

## **Twitter and Tyrants: New Media and its Effects on Sovereignty in the Middle East**

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### **Introduction**

There was no shortage of reporting on the role of new media, in particular social networking media, during the revolutions that spread throughout the Middle East starting in Tunisia in December 2010, leading to the ousting of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and are ongoing in other countries of the region. Dubbed the Facebook, Twitter, and/or YouTube Revolutions by commentators, one might be forgiven for believing that these new forms of media might have caused the events that we have seen unfolding since late 2010.

Such characterizations, however, take away from the true causes of the uprisings: the yearning, among hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Arabs for human dignity and freedom from economic and social ills and political oppression. Thousands of Egyptians finally had had enough and they were prepared to die for their cause. Media can play a role in such movements, but it is highly doubtful that they can cause them. It takes more than a call to join a flash mob via Facebook to get people to participate in protests, fully aware that they could pay with their lives. The following sentence summarizes the role of the media in the Arab Spring, with regard to Egypt: “Mubarak provided the grievances, Tunisia gave the inspiration, Facebook set the date, and the Egyptian people did the rest.”<sup>1</sup> The role of the media in the Arab Spring can primarily be defined as providing a tool, not the cause for the political movement.

However, more than a year after the beginning of the uprisings, balanced scholarly accounts of the role of the media are hard to find. Some hold on to the technological determinism argument that the Arab Spring could not have happened without the advent of information and communication technology in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Many others acknowledge the deeper causes of economically and morally bankrupt repressive regimes that failed to offer any true hope for the

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<sup>1</sup>Marc Lynch et al. (eds.), “Revolution in the Arab World,” *Foreign Policy* (2011), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Philip N. Howard et al., “Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?” Working Paper 2011.1, Project on Information Technology & Political Islam; accessed November 26, 2011 [http://dl.dropbox.com/u/12947477/publications/2011\\_Howard-Duffy-Freelon-Hussain-Mari-Mazaid\\_pITPI.pdf](http://dl.dropbox.com/u/12947477/publications/2011_Howard-Duffy-Freelon-Hussain-Mari-Mazaid_pITPI.pdf)

futures of their predominantly young populations.<sup>3</sup> Yet most tend to focus their analysis on social media, generally neglecting the wider influence of other media forms, which in this paper are combined under the term new media, and their interactions. Only by looking at the role of new media from a more holistic point of view is it possible to draw conclusions about their effects on sovereignty in the Middle East.

In this context, the focus of this article is to evaluate whether we are witnessing a turning point in state-society relations whereby the digital tools made accessible as a result of the information revolution fundamentally undermine the power of authoritarian regimes. Looking at the Middle East, it will be argued that the advent of new media is tipping the balance in favor of the people and that it is becoming increasingly difficult for authoritarian governments to control the flow of information to their advantage. With the diffusion of new media technology across the region, the tools of power have changed. New media empowers the individual, makes it easier for him or her to connect to like-minded groups and to organize against government suppression. But new media do not only play an important role in terms of facilitating social movements. They are also fundamental to building Arab citizenship skills which, in the long run, are most likely to have an adverse effect on tyrannical rule in the Middle East.

The paper begins with some notes on definitions of terms like social and new media along with an overview of ICT diffusion in the Middle East, followed by some historical context of the media landscape in the region. In the main body, shifting state-society relations are addressed, followed by a discussion of how new media facilitate outside interference on the sovereignty of Arab regimes.

### **Definitions and ICT Diffusion in the Middle East**

The media punditry, as well as the academic literature, tends to use the terms Internet, social media, ICTs, Web 2.0 tools and new media interchangeably. Since this is a relatively new field, there is no clear consensus about the definition of these various terms. Some studies focus on the effects of the Internet and politics, although they often also address the broader category of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In this context, the importance of mobile phones should be stressed.

In many developing countries, mobile phones are more widespread than computers, and the rate of diffusion has been higher in recent years. The Arab world is no exception. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the number of mobile cellular subscriptions in Arab states increased from 27.1 per 100 inhabitants in 2005 to 87.9 per 100 inhabitants in 2010.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance," *Arab Media and Society* 13 (Summer 2011); accessed November 26, 2011 <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=769>

Mobile broadband subscriptions dramatically rose from 0.1 to 10.2 per 100 inhabitants over the same five-year period.<sup>4</sup> It is not a surprise then that in developing countries and the Arab world in particular cell phones are regarded as the devices that are most likely to bridge the digital divide.

