



THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

KAMAL ADHAM CENTER FOR TELEVISION AND DIGITAL JOURNALISM

Arab Media & Society 3 YEARS SINCE THE SPRING



A Collection of Essays on the State of Arab Media

Cyberactivism, Civic Engagement, Citizen Journalism and the Arab Spring

Twitter and Tyrants: New Media and Sovereignty in the Middle East

Is the Egyptian Press Ready for Democracy?

The Discourse of Desperation: Leaders' Last Words

ARAB MEDIA & SOCIETY
3 YEARS SINCE THE SPRING

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Cover Image - Protesters, including a female blogger, blocked by a police-erected barricade outside then-President Morsi's Itihadia Palace in Heliopolis, Cairo. Photo taken December 11, 2012 by Patrick Baz. Getty Images.

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Introduction

The Arab uprisings of 2011 triggered a wave of discourse on media and social movements. As interest grew, so did questions about the scope and impact of media, particularly new media, on the events that unfolded. *Arab Media & Society* was a natural home for this discussion. Borne out of the 1990s satellite television revolution, *Arab Media & Society* (formerly *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*) has worked to evolve with the changing media landscape. Most recently this has meant broadening content to include an online environment increasingly characterized by civic engagement and citizen journalism. In few instances has this transmutation been more apparent than during the Arab Spring.

In the more than three years since the uprisings began, initial waves of euphoria and optimism have gradually given way to more pessimistic points of view. This has manifested in both broader concern at events that have unfolded across the region, and in terms of the role of media in the uprisings themselves. Parsing through the journal's six issues since the Arab uprisings began, we found a vibrant collection of voices, research, and reflections that closely mimicked the broader evolution of events on the ground. We also observed a representative change in tone, as optimistic outlooks gradually gave way to increasingly critical perspectives.

In the pages that follow, you will find some of the best selections from Arab Media & Society's post-revolution archives, as well as some new content. Reflecting the hybrid nature of the journal, the volume includes a melting pot of quantitative and qualitative research and analysis, presented by academics and practitioners alike. Taken together, this collection seeks to paint a narrative of the media landscape as it, like the region, continues to stumble through a turbulent transitional period with an uncertain future.

We hope that you find this collection to be a useful resource for understanding the media landscape of the region, and the role of media in the events of the last three years.

Sincerely,
AMS Editorial Team

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EARLY REFLECTIONS
&
OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOKS

The Arab Spring and the Discourse of Desperation: Shifting from an Authoritarian Discourse to a Democratic One

Originally Published Summer 2011

El Mustapha Lahlali

This paper examines the themes and structures of the last three speeches by President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia before they were forced out of office. The paper compares and contrasts the substance and structure of the speeches and the strategies used to address the public unrest that swept the streets of Tunisian and Egyptian cities in December 2010, and January and February 2011. The paper puts these themes in their social and cultural contexts, with a focus on the lexicon used, to see if there is any shift in terms of language use. The paper concludes that, as the pressure on them mounted, the presidents used different strategies and language in each speech to address the level of unrest. The paper also concludes that both former presidents adopted the same discourse patterns and strategies in dealing with the unrest. However, there is a difference in their speeches in the use of dialect as a medium of communication with the public.

Background

Before we embark on the analysis of Mubarak's and Ben Ali's last three speeches while in power, it would be useful to give a brief background on the political profile of both former presidents in order to contextualize their last speeches.

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ruled Tunisia for 23 years and under his presidency the country saw economic development, stability and some prosperity due to the robust economic program he established in his early years of office[1]. He came to power on November 7, 1987 after toppling ageing President Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless coup. His initially liberal approach to politics and the economy made him a popular face inside and outside Tunisia (Murphy

1999). His crackdown on the Islamist Ennahdha party won him allies among liberal elites and Western governments, who saw him “as an effective bulwark against Islamist extremism”

According to Murphy (1999), the Islamist opposition “had been subjected to a ruthless campaign of annihilation, along with leftist and trade union opposition to the regime” (Murphy 1999: 6). During his rule he gave special attention to education and women’s rights. Politically, he scrapped the title “president for life” and initially restricted the presidency to three terms (he later changed the constitution so that he could serve a fourth term). On the social front, he reformed the welfare system and created a special fund for the poor and needy. His discourse emphasized equality and prosperity for all. While his social reform was popular among Tunisians, on the political front there was little progress. The opposition was stifled and the media was fully controlled and monitored.

Human right organisations accused him of detaining hundreds of prisoners, notably members of Ennahdha[3]. His rule came to an end when young Tunisians took to the streets in protest at widespread unemployment, corruption and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The protests gained strength, and despite his attempts to subdue the uprising, Ben Ali was left with no option but to flee the country to Saudi Arabia. Within weeks Egyptians, inspired by the Tunisian example, came out on the streets too and after 18 days of confrontation, the Egyptian army took control and Mubarak went into retirement.

Mubarak came into power in 1981 on the assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Cautious and unimaginative, he provided stability coupled with political stagnation. Under the influence of his son Gamal and economic liberals close to Gamal, the economy began to grow rapidly from about 2004 but growth also increased the gap between rich and poor. The protesters that came out on the streets from January 25 accused the regime of corruption, brutality and political repression. Like Ben Ali, despite numerous attempts to subdue the protests, Mubarak failed to convince the protesters that his offers of reform were sincere.

Before they stepped down, both presidents tried hard to win the masses over to their promises of reform, but to no avail. Despite their attempts to use the discourse of unity, patriotism and change, their discourses were regarded as deceptive and lacking credibility. Like communist regimes in 1989, ‘the lexical substitution in political discourse’ (Bourmeyster 1998: 71) was considered too little too late. They promised ‘democracy’, ‘freedom of expression’, ‘prosperity’ and ‘liberty’ in order to appease protesters who had broken the barrier of fear, but their poor records for fulfilling previous promises undermined their chances of success.

As will be clear from the analysis of both Ben Ali and Mubarak’s last speeches in power, there was a major shift in the genre of discourse and in the way this discourse was produced. It no longer embodied the hegemonic tone and lexis that were designed to portray these regimes as powerful, knowledgeable and after all immune from criticism.

Instead they adopted a new lexicon, drafted to respond to the voices of the masses in the street. These shifts in the production of discourse reflect a major shift in the political context, a shift from a discourse of despotism to a democratic one. A striking feature in both cases is the gradual concessions reflected in the discourse and lexicon. Under enormous pressure from huge demonstrations, the two regimes found themselves obliged to give in to the protesters’ demands, making concessions that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier. The following sections will analyse their speeches by looking at the themes, strategies and language employed in response to the uprisings.

Methodology

The analysis centres on the speeches Ben Ali and Mubarak gave after the eruption of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia. The analysis will compare and contrast the strategies used in these speeches, the substance and the language, as well as the structure of these speeches. A textual analysis will be adopted to examine the shift in language and discourse of Ben Ali and Mubarak throughout the duration of the protests.

The strategy of blame and denial.

An examination of the first speech by each president indicates that both used the strategy of blame and denial, rejecting criticism and pointing fingers at others. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak blamed external forces for the unrest, insinuating that some of the protests were driven by foreign agents whose aim was to undermine Egypt and Tunisia.

Extract 1

حتى نفرق بين هذه العصابات والمجموعات من المنحرفين

Until we isolate these gangs and groups of delinquents... (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 2

أحداث وراءها أيد لم تتورع عن توريط أبنائنا من التلاميذ والشباب العاطل فيها. أيد تحت على الشغب والخروج إلى الشارع بنشر شعارات الياس الكاذبة

Incidents [have been] committed at the instigation of parties who have not hesitated to implicate students and unemployed youth in them. These parties are inciting riots in the streets by propagating false slogans of despair. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 3

استغلهم من سعى لاشاعة الفوضى واللجوء إلى العنف والمواجهة وفي القبض على الشرعية الدستورية والانقضاض عليها

(...) they were quickly exploited by those who sought to spread chaos, resort to violence and confrontation, and violate and attack constitutional legitimacy (Mubarak speech: 1 February, 2011)

As the above extracts demonstrate, both Ben Ali and Mubarak laid the blame on a minority of protesters who were seen to be manipulated by foreign agents working against the country's interests, in the belief that Arabs would rally behind their governments against any foreign intervention. The 'perpetrators' are referred to anonymously and described as violent mobs. (Extracts 1

& 2). When this strategy failed and the protesters showed no signs of backing down, the presidents tried blaming Islamists for the unrest – an approach designed in part to maintain Western support by magnifying the Islamist threat (Extract 4). While Ben Ali was very explicit in referring to Islamists, Mubarak used vaguer terminology in the knowledge that his audience would read it as a reference to the Muslim Brotherhood and others (Extracts 5 & 6). This strategy failed in the face of overwhelming evidence that the Islamist element in the protest movements was relatively small. Both also tried to appeal to the domestic ‘law and order’ lobby, emphasizing the danger of chaos.

Extract 4

مناوئون مأجورون ضمائرهم على كف أطراف التطرف والارهاب التي تسيرها من
الخارج أطراف لا تكن الخير لبلد حريص على العمل و المثابرة

Hostile elements in the pay of foreigners, who have sold their souls to extremism and terrorism, manipulated from outside the country by parties who do not wish well to a country determined to persevere and work. (Ben Ali's speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 5

قوى سياسية سعت الى التصعيد وصب الزيت على النار استهدفت امن الوطن واستقراره
بأعمال إثارة وتحريض وسلب ونهب وإشعال للحرائق وقطع للطرق واعتداء على مرافق
الدولة و الممتلكات العامة

(Those protests were transformed from a noble and civilised phenomenon of practising freedom of expression to unfortunate clashes, mobilised and controlled) by political forces that wanted to pour oil on the fire. They targeted the nation's security and stability through acts of provocation and incitement, theft and looting, arson, blocking roads and attacking state facilities and public property. (Mubarak speech: 1 February, 2011)

Extract 6

ثم تابعت محاولات البعض لاعتلاء موجة هذه التظاهرات والمتاجرة بشعاراته

I have followed attempts by some to ride the wave of these demonstrations and exploit the slogans. (Mubarak speech: 29 January, 2011)

Extracts 4, 5 and 6 contain references to a minority of protesters said to be behind the unrest. This minority is described as a dangerous mob that threatens national unity and security. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak criticised those behind the protests, but failed to refer to the reasons behind these uprisings. Both regimes denied at the beginning of the unrest the economic grievances that had brought millions to the street. Their narrative was that great economic and political reform was already under way, and that the protesters had other motives and hidden agendas (Extract 6). The following extract shows Ben Ali's emphasis on the achievements of his government in employment and education, and the regime's efforts to address the issue of unemployment.

Extract 7

والجميع يعلم كم نبذل من جهود للتشغيل، التشغيل الذي جعلنا منه دوماً أوكد أولوياتنا.
والجميع يعلم كم هي كبيرة عنايتنا بحاملي الشهادات العليا الذين كما قلت نعتز بأعدادهم
المتكاثرة ونعمل على رفع التحدي الذي تطرحه هذه الأعداد لأن خياراتنا
التر بوية من ثوابت مشروعا الحضاري

Everyone knows how hard we have tried on employment, which we have always made our priority. Everyone knows how much attention we have paid to graduates. As I said, we are proud of their increasing numbers and we are working to meet the challenge that these numbers pose, because our educational choices are an intrinsic part of our project for civilization. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

However, as the protesters calling for the downfall of the regimes grew both in number and confidence, the pressure mounted, leading to more concessions. This was reflected in the type of discourse and the language employed by both former presidents. The demonstrators are no longer referred to as troublemakers mobilised by external forces, but as legitimate protesters who have legitimate rights and concerns. This shift in the political position led to a shift in the political discourse.

Extract 8

وأنا فهمتكم، فهمت الجميع: البطال، و المحتاج والسياسي و اللي طالب مزيد من الحريات،
فهمتكم، فهمتكم الكل

I understand you all: the jobless, the needy, the political and all those who are calling for more freedom. I understand you, I understand you all. (Ben Ali's speech: 13 January, 2011)

Despite their attempts to appease the population, there was still no sign that protests would subside. Both the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes reviewed their strategies. They shifted from a strategy of defiance and blame to a strategy of acknowledging reality. Both presidents recognized that the status quo was unsustainable and that change was inevitable (Extract 9). The blame this time falls on their ministers, who were accused of incompetence and corruption. To shift the focus from their own incompetence and corruption, both former presidents dismissed their cabinets and promised to form new ones, in the hope that this would calm down the protesters. This move did nothing but fuel the protests further.

Extract 9

نكلمكم لأن الوضع يفرض تغيير عميق...تغيير عميق وشامل

I am addressing you because the situation dictates deep change, deep and comprehensive change. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

In Extract 9, Ben Ali did not refer to 'islah' (reform), but rather to 'taghyir' (change). His change of rhetoric is a clear indication of his acknowledgment of the gravity of the situation and the enormous challenge that the widespread protests posed for his regime and government. There is here a stark contrast between the discourse of his first and last speech. In the first speech he was very cautious and defiant, but in his last speech he appeared more flexible in his approach, adopting democratic terms such as 'change', 'democracy', 'liberty' and 'freedom'. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak admitted that economic reforms were needed in order to eradicate the unemployment and poverty ingrained in society. While stressing that good progress had been made economically, they admitted that more work and effort were needed to improve the economy.

Extract 10

ونحب نأكد أن العديد من الأمور لم تجر كما حبيتها تكون, وخصوصا في مجال
الديمقراطية والحريات, وغلطوني أحيانا بحجب الحقائق وسيحاسبون

I would like to affirm that many things didn't take place the way I would have wished, especially in the areas of democracy and freedoms. They misled me sometimes by hiding the facts, and they will be held accountable for that. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 11

ولذا أجدد لكم، وبكل وضوح، راني باش نعمل على دعم الديمقراطية وتفعيل التعددية. نعم على دعم الديمقراطية وتفعيل التعددية

So I clearly repeat that I will work to promote democracy and pluralism; yes, to promote democracy and pluralism. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 12

أنا مقتنع تمام الاقتناع بصدق نواياكم و تحرككم وأن مطالبكم هي عادلة و مشروعة، والأخطاء موجودة في أي نظام ودولة، ولكن المهم الاعتراف بها و محاسبة مرتكبيها، وأنا كرئيس جمهورية لا أجد حرجاً في الاستماع الى شباب بلادي

I am fully convinced that your intentions and your actions are honest, and that your demands are just and legitimate. Mistakes happen in any system or state but what is important is to recognize them and hold those responsible to account. As the president of the republic, I am not embarrassed to listen to the young people of my country. (Mubarak speech: 11 February, 2011)

In the case of Ben Ali, there is a clear reference in his last speech that he has been misled about the situation in his country, and he promised to bring those responsible for this to justice (Extract 10). His repetition of the word 'sayu-hasabun' (they will be held accountable) reflects his discontent with his inner circle. However, the reader is left with little information as to who will be held accountable and who is going to hold them accountable. Ben Ali has tried here to align himself with the public against his own advisers and cabinet. But, the discontent in the streets of Tunis was directed at Ben Ali first and foremost. This was evident in the slogans chanted, such as 'dégage' (leave). Although Ben Ali's speeches focused on the economic situation and the way to improve the lives of the Tunisian people, they also mentioned political and social reforms. What is interesting here is the use of a new discourse; the discourse of democracy and social reform. In Ben Ali's last speech he promised complete freedom of speech and access to the Internet; a complete change in

his discourse, from a discourse of censorship to a discourse of freedom and liberty (Extracts 10 & 11).

What is striking about Ben Ali's speeches, especially his last speech, is the prevalence of repetition. One could not help noticing repeated words and phrases throughout his speeches. His repetition of the lexical item 'ukallimukum' (I speak to you) is very revealing. It conveys a sense of friendliness and informality. He has chosen this lexical item over 'ukhatibukum' (I address you) to bridge the formal gap between him and the rest of the population. His use of repetition is designed to convince the Tunisian people of his message (Rieschild 2006: 21; Johnstone (1991). Al-Khafaji (2005: 16) pointed out that excessive repetition is designed to appeal to the reader and 'attract their attention'. However, there is some confusion between the use of the first person plural pronoun and the use of the first person singular pronoun in Ben Ali's last speech. The use of the 'we' form suggests a formal setting where those in authority receive respect. By using the 'royal we', he has deliberately asserted his authority as a president who can still be respected. However, in other parts of the speech he uses the first person singular pronoun, 'ana' (I), to appear less formal and approachable. This suggests some confusion in his state of mind.

Defending the self

Both Ben Ali and Mubarak also found time to defend their individual records and their service to their respective countries, emphasizing their patriotism and sacrifice in an attempt to persuade their audience to let them stay in power in dignity, as in the following extracts:

Extract 13

حزني وألمي كبيران لأنني مضيت أكثر من 50 سنة من عمري في خدمة تونس في مختلف المواقع: من الجيش الوطني إلى المسؤوليات المختلفة و 23 سنة على رأس الدولة, كل يوم من حياتي كان وما زال لخدمة البلاد

I am deeply saddened because I have spent more than 50 years of my life in the service of Tunisia in various positions: from the national army, to various responsibilities and 23 years as head of state. Every day of my life was and will always be devoted to the service of my country. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 14

اننى لم أكن يوما طالب سلطة أو جاه ويعلم الشعب الظروف العصيبة التي تحملت فيها المسؤولية وما قدمته للوطن حربا وسلاما كما أننى رجل من أبناء قواتنا المسلحة وليس من طبعي خيانة الأمانة أو التخلي عن الواجب والمسؤولية

I have never wanted power or prestige, and the people know the difficult circumstances in which I shouldered the responsibility and what I have given to the country in war and in peace. I am also a man of the armed forces, and it is not in my nature to betray a trust or abandon duty or responsibility. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

Extract 15

إن حسنى مبارك الذي يتحدث إليوم يعتز بما قضاه من سنين طويلة في خدمة مصر وشعبها إن هذا الوطن العزيز هو وطني مثلما هو وطن كل مصري ومصرية فيه عشت و حاربت من اجله ودافعت عن أرضه وسيادته

Hosni Mubarak who speaks to you today is proud of the long years he spent in the service of Egypt and its people. This dear nation is my country, as it is the country of all Egyptians, here I have lived and fought for its sake and defended its territory and its sovereignty. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

Extract 16

لقد شهدت حروب هذ البلد, وعشت أيام الانكسار وأيام النصر والتحرير, وكانت أسعد ايام حياتي عندما رفعت علم مصر فوق سيناء

I witnessed this country's wars. I lived through days of defeat, days of victory and liberation, and the happiest day of my life was when the flag of Egypt was raised over Sinai. (Mubarak speech: 11 February, 2011)

By repeating their achievements and records in government, they tried to remind the young generation behind the uprising of the services they had performed for their countries, again in the hope of winning sympathy and persuading people to call off their protests. Another strategy both presidents adopted was to make promises that they would not stand for re-election (Extracts 17 & 18).

Extract 17

ونحب نكرر هنا, وخلافا لما أدعاه البعض, أنني تعهدت يوم السابع من نوفمبر بأن لا رئاسة مدى الحياة, لا رئاسة مدى الحياة, ولذلك فأني أجدد الشكر لكن من ناشدني للترشح لسنة 2014 , ولكني أرفض المساس بشرط السن للترشح لرئاسة الجمهورية

I would like to reiterate here, contrary to what some claim, that I pledged on November 7, 1987 that there would be no lifetime presidency, no lifetime presidency. So I again thank those who called on me to stand in 2014 but I refuse to touch the age condition for candidates for the presidency of the republic. (Ben Ali speech: 10 January, 2011)

Extract 18

وأقول بكل صدق وبصرف النظر عن الظرف الراهن انى لم أكن انتوى الترشح لفترة رئاسية جديدة وقد قضيت ما يكفى من العمر في خدمة مصر وشعبها

I will say with all honesty -- and regardless of this particular situation -- that I did not intend to seek a new term as president, because I have spent enough of my life in serving Egypt and its people. (Mubarak speech: 2 February, 2011)

In both cases this was interpreted as an appeal to the public to let them complete their tenure, but this, again, fell on deaf ears, and the demonstrations continued. Both Ben Ali and Mubarak addressed their discourse to two audiences; the domestic audience and the external audience. The focus on economic, social and political reforms was designed to persuade both audiences that they were listening and were willing to act on the demands of the protesters. For the external audience - mainly Western governments - the two regimes tried to show that they were making an effort to address domestic issues. But, what is interesting is the focus in an explicit manner on the extremist groups who, according to both regimes, were behind the unrest. This could be considered as a scare tactic to reinforce Western support for both regimes.

Unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak in his last speeches did however make an explicit criticism of Western interference in his country's affairs. This may have been a strategy to shift the focus from his greater domestic problems, or may have reflected genuine frustration with the continuing calls for his resignation by Western governments.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) vs Dialect

At the linguistic level, the main feature of the discourse was Ben Ali's use of colloquial Tunisian rather than Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in parts of his last speech as president, in contrast to Mubarak's invariable use of MSA throughout. By switching to dialect, Ben Ali may have been trying to appeal to a wider section of the Tunisian society, especially those less educated people who could not easily follow his speech in MSA. He may also have wanted to remind his own people that he is a Tunisian and try to bridge the social gap between himself and the wider Tunisian public. The use of dialect could also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the middle class people taking part in the protests. The following are examples of his switch from MSA to Tunisian dialect.

Extract 19

نكلمكم بلغة كل التونسيين والتونسيات

I speak to you in the language of all Tunisians. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 20

العنف ما هوش متاعنا ولا هو من سلوكنا

Violence has never been part of our custom, or part of our behavior. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 21

أولادنا اليوم في الدلر، وموش في المدرسة، وهذا حرام وعيب لأن أصبحنا خائفين عليهم
من عنف مجموعات سطو ونهب واعتداء على الأشخاص

Our children are at home today, not at school. This is immoral and unacceptable, because we are afraid for their safety, from the violence perpetrated by groups of bandits from looting and attacks against persons. (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Extract 22

نؤكد يزي من اللجؤ للكرطوش الحي، الكرطوش موش مقبول، ما عندوش مبرر إلا لا قدر
الله حد يحاول يفك سلاحك ويهجم عليك بالنار

I say stop using live ammunition. Live ammunition is not acceptable, and not justifiable unless, God forbid, anyone tries to snatch your weapon and opens fire at you (Ben Ali speech: 13 January, 2011)

Although Ben Ali is used to delivering his speeches to the nation in MSA, his switch to dialect could be said to be dictated by the social and cultural change exemplified in the widespread unrest (Hudson 1980: 57). The use of Tunisian dialect conveys Ben Ali's 'attitude towards his audience' (Paradis 1978: 2). He tries to convey sympathy with his people and his acknowledgement of the special circumstances. According to Scotten and Ury (1977), speakers may switch from one language to another for a variety of reasons, sometimes to redefine the interaction as appropriate to a different social arena. In the case of Ben Ali, the social arena includes uneducated and illiterate people who may not be well-versed in MSA.

As for Mubarak, he consistently used MSA throughout his speeches. By doing so, he focused on those educated middle-class people said to be behind the revolution. Another interpretation could be related to his desire to maintain the prestige of leadership with a good command of prestigious language. It should be said here that throughout his speeches Mubarak performed that role well, apart from a few grammatical mistakes in his last speech. The use of gesture is another difference between the two former presidents. While Ben Ali used hand gestures to illustrate his speech, Mubarak delivered his speech without any such gestures. He appeared calm and composed while delivering his speeches and his intonation reflected a sense of defiance, unlike Ben Ali, whose speech reflected a state of nervousness.

However, in terms of the structure and strategy, both former presidents followed the following pattern in the sequence of speeches:

- Blame and denial
- Acknowledging reality
- Emphasis on individual achievements
- Pledge of drastic reform and change

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a detailed analysis of the type of discourse used by the former presidents of Egypt and Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak and Ben Ali, in their last weeks in power. The paper compares and contrasts the main themes and strategies they used in addressing the uprisings that swept their countries. The analysis shows that they followed similar strategies, passing through a series of stages as earlier strategies failed. The language they used shaped and was shaped by those strategies. The one contrast is in the realm of register: while all Mubarak's speeches were delivered in MSA, Ben Ali in his final speech switched between MSA and Tunisian dialect. Another aspect that was quite prevalent in Ben Ali's speeches is repetition of the same phrases and words, while Mubarak seems to repeat themes rather than phrases or single words.

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Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance

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Introduction

“If you want to free a society, just give them Internet access.” These were the words of 30-year-old Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim in a CNN interview on February 9, 2011, just two days before long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down under pressure from a popular, youthful, and peaceful revolution. This revolution was characterized by the instrumental use of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and text messaging by protesters, to bring about political change and democratic transformation. This article focuses on how these new types of media acted as effective tools for promoting civic engagement, through supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by allowing forums for free speech and political networking opportunities; providing a virtual space for assembly; and supporting the capability of the protestors to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests.

Additionally, it explores how these new media avenues enabled an effective form of citizen journalism, through providing forums for ordinary citizens to document the protests; to spread the word about ongoing activities; to provide evidence of governmental brutality; and to disseminate their own words and images to each other, and, most importantly, to the outside world through both regional and transnational media.

In discussing these aspects, special attention will be paid to the communication struggle which erupted between the people and the government, through

shedding light on how the Egyptian people engaged in both a political struggle to impose their own agendas and ensure the fulfillment of their demands, while at the same time engaging in a communication struggle to ensure that their authentic voices were heard and that their side of the story was told, thus asserting their will, exercising their agency, and empowering themselves. The article concludes that these aggregate efforts resulted in tilting the political and communication balance in Egypt in favor of freedom-fighters and political activists.

To better understand these phenomena, and how they played out before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution, a brief overview of the dynamics of the transformative Arab media landscape, with a special focus on the role of new media, is mandatory.

The Transformative Arab Media Landscape: The Impact of New Media

For a number of years, the Arab media landscape has been witnessing a perplexing paradox, namely: a gap between the vibrant and active media arena, where many resistant and oppositional voices could be heard, on one hand, and on the other hand the dormant and stagnant political arena, which did not exhibit any serious signs of active change, popular participation, or true democratization. This puzzling gap, which was prevalent in many parts of the Arab world, was explained by some Arab media scholars (Seib, 2007; Khamis, 2007, 2008) by using the “safety valves” notion, i.e., that Arab media, especially the opposition press, were being exploited by the autocratic ruling regimes as a platform for people to vent their angry feelings and resentment towards their authoritarian governments, instead of taking decisive steps in the direction of radical reform and transformation, thus substituting words for action (Seib, 2007). It was not until the latest wave of political upheaval that swept the Arab region that Arab media, or more precisely new media in the Arab world, started to become effective tools for “public will mobilization” (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010).

Prior to 1990, most media ownership in the Arab world lay with governments, and most media functioned under strict governmental supervision and con-

trol. A number of authors (Abdel Rahman, 1985, 2002; Boyd, 1999; Mellor, 2007; Rugh, 2004) argued that in this era Arab media were mostly controlled by governments mainly to keep lay people uninformed, and thus incapable of effectively participating in political controversies and rational debates.

A new media revolution erupted in the Arab world after 1990, inspired by the introduction of both satellite television channels and the Internet (Khamis & Sisler, 2010). In the 1990s Internet penetration started to spread throughout the Arab world. Although the region generally suffered from being on the low end of the digital divide (Abdulla, 2007, p. 35) and faced many challenges, including the lack of human and economic information technology (IT) resources, illiteracy and computer illiteracy, the lack of funds for IT research and development, and the lack of solid telecommunication infrastructures (Abdulla, 2007, p. 35), this situation is rapidly changing, since many Arab countries are currently striving to increase Internet penetration rates.

Ironically, although many Internet websites and blogs were 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, as in the case of the Egyptian government (Abdulla, 2006, p. 94). This provides more evidence of the highly ambivalent and complex relationship between media and governments in the Arab world (Khamis & Sisler, 2010).

Overall, it could be said that the introduction of satellite television channels and the Internet represented an important shift from the monolithic, state-controlled, and government-owned media pattern to a much more pluralistic and diverse media scene, where many diverse and competing voices representing different political positions and orientations could be heard at the same time, adding to the richness of ongoing political debates and the formation of a wide array of public opinion trends (Khamis, 2007, 2008; Atia, 2006).

The rise in social media usage in the Arab world followed a rise in overall Internet and mobile phone penetration in the region. A study by Philip Howard (2011, pp. 19-20), encompassing predominantly Muslim countries throughout the world, shows that mobile phone and Internet penetration has increased

dramatically over the last 10 years, with technology adoption rates in these countries among the highest of all developing nations.

The Internet allows for the dissemination of cultural content in the Arab world (Howard, 2011, p. 163). Much of the user-generated content is transmitted using social media, such as Facebook, the video-sharing portal YouTube, Twitter, and short message service (SMS) or text messaging. These media enable peer-to-peer communication between users and can be linked to each other, allowing users to transmit their ideas and images to large numbers of people. Therefore, it is safe to say that one of the most important avenues through which public opinion trends and public spheres are both shaped, as well as reflected, in modern Arab societies is the Internet (Zelaky et al., 2006, p. 5). The significance of the introduction of the Internet stems from the fact that it defies boundaries, challenges governmental media censorship, and provides an alternative voice to traditional media outlets, which echo official, governmental policies and views. In other words, it enables the in-flow and out-flow of information simultaneously through a “virtually defined ...emerging cyberworld that knows no physical boundaries” (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010, p.159). Therefore, it provides invaluable opportunities to public mobilization across borders.

The Internet is also a rapidly growing and expanding medium, especially among young people. Recent research studies indicate that Internet use is increasingly more prevalent among younger age groups within the Arab world, especially the 20 to 30 year old age group, which uses the net more avidly compared to the rest of the population (Abdulla, 2007, p. 50). This can very well explain why and how new media were effectively deployed by young people in the Arab world to trigger political reform. In Egypt, for example, the 15 to 17 percent of the population who are active Internet users are mostly youth, who were the driving force behind the Egyptian revolution.

Howard (2011, p. 182) notes that through social media, citizen journalists who are dissatisfied with traditional media's version of events are telling their own stories, and that “these patterns of political expression and learning are key to developing democratic discourses.” He observed that social media not only help start democracies, but also help entrench existing ones, and that the

“networked design” of social media is the key factor threatening authoritarian regimes, since “These are the communication tools for the wealthy, urban, educated elites whose loyalties or defection will make or break authoritarian rule” (Howard, 2011, p. 11).

Social media can also serve as channels for expressing collective consciousness and national solidarity. Daron Acemoglu (Freeland, 2011) argues that 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. “What really stops people who are oppressed by a regime from protesting is the fear that they will be part of an unsuccessful protest,” he says. “When you are living in these regimes, you have to be extremely afraid of what happens if you participate and the regime doesn’t change.” Therefore, he contends, satellite television and social networking have made it easier to let each individual know that his/her views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile and safe (Freeland, 2011).

After providing this overview of the impact of the introduction of new media in the Arab world, and before turning our attention to the significant role they played before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution, we have to first provide conceptual definitions of basic terms.

Cyberactivism, Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism: Conceptual Definitions

The role of new media before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution was especially important in three intertwined ways, namely: enabling cyberactivism, which was a major trigger for street activism; encouraging civic engagement, through aiding the mobilization and organization of protests and other forms of political expression; and promoting a new form of citizen journalism, which provides a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves and document their own versions of reality. Therefore, it is crucial to provide definitions for these terms, in order to better understand their relevance and applicability in the context of the Egyptian revolution.

Howard (2011, p.145) defines cyberactivism as “the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline,” adding that

“the goal of such activism is often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes.” Cyberactivism differs from mobilization because of the latter’s focus on planning, execution, and facilitation of actions. However, they are both closely interrelated, since cyberactivism can help to foster and promote civic engagement, which, in turn, gives birth to various forms of mobilization.

The term civic engagement refers to the process through which civil society is invited to participate in ongoing political, economic and social efforts that are meant to bring about change. According to the Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership at the University of Maryland:

Civic engagement is acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good. Civic engagement encompasses the notions of global citizenship and interdependence. Through civic engagement, individuals - as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world - are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world.

A better understanding of the term civic engagement requires a deeper comprehension of a closely intertwined term, namely: civil society. Edwards (2004) defined civil society as “a reservoir of caring, cultural life and intellectual innovation, teaching people...the skills of citizenship and nurturing a collection of positive social norms that foster stability, loosely connected under the rubric of ‘social capital’” (p. 14). According to Diamond (1999):

civil society is the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from ‘society’ in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, preferences, and ideas...to hold state officials accountable (p. 221).

Most importantly, “According to much contemporary democratic theory, civil society forms the bedrock of good democratic governance – and this sentiment is echoed in more popular political discourse” (Browsers, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, “The most noticeable change has been a distinct shift of focus in discussions of democratization from the state to society – that is, from theories that view the state as the locus of political change to theories that see the impetus for change as arising in a non-governmental realm.” (Browsers, p. 19).

A concept closely interlinked with civic engagement is public will mobilization. The term “public will” refers to “a social force that can mobilize organically, or with external support and influence, to become a political lever for social change...[it] has the potential, if adequately resourced, organized, and mobilized, to serve as the impetus for social change” (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010, p.159). Public will usually “crystallizes around a social condition that is recognized as problematic; it coalesces into a collective consensus about how the problem can and should be ameliorated; and it can erupt, through coordination of resources and collective resolve, into social action” (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010, p.159).

An equally significant concept worth defining is citizen journalism, which provides ordinary citizens the opportunity to document their own version of reality and tell their own side of the story. It is distinguished from professional journalism in that ordinary citizens use digital media tools to report on events on the ground, uploading text and videos directly to the Internet or feeding the information and videos to media outlets. Therefore we can contend that citizen journalism “is a promising new breed of news-making that has been championed by various scholars...[for] granting ordinary citizens a novel, hands-on role” (Reich, 2008, p. 739). Citizen journalism “gives people a voice and therefore power. The people’s participation itself and what they produce are regarded with the hope to contribute to an informed citizenry and democracy” (Nip, 2006, p. 212). Citizen journalism assumes that “average citizens are capable of intelligent judgment, mature understanding, and rational choice if offered the opportunity; in other words, that democracy as ‘self-government’ is not a dream but a practical premise” (Rosen, 1994, p. 18).

After providing conceptual definitions of these key terms, we should now turn our attention to the role that cyberactivism played before, during, and after the Egyptian revolution.

Cyberactivism Before the Egyptian Revolution: Paving the Road for Change

Before the Tunisian revolution lit the spark for Arab uprisings, the stage had been already set in Egypt by existing protest movements and a network of activist groups that had learned from their previous attempts at affecting change. According to Egyptian political activist Mohamed Mustafa, who was one of the coordinators of the National Coalition for Change campaign and one of the organizers of the January 25 revolution: “Unlike the Tunisian revolution, which was triggered spontaneously through the act of a single person that led to a massive wave of national protest, without any prior planning, the Egyptian revolution was already being planned [since] a long time ago.” In fact, a protest was already in the planning stages: the National Coalition for Change had proposed holding a protest for political reform in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, when Egypt’s then-president Hosni Mubarak was going to give a speech to celebrate Police Day (Baker, 2011) in honor of a police revolt suppressed by the British (Hopkins, 2011).

This was not the first time a protest had been called in Egypt. In fact, because the Egyptian people were already fed up with the degree of corruption, dictatorship, economic distress, and humiliation they had been suffering for a long time, several protest movements were already active in the Egyptian political arena. These included, according to Mustafa (2011), the Kefaya movement; the Muslim Brotherhood, which was active despite its officially banned status; and Ayman Nour’s political party (Hizb el Ghad), to mention only a few. He explains that the reason behind their ineffectiveness in bringing about real change had been their failure to achieve public mobilization on a massive scale. Most of their marches and protests attracted only a few hundred, which made it easy for the police to crack down on them.

This was not the case in Egypt’s 2011 popular revolution. “The use of new technologies this time helped to spread the word out about this planned protest, to ensure a popular base of support for it and, thus, to assure those organizing the January 25 (protest) that there will be enough numbers of people supporting them,” Mustafa (2011) explains. However, he also acknowledges the role of street activism, which preceded the actual revolution and paved the

way for it, “Because not everyone in Egypt has Internet access, we had to also make sure through street activism that those who do not have Internet access could also be reached and that their sentiments are in support of the revolution. That was secured in previous campaigns through collecting signatures from lay people to document their support of the “Change Declaration” that was drafted by Dr. ElBaradei; knocking on peoples’ doors and rallying their support; and even rehearsing for this major event through sporadic, mini-protests to guarantee public support.”

