took place due to the capacity of new media to act as effective catalysts and accelerators for change in society, thus filling the gap between online and offline political activism.

Sixth, activists from different Arab countries are becoming even more networked, not just online, but also offline. For example, Syrian activists and political leaders have been fleeing to Cairo, where they have created a center of opposition to the Assad regime, opening cramped offices, staging protests at the Syrian embassy and the Arab League, holding press conferences, and interacting with Egyptian and Yemeni activists (Daragahi, 2012). This allows for the exchange of useful knowledge, technical know-how, and practical on-the-ground experience.

It is the myriad of complex factors mentioned above that finally dictates how and when political transformation can take place in a certain country. So it is important to remind ourselves again of the different phases that the Egyptian and Syrian uprisings are in, with Egypt already in a post-revolutionary phase, with all its complexities and challenges, and Syria still going through a bitter struggle. These different revolutionary phases reflect the different contexts, actors, and communication strategies in each country. In the case of Egypt, for example, Lauren Bohn (2012), in her article “Egypt’s revolutionary narrative breaks down,” poses the important question: “With Hosni Mubarak long gone, a heavily Islamist parliament in place, and the military in uneasy command of the country, who speaks for the revolution?” This is a pressing question that Egyptians are currently grappling with, but which does not yet have a clear or easy answer.

Similarly, Syrians confront unanswered questions, as they engage the Assad regime peacefully through demonstrations, and violently through the Free Syrian Army. The most important

questions being when and how the Syrian people will ultimately prevail in overthrowing the Assad regime and in building a new Syrian government.

In conclusion, despite the fact that the final outcomes in Egypt and Syria remain unknown, one thing is certain: for both countries the struggle for political transformation has started and it is not likely to stop. Likewise, the “cyberwars” will continue to evolve in unpredictable and interesting ways. Therefore, we should continue to carefully watch and describe how the various actors battle each other not only for achieving political change, but also for controlling the ways in which nations will be governed in the future, and in doing so we should also continue to document how new media can be utilized by different actors to achieve different goals.

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