Many observers caution that the influence of the Internet and related technology should not be overestimated due to the relative lack of access to it in the Arab world. Indeed, according to the 2009 Arab Human Development Report, the number of computers per person is less than the global average in most Arab countries.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Internet usage also remains below the prevailing global rates of 21 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Internet usage has proliferated considerably over the past five years in the Arab world. The ITU reports a rise in estimated Internet users in Arab states from 8.1 in 2005 to 24.1 in 2010 per 100 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, 100 million Arabs are estimated to be online.<sup>8</sup> A recent market research study confirms the finding that for many people in the Arab world, Internet usage is a recent phenomenon: 22 percent of online users started using the Internet less than two years ago.<sup>9</sup> The same study found that 22.1 percent of the Egyptian population has Internet access. In Saudi Arabia it is 38.1 percent and in the United Arab Emirates 75.9 percent.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the primary reason for usage in these three countries is emailing, followed in all three instances by social networking.<sup>11</sup>

Since the 2009 “green revolution” in Iran, social media has become a focus for most commentators on the media in the Middle East. Social media, in broad terms, refers to Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.<sup>12</sup> Sources estimate that there are 17 million Facebook users in the Middle East, five million alone in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> However, social media is difficult to separate from the term Web 2.0, although some

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<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunications Union, “Key Global Telecom Indicators for the World Telecommunication Service Sector” (2010); accessed March 19, 2011 [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at\\_glance/KeyTelecom.html](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom.html)

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Arab Knowledge Report 2009*, 145; accessed March 19, 2011 <http://www.mbrfoundation.ae/English/Documents/AKR-2009-En/AKR-English.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 146.

<sup>7</sup> ITU (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011* (Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance, 2011), 4; accessed March 19, 2011 [http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/CIMA-Arab\\_Social\\_Media-Report%20-%2010-25-11.pdf](http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/CIMA-Arab_Social_Media-Report%20-%2010-25-11.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> TNS, “Digital Life” (2010); accessed April 10, 2011 <http://discoverdigitallife.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> In Egypt 49 percent of respondents use the Internet for emailing, 36 percent for social networking. In Saudi Arabia, 57 percent access the Internet for emailing and 22 percent for social networking. Respondents in the UAE use the Internet for emailing and social networking both at 42 percent.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media,” *Business Horizons* 53:1 (January 2010): 61.

<sup>13</sup> Ghannam, 5.

regard the latter as merely the platform for social media. In any case, Daniel Drezner provides a useful definition:

Wikipedia (itself an example of the phenomenon) defines Web 2.0 as, “a perceived second generation of Web development and design, that aim[s] to facilitate communication, secure information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration on the World Wide Web.” In short, the concept describes the democratization of knowledge production that resulted from the standardization of online media platforms—podcasting, blogging, wikis, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and the Social Science Research Network, to name a few. Web 2.0 technologies make it easier for users to create and share information on the World Wide Web.<sup>14</sup>

Given the overlapping nature of the individual terms, new media seems to be the most appropriate one to use. It is based on ICTs (including mobile phones) but incorporates social media, Web 2.0 technologies and media forms such as satellite television. The latter deserves special attention as well with regard to the Middle East, since Al Jazeera has been playing a crucial role in the Arab revolts. This paper will therefore primarily use new media as an umbrella term, although it might be referred to as ICTs or the Internet occasionally.

### **The Media Landscape of the Middle East**

Whether the media make the state stronger or weaker is a complex question, one that would not be served well by simply looking at the current media ecology in the Middle East. The role of the media in the Middle East can only be understood by looking at how they have extended their scope over time.

In general terms, the answer to the above question depends on what kind of state one looks at, but also on the type of media. In authoritarian states, the media have long been used as a tool to maintain state control over the flow of information, which in turn allowed the state to keep its people in check and, until recently, geriatric leaders in power. Most of the media in the Middle East were, and still are, either state controlled or affiliated with wealthy businessmen that generally have strong ties to the ruling political class or royal family.

The main reason for this is the weak economic base on which Arab information media were established. When newspapers first developed in the Arab world, incomes were low and illiteracy rates high. As a result, attempts at finding advertisers were limited and revenues small. The same applies to electronic media, which are even more expensive to operate. Consequently, media institutions in the Middle East rely heavily on subsidies, and most television and radio

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<sup>14</sup> Charli Carpenter and Daniel Drezner, “International Relations 2.0: The Implications of New Media for an Old Profession,” *International Studies Perspectives* 11:3 (August 2010): 261.

stations are monopolies owned by the government.<sup>15</sup> For a long time, therefore, a public sphere—defined as access to active arguments before an audience about issues of shared concern—did not exist in many Arab countries; instead there was, in Marc Lynch’s words, “a single voice driving out all dissent, questioning, and critical reason.”<sup>16</sup>

This began to change with the establishment of Al Jazeera by Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in 1996. With it, “the government monopoly of information and Western media imperialism was coming to an end.”<sup>17</sup> The channel started to create public opinion among people who otherwise would not know what was going on in their own country. According to a Yemeni journalist, “we hear about what is happening in our country through Al Jazeera or CNN before it gets reported on the local TV. Sometimes it never does.”<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Pintak points out that in strongly controlled states like Tunisia, for instance, the availability of independent news coverage of national events broadcast by satellite channels puts pressure on the government.<sup>19</sup>

Such examples highlight the fact that the new forms of media cannot be used as a tool for propaganda and oppression as easily as old forms, such as television. Jordan’s Queen Rania can go on Twitter to promote government reforms, but the effectiveness of her message can well be questioned. Her voice will be just one among many. Further research needs to be conducted on the use of new media by tyrants, but it is fair to assume that it does not compare to how repressive governments were able to exploit earlier forms of media.

With the advent of Al Jazeera, the era in which the media were “extensions of the ministries of information” came to an end.<sup>20</sup> New media eradicate gatekeepers with the result that information is no longer exclusively disseminated from the few to the masses, but increasingly from the many to the many.