Another group called the April 6 Movement was also active before the revolution. The group was named for its first effort, a labor strike it supported in the Nile Delta city of El-Mahalla el-Kubra on April 6, 2008 (Kirkpatrick & Sanger, 2011; Gopal, 2011; Rosenberg, 2011; Ishani, 2011). The April 6 movement used cell phones, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to document police excesses, organize meetings and protests, alert each other to police movements, and get legal help for those who had been arrested (Ishani, 2011; Nelson, 2008). However, the April 6 protests showed the limits of social media for democratic movements: Facebook attracted many sympathizers online but was unable to organize them well offline (Rosenberg, 2011).

A popular Facebook group affiliated with the April 6 movement, “We Are All Khaled Said,” also existed before the uprising and was famously linked to young Google executive Wael Ghonim, its (initially) anonymous creator. The Facebook page had over 350,000 members before January 14, 2011, and it was named for Khaled Said, a young Egyptian man dragged from a café and beaten to death in the street by police in June 2010 (Giglio, 2011, p. 15). Ghonim used the site to educate and inspire Egyptians about democracy, driving home the message that “This is your country; a government official is your employee who gets his salary from your tax money, and you have your rights” (Kirkpatrick & Sanger, 2011). Ghonim claimed that the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page was successful because it used surveys to determine the majority’s opinion, which then prevailed (Joyce, 2011).

Egyptian tech-savvy activists were fighting back against state control of the Internet prior to the 2011 protests. Many had reached out to the international community to educate themselves on new technologies for bypassing state controls. The April 6 Movement received technical advice from the Ital-

ian anarchist party on how to use “ghost servers,” which “bounce Internet searches to nonexistent servers to confuse any online monitoring, allowing users to share information and continue coordinating their activities in heavily monitored digital and telecom environments” (Ishani, 2011). Others in the movement worked with the Kenyan NGO Ushahidi to develop their “capabilities for securely and credibly capturing raw video and reporting on the ground with mobile phones and building online content around it,” and yet more received training from a U.S. NGO on how to use mapping tools, such as Google Maps and UMapper, to document protests and choose demonstration sites (Ishani, 2011).

Therefore, as Marc Lynch (2011) indicates, Egypt was unlike Tunisia, where the very controlled and restricted information environment before the revolution meant that people were largely unaware of the degree of dissatisfaction with the ruling regime that may be shared with their fellow citizens, and the protests thus resulted in an “information cascade”, where “a small act of protest became a wide act of public revolt when proliferated via new media technologies.” The Egyptian case was very different: according to Lynch (2011), Egypt enjoyed a much more lively and vibrant communication environment over the last decade, where many oppositional voices were loudly heard and many active political groups were already expressing their discontent with the ruling regime. Therefore, as Lynch (2011) puts it, it was not a matter of knowing, or not knowing, how their fellow citizens felt about the regime, rather “it was only a matter of calculating the risk involved in protesting and the chances of success; how much people are ready to sacrifice; and whether they are willing to pay the price of freedom.”

However, despite the degree of political dissatisfaction that was generally shared among the Egyptian people at large and the availability of shared knowledge and information in the political arena, there was a need to find the missing link between public anger and resentment of the ruling regime on the one hand, and actual public mobilization to bring about real change on the other hand. Political activism in the real world, aided by cyberactivism in the virtual world, succeeded to find this missing link.

Cyberactivism during the Egyptian Revolution: Triggering Public Mobilization

As shown above, social media had already been used by protest movements in Egypt to help in mobilization efforts in previous protests, and so it is no surprise that they were put to use again in the run up to the January 25 revolution. The National Coalition for Change used a well organized and intertwined communication network that included Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to get the word out and sent text messages, such as “Tell your friends,” and “Look what is happening in Tunisia. This is how people change their country” (Baker, 2011). Facebook’s largest impact was in the mobilization of protesters (Vila, 2011). In fact, it could be said that the Egyptian revolution witnessed the first incident of the “politicization of Facebook” on a grand scale to orchestrate major reform and drastic change. Ghonim invited “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook members to protest on January 25, and within 3 days more than 50,000 people responded that they would attend. As Giglio (2011, p. 16) explains: “Ghonim implored his Facebook fans to spread word of the protest to people on the ground, and he and other activists constantly coordinated efforts, combining online savvy with the street activism long practiced by the country’s democracy movements. Ghonim seemed to view the page both as a kind of central command and a rallying point—getting people past ‘the psychological barrier.’”

The social network best suited for the task of organizing the protesters was Facebook, “where information could be spread to thousands of people in an instant and then shared between friends,” and this “dissemination was far faster than leaflets, with the added benefit that those receiving the messages were already interested and trusted the source” (Idle and Nunns, 2011, p. 20). This highlights the value of social media in terms of creating networks that enable peer-to-peer communication between users. Networks are multifaceted communication systems comprised of relations that allow for “dynamic, emergent, adaptive, and flexible associations” (Howard, 2011). However, different social media tools lend themselves to different types of networks. Facebook, for example, is built on linkages between “friends”, whereas Google Moderator and Twitter allow anyone to comment on a subject. Google Moderator allows for commentary and voting on subjects by all users. Twitter allows users to create

a subject for discussion and post a comment, or “tweet,” about that subject (which could include a link to other content), which can then be picked up by other users and “retweeted” multiple times, until it becomes widespread. Thus, tools like Twitter lead to an environment where the best ideas and content, regardless of who posted it, can spread and gain great influence in a type of “meritocracy” of ideas and information (Maher, 2011). By combining these multiple functions of different types of online media together in one effective communication network during the January 2011 revolution, it is easy to understand how Egyptian political activists won their battle against the regime, both online and, most importantly, offline.

The “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page, for example, became an important source of information and advice for protesters, with links to tools like Hotspot Shield, which circumvents web filters, and advice such as “Egyptian flags only, no political emblems, no violence, don’t disrupt traffic, bring plenty of water, don’t bring your national I.D. card, etc.” (York, 2011a). In another example of cross-border exchange of ideas using social media, Tunisian activists on Facebook posted “Advice to the youth of Egypt: Put vinegar or onion under your scarf for tear gas” and brainstormed with their Egyptian counterparts on how to evade state surveillance, resist rubber bullets, and construct barricades (Kirkpatrick & Sanger, 2011).

Zack Brisson et al. (2011, p. 28) reported that Facebook was used as an “advocacy and press management tool by certain opposition groups”. For example, they mention that “one leading organizer with the Democratic Front Party described how they turned to Facebook as a spin machine whenever the government provided an opportunity.” According to this organizer, “When the security forces broke in our front door on January 26, we immediately put up a Facebook group to collect popular anger and let the media know” (Brisson et al., 2011, p. 28). Similarly, political activist Mohamed Mustafa describes how the organizers of this revolution used their hand-held mobile devices, especially cell phone cameras, to document any incidents of arrest or police brutality and to upload them immediately to Facebook and tweet about them, thus attracting attention and rallying support.

However, because of security concerns, most of the activists’ sensitive planning occurred offline to avoid detection, especially during the beginning stag-

es, and, if it was not face-to-face, “when technology was used, it was private and one-to-one (SMS, phone calls, GChat), unlike social media, which is public and many-to-many” (Joyce, 2011). In general, Brisson et al., (2011, p. 28) report that “technology was only marginally, if at all, used by several factions critical to the revolution. Even mobile phones, while near ubiquitous, were little used in campaigns by the labor movement and the judiciary.” This was due to the groups being mobilized by the labor and judiciary movements (many of them not Internet users), institutional tradition, and fears of Internet surveillance. This again reminds us of the crucial role played by on-the-street public mobilization both before and during the revolution.

And once people were in the streets, Facebook and similar platforms were “less immediately relevant,” although online tools were still important for coordination, such as maps made with Google tools and SMSs to alert protesters to sniper locations (Vila, 2011). Twitter was used simultaneously for citizen journalism and mobilization during the revolution. For example, Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns (2011, p. 31) report that “protesters marched through the back streets in districts like Shubra and Boulaq, gathering people as they went, all the while tweeting news of their location and progress.” On Twitter, images were posted showing satellite maps marked with arrows indicating where protesters could go to avoid pro-government thugs (Meier, 2011).

Furthermore, protesters on the street used Twitter to “announce new initiatives, like marching to the parliament building, and to boost their collective morale with reports of other developments around the country” (Idle and Nunns, 2011, p. 20). “Planning discussions also took place on Twitter, using the hashtag #Jan25 to enable anyone to join the conversation, and activists talked to each other directly using the @ reply function” (Idle and Nunns, 2011, p. 20).

Cyberactivists used digital artifacts effectively during the Egyptian revolution through “digitally encoding text, video, or audio” and then uploading them directly or synthesizing content by aggregation (“bringing together content of the same type,” such as photos and news articles) and mash-up (“bringing together content of different types,” such as “GPS data, video, music, text, and maps”) (Joyce, 2011). These were aggregated and distributed by the protesters to achieve a set of strategic goals during the revolution and beyond.

In brief, it could be said that cyberactivists deployed new media for multiple reasons throughout the revolution. For example, as Mary Joyce (2011) stated, Egyptian activists used digital technologies to broadcast general information; mobilize protesters by sharing information with a “call to action”; co-create by collective “design and planning”; protect each other by “evading censorship and surveillance”; and transfer money.

It is worth noting that the Egyptian revolution entailed not only a political struggle, but also a communication struggle between the government and the activists. Egyptian protesters had been forced to contend with some Internet monitoring before the uprising, but not to the extent seen in Tunisia before its as previously mentioned. During the uprising, protesters were highly successful in circumventing Internet controls, using tools like the aforementioned Hotspot Shield and Tor, which maintains the anonymity of the user while online (York, 2011a; Daily Mail, 2011), and other techniques they had learned before. After the regime blocked Twitter, people tweeted the websites of proxy servers to circumvent the control (Idle and Nunns, 2011, p. 41).

However, once the protests began to threaten the Mubarak regime’s existence, the state used a more aggressive — and cruder — method than Tunisia’s government to impede Internet and mobile phone access. On January 28, 2011, the Egyptian government shut off the Internet and mobile phone services for the entire country, resulting in a blackout that lasted almost one week (Ishani, 2011). The economic impact of the Internet and mobile phone shutoff was staggering, with preliminary estimates of \$90 million in losses by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Noble, 2011). A survey conducted during the Egyptian uprisings (which covered some days before and after the Internet shutdown) shows the impact that state censorship had on the public:

More than half of the survey respondents stated that governmental restrictions had impeded their ability to use their mobiles and/or the Internet.... On the other hand, only around 20 percent reported having used the technologies in question to follow or share the news since the start of the uprising — a period which included at least four or five days when Internet and mobile access were not

yet blocked. One possible explanation for this apparent contradiction is that interest in acquiring and sharing news via peer-to-peer media grew as the protests mounted, but once the crackdown on these media began, new entrants into the world of social media ran up against the government blockade and were unable to make effective use of these communications methods. If this hypothesis is correct, it is reasonable to assume that the overall usage of mobiles and social networks to gather and share information would have [been] substantially greater in the absence of governmental censorship (IBB Office of Research, 2011).

The blackout, which lasted nearly a week, forced activists to find more innovative workaround solutions, such as setting up FTP (file transfer protocol) accounts to send videos to international news organizations (Ishani, 2011). Another solution they found was using landlines to connect to Internet services in neighboring countries by calling international numbers with older dial-up modems, a connection that was slow but sufficient for posting tweets about events on the ground (Sigal, 2011; Seibt, 2011). They even resorted to using Morse code, fax machines, and ham radio to get the word out about events on the ground, and the website for the activist group We Rebuild transcribed transmissions from Egyptian amateur radio stations and posted resources for circumventing the blackout (Seibt, 2011; *Daily Mail*, 2011). They also smuggled satellite phones and satellite modems into Egypt, which did not depend on Egypt's infrastructure to function (*Daily Mail*, 2011). The BBC (2011b) noted that "Dial-up [modem] numbers featured heavily in Twitter messages tagged with hashes related to the protests such as #egypt and #jan25". However, the report added, few domestic phone lines in Egypt could call internationally to reach those modems, and so the Egyptian blog Manalaa "gave advice about how to use dial-up using a mobile, bluetooth and a laptop. It noted that the cost of international calls could be 'pricey' but said it was good enough for 'urgent communication'. The advice was posted to many blogs, copied and sent out by many others." The BBC (2011b) added that although most Internet connections were cut, the ISP (Internet service provider) Noor was working because it was used by the Egyptian stock exchange and Western companies, and "many people and businesses" who subscribed to Noor "removed the passwords from their wi-fi routers" so that others could "piggy-back on their connection."

To circumvent the mobile phone blockade, “protesters circulated alternative message centre numbers,” which “allowed some locals to continue texting and using services such as Twitter” (BBC, 2011b). Moreover, when the Egyptian government closed down the office of Al Jazeera television channel in Cairo, detained its bureau chief, and blocked Al Jazeera transmission via Nilesat, Egyptians resorted to watching Al Jazeera transmission via Hotbird and Arab-sat instead. In every case, they were both resilient and creative in circumventing these blockages.

The protesters also took advantage of international efforts to help them. During the Internet blackout, Google and Twitter scrambled to offer the “Speak-2-Tweet”, a service whereby users could call an international telephone number to post and hear Twitter messages without the Internet (BBC, 2011). The Small World Newsproject “Alive” partnered with Speak-2-Tweet to translate voice messages from protesters at Tahrir Square, and one of their reports was that of a 15-year-old boy telling his story about being “abducted from the street, beaten, and detained for 22 days” (Silver, 2011). Some recordings appeared on the Speak-2-Tweet Twitter account from Egyptians who learned about the service during the blackout, possibly via phone calls with friends and family outside of Egypt (York, 2011c). This last point highlights an interesting phenomenon, whereby Egyptian activists were supported by the flow of information coming to them from abroad, while simultaneously influencing international public opinion abroad, through their own coverage of the Egyptian uprising and the information they provided on it. This clearly signals the “indispensable role for the mobilization of communication networks across borders in an attempt to recruit political support and...resources required for public will to emerge and gain traction” (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010, p. 162).

In brief, the Egyptian regime’s shutdown of the Internet was not only costly, but it also backfired. It enraged Egyptians accustomed to Internet and mobile phone access (*Daily Mail*, 2011). Young, educated Egyptians were affected by their years of access to the Internet, which shaped their outlook and connections to each another and led to a sense of entitlement to Internet access, “so much so that when this access was revoked [when the regime turned off the Internet during protests] they ended up flooding the streets” (Vila, 2011).

Also, speaking at a recent forum, Amira Maaty of the National Endowment for Democracy said that in the absence of the Internet, people were afraid there would be a massacre, and so they took to the streets in large numbers to protect each other (Maaty, 2011). And when young activists were not able to find their friends and counterparts on Facebook, they took to Tahrir Square to meet them there. Therefore, it could be said that, in this particular case, the lack of information in the virtual world fueled activism in the real world, instead of halting it.

According to Adel Iskander, an adjunct faculty at Georgetown University and an expert on Arab media, the Egyptian people felt insulted by the government's blockage of the Internet and cell phones: "their reaction to this was strong...they became more resilient and more determined, 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'." He also explains that as much as Facebook can be an effective tool for public mobilization and organization, it can also easily become "a weapon of mass distraction", when people spend too much time on it, thus indulging themselves in "virtual activism instead of real activism". Therefore, he contends that shutting down the Internet led to a surge in real activism on the streets, as evident in the huge numbers of protesters (Iskander, 2011).

The regime realized too late that many, if not most, of the people in the streets were not Internet users (Ishani, 2011). In fact, "some of the protesters in Tahrir Square have never heard of Facebook before, but they were energized and inspired by the huge numbers of people flooding to the streets each day" (Iskander, 2011). Therefore it is clear that while the Egyptian activists combined their strong public will and determination for change with the effective utilization of new media to achieve political reform and democratization, the Egyptian government combined its incompetent political strategy with an equally ineffective communication strategy that not only failed to halt political activism, but even fueled it further.

Beside the evident role of civic engagement in the Egyptian uprising, citizen journalism also played a major role. It was inspired by examples from other uprisings, such as those in Iran and Tunisia, where state-controlled television

prevailed before their uprisings. According to Idle and Nunns (2011, p. 26), people “no longer had to read stifled accounts in state-run newspapers when they could go on the Internet and hear from...protesters directly through social networks.” During the Egyptian protests, activists worked to connect reports from the protesters to international human rights monitors and to feed images taken by activists to the international media (Ishani, 2011). Idle and Nunns (2011, pp. 20-21) noted that activists were not only tweeting to other Egyptians but “to the international media and the world” and that they “went to great lengths to get online during the five-day Internet blackout, when their tweets could not easily be read by other Egyptians.” To do this, activists telephoned friends living abroad to upload tweets, pooled their resources to access Noor, and offered interviews to international news outlets “in return for access to their satellite Internet connections,” thus ensuring that the regime would not be able to “cut them off from the world” (Idle and Nunns, pp. 20-21).

Protesters uploaded raw videos of police brutality to YouTube and other video sharing sites (Abrougui, 2011). And, during the Internet blackout, while professional journalists struggled to get their stories out, “street protesters were using land lines to call supporters, who translated and published their accounts on Twitter for an international audience hungry for news of the unfolding events” (Ishani, 2011).

Jillian York (2011b) said that as violence escalated on Cairo’s streets, professional journalists found it difficult to report on events on the ground, but young Egyptians “were in the thick of things, mobile phones at the ready, often live-tweeting as skirmishes broke out”. She added : “Others in various parts of the city uploaded photographs and pictures from the day’s events, not just from Tahrir Square but from side streets as well, documenting graffiti, ordinary life, and those now-famous leagues of neighborhood protection committees. Still others tweeted from more remote locations, and from cities without the benefit of dispatched reporters.” (York, 2011b)

Furthermore, York said that in situations such as the protests, the advantage of citizen journalism might outweigh the risk of them providing false information because “Egyptians know their country better than CNN, MSNBC, or even Al Jazeera possibly could” (York, 2011b). Therefore, citizen journalists

can be the most reliable and credible source of news and information during these significant political events.

Brisson et al. (2011, p. 29) reported that “beyond immediate communications, the near-ubiquitous mobile phone also provided protesters the opportunity to document the events that were unfolding,” adding that as “tools for crafting the revolution’s narrative, mobile phones gave protesters a sense of ownership” of events, and that their text, videos, and photos “will also be used to shape the story that will live on.” Idle and Nunns (2011, pp. 19-20) noted that Twitter was mostly used as a type of alternative press by professional journalists, bloggers, and ordinary citizen-journalists producing “(usually) accurate bites of information and a flow of videos and pictures,” with the result being “like a company of artists painting a constantly updated picture of events”.

One of the features of the uprising was the gradual undermining of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalists began to resign as the public saw the ludicrous coverage for what it was. Also, instrumental in this process was the contrast provided by transnational satellite TV channels, like Al Jazeera, whose reporting was often influenced by information and footage coming from citizen journalists on the ground (Idle and Nunns, 2011, p. 20).

A credibility crisis emerged in terms of the public’s perception of national, state-controlled media, which eventually led to mounting pressure to dismantle and abolish the Egyptian Ministry of Information, in the hope of creating a truly free and liberal media system, thanks to coverage from transnational satellite channels such as Al Jazeera, and the reporting of citizen journalists, who provided minute-by-minute unedited accounts of actions on the ground.

Cyberactivism after the Egyptian Revolution: Transitioning to Democratization

The flame of cyberactivism that sparked the Egyptian revolution was not extinguished when Mubarak left office. In fact, there is sufficient evidence to prove that it is still glowing. National issues are still being discussed and debated online, as well as in traditional media. Global Voices reports that the de-

bate over the recent constitutional referendum “raged in the blogosphere” as well as in newspapers and video advertisements, and that the “yes” and “no” votes were “almost even” on Twitter and Facebook. The “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook page also polled its members regarding the vote. Although many of the online activists urged citizens to vote “no” on the referendum (in order to allow the constitution to be rewritten instead of simply amended), “the voters overwhelmingly passed the referendum for the new amendments to the constitution,” which caused some to question the effectiveness of social media in terms of shaping the opinions of the “masses in the streets” (Amr, 2011c).

Political activist Mohamed Mustafa explains that the “yes” vote by the majority of voters was not an indication of the ineffectiveness of social media or the failure of cyberactivism efforts, but was primarily due to the lack of sufficient awareness among the voters of the nature of the issue they were asked to vote on. He explains that:

The military council didn’t allow enough time for a public awareness campaign to take place before the set date of this referendum. This, in turn, resulted in a shortage of knowledge and a vague idea in the voters’ minds, many of whom thought that the ‘yes’ vote is an expression of their patriotic sentiment and their support of the revolution and what it stands for. Therefore, despite the fact that we were hoping for a total change, rather than an amendment of the constitution, the ‘yes’ vote could still be considered a victory for the revolution and an indication of public support for it. (Mustafa, 2011)

However, regardless of whether the activists can use it to sway opinions, Brisson et al. (2011, p. 17) report that “every week sees the launch of new citizen-driven websites eager to provide an online meeting place for civic debate. Likewise, Internet and satellite connections continue to broadcast and build audiences for foreign news entities.” Also, in Egypt Wael Ghonim’s current project is using Google Moderator, a product of his company, “to help sketch out the direction of the country’s future” (Hopkins, 2011). Also, according to

Adel Iskander, “more than 2 million Facebook accounts have been created in Egypt since the revolution.” Brisson et al. (2011) quote an average Egyptian citizen, who never had a Facebook account before, as saying “Technology is powerful. It allows dialogue...Everyone should be on Facebook. It is our duty.”

Cyberactivists in the Egyptian online community have continued to defend free speech advances since the resignation of Mubarak. Global Voices reported that Egyptian blogger Maikel Nabil was arrested by police on April 11, 2011, for posting remarks critical of the military, and by the next day more than 2,700 Egyptians had joined the “Free Maikel Nabil” Facebook site, and a “dedicated Twitter account (@MaikelNabilNews) was created within hours of Nabil’s sentencing.” Nabil sent a message to his countrymen from jail urging them to “shoulder the burden of newfound freedom” (Masouras, 2011). Users on Twitter also accused the media of ignoring Nabil’s case, and they put pressure on Yosri Fouda, a prominent anchorman in the private Egyptian satellite channel ON-TV, to provide more coverage (Amr, 2011b).

Political activists have also used Google tools for cyberactivism purposes, such as creating an online spreadsheet that documents Mubarak’s assets: if anyone knows of an asset not shown on the spreadsheet, he or she can add the information anonymously (Vila, 2011). They also continued to post material online.

However, Luke Allnutt (2011) of the blog Tangled Web points out that one problem with the uploading of videos to sites such as Flickr, YouTube, and the like is that the “information gatekeepers” of those sites are not obliged to support the efforts of the activists. “After protesters broke into the headquarters of the Egyptian security agency, they removed a slew of digital evidence, some of which ended up on Flickr. But Flickr removed the images, citing a violation of its Community Guidelines...” (Allnutt, 2011). He explains that:

Sensitive information -- uploaded in the heat of the moment -- is often taken down, or pages are disabled, because enough people (government lackeys, extremists, whatever) are flagging the content for abuse. As sites like Facebook or YouTube can’t personally

deal with every flag, automation kicks in. (In a commercial world where Flickr is set up for people to share their family's baby photos, rather than be a repository for sensitive documents from the Egyptian secret services, those terms of service and community guidelines make sense). (Allnutt, 2011)

Also, when the generals of the military transitional government met with representatives of the youth movement, activist Wael Ghonim posted notes from the meeting on a Facebook page he manages (AP/The Huffington Post, 2011). Interestingly, the military, too, has been using social media – in the form of SMS messages – to update the masses on its view of events (Brisson et al., 2011, pp. 29-30). They also lately created their own Facebook page, which was seen as “an attempt on their part to catch up with the wave of technological advancement that is sweeping the country”, as Egyptian activist Mohamed Mustafa puts it. He also indicated that the new Egyptian prime minister, who was nominated by the popular revolution, has set up a Facebook page for his government “in an effort to modernize its means of communication.”

However, one problem facing digital media is that many do not see it as a secure means to communicate, especially given the regime's history of surveillance:

“Thus, while services such as Facebook could be used in advocacy activities such as recruitment campaigns, they could not be trusted for sensitive organizing. Most senior organizers we spoke with still ran their core activities in a very analog, cellbased fashion. Top strategies were set by leadership committees that gathered regularly in hubs like Cairo. Upon returning to their communities, these leaders would distribute handwritten organizing documents to collaborators. Using such tactics, one group was able to slowly but confidently disseminate a confidential organizing strategy to a network of 8,000 activists nationwide.” (Brisson et al., 2011, p. 30)

Social media's horizontal and non-hierarchical structure was empowering for women, who not only engaged in online activism and citizen journalism through social media, but also effectively and courageously participated in

demonstrations and protests. At the peak of the protests in Egypt, for example, roughly one quarter of the million protesters who poured into Tahrir Square each day were women and “Veiled and unveiled women shouted, fought and slept in the streets alongside men, upending traditional expectations of their behavior” (Otterman, 2011). Even after the revolution, Egyptian women are mobilizing to ensure a “gender inclusive democracy” that provides them with full social and political rights, including the right to run for presidential elections, and are insisting on constitutional reforms that safeguard these rights, amid concerns by women activists that the post-revolution committee revising the constitution is all male (Krajeski, 2011).

Since the overthrow of Mubarak, social media has served as a platform for civic engagement, especially for women. Activist Bothaina Kamel, a former television anchor, used Twitter to announce her plans to run for president. Reactions from Twitter users to the announcement were mixed, with some supporting her candidacy (Amr, 2011a). Egyptian blogger and activist Dalia Ziada, who is the North Africa bureau director for the AIC (American Islamic Congress), says that social media “will be vital in building a democracy that respects the rights of women and minorities” and she feels it will “provide a virtual forum that will lead to more tolerance and exchanges of ideas” (Bortot, 2011). Ziada, who, soon after Mubarak left office, organized Egypt-wide debates on “the role of cyber and traditional media in the democratic process and the question of a civil versus a religious state,” said, “When you debate with someone online, they never care who you are, they never care if you are a man or a woman, they never care if you are from an upper-class family or a poor family. ... They just care about your point of view and really focus on what you say. It is mind-to-mind talking.” (Bortot, 2011)

A Final Word...

Cybercivists in Egypt used new media effectively to express themselves politically, inform others of abuses by the state, organize protests and acts of resistance against the authoritarian regime, and ensure that their voices are heard and that their side of the story is told. In other words, new media were deployed effectively before, during, and after this revolution as tools for protesters to enhance their agency and capabilities and to exercise public will

mobilization (Salmon, Fernandez & Post, 2010). Clay Shirky (2011) states that as the “communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. In the political arena...these increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated publics demand change.”

One of the most striking aspects of the Egyptian uprising was its loose structure and lack of identifiable leaders. It was largely a grassroots, across the board, horizontal movement that had a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, structure. Charlie Beckett (2011) notes that the Egyptian uprising was “not the work of conventional opposition parties or charismatic leaders.” Therefore, he indicates that during this revolution:

... the momentum was animated by collective, marginal actions (e.g., demonstrations) rather than a tactical objective (e.g., seize the Presidential palace). These coalesced in Egypt into that extraordinary physical statement of the crowds in Tahrir Square. Take the battle for Tahrir Square, for example, when protesters faced up to the organised violent pro-Mubarak incursion into the demonstration. It was resisted in a collective but relatively spontaneous way. (Beckett, 2011)

Beckett (2011) added that the “diffuse, horizontal nature of these movements made them very difficult to break. Their diversity and flexibility gave them an organic strength. They were networks, not organisations.” It can also be said that they were more about “processes” than “persons”. In other words, they were characterized by collective and effective processes of group mobilization, both online and offline, rather than individual acts of leadership by one or more charismatic persons. That’s why they were generally described as “leaderless revolutions”.

The fact that the uprising was largely leaderless is further evidence that it was a genuine expression of the public’s will. The protests were organized and led largely by a loose network of young people, most of whom demonstrated significant capacity for organization, discipline, restraint, and integrity, result-

ing in a unique peaceful and youthful revolution. This opinion was echoed by Shibli Telhami, Anwar Sadat Chair of Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, who indicated that this revolution did not have any actual or symbolic leaders but rather some “accidental leaders”, such as Wael Ghonim, who had been invisibly administering the “We Are All Khaled Said” page, but only became famous after he was detained for 12 days by the Egyptian security forces. “Although he insisted that he is not a hero and should not be given credit for the revolution, he soon started to gain fame and to achieve a celebrity status, which he did not intentionally seek.” (Telhami, 2011)

Likewise, Egyptian political activist Mohamed Mustafa emphasized the fact that we cannot single out one person as the “leader” of this revolution, since it was the fruit of many collaborative efforts by different activist groups, many of which had different trends and ideologies, but who all shared one common goal, namely “getting rid of Mubarak and his corrupt, dictatorial regime.” He mentions that even someone such as Dr ElBaradei could be at best described as the “godfather” of the Egyptian revolution, since he gave strategic guidance, legal advice, and moral support to the young organizers. However, he still left much room for them to act autonomously and to take their decisions independently (Mustafa, 2011).

The empowerment of protesters was enhanced by social media, which helped to create a type of public commons for free speech, as evidenced by the free expression of views seen in Facebook, Twitter, YouTube videos, and blogs; provided means for people to find and associate with others of similar political views, as seen by their defiant assembly in public spaces organized by social media; provided a virtual space for assembly, as seen by the popularity of “We Are All Khaled Said” and other popular Facebook pages; supported the capability of the protesters to plan, organize, and execute peaceful protests, as seen by the use of social media by the April 6 movement and other activist groups; and allowed the public to engage in citizen journalism, as seen by the proliferation of cell phone-captured images and videos online and in international media stories.

Social media also empowered activists to associate and share ideas with others globally, enabling collaboration between activists in Egypt and Tunisia, as well

as between protesters and Arabs in the diaspora; democracy activists in other countries; and Internet activists, who assisted them in their struggles. Thus, new media not only energized political activism inside Egypt, they also created a “virtual global public sphere” (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2009), where acts of political resistance could be proliferated and supported internationally. This provides an excellent example of “exogenous mobilization”, which takes place, according to Salmon, Fernandez & Post (2010), when governments “actively suppress a group that is attempting to voice its will and express its grievance. In such a case, communication networks outside the social system mobilize support in a variety of forms” (p.163). As the case of the Egyptian revolution reveals, “For these types of efforts, communication is particularly important because of the structural disconnect between the group impacted by the change and those groups mobilizing on their behalf” (Salmon et al., p.163).

That social media were a powerful instrument in the protest movement was revealed when the regime felt it necessary to impede or shut off Internet service to thwart the protesters, despite the damage the disruption caused to the economy. The restrictions and shutdown, however, revealed the protesters’ empowerment and determination, as they resisted efforts by the government to block access to the Internet and found innovative ways to circumvent controls. This reminds us that “communication technologies have led to unprecedented amounts of information sharing across borders in spite of efforts by governments to control the flow” (Salmon et al., p.160). These governmental strategies could be attributed to the regime’s realization of the significance of global information flow in bringing about social change at the grassroots level and boosting public will mobilization.

However, it would be a mistake to characterize the uprising as a Facebook or Twitter revolution. Although social media played a key role in the Egyptian revolution, it must be stressed that these new media were nothing more than powerful tools and effective catalysts: social media were only effective because of the willingness of large numbers of people to physically engage in and support peaceful social protest, sometimes at great personal cost, including grave injuries and even loss of life. In short, social media were not causes of revolution, but vehicles for empowerment. This opinion is echoed by Adel Iskander

who says: “Facebook amplified, magnified and expedited the process of revolt, through providing unique networking opportunities. The strategic use of new media helped the revolution to snowball, through using certain strategies, maneuvers and tactics that turned small protests into a huge challenge to the regime that led to its ultimate demise.” However, Iskander (2011) makes it clear that, “If it was not for the power and determination of the Egyptian people to act, organize, and mobilize on the streets, this revolution would have never succeeded.”

This reminds us that in referring to the Internet’s role in this revolution, it is not realistic to exaggerate the power of new media technologies in a way that reflects “technological determinism,” which “falls short in considering the social, cultural and economic contextual factors” (Paulussen, 2008, p. 28), as well as the overall political context that triggered this revolution. Recently, “technological deterministic accounts of online journalism have become outnumbered by social constructivist approaches in which the adoption of online journalism practices...is no longer seen as the result of a technology-driven process, but as the outcome of the complex interaction between professional, organizational, economic and social factors” (Paulussen, 2008, p. 28). Iskander (2011) reminds us that, “We have to respect the complexity and multifaceted nature of revolutions, rather than resorting to categorizing them and labeling them in a manner that oversimplifies or undermines their true nature and special dynamics.” He indicates that:

It is very important to understand the nuances of the relationship between technology and activism in the context of the Egyptian revolution, through placing it within its proper historical and sociological framework. In doing so, we have to realize that political activism in the real world was the backbone of this revolution, while technology was at best a utility that contributed to the success of the revolution. It was still possible for the revolution to take place without this utility, even if it would have taken longer or could have been harder. (Iskander)

Howard (2011, p. 12) said technology does not cause political change, but it does “provide new capacities and impose new constraints on political actors.”

It will be difficult to quantify the exact contribution of each type of social media to each revolution, but in the words of Wael Ghonim (AFP, 2011) “Without Facebook, without Twitter, without Google, without You Tube, this would have never happened....If there was no social networks it would have never been sparked.” We can argue, in an effort to avoid either overestimating or underestimating the role of new media, that although the Egyptian revolution might have still erupted without these new tools, it certainly would not have spread so quickly and achieved its outcomes so effectively.

Given the extensive use of communication technologies by cyberactivists in Egypt, we saw how the government tried hard to limit or suppress access to the Internet and mobile phone services. We also saw how such repressive measures only led to further resistance by young activists, and how they even backfired in some cases. Therefore, in mapping the transformative political and communication landscapes in Egypt, it can be noted that efforts by the state to repress its citizens’ empowerment through social media can be dangerous for the state, as well as its citizens. Zeynep Tufekci (2011) points out that repressive regimes face a “dictator’s dilemma,” in that allowing Internet access for their citizens poses a threat to their regime, but limiting or banning the Internet can lead to isolation that can harm the country economically, as well as socially. During unrest, the dilemma becomes most pronounced as people’s empowerment and capacity for free speech is enhanced by the sheer volume of dissent and overwhelms the regime’s ability to effectively filter or block the Internet:

The ability to ensure that their struggle and their efforts are not buried in a deep pit of censorship, the ability to continue to have an honest conversation, the ability to know that others know what one knows all combine to create a cycle furthering dissent and upheaval. (Tufekci, 2011)

What’s Next?

The success of the Egyptian revolution, and the effective role that new media played in it, has broad implications for repressive states in the Arab region and, indeed, throughout the world. Given the demographic, economic, and political conditions in the broader Middle East region, uprisings and political

movements are likely to continue to ferment, especially with the examples of Tunisia and Egypt exemplifying the successful overthrow of authoritarian regimes by peaceful protest. The echoes and ramifications of these two successful revolutions are already being witnessed in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Jordan, and the ripple effect will not stop there. Howard (2011, pp. 20-21), presciently, given the Egyptian example, noted that nations with significant Muslim populations show “modular political phenomena”, i.e., “political action based in significant part on the emulation of successful examples from others,” that “successful democratization strategies in particular countries are transported into the collective action strategies of movements in other countries,” and that “democratization movements appear to be learning to use information technologies from each other, linking up to share experiences and transporting successful organizational strategies.”

In future uprisings in the region, and possibly other parts of the world, it is likely that social media will continue to play a significant role. “New information technologies do not topple dictators; they are used to catch dictators off-guard. Today, being an effective social movement means utilizing social media” (Howard, 2011, p. 12). Also, “The initial conditions for social movement organizing are very different from those of the pre-internet era” (Howard, p. 12).

