

**Technology Cannot a Revolution Make:
Nas-book not Facebook**

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“What happened in Tunisia was not a Facebook revolution, and what’s happening now in Egypt is not a potential Twitter revolution...technology cannot a revolution make.” --Nicholas Thompson (“Is Twitter Helping in Egypt?”) in the *New Yorker*, January 27, 2011

Examining the ongoing academic debate over the effect of the new social media on social movements, I get the impression that we are returning to the era of the “magic bullet” theory that was popular at the beginnings of the past century when people were fascinated by the power of the then-new media outlets of radio and film. The belief then was that the effect of these new platforms was massive and uniform. The present euphoria about social media suggests that we are going through another cycle of theories about media effects, returning to the “magic bullet” argument.¹

As a sociologist and student of the media, I cannot fail to see the resemblance between the mood of the 1920s and today’s attributions to media effects. The academic community seems now to be engulfed and fascinated by Facebook, Twitter and other new media platforms to the extent that they attribute to these platforms the recent Arab uprisings and the regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt. New social media technology is indeed playing an important role in shaping events. Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones have undoubtedly contributed to spreading information about protests by quickly connecting people who are not generally able to connect. They amplify the protest messages and help build support for their cause. But people protested and brought down governments long before the Internet and Facebook. The communication channel used then was the “human voice,” a channel that is central for face-to-face communication and that is overlooked or given little attention today.

¹ This essay is a preliminary piece for a survey I am conducting with American University of Beirut Professor Jad Melki on Arab media research.

Available research data suggests that the influence of mass media factors more in the area of dissemination of information and setting public debate agendas than in attitude change.² The Internet, like the rest of the mass media, is an efficient device for disseminating information and getting people to believe more strongly in what they already think, but it does not produce attitude conversion. Social media can play an active role in organizing and informing the masses, but there is still no empirical evidence to support the position that social and other mass media are sufficient means for bringing about attitude change, let alone regime change.

The return to the “magic bullet” theory has led many Arab and Western media scholars to focus on the study of the role of social media in developing popular movements. Little or no attention is paid to folk and traditional communication outlets such as Friday sermons, coffeehouse storytellers (“hakawati”), and mourning gatherings of women (“subhih”). These face-to-face folk communication vehicles play an important role in developing the Arab public sphere as well as in introducing change. Facebook and Twitter certainly played an important role in making people in Tunisia and Egypt aware of the mass protests and demonstrations calling for change, but it was the face-to-face interactions at mass gatherings in “Midan al-Tahrir” (Tahrir Square) in Cairo and the Friday mosque gatherings that produced the moving force for change. Social media played the role of informing and gathering the masses as well as reinforcing existing attitudes while traditional face-to-face media prompted and triggered the change. It is no accident that the peak of mass demonstrations happened on Fridays, directly after mosque gatherings or mass gatherings on university campuses. Traditional face-to-face media, including signs, posters, graffiti, and word of mouth, were far more instrumental in shaping the Arab Spring, according to American University in Cairo professor Mona Makram Obeid who lived in Tahrir Square during the uprising.

The idea of the “Arab Facebook Revolution” is challenged by the facts on the ground in the recent Arab uprisings. I would argue that what was at work was “*nas-book*” (“nas” in Arabic being “people”), as suggested by a media colleague in one of our discussions. Indeed, the wedding of Facebook and the Internet with satellite television and folk media resulted in a “nas” or “people” interface that ignited a mass movement. To quote my colleague, “Facebook has been instrumental in Egypt for a long time with the ‘Kefaya’ movement, but in the end, for it to translate to a political change, it took people being physically out in the streets.” Spreading critical national information messages to an active, young and educated intelligentsia through Facebook, the Internet and satellite television could call Egyptians to the streets, but it could not have sustained a mass movement had it not been for the direct contact among people. This

² As early as the 1944 classic study of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (*The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, Columbia University Press) and as recently as the Robert S. Erikson, Costas Panagopoulos and Christopher Wlezien 2010 study on “The Crystallization of Voter Preferences During the 2008 Presidential Campaign,” research findings suggest that “voters tend to be persuaded more by personal contacts than by campaign propaganda” (*Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010): 482-496).

contact occurred through word of mouth, Friday sermons, signs, posters, graffiti, folk songs, ceremonies, rituals and the chanting of resistance slogans as people marched through the streets and around Tahrir Square.