This leads to another point, namely that media influence is different from country to country. While the press in Egypt was relatively free by Middle Eastern standards, the situation in Saudi Arabia, for example, is very different. The Saudi regime has many more resources and thus more influence over not just Saudi media outlets but over media outlets broadcasting across the Middle East. While uprisings were occurring all over the region during 2010 and 2011, the Saudi government could look at the state media as a useful tool in helping denounce the Arab Spring as

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<sup>15</sup> William A. Rugh, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 32.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Pintak, *The New Arab Journalist: Mission and Identity in a Time of Turmoil* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Nadia al-Saqqaf quoted in Pintak, 41.

<sup>19</sup> Pintak, 50.

<sup>20</sup> S. Abdallah Schleifer, “Media Explosion in the Arab World: The Pan-Arab Satellite Broadcasters,” *Transnational Broadcasting Journal* 1:1 (Fall 1998); accessed November 25, 2011 [http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall98/Articles1/Pan-Arab\\_bcasters/pan-arab\\_bcasters.html](http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall98/Articles1/Pan-Arab_bcasters/pan-arab_bcasters.html)

a conspiracy against it, framing Iran as the enemy.<sup>21</sup> Saudi media ownership is not just limited to traditional forms of media; a recent study found that Saudis own a substantial portion of the Internet service providers in the region.<sup>22</sup>

So, while it looks like the media played a major role in shifting power from the state to the people, beginning with the arrival of Al Jazeera and culminating with the overthrow of several regimes in the region, the case is not entirely clear cut. At the same time as the media facilitate the strengthening of an Arab public sphere, they also help repressive regimes to maintain control in the face of increased popular resistance.

### **Tipping the Scales?**

In 2005, Drezner presented a paper titled “Weighing the Scales: The Internet’s Effect on State-Society Relations” which was published as an article in 2010.<sup>23</sup> In it he contends that:

In open societies, there is no question that the Internet has enhanced the power of civil society vis-à-vis the state. However, in dealing with totalitarian governments [...] the information revolution does not fundamentally affect the state’s ability to advance its interests.<sup>24</sup>

In his 2011 book, *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Evgeny Morozov makes the same case. He argues that authoritarian regimes can use the Internet and connected technology for censorship and surveillance purposes.<sup>25</sup> This is a valid point, one that is demonstrated in the recent uprisings during which governments the region over have cracked down on protestors using Internet technology. In Tunisia, it was reported that the government hacked into blogs, email and Facebook accounts in order to delete anti-government information.<sup>26</sup> Egypt shut down nearly all Internet traffic overnight. Even after the ouster of Mubarak, the intimidation of journalists and online activists continued as the country struggled under military rule.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, “Is Saudi Arabia Immune?” *Journal of Democracy* 22:4 (October 2011): 53.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Oghia and Helen Indelicato, “Ruling the Arab Internet: An Analysis of Internet Ownership Trends of Six Arab Countries,” *Arab Media and Society* 13 (Summer 2011); accessed November 25, 2011 <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=779>

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Drezner, “Weighing the Scales: The Internet’s Effect of State-Society Relations,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16:2 (Spring/Summer 2010). The 2005 paper is available at <http://www.danieldrezner.com/research/scales.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Drezner (2010), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), xiii-xv.

<sup>26</sup> Bilal Randeree, “Violent Clashes continue in Tunisia,” *Al Jazeera English Online* (4 January 2011); accessed March 25, 2011 <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/01/201114101752467578.html>

<sup>27</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *Upheaval in the Arab World: Report November 2011*, 7; accessed December 1, 2011 [http://www.rsf.org/rapport/RSF\\_BILAN\\_MOYEN\\_ORIENT\\_2011\\_GB.pdf](http://www.rsf.org/rapport/RSF_BILAN_MOYEN_ORIENT_2011_GB.pdf)

Trends in other Middle Eastern countries are concerning too. In the United Arab Emirates, which has remained largely untouched by popular uprisings, five bloggers were put on trial early in 2011. They were sentenced to jail but then pardoned by the president, suggesting that the UAE regime had learned from the mistakes of Ben Ali and Mubarak who cracked down on their people, instead of letting their grievances air.<sup>28</sup>

A report by the OpenNet Initiative found that nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa “utilize Western-made tools for the purpose of blocking social and political content, effectively blocking a total of over 20 million Internet users from accessing such websites.”<sup>29</sup> McAfee Inc., for example, has provided content-filtering software used by Internet service providers in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and Netsweeper Inc. of Canada has made deals in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Yemen.<sup>30</sup>

After Ben Ali was ousted, it became clear that Tunisia had some of the most pervasive Internet filtering in the world. The Interior Ministry had controlled the filtering equipment since 2004, and the entire country’s Internet traffic flowed through it. According to the new head of the Tunisian Internet Agency: “I had a group of international experts from a group here lately, who looked at the equipment and said: ‘The Chinese could come here and learn from you.’”<sup>31</sup>

These examples show that the democratic influence of the media in the Arab uprisings is not as all encompassing as many commentators would like to think. Social media, in theory, might help in the creation of communities that want to hold the government accountable, but in practice this is a very difficult task which requires more than simply access to media and technology. The events in Egypt, Tunisia and other Middle Eastern countries following the uprisings have shown that social media are unlikely to be a substitute for skilled organizers who can build and sustain successful social and political movements. Nor does the availability of mobile phones and computers and access to the Internet guarantee the emergence of a free and independent media.