The final outcome of Egypt’s transition to democratization and reform remains to be seen and is likely to depend partially on the continuing successful use of social media by the public to ensure that democracy takes root and leads to permanent and profound change. Brisson et al. (2011) say:

To democratize the fruits of technology, tools must be tailored for wider accessibility. Adapting online tools for use via SMS is one possibility that could serve populations that lack computer access. Basic text messaging remains among the most inclusive technologies. If online services make greater use of this channel, the share of Egyptians able to use them will expand correspondingly. In the meantime, for excluded populations, technology will continue to impact them only in a proximate manner and through exposure to other, technologically enabled parties. (p. 31)

Most importantly, however, the success of this transition to democratization will depend on the Egyptian people's will and determination to continue putting pressure on the military council that is in charge during this transitional phase, through political activism, such as organizing massive protests and demonstrations, as well as cyberactivism, through which these protests and demonstrations can be organized and orchestrated. In the past, "it all came down to how much force the authoritarian state was willing and able to deploy – which in turn, depended on the willingness of the security apparatus" (Tufekci, 2011). Today, the state is hindered because images of their actions will be broadcast and seen by "their citizens, their neighbors and their children and grandchildren" (Tufekci, 2011), and, one can also add, by the rest of the world at large. In other words, it could be said that the ability of these new forms of communication to expose the wrongdoings of the ruling regimes and to demonstrate their brutality has led to a new era of accountability and responsibility on the part of these governments that did not exist before this information revolution. Today, no government can afford to totally ignore the power of public opinion on its own streets, or to completely block its ears to the cries of its own people, thanks to the new media in the protesters' hands.

The true implications of the current wave of political upheaval in the Arab world, and the extent to which it will be influenced by social media, remain to be seen over the course of the coming years. As Jeffrey Ghannam (2011) states in a report to the Center for International Media Assistance, "Social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilize, and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead to even greater voice, political influence, and participation over the next 10 to 20 years." Indeed, as Shirky (2011) says, 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." The fact remains, however, that this new communication revolution has succeeded in providing people in the Arab world with new "weapons" to engage in their simultaneous political and communication struggles against their authoritarian regimes and long-time dictators, namely: their cell phones and computers. It is through these technological weapons that they can continue to exercise their agency and capabilities, empower themselves, and mobilize their public will.

It is obvious that the Egyptian people were able to successfully use these weapons to win their battle against President Mubarak and his autocratic regime; however, it remains to be seen if they will be equally successful in using them to win their ongoing battle to achieve a swift, safe, and smooth transition to democratization.

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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 had finally 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.[1] 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.[2] Many others acknowledge the deeper causes of economically and morally bankrupt repressive regimes that failed to offer any true hope for the futures of their predominantly young populations.[3] 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. Mobile broadband subscriptions dramatically rose from 0.1 to 10.2 per 100 inhabitants over the same five-year period.[4] 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.[5] Consequently, Internet usage also remains below the prevailing global rates of 21 percent of the population.[6]

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.[7] In 2015, 100 million Arabs are estimated to be online.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] Interestingly, the

primary reason for usage in these three countries is emailing, followed in all three instances by social networking.[11]

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.[12] Sources estimate that there are 17 million Facebook users in the Middle East, five million alone in Egypt.[13] However, social media is difficult to separate from the term Web 2.0, although some 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.[14]

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 stations are monopolies owned by the government.[15] 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.”[16]

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.”[17] 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.”[18] 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.[19]

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.[20] 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 a conspiracy against it, framing Iran as the enemy.[21] 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.[22]

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.[23] 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.[24]

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.[25] 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.[26] 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.[27]

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.[28]

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.”[29] 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.[30]

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.”[31]

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 Facebook, but the Brotherhood has a branch in every neighborhood and town.”[32] 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.[33] 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.[34] 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.[35] 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 technolo-

gies 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.”[36]

“Technology,” Melvin Kranzenberg wrote in 1985, “is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.”[37] 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.”[38] 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 “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.[39] 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.[40] 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.[41]

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.[42] 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.”[43] With new media and information technology in the mix, it is much harder to imagine that a change of behavior will not occur.

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.[44] In 1982, the Syrian people knew only what their media outlets told them about the Hama massacre.[45] 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.[46] 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—inter-state negotiations and totalitarian governments—the Internet has no appreciable effect.[47]

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.[48] 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 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.[49]

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.[50] 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.[51] 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.”[52] 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.”[53] 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 formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference.[54]

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.[55] 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 sociali-

zation, however, is unlikely to produce the same state-centric result.[56]

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." [57]

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." [58] 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. [59] 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.

Additionally, ICTs and new media lower the transaction costs, that is, the difficulties that keep individuals in modern society from building social capital. [60] 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.”[61] In late January 2011, Wael Ghonim tweeted “To all Egyptians silence is a crime now!”[62] 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.[63] 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 over the last decade, it is still not widely available to the majority of Arabs.[64] 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.[65] 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.[66] 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." [67] 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.[68] 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.[69] And Al Jazeera was there to beam the pictures of the protestors into upwards of 70 percent of Egyptian homes.[70]

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 activists.[71] This and other transformations from consumer of information to content creator were, according to Alterman, "the true transformative effect of social media." [72] 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.[73]

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.[74] 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.[75] 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?”[76]

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.[77] 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 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.[78] 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.

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.[79] 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.

Notes

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[63] 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

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[65] 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>

[66] 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

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

[68] *Ibid.* 109.

[69] *Ibid.* 110.

[70] *Ibid.* 111.

[71] Alterman, 110-111.

[72] *Ibid.*

[73] *Ibid.* 112.

[74] 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.

[75] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 36.

[76] Howard, *Digital Origins*, 10.

[77] Risse-Kappen, 8.

[78] Regan E. Doherty, "Special Report: AlJazeera's news revolution," Reuters (February 17, 2011); accessed November 25, 2011 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/17/us-aljazeera-idUSTRE71G0WC20110217>

[79] 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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Egypt's Media Ecology in a Time of Revolution

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Abstract:

In 1984 William Beeman published a brief but useful essay on the media ecology of Iran before, during and after the revolution. After briefly discussing the relationship between interpersonal gossip (“the grapevine”), and state television and radio, he discusses the dramatic changes in the news media as the revolution progressed, only to settle back into its original role as a voice for the regime—albeit a new regime. The Egyptian uprising had new elements absent in the Iranian revolution, most notably social media and satellite television. Social media does not replace either “the grapevine” of networks of face-to-face interaction nor the monodirectional power of television (which was, in fact, somewhat less unitary than 1970s Iran because of satellite programming). Rather, it offers a way to extend the “grapevine” networks to link otherwise geographically separated individuals into an entirely new public sphere, on the one hand, and to appropriate, supplement, comment on and reframe other media on the other. The revolutionary media ecology of Egypt—in particular the ways various media index, image and influence one another—suggests that (unlike Iran) whatever the ultimate political outcome of the uprisings, the mediascape of Egypt after the revolution will be significantly different than it was before January 25.

At times newly introduced mass media have produced revolutionary effects in the societal management of time and energy as they forged new spaces for themselves. Thus media are cultural forces as well as cultural objects. In operation, they produce specific cultural effects that cannot be easily predicted (Beeman 1984: 147).

Revolutions are extraordinary times in any society. As they break down pre-existing political, economic and social structures, they usher in periods of enormous creativity and imagination. In his work on social and cultural process, anthropologist Victor Turner described this period as “anti-structure”, that period in which the structures of everyday life of the immediate past have been disrupted or overturned, but new structures have not yet emerged to replace them (1969). Borrowing the language of ritual studies, Turner argues that as revolutions move a people from one state to another, they usher in a period of “liminality”, in which the world is turned upside down and old rules do not apply.

Unlike traditional rites of passage, however, in which the outcome of the process is known, during a social and political revolution the contingent nature of the future engenders a state of creativity, energy and imagination in which transformational possibilities seem endless (1974). Media play at least two key roles in this process. On the one hand, their institutional roles — their relations with the state and communities of reader/viewers — may be abruptly changed. On the other hand, as social forces they will play various roles in the revolutionary process. These processes are recursive: transformations in the relations between press and state, for example, will affect the capacity a medium has for contributing, through its representation of various narratives and key symbols, to social change. And the reverse is also true: changes in the ways media represent events in society can lead to shifts in institutional relations between various media industries, as well as between media and their audiences, or with the state.

One of the few efforts to analyze such processes is a brief but insightful essay by William O. Beeman on the media ecology of Iran before, during and after the revolution (1984). After briefly discussing the relationship between interpersonal gossip (“the grapevine”), newspapers, and state television and radio, he discusses the dramatic changes in the news media as the revolution progressed, as well as the way these mainstream media settled back into their original role as a voice for the regime—albeit a new regime. This paper takes Beeman’s approach and applies it to the ongoing revolution in Egypt. I am particularly interested in those forms of media absent in the Iranian revolution, most notably social media and satellite television, and curious as

to their effects on what I assume to be essentially conservative tendencies by mainstream media.

The Egyptian Media Ecology Before the Uprising

Egyptian media before the January 25 uprising were deeply implicated with the state. Newspapers in Egypt could, in fact, be classified according to their distance from the state:

1. *State newspapers* served as the voice of the government. Their editors were appointed by the Ministry of Information and the newspapers were funded in part from state coffers. State newspapers not only reported events from the government's perspective, but constructed heroic narratives around the persons of leading government figures, and the Mubarak family in particular.
2. *Party newspapers* are published by officially sanctioned political parties. Fourteen of Egypt's political parties had the right to publish their own newspapers, receiving a small subsidy from the government and sometimes the use of government presses. Most of these were small, weekly publications, with the exception of the daily newspapers published by *Al-Wafd* and *Al-Ahrar*. Although by definition these newspapers took anti-government positions on many issues, state domination was exercised through control of subsidies, and journalists and editors were liable to prosecution under emergency law if they violated certain taboos, such as direct criticism of the president or his family.
3. *Independent newspapers*, also often called opposition newspapers, are for-profit newspapers licensed by the state. The most prominent are *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Al-Dostor* and *El Shorouk*. Owners of independent newspapers must be cleared by several security and intelligence agencies in order to receive a state licensure, and the State Information Service can revoke the license at any time. Some have been required to (pay to) use state presses to publish. Independent newspapers were not pre-censored but were subject to prosecution under vague laws that prohibited journalists and broadcasters from saying or writing things that might

damage “the social peace,” “national unity,” “public order” or “public values.” Part of the genius of the regime was that such laws were inconsistently enforced. No journalist, blogger or television reporter knew exactly where the lines were drawn or when the police might show up because they had crossed an invisible line. This produced a self-censorship far more efficient and cost-effective than direct pre-censorship would have been, while allowing the regime to state truthfully that there was no state censorship of news.

4. *International newspapers.* The foreign press is usually subdivided into regional and international, the former consisting of other mostly Arabic-language newspapers (but including those published by Arab communities seeking press freedom in Europe), and the latter consisting of newspapers in languages other than Arabic and published from sites outside the Middle East. Although the international press is free from both censorship and prosecution, it is against the law to “damage Egypt’s reputation abroad” by criticizing the government in foreign media, making sources for stories on Egypt necessarily less forthright in speaking to foreign reporters than they might otherwise be.

Broadcast television in Egypt followed a similar pattern of domination by the state. Since its establishment in 1960, Egyptian television has always been regarded as the voice of the Egyptian government. Terrestrial channels and Egyptian satellite channels are under direct government supervision, operation and ownership. The Egyptian Radio and Television Union or ERTU, housed in the Maspero Building in central Cairo, is the state agency that operates all terrestrially broadcast television in Egypt. Since 2009, ERTU has also included the Nile TV International satellite network. Both the ERTU and the television sector chairmen are appointed by the Minister of Information.

A handful of private channels exist but continually face the dilemma of creating programming that will attract audiences without provoking the authorities. The first private channel was Dream TV, established in 2001 by Egyptian businessman Ahmed Bahgat. Another major private TV channel is OTV (now ONTV), owned by Naguib Sawiris. All private channels are subject to indirect control by ERTU, which is the main shareholder of Egyptian Media

Production City (EMPC) and Nilesat, services crucial to private broadcasting. Additionally, companies producing television shows in the EMPC require licenses from the Public Authority for Investment and Free Zones, which can suspend or refuse to renew licenses in the case of questionable content. And, of course, Egypt's emergency law granted the government complete freedom to punish political criticism. Among other things, ERTU forbade rival television news programs, so private channels had to make do with talk shows and political commentary. In 2010, on the eve of the revolution, Reporters Without Borders ranked Egypt 127 out of 178 in its Press Freedom Index, which evaluates both print and television newsmaking.

The Internet began in Egypt as a university Internet system that connected to the global Internet in 1993. In 1994 the government created the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC) which provided free Internet access to public and private corporations, government agencies, NGOs and professionals (Kamal and Hussein 2001). Private Internet providers were licensed in 1996, and in 2002 the government began to offer "free" dialup Internet services through a revenue sharing agreement between private ISPs and the national telephone company (Elamrani 2002). These measures at making Egypt a Middle Eastern leader in Internet use were effective; there were nearly 20 million Internet users in Egypt by the time of the uprisings (CIA World Factbook).

With the rise in Internet use came a rise in the importance of social media, especially between 2005 and 2010. These did not replace either "the grapevine" of networks of face-to-face interaction nor the monodirectional power of television (which was, in fact, somewhat less unitary than in 1970s Iran because of satellite programming). Rather, Facebook, blogging, Tweeting and other social media offered ways to extend the networks of small communities of practice, especially (but not exclusively) resistance movements, by linking otherwise geographically separated individuals into entirely new public spheres, and enabling them to appropriate, supplement, comment on and reframe other media by linking, embedding, quoting and commenting.

The Changing Functions of Media During the Uprising

The role of state media in the uprising was to offer a state counter-narrative to the revolutionary discourse offered by international media and social media. Successful efforts were undermined by a number of factors: availability of alternative media, the resignation of key players, and the failure of party leadership to supply a consistent counterrevolutionary narrative.

State media were apparently taken by surprise by the size, scale and media sophistication of the uprising. Like other state institutions, media sought to use their traditional toolkit for dealing with the uprising. They ignored the uprising as long as possible, broadcasting images of calm areas of Cairo even as tens of thousands were gathered mere blocks away. They subsequently created counter-narratives, in which the numbers of protesters was under-reported, protesters were described as hired thugs and paid hooligans, and the entire protest movement was ascribed to foreign influences who wanted to damage Egypt (variously Israel, the United States, Iran, and Al Qaida). These stories were frequently inconsistent, as journalists attempting to report events received no clear and coherent leadership from the Ministry of Information. The credibility of the counter-narratives was further cast into doubt by the resignations of high profile media figures such as Mahmoud Saad, Soha El-Nakash and Shahira Amin over the increasing credibility gap.

Al-Ahram, the state-controlled newspaper with the highest circulation, offers a telling example of the ways state media operated as they tried to figure out how to cover the uprising. Initially it ignored or downplayed the protests. On January 26 it reported protests in Lebanon but not in Tahrir Square, describing instead how citizens had celebrated Police Day by exchanging “chocolate and flowers” with policemen. On February 3 the front page headline of *Al-Ahram* Arabic daily read “Millions march in support of Mubarak.” Although *Al-Ahram* reporters signed a letter asking the paper’s editor to distance the newspaper from the government, no steps were taken in this direction until February 7, when the newspaper’s editor-in-chief, Osama Saraya, hailed the “nobility” of what he described as a “revolution” and demanded that the government embark on irreversible constitutional and legislative changes. Following Mubarak’s resignation, the newspaper’s headline trumpeted “The people have ousted the regime.”

Independent news media were bolder in covering the protests. *Al-Masry al-Youm* in particular offered consistent, reliable coverage. But perhaps the most notable example was the emotional February 7 interview of political activist Wael Ghonim by Mona el-Shazly on Dream TV, which galvanized the uprising at a crucial point.

Internet use exploded in Egypt during the uprising as traditional users discovered its political power, and new users were attracted by the uses to which social media sites were being put. Facebook alone garnered an extra one million users after Internet service was restored on February 2 (up from 4.2 million people in January to 5.3 million in February). The state-owned Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported that during the uprising Egypt had the largest Facebook community in the Middle East.

Several elements made social media particularly effective at this stage. First, there was the capacity to point users to other sites, such as blogs or international media reports. Second, most links were accompanied by a brief framing message. That is, a message might point to a state media story about foreign influences and offer a mocking message such as “Oh yeah, because the U.S. and Al-Qaida work so well together,” pre-framing the story for those who click on the link. Facebook offers lengthy narratives to accumulate as others add to the commentaries.

The multiple levels that social media could play are well illustrated by Piggipedia, a Flickr “group pool” to which are being uploaded the photographs and names of members of the state security forces with the aspiration “that they can be brought to trial.” Piggipedia began before the January 25 uprising, one of several initiatives intended to disrupt the practices through which the regime put down protests and anti-regime activities. The idea, according to one of the organization’s founders, was that “in every single event, demonstration or strike we have to snap at least one photo of the police officers, corporals, and plainclothes thugs present” and upload it to the site.

Piggipedia was thus a social medium that invited protesters to share photos from their anti-regime activities, and that could serve as a resource from which bloggers and other media could draw photos. But Piggipedia was also

an act of resistance that sought to turn the tables on state security in important ways. First, members of the state security apparatus who spied on and kept files on the people of Egypt on behalf of the regime now became themselves subjects of a gaze. Second, the site sought to meet the secret gaze of the security apparatus with a public gaze that would expose security officials to their families, friends and neighbors. Nor was the security apparatus unaware of this; among the documents seized in State Security offices was one describing the “Piggipedia threat.”

It is important not to overemphasize the importance of the Internet, whose penetration in Egypt was only 20 percent. This mistake was made by the regime when it began shutting down the Internet in Egypt on January 27, instructing ISPs to disconnect their services or lose their licenses. The regime also took down Egyptian country code Domain Name Servers, halting all traffic to and from local sites. Finally, Internet Exchange Points (IXPs) were disabled, severing in-country connectivity. Approximately 91 percent of Egypt's networks were effectively suppressed by January 29. The government also shut down mobile texting and Twitter, cut off Al Jazeera Arabic TV, and temporarily stopped all mobile telephone service. While many people found workarounds – long distance calls to friends abroad enabled others to post Tweets and Facebook comments, people could access dial-up services via long distance telephones, and so forth – less than ten percent of the population had access to, or could afford such solutions.

The Mubarak regime presumably expected disruption of communication would slow political agitation by cutting off leadership and coordination. If so, the government clearly misunderstood the popular nature of the movement:

Although we may never know the true impact, in fact it likely sped up the regime's fall. In the absence of new technologies, people were forced to rely on traditional means of communication, including knocking on doors, going to the mosque, assembling in the street, or other central gathering places. Thomas Schelling won a Nobel prize in part for discovering that in the absence of information, people will coordinate by selecting a focal point that seems natural, special or relevant to them. Given the protests,

Tahrir Square was the obvious focal point. By blocking the Internet, the government inadvertently fueled dissent and galvanized international support for the people of Egypt (Bowman 2011).

Ironically, the shutdown harmed the business economy more than the protests, as the banking system and stock exchange all but collapsed for several weeks, and hundreds of millions of dollars were lost from electronic transactions.

The Role of International Media

International media played two crucial roles in the uprisings. First, they offered credible alternatives to state media for Egyptian viewers. Second, they served to shape public opinion outside Egypt.

During the uprising, Al Jazeera played a particularly notable role as an alternative to state media stories about riots and looting in Tahrir by offering live, continuous coverage of the protests to a worldwide audience. The government responded by trying to censor the channel. At one point, editors were threatened. Subsequently, six key people were arrested and taken into custody. Shortly after, police entered and confiscated equipment and turned off power. The regime also cut off Al Jazeera's access to Nilesat, one of the main satellites pipeline through which their coverage was broadcast to the world. The network kept coverage going by uploading podcasts and videos to their web site, and a coalition of other Arab networks interrupted their own programming to share the airwaves and enable Al Jazeera to continue to broadcast live. In addition, Egyptians connecting to the two other widely used satellite providers in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia-based Arabsat and France-based Hot Bird, continued to receive Al Jazeera.

Outside of Egypt, and particularly in the United States, Al Jazeera's footage and news coverage became important for networks covering the uprisings as a story. US foreign policy in turn was heavily influenced by CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera coverage, all of which mostly represented the uprisings as a genuine popular democratic uprising. US support for the Mubarak government, long a centerpiece of US policy in the Middle East, was based on the assumption that the autocratic regime was all that stood between Egypt and chaos.

This was, in turn, bolstered by Orientalist stereotypes that Arabs were culturally unprepared for, or incapable of democracy. Given the relatively peaceful nature of the protests, the demands for greater democratic representation, and the presence of Egyptians of different classes, faiths, genders and classes represented in television images, as well as the representation of the regime's clumsy, brutal and ineffective efforts to suppress the protesters, the United States moved relatively rapidly from strongly endorsing the regime in the early days of the protests to calling on Mubarak to respond to popular demands.

Egyptian Media after Mubarak

As signs in Tahrir Square reading "Thank you Shebab al-Facebook" and graffiti praising Twitter suggest, social media have taken on a whole new importance in post-Mubarak Egypt, not only among those who participated in the uprisings, but for Egypt's state media, for political parties, and for the military council that has, at least temporarily, replaced Mubarak at the apex of Egypt's government.

Leaders of the protest movement continue to use social media as a tool to guide the ongoing revolution in the democratic directions they wish it to move. Blogs and Facebook pages such as "We Are All Khaled Said" continue to serve as forums for discussing social ills and the collective actions needed to redress them. Blogs are playing a significant role in the changing internal politics of the Muslim Brotherhood.

And social media continues to serve as an agent of change. Piggipedia, for example, took on a third level of resistance after the revolution, becoming a source of opposition to attempts to simply reincorporate the old state security system into a new system. This function was given a huge boost when protesters who entered the state security headquarters in February 2011 found digital image archives of officers and uploaded them to Piggipedia.

Yet the interim rulers have also tested the power of the groups that used social media so effectively in setting off the January 25 uprisings. The social media youth movements could not swing a "No" vote on the constitutional changes endorsed by the military, nor could they inspire much anti-military sentiment

after the army arrested and tortured protesters on March 9. Yet these same sites proved able to help call a hundred thousand protesters back into the streets to support the prosecution of Hosni Mubarak.

The role of social media in Egypt's changing political culture continues to evolve as it is used experimentally for a variety of forms of political communication. In April 2011, the prosecutor general announced the detention of Hosni Mubarak on Facebook, rather than calling a press conference. The same month some 1,400 university professors used Facebook as a vehicle to demand the removal of Higher Education Minister Amr Ezzat Salama and demand reforms of higher education.

The press also continues to transform itself. *Al Ahram* apologized to the Egyptian people on February 13 for its decades of "bias in favor of the corrupt regime" and pledged for the future "to always side with the legitimate demands of the people" and to become "the conscience of this nation". In so doing, it took a further step toward distancing itself from the government for whom it had so long been a mouthpiece. It has, like electronic state media, been driven by uncertainty about its role in the new Egypt that the pro-democracy protesters are trying to create.

In addition, state media underwent a complete reshuffling of leadership positions in late March. The government had earlier hinted that it might allow editors to be elected by members of the press syndicate, but eventually settled for a mere reshuffling of positions. These changes have failed to appease many staff members, who are calling for more dramatic reforms. Staff point out that the new faces are mostly long-time players as comfortable with the traditional ways of doing things as the people they replaced, and many of the sacked leaders have been kept on as consultants.

Still, just how far-reaching changes in independent and state media could become was dramatically illustrated on March 2 when Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq was grilled mercilessly by novelist Alaa El Aswany on the television show *Baladna bil Masry* and subsequently resigned. It was a clearly unplanned moment—Shafiq had been a guest on the previous talk show alongside the television company's owner, Naguib Sawiris, and had agreed to stay on and

continue the conversation as the new guests arrived. Many in the national audience were deeply offended by Aswany's complete lack of reserve in confronting the head of the government, but after Shafiq's resignation the transformative agency of an open media could not be denied.

But the new independence of the media apparently does not extend to the military itself. While the military has been responsive to popular protest against the former regime, it is far less patient with criticisms directed at its actions. For example, the seizure and torture of protesters on March 9 was underreported in the Egyptian press. Many of the stories that did appear were based primarily on army statements. On March 23, the interim cabinet headed by Essam Sharaf imposed a theoretical gag order on the media, suggesting that news on military arrests, tortures and secret trials will be even more deeply buried.

Yet social media continue to serve as an alternative to mainstream media. Several March 9 victims gave public testimony about their experiences at Cairo's Press Syndicate. Given the scant attention Egyptian and international media paid to the event, some speeches were videotaped, subtitled in English, and posted to YouTube, others posted to Facebook pages, sometimes in multiple languages. Only when Amnesty International issued a statement on a subset of victims—women subjected to “virginity tests”—did these events receive significant mainstream media attention. Even here, many Egyptian news media quoted foreign news sources, to distance themselves from the reporting, or entirely quoted army spokespersons, without interviewing victims.

The Cultural Ecology of News in Post-Mubarak Egypt

A media ecology refers to the dynamic, complex system in which media technologies interact with each other and with other social and cultural systems within a particular social field, and the ways these interrelationships shape the production, circulation, transformation and consumption of images, texts and information within this system. In Egypt's current revolutionary phase, the media ecology is unstable, in flux, as the myriad of institutions and technologies adapt to the dramatically changed – and changing – economic, social and political climate.

In Beeman's account of the media ecology of revolutionary Iran, within a year after the revolution the news media "had returned to their roles of supporter of the dominant state ideology", although the ideology was now that of the Islamic Revolution (1984: 163). Looking at other revolutions, it is easy to imagine other possibilities. In post-Soviet societies, the enthusiasm of the anti-structural period, in which a new society was being constructed out of the pieces of the old, led in many cases to nostalgia for the structure of the Soviet past, as the new society failed to live up to what had been imagined for it (Klumbyte 2010). In Dominic Boyer's superb work on this topic, *East German Intellectuals*, accused of being insufficiently grateful for their new Westernized, democratic lifestyles, recognize that their nostalgia is not really for the Soviet past, but for that period of antistructure, when anything seemed possible (2005). The possibility that state media will return to its role as an uncritical voice for the state is a real possibility, as is the prospect that a sector of the media will become an apologist for the "good old days" of the Mubarak regime as the new Egyptian polity struggles to invent itself and tries to grapple with Egypt's intractable economic conditions.

Finally, there is the evolving role of social media to consider. Beeman notes in his analysis of media in the Iranian case that cassette tapes were wielded with great effect as opposition media during the revolution (see also Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). Like social media in Egypt, cassettes in Iran were a relatively new medium whose political potentials were only just being revealed. Cassettes derived part of their effectiveness as examples of Enzenberger's "new media," in which ownership of the means of consumption also meant one owned the means of production (1970). Cheap, easily made, and simple to distribute, cassettes were functionally different than the "old" broadcast media in which a relatively small set of producers broadcast messages to a substantially larger body of consumers. Such new media proved extremely difficult to control, and Beeman notes that after the revolution, cassettes continued to play a significant role as an opposition media — now in opposition to the new clerical regime, rather than to the dictatorship of the Shah. In Egypt, social media revealed in January 2011 a set of crucial political capacities that in turn affected all the other major elements in the media ecology. Following the uprisings, the inability of the Shebab al-Facebook to produce a "No" vote on the constitutional referendum, or to generate signifi-

cant protest against the military for the detention and torture of protesters on March 9, emphasized its limitations, even as the protests on April 8 for the prosecution of Mubarak showed that social media still could exert considerable political power under the right conditions.

Digital media exhibit many characteristics of Enzenberger's "new media" but may also represent a shift in mediated communication of a whole new order. While resembling new media in its production capacities, they offer far greater potential to selectively quote, aggregate, transform and comment on other media. Moreover, they encourage, and in some cases necessitate, coproduction between spatially dispersed producers. Finally, their distribution capacities are truly global, and public, in ways that make it extremely difficult to control, as the Mubarak regime learned. It seems likely that social media will retain its character as a site for social and political protest into the future, even as the new Egyptian government or governments seek to exploit its or their capacities for state-building.

Egypt's media ecology is currently best characterized as being in an experimental phase, in which journalists, editors, military leaders, officials in old and new political parties, bloggers, and many others are seeking to find a new balance of roles and relationships. Every action — from the confrontation of a political leader on television, to the prosecution of a blogger — is an experiment whose political, economic and social consequences will shape subsequent experiments. These myriad contingent actions will collectively restructure Egypt's media ecology as the revolution continues to unfold. The revolutionary media ecology of Egypt — in particular the ways various media index, image and influence one another — suggests that, unlike in Iran, whatever the ultimate political outcome of the uprisings, the mediascape of Egypt post revolution will be significantly different from what it was before January 25.

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Notes

i For example, in 2008 Ibrahim Eissa, the outspoken editor of *Al Dostor* newspaper, was sentenced to two months in prison on charges of insulting President Mubarak for reporting—accurately, it turned out—about his health. Eissa subsequently had to fight civil suits by NDP members. Ultimately he was pardoned by President Mubarak. Eissa is wealthy, educated and well-connected. The government has no desire to actually keep him in prison. Rather, the case sent a chill through the Egyptian press, as it was intended to do. In 2010, after his newspaper was bought by a new publisher, Eissa was fired for agreeing to publish an article by Mohamed ElBaradei calling on Egyptians to boycott the unmonitored 2010 elections.

Why the Arab World Needs Community Radio

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Daoud Kuttab

Despite the ongoing debates about cause and effect, the protest movements that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the Arab world have had one clear vehicle: freedom of assembly and expression. The crowds of Arab youth who have assembled in cities, towns and villages have forced authoritarian rulers to recognize them, their right to protest the status quo and their right to demand change. While in some countries winning this right has been accomplished relatively easily and quickly, in other countries it has been difficult, dangerous and deadly. Yet the protesters have continued to demand the right to voice their grievances against the powers-that-be.

While the protests and mass expression of demands have taken place largely using traditional means (e.g. word-of-mouth, demonstrations, marches and sit-ins, all broadcast via satellite television channels), like all revolutions, we have seen an explosion of creative ideas that have leveraged creative solutions. From the use of colorful graffiti in Libya to new and social media in Egypt and Syria, young Arabs have been busy making their voices heard through a variety of new platforms.

Yet one tool that has escaped the majority of Arab protesters has been radio. Like many other traditional media tools, radio has been declared dead numerous times only to see its revival and novel usage in new settings and contexts. But while the rest of the world, including many semi-closed regimes, has been tolerant of private and community radio, the Arab world, including some relatively open societies, has persistently rejected any regulation that would grant radio licenses to anyone other than government organizations or the elite business entities that circulate within their orbit.

There are historic reasons for this anti-radio policy. As radio was experiencing its golden age, the post-colonial Arab world witnessed repeated revolutions and coups in which a military general typically took over the national radio station along with the presidential palace. Communiqué number one announcing the new ruler was usually broadcast over the radio waves and all other organs of government quickly fell in line. Naturally these same military dictators who took power by capturing the radio network would then take all measures to protect it from challenges to their power. In the Arab world, the buildings that housed radio stations, and later television stations, often came to be the most heavily guarded pieces of real estate in the entire country. Media outlets effectively were turned into military installations with multiple passes and body searches required for entrance.

The programming broadcast by these stations was also entirely controlled by central governments. A direct telephone line would connect the office of the radio or television director to the palace of the president or king. Even with the proliferation of satellite television and the Internet in the 1990s and 2000s, radio licenses continued to be denied to all but the most loyal and trusted friends of the rulers. And when private licenses were granted, the owners were given clear instructions not to deal with politics and news.

Much like attempts to control Arab citizens through centralized security and administrative apparatuses, media enterprises were similarly restricted to the country's capital, where they could be kept under watch of the ruling elite.

As for programming, centralized and government-controlled media, as well as the few private media companies owned by businessmen close to the governments, generally focused their coverage on protocol-laden reporting of formal events and achievements of the leader and his government, while the rest of the news focused on regional and international news. This system also ensured that all news coverage was sanitized of anything that might disturb or question the prevailing government narrative. The stark absence of local news—a kind of escapism policy—ensured that the public's attention was diverted from the pressing social, economic and political issues that local communities were facing.

This control over media sources was so entrenched and comprehensive that even when the Arab uprisings managed to unseat ruling powers, little was done to change the prevailing media structures. It became clear that changing rulers was somewhat easier than causing genuine change in the media regulatory framework that had been built up over decades.

The millions of protesters in Tahrir Square or Alexandria or Suez who succeeded in creating geographical zones free of security or police control, were unable to even think about—let alone work toward—creating an equivalent on the airwaves, i.e. local radio stations through which they could propagate their revolutionary vision. Transmitter equipment was nowhere to be found and electrical engineers were not even called on to create a simple transmission system—the kind that any physics student can set up for his high school science fair. Decades of government intimidation had clearly had its effect on the psyche of everyday Egyptians, Tunisians or Yemenis, leaving the air waves uncontested by revolutionary voices.

While the deregulation of laws to permit private media ownership of radio would be a step in the right direction, it would not produce the kind of community-based radio environment that exists in the great majority of the world's countries. For example, Jordan, which in 2003 did establish an audio-visual commission to license private radio stations, proceeded to attach a high fee for stations that dealt with public affairs. Any private radio station that broadcasts news and political programming must pay a 50 percent surcharge fee. Government or semi-governmental agencies, such as the police, public universities and government-appointed municipalities, are exempt from the licensing fees, while NGOs, private universities and elected municipalities are not. In Tunisia, the new government installed after the flight of Ben Ali introduced a licensing regime for private radio in which the license cost over \$60,000 a year—hardly an incentive to create community radio stations. In Egypt, the former Mubarak regime issued a single private license on the condition that this commercial station stay away from news or politics. After the revolution, the license was renewed by SCAF without any tendering process.

What is it about community radio that has made Arab leaders so wary of it? What *is* community radio? This is a question that is often asked in the Arab

region even though the concept has been widely accepted in the rest of the world for decades. UNESCO and AMARC (The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters) define community radio simply as radio owned and operated by a local community, usually with the support of volunteers and local contributions. Typically, community radio stations are owned by NGOs and are limited in their broadcast coverage to a particular community, language or special audience.

Autocratic Arab rulers who enforced national unity by the power of the gun certainly would not be interested in any media that encouraged local communities to celebrate their specific ethnicity, language, culture or religion. The assumption in the Arab world has always been that forced assimilation and the denial of community-based freedom of expression would produce stability. For a while—a long while—this system seemed to work. The nationalistic rhetoric that glorified the struggle for pan-Arabism, or Palestine, or whatever the political/national flavor of the month was, fooled citizens into believing that their rulers were really trying to do what was best for them.

Community radio, of course, is not just about issues of identity and ethnicity. Local communities that can control the means to express themselves, communicate within their own populations, and develop mechanisms for speaking to local and regional powers via radio, are instantly empowered in ways not easily tolerated by authoritarian power. To deny this basic communication capacity ensures that these populations remain forever ignorant, unable to educate themselves, and therefore unable to fight for their rights.

World Bank studies conducted in Africa and Latin America have shown that countries that allow community radio stations measure considerably better than countries that ban community radio. Poverty and unemployment figures are less, and productivity and development indicators are much higher. Community radio is also credited with arresting the dangerous epidemic of emigration from rural communities to urban centers. The Washington-based Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) issued a long report in 2011 praising the role of community radio entitled *Voices from Villages: Community Radio in the Developing World*. “International aid agencies are showing ever greater interest in community media’s ability to inform and em-

power. More governments are acknowledging the contribution of community media to education, public health, and economic development and are creating policy and legal frameworks to enable its expansion,” the report’s executive summary said.

There are those voices who wrongly claim that community-based media will exacerbate tensions between various ethnic and national communities, contribute to the break-up of countries, and even introduce civil war. The fact is that the people living in the various countries that make up the Arab League are diverse in a multitude of ways. Instead of denying this diversity and forcing people of different backgrounds to conform to a single cultural and national identity, a more humane approach would be to allow these diverse flowers to bloom within the national garden. By embracing and empowering these different groups, the Arab world’s new rulers will be planting the seeds for stable governing bodies that will better withstand both internal and external threats. Community radio would therefore be a savior for these new regimes and not in any way an obstacle.

In order to successfully introduce community radio to the Arab world, an enabling environment needs to be created. Legislation must be introduced that simplifies the laws allowing communities to broadcast on specified frequencies. This creates an atmosphere in which organized groups and communities are empowered to communicate, using one of the simplest and most inexpensive media tools available. A microphone, audio mixer and a simple transmitter with an antenna are the basic equipment needed to establish a radio station. In addition to start-up capital, training is vital to promoting best practices when using radio for development, expression and raising awareness.