Another misconception in the academic community about the Arab uprisings is that they were triggered by a yearning for democracy. A proper understanding of Arab culture will suggest that achieving democracy is not the primary factor that made Arab peoples' protests escalate to the level of activism that we have seen.

In the age of globalization, the dominant powers set the debate agendas and determine research instruments and concepts. The concept of democracy is exaggerated by western politicians and scholars as a basic aspiration of people across nations and cultures. It is the model that explains the norms of proper governance and civic engagement. The concept of democracy is advocated as the main worthy governance form that explicates the aspirations and expectations of people everywhere.

The Arab peoples' uprising, I argue, is not triggered by a craving for democracy, but rather by a need for a proper and dignified life. Mohamed Bouazizi, the young Tunisian street vender who immolated himself and subsequently died from his burns in January 2011, was not in the pursuit of democracy in Tunisia. He was a poor, non-Internet user who set himself on fire: a desperate measure by a desperate man which, when seen by others, ignited a huge uproar. In this case, the Internet was simply the medium, not the message. But the significance of this medium is that it enabled the dissemination of the message, which may not have otherwise reached a wider audience. His act symbolized the frustration and desperation of millions in the Arab world and it set in motion a series of Arab movements calling for change. But Bouazizi himself was crying out for pride, dignity, and opportunity. His cry represented an accumulation of social pressures and demands built up over a long period of time, and now vigorously expressed around the Arab world.

While democracy in its western shape is undeniably an important value among the young Arab masses, it is not the main resonating force for change in the Arab world. A proper understanding of the history and culture of Arab societies suggests that the concept of democracy in traditional and patriarchal Arab society has a different connotation than that in the West. In the Arab "high power distance" patriarchal system, people accept to subordinate themselves to hierarchal authority, and inequality in power is explained from the bottom up. Arab democracy is achieved by "shura" (consultation) where governance is carried out through consultation with the different powers-that-be within the system (society) and not through the idealized western style of governance. The authority of the "patriarch" in traditional Arab culture is next to the divine, and is rarely challenged.

Freedom and social justice in the context of Arab culture is not restricted to personal freedom and personal justice, but is rather a collective freedom and justice. The group is more important

than the individual. Thus the group's pride and national pride surpass democracy in Arab priorities.

The pursuit of democracy may not be the appropriate framework to employ in understanding or promoting change in the Arab world. A recent private empirical study about Arab attitudes towards media that surveyed 5,600 respondents in six Arab countries for an international media group, to which I served as an outside consultant, showed that democracy is not the most sought-after value for those interviewed. To a question about the ideal role of Arab media, "making Arab officials accountable" ranked sixth, while "creating national pride and unity" ranked first (89% in Egypt; 96% in Jordan; 99% in Lebanon; 96% in Saudi Arabia; 97% in Syria and 94% in Yemen).

Employing the wrong tools (concepts) to understand change in the Arab world has resulted in a failure to explain or predict change in Arab societies. The focus of western commentators on the examination of this phenomenon has been in the interests of the ruling elites (local or foreign) and not the aspirations of the masses. The investigation tools employed were western and not related to the Arab landscape. Democracy is definitely an important concept, but it is not the only important variable in the equation of Arab governance. In Arab patriarchal culture, pride and dignity (personal and national) as well as moral justice (divine justice) are more important than the concept of (western) democracy in explaining the recent Arab uprisings. Indeed, the final straw for Mohamed Bouazizi was reportedly a slap in the face by a female police officer.