Following the ouster of Mubarak, liberal activists in Egypt were unable to produce a presidential candidate. Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood replaced the secular youth as the driving force of change in Egypt and emerged as the most powerful political opponent of the military hierarchy. As one scholar put it, “The young people who filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square may know how to use

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<sup>28</sup> William Shaw, “Blogger Trial Will Test UAE’s Approach to Dissent,” *Institute for War & Peace Reporting: Arab Spring Issue 40* (November 25, 2011); accessed November 26, 2011 <http://iwpr.net/report-news/blogger-trial-will-test-uae%E2%80%99s-approach-dissent>

<sup>29</sup> Helmi Noman and Jillian C. York, “West Censoring East: The Use of Western Technologies by Middle East Censors, 2010-2011,” OpenNet Initiative, accessed April 10, 2011 <http://opennet.net/west-censoring-east-the-use-western-technologies-middle-east-censors-2010-2011>

<sup>30</sup> Paul Sonne and Steve Stecklow, “U.S. Products Help Block Mideast Web,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 28, 2011); accessed April 10, 2011 [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704438104576219190417124226.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704438104576219190417124226.html?mod=googlenews_wsj)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Facebook, but the Brotherhood has a branch in every neighborhood and town.”<sup>32</sup> Since the summer of 2011, the Brotherhood, which had been prohibited from broadcasting its message under Mubarak, has operated its own television station while state-run media has gravitated toward support of the military council.<sup>33</sup> More recently, the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated upper house of Parliament has tried to secure its influence over the appointment of the editors-in-chief of the state-run publications.<sup>34</sup> These continued power struggles between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood over state-run media demonstrate the urgency with which the ruling authorities want to maintain control over the flow of information. They also show that the progression towards a free and independent media in Egypt is far from certain. Similar conclusions can be reached in Tunisia, where respected journalist Kamel Labidi recently resigned from his position as head of a national media reform commission, citing repressive censorship practices of the newly elected Islamist government.<sup>35</sup> In spite of these trends that demonstrate the tenaciousness of government authorities in controlling media, it is widely believed that over time their power over Internet access and other technologies will diminish. As Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen point out, “not even governments can stop, control, or spy on all sources of information all the time.”<sup>36</sup>

“Technology,” Melvin Kranzenberg wrote in 1985, “is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.”<sup>37</sup> Citizens can use ICTs to try to change or rise up against repressive regimes, while these governments can use the same technologies for censorship and surveillance, thus maintaining their repressive grip on their citizens. But, as Howard explains, “such technologies are designed with specific applications in mind and have an impact on the structure and content of political communication.”<sup>38</sup> ICTs are not neutral, therefore, particularly not in the Middle East where citizens use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs—all platforms that originate in the US—to coordinate their protests. With mission statements like Google’s “Don’t be evil” and Facebook’s

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<sup>32</sup> Lucan Way, “The Lessons of 1989,” *Journal of Democracy* 21:4 (October 2011): 21.

<sup>33</sup> See Jared Malsin, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s post uprising TV station,” *Columbia Journalism Review Online* (July 25, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012

[http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/muslim\\_brotherhood\\_tv\\_station.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/muslim_brotherhood_tv_station.php) and David D. Kirkpatrick and Mayy El Sheikh, “Egypt’s New President is Being Undercut by State-Run Media,” *New York Times* (July 13, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/14/world/middleeast/president-morsi-of-egypt-is-undercut-by-state-run-media.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>34</sup> Dahlia El Zein, “Egypt’s state-run media threatened by Shura move,” *CPJ Blog* (July 16, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012 <http://www.cpj.org/blog/2012/07/egypts-state-run-media-threatened-by-shura-move.php>

<sup>35</sup> BBC News, “Tunisia media commission resigns over press freedom” (July 5, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18717651>

<sup>36</sup> Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, “The Digital Disruption,” *Foreign Affairs* 89:6 (November/December 2010): 77.

<sup>37</sup> Melvin Kranzenberg, “The Information Age: Evolution or Revolution?” in Bruce R. Guile (ed.) *Information Technologies and Social Transformation* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1985), 50.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.



“Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected,” these platforms can hardly be called neutral, even when considering that most of the censorship technology used by Middle Eastern dictators comes from the US as well. Even those technologies are designed, first and foremost, to protect users from the dangers of the Internet, not to violate their human rights.