UNESCO, the global UN body charged with supporting culture, education, and science, considers the establishment of community radio to be their number one priority around the world. Whereas most regions of the world have worked with UNESCO to set up community radio stations, the Arab world has lagged in this area, late to understand the concept let alone setting up stations, training volunteers and creating a network of community radio stations. However, it is worth noting a number of recent initiatives that have begun in the Arab world with the aim of introducing community radio.

Aswatona a project of the Amman-based Community Media Network, will establish seven community radio stations in seven Arab countries over the next three years. These stations will begin by broadcasting over the Internet and via satellite and will then add FM broadcasts as soon as countries allow for their licensing. The program, funded by the Swedish Agency for International Development, also includes an advocacy component aimed at pushing national governments to permit community radio to operate with as few bureaucratic and financial restrictions as possible. The British Foreign Office has also recently supported this effort with a three year grant aimed at reaching an additional three Arab countries.

Communities, especially those outside the main metropolitan capitals of the Arab world, have largely been ignored by autocratic powers. Now that these totalitarian power structures are being replaced by democratically elected governments, one would hope that new leaders will change their policies towards these communities for the better. Allowing community radio to thrive has no cost for governments and produces amazing results in communities, and therefore in nations. Creating a welcoming administrative and legal environment for community radio in the Arab world should be a “no-brainer”—provided that we have leaders that genuinely care about their communities.

Rebuilding Egyptian Media for a Democratic Future

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By Ramy Aly

Mediating ‘the Nation’: from State to Public Service Broadcasting, critically engaging Egypt as a complex society.

The protests around Tahrir Square and other urban areas in Egypt represented a revolutionary moment in which the class, sectarian, gender and regional fractures and dynamics of Egyptian society were temporarily suspended. The protests, which were driven by a number of political and socio-economic factors, were significantly a rejection of the social and cultural consequences of life in the shadow of authoritarianism. Most Egyptians have been alienated from political participation and from an iterative relationship with the state and its institutions through an inclusive public sphere. The atmosphere of common purpose, free expression, tolerance and inclusion experienced by protesters between January 25 and February 11 has already led to significant changes in attitudes and practices around the ownership of public space, freedom of expression and the right to mobilize. For many, one of the most promising potentials of the revolution lies in the prospect that it might lead to a fundamental cultural re-imagining of the nation, of difference, inclusion and citizenship. However, the manner in which the revolutionary moment is now subject to cultural narrativization and canonization suggests the persistence of particular representation practices which should be met with caution.

Egypt’s media environment (both state and privately owned) offers a good vantage point from which to consider some of the discourses and practices which have led to the alienation, invisibility and misrepresentation of large swathes of Egyptian society within the public sphere. Egypt has inbuilt limits on media participation and representation that are hugely consequential

with reference to the inclusions, exclusions and forms of representation that constitute public spheres. In spite of the ostensible media liberalization which Egypt has undergone in the last decade, television broadcasting in Egypt remains subject to the stranglehold of the state on the one hand and co-opted religious and commercial elites on the other. A logonomic system prescribing legitimate discourse and representation has calcified around these nodes of production which in turn have come to control the behavior of the producers of these discourses and the expectations of potential consumers who consequently participate in sustaining and reconstituting these genres (Hodge and Kress 1988).

While there is significant activity and cultural production within counter-publics, the extent to which attempts to break established genres, modes of representation and expression are deemed illegitimate by an elitist, centralized and securitized approach to “culture” has meant that counter-publics have been kept at arm’s length and considered not as legitimate ground-up modes of expression, but as ignominious and menacing. This is well demonstrated by Sabry Hafez, who charts the way in which new Egyptian novelists who have sought to capture the complex linguistic, social and political landscape have been subjected to sustained campaigns of condemnation by the literary and cultural establishment (2010). Such a reading goes well with the idea of language as the site of social and class struggle, as advocated by Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued that centripetal authoritative discourses ‘which represent the forces of political centralization, a unified cultural canon and a dominant national discourse are in constant tension and intersection with centrifugal marginalized and ‘inwardly persuasive discourses’ and genres associated with subordinated groups in society marked by class, age, religion, gender and race’ (Maybin 2001: 65-66).

The way in which these tensions are played out is not only in textual confrontations but also in cultural practices. This can be seen in the way that the practice of saint veneration at *Moulids* (annual celebrations of the saint’s day) has come under various pressures from a state and a conservative religious current with an abrasive understanding of modernism and reformism. There have been attempts to constrict these events through the deployment of politico-religious authority that conceives *Moulids* in aesthetic terms as representing

‘civic’ oppositions such as ‘cleanliness and filth, order and chaos, and calm and noise’ (Scheilke 2008: 550) or in relation to conservative religious readings which frame these practices in terms of *bid’a* (heretical innovation) and *shirk* (polytheism). Within a political and legal framework which acts as the arbitrator of public morality and decency, this configuration is far more ominous than being simply a matter of the politics of taste or the aristocracy of culture. Instead it represents class struggle, a fundamental intolerance towards difference and strong evidence of the corporeal power of discourse.

The freedom to interrogate and challenge established genres and modes of representing gender, age, geography, piety, class, respectability and nationalism have been vigorously policed and regulated in Egypt, resulting in a discursive terrain of subjection whose reiterations produce ‘that which they name’ (Butler 1990, 1993). Through the stylized repetition of speech and bodily acts, social intelligibility and legitimacy in Egypt are inscribed and prescribed. In the process the complexity of subjectivity and society is flattened and made to fit into simplistic yet authoritative linguistic representations, metaphors and tropes, the most violent of which I argue is the notion of *al-shakhsiyya al-masriyya* or the (quintessential) Egyptian Character, which has been used as the fuel of jingoism and ethno-nationalism on the one hand and to prescribe social intelligibility on the other.

Al-shakhsiyya al-masriyya has become one of the technologies of power and governmentality, representing a kind of biologically deterministic approach to Egyptian society, whereby certain types of women and men are produced through fixed notions of citizenship, belonging, gender, class, religion and social stratification. Lila Abu Lughod (2005) lucidly demonstrates the central role of mass media, the culture industries and in particular soap operas as (national) pedagogic mechanisms for the reproduction of an authentic Egyptian subject. Tartoussieh points to the way in which this ‘pedagogical approach to art and culture blurs the national with the cultural, spoon-feeding the image of the ‘real’ Egyptian as a good citizen and a pious Muslim’ (2010: 9). A self-referential discourse has fueled this style of production in both the state and private sectors, where simplistic and simplifying scripts, sets and acting are seen as the best way to engage a simple and simplistic audience that is only interested in a particular genre of rhetorical pseudo-realism.

These production and representational styles not only make for poor quality drama but have led to large swathes of Egyptian society either remaining invisible or being misrepresented within the national public sphere. Egypt's 47.5 million rural inhabitants are a case in point. While constituting over half of Egypt's population, it is rare to see the Egyptian countryside or its people depicted on national or private television beyond stereotypical depictions in the hyper-unreality of soap operas, or as the happy and colorful people of liquid soap and home-care advertisements. Rural people are typically never played by rural actors, as such a constituency is thought not to exist. They are routinely depicted as honor-driven, violent, patriarchal simpletons by urbanite scriptwriters and actors whose attempts to represent *Sai'dis* rarely do more than add to the freeze-framing of rural people and rural life as quintessentially and predictably parochial and authentically backward. Even after the revolution it remains almost unthinkable to imagine a weekly program on rural life broadcast on channel one (Al-Oula), with a rural presenter, speaking in his or her accent without apology or *la mu'akhatha* (pardon me) - the standard reminder that all things rural are to be considered uncouth and subordinate.

Similarly, Nubians and the Bedouins of Sinai, the Eastern and Western deserts are rarely given any attention, apart from reluctant references to them on the state television news broadcasts where their political and economic "demands" are spoken about with vague incredulity. After years of exposure to this exclusive and unrepresentative public sphere one might be forgiven for thinking that these groups have no legitimate place within the nation's cultural sense of self, no music, poetry or popular culture of their own, no history and no future which is worthy of being shared with the rest of society. While some of these groups are crudely advertised to as part of Egypt's consumer market or advertised as part of its tourist attractions, they are rarely given the respect they deserve in terms of a share of public broadcasting. Religious groups such as Christians, Baha'is and Shi'ites are the preserve of discussions where national culture, national unity and national security are seen as going hand-in-hand and where anecdotes of ethnic and religious harmony are exchanged between guests and presenters who continue to insist that sectarianism and discrimination are not systematic or institutional in Egypt.

The endemic negligence in relation to regional, ethnic and religious diversity on television is matched only by the disregard of the class structure and pov-

erty within Egypt. The millions of Egyptians who live in shanty towns within and around greater Cairo and every other major city in the country, without government services or basic utilities such as water and sanitation have to date been almost totally ignored by the 19 state-run channels. In recent years only one program, hosted by Amr Al-Laithi on the privately run 'Dream' network, set out to investigate and bring into people's living rooms the full dreadfulness of Egypt's urban deprivation. What is clear is that a particular televisual culture has meant that many groups are subject to one-dimensional programming where they are restricted to particular discursive frames. Lest the point be misunderstood, what is being suggested here is not that there should be a philanthropic turn towards marginalized groups by state-owned and private television, or that Egypt should engage in corporatist identity politics so that these constituencies are further framed only in terms of political and economic problems for the nation. Instead a balance must be found whereby programming on national as well as local and private channels seeks to reflect the social and cultural vibrancy and creativity of these groups as well and include them within the principal shared medium of the nation: national television.

True to its common name, programming on '*Television al-dawla*' (state Television) rarely seems to reflect Egypt's people or their culture. Even after the fall of the Mubarak regime it continues to reflect the public relations needs of the military council and the transitional government. Its small news, public information and current affairs programming remain unimaginative, unattractive and have not departed in any significant way from the syntax of deference to authoritarianism and crude nationalism. What remains of 'state' broadcasting in the form of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) is now paralyzed by economic and institutional problems. The abolition of the Ministry of Information comes with no guarantees that the fundamental shift in purpose and institutional culture at the ERTU will take place, at a time where Egyptians are most acutely in need of high quality public service broadcasting. At the core of Public Service Broadcasting is the responsibility to reflect the different cultures, concerns and constituencies of the nation, and not to do so in ways that are exclusionary, centralized and securitized.

The revolution poses a number of questions about the Egyptian state's institutional and legislative future, which in turn lead to questions about the relation-

ship between broader cultural conditions and the process of reconstituting the state in the aftermath of a revolutionary moment. At what point do dominant cultural values and practices, social norms and styles of representation begin to restrict the realization of basic freedoms and modes of expression among disparate subjectivities and groups within society? Importantly in relation to the media, when do these established cultural norms prevent Public Service Broadcasting and the media more broadly from seeing Aswan, Sinai, Sohag and Alexandria as being of equal importance to the nation as Cairo? When do these cultural norms become an obstacle to airtime and programming opportunities for different religious, class, geographical, age and sub-culture groups? Television gives us a sense of society and self and if marginalized groups are invisible, it matters. While some may sound a cautious note that behind such a question is a sinister form of cultural imperialism and Orientalism; we must be equally conscious not to orientalize ourselves or place too much confidence in cultural relativism, negating the commonality of the cultural change within all contexts where access to rights and recognition is enshrined in legislation. The racism, discrimination, sexism, regionalism and class-based disadvantage that mark Egyptian society have in other contexts been the subject of protective rights-based legislation while at the same time being fundamentally encrypted in cultural repertoires and structures which are everywhere seen as authentic, arboreal and sacred. We are still left with the challenge that the revolutionary moment has created a expectation that new institutional arrangements, forms of engagement, participation and representational practices will be created within a public sphere that will live up to the cultural expectations of Egypt's revolution.

So far, in the weeks after the fall of the regime, the project of mediating post-revolutionary nation building in new and creative ways has largely been left to private satellite channels, most notably ONTV, which has embarked on a concerted set of public information campaigns around politics, participation and civic responsibility. While the private sector is to be commended for this, it should be noted that ONTV may represent not the rule but an exception to the profit- and advertising-driven private media in Egypt. Commercial channels have and must be subject to regulations that require them to play a role in public service broadcasting. However, as Elsässer (2010) has shown in relation to media liberalization and sectarianism in Egypt, the increasing range of re-

religious channels and Christian and Muslim websites and new media platforms has in the most led to further entrenchment, antagonism and discrimination. The 'shared ideas, interests and aspirations of Muslims and Copts [for example] as Egyptian citizens do not figure in the discourse of transnational religious satellite channels and Internet portals' (Elsässer 2010: 147).

Deregulation and liberalization may offer broadcasting to an increasing number of single-interest groups but is likely to do very little in relation to mediating the nation post-revolution. Public Service Broadcasting has a unique remit in this regard and should seek to address the need for shared space to promote shared interests and values, helping to forge an inclusive and empowering mainstream. While this will require major institutional and legal restructuring that transforms Egypt's state broadcasting into public service broadcasting, it will also take a fundamental shift in the way that Egypt sees and represents itself and a radical departure from the discourses, modes of production and representation that have disenfranchised so many by ignoring, simplifying and patronizing - ultimately reproducing a divisionary and hierarchical cultural vision of the nation. The revolutionary moment requires a new vision of the future, a task made all the more difficult by the widespread attachment and confidence in the social configurations of the past. Echoing throughout Tahrir Square and now on the airwaves of satellite channels are the words of Sheikh Imam "*ya Misr oudi zay zaman*" (Oh Egypt return to your former self) – a testament to a nostalgic yearning for an imagined and romanticized past that is often debilitating to attempts to make sense of the present and imagine the future. While nostalgia at times of crisis is by no means unique to Egypt or the Arab world, Egypt's revolutionary moment will certainly remain unrealized if, as Sabiha Al Kheimir (1993) persuasively puts it, we 'wait in the future for the past to come'.

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Is the Egyptian Press Ready for Democracy? Evaluating Newspaper Coverage as an Indicator of Democratization

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Abstract

If the Egyptian transition to democracy is to succeed, social institutions like the press will have to embrace their democratic responsibilities. In this paper, I look for signs of change in the post-Revolution press as an indicator of the progress of Egyptian democratization. During interviews conducted over the summer of 2011 with journalists and media experts in Egypt, I found that the press was still constrained by low journalistic standards and continued government interference. But the newspapers' content tells a different story. Digitally combing through five years of coverage from the independent newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s online archives (comprising more than a quarter of a million articles), this study determined that coverage in the six months after the Revolution heavily converged on political topics that were formerly off limits. This newspaper replaced trivial reporting on culture and entertainment with coverage of the protests, political players like the Muslim Brotherhood, and the branches of government. These stories put pressure on the emerging government and set a precedent for political coverage under the new democratic regime. The evolution of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s coverage suggests that the newspaper is beginning to play a democratizing role, indicating that Egypt is progressing along the path to democracy.[1]

Introduction

On the evening of January 25, 2011, a tense atmosphere gripped the newsroom of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*[2] (The Egyptian Today)—Egypt's largest inde-

pendently affiliated daily. That day, its reporters had witnessed the largest political protests in recent memory. Tens of thousands of people had converged on Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo, among other locations across Egypt, in a show of strength that mirrored Tunisian protests that had ousted President Ben Ali eleven days earlier. For those journalists who wished to expand and challenge the public discourse, the events on the street seemed to be the culmination of everything they had worked towards: a public challenging of the regime. Many of them were at that moment in Tahrir Square reporting or protesting, or both. But the newspaper administration knew the risks of reporting on the protests. They knew that if they reported objectively on the demonstrations of that afternoon, the President, State Security Minister, or Information Minister would be calling the next day. And even if the caller did not revoke the newspaper's publishing license on the spot, he would explain that the newspaper's future was in question. It was not hard to predict that government-run newspapers would downplay the size of the protests—certainly placing coverage below the fold—and objective reporting of any sort would be unlikely.

Across the front page of the January 26 edition of *Al-Masry Al-Youm* ran a one-word headline: "Warning" (see Appendix A)—the newspaper had accepted the risk. The next day the Minister of Information telephoned the paper. "You deal with the president, you're on your own," he said, according to Vice-CEO Sherif Abdel Wadoud (2011). "It's over, we're done," Wadoud remembered thinking, as he knew the regime had the authority to revoke the paper's license and effectively shut it down. But the regime never recovered, and *Al-Masry Al-Youm* continued to report on the demonstrations. The newspaper confirmed that in the 18 days before the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, it could act as a democratic press.

The political ramifications of the uprising that began that January day are increasingly apparent today and the discourse on post-Revolution democratization in Egypt often assumes further democratization. But making sense of Egyptian society in the aftermath of the Revolution[3] is a challenge even nearly two years later. Are institutions like the press fulfilling their roles in a democratic society by acting on the precedent set by *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and other newspapers during the Revolution? While democratic ideals of politi-

cal participation infused the initial protests and the presidential elections, the extent of democratization in Egyptian society after the Revolution remains unclear.

In this study, I hope to contribute one perspective on the impact of the Revolution in Egypt. I argue that the role of the press in a society is strongly indicative of the structure of that society; thus, developments in the Egyptian press after the Revolution can reveal significant changes in Egyptian society. A more democratic role for the press, evident in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*'s coverage in the initial weeks, suggests a vibrant public sphere that is essential to democracy. However, the press may now have reverted back to its handicapped role under the old regime as did the revolutionary media of Iran after 1979 (Beeman 1984), suggesting that democratization has not necessarily taken hold throughout Egyptian society. As many hoped, did democratic ideals entrench themselves in society? Or, at the other extreme, did democratization end with the ouster of the former president and the rise of the interim military regime?

This paper uses a quantitative textual analysis of content from *Al-Masry Al-Youm* to investigate developments in press coverage in the six months after the Revolution. Digitally combing through five years of coverage, I asked whether the press, although constrained by a variety of factors including government interference, participated in and contributed to a growing public sphere. In the analysis, I found that press coverage heavily focused on political issues after the Revolution, suggesting that the press was more likely to engage with the political sphere. Furthermore, key topics that had been formerly off limits or restricted from coverage, including the presidency and the Muslim Brotherhood, were heavily covered in the post-Revolution environment. Despite continued social and political impediments, the press has shifted the discourse and contributed to the public sphere. This conclusion does not imply a causal relationship—the press may be channeling a renewed public interest in the political sphere instilled by the Revolution, and a growing public sphere does not inexorably cause democratization. But the depth of coverage of political activity does indicate an enlarged public sphere that is more compatible with potentially ongoing democratization.

Research Methodology

This study analyzed the content of *Al-Masry Al-Youm* exclusively for both practical and analytical reasons. There are numerous Egyptian news organizations and an analysis of all of their content would have been highly impractical given the quantity of material. Furthermore, the research question asks how print media contributed to a more robust public sphere across Egyptian society. Thus, news outlets outside the mainstream with a smaller readership are far less likely to have had a major impact on this sphere. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* is among the highest circulating newspapers and saw its readership spike in the months after the Revolution, making it an appropriate sample of widely read press during that period.

The independent coverage in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* is also more flexible than in the other two categories of print news in Egypt—government and political party newspapers—and therefore more valuable as an indicator of change in the period immediately after the Revolution. The rise of an independent press, which began in the late 1990s and took shape in the middle of the following decade, has provided the groundwork for non-biased and professional journalism. Party newspapers still contain obvious party biases, and government newspapers retain allegiances to the ruling government that likely continue to taint their coverage. During the Revolution, independent newspapers like *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *Al-Shorouk* (The Dawn) gained widespread respect for their accurate coverage of the protests that contradicted the blatantly false reports of the government newspapers.

The study's analysis examines content from the online archive of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*[4] between the dates of November 24, 2005 and July 25, 2011. The start date represents the first point at which *Al-Masry Al-Youm* archives were available online, one year after the paper was founded.[5] I selected July 25 as the end date because it includes a six-month period after January 25, the start of the Revolution. This six-month period also coincided with the time I spent conducting interviews with journalists, media professionals and media analysts in Egypt. As a result, the qualitative data from these retrospective interviews can be understood to cover the same six-month period as the quantitative data. For an explanation on how I gathered the Arabic newspaper text and prepared it for the LDA code, see Appendix B.

My quantitative analysis used statistical methods in R programming to form what is called a “topic model.” A basic topic model extracts recurring themes or “topics” in a text by identifying the frequency of related words (Blei 2011). The approach used here, refined in the late 1990s, revolutionized data retrieval from large quantities of text by eliminating the need for a search input that could alter or bias the results (Hofmann 1999). The model was particularly useful for my own study because it vastly expanded the scope of my research on the diversity of coverage, allowing me to identify and track all dominant points of coverage.

I used a topic model called Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), first developed in 2003 (Blei et al. 2003). LDA assumes that there are multiple topics to be found within a corpus of text and allows the user to request an output with a specific number of topics. This topic model is an increasingly common tool for analyzing vast quantities of text on the web, including both mainstream news media and social media. Zhao et al. (2011) used LDA to compare news content on the social media site Twitter and on the New York Times website. Doumit and Minai (2011) used LDA to identify underlying biases in news organizations. The specific LDA code that I used, which draws from a pre-existing R library, was designed by Brandon Stewart, a graduate student at Harvard University’s Department of Government. Blei et al. (2003) provide an accessible explanation of topic models and LDA.

Before running LDA, the code required an input of the number of topics that I wanted the model to identify. Too few topics would produce a list of broad categories (politics, culture, and sports, for example) that would be of little use in this study. Undoubtedly newspapers in Egypt consistently wrote about topics like politics. Rather, I was interested in specific areas of politics that may have been deemed taboo or subject to censorship. However, too many topics would be both burdensome and overly specific. For example, the model may have classified a topic on worker protests in 2006 and worker protests in 2008 as separate topics, ignoring a key shared thematic point of coverage—worker protests.

After some experimentation on both ends of the spectrum, I concluded that a topic model with 50 topics would produce the most appropriate number of results. This model ended up extracting a wide range of topics without exces-

sive thematic repetition and included both relevant and irrelevant topics. I determined an appropriate label for each topic by analyzing the topic's 30 most common words in a process that inserts an inevitable degree of subjectivity into the analysis. A sample of the top ten most common words in the most relevant topics is available in Appendix C.

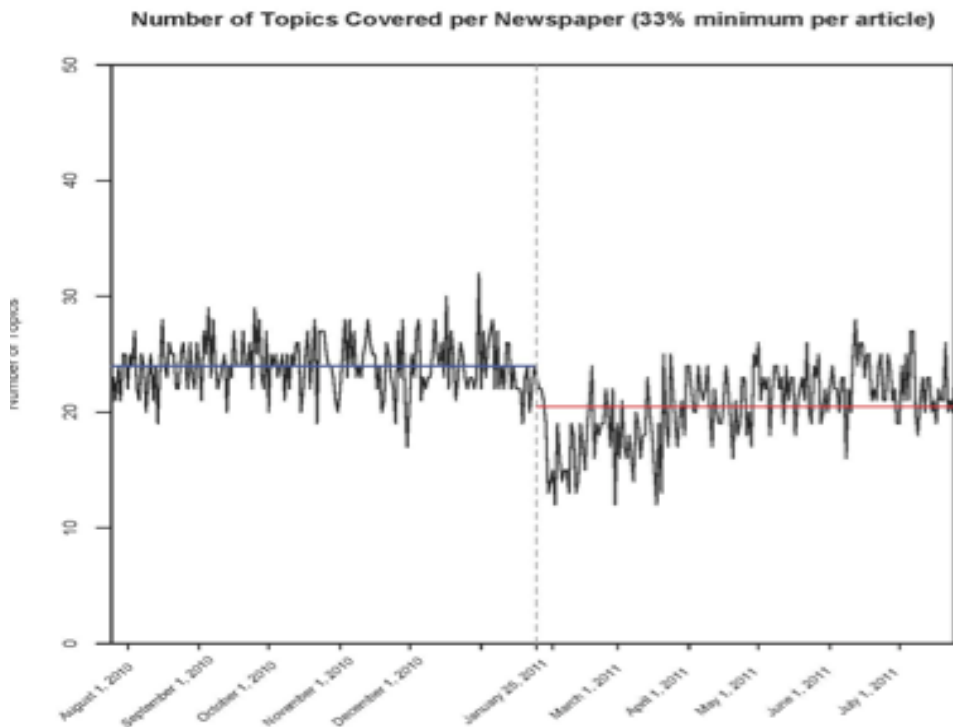
In order to assess the topic variety, I broke down the 50 topics into 7 different categories: Crime, Culture, Economics, Foreign Affairs, Miscellaneous (combinations of words that demonstrate no clear or substantive theme), Politics (the most common), and Sports (see Appendix D for distribution). Topics in each category relate to a specific subject, but often vary in their focus. Within the Sports category, for example, the words in one topic suggest a focus on the national soccer league. This is evident in the frequency of "Ahly" and "Zamalek," the names of the two most popular soccer clubs in Cairo, and in the common use of the word "club." The words in another sports-related topic suggest coverage of the World Cup: top words included "match," "World Cup," "Brazil," and "Africa," home of the 2009 Confederations Cup and the 2010 World Cup. It should be noted that these topics are not time specific. Although coverage of the World Cup topic presumably spiked leading up to the 2010 championship, the topic likely also arose in 2006 coverage of the World Cup in Germany and perhaps in miscellaneous coverage of FIFA, the international soccer organization.

Evann Smith, a PhD candidate in Harvard's Department of Government, composed R code allowing me to track the frequency with which topics appeared over time. In my research, I performed two primary analyses of the data to better understand the Egyptian Revolution's impact on press coverage. First, I ran an analysis of variety in coverage, including before and after the Revolution. Second, I analyzed the coverage of salient individual topics over time, including before and after the Revolution. The latter analysis demonstrates to what extent the press covered key issues that may have been avoided prior to the revolution and suggests the current role of the media in the post-Revolution political discourse. The data from interviewees generally indicated that continued restrictions on press freedom and limitations on the quality of the press prevent a more vibrant media environment. However, this study's quantitative analysis demonstrates that coverage of politically perilous or socially taboo issues nonetheless increased after the Revolution.

Variety in Topic Coverage

In the six months after the Revolution, the variety in coverage of the 50 topics dropped significantly, suggesting a concentration of coverage on political developments beginning on the first day of the protests. Coding identified the percentage topic makeup of each article and then compiled articles according to their publication date (newspaper edition). If an article had more than 33 percent of terms referring to a certain topic, then that topic was considered “covered” in that article’s issue. A relevant article had to give the topic sufficient play, for an article that gave only passing mention of a topic was not considered to be about that topic. Figure 1 provides a visual comparison of this variety in coverage in the six months prior to the Revolution and in the six months after the Revolution. The graph shows the number of topics considered “covered” in a given issue. The horizontal line indicates the mean number of topics and provides a helpful visualization of the difference over time.

Figure 1

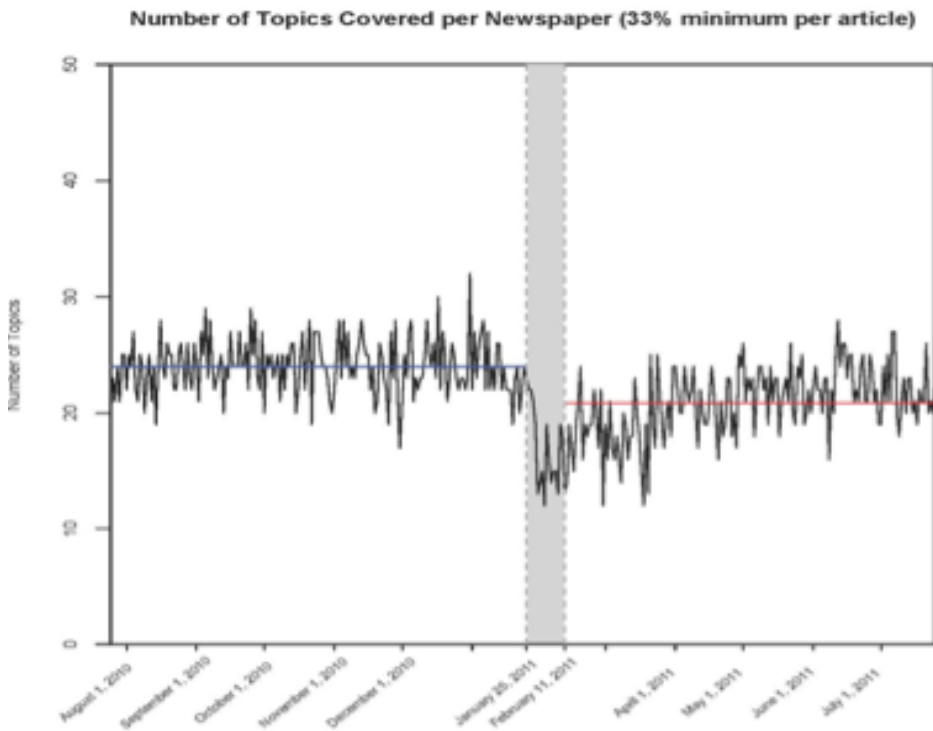


This analysis demonstrates a marked drop in coverage variety (statistically significant, $p\text{-value} < 2.2\text{e-}16$). While an average of 23.98 topics were covered per issue in the six months leading up to the Revolution, an average of 20.47 topics per issue were covered afterwards. Coverage variety in the initial weeks of the demonstrations plummeted, with some issues covering fewer than 15 topics. Coverage at this time was nearly exclusively focused on the protests and the ensuing political turmoil. Working on the international desk of the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar*, journalist Yasmine Hani (2011) recalled turning all of her attention to the demonstrations. Previously, she used to scan international newswires for stories of general interest to the Egyptian reader. After the Revolution broke out, she was tasked with compiling articles on international responses to the protests in Egypt. “During the 18 days of the revolution all the newspaper was focusing on Egypt,” Hani said. Coverage at *Al-Masry Al-Youm* also did not return to the diversity of the pre-Revolution period, suggesting a continued focus on the political sphere. Figure 2 shows a comparison of topic variety between the period before the Revolution and after the Revolution, excluding the 18-day period before Mubarak relinquished power (in which the paper covered on average 20.87 topics per issue). A two sample T-test demonstrates that the difference in mean is again statistically significant ($p = 2.067\text{e}^{-12}$).

In order to ensure that the 33 percent threshold was not too demanding, I performed a robustness check by reducing the percentage. The model’s design allowed for topics to be sprinkled through articles in the post-Revolution period without achieving the classification threshold in individual articles. However, the robustness check identified a topic as covered if it composed more than only 10 percent of an article. The results also demonstrated a statistically significant decrease in the post-Revolution period excluding the 18 days, confirming that threshold was not driving results ($p\text{-value} = 1.197\text{e}^{-11}$, see graph in Appendix E).

A look at the entire corpus dating back to 2005 (with a 33 percent threshold) indicates that the six months prior to the Revolution (including the 2010 parliamentary elections) did not have exceptionally high variety in coverage. Figure 3 compares the mean number of topics per issue before and after the Revolution in content, spanning from November 25, 2005 to September 30, 2011. The analysis shows a statistically significant drop in number of topics ($p\text{-value} = 5.24e^{-16}$). Again, a robustness check at 10 percent was still statistically significant ($p\text{-value} = 2.626e^{-08}$, see graph in Appendix F).

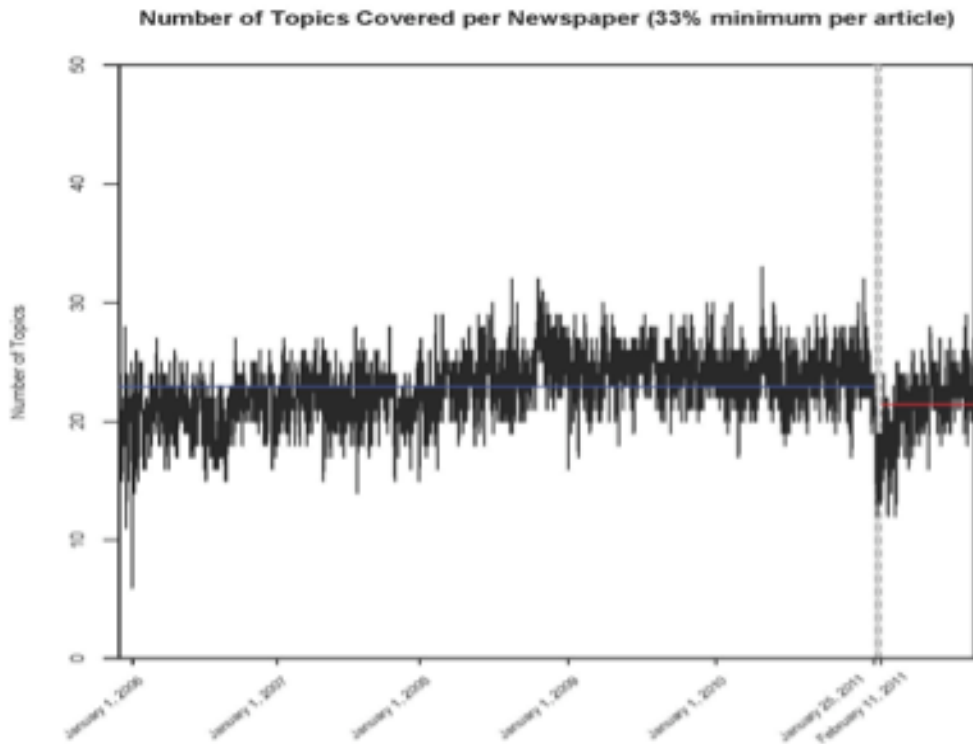
Figure 2



This drop in variety indicates that the press provided less comprehensive coverage of society after the Revolution. The drop could also be understood to mean that the press did not rise to fill the void in public discourse created by the fall of the regime. But I contend that this is a false conclusion, for after further analysis of individual topics, the press's contribution to the public sphere

in fact increased. More coverage of topics does not inherently indicate a more free or active press because only a small number of such topics are vital to the public sphere. Sports, entertainment, and foreign affairs are not generally components of the public sphere. Rather, the press contributes to the foundations of a vibrant public sphere mainly by covering political activity.

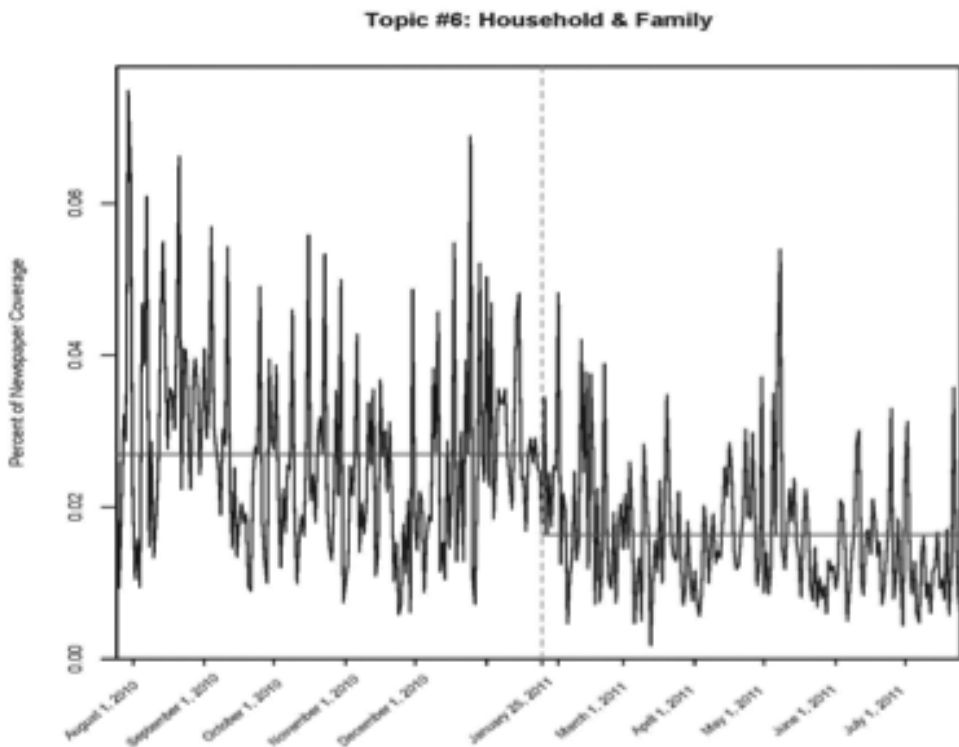
Figure 3



In fact, an analysis of specific topics over time indicates that *Al-Masry Al-Youm* concentrated coverage on politics while reducing its reporting on other topics. Figure 4 demonstrates that coverage of the topic labeled *household* and *family*, which consists of words like “children,” “house,” and “family,” dropped. Likewise, entertainment coverage nearly halved as a percentage of other topics (Figure 5). These topics appear to be elastic areas of coverage that were replaced by other topics that arose during that time. Interestingly, some non-

political topics did not demonstrate this same elasticity. The newspaper continued to cover the national soccer league, for example, at an almost equal rate except for the period immediately after the Revolution when many games were canceled. Figure 6 shows coverage over time of one of the soccer topics, labeled *sports*.