Dignity and pride (being human, worthy, honorable and esteemed) for an Arab are among the most important values. A person without dignity or pride has no honor and thus has no "face" to show. It was not the desire for democracy that prompted Bouazizi to set himself on fire, but rather it was the feeling of humiliation and despair (loss of dignity and pride) at both the personal and national levels.

An example of the precedence of maintaining dignity and pride over achieving democracy is that of former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. His system of governance can in no way be described as democratic, yet he is considered by millions of Arabs as the greatest and most respected modern Arab leader. The Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim, chairman of the Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo, attributes this to Nasser's "defiance of the West." The fact that Nasser stood up to the superpowers gave the Arab masses a feeling of dignity and pride, even though his country lacked a democratic system of governance. Similarly, one can argue that the regimes of former presidents Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali were viewed as excessively willing to obey the orders of the West and thus were seen to have squandered their countries' national dignity and pride. Consequently, they were humiliated by their people and their regimes collapsed quickly.

On the other hand, we see that the regime of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad is resilient and is supported by a great number of people, although its system of governance is not democratic.

Much of al-Assad's support has come from people who may not approve of his system of governance but yet perceive him as a person who gave them dignity and made them proud by his defiance of the West. Supporters of al-Assad's regime defend their position by pointing out that those wanting to overthrow it have public support from the West and Israel.

A more recent example of the importance of dignity and pride to Arabs is a local Egyptian response to fears that \$1.5 billion in aid from the U.S. could be cut over the government's prosecution of foreign NGOs. Salafi Sheikh Mohammad Hassan, supported by the leading Sunni Islamic body, Al Azhar, and Egypt's interim cabinet, has formed an initiative—called the Fund for Dignity and Pride—aimed at restoring Egypt's national dignity by raising its own funds.³

Arab intellectuals are generally inclined to adopt models, concepts, and solutions developed in the dominant cultures of the West to explain problems or events facing their societies. This tendency may be attributed to several possible causes: having been educated in the dominant cultural systems of the West and ignorance of their indigenous culture, feelings of intellectual inferiority, lack of self-confidence, and lack of resources or the intellectual environment in which to explore and develop their native thoughts. Branding solutions or products (even universities) with a western label is now considered to be proof of the quality and reliability of the solution or product. For example, one can observe the mushrooming of universities in Lebanon that add the label "American" to their name and the great number of educational institutions being parachuted into the Arab Gulf bearing the label of prestigious western universities. This trend, it can be argued, hinders rather than advances genuine national development.

Arab governments and education systems are also generally inclined to focus more on "image" (we use the term "look") and "structure" rather than on "content" and "relevance." They import designer programs, believing in the label more than in the content of the program. The label (MIT, Princeton, Harvard, etc.) has become more important than the quality of the program or product. We are comfortable with playing subservient roles and our education policies lack national vision as well as cultural ambition. As a consequence, instead of aiming at producing cars, we take pride in producing technicians who can fix foreign-produced cars.

Our media programs focus on developing graduates who can man newspapers, radios, television stations or who are skilled in new media, but give little attention to graduating media scholars capable of conducting media research, designing culturally relevant programs and drafting national policies. The need is for the study of media channels as social institutions, and for a more realistic focus on the role of the media in socialization and social change.

The rise of social media in the Arab world is undoubtedly worthy of study and analysis, but it should occur alongside a proper understanding of the communication process within an Arab

³ Rod Nordland and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Dossier Details Egypt's Case Against Democracy Groups," *New York Times*, February 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/21/world/middleeast/egypt-relying-on-accusatory-testimony-against-foreign-groups.html?scp=1&sq=dossier%20egypt&st=cse>

context. Our tendency is to adopt the attitude that “what is foreign shines” and to rush to adopt new and imported technology, including language, irrespective of whether it is relevant or even beneficial. This slavishness to foreign labels is alienating and stirs national pride and dignity.