Given the nature of these technologies and software, it will always be easier for outside social groups to adjust design capacities to their purposes—whether political or otherwise—just as it will be easier for them to overcome design constraints. On January 27, 2011, in an incident unprecedented in its scale, the Egyptian government shut down most of the country’s Internet and cell phone service, causing a 90 percent drop in data traffic to and from Egypt within a few hours.<sup>39</sup> A couple of days later, Google announced that they had already gone live with a speak-to-tweet service that Egyptians could use to stay connected via Twitter by simply calling one of the provided phone numbers, without the need for an Internet or cell phone connection.<sup>40</sup> There are many other ways of getting around government Internet and phone server shutdowns, and more and more people are becoming adept at using them. Makeshift antennae, portable FM radio stations, even microwaves can be used to circumvent Internet shutdowns.<sup>41</sup>

There is no denying the fact, then, that technological progress and new media have changed the nature of activism. The advances in online anonymity tools like Tor have enabled thousands of Internet users to access censored websites securely, thus reducing the risks associated with political activism in authoritarian countries.<sup>42</sup> What is more, after thousands of Arabs have seen what their protests can do, it will be difficult to imagine that they will return willingly to the pre-uprising status quo of government oppression and censorship. The possibility remains that the Arab Spring does not succeed like the revolutions of 1989 and we may still see the emergence of more one-party systems. Yet whether these systems can survive over the long run can well be doubted. Revolutions might not always be successful, but they change the behavior of the country, as noted by George Soros: “The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was repressed. But it carried with it the seeds of the successful revolution in 1989.”<sup>43</sup> With new media and information technology in the mix, it is much harder to imagine that a change of behavior will not occur.

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<sup>39</sup> Matt Richtel, “Egypt Cuts Off Most Internet and Cell Service,” *New York Times* (January 28, 2011); accessed March 25, 2011 [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/technology/internet/29cutoff.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/technology/internet/29cutoff.html?_r=1)

<sup>40</sup> “Some weekend work that will (hopefully) enable more Egyptians to be heard,” *The Official Google Blog* (January 31, 2011); accessed March 25, 2011 <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2011/01/some-weekend-work-that-will-hopefully.html>

<sup>41</sup> *The Economist*, “Signalling dissent” (March 17, 2011); accessed March 25, 2011 <http://www.economist.com/node/18386151>

<sup>42</sup> Runa A. Sandvik, “Social Media and Online Anonymity during the Arab Spring,” *WE-NATO Blog* (July 13, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012 <http://we-nato.org/2012/07/13/social-media-and-online-anonymity-during-the-arab-spring/>

<sup>43</sup> George Soros quoted in Chrystia Freeland, “Lessons From Central Europe for the Arab Spring,” *New York Times* (June 16, 2011); accessed November 26, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/europe/17iht-letter17.html?pagewanted=all>

The events of 2011 have been documented, tweet by tweet and YouTube video by YouTube video. In countries where until now there had only been one accepted and widely distributed storyline of events, there are now several versions of history.<sup>44</sup> In 1982, the Syrian people knew only what their media outlets told them about the Hama massacre.<sup>45</sup> But with access to satellite TV, mobile phones and Twitter, it has been impossible for the Assad regime to keep its people from learning an alternative version of the events in 2011-12. Moreover, the new governments in Tunisia and Egypt will have a hard time making the records of the Arab Spring disappear. In effect, usage of new media in the protests has laid the groundwork for Arab citizenship skills.<sup>46</sup> These will not go away that easily, and neither will the technology that is becoming more and more difficult for dictators to control.

While there seems to be clear evidence that new media empower non-state actors more than they empower the state, even in authoritarian regimes, Drezner does not take such an optimistic stance. He draws the conclusion that the Internet simply reinforces dynamics that already exist between states and non-state actors:

In societies that value liberal norms—democracies—the Internet clearly empowers non-state actors to influence the government. In arenas where liberal norms are not widely accepted—interstate negotiations and totalitarian governments—the Internet has no appreciable effect.<sup>47</sup>

Although they are ongoing and therefore not conclusive, the current events in the Middle East suggest that there might be more to the interplay between non-state actors and ICTs with regard to influencing authoritarian regimes. In his 1998 book, Thomas Risse-Kappen made the case that non-state actors are in fact more influential in states with more centralized state power. It is more difficult to gain access in these states, but once this has been achieved, it becomes easier for non-state actors to exert influence. The influence of non-state actors is even greater if powerful state actors are predisposed toward the goals of the non-state actors.<sup>48</sup> Given that ICTs and new media are tools that no state keen to join the 21st century global economic sphere is able to ignore, this statement might no longer hold true.

The economic necessity of supporting information technology is more likely to facilitate access to authoritarian states. Once it becomes easier for the tools to enter the “target” state, non-state

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<sup>44</sup> D. Parvaz, “The Arab Spring, chronicled Tweet by Tweet,” *Al Jazeera Online* (November 6, 2011); accessed November 26, 2011

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/11/2011113123416203161.html>

<sup>45</sup> John Kifner, “Syria Offers Picture of Hama Revolt,” *New York Times* (February 24, 1982), accessed November 26, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/02/24/world/syria-offers-picture-of-hama-revolt.html>

<sup>46</sup> Parvaz.

<sup>47</sup> Drezner (2010), 39.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.

actors working toward democratic change will find it easier to use these tools for their purposes as well. A rise in investment and development in ICT in the Arab world has coincided with increasing popular uprisings in the region. This suggests correlation, not causation, but it does not seem far-fetched to suspect that as ICTs become more widespread as a result of economic necessities, the influence of authoritarian regimes on the flow of information decreases.<sup>49</sup>

Risse-Kappen's study also argues that the more an issue (e.g., landmines, torture, women's rights) is regulated by international institutions, the easier it is for the transnational actor to influence the state.<sup>50</sup> When looking at ICTs and the Internet in particular, this theory does not seem to hold up, however, because there is no international regulation for cyber conduct, Internet freedom, or even regular use of media abroad. The US has been beaming its Voice of America and Al Hurra TV into Middle Eastern states for decades and years without repercussions and is now pursuing a policy of Internet freedom aimed at foiling autocratic governments who use the Internet and its related technologies to repress dissent.<sup>51</sup> Censorship remains a sovereign issue, and yet we see how authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are undermined by transnational coalitions aided by ICTs and new media.