Figure 4



Notably, coverage of the topic containing basic government terms did not demonstrate a significant increase in coverage after the Revolution (Figure 7). This topic, labeled *government*, contains non-incendiary, common government terms like “assembly,” “minister,” and “president.” The concentration in coverage thus does not simply reflect a rise in writing about the “surface” of the political sphere. Indeed, the press has long reported on Egyptian political cycles (though the topic coverage increased during the period of the 2010 elections) and general day-to-day activity (i.e. new legislation or a presidential trip abroad).

Figure 5

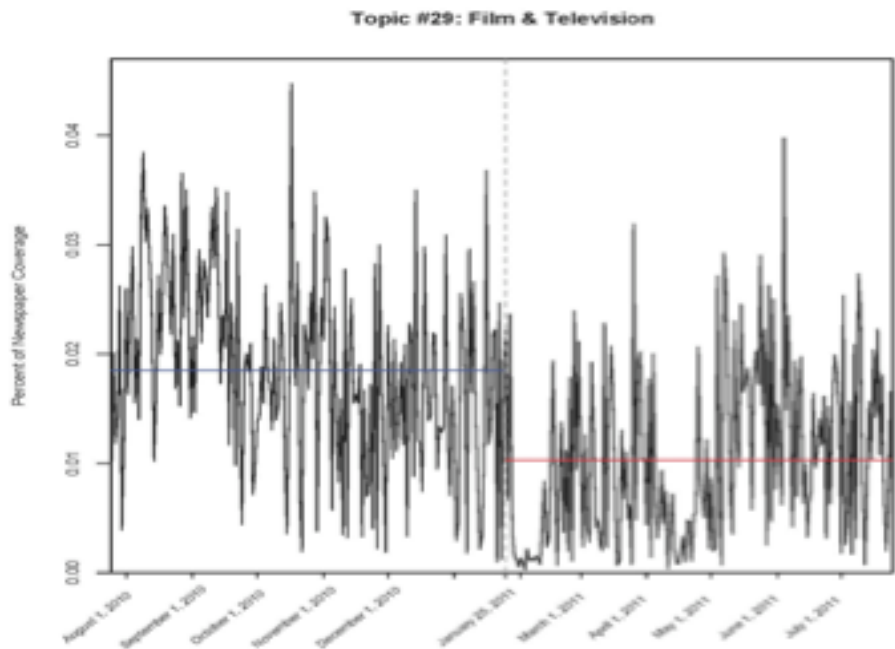
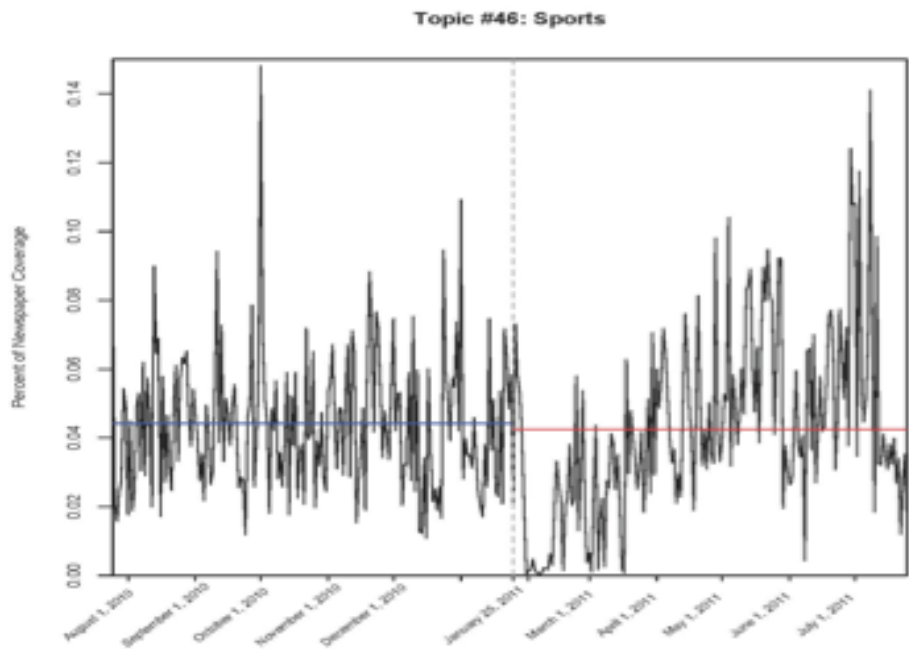
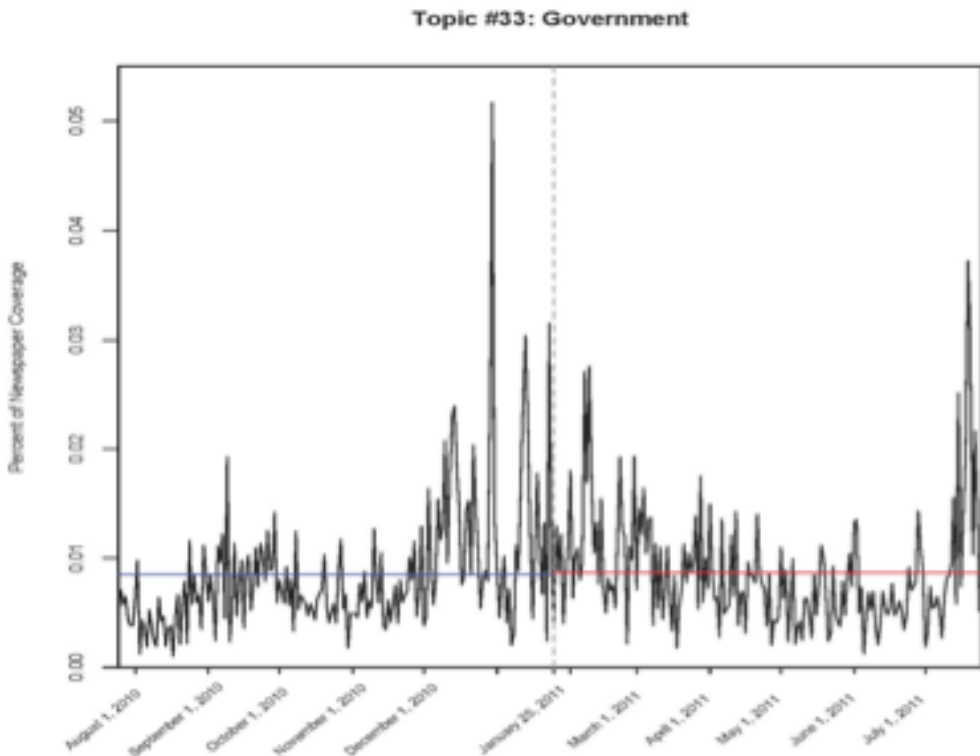


Figure 6



According to the analysis in the following section, certain key political topics increased as percentages of coverage during this period. This concentration of coverage was in fact reflective of an enhanced focus on specific institutions in the political sphere. Greater coverage of these specific topics, including the various aspects of governance, suggests a level of engagement with politics that the press did not demonstrate before the Revolution. In the next section, I look at the ways by which the media cast light on specific political topics, eventually helping to construct a more robust public sphere.

Figure 7



Individual Topic Analysis

While the journalist contributes to the public sphere with a wide range of coverage (as even economic coverage will have implications for government action), direct coverage of politics represents the most tangible contribution

to this sphere. Media alone, including the instant connections of the Internet, cannot establish an effective public sphere without first engaging with politics and politicians. In his analysis of Arab media, Marc Lynch argued that transnational satellite television served as a public sphere for Arab populations. But he notably claimed, “only when al-Jazeera refocused the satellites away from entertainment and toward politics ... did it become a public sphere” (Lynch 2006, 33). By the same token, Egyptian media has an extensive tradition of producing tabloid-style newspapers, talk shows, novels, television series, and films popular across the Arab world. But this cultural discourse has not been translated into a public sphere because it has not incorporated politics.

In selecting topics from the 50 possibilities within the topic model, I was therefore primarily interested in those topics related to national politics. From the unsupervised topic model, I identified six of the 50 topics that I believed were political and therefore most relevant to this analysis. Each topic had political associations: the topic labeled *Muslim Brotherhood*; branches of government (including topics labeled *presidency*, *judiciary*, and *parliament*), and public protests (including topics labeled *worker protest*, *national protest*, and *revolution*). For a sample of the top ten terms for each of these topics, see Appendix C. In the following subsections, I elaborate on each topic and its coverage over time.

Protest Movements

Two separate but similar topics on this subject were discovered in the topic modeling. The first, labeled the *worker protest* topic, is self-explanatory in subject and likely draws from coverage of Egypt’s high-profile protests in 2008 as well as coverage of rather common labor disputes and strikes. This topic includes words such as “workers,” “sit-in,” “strike,” “syndicate,” and “protests.” The second protest topic is the national protest topic, which appeared to focus on the political protests of the January 25 Revolution. This topic includes words like “demonstrations,” “revolution,” “security,” and “Tahrir Square,” the core of the nationwide demonstrations.

In the six months after the Revolution, coverage of both topics significantly increased (See Figure 8 and Figure 9). Compared to the previous six months, there were about five times as many articles focusing on these two topics, a

jump from 212 to 1156 articles. *National protest* quite unsurprisingly spiked in the last week of January 2011, at one point consisting of nearly half of the topics covered in one newspaper edition. On average, the topic composed about 6.6 percent of total coverage in the six months after the Revolution, compared with 1.1 percent in the six months prior (statistically significant, $p\text{-value} < 2.2e^{-16}$). [6] Coverage of these national protests far surpassed that of past coverage of worker protests, reflecting the exceptional nature of the national protests. In contrast, coverage of worker protest reached its highest point in the six months preceding the Revolution in October at around 5 percent of coverage—and at no point did a million Egyptians take to the streets in support of workers' rights (in fact, worker demonstrations were often limited to tens or hundreds). This comparison is significant because it suggests the extent to which coverage of the Revolution represented a wholly unprecedented foray into reporting on political opposition on the street.

Figure 8

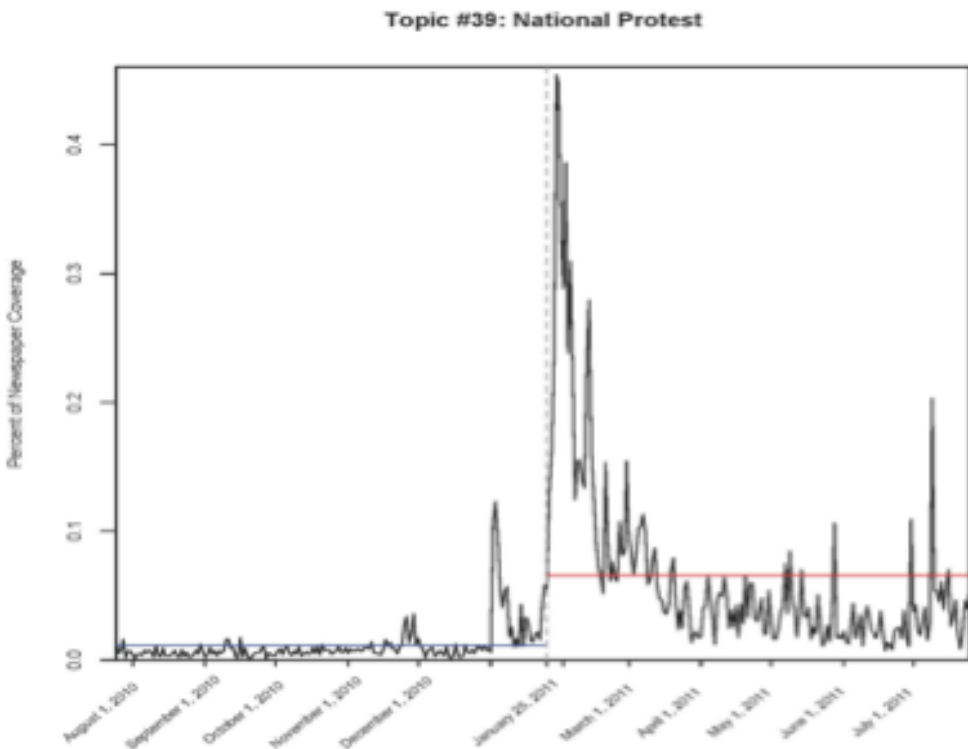
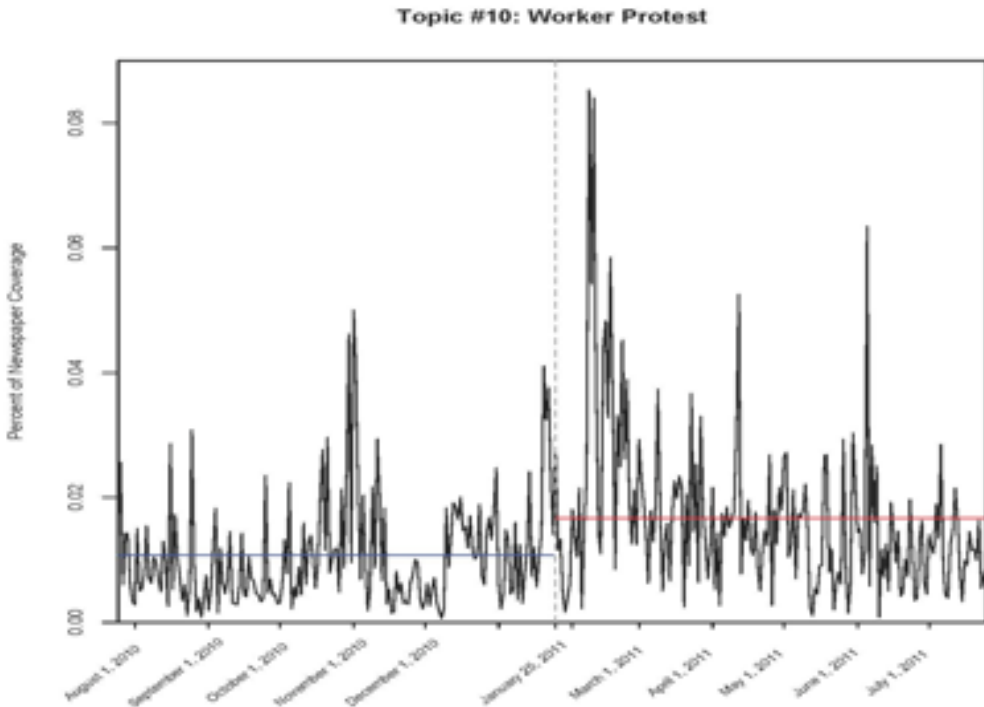


Figure 9

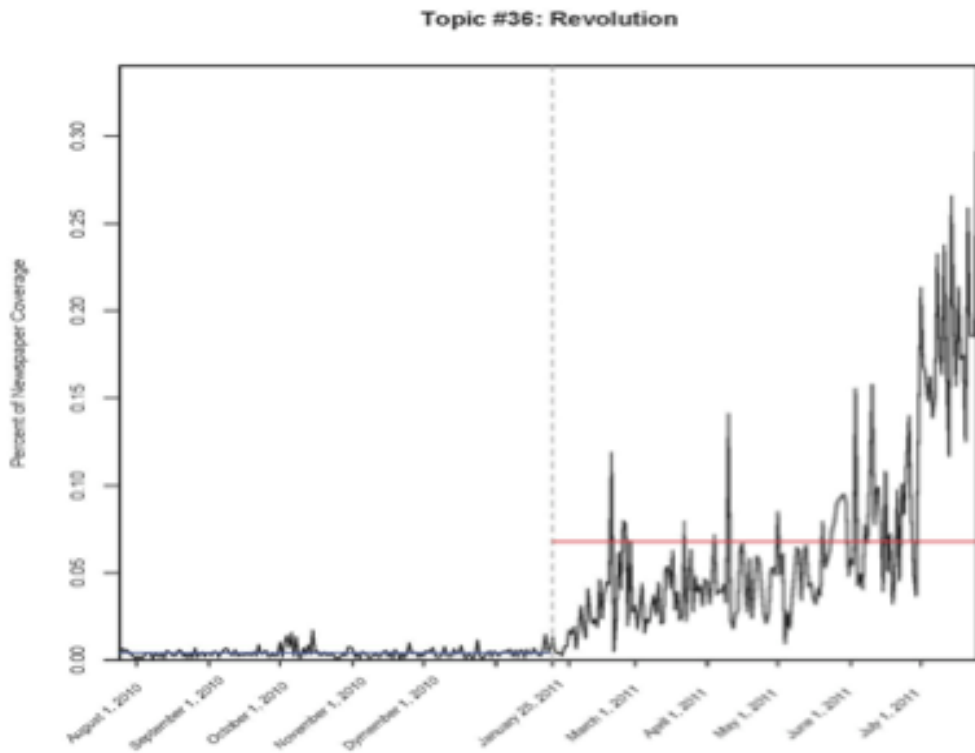


Though increasing by a lesser degree, the rise in coverage of *worker protests* is also noteworthy. While occurrences of worker protests and strikes may have increased along with the Revolutionary protests, continued coverage of the workers demonstrates a remarkable awareness on the part of the newspaper. Despite the nationalist fervor of the Revolution, the newspaper retained a scope of coverage of sufficient depth to differentiate between general demonstrations and worker protests.

It can be argued that coverage of protests is inherently event driven and thus this rise in coverage did not represent a systematic change in coverage. In fact, after its initial spike coinciding with the 18-day period of mass demonstrations, coverage of national protests did decrease. Was this impact on the press temporary? One related topic helps paint a more nuanced picture. While coverage of protests only corresponded with live events, political discourse survived in the pages of the newspaper. The topic labeled *revolution* also increased

in coverage over time, identified with words such as “revolution,” “military,” “Brotherhood,” “authority,” and “liberation.” After the initial protests, political discourse did not disappear but rather evolved and expanded. Figure 10 shows that the decrease in coverage of *national protests* coincides chronologically with the rise in coverage of *revolution*. The Revolution thus spawned a discourse of political opposition that was to outlast discussion of mass street demonstrations.

Figure 10



The Muslim Brotherhood

The *Muslim Brotherhood* topic characterizes how coverage of political opposition was restricted by social taboo and political pressure. The Brotherhood represented a thorn in the government’s side since its founding in 1928, as it was endowed with tremendous mobilizing abilities that authorities considered threatening. Despite boasting membership well in the millions, the Islamic

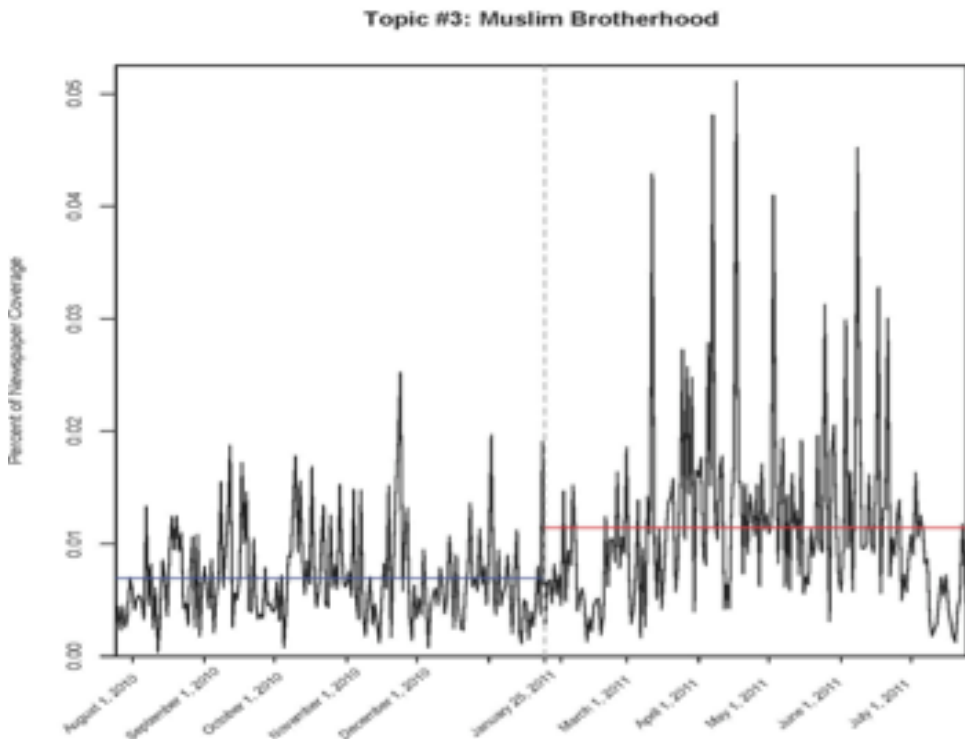
movement was continuously banned between 1954 and the fall of the Mubarak regime. Members could run for elected office only as independents, and several waves of arrests exposed the government's intensive efforts to suppress the movement. Because the Brotherhood had no official political arm, and facing pressure from the government, the media often only covered the Brotherhood in terms of arrests and extremist activity. Key words in the topic demonstrate this narrow type of coverage: "security," "arrest," and "Qaeda," in reference to the international terrorist organization "Al-Qaeda." But the topic also includes terms that suggest political participation: "elections" and "political party," for example. These key terms were likely drawn from post-Revolution coverage of the Brotherhood, though not exclusively.

In a random sampling of five articles that cover the Muslim Brotherhood topic published in the six months leading up to the Revolution, the angles of coverage demonstrated some variability, though none of the articles report on the Brotherhood as a legitimate political actor. One article, for example, discussed possible perpetrators of the January 2011 bombing of a Christian Church in Alexandria, focusing on Islamist groups but making no explicit mention of the Muslim Brotherhood (Nour Al-Din 2011). A historical piece—a 2,600 word essay—recounted the political relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and former president Gamal Adel Nasser, though it notably made no mention of current events or of Mubarak ("Abdel Nasser and the Group" 2010). Another piece—an opinion article—more pointedly analyzed the relationship between the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the governing National Democratic Party. In the article, "The State ... And Legitimizing the 'Prohibited,'" the author, head of *Al-Masry Al-Youm's* political Islam desk, envisioned a path of legalization for the Muslim Brotherhood (though he made no direct criticism of the existing relationship) (El-Khatib 2010).

In the six months after the Revolution, the percent of *Al-Masry Al-Youm* coverage devoted to the Muslim Brotherhood nearly doubled, demonstrating a highly tangible expansion of the newspaper's political discourse (see Figure 11; this increase was statistically significant with a p-value of $7.842e^{-10}$). Several factors likely contributed to this new coverage. The fall of the Mubarak regime paved the path for the legitimization of the Brotherhood in the public eye, as its widespread support was generally recognized. Though the

movement was declared legal only in June, plans for political participation were immediately set in motion after the Revolution. These plans culminated in the establishment of the movement's political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party. A random sampling of five post-Revolution articles that cover this topic demonstrates how much of the post-Revolution coverage focused on the newfound politicization of the movement.[7] One article, for example, described divisions within the movement about the political future of the party and sourced several high-level members directly rather than depending only on public statements (El-Wazeery 2011).

Figure 11



But the increased coverage also reflects a general trend of reporting on a range of political parties. One article in this sample from after the Revolution reported directly on a public statement from the leader of the extremist Islamic Group *Jamiyyat Islamiyya* (Abeer and Dabashi 2011). Another article quoted

a Muslim Brotherhood leader explaining that contrary to military accusations that he was laundering money to fund the organization, the membership itself financially supported the organization (Qassem and Shamis 2011). Unlike past reports that tended to frame the organization as the antagonist, this article did not include such accusatory quotes but rather offered a positive perspective on an opposition political party.

Hisham Omar, a journalist at *Al-Masry Al-Youm* during this period, described the transformation in coverage of the Muslim Brotherhood in an interview (2011). He explained that in the aftermath of the Revolution, the public expected coverage of all political actors since many in the public were Brotherhood members. “Before the Revolution, the security forces weren’t allowing [newspapers] to have something written about the Muslim Brotherhood, especially if it was good about them,” he recalled. “After the Revolution, public awareness is demanding that you publish something that is correct.” He said that coverage of the Brotherhood was now also not limited to the independent press. He was shocked, for example, when the national news wire service MENA interviewed a Muslim Brotherhood leader for his analysis of disappointing tourist numbers in Egypt. “This was something fascinating,” Omar said.

After the Revolution, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* did not consider legal barriers in reporting on the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that today plays a primary role in Egyptian politics. While the Mubarak regime may have sought to persecute the newspaper for writing positive or legitimizing reports on the Brotherhood, post-Revolution authorities could not challenge the movement’s legitimacy. This growth in coverage also represented a public recognition of the size of the movement in Egyptian society and a significant expansion of the public political discourse. For the first time, the Egyptian press was playing a democratizing role by reporting on all parties, willing to set a new precedent for the sake of objective coverage.

Branches of Government: Presidency, Judiciary, and Parliament

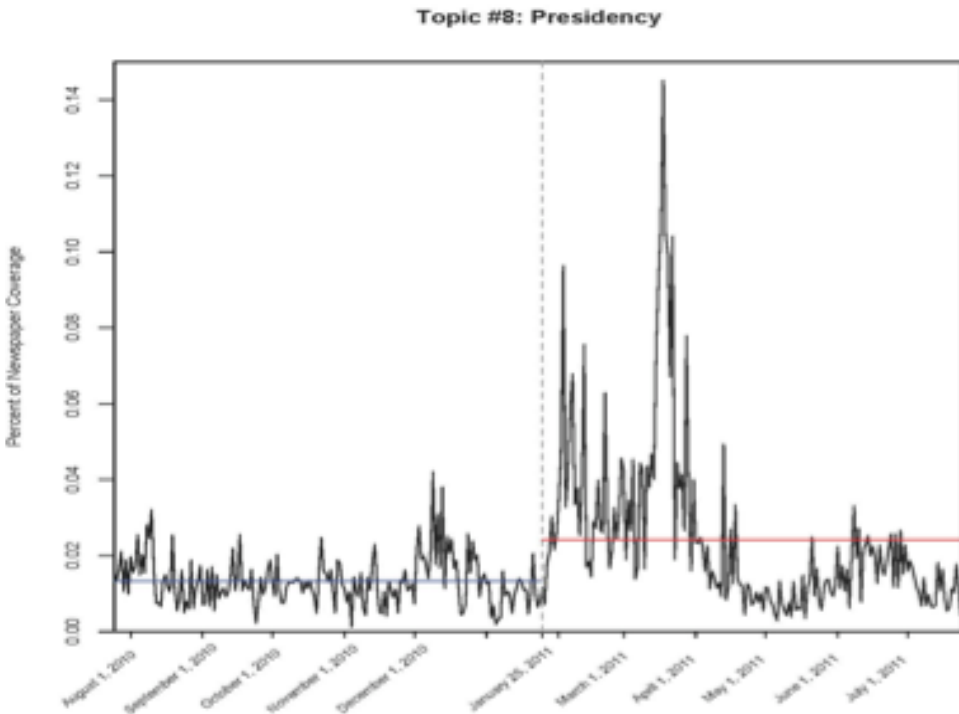
Until the Revolution, the regime prohibited any in-depth reporting on the president. In March 2008, editor Ibrahim Eissa was sentenced to six months

in prison for reporting false information after speculating on the health of the 80-year-old president. Although Mubarak ultimately pardoned the journalist—under popular and international pressure—this incident was a prime example of limitations on covering the presidency. Three years earlier, Mubarak was reelected with an improbable 88.5 percent of the vote in what was supposed to have been the first contested Egyptian presidential election (Whitaker 2005). Media coverage at the time was restricted by policies on reporting on the president as well as by the lack of an independent press (the usual depth of coverage of any single candidate for the American presidency was unimaginable in Egypt). The next elections were scheduled for the end of 2011, and the media indeed vigorously speculated about the future. A general assumption, though left unmentioned in most articles, was that Mubarak was becoming increasingly ill in his old age and might not run for the presidency. The media focused on possible opposition candidates but also knew that the regime would offer its own candidate. Most Egyptians believed President Hosni Mubarak would likely endorse his son Gamal, already a rising politician. In this period prior to the Revolution, coverage of possible succession thus filled the void of presidential coverage enforced by the regime.

The topic I used to analyze coverage of the presidency appeared to draw from terms reflecting basic political reporting on the office (note that in the first six months after the Revolution, the office of the presidency remained vacant while elections were planned). Key words in the topic include “elections,” “political party,” “president,” “Mubarak,” “Gamal,” “presidential,” and “reform.” However, between January and May 2011—when the presidency was vacant—coverage of this topic spiked, as can be seen in Figure 12 (in one issue, 14 percent of the articles focused on this topic). Additionally, the mean amount of coverage over the six months after the Revolution remained substantially higher than the six months prior (statistically significant, $p\text{-value} = 2.325e^{-09}$). Some words in the topic may help elucidate the reasons for this spike in coverage: the words “constitutional” and “amendments” reflected the major debate over drafting a new constitution that was common at this time. On March 19, precisely when the topic coverage spiked, Egypt held a referendum on constitutional reforms that included term limits for the presidency and charged a commission to draft a new constitution following parliamentary elections. The word “elections” appearing in the topic may also have

been in reference to the debate in society regarding the timing of these new parliamentary and presidential elections.

Figure 12



Given the existing public debate on the future of the presidency, the high coverage of this topic during the period after the Revolution does not paint a picture of the press smashing down established political and social barriers. Coverage of the former president, who was ordered to stand trial in May, rose only as his name and his authority fell into history. Also, writing about the past president may not necessarily predict greater coverage of politicians in the future. Furthermore, political conversation was already flooding the streets—18 million people participated in the referendum, and this was after one of the largest popular political movements in Egypt's history.

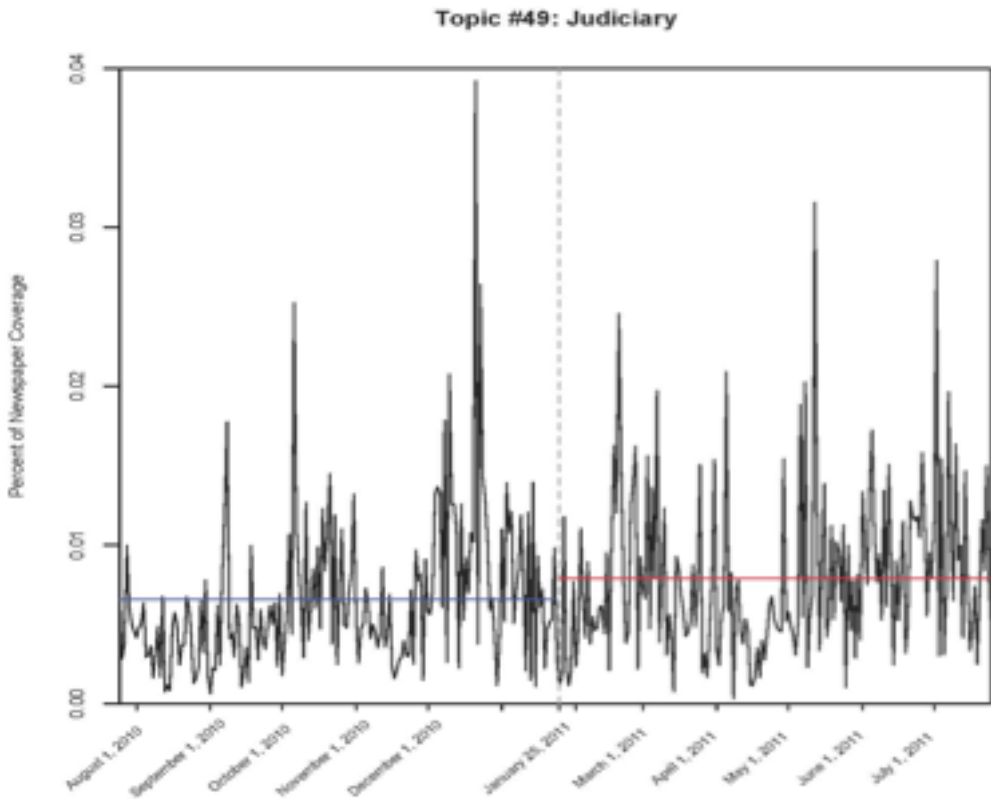
However, this paper argues that the press serves as an important mechanism to record and systematize public political discourse. The press is a tangible

component of the public sphere that connects the reader to the political state. Unlike ethereal street conversations, news coverage is a systematic process that cannot be easily dismantled. The precedent set by coverage of the office of the presidency established a common practice, regardless of whether or not the press was the first actor to breach the topic. This practice may even outlast the current political environment and will be more difficult for future regimes to suppress. Overall, the rise in coverage of the presidency and the political process in general represents a strengthening of the public sphere unseen in Egypt in decades, setting the stage for democratization.

In order to further support these findings, I examined topics related to other branches of government for which an increase in coverage could also signify a greater level of political engagement. For this analysis, I looked at coverage topics that I labeled *judiciary* and *parliament*. Coverage of the *judiciary* topic rose in the period after the Revolution as demonstrated in Figure 13 (statistically significant, $p\text{-value} = 0.01403$). Though *judiciary* remained a minor topic in coverage (less than 1 percent), this increase is particularly interesting because of the traditional distance between the judiciary and the public in Egypt. Despite their fraudulent history, elections for the president and the parliament established the appearance of a direct connection between the people and the state. Members of the judiciary, on the other hand, receive lifetime appointments from the Egyptian president, requiring approval only from the Supreme Judicial Council. Thus, the press is the sole mechanism for popular oversight of the judiciary. Notably, words within the topic suggested coverage of political trials. While top words like “justice,” “judiciary,” “law,” and “court” indicate that the topic referred to the system as a whole, other topic keywords pointed more specifically to coverage of political trials, including the prosecution of journalists. These words include “syndicate,” [8] “journalists,” “justice,” “press,” “liberty,” and “newspapers.” While a rise in prosecution of the press does not augur well for democratization, coverage of such trials exposes them to the public eye and suggests that the press continues to fulfill its democratic responsibilities in the face of persecution.

The *parliament* topic clearly focuses on parliamentary elections: top words include “elections,” “political party,” “parliament,” “Wafd,” [9] “candidate,” and “voters.” But the list also includes words that suggest a depth in coverage

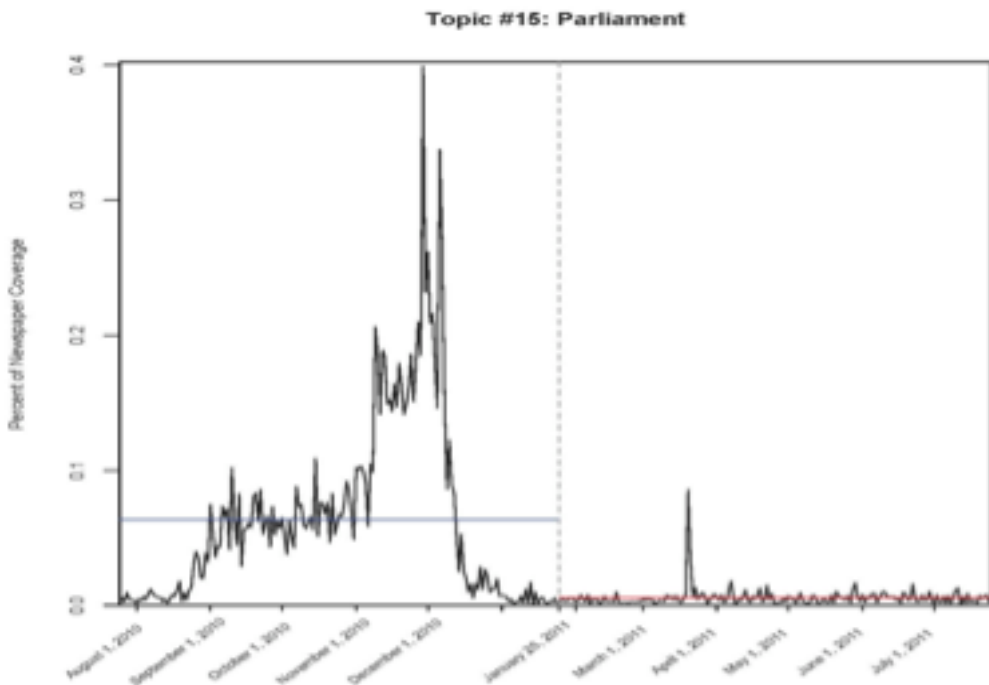
Figure 13



concentrating on marginalized and opposition voices. These words include “Brotherhood,” “workers,” “voices,” and “independent.” They generally reflected the relative freedom afforded parliamentary politics and coverage of parliamentary politics under the regime. Prior to the Revolution, the regime had firmly secured its position in parliament (the regime’s National Democratic Party won 420 of 454 seats in parliament in the 2010 elections) and the Muslim Brotherhood was officially banned from politics. The 2010 parliamentary elections, for example, were widely considered fraudulent yet were covered superficially nonetheless by the press with some degree of freedom in reporting on candidates.