The events in the Middle East also seem to support the contention that ICTs and new media can even be effective in states where civil society is not particularly strong. In fact, these new technologies and forms of media might have their greatest influence over the long term precisely because they help build civil society.

## **New Media and Civil Society**

As Clay Shirky puts it “the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere—change measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months.”<sup>52</sup> This does not just apply to social media, but new media in general. They are not just communication tools anymore, but, in Howard's words, “a fundamental infrastructure for social movements.”<sup>53</sup> Shirky writes:

[M]ass media alone do not change people's minds; instead there is a two-step process. Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues. It is in this second, social step that political opinions are

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<sup>49</sup> The case of China might be cited to counter this argument as it has invested heavily in IT technology to modernize its economy, while a broad popular uprising against Internet censorship has not occurred. Other factors driving such uprisings need to be taken into consideration, but only time will tell how long China can escape such revolts.

<sup>50</sup> Risse-Kappen, 297.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Landler and Brian Knowlton, “U.S. Policy to Address Internet Freedom,” *New York Times* (February 14, 2011), accessed March 25, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/15/world/15clinton.html>

<sup>52</sup> Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:1 (January/February 2011), 30.

<sup>53</sup> Howard, *Digital Origins*, 10.

formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference.<sup>54</sup>

ICTs and new media reduce the importance of physical location. They may provide a symbolic place in which individuals can forge their collective political identities.<sup>55</sup> By doing so, they can be seen as a secondary political socialization process. While the government has considerable control over the primary political socialization process, its influence on the secondary process is limited:

[T]he stability of a nation-state rests on the ability of its agents of socialization to produce feelings as to the rightness, the oughtness, and the legitimacy of the political order... In virtually all nations, this task is assigned to the schools... Mediated secondary socialization, however, is unlikely to produce the same state-centric result.<sup>56</sup>

By influencing the individual, therefore, new media also shape civil society in new ways. Because new media are more participatory than the prevailing forms of political participation, political processes themselves are democratized. In Howard's words, "Every time a citizen documents a human rights abuse with her mobile phone, uses a shared spreadsheet to track state expenditures, or pools information about official corruption, she strengthens civil society and strikes a blow for democracy."<sup>57</sup>

Another good example of this process is Al Jazeera, which has been instrumental in creating a new, transnational public sphere. Khalil Rinnawi called the newly shaped pan-Arab nationalism McArabism, "in which citizens throughout the Arab world receive identical nationalist pan-Arab content via transnational media."<sup>58</sup> This broader Arab identity became apparent when citizens of Bahrain and Jordan took to the streets in solidarity with protesters in Egypt in 2011. Such development also suggests that there is a trend undermining state control in favor of a stronger civil society. This subverting trend is likely to continue even as viewing habits in the Arab world change in the period following the revolutionary movements, including a demand for local news which pan-Arab television channels are already trying to meet.<sup>59</sup> Whether this will lead to the end of pan-Arab programming remains to be seen. However, the increasing demand for local information suggests that civil society in Egypt and Tunisia is expanding.

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<sup>54</sup> Shirky, (2011), 35.

<sup>55</sup> Nisbet, Erik C. and Teresa A. Meyers, "Challenging the State: Transnational TV and Political Identity in the Middle East," *Political Communication* 27 (2010), 349.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Philip Howard, "The Lasting Impact of Digital Media on Civil Society," *America.gov* (January 25, 2010), accessed March 25, 2011 <http://www.america.gov/st/democracyhr-english/2010/January/20100126140433mlenuhret0.8288081.html>

<sup>58</sup> Khalil Rinnawi, *Instant Nationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), xiii.

<sup>59</sup> Tom Gara, "Sky enters Arabic news market," *Financial Times* (May 6, 2012); accessed July 31, 2012 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/98d9d178-978c-11e1-83f3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz21wwkOO4G>

Additionally, ICTs and new media lower the transaction costs, that is, the difficulties that keep individuals in modern society from building social capital.<sup>60</sup> These transaction costs are even higher in repressive regimes where one might lose a job, be sent to jail or worse for simply trying to organize socially. New media make it easier for like-minded people to find each other, form groups and join them. Social media are particularly helpful in this regard as they do not just connect people to each other, but to a whole network. And, in terms of voicing anti-government concerns or demands in autocratic regimes, networks are more difficult to shut down than individuals or a group of individuals.

The new forms of media also help foster information cascades whereby peer pressure becomes more powerful, as noted by Drezner who writes that “many individuals will choose actions based on what they observe others doing.”<sup>61</sup> In late January 2011, Wael Ghonim tweeted “To all Egyptians silence is a crime now!”<sup>62</sup> Two weeks later, Mubarak handed over power. In 1989, the Monday demonstrations in East Germany attracted an increasing number of protesters each week as word about them spread. With the ability to gauge the reactions of others instantly through YouTube, Twitter and Al Jazeera, citizens were able to act on these cascading effects much faster during the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

In repressive regimes, new and social media also play an important role in legitimizing information cascades. Chris Edmond at the National Bureau of Economic Research found in a recent quantitative study that the quantity of information available to citizens is not sufficient to encourage enough people to act against a regime and overthrow it. What needs to be present as well is an increase in the reliability of the information.<sup>63</sup> In other words, it is not just the amount of information that matters, but also where it comes from. Citizens see social media generated by their social networks as more reliable than state-controlled media, and this allows them to gauge the difficulty and danger of acting against the regime.

## **The Impact of Satellite TV**

While the foregoing underlines the importance of new media in the overthrow phase of the Arab Spring, the role of satellite TV, and Al Jazeera in particular, in the mobilization of the Arab masses must not be overlooked. Proponents of the Facebook and Twitter Revolutions argument often overlook the fact that while Internet diffusion in the Middle East has increased dramatically

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<sup>60</sup> Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 193.

<sup>61</sup> Drezner (2010), 40.

<sup>62</sup> Tweet by Ghonim, January 26, 2011; accessed November 25, 2011

<http://twitter.com/ghonim/statuses/30283356453208065>

<sup>63</sup> Chris Edmond, “Information Manipulation, Coordination, and Regime Change,” Working Paper 17395, National Bureau of Economic Research (September 2011), 2-3; accessed November 25, 2011

[http://www.nber.org/papers/w17395.pdf?new\\_window=1](http://www.nber.org/papers/w17395.pdf?new_window=1)

over the last decade, it is still not widely available to the majority of Arabs.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, given that the average adult literacy rate in the MENA region is 74 percent, and in some countries even lower (Egypt 66 percent, Libya 58 percent, Yemen 61 percent) the Internet and social networking are still an elite form of information gathering.<sup>65</sup> A recent Arab public opinion poll by the Brookings Institution found that television is still the primary source of news for 58 percent of people in the Middle East, followed by the Internet with 20 percent.<sup>66</sup> Social media played an important role in the Arab uprisings, but television's part was, according to Jon Alterman, "fundamental to the unfolding of events, playing a decisive role in expanding protests of thousands into protests of millions."<sup>67</sup> While social media is influential when it comes to getting social and political movements off the ground, television is indispensable when scaling upward.

Many of the protest movements that preceded the 2011 uprisings in Egypt had already learned this lesson. The Kefaya ("Enough") movement worked to bring together secular, liberal youth and young Islamists between 2004 and 2007. The movement recorded several successes, holding protests and calling for regime change, but even in its heyday it did not count more than a few hundred activists, and eventually dissolved.<sup>68</sup> The April 6 movement experienced a similar fate after an initial success in staging a massive strike in the town of Mahalla in April 2008. Even the Facebook group created by Ghonim, named after Internet activist Khaled Said who was beaten to death by police, had initially only limited success in drawing crowds into the streets. Of the group's half-million Facebook followers only a few hundred took part in the initial protest on January 25. Only when protesters shifted their narrative from change and freedom to economic grievances and went into poor neighborhoods, did the crowds flood the streets and turn a movement of a few hundred into a movement of thousands.<sup>69</sup> And Al Jazeera was there to beam the pictures of the protestors into upwards of 70 percent of Egyptian homes.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, from the beginning of the Egyptian uprisings, Al Jazeera framed them as a defining revolutionary movement. When NileSat, an Egyptian-owned television satellite, shut down its Al Jazeera broadcast on January 30, the station informed people how to access alternative satellite feeds, thus turning viewers, who followed instructions to circumvent the government ban, into

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<sup>64</sup> For instance, only 0.9 percent of Egyptians have access to broadband Internet, according to Jeffrey Ghannam, 5.

<sup>65</sup> UN Data, Adult Literacy Rate (2005-2008); accessed December 2, 2011 <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=SOWC&f=inID%3a74%3bcrID%3a294%2c303%2c485%2c511&c=1,2,3,4,5,6&s=crEngName:asc,sgvEngName:asc,timeEngName:desc&v=1>

<sup>66</sup> Shibley Telhami, "The 2011 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll," Brookings Institution; accessed December 1, 2011 [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2011/1121\\_arab\\_public\\_opinion\\_telhami.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2011/1121_arab_public_opinion_telhami.aspx)

<sup>67</sup> Jon B. Alterman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The Washington Quarterly* 34:4 (Fall 2011): 104.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 111.

activists.<sup>71</sup> This and other transformations from consumer of information to content creator were, according to Alterman, “the true transformative effect of social media.”<sup>72</sup> Instead of just watching what was happening, citizens were taking their own photos and videos, creating and publishing their own posts online. It is not so much the process of finding an audience for activists, but turning the audience into activists, that defined the impact of social media in the Arab Spring.<sup>73</sup>