Thus, it is not entirely surprising that coverage of this topic in fact fell in the period after the Revolution (statistically significant, $p\text{-value} < 2.2e^{-16}$ as seen in Figure 13). After the Revolution, the Egyptian military dissolved the standing parliament without setting a permanent date for future elections. As a result, political reporters were unlikely to reference a nonexistent parliament and had no impending elections to write about.

Figure 14



One sector of government was notably absent from the entire topic model: the military appeared rarely even as a keyword in any of the topics. The keyword “army” appeared in only three topics, and two of those appearances were in reference to the American army in Iraq and Afghanistan. The third instance occurred in the *political protest* topic that focused on the protests in Tahrir Square since the upheaval began on January 25, 2011. It should be noted again that this topic label is my own conjecture based on keywords such as “demonstrations,” “revolution,” “security,” and “Tahrir Square.” But these findings suggest that the military was covered only in reference to its roles in

the protests (in some cases siding with the protesters and in others clearing them out). The word did not appear at all in reference to topics of general politics or governance. The keyword “military” and its adjectival form—as in “military authority”—followed a similar pattern. One instance referred to foreign affairs, and two other instances appeared within topics clearly related to the post-Revolution period (*political change* and *revolution*). This lack of coverage of the military in pre-Revolution Egypt is even more remarkable when one considers the institution’s prevalence in society. Not only do nearly all Egyptian men serve in the military, but it also plays an enormous role in Egyptian society beyond national defense. As a result of military and non-military commercial holdings, the Egyptian army reportedly controls as much as 40 percent of the economy (Hammer 2011; precise figures are not made available). However, my analysis did not identify a significant shift in coverage of the institution immediately after the Revolution. In fact, according to interviews and recorded multiple instances of arrests of journalists, in-depth reporting on the military remained a “red line” or taboo topic. This lack of coverage demonstrates the extent to which coverage of a primary segment of state authority was absent in the Egyptian press both before and after the Revolution.

Conclusion

The Egyptian parliamentary elections last year represented only one step toward democratization in the wake of the Revolution. If Egyptian society does not follow suit, adapting to its new role in a democratic state, the political transition risks evaporating under renewed authoritarianism. The military must, for example, fully detach itself from politics, civil society must find its voice, and the media must embrace its responsibility as the Fourth Estate.

In interviews conducted over the summer of 2011, I found that the post-Revolution Egyptian press continued to fall short of playing this necessary role in a democracy. In such a role, the Egyptian press must act as a political watchdog, serve as a check on government authority, and enable voters to make informed judgments (Scammell and Semetko 2000, xiii). Prior to the Revolution, the Egyptian press was restrained by both internal and external factors. Journalistic standards and goals did not line up with a democratic role for the Egyptian press. Also, government-run newspapers, some of the largest

institutions of the Egyptian press, maintained institutional ties to the ruling regime. However, following the fall of Mubarak subsequent regimes have meddled in press coverage and continue to do so, as the still-active Ministry of Information indicates. Thus a qualitative analysis of the media environment in Egypt suggests a laborious progression towards a more democratic role for the Egyptian press.

A quantitative analysis, however, demonstrates that the press in fact substantially covered the political sphere in the months after the Revolution, crossing boundaries that had formed under the previous authoritarian regime. Newspapers like *Al-Masry Al-Youm* readily responded to the dissolution of “red lines” with a sharp rise in coverage of topics that were formerly off limits. Opposition protests that reflected this growing public sphere were recorded and disseminated in the press. Reporting and writing about the Muslim Brotherhood further demonstrated a new awareness of the breadth of the political spectrum. Coverage of the branches of government has set a precedent for public engagement with politics that extends beyond taking to the street.

Future democratization in Egyptian society will depend on a public sphere maintained and expanded by a robust press. The extent to which politics has entered dinner-table conversation would shock a visitor from Egypt’s pre-Revolutionary era. This textual analysis of newspaper content demonstrates that such popular engagement with politics—the public sphere—has begun to institutionalize itself in the form of the press. A similar analysis of recent newspaper coverage would reveal to what extent the press has preserved this newfound role. But the sophisticated political coverage evident in the pages of *Al-Masry Al-Youm* in the months after the Revolution is one strong indicator that Egyptian society, now with a democratically-elected government, will continue down the path of democratization.

Appendix A

1. *Al-Masry Al-Yaum*, Jan. 26, 2011.



Source: American University in Cairo University Archives, photocopy.

Appendix B

The process of scraping text from the website produced a corpus of 234,315 articles spanning 2,161 newspaper editions. The first issue scraped from the website dates to November 24, 2005 and represented the newspaper's 529th issue. The last issue dates to October 25, 2011, reflecting the date on which the scraping was conducted and representing the newspaper's 2,690th issue, though my analysis primarily focuses on the period ending July 25. In preparation for the LDA code, I transliterated the Arabic text and applied a stemming code that removes superfluous characters and words, such as punctuation, prepositions, conjunctions, the definite article, and other prefixes and suffixes attached to Arabic nouns and verbs. [10] This process of reducing the text to its most basic form, following established pre-processing steps for natural language analysis with some additional coding to account for the Arabic script (Manning et al. 2009), produced a collection of 583,215 total term observations, still a massive quantity of data.

In order to reduce the size down to the most relevant information, I applied code to remove terms that occur in less than one percent of the articles and were therefore irrelevant to common topics. I did the same for terms that appear too frequently (more than 99 percent of the time), including remaining superfluous terms and words on the webpage that are not related to the article. By eliminating the highest and lowest frequency terms, I created a more manageable collection of 5,246 unique terms.

Appendix C

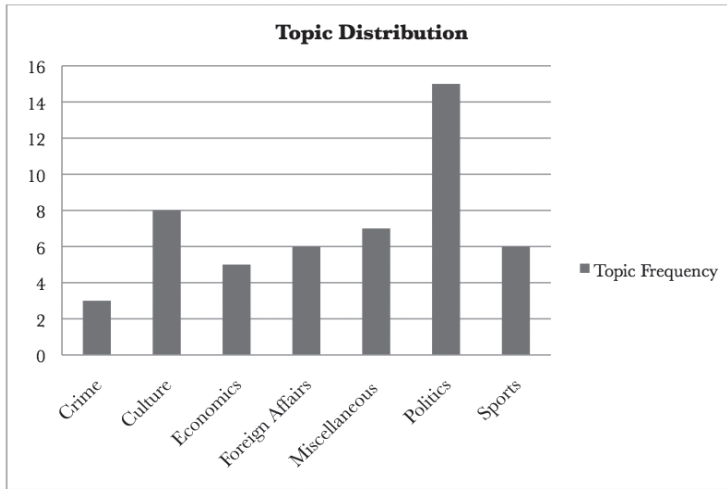
Topics with Top 10 Terms (translated)

TOPICS:	Worker Protest	National Protest	Revolution	Muslim Brotherhood
1	Workers	Security	Revolution	Brotherhood
2	Workers	Demonstrators	Military	Group
3	Sit-in	Demonstrations	Brotherhood	Muslims
4	Company	Power	Parliament	Islamic
5	Strike	Midan	Election	Organization
6	Syndicate	Tahrir	Party	Party
7	Work	Internal	Israel	Politics
8	Financial	Revolution	Power	Guide
9	Exchange	Demonstration	Honor	Leaders
10	Guinea	Security	Mubarak	Security

TOPICS:	Presidency	Judiciary	Parliament
1	Party	Judges	Elections
2	Elections	Syndicate	National
3	Parties	Council	Party
4	Constitution	Judiciary	Candidate
5	Politics	Journalists	Candidates
6	President	Law	Brotherhood
7	Democrat	Judicial	Electoral
8	Amendments	Lawyers	Department
9	Constitutional	Council	Seat
10	Mubarak	Government	Parliament

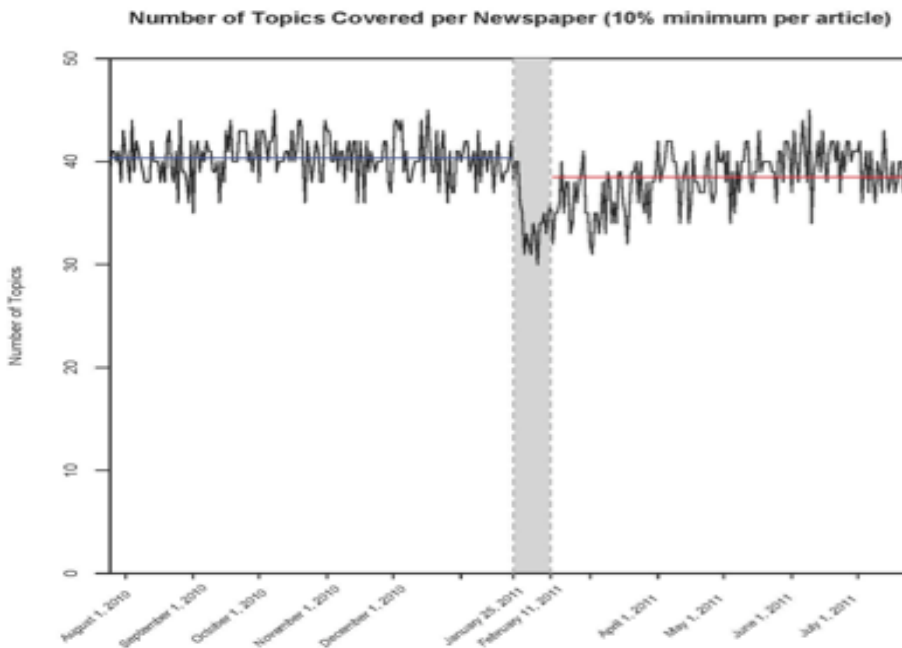
Appendix D

Topic Distribution in LDA Topic Model with 50 Topics



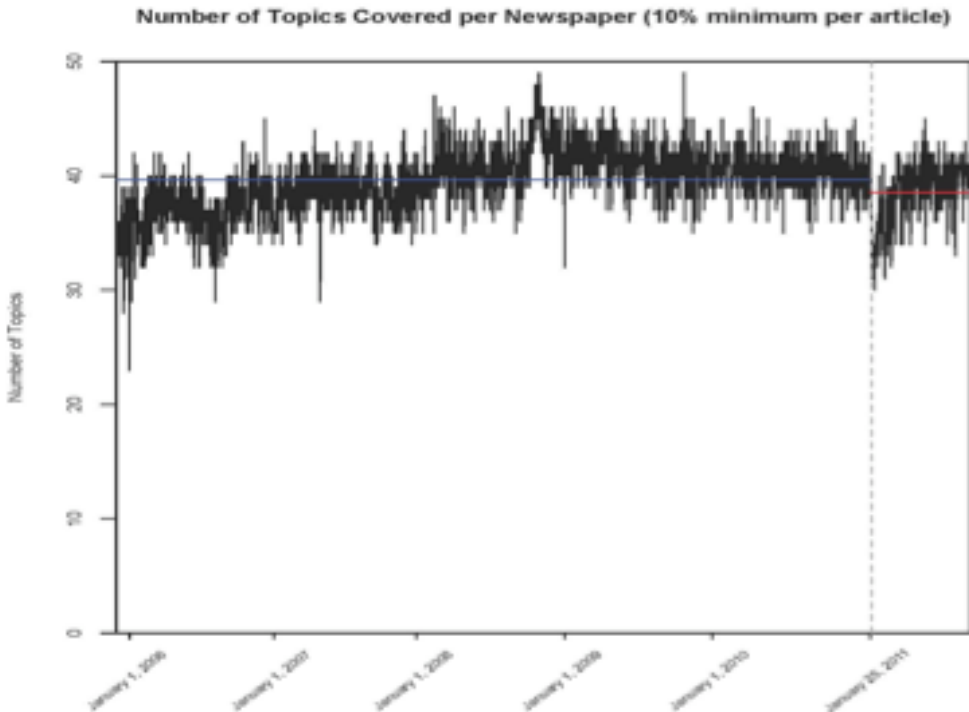
Appendix E

Robustness Check: Number of Topics Covered per Newspaper, 1 year excluding period of Revolution (10% minimum per article)



Appendix F

Robustness Check: Number of Topics Covered per Newspaper, entire corpus (10% minimum per article)



Notes

[1] This article was adapted from a Harvard College 2012 thesis submission titled “The Press in Egypt: Evaluating the Role of the Press as an Indicator of Democratization.” I would also like to express my deep appreciation for my thesis adviser Evann Smith, a Ph.D Candidate in the Harvard Department of Government, who provided invaluable suggestions, guidance, and technical support throughout the process of preparing this thesis.

[2] A note on the Arabic: all translations are my own except if otherwise noted. I transliterate names of people and institutions without self-established transliterations according to common practice.

[3] In this study, I refer to the ouster of former President Mubarak as the “Revolution” because that is how it is referenced in Egyptian popular discourse and in many of my interviews. But I use the term only as a proper noun because a full revolution, involving a transformation of the political system, occurs over a protracted period of time.

[4] Archive available at: <http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/backissues.aspx?l=ar>

PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE REVOLUTION

A PHOTO ESSAY OF THE WORK OF GHAZALA IRSHAD

MASTER OF ARTS 2013, THE ADHAM CENTER FOR
TELEVISION AND DIGITAL JOURNALISM



February 3, 2011

Ten days from the January 25th start of the Revolution, protesters stand in Tahrir Square, upholding the Egyptian flag as it blows in the wind



February 3, 2011

Men sit reading the news near the protest
encampment, on the concrete below them:
“Down with Mubarak the tyrant”



February 3, 2011

A protester holds a sign that reads:

“Thank you...youth of Egypt on Facebook”



February 5, 2011 (*Opposite*)

During prayer, an injured protester displays broken bones, but not a broken spirit

February 8, 2011

A sign credits Facebook with the initial organization of protests, and references the Egyptian Social Network - or “Nas-Book”





EMPORIO
ARMANI
AG
DEBB



February 3, 2011 (*Opposite*)

A protester covered in dried blood makes a somber and silent request for peace

February 8, 2011

A woman leads a chant while holding up a photocopy of a newspaper announcing the deaths of protestors



August 20, 2011

Protesters capture events outside the Israeli embassy in Cairo following the border killing of Egyptian police officers



August 20, 2011

Egyptian security forces monitor protests outside
the Israeli embassy in Cairo



November 21, 2011

Two men stand above a crowd as several others capture events on cell phones and cameras. In Cairo renewed protests grew violent as civilians called for the military to step down



November 21, 2011

Members of the Armed Forces look on as a protester strolls away from their road block



November 21, 2011
Protesters disperse to escape tear gas



November 21, 2011

A protester protects herself from tear gas
with the help of an Egyptian flag



July 5, 2013

After Cairo clashes between pro and anti-government protesters, a man displays a handful of bullet casings

[5] For this study, the missing year dating back to the newspaper's founding was not deemed crucial: the newspaper was not yet a mainstream source of information in Egypt at that time, and the available data from before the revolution, spanning five years, is more than sufficient for the purposes of identifying trends in the paper's coverage.

[6] The latter figure was driven up substantially by nationwide demonstrations in support of the Egyptian Christian community in the wake of the January 1, 2011 bombing of a church in Alexandria.

[7] As noted, the movement had previously participated in politics only through "independent" candidates.

[8] Presumably, though not exclusively, in reference to the journalists and lawyers syndicates, both of which are vocal and powerful advocates for their members.

[9] The main legal opposition party in Egypt, which won 6 out of 454 seats in the People's Assembly of parliament in the 2010 elections.

[10] The Python stemmer was designed by Rich Nielsen and Iain Osgood, a graduate student in Harvard's Department of Government.

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DASHED HOPES
&
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

From TUNeZINE to Nhar 3la 3mmar: A Reconsideration of the Role of Bloggers in Tunisia's Revolution

Originally Published Winter 2013 (P)

Amy Kallander

Introduction[1]

In mid-November 2010, prominent bloggers Lina ben Mhenni and Arabasta began a campaign to attract new voices to the Tunisian blogosphere under the rubric “7ell blog”[2] or “start blogging” through an eponymous webpage and Facebook group. Posts included instructions for beginners, links to hosting sites, explanations on how to add videos or how to participate in an aggregator, and debates about whether bloggers should write anonymously. By early January 2011 they tallied over 3,000 friends, and had posted links to 100 newly created or recently revived blogs. The site was then hacked by government censors (7ellblog 2011). While the initiative did not espouse an overt activist agenda, was not affiliated with any political party or civil society organization, by connecting blogs to increasingly popular forms of social networking it highlighted the importance of new media as a format for encouraging freedom of expression. Their efforts were comparable to previous online efforts to defy censorship in that a few motivated individuals were able to generate digital momentum for a cause just as their experience with censorship was typical of the prevalent Internet surveillance that characterized Tunisia under Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). Across the Middle East, as young, well-educated, upper-class critics turned to the Internet to voice their opinions, they faced a range of serious consequences from harassment to arrest and torture (Lynch 2007). This article will examine Tunisia's particular case, showing that the international focus on social media's impact stemmed partially from the paradoxical ability of Ben Ali to control the Internet while maintaining a reputation as a modern, democratic statesman.

Despite state supervision of the Internet, in the final weeks of 2010 bloggers helped publicize the wave of protests that began in the small southern town of Sidi Bouzid, giving international exposure to the inhabitants of Tunisia's dispossessed, and often ignored interior. Whether focused on the demands of local communities for respect and economic opportunities, covering the wave of desperate suicides triggered by Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation, the lawyers' solidarity strike, or the closure of universities and high schools in early January, Tunisian bloggers visited sites of protest, gathered information from text messages, phone calls, and Facebook networks and posted them online. Their pages in turn served as databanks for foreign journalists with minimal experience in Tunisia. Blogs, Twitter feeds, and video sharing thus increased the international visibility of demonstrations, revealing the brutality of the police force and the vacuity of the regime, to people who knew little about Tunisia. As a result, Ben Ali's resignation on 14 January revived debates about the democratic potential of the Internet, a debate that had been largely dormant since the failed "Twitter Revolutions" in Moldova and Iran in 2009. While a few journalists offered more nuance (McManus 2011; Gilson 2011), flashy headlines zeroed in on how cyber subversives "helped topple a dictator" (Giglio 2011), and how activists "used Twitter to organize their protests and inform the outside world of their activities" (Tapscott 2011). The Egyptian uprising and downfall of Hosni Mubarak in the following month led to a celebration of the contribution made by Western technology (Kang and Shapira 2011) and proclamations that "The Revolutions will be hashtagged" (Radsch 2011).

That the protests in Tunisia caught many by surprise can be attributed to the country's international reputation as an exception to Middle East stereotypes of despotic regimes, an angry Arab street, and Muslim extremists. Instead, its presidents had built a successful tourist industry and lured foreign investors around an image of inviting beaches, women in mini-skirts, and an expanding middle class that was secular, educated, and European in outlook. If the socio-economic grievances and regional inequalities that fueled the revolution should have dispelled this myth, it was nevertheless perpetuated by the technocentric focus of news coverage.

By opening this article with the ephemeral popularity of the 7ell blog movement, driven by a group of tech-savvy, middle- and upper-class, bilingual

professionals, directly prior to Ben Ali's departure, this study reconsiders the ostensible success of social media in the Tunisian revolution. First, I locate the experiences of netizens within Ben Ali's Tunisia in a longer trajectory of regime critique. This entails an overview of Tunisia's media landscape and the institutional limitations on freedom of expression in order to suggest the continuities between the authoritarian policies of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987), towards the press and broadcast media, and the policies of Ben Ali toward the Internet. Rather than a novel phase in modern authoritarianism, the surveillance, harassment, and intimidation that plagued the Internet under Ben Ali were representative of the repression meted out against generations of journalists, human rights militants, union leaders, Islamic political groups, communists, and other dissenting voices.

I then place the revolutionary protests in the context of the preceding decade of online activism in order to demonstrate that while creative and innovative, ruses to circumvent state efforts to control the Internet produced few concrete results. In addition to adding much-needed historical context to theoretical debates over the impact of new media, this article incorporates the experiences of a prominent component of Tunisian bloggers. While on the surface the engagement of bloggers and the prevalence of social media in international coverage gave the revolution the appearance of being driven by technology, an in-depth examination of the Tunisian case supports the skeptical position of the limitations of online activism, and the power of authoritarian regimes to restrict Internet expression. It further indicates that the fame of netizens resulted more from tenacious stereotypes about Tunisia as a liberal success story than it demonstrated a causal relationship with political change.

The Tunisian Bloggers

Many of the political bloggers cited in the media and receiving recognition for their online activities in late December 2010 and January 2011 were bilingual, leftist, and often secular professionals, in part a reflection of the costs of Internet access and the linguistic parameters of blogging prior to 2005. Many had traveled regionally and internationally or lived abroad and were well positioned to serve as vectors between Tunisia and foreign audiences. For instance, Riadh Guerfali (Astrubal), a prolific blogger online since the early

1990s, is a professor of law and human rights activist who was based in France. By the time he co-founded the online discussion forum Nawaat with Sami ben Gharbia in 2004, the latter had become one of the most outspoken representatives of the Tunisian diaspora, an activist and journalist at Global Voices, whose online projects included a blog, a digital book, and an interactive map of Tunisian prisons. Ben Mhenni, whose leftist father was a political prisoner, is a journalist who teaches at the University of Manouba and a former Fulbright scholar in the United States. The blogosphere contains a disproportionate number of liberal professionals such as Slim Amamou and Mehdi Lamoulou, both in the IT sector, the engineer Yassine Ayari, and Zied Mherisi who works in medicine, academics Tarek Kahlaoui and Tarek Chentiti, the consultant Houssein ben Ameer, and Fatma Riahi (FatmaArabicca), a high school drama teacher. Along with anonymous bloggers such as Arabasta, Boukornine, Massir, and Z (an architect), they formed a network by posting links to and comments on each other's pages, collaborating both online and off.

The prevalence of intelligent, middle- and upper-class Tunisians who might use the Internet to foster political change coincides with soft-power policies and idealistic theories about the Internet as a source of democratization represented by figures such as Clay Shirky. It follows that social media and online activism have been credited with providing a crucial and material cause for the revolution (Tufekci 2011). Yet as skeptics caution, not only can the Internet be monitored and filtered, and social media deployed towards racist, extremist, or authoritarian goals, but online organizing also does not automatically translate into cohesive and committed social movements (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011).

Why Blog? One-Party Rule and Control of the Media

Structural and legal limitations on freedom of expression can be traced to the process of state-building that began shortly after Tunisian independence from France in 1956. As Bourguiba sought to create national unity and cultivate personal loyalty he installed a single-party monopoly on politics, civil society, and associational life that extended to the circulation of information and the organization of the press. The government monitored newspapers, and

pushed independent publications to close, for instance outlawing the Tunisian Communist Party paper by forcibly dissolving the party in 1963. By the mid-1960s even “the nonparty papers learned to echo the political line of the government’s Information Department” (Moore 1969, 78). If a few weekly and monthly reviews appeared towards the end of the 1970s, their content was limited by the 1975 press code, especially articles 68 through 80 which prohibited subversion and defamation, established fines and prison terms, and allowed the government to confiscate the publication in question. Extralegal silencing was accomplished through the aid of printers and distributors who refused to publish or distribute publications by the opposition (Chouikha 2004). In spite of his modern veneer, Bourguiba’s demand for allegiance from the press corps matched the repressive realities of his desire to control labor, the women’s movement, and the political process more broadly (Belhassen 2004; Bessis 2004; Marzouki 1993).

Ben Ali’s approach to print, broadcast, and digital media demonstrates continuity with Bourguiba’s practices. In spite of the accelerated program of economic liberalization, the promise of “change” following Ben Ali’s 7 November 1987 medico-legal coup proved superficial on multiple levels as he perpetuated party and state control over government and civil society and expanded state surveillance by tripling the police force (HRW 2010). Independent journals, allocated only minimal state subsidies and advertising revenues, were denied permission to publish, and the threat of sanction or unemployment led many journalists to practice degrees of self-censorship (LTDH 2004). Those who spoke out were followed by the police, harassed, and frequently arrested. When foreign dailies such as *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, *Courrier Internationale*, *Le Monde* or *Le Monde Diplomatique* included content critical of the regime, they were delayed or did not arrive at kiosks. In 2005, there were only three opposition papers, and in 2009 the president’s son-in-law Sakher al-Materi bought 70 percent of the al-Sbah group which edited two of the major dailies, *Al-Sbah* (Arabic) and *Le Temps* (French) (Beau and Graciet 2009). Thus even as the media became increasingly privatized the range of opinion remained narrow. By 2010, the blogger Arabasta offered a cynical synopsis of the situation:

- Official newspapers (*Renouveau* & *Al-Hureya*): newspapers sold for a fee, distributed free of charge in order to clean the windows of administrative offices and eventually those of private homes
- Newspapers of the “moderate” opposition: nonexistent, read *Renouveau*, it is less exhausting for everyone. (Arabasta 2010)

The repetitious nature of print media contributed to low distribution figures and popular disengagement, with an estimated 45,000 for *Al-Shurug* and 30,000 for *La Presse*. According to a 2004 report, there were only 19 daily newspapers per 1,000 inhabitants, one of the lowest rates in the region, higher only than Libya and Yemen (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2004). By the end of Ben Ali’s tenure the newspapers with the largest circulation were either owned by the state directly (*Al-Sahafa* and *La Presse*) or indirectly through the ruling party (*Renouveau* and *Al-Hureya*) and friends and family of the president (*Al-Shurug*, *Al-Sbah*, *Le Temps*) (El-Issawi 2012).

Radio and television were similarly monotonous and state controlled even after privatization (Chouikha 2005-2006). Frequencies were assigned by a national agency within the Ministry of Communications as a way to prevent independent broadcasting. The first private radio station, Mosaïque, was given to a zealous supporter of the regime and then to presidential brother-in-law Belhassen Trabelsi. Other private stations were owned by al-Materi (Zaytuna FM), Ben Ali’s daughter Cyrine Mabrouk (Radio Shams FM), and the son of his private doctor. The state monopoly on television ended with the arrival of Italy’s Rai Uno, and the broadcasting of France 2 in 1989, although the first private station Hannibal (2005) was backed by Trabelsi. After initial efforts to regulate and limit access to satellite receivers, the regime realized their diversionary potential and made them available on credit (Chouikha 2002). A range of measures was employed to limit regime criticism, from harassing foreign correspondents to pulling the plug. On one occasion in the summer of 2002, while the exiled opposition figure Rashid Ghannushi was speaking on al-Mustaquilla, an Arabic-language station based in England, power was cut throughout the capital, although most Tunisians had been watching the final matches of the World Cup. Given the omnipresence of the state in print and broadcast journalism, by the late 1990s there was hope among the Tunisian opposition that digital media held fewer obstacles. At least this hope moti-

vated the news site Kalima to go online in 2000 after they were denied permission to print a journal (Pintak 2007). However, similar repressive practices were soon extended to the Internet.

The Expansion of the Internet and Internet Control

In 1991, Tunisia was the first Arab country with Internet access, and the state later supported increased connectivity and technology, such as broadband, to encourage foreign investment and maintain its image as an open society. It simultaneously enacted measures to control access and content such as the Telecommunications and Internet Decrees of March 1997 which extended the restrictive provisions of the 1975 press code to the Internet. In particular, articles 49 and 50, which prohibited the dissemination of false news and penalized defamation (broadly defined), were routinely deployed against Internet users (HRW 2005). In addition, a 1998 postal regulation was extended to email to permit the interception and confiscation of messages deemed a threat to public interest and national security (RSF 2002, 110). As early as 1999, authorities were monitoring activities in Internet cafes and online discussion forums (Ben Brik 2000, 244-246). Internet service providers (ISP) and the owners of Internet cafes were liable for content accessed through legal provisions that implicitly encouraged them to monitor individual users.[3] These measures established a legal apparatus with which to monitor the Internet and prosecute digital dissent.

Internet usage remained quite limited for the first decade, with many of the initial connections serving administrative purposes as the costs of services and owning a personal computer were prohibitive for the average Tunisian. According to data provided by the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) which operated the country's only server, in 2000 there were about 100,000 Internet users or roughly 1 percent of the population (compared to almost 6 percent in Lebanon and Kuwait). In a 2004 report, the Tunisian Human Rights League underlined the low rate of Internet users compared to Latin America and Asia; even in Algeria, there were four times as many Internet cafes per capita (LTDH 2004). Government subsidies for Internet cafes, connections at universities and secondary schools, and efforts to facilitate the purchase of computers contributed to a significant increase in users after 2007. By 2010

around 34 percent of the Tunisian population was online, slightly above the average for Arab countries in the Middle East (29 percent), although considerably below Oman and the UAE (Internet World Stats).

Regardless of the slow growth rate of the Internet, the regime began demonstrating its commitment to monitoring online content and utilizing punitive legislation with the incarceration of Zouhair Yahyaoui in 2002. A highly educated man unable to find employment to match his qualifications, he opened an Internet café where he created one of the first online discussion forums in 2001 under the pseudonym “al-Tunsi” (the Tunisian). The site, TUNeZINE, featured political cartoons that parodied the president (referred to by his initials, ZABA), mocked the vacuity of official rhetoric, and involved Tunisians from across the political spectrum. Notably, he posted an open letter to the president from his uncle, the outspoken judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, criticizing the subordination of the judicial system. Visitors to the site were polled as to whether they considered Tunisia a democracy, a kingdom, a prison or a zoo. The majority voted for prison. As the site gained more readers, it also earned the ire of authorities; Yahyaoui, Tunisia’s first cyber-dissident, was apprehended at work in 2002 and sentenced to 28 months for disseminating false information. The number of Internet cafes subsequently dropped from approximately 300 to 260. Subjected to ill treatment and torture, Yahyaoui undertook hunger strikes while in prison, as his family, friends, and French fiancée mounted an international awareness campaign on his behalf. When he was conditionally released late in 2003, his health had already declined due to prison conditions. This episode of protest reached a sad end when Yahyaoui died of a heart attack in March 2005 at the age of 37.

Government recourse to stereotypes of Islamic terrorism offered a consistent premise for the silencing of dissent. Ben Ali first used a potential Islamist menace as a justification to suppress opponents in the 1990s, taking advantage of the dirty wars in neighboring Algeria (Amnesty International 2003). While relative political stability by the end of the decade might have inaugurated a more lenient approach, the 2001 attacks in the United States ushered in a new phase of Internet repression under the umbrella of anti-terrorism and led to a series of statutes enacted in 2003. These statutes were retroactively applied to the February 2003 arrest of eight young men in Zarzis and twelve

high school students in Ariana, all of whom were charged with acts of terrorism based on files they had supposedly downloaded from the Internet. The cases were marked by procedural failures including falsified arrest records and constraints upon the defense lawyers, while the young men were subjected to ill treatment and torture, and some of their family members were harassed. Although independent observers found the charges entirely groundless, four youths from Zarzis were sentenced to thirteen years, and the Ariana youths received sentences varying from four to sixteen years (IFEX 2005; Ben Amor 2004).^[4] By cracking down on students surfing the web, these heavy sentences indicated a concentrated attempt to dissuade people from online browsing or frequenting Internet cafes.

Policing the Internet took on myriad forms both online and offline. US-manufactured commercial software called SmartFilter was programmed to censor foreign reporting on Tunisia, the pages of human rights organizations, a range of blogs, opposition groups, as well as video sharing venues such as YouTube and DailyMotion often by inserting a standard “404: not found” message indicating that the server was unable to connect with the page (Ville-neuve 2006). Bloggers were the targets of routine harassment; between 2001 and 2008, at least twelve bloggers were arrested, and “almost every single Tunisian opposition website and self-hosted blog has been the victim of one or more hacking incidents” (Ben Gharbia 2008). Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders all documented the relationship between strict censorship and physical violence including torture of and legal sanctions against cyber-dissidents, labeling the country an “Internet Enemy” and earning it third place in a 2007 list of “The World’s Most Net-Repressive Regimes” (Eid 2004; Greenberg 2007; HRW 2005). By 2010, government censors practiced extensive phishing, sending fake email messages to steal passwords for Facebook pages and blogs of activists; once secured they deleted the content (Amamou 2010a).

While the Tunisian government combined widespread surveillance with punitive measures against dissidents, this did not significantly mar its international credibility (Wood 2002); it was designated to host the 2005 UN World Summit on Information Society and Habib Ammar, widely known among human rights advocates for orchestrating a campaign of torture against political

prisoners during his term as Minister of the Interior (OMCT 2003; Whitaker 2001) was appointed head of the preparatory committee.

The Beginnings of Cyber-Dissent: Blogging with 3mmar

As Internet access expanded in the 2000s, so too did the use of blogs covering subjects as diverse as politics, poetry, personal narratives, technology, or international affairs, and producing a similar panoply as seen across much of the Middle East (Bunt 2009). Ben Ameer, the administrator of the aggregator “Tunisie blogs,” estimated that in early 2006 there were possibly 300 to 400 blogs, only a handful of which were overtly engaged with Tunisian politics. Compared to the more active blogging opposition in Egypt or Iran, he attributed this to the smaller population of Tunisia despite its relatively higher proliferation of Internet access (Ben Gharbia 2006). A similar conclusion was reached in a 2009 analysis of Arabic blogs stating that Tunisians (and Algerians and Moroccans) were more attentive to human rights than other bloggers, but that Tunisian bloggers “rarely discuss political issues” (Edling et al. 2009, 23).

At least for some Tunisians, blogging fostered pan-Arab connections and awareness, but remained restricted to the blogosphere and did not translate into greater activism or national organizing around Tunisian issues. For instance in May 2010—a time when some bloggers were trying to organize a protest on the ground—the cartoonist-blogger Seif Eddine Nechi focused on headlines about the Israeli attack on the humanitarian flotilla to Gaza, but did not discuss the protests in Tunis. Similarly, the blogger Massir, who reviewed books by prominent liberal Arab feminists such as Fatma Mernissi and Nawal al-Sadawi, was discussing Anouar Benmalek’s novel *Oh Maria* and baking, rather than the online efforts to organize protests. Those who were more active included Nadia from Tunis, a “proud member” of the MidEast Youth, an online activist network and news page bringing together youth from across the region. Others rallied to the Free Kareem campaign in solidarity with the Egyptian blogger arrested for his writing in 2006 (Radsch 2010) just as ben Mhenni encouraged the release of Bahraini blogger Ali Abdullemam by posting a banner on her page.

Avoiding sensitive topics such as human rights or politics did not protect bloggers from sanction as demonstrated by the November 2009 arrest of Fatma Riahi. Although she blogged and wrote poetry under the name FatmaArabicca, her interrogators claimed that she was the anonymous blogger Z whose cartoons and satires poked fun at Tunisian politics. As other bloggers organized for her release and started a Facebook page to the same effect, Z posted a solidarity cartoon that juxtaposed the message “I am not Fatma,” to substantiate her innocence, with the clichéd statement of support “We are all Fatma” (Al Jazeera English 2009; Z 2009). Massir also saw the censoring of her blog in May 2010 as unwarranted, as she wrote about recipes, humor, books, careers, spirituality, and travel.

Within Tunisia a small cohort of politically engaged bloggers ensured that on-line dissent kept pace with the restrictions of the censor. Online actions supporting freedom of expression included protests against censorship in 2005 and 2008, demanding the unblocking of DailyMotion in 2007, and Blank Post days in 2006 and 2007 (Ben Gharbia 2008). In December 2008, about a dozen bloggers, including Kahlaoui, Mheri, ben Mhenni, Stupeur (Amine Kochlef), Arabasta, and Sofiane Chourabi, created a group page in favor of free speech, the “Network of Tunisian Bloggers for Free Blogging.” This site was increasingly active throughout 2009 and the number of contributors doubled, although the project fizzled early in 2010. False “404” messages became the subject of satires targeting an invisible censor who came to be called by the common male name “Ammar” or “Uncle Ammar” (see Figure 1). While advocates of free speech were isolated from mainstream bloggers, all these activities fostered a climate of mutual support among the activist community.

The first major effort to take blogging networks to the streets was an anti-censorship demonstration called “Nhar 3la 3mmar” (the day against Ammar), planned to take place in Tunis on 22 May 2010. It was a response to a wave of heavy censorship that blocked approximately 200 websites and blogs in April (Khadhraoui 2010a). Simultaneous protests at Tunisian embassies in Paris, Montreal, Bonn, and at the Mission to the UN in New York were planned by Tunisians living abroad with participants wearing blank white t-shirts or adding slogans related to censorship. The action was organized under an apolitical façade, coordinated through online discussions and face-to-face meetings,

and not affiliated with any of the officially recognized political parties (generally the only groups authorized to hold demonstrations). When Z proposed to make a poster depicting President Ben Ali sitting in front of his computer, defensively gripping a pair of scissors, as protestors walked out of the screen into his room, it was rejected as too political. The intent of the organizers was to gain visibility around the human rights issue of freedom of expression, and not to directly criticize the regime.

Prior to the event, bloggers Amamou and Ayari went to file the constitutionally mandated paperwork, yet the official refused to accept their declaration in person or by mail, thus rendering the demonstration illegal (Malek404 2010). On 21 May, Amamou and Ayari were arrested and only released that evening when they made a video telling people not to attend the protest. As a result the march did not materialize in Tunis, although small groups in white t-shirts sat at cafes on Bourguiba Avenue, the capital's main boulevard (Amamou 2010b; Dryef 2011). Three months later bloggers again attempted to organize offline with a flash mob planned for the touristic coastal suburb of Sidi Bou Said. The event was to be a nonviolent action during which participants would dress in white and gather for a minute of silence against censorship. About fifteen participants convened but were faced with twice as many police officers waiting to escort them back to their homes (Ben Mhenni 2010; Khadhraoui 2010b). On both occasions the non-political message of a relatively small cohort of activists was blocked by police interventions that limited their ability to generate further public engagement.

The arbitrary and unaccountable nature of censorship created a climate of intimidation that succeeded in dividing the blogosphere, and uniting activists. Leilouta, a Tunisian blogging from the US, was cut off from other bloggers after posting an adulterated photo of Ben Ali (Ben Gharbia 2006). In organizing a Tunisian Blog Awards competition in 2008, "nationalist bloggers" deployed anodyne eligibility requirements in order to disqualify their outspoken counterparts such as Stupeur and Boukornine who were unable to register (Brea 2008; Stupeur 2008). Frustration with the regime's punitive measures led Boukornine to observe in June 2010 that most of the pages that were censored became inactive, leading him to conclude "Ammar is efficient." Massir added "I look at my stats and the number of pages read per day was divided by six. When you know that you are writing essentially for Tunisians and that

the majority of them will not be able to read you... discouragement begins to set in and you ask, what for?" (Boukornine 2010a). By the time the 7ell blog campaign opened in November 2010, Mehdi Lamoulou saw the Tunisian blogosphere as past its prime, having slowly dwindled in numbers since 2007 (Lamoulou 2010). Z was cautiously optimistic and wondered if the movement might "resuscitate the corpse of the Tunisian blogosphere mutilated by regime censorship" (Z 2010a). Emna ben Jemaa was similarly hopeful that the 7ell blog campaign would generate renewed interest in creating and reading blogs since people were turning instead to social media forums (Ben Jemaa 2010). If the 7ell blog experience confirmed the greater popularity of social media than blogging, a cohort of bloggers remained committed to online activism, regardless of a sense of pessimism about the effect of censorship and their small audience.

The events of May 2010 illustrated the difficulties of taking digital protests into the public space in Ben Ali's Tunisia. If a minority of bloggers was willing to take risks and then openly commiserate online about the ensuing difficulties with the political police, they were subjected to travel bans, and risked arrest. These common perils coupled with similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds fostered solidarity among these bloggers in the early years of Internet growth. As the online community diversified from 2005 onwards, some activists saw it as less cohesive and for Stupeur the network remained "A world that I love, that I worry about, and that I support. Throughout my experience in the world of blogging I have made friends, enemies, virtual relationships that have transformed into real relationships" (Stupeur 2008a). Censorship did not stem the flow of information within Tunisia or protect Ben Ali's manicured image (Beau and Graciet 2009; Beau and Tuquoi 1999), but surveillance and policing mitigated against the possibilities of collective action in favor of political change such that bloggers did not see themselves as reaching a significant audience within Tunisia, nor as capable of mobilizing the masses.

>> Figure 1 *With the caption "the blogosphere responds to Ammar," Ammar, the invisible censor, is questioned by a police officer who sees the online protests and asks "Ammar, what is this all about?" The overworked Ammar is depicted in a violet-colored suit representative of Ben Ali's party, with his scissors on the desk, an incomplete "404 to-do list" on one wall, and the obligatory photo of Ben Ali on the other. Blog by Z.*



The Questionable Impact of Bridge-blogging during the Tunisian Revolution

In December 2010, several factors combined to make the Internet an ideal space for the dissemination of information both within Tunisia and abroad, among them the convergence between digital and broadcast media and the many multilingual Tunisian bloggers living in the diaspora. The Ben Ali government's response of first ignoring, and then dismissing, protests in Tunisia's central region further widened the communicative potential of the Internet. The national station TV7 waited days before referring to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi claiming that it was an isolated incident. Police en-

circled Sidi Bouzid attempting to block communication with the rest of the country. What information did leak out via cell phone cameras and videos, text messages, and word of mouth was posted online by attentive bloggers. For instance, Chourabi combined reports with an audio broadcast in standard (as opposed to Tunisian) Arabic on the recent events in Sidi Bouzid, and later posted videos from Facebook of the demonstrations taking place in the town (2010a; 2010b). Ayari (then in Belgium) included a Twitter feed on #Sidi-Bouzid on his blog (2010), whereas Boukornine expressed his thoughts in prose and poetry juxtaposing them with the official version of events (2010b). With typical sarcasm and wit, Z mocked the brief TV7 coverage with a series of cartoons including one of Ben Ali yelling into the phone “nothing is happening in Sidi Bouzid!! Just an idiot playing with his lighter!” (2010b). Massir encouraged all her readers to turn to Facebook and Twitter where they could watch live footage and stay up to date if blogs were blocked (2010). The use of Arabic and the direct challenging of false claims made by national television show the bloggers’ concern with misinformation, and an effort to increase national awareness, but not necessarily the goal of mobilization.

Other bloggers combined standard Arabic, English, and French to provide a broader context to the events, one that would serve as a bridge to international spectators (known as “bridge-blogging”) (Zuckerman 2008). Ben Mhenni, an experienced journalist, was one of the first bloggers to report about protests in Sidi Bouzid in mid-December 2010, and consciously wrote in a manner accessible to Tunisia neophytes, posting similar articles in French, English, Arabic and German that were supplemented by high-resolution photographs (2010b; 2010c; 2010d). She soon became a contact for various Canadian and French newspapers, as well as for Al Jazeera (Lynch 2011). New blogs posting information and photographs appeared in English such as that of Youssef Gaigi (who was in touch with Al Jazeera English) and a satirical parody of the president’s wife, under the heading “Leila Trabelsi ben Ali” (Gaigi 2011). As an increasing number of Tunisian bloggers directly spoke out against the regime in late December and early January, Tunisian authorities responded by attempting to restrict access to Facebook, removing unwanted content, and limiting video sharing by stealing passwords and hacking into accounts (Madrigal 2011). The first indication of international awareness and support arrived via the hackers’ collective Anonymous, whose Operation Tunisia, inau-

gured on 2 January 2011, led to the hacking of government sites. Although this was initiated by Anonymous, they collaborated with Tunisian bloggers such as Amamou (Norton 2012), who was arrested on 6 January along with Sofiane Belhaj (who blogged as Hamadi Kaloutcha), and Azyz Amamy, under suspicion that they had instigated the attacks.

Despite the escalating cyber-battle waged by Tunisia's bloggers critical of the government and national media, its precise impact remains questionable. Contrary to the situation in Egypt, the protests in Tunisia were not initiated by any online contingent nor were they affiliated with any sector of civil society. The protests' rural origins indicated that bloggers did not contribute to mobilization, a fact which is confirmed by the posts that focused on disseminating information about the events rather than organizing them. Although Facebook pages constituted a popular discussion platform, as of late 2010 it remained confined to a narrow demographic, with 78 percent of Facebook users in Tunisia between the ages of 15 and 29 (yet representing only 37.5 percent of the total population) (Mourtada and Salem 2011). The government did not feel threatened enough to shut down the national server, as was the case in Egypt.

In terms of international observers, as late as 12 January, media scholar and Internet activist Ethan Zuckerman wondered if anyone outside of Tunisia not already interested in the country was actually paying attention to the protests and the nationwide massacres. Examining data collected on Google Trends, he pointed out that the moderate spike of interest on 12 January was lower than the amount of Tunisia-related Google traffic that followed the country's loss to Ukraine in the 2006 World Cup (Zuckerman 2011a). As Table 1 similarly indicates, Ben Ali's departure on 14 January grabbed headlines and brought Tunisia into the spotlight for the following weeks, the major peak in blogging about Tunisia occurred between 14 and 15 January 2011, and dissipated soon thereafter. One blogger writing on the discussion forum Nawaat charted very little Tunisia-related Twitter activity between 17 December and 3 January. While there was an increase over the next ten days it resulted from discussions about solidarity protests in France, and the huge peak occurred only after 14 January (Eli'copter 2011). Despite what appeared to be a sensational surge, Tunisia, Sidi Bouzid, and Ben Ali did not rank high enough for

Twitter's 2011 Hot Topics list of cities, countries, top hashtags, or world news (Twitter 2011).^[5]

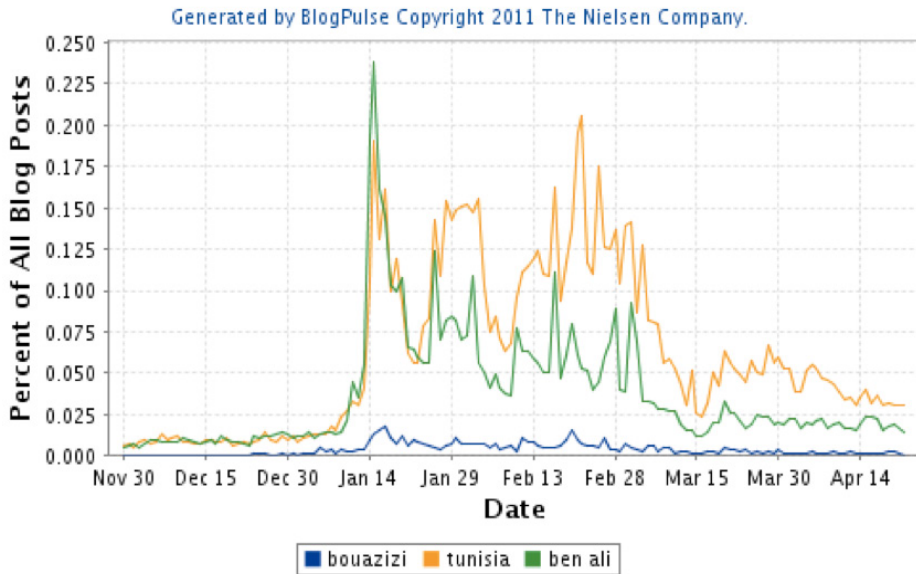


Table 1 *Tunisia-related blog posts December 2010 to April 2011*

This raw data from Google Trends and Twitter is only partial as it does not indicate the geographic origins of bloggers or Twitter users, nor the locations or responses of readers. One selective sample of Tunisia-related Twitter feeds between 12 and 19 January indicated that the most popular Tweets were those circulating among activists, journalists, and the numerous bloggers who maintained an active profile on the micro-blogging platform. In other words, they remained largely confined to a circle of previously attentive Internet users (Lotan et al. 2011). Another study attempting to broach the question of how online information was consumed concluded that linked articles circulating on Twitter were mainly followed by an international audience, and not domestically, with minimal long-term impact (Aday et al. 2012). Finally, media attention cannot be linked to any diplomatic pressure on the regime, as its major ally, France, and its Minister of Foreign Affairs in particular, remained staunchly in support of Ben Ali until his departure (Beau and Muller 2011).

As skeptics have argued in relation to micro-blogging, an increasing number of hashtags and protest-related trends does not prove greater understanding of an issue or action since Twitter-based news is “repetitive and uninformative,” and difficult to verify (Forte 2009; Pintak 2011). In the US, Tunisia rarely made the headlines of international newspapers before 14 January as CNN’s web reports were based on wire services up until 10 January. On that day the first New York Times online article on the protests appeared. Anecdotal evidence suggests that headlines had a minimal impact on American perceptions of Tunisia. One of the first post-revolution pieces, published on the popular online magazine Salon.com, “President flees amid riots, possibly ending 50 years of oppressive rule. What’s it mean -- and where’s Tunisia?” offered a short (and inaccurate) background to its readers (Estes 2011). As news anchors turned their attention to Egypt and the wave of protests spreading across the Middle East, Steve Colbert of Comedy Central’s Colbert Report summarized the loss of interest in Tunisian affairs by joking “The country that started this freedom-nami is Egypt, because I don’t know where Tunisia is.” The tenacity of clichés about Tunisia and its “Jasmine Revolution” led the blogger Nadia to acerbically retort “Tunisians were not prancing around with flowers to protest against the regime.” Insisting that “the Tunisian revolution is not a postcard,” she considered such picturesque and folkloric images representative of the entrenched vision of Tunisia as a seaside tourist destination, and not its revolution (Nadia 2011; see also Hazbun 2008). Although Tunisian bloggers were able to circulate information about the growing protest movement through a combination of old and new media, the increasing vociferousness of the online conversation about Tunisia does not appear to have definitively impacted the course of events given that most viewers tuned in following the departure of Ben Ali, and international media attention was fleeting.

Concluding remarks

Although the months following the revolution witnessed an unprecedented media opening and surge in independent news publications with promising ramifications for freedom of expression and online communication, these appear to have benefited television more than the Internet.[6] The revolutionary flourishing of citizen reporting and the visibility of online social media did not correlate with a substantial increase in Internet accessibility or forge

a popular consensus of the Internet as a source of information. As of January 2012, 64 percent of Tunisians said they were most likely to get their local news from Tunisian television, with only 14 percent citing the Internet. When asked about the most effective campaign strategies in the 2011 elections, 62 percent cited the appearance of candidates on television. Door-to-door campaigning (38 percent), the organization of public events (34 percent), radio appearances (31 percent), and the distribution of written material (25 percent), were all mentioned before online media with 15 percent (International Republican Institute 2012). Another 2011 poll asking Tunisians which media sources they use most similarly placed television at the top of the list with Tunisian stations at 74 percent, followed by foreign channels (67 percent), radio (45 percent), and then the Internet. At almost 37 percent, this figure reflects the portion of the population that has routine Internet access (El Ouid 2011). The arrest and detention of television producer Sami Fehri, owner of the Al-Tunisiya channel, and the ensuing campaign for his release generated sustained media attention, and a level of visibility unmatched by even the most prominent bloggers.

Throughout the protests Tunisian blogs and social media had consciously operated in tandem with older media platforms in order to reach a larger audience, making this convergence, or hypermedia interaction more significant than the Internet alone (Jenkins 2006; Kraidy and Mourad 2010). As the enthusiasm of new bloggers linked to the 7ell blog project had dwindled by April 2011, with only about 25 percent still actively posting after the revolution, the site moderators encouraged them to participate in print and broadcast media. [7] A final message on the 7ell blog page, dated 14 January 2011, addressed the “blogging community,” insisting that “our martyrs did not die only to end censorship on the Internet.” It urged everyone to start publishing newspapers and magazines, to become involved with radio and television, and to engage with all forms of media to demand their rights. With its call to take activism offline, the post was cognizant of the limits of blogging as a means of digital protest. “Are you Tunisian?” the post concluded, “then speak up.”

Tunisian bloggers have also debated amongst themselves the extent of their role in the national protests. Akram ben Yedder asked the question “Who consults the blogs of Influential Bloggers?” to answer it tongue-in-cheek, only

“other Influential Bloggers,” revealing his opinion that the blogosphere was mainly a self-contained community. While Lamloum jokingly commented “You think there really are influential bloggers in Tunisia?” Ben Yedder went on to lament the sad reality “that blogs have not been able to touch the masses” since only those already connected “know the universe of the Tunisian blogosphere” (Ben Yedder 2011; see also Ferhatovic 2011). Cheniti characterized the particularities of the blogosphere’s activist core as representative of a “post-Bourguibist generation.” Mainly in their thirties, raised in a milieu that prioritized education, they placed economic success before ideologies or idealism (2010). For Mhersi, their financial comfort allowed them to shop at high-end commercial centers, to buy cars and to lead an urban, consumerist lifestyle accessible only to a minority of Tunisians (2010). Post-revolution book contracts (Ben Mhenni 2011; Z 2011) and free speech awards (received by ben Mhenni, and Guerfali) suggest the notoriety of a few individuals. Fame may have fostered professional opportunities for ben Mhenni, ben Jemaa, Chourabi, Gaigi, and Haythem el-Mekki who continue to build on their work as journalists in Tunisia and abroad.[8] Yet if their privileges allowed politically minded bloggers to publicize the protests, they were never representative of its masses; none of the bloggers who ran for seats in the 2011 Constituent Assembly were elected.[9]

The international focus on social media as an explanation for the success of popular protests in Tunisia resonates more with cyber utopianism than with any direct correlations between blogging, domestic mobilization, international pressure, and regime change. If the American fascination with the tech-savvy, upper-middle class, educated youth who led the online protests brings to mind Orientalism (El-Mahdi 2011), it also perpetuates the conventional wisdom defining Tunisia as an exception to the Middle Eastern stereotype. According to official depictions accepted by international lenders and diplomatic allies, Tunisians under Bourguiba and Ben Ali benefited from an economic miracle and liberal family laws that elevated their standard of living, encouraged secular norms and a Westernized outlook (Beau and Tuquoui 1999; Hibou 2006; Lamloum and Ravenel 2002). It was not the connection between bloggers and popular protests that created headlines about a “Twitter Revolution,” but the facile connection made between such entrenched myths and a preconceived belief in the democratizing power of the Internet.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Niki Akhavan for preliminary suggestions and Will Youmans for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] Following SMS transliteration system, Arabic numbers are used to represent distinctive letters such as 3 for ayn or 9 for the letter qaf particularly when writing in a combination of Arabic and French, or in Arabic with the French alphabet. In this case the 7 indicates the heavier “h.”

[3] One of the first private ISPs, PlaNetTunisie, was owned by Ben Ali’s daughter Cyrine Mabrouk.

[4] Those still detained in February 2006 benefited from a massive presidential pardon that year.

[5] Yet Cairo topped the list of cities and countries, #egypt and #25Jan were in the top ten hashtags, and both Mubarak’s resignation and Qadhafi’s death were among the leading news stories.

[6] Significant changes since January 2011 include the replacement of top media personnel including the director of the Tunisian Internet Agency, and the restructuring of the Ministry of Information. At the same time there have been repeated incidents of censorship, and journalists remained concerned about government attempts to limit their freedom of expression seen recently in the July 2012 resignation of Kamel Labidi from the National Authority to Reform Information and Communication, and the August 2012 appointment of government crony Lotfi Touati as head of the Dar al-Sbah media group (El Zein 2012; Guellali 2012).

[7] Of the rest, 10 percent had been removed, 35 percent had posted three times or less during the campaign and not at all in 2011 and many others had not posted in the previous forty-five days.

[8] In January 2011 ben Jemaa and Mhersî began to produce a weekly radio program called Net Show on Express FM. Their first broadcast included discussions with ben Ameur, Cheniti, and Kahlaoui, with Amamou, ben Gharbia, and Ayari appearing on subsequent shows.

[9] This included Ayari, Guerfali, Kahlaoui, Lamloum, and Amira Yahyaoui (Mokhtar’s daughter) most of whom ran as independents in the overseas electoral districts; Yahyaoui ran with the Sawt Mostakel list which earned only 0.34 percent of votes in northern France.

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‘Not Ready for Democracy:’ Social Networking and the Power of the People--The Revolts of 2011 in a Temporalized Context

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Abstract

This essay argues that the rise of social networking is to the detriment of the democratic processes that come to us from at least the time of the Enlightenment. Analysed from the perspective of temporality, the essay argues that liberal democracy has its own indelible rhythms and temporal processes, based fundamentally upon the technologies of writing and on the print culture they created. Postmodern neoliberalism and the revolution in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has created a ‘destabilization of the word’ that traditionally gave rhythm to democracy—and to society more broadly. The digitalized word has accelerated economy and society to the extent that it has left the slower rhythms of democracy in their wake. Social networking, as an outgrowth of the neoliberal information society, has propelled political action into this accelerated digital domain. From this perspective, it is argued that the revolts sparked in North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011 were a dramatic example of a postmodern political process that has no roots, no ‘strong tie’ links, and leaves no time for the development of a programmatic politics of the traditional kind. Social networking, in short, creates a political vacuum into which forms of power, potentially less democratic than ‘people power’, will invariably flow.

Breaking the chains of servitude?

More than a few observers have argued that early 2011 may go down in history as the Middle Eastern equivalent of late 1989 in Central Europe. Politi-

cal scientist Mary Kaldor, for example, sees 2011 as the culmination of that East European democratic impulse (Kaldor, 2011). In 1989, millions of ordinary people in cities from Prague to Bucharest via East Berlin toppled their indigenous Communist Parties in a vast wave of change that still reverberates powerfully today—in many largely unexpected ways. In 2011, from Morocco in the Maghreb, due east to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and further still into the Syrian Levant, millions of people suddenly engaged themselves in another spontaneous ‘great refusal’, or an unspecific unwillingness to continue their lives as usual. An apparently cross-class agglomeration from these predominantly Arab societies decided that they had had their fill of the old regimes. A line from the opening passages of John Buchan’s 1916 *Greenmantle* became a much-quoted epigram to illustrate the Arab upsurge. It reads: ‘There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark’ (Hitchens, 2011: 290). And so it seemed. From the liberal democratic perspective, especially, the sudden conflagration was seen as a good thing. The BBC World Service radio and BBC World television, for example, endlessly played footage from correspondents in Tahrir Square in Cairo, or on a hotel balcony in Benghazi, where their private views on what they were witnessing seemed to be obvious; the uprisings were viewed in similarly positive terms further to the political Left, as exemplified by Kaldor, and from the more radical Left by intellectuals such as Slavoj Žižek, who thought the events in Egypt in particular to be both a ‘miracle’ and ‘sublime’ (Žižek, 2010).

For all the media excitement about Arabs finding their feet at last, and the praising of their undoubted bravery in inaugurating, possibly, a wider democratic phase across the world, where authoritarianism and the archetypal strongman was at last on its way to history’s dustbin, it is evident that these portents actually say something else; something different from Kaldor’s identification of the new-found ‘power of civil society’ or what Žižek sees as the ‘breaking [of] the chains of servitude’ (2011). Yes, the events of 2011 do say something positive and important about a universal thirst for fundamental democratic principles. And yes, these principles of justice and freedom and dignity have at least been seen to be more than the preserve of Euro-America—and more properly the entitlement of every human being. However, the comparisons with 1989 are flawed and misleading. Much of the talk in print, television and the blogs of ‘revolution’ and ‘people power’ is reflective, funda-

mentally, of the comfort-zone thinking that most of the Left remain unwilling to abandon. As I will show, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumult that preceded and followed it was the acting out of the final historical scenes of a system of politics shaped by its classical Enlightenment-inspired mode. This was a politics of a form and quality that reached back to at least 1789. It was a politics of ideas that had their own history and their own traditions; a politics of ideas that had institutions and organizations that promoted political programmes that (at least in theory) represented the way forward for a particular interest group or class.

We live in a very different time, politically, in our post-Cold War age. The British intellectual Perry Anderson put it bluntly:

Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view. It can be put like this. For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant oppositions—that is, systematic rival outlooks—within the thought-world of the West (2000: 17).

We live in a neoliberal-dominated world, where the market (and the market mechanism of competition) is seen as the only workable way to organize and develop the economy—and society too. In a sense, then, Francis Fukuyama was onto something when he argued in that fateful year of 1989 that liberal democracy (a neoliberal democracy) has triumphed and that the ‘end’ of a particular stream of ‘history’ had come to pass (Fukuyama, 1989). Politics, and political conflict and tumult of the kind witnessed in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, thus represents a post-Enlightenment turn, the contours of which are at present difficult to make out clearly. But these do not augur well for the promotion of the normative forms of democracy that have come down to us from Enlightenment-age Europe and North America. To get some insight into the nature of this negative development, we need to appreciate the role and function of temporality in our modernity, together with the effects that networked information technologies are having on our relationship with time.

The rhythms of democracy in a networked society

In 1989, as the storm of revolt was breaking over the heads of apprehensive communist elites struggling to figure out what it all meant, the West was undergoing its own upheavals—and had been for over a decade by that time. These were economic as well as political. Economic globalization (of which the revolts in Europe were undoubtedly a part (Harman, 1990: 3-94)) was forming a worldwide grid of capital flows that was intended to free business from the alleged constraints of the nation state and its stultifying bureaucracies. Neoliberalism led the charge. Globalizing capitalism was also becoming a networked capitalism, forming an increasingly close interlinking of markets and the societies that sustain them to create a ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey, 1989). An important ideological element that took hold at this time was that the neoliberalized political institutions—parties and government bureaucracies—began to abrogate their historic role as the ‘leading actor’ in society—ceding it to the abstract dynamics of market-centred competition (Sassen, 1998).

Vitaly, this process was also technological. Globalization could not have evolved in the way that it did had Harvey’s ‘time-space compression’ not been made real by information technologies. And information technologies, in their turn, could not have had the developmental trajectory that they have enjoyed since the early 1980s without an unrestricted free-market competitive impetus which made them more powerful, more comprehensive in their range of application, and much, much faster. The intended effect was to make markets and production more efficient (and hence cheaper). But an unintended (and still largely ignored) effect was to make society and social relations accelerate temporally. Life became faster, in other words, as economic relations sped up exponentially (Castells, 1996; Rifkin, 2000; Gleick, 2001; Hassan, 2003).

This speeding up of many elements of human social relations has a fundamental political problem associated with it. Politics, as sociologist Hartmut Rosa reminds us, is a social “‘institution”, a term whose Latin root indicates its static, durable character’ (2003: 44). It is a temporal point illustrated by French philosopher Jean Chesneaux who wrote that ‘Speed has become one of the paramount values and requirements in our modern societies. Yet democracy

needs time, as a major pre-condition for political debate and decision-making; it cannot surrender blindly to speed' (2000: 407). Building on these temporalized perspectives, William Scheuerman in his *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time* argues that liberal democracy has become de-coupled from economic and social life, and in effect has become too slow to function (democratically) in a 'high-speed society' (2004: 26-71)

The arguments of Rosa, Chesneaux and Scheuerman may be dismissed as describing simple common sense. It could be stated, moreover, that of course we know that political decisions should not be taken in haste, and that the political process itself should be as reflective and slow as is necessary to each particular case. But this knowledge does not get us very far; it does not get us to the root of the problem, the cause of our desynchronization from democracy, which is—perhaps counter-intuitively—the displacement of writing and reading in our networked society.

The temporality of the word and of politics

When we think of the communicative sources for our ideas of democracy and for the conduct of political institutions more broadly, we see that they lie in the writing and reading of the printed word, in books, pamphlets, newspapers and so forth. In the modern era, these political institutions were formed and their ideas disseminated to produce the 18th century Enlightenment. The French philosopher and political thinker Régis Debray termed this formative phase in our democratic development the 'graphosphere' (the realm of writing) wherein communication networks based upon print constructed a great periodization, an 'arc of time' that was only superseded with the coming of the digital age (2007: 7). This might be read as somewhat prosaic, but in the context of democracy in our high-speed networked society, the effects of the digitalization of the word have been profound—and in ways that we have barely begun to consider.

So deeply has writing entered the consciousness of almost all human cultures, that we forget, or fail to recognize, that it is a technology, an invention like the flint knife or the wagon or the laptop. Walter Ong realized this and in his essay 'Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought,' he reminded

us that writing ‘tends to arrogate to itself supreme power by taking itself as normative for human expression and thought’ (1992: 30). What we are and what we think, therefore, is closely bound up with the technologies that we use. In terms of writing and communication, this insight suggests some rather interesting consequences.

Debray takes up this line of reasoning in his concept of the ‘graphosphere’. He argues that it is ‘Impossible to grasp the nature of conscious collective life in any epoch without an understanding of the material forms and processes through which its ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have social existence’ (2007: 5). The 18th century ‘graphosphere’, where print culture was dominant, is the context that shaped modern politics. It produced the political theories of the Enlightenment—the ideas of Hume and Locke and Paine and other contemporaneous philosophes—that constituted the so-called ‘republic of letters’. A historian of this period, Robert Darnton, saw it as a ‘great era of epistolary exchange’ where ‘writers formulated ideas, and readers judged them [and] thanks to the power of the printed word, the judgments spread in widening circles’ (2009: 11). This exchanging of letters, books, pamphlets, etc., was the first global (or at least inter-continental) communication network of the modern period. Its rhythms were based upon the information and transportation technologies of the period, and, in interaction with the human capacities (and physical limitations) of reading, writing and debating, they made up the ‘time’ of modern politics (Hassan, 2012). Let us look at this idea in more detail.

Recent work in the social theory of time argues that space and time are indivisible concepts and inseparable social practices (May and Thrift, 2001; Adam, 2004; Hassan, 2009). Accordingly, a specific form of temporality also characterizes the ‘sphere’ that Debray discusses. Of key importance here is the idea that humans, individually and collectively, ‘produce’ social time and social space in the creation of their worlds. The temporality or rhythms of time that dominated in the 18th century were themselves increasingly technologically driven. This was the period when the clock and the machine began to give rhythm to the industrializing societies of Europe and North America. The technology of writing, moreover, was implicated within this intersecting ‘timescape’, as Barbara Adam terms it in her book *Time* (2004). These tech-

nologies, i.e., writing, the clock and the machine are human creations and ultimately humans ‘entime’ their creations with the temporalities that dominated at the time of their creation. Writing, indeed, was encoded at its inception in 3500 BCE Mesopotamia with the temporal rhythms of that ancient society (Fara, 2010:11). That is to say, the physical practices of writing (and reading) were infused by innate bodily rhythms—the function of the hand and eye, primarily—that allowed the process to become practical. That the practice of writing and reading as we know it is ‘entimed’ is seen in the fact that we can only write and read so fast, and there is a temporal limit to what can usefully be sustained with these actions. At its core, writing and reading are thus organic processes, and constitute an organically governed technology that corresponds closely to human temporal rhythms and temporal capacities.

Machine technology came much later, of course, but it too was infused with the more rigid and abstract temporalities of mathematics and Newtonian physics, serving to sublimate or displace the immanent, organic temporality that the practice of reading and writing contained (Hassan, 2009). Machines (fundamentally the clock) began to order and regulate industrializing societies in the 18th century, giving motive force to industry, but also to the culture of print, which could now be mass produced and widely disseminated to an increasingly literate society (Whitrow, 1986). Inexorably, society began to accelerate due to the inculcation of a competition-driven and machine-based rhythm that stemmed from the productive forces of capitalism.

Nonetheless, the practice of writing and reading remained more or less the same in terms of its physical routines—there was just far more of it, and far more people doing it, with correspondingly enlarged social, economic and technological consequences. The key point to bear in mind is that it is this temporal world, and its print-based culture, that enabled ‘thought to have social existence’ and gave birth to the ideas and practices of liberal democracy that continue to underpin the ideal type of governance in the 21st century (Scheuerman, 2004: 27-61). With the rise of new computer-based information technologies, we see the beginnings of a schism in terms of temporal theory and the practice of liberal democracy. The main effect of this tech-

nological change has been that the ‘digitalization’ of the word, together with the new ability to ‘process’ it as information, has destabilized words and their meanings and has desynchronized them from the much slower rhythms of print-based democratic politics.

The Tweet and the Tyrant

Fast forward to January 2011 when the ‘Arab street’ began its historic mobilization. Journalists, media producers, theorists and analysts across the world made much of the fluid power of social networks being used by millions of people. For example, at the opening phase of the Libyan revolt, Syrian blogger and journalist Anas Quesh observed in the *Guardian* that ‘old media can still be censored, but...the people are now always a step ahead of the tyrants’ (2011). Are they? If so, in what sense? And what—from the temporalized perspective—does being ‘a step ahead’ actually mean for the process of political power and democratic change?

The self-immolation of a poor and frustrated Tunisian fruit trader in protest against a perceived humiliation at the hands of a government official provided the spark that lit the highly combustible ‘parched grasses’ that were now widespread across the region. The conflagration spread like a bushfire in a hot and dry summer. But it was also able to spread in the cold, late winter of North Africa and the Middle East because the fuel was information. There is no doubt that new media technologies in the hands of millions in the Arab world were the fundamental element that turned a group of rigid and conservative autocracies into fluid spaces of political possibility. The fluidity of the political dynamic is a central component of the process. So rapidly did information technologies allow the uprisings to occur, that virtually no one saw them coming, and fewer knew where they might lead. The media pundits in their London, Washington and Doha studios could only guess at how events might unfold. The demonstrators, too, were doubtlessly surprised to find themselves suddenly on a street or in a square with the unfamiliar scent of power in their nostrils.

This was power, but it was a diffuse and unfocused power. What was clear even to the untrained eye watching the footage from Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi and elsewhere, was that we were witnessing the nascent stirrings of ‘people power’ in that the global media showed the streets and squares being occupied by all kinds of people. These were not demonstrations led by wild-eyed Islamists, or repressed workers’ organizations, or even the local business classes seeking more autonomy. The crowds of 2011 were a mirror image of the entire social composition in each country. Men, women, young children and the elderly were united only in the advocacy of more freedom and more justice. Of the ecumenical nature of this ‘Arab Internet generation’, journalist David Hirst reflected a common observation when he wrote that ‘the virtual absence of factional or ideological slogans has been striking’ (2011: 1). Such slogans that were evident were aimed through the media at the English-speaking world and stated simply and powerfully ‘democracy’ or ‘justice’ or *Liberté*.

Qiesh was correct in his view that this generalized revolt constituted the people taking a ‘step ahead of the tyrants’. The elites of the region, tyrannical or otherwise, didn’t know what hit them. But where did this ‘step ahead’ take them? In terms of the political process, and its communication networks, this was a leap into uncharted cyber-spatial territory. What the world witnessed in early 2011 was not simply the destabilization or fall of dictatorial governments, or the scaring of authoritarian regimes into rapid concession making. In its essence, it was an example of networked-society politics conducted at the speed of the network itself, taking a ‘step ahead’ to create a democratic vacuum.

This was commented on at the time by various journalists and analysts who noted that in these popular movements no one seemed to be in charge. There was no popular and acclaimed figure or group that emerged in any of these countries, someone or something that the majority could rally around. The point is worth restating: No Arab country that had a democratic upsurge in 2011 was able to produce a popular figure, or set of political policies, or political demands, that could galvanize a critical mass toward specific objectives. The people rapidly found their voices, but could not so easily find their feet.

The inevitable consequence was that elements of the old regimes were able to remain in power, as was seen with the army in Egypt, and with much of

the elite in Tunisia. The vacuum into which the Arab masses stepped exposed their immaturity and their relative powerlessness. Immaturity should not be read as an orientalist labeling, but as a temporal description. A society (any society) may be spontaneously ‘democratic’, able to organize itself immediately at the grassroots level to distribute food, arrange security and keep essential services running. And this occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya where power vacuums opened up. All these examples show us that democratic action can erupt spontaneously, and seemingly without the need for the bedrock of tradition. However, as a Leading Article in the London *Independent* noted of the examples of Egypt and Tunisia, “‘people’s committees’ offer elements of a grassroots democracy. But little of this extends beyond the localities’ (2011). Democratic culture takes time to mature, and there can be no radical acceleration of this process in the way that is encouraged by networked communication.