## External Effects

Due to new media and revolutions in ICT it is now easier for news of events taking place within a state to reach the outside world. This had two observable effects on the Arab uprisings and on the speed with which the protests spread from one country to the next. First, the fact that other people in the region could see what was happening in Tunisia and later Egypt led to a contagion effect, whereby people in Libya, Yemen and Syria concluded that they had a chance to overthrow their tyrants as well.<sup>74</sup> Second, the instantaneous availability of information to outsiders caused these outsiders to take action in support of the people within, as seen in the case of Bahrain and Jordan following the protests in Egypt. This demonstrates that the so-called boomerang effect can be a powerful anti-tyranny tool in a networked global society.<sup>75</sup> In the words of Howard: “what is the regime countermeasure for the chilling effects of a plea from someone in your social network who has been a victim of police brutality?”<sup>76</sup>

Discussions of the boomerang effect as outlined by Keck and Sikkink usually refer to the role of nongovernmental organizations in first pressuring the regime in question to change its behavior. If this is unsuccessful, NGOs then distribute information to outsiders so that they will put pressure on the government. Whether the media can be equated with NGOs deserves some consideration. The theoretical literature generally distinguishes between two kinds of non-state actors: the ones that work purely for profit and the ones that push for ideational objectives.<sup>77</sup> Many of the central media organizations of the Arab Spring, however, seem to be a hybrid form in this regard. While Google and Facebook clearly have commercial objectives, they also seem to advocate the ideals of democracy. For one, they profess to abide by mission statements that

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<sup>71</sup> Alterman, 110-111.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 112.

<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that availability of instantaneous news and information does not just help citizens learn from each other across national boundaries, but also makes it easier for dictators to learn from the mistakes of their counterparts in other countries. Leaders in Morocco and Algeria, for example, were quick to adopt reforms instead of cracking down on their people, presumably because they saw that this approach failed in Egypt and Libya.

<sup>75</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>76</sup> Howard, *Digital Origins*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Risse-Kappen, 8.

aim to make information and content accessible to and producible by everyone, thus fostering democratization at the individual level, and by helping people on the streets to work around Internet shutdowns and censorship, they were at some level assisting in the overthrow of the Middle Eastern dictators.

It is also worth mentioning the so-called “Al Jazeera effect” during the Arab uprisings. As the primary foreign (and independent) media organization on the ground in Tunisia and Egypt, Al Jazeera (especially Al Jazeera English) became the only source of what US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called “real news” from the Middle East and the Arab Spring in particular. Al Jazeera’s global viewership rose dramatically during the Arab Spring. During the first two days of the Egyptian protests, viewers watching Al Jazeera English live streamed over the Internet increased by 2,500 percent to 4 million, 1.6 million of them in the US, prompting many to call for broader Al Jazeera English availability.<sup>78</sup> As previously mentioned, new media play an important role in framing issues. Al Jazeera framed the events in terms of a revolutionary movement from the beginning, but the juxtaposition of peaceful protesters with brutal police forces was also important with regard to generating sympathy among foreign audiences.

Further research is needed to evaluate the impact of the “Al Jazeera effect” on the NATO intervention in Libya. However, it seems that this case highlights the limits rather than strengths of media influence. While it is probably fair to say that Western publics certainly felt sympathy for the Libyan people, other considerations for and against the war (for example, the economic crisis, and the US being already involved in two wars in the region) were mitigating public outrage over human rights violations by Gaddafi. This becomes even more obvious when looking at the ongoing atrocities carried out by the Assad regime in Syria, which so far has failed to garner enough international public outrage to support military intervention.

It seems, then, that while repressive governments can react to popular uprisings by resorting to ever more brutal crackdowns, they have to a large degree lost their power over the flow of information. And while none of the means of influence outlined above alone pose an existential threat to autocrats, when added together they can be a powerful collective tool for actors that are usually weak. In the Middle Eastern uprisings, a combination of boomerang effect, framing and audience action not only mobilized people in one country to form large scale protests, it swept the whole region. It also mobilized the US to pursue a policy of Internet freedom, openly supporting dissidents in their efforts to circumvent government restrictions on Internet access. And it led the international community to take military action against Gaddafi after he cracked down on protestors most brutally.

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<sup>78</sup> Regan E. Doherty, “Special Report: Al Jazeera’s news revolution,” *Reuters* (February 17, 2011); accessed November 25, 2011 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/us-aljazeera-idUSTRE71G0WC20110217>



## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the state still holds the majority of power, but the tools of power have diversified and advanced. In a globalized world marked by constant transnational flows of information the power of the citizen journalist and the online dissident, the power of framing and the power of the audience should not be underestimated. Nor should the role of ICTs and media be downplayed. It is they that make these powers possible and strengthen civil society at the cost of tyrants.

Empirical evidence for the influence of new media and social media in particular is only starting to emerge. There are plenty of opportunities for further research in the area of new media and its effects on the individual, on intergroup relations, on collective action, on regime policies, on external attention, and on grassroots political organization.<sup>79</sup> This paper was merely able to give an overview, but the trends it outlines suggest that in the struggle between Twitter and tyrants, the former might prove to be more useful than many scholars and observers want to give it credit for. As the events in the Middle East continue to unfold, we will have to stay tuned to find out.

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<sup>79</sup> Sean Aday et al., “Blogs and Bullets,” *Peaceworks* No. 65 (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2010); accessed April 10, 2011 <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/pw65.pdf>

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