The digital dialectic and the limits of the modern democratic impulse

To fully understand the process of the ‘temporality of democracy’ we need to look at the function of information in the neoliberal, networked society. There we see what Peter Lunenberg (2000) termed the ‘dialectic of information’. The dialectic has two elements of ‘space-time’ that together militate powerfully against the development of democratic forces that would be sustainable in the long term. First, there is what we might term the ‘digital space-time dialectic’. This is the dynamic, propelled by neoliberal communication networks, by which ideas are given social existence (Debray, 2007:5). With the growing dominance of digital networks in the conduct of social and political (not to mention economic) life, the rhythms of democracy, and its foundation on words and texts—as well as images—have been digitalized and therefore destabilized. Ideas are engineered and programmed to flow at hyper speed through the Internet and the myriad applications that connect to it (Schiller, 2007).

The loci of power, likewise, have become based upon the dynamics of computer networks. As Scott Lash has observed in his *Critique of Information* ‘power is swallowed [in an] implosion into a generalized indifference’, a shifting,

contingent and diffusing process that ensures that 'power is elsewhere' (2002: 75). David Harvey observes that information networks that carry the basis of political action and political processes now take place increasingly inside this realm of 'time-space compression', effecting 'a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices' (Harvey, 1989: 285). Harvey goes on to say that the capitalism/network-driven disruption of the space-time of modernity means that we are 'forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves' (1989: 240).

The 'Arab Internet generation' was similarly 'forced' (through means of networkable technologies such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) to represent the world to themselves as a global digital media space that was wholly disconnected (in time and in space) from the physical world that they actually operated in. They had suddenly become disembodied representations of a revolt that was in fact being temporalized through a global media space of 24-hour news cycles, instant analysis, competing media priorities and the inevitable media train crash of event upon event that forms no predictable pattern nor signals any clearly discernible outcome. These actions and effects failed to articulate any political programme that might be sustainable.

The second element in play may be termed the 'physical space-time dialectic'. This is the acknowledgment of the ineradicable fact that notwithstanding the accelerating tempo and flow of digital networks, of ideas and their political power potential, people themselves remain physically on the ground. This is the materially based realm of modernity, of flesh and blood, of ink and paper, of reading and writing and cognition, using ancient technologies with their inherent rhythms, and of machine-age distribution networks that created and sustained the processes of democracy until the advent of the digital age. Nothing can change much here. However, Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the speed of digital age globalization has produced a 'new polarization' (what I would term a 'temporal desynchronization') (2000: 18). Bauman notes that in this process of polarization, the global elite is effectively freed from physical 'territorial constraints'. And so because 'information floats independently from its carriers', those who have access to information have access to what Bauman calls 'deterritorialized power'. Others, such as the vast majority of Arab communities, have 'little chance

of cutting themselves free' from their physical and spatial bonds of poverty and joblessness and the compulsions of day-to-day living. People—classes of people—become the weakest link in the chain of effect from cyberspace to physical space. As Bauman puts it: 'In cyberspace, bodies do not matter—though cyberspace matters, and matters decisively and irrevocably, in the life of bodies' (2000: 18-20).

The fluidity of power and the contingency of power in networks means that the masses are sometimes afforded brief periods of access to this 'deterritorialized power'. However, the speed (and disorientation) of digital networks that makes these glimpses possible, soon takes it away as 'events' become a part of the global media network. What we saw in the Arab world was that the power being held in the Arab streets and squares—a part of the 'digital dialectic' through Facebook, Twitter and so on—soon gave way to an inevitable power vacuum 'on the ground' because 'on the ground' there were no roots. People power flowed back into the swirling digital ether. In North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, unlike Eastern Europe in 1989, networks of political modernity that could hold and coordinate and utilize power hardly existed. There was no rhizome or samizdat, or long-term organization, of sub rosa affiliations with strong and enduring ties. In 2011, the concepts of democracy and justice, though well understood and 'natural' attractors for the Arab masses, lacked the durable analogue and material ties that would hold them together as the modern political project requires.

The 'step ahead' that the people of North Africa and the Middle East took was, more accurately, a rapid leap into the void as far as the attainment of freedom and justice is concerned. These are concepts that have their own Enlightenment-era temporalities in terms of their practice, implementation and institutionalization. As current-day Iraq and Afghanistan make so painfully clear, quick solutions applied by what former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld engineered to be a mobile, light, scaled-down and highly networked military, simply do not work. 2011 was not therefore a 'culmination' (or even an evolution) of 1989. It was an articulation of a wholly new post-modern political process, one whose dynamics are fast moving, whose contours are indistinct, and whose trajectory is uncertain—just like the digital networks that gave life to the impulse.

Can the network society sustain democracy?

In an article titled 'Digital Natives in Revolt', the political theorist John Keane considers the Arab uprising from a critical-political perspective, and makes a few tantalizing observations. One finding mirrors my own argument in that he sees the 'communicative abundance' enabled by Twitter, Facebook and so on, as being as much of a challenge for democracy as it is an opportunity (2011: 11, 12, 22). Even more interestingly, from the perspective argued here, is that he locates the transformations, and thus the possible problems stemming therefrom, in our relationship with words as the contingent bearers of information and meaning. He writes:

Just as in the 16th century, when the production of printed books and the effort to read codex type required a fundamental shift of perspective, so today a new mental effort is required to make sense of how democracies are being shaped by the new tools and rhetoric of communication, and why our very thinking about democracy must also change (2011: 11).

Keane's point is well made, but is not pursued systematically in the context of what is a short piece. Others have tried to figure out what this means in a more sustained context, and consideration should be given to some of the prominent among them. For example, Evgeny Morozov's *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* is a sceptical corrective to much of the hyperbole surrounding the democratic potential of the Internet. His main argument is that repressive governments, or even the liberal democratic governments of the West, are in a better position to organize information networks than are the masses that might spontaneously take to the streets. The Internet can be used by governments to infiltrate democracy networks and feed their own propaganda or misinformation. And in regimes where the government has no credibility with its people, the Internet can serve as an important source of truth—a truth that their governments are easily able to manipulate. This is useful stuff, and his book should be required reading for democracy activists everywhere. Morozov himself is a techno-enthusiast and believes that technology can promote democracy (a difficult proposition to argue against), but cautions that there is no 'silver bullet that could destroy authoritarianism' (2011: 319).

Malcolm Gladwell, writing in the *New Yorker* in late 2010, exhibits a similar cyber-scepticism in his ‘Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweet-ed’. Essentially, Gladwell argues that authentic and effective revolutionary change in politics and in society needs roots; or to temporalize his argument, revolutionary change needs its own pre-history that leads up to the revolutionary moment. He makes the important point that the much-lauded ‘Twitter Revolution’ in Iran in 2009 was in fact no such thing; the tweeting came largely from the West. Gladwell quotes the Iranian correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Golnaz Esfandiari, who wrote that much of the hype at the time was cooked up by western bloggers and journalists ‘who couldn’t reach—or didn’t bother reaching?—people on the ground in Iran [and so] simply scrolled through the English-Language tweets posted with tag #iranelection’. She went on to raise an important question: ‘Through it all, no one seemed to wonder why people trying to coordinate protests in Iran would be writing in any other language other than Farsi’ (cited in Gladwell, 2010).

Gladwell goes on to use the example of the civil rights movement in the United States in the early 1960s as an illustration of his argument that politics needs roots. Drawing upon established sociological theory, Gladwell suggests that this movement was successful, ultimately, because it evolved naturally (or at a pace that was not dictated by communications technologies). For example, the famous sit-in at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960 by four black college students, to protest segregation, had been in discussion for nearly a month. Such ‘high-risk activism’, Gladwell maintains, drawing again on the sociological literature, is a ‘strong-tie phenomenon’, a network of relationships that evolves through time and can only function and be sustainable if it has a pre-history of ideological contextualization and face-to-face interaction. It is, in other words, a mobilization that can only come about (and gain sufficient size) through the striking of organizational roots, and the sacrifices that this has historically demanded from both the individual and group.

Gladwell’s analysis is deeply temporal. He argues, like Chesneaux and Scheuerman, that politics needs time. Only a political project that is able to evolve in the time that it needs—the time appropriate to its own specific tasks—will have a chance of realizing its objectives. In other words, a democracy that comes to us from the Enlightenment, but whose local articulation is

able to take on many forms, is confined to the speed and the rhythms of the communication networks that made it possible.

This should not be read as nostalgia for a pre-digital age. There are political activists today who are highly Internet-savvy, but who also realize that there is no substitute for politics prepared and conducted in the traditional way and oriented toward the long-term perspective. Tina Rosenberg writes on the work and rationale of the Center for Applied NonViolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), a pro-democracy group that cut its teeth in the Serbian upheavals of the 1990s and the 2000s. Their philosophy is that social networking can generate a ‘wave of revolt’, but that ‘these elements alone do not a revolution make (Rosenberg, 2011). Rosenberg goes on to quote CANVAS ‘trainer’ Ivan Marovic who told her in an interview that classic revolution is:

...often seen as spontaneous...It looks like people just went into the street. But it's the result of months or even years of preparation. It's very boring until you reach a certain point, where you can organize mass demonstrations or strikes. If it is carefully planned, by the time they start, everything is over in a matter of weeks.

And so any analogizing of 2011 with 1989 is not simply wrong; it is dangerously wrong in terms of the future of the democratic political project that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. The revolutions of 1989 took hold and held fast and did not create a political vacuum or descend into ugly social chaos because they had deep enough roots in the social and political fabric of the countries concerned. The ideas contained in movements such as Czechoslovakia's Charter 77, or Poland's Solidarnosc, and the inspiration given to repressed peoples across Eastern Europe and beyond by prominent thinkers such as Andrei Sakharov, Yelena Bonner, Solzhenitsyn were what ‘enable [d] thought to have social existence’ (Debray, 2007: 5). The communication networks necessary for this transition from thought to social reality were satellite television, short-wave radio, secret meetings, *samizdat* literature, and so forth. These formed the information networks that nourished the democratic roots.

No one could have known it then, but the logic and motive force of the revolutions of 1989 would almost immediately collide with another resurgent

logic: that of neoliberalism and the networked society that it would create. For many, this society would not appear as a force antithetical to freedom and justice and democracy, but from the perspective of temporality and the political process, that is what it is. Twenty-two years after the historical events, culminating symbolically in the pulling down of the Berlin Wall, a generation has grown up in Eastern Europe and indeed across the world, for whom the information society is a mere fact of life. But what kind of society is this, and what kind of democracy can it offer? Neoliberalism brought free markets, finance, competition and consumerism on a global and interconnected scale. But these dominating features have meant that the democratic projects of the 1989 dissident movements would find little in the way of positive reception in new societies that would equate freedom with a new car or house, and democracy with a ballot every few years. With some understatement, Bärbel Bohley, who was a dissident figure in East Germany during the 1980s, said of the reunification with West Germany that the results were ‘less than what we dreamed’ (LA Times, 2011).

In this post-modern (and post-Enlightenment) context, economics, communications, processes of production and consumption—and the processes of political communication—have become highly informationalized. The tempo of these processes, and the tempo of society more broadly, are leaving modernity and its legacies, increasingly behind. And therein lies the problem. Our new relationship with speed, space and time has constructed a new digital timescape, one that we barely recognize as such, and one for which we are completely unprepared.

Conclusions

The media tagged the risings of 2011 the ‘Arab Spring’. Not only is the description lazy journalism (or, to be fair, journalism borne of the exigencies of time shortage) it is also wrong. Spring is a time when roots begin to grow and strengthen and eventually flourish. But in that region there were no roots, no rhizome that had been growing systematically and inexorably in the years prior to 2011. The people’s risings were spontaneous in the true sense of the word. They arose out of virtually nothing except a long-standing but unfocussed and largely unacted-upon anger and resentment against their oppres-

sors; the spark was the opportunity provided by social networking technologies. At the time of writing, there are no unambiguous trends towards democracy here; and nor could there be. There are no deep-rooted social bases for it in the region. The most likely path (or paths) for the countries in the region are ones that are too easily predictable: either these ‘new’ societies will be born, weak and underdeveloped, into a context where global capital finds a positive reception for its offers of aid and investment—meaning subservience to undemocratic neoliberalism (Klein, 2007). This would be a relatively quick process, where local elites become locked in to the real circuits of power and information. The alternative path is one of years of grinding factionalism or bloody sectarianism, with Iraq as an extreme post-political prototype. Even here, roots may be struck and local articulations of democracy may begin to emerge. People may find their feet as well as their voices and identify their needs. But the process will necessarily be slow and organic, and information technologies can have only the most peripheral of roles.

Shortly before his deluded boss was deposed, Egyptian Vice-President Omar Suleiman told the media that the people over whom his regime had ruled were ‘not ready for democracy’ (Steavenson, 2011: 26). Suleiman seemed to suggest that the *longue durée* necessary for democracy to take proper roots and have its culture develop, had not taken place. In this he was right. But in our networked society, the real issue is a different one that yields a different insight. The issue is one of temporality and the insight is that democracy is not ready for the people. At the broad economic level, a high-speed neoliberal network society has left the democratic process flailing in its wake. What the network offers as democracy cannot function as such. At the level of social networking, digital technology propels mass political action a ‘step ahead’—and toward a precipice. The masses, be they the Occupy manifestations in the West, or the freedom-seeking peoples of the broader Levant, are always going to be the weakest link in the digital dialectic between the immutable time of democracy and the accelerating time of the neoliberal network. Unless we recognize the relationship between time and the democratic process, and until we learn how to ‘temporalize democracy’, then social networking that is oriented towards rapid political action can lead only to a political vacuum—and that is the first refuge for the political opportunist.

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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 communica-

ion 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.

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 (“haka-wati”), 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 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 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.

Notes

[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.

[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.

[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>

Digital activism: efficacies and burdens of social media for civic activism

Jad Melki & Sarah Mallat

Abstract

This article explores digital activism among Lebanese social movement organizations (SMOs) using a social movements theoretical framework. It highlights the commonly used digital and social media tools for activism, and analyzes their perceived benefits and disadvantages. The study used a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, focus group, and participant observation methods. It found that digital activism is on the rise, and that social media platforms offer many perceived benefits for activism work, but also create significant obstacles in both the digital and offline realms. As such, this article offers recommendations, based on best practices, to bolster the efficacy of digital activism in Lebanon.

Introduction

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, academics debated the role digital and social media played in these uprisings. Much of the discussions centered on Egypt and Tunisia, where the most successful revolts took place. Other Arab countries like Lebanon, where the outcomes varied between repeated failures and incremental successes, remained overlooked, despite offering a rich experience and comprising a vibrant civil society. Accordingly, this study explores digital activism in Lebanon, particularly because of its unique socio-political context, its avant-garde position in the region, and its growing pulse of activism. The study investigates how local activists utilize digital and social media. It explores the perceived benefits and burdens of such platforms—a matter not greatly addressed in the literature (Garrett, 2006)—and the broader implications for digital activism in society.

In this study, *digital activism* refers to the use of digital technologies to facilitate change in the political and social realms (Joyce, 2010). These tools include the Internet in its various applications, mobile phones, and other digital devices. The term Social Movement Organization (SMO) encompasses non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and activists. Social movements are shared feelings or activities that aim towards changing social systems or social relations (Ash Garner and Zald, 1987).

Literature Review

Despite attracting many scholars recently, research on digital activism in the Arab world remains rare, especially country-specific and empirically driven research. This section starts with a theoretical framework for the study and then discusses the three factors of this framework in the Lebanese context.

Digital Media and Social Movement Theory

This study uses a social movements theory analytical lens. Various social sciences disciplines have studied the effects of new media technologies on social movements, offering a wide range of disconnected scholarship on the matter. Garrett (2006) advanced a theoretical framework that built on the commonly used McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) framework in an attempt to align the diverse studies and methods into a more coherent body of literature. This study adopts the same framework that explains social movements through “three interrelated factors: mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes” (Garrett, 2006, p. 203). Mobilizing structures entail the formal and informal organizations and relationships and familiar forms of protest that enable citizens to organize themselves into social movements. Opportunity structures are the political structures and opportunities that facilitate or constrain a movement’s action. Finally, framing processes refer to the collective efforts and processes engaged in interpreting events, advancing perspective, constructing realities, unifying visions and perspectives, and contesting opposing discourses. The rest of this section is organized according to these three factors.

Framing Opportunities:

Lebanon's Diverse Media Landscape and Fractured Public Sphere

Freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to dissent, have long been suppressed in most Arab countries. Freedom House (2011) considers all but three countries in the region 'Not Free.' Kuwait, Lebanon, and Morocco are considered 'Partly Free.' The controversial source notwithstanding, it is hard to deny that most Arab governments are closed, authoritarian, and oppressive, albeit to varying degrees (Barakat, 1993).

In comparison, Lebanon's curious political system has historically offered its population greater civil liberties. These freedoms nevertheless remain checked by rampant political and economic corruption stemming from rigid nepotistic alliances backed by sectarian institutions and clerics (Khashan, 2011; Makdisi et al., 2010). According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Lebanon ranks 134 out of 183 countries (Transparency International, 2010).

Censorship in Lebanon is nowhere near as stringent as in its regional counterparts, although journalists and bloggers self-censor for personal safety (Alabaster, 2011). Lebanon has a long tradition of press freedom, though nearly all media have ties to political groups (Al-Najjar, 2011), creating limited opportunities for advancing independent perspectives or contesting opposing discourses without appearing as a partisan.

Moreover, while the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, religious discrimination remains rampant. Sectarian affiliation regulates day-to-day affairs and major life decisions (Haddad, 2002; Ofeish, 1999). Furthermore, each sect has its own laws for dealing with family and personal-status matters (Shehadeh, 1998). In the absence of strong secular forces in the country, this sectarian environment results in a fractured public sphere, divided essentially into smaller sectarian public spheres (Dawahare, 2000) that rarely interact despite overlapping interests.

This fractured public sphere and its corresponding partisan media ecosystem impose on the country's citizens a sectarian lens for interpreting any national

or local issue, potentially limiting and distorting framing opportunities for activists who champion even the most non-partisan public causes.

Lebanon's Mobilizing Structures: Civil Society and its Causes

Over the past two decades, the Arab world has witnessed unprecedented population growth accompanied by a region-wide 'youth bulge.' By 2003, youth under the age of 24 made up 50% to 65% of the population, a rate that continues to expand (Fuller, 2003). In Lebanon, youth aged 15-24 comprised 19.5% of the population in 2007 (Central, 2007). Accompanying this growth is an expanding civil society. In 2005, the official number of NGOs in Lebanon surpassed 3,500 (UNDP, 2009). This large number of organizations for a population of four million parallels the large number of issues facing youth.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese rallied in favor of or in opposition to the government. Also common are demonstrations and rallies to champion civil rights and liberties of citizens or others living or working in Lebanon. Local SMOs, which operate openly and legally, spearhead many of these protests that vary from women's rights to advocating for cheaper Internet access.

While Lebanese women enjoy many of the same rights as men, they experience social and legal discrimination. Paramount among these are discriminatory laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody (Shehadeh, 1998). Lebanese women married to non-citizens cannot transfer citizenship to their children and do not receive equal social-security provisions (Farhood, 2009). Women are severely underrepresented in political office and in the news industry (IWME, 2011). Furthermore, men convicted of honor crimes against women usually receive lenient sentences, if any adjudication takes place at all (Freedom House, 2011).

Refugees, minorities, and migrant workers have few rights under Lebanese law. While some progress has been made to combat arbitrary detention, inhumane treatment, and torture of refugees and illegal immigrants, officials often don't enforce regulations pertaining to these matters (Freedom House, 2011). The nearly 350,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are denied

citizenship and civil rights and face arduous restrictions on working, building homes, and purchasing property (Hanafi and Tiltles, 2008). Migrant workers, particularly female domestic workers, often face exploitation, and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. Human Rights Watch (2008) revealed more than one migrant domestic worker dies each week in Lebanon, most often from suicide or failed escape attempts.

While most SMOs operate openly and legally, the case is different for Lebanese groups that advocate LGBTQ rights, as homosexuality remains illegal. However, such SMOs are publicized and relatively outspoken, especially in Beirut, and homosexuals enjoy a certain degree of freedom unthinkable in other Arab countries (Hardy, 2010). Moreover, Lebanon's brittle infrastructure and struggling economy attract sporadic popular protests. The government still rations both water and electricity, and the high cost and low speed of telecommunications and Internet services garner heavy criticism (Anderson, 2011). Public and private sector employees went on industry-specific strikes several times over the past few years, and general labor strikes took place to condemn the high cost of living, inflation, low minimum wage, and lack of jobs. Other areas of concern have a weaker sense of urgency, such as environmental protection and the preservation of cultural hallmarks, but they continue to witness growing support.

Despite major defects in government policies and legislation, Lebanon offers a hospitable environment for activism. The delicate political balance between the various religious sects paradoxically sustains sanctuaries and spaces for freedom, and the country's notable history of a vibrant civil society provides a strong tradition for future activism. The combination of comparatively wide margins of freedom, numerous grievances, a significant number of activist organizations, and a generation of disaffected youth adept at utilizing digital and social media hints at the makings of a robust civil society.

***Lebanon's Opportunity Structures:
The (Dis)Enabling Digital and Legal Environments***

The Arab world comprises 40-60 million Internet users, with estimates reaching 100 million users by 2015 (Arab, 2009). However, studies show these In-

ternet users are more interested in entertainment and networking rather than political activism. Melki (2010) found only 5% of youth in Lebanon, Jordan, and the UAE used social media for political activism, while 84% used them for fun and to connect with friends (p. 21). Nevertheless, the use of digital media to facilitate the uprisings across the Arab world is part of a widespread increase in digital activism (Jansen, 2010; Raynes-Goldie and Walker, 2008).

Estimates place the number of Internet users in Lebanon at one million, about 30%-35% of the population (Index Mundi, 2009). This puts Lebanon above the average Arab penetration rate of 24.9% (International, 2010). This relatively high penetration rate is somewhat compromised by high cost, sub-par speed, and reliability of Internet services. For instance, as of 2009, less than 5.3% of the population had broadband connections (International, 2010). Out of 174 countries, Lebanon ranks 163 in download speed, and second to last in upload speed (Net Index, 2011), while Internet services overall remain expensive and confined to certain areas (Sakr, 2011). Nevertheless, 98% of Lebanese online use social media (Mourtada and Salem, 2011), and a government initiative in November 2011 brought 3G network capabilities to urban users, and slightly lowered the cost of DSL; a timid effort to catch up with many Arab countries that offer better and cheaper Internet access.

Unlike most Arab countries, however, Lebanon has an Internet freedom rating of 20/20, with no evidence of website filtering or blocking (Mourtada and Salem, 2011). Likewise, 'academic freedom is firmly established and rights to freedom of association and assembly are generally unrestricted' (Freedom House, 2011, para. 18). Nonetheless, Lebanon's media laws prohibit insulting the president (Freedom House, 2011), and 'authorities have incarcerated individuals who have expressed opinions deemed offensive to government authorities' (Ghannam, 2011: 9). Such cases remain rare, however, and create news and public protests that almost always result in a swift release. Therefore, Lebanon offers a requisite free environment and an active, albeit fractured, online public sphere. Countered by technological impediments and some legal restraints, it is an environment that presents its own set of inquiries for Lebanese digital activism. As such, this study asks the following question: What are the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media for activism?

Methodology

This study used a combination of focus groups, observational methods, and in-depth interviews with key members of Lebanese SMOs. This approach allowed for rich data that provides insight into under-explored topics and unique social situations (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Using purposive sampling, the researchers conducted one-on-one in-depth elite interviews with 32 individuals from 23 SMOs (Appendix A). Based on a review of all civil society causes being actively pursued today, the included SMOs encompassed a sufficiently representative sample of civil causes under focus in Lebanon. Interviews took place at organizations' head offices, lasted one hour, and were digitally recorded, and names of participants remained confidential.

The researchers also conducted a two-hour focus group, which included seven SMOs, and observed four public events that SMOs advertised through social media. This observation approach aimed to explore activists' use of digital tools to plan and organize events. Data collection spanned one year, ending in 2012.

The interview instrument comprised 15 guiding questions to highlight the social media tools SMOs used, and the benefits and disadvantages accompanying their use. The focus group questions expanded on the major issues revealed by the interviews to obtain concrete cases. After transcription and data cleaning, the researchers reviewed the data through inductive analysis to 'identify salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief' (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 154).

Researchers faced some limitations, including time constraints and the sensitive nature of some organizations' causes. While the categories of causes included represent the major issues under focus in Lebanon, the participants do not represent all Lebanese SMOs.

Results

Digital activism in Lebanon remains in a developmental stage but continues to spread rapidly. The degree of online engagement varies from one SMO to another, depending on the goals of each organization, the resources available to it, and the perceived benefits and disadvantages associated with the use of digital tools.

Commonly used tools

The most commonly used digital platforms by SMOs are official websites and Facebook groups (Table 1). The majority of participants (16 organizations) also use Twitter to varying degrees. Most SMOs also use YouTube to share pre-existing video content relating to their causes, and several have their own YouTube channels. For example, IndyACT—a collective of environmental and cultural activists—has a YouTube channel that displays videos about climate change, traffic pollution, racial discrimination, and footage of protests and illegal practices.

Table 1

Social Media tool	Facebook	Website	Twitter	YouTube	Blog	Flickr	Other
n (%) of Organizations	22	21	16	13	12	5	7
(n= 23)	(96%)	(91%)	(70%)	(57%)	(52%)	(22%)	(30%)

Table 1: Number of organizations' that use various digital and social media platforms

Blogging falls behind other social media. However, most participants consider blogging to be a critical and underutilized tool for activism, and expressed plans to use it in the future. Nevertheless, 11 out of the 23 organizations have at least one blog. A handful of organizations have multiple blogs, each dedicated to specific causes. In addition, a few tech-savvy organizations use blogging platforms, such as WordPress, to manage their websites, which has allowed for greater efficiency, creative control, and cost effectiveness in their work. Flickr and other photo-sharing applications are not widely used, but some plan to

add them to their digital repertoire. Others say such applications are unnecessary because of the photo-sharing capabilities of other social media, such as Facebook. Founder of Save Beirut Heritage—an initiative to protect historical buildings—says rather than assign a few individuals to upload images to Flickr, all 8,600 of their Facebook followers post images of structures at risk of demolition, posting comments in the same space.

Other digital and social media tools SMOs use include Grou.PS, LinkedIn, Skype, StumbleUpon, Storify, Slideshare, and Sribd. While only six organizations use one or more of these applications, most recognize their availability and usefulness. However, most SMOs hesitate to incorporate more tools because they require additional time and personnel (see RQ2). Furthermore, beyond smartphone versions of the widely used social media tools, participants do not use mobile phone applications extensively. Using mass SMS tends to be expensive. In addition, up until November 2011, when the government reduced Internet cost and introduced 3G, mobile Internet had been very slow and expensive. In sum, while Lebanese SMOs extensively use popular social media tools, most do not use the less known platforms—especially mobile apps.

Perceived benefits and disadvantages of social media

When investigating the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using digital media for activism, the study found considerable overlap across SMOs. Many perceptions stem from the basic characteristics of new media platforms (Flanagin and Metzger, 2008; Lai and Turban, 2008; Langlois et al., 2009; Mansell, 2002). Others pertain to Lebanon's political and cultural milieu. The major benefits of social and digital media for Lebanese SMOs pertain to publicity and communication, organization and collaboration, fundraising and accountability, accessing information, and circumventing censorship.

Achieving instant visibility inexpensively. Lebanese SMOs perceive rapid exposure and visibility, both in mainstream and digital media, as the greatest advantage social media can offer. Nascent groups particularly see these tools as valuable, especially when targeting young activists.

Digital platforms allow activists to reach broader audiences inexpensively, particularly youth because they rely less on mainstream media. Although television remains the main source for news, few Lebanese youth regularly read newspapers or listen to radio, and the majority relies on online sources (Melki, 2010).

SMOs recognize these trends. An activist with refugee-rights group *Frontiers-Ruwad* insists, Lebanese youth ‘don’t read newspapers and are turning more to online sources.’ Environmental group *Green Line Association* confirms, ‘exposure via social media lets us reach younger audiences we were unable to reach before. Twenty years ago we were reaching mostly environmental experts... Now we have a larger pool of potential followers.’ Exposure is even more critical for nascent organizations. The founder of *Migrant Workers Task Force* explains, ‘We are new and small and don’t have the funds to publicize ourselves, but we were able to achieve instant visibility via social media.’ Their supporters even include international activists, something unimaginable without social media.

Additionally, digital platforms allow activists to reach audiences in under-represented and inaccessible areas. Historically, activism centered on Beirut, and SMOs had difficulty accessing rural areas. Today, explains the founder of *Migrant Workers Task Force*, ‘you can reach millions who are otherwise inaccessible, especially those living outside of Beirut. Many from these areas initiate contact themselves after seeing us online.’

Moreover, SMOs realize social media often help them attract mainstream media coverage, locally and internationally. For example, women’s rights activists made significant progress in 2011 with the help of social media. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Women’s Day, activists organized multiple events, including two awareness marches. *Nasawiya*, one of the organizing SMOs, advertised the events almost exclusively online, via Facebook, websites, blogs, and online forums. While the turnout was not staggering, both events received substantial local and international news coverage.

Beyond these events, women's rights groups rely heavily on digital tools to promote public events and increase community dialogue. The cumulative effect, in combination with strategic litigation and advocacy, led to significant successes, for example the implementation of tougher sentences for honor crimes in 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011) and the passing of a law on domestic violence in April 2014 (Anderson, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similarly, Animals Lebanon campaigned in 2010 to shut down a circus accused of animal abuse. The group launched the campaign through Facebook, and their email list and website. It succeeded in shutting down the circus for one month. More importantly, the publicity surrounding the campaign garnered attention from local and international media and broad support from animal advocacy groups, leading to the first animals' rights legislation in Lebanon. In 2011, Animals Lebanon presented the draft law to the Lebanese Minister of Agriculture (Al-Quntar, 2011) and began campaigning, primarily via social media, to collect 25,000 signatures to support the bill in parliament. In about two months, the petition collected 12,600 signatures, over half of which were collected online.

Furthermore, co-founder of Social Media Exchange Beirut (SMEX) attributes the success of the 2010 efforts to halt a parliamentary vote on an e-transaction law to the tactical use of blogs. The law in question aimed at regulating online transactions, but many perceived that its broad scope and vague wording threatened online freedom of expression and violated Internet privacy (Malo, 2010). Beyond publicizing the issue on SMEX's website, the group's members, along with other SMOs, each blogged about it in detail. The multiple blogs attracted a larger audience and promoted the issue in various discussion forums and on social media. The online publicity then drew international media attention, subsequently attracting the local media, who had initially ignored the issue. Within 24 hours, SMEX and other groups began receiving inquiries from politicians asking why the law should not pass. Ultimately, the vote was delayed.

Communicating with ease, breadth, and versatility. Lebanese SMOs perceive the ease, breadth, and versatility of communication as important benefits of digital

media, allowing them to share information in ways unthinkable before and to use the same information for multiple purposes.

This applies even to the most primitive use of online media. The founder of Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon admits his group has not used digital platforms effectively, as its online presence only constitutes a website. Nonetheless, he says that ‘the ease of instant and elaborate communication as a tool for advocacy is incalculable, from sharing photos and PDF documents and academic studies, to chatting and spreading the word.’ These general attributes of the medium offer significant advantages in Lebanon, since addressing the rights of Palestinian refugees remains largely absent from mainstream media (Kawzally, 2009).

Moreover, digital media’s versatility permits various uses of information beyond mere dissemination. It allows activists to bolster the credibility of their communication and hold officials and journalists accountable. Ontornet, a group promoting faster and affordable Internet, considers this advantage paramount. ‘When we meet with politicians, we record everything and Tweet it live. It provides a record they cannot deny and gives us more credibility while simultaneously sharing information,’ which is also archived for future use. A Syrian anti-government activist based in Lebanon reiterates this advantage. ‘Most reporters reach us through Twitter today. We conduct entire interviews through that platform, and people can see the questions and answers live.’ This virtual exchange has largely replaced traditional reporting on Syria since the government denies most foreign correspondents entry. It simultaneously offers a de-facto watchdog mechanism that promotes accurate journalism, particularly in Syria’s case, as most media have become active propagandists, for or against the government (Dagher, 2012).

Furthermore, social media and blogs offer a richer dialogue, where activists can act as mediators between the public and Lebanese officials. Ontornet activists assert, ‘we are not only asking our questions; we are asking everyone else’s questions too.’ Kahn and Kellner (2004) stress, ‘blogs make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary central and emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to

a heightened degree' (p. 91). SMOs emphasize this perception of blogging as more dynamic and interactive than traditional websites. KAFA's media officer explains, 'it's the interaction and feedback that matters, and blogging gives you a space to explain and interact more than just a static website.'

Internal organization, external collaboration, and stronger relationships. SMOs depend on social media to organize events internally, build coalitions, collaborate on initiatives, and strengthen relationships with supporters. Many SMOs depend on digital tools to organize day-to-day operations. Flip the Switch, a group advocating faster and affordable Internet, has two Facebook pages, 'a private page for organizing meetings and coordinating internally, and a public page where people can show support.'

Some SMOs emphasize the importance of social media tools in strengthening relationships with supporters and deepening the commitment of volunteers through continuous feedback and online interaction. Co-founder of the youth-publication Hibr and social media initiative AltCity says that for two years Hibr's creators managed the newspaper online without having met most volunteer writers and bloggers in person, nor had the volunteers met one another. In 2011, when AltCity debuted its first public event, 'the interaction element in social media encouraged the online community to meet in person.' Similarly, co-founder of SMEX says their online presence contributed not only to an increase in the number of volunteers and trainees, but also to stronger relationships with what have now become their customers. 'The hard numbers kept going up, but the quality of the relationships were also intensifying, so much so that we had to think of a way to give us greater financial control over our initiatives.' SMEX expanded its non-profit group into a hybrid structure by creating a for-profit branch, SMEX&CO, which now supports and funds the non-profit arm.

Furthermore, some SMOs use social media for building coalitions and coordinating with other organizations, a crucial factor for sustainable change (Jad, 2004; Khattab, 2010), although the outcome has not always been positive because competition between the SMOs over scarce funding and media recognition often impair collaboration. Communication coordinator at Nahwa

Al-Muwatiniya says more coordination between SMOs is badly needed, as most of their activities overlap, and the best outcomes have been the result of collaborative efforts. Indeed, Lebanese feminist activists partially attribute the relative success of the women's rights movement to a commitment to collective action. On the other hand, most SMOs blame the fragmentation within the anti-sectarian movement for its recent failure. In 2011, the movement organized several marches that drew protestors from all over Lebanon, the largest of which was 10,000 strong ('The Arab Awakening,' 2011). The initial increase in numbers signaled a growing movement. However, several subsequent rallies saw minimal participation and raised questions about the movement's sustainability (Sikimic, 2011). The movement ended up in a stalemate soon after its inception due to fragmentation and infighting over goals, strategies, and disputed leadership and recognition. 'The public got confused and annoyed, and support for the overall cause diminished.'

Nevertheless, SMOs who have succeed in building successful coalitions highlight the important role of social media in strengthening such alliances. Green Line Association Director says, 'We heavily depend on digital media to organize events... and collaborate with other initiatives outside of Beirut.' In 2011, the group held simultaneous activities for World Environment Day in three Lebanese cities, collaborating with three other organizations, without meeting them in person.

Boosting fundraising and accountability. Most SMOs realize funders are increasingly discriminate and cautious, due to the high number of NGOs and the ease in creating them (Wehbi and El-Lahib, 2007). However, many also argue that having a digital presence increases the credibility of an SMO and allows funders to keep track of their work. A few SMOs even said funders initiated contact with them as a result of their online presence. Co-founder of Kunhadi believes a strong online presence is proof that an organization is serious. 'We are receiving more funding because we have real-time activities and events that generate visible results.' Although activists realize that digital media cannot replace conventional fundraising methods, many believe a strong online presence strengthens their proposals. 'Having 2,000 Twitter followers shows funders that people are interested in our work, and we have the means to reach them,' says Hibr co-founder. Conversely, the relative ease

of establishing presence online leads to increased competition over funding, which hinders inter-organizational collaboration.

Circumventing censorship and facilitating access to information. Despite the relative lack of censorship in Lebanon, the digital realm allows SMOs to circumvent censorship involving controversial topics like Palestinian rights, LGBTQ rights, and certain areas of women's rights. For example, Palestinian Civil Rights Campaign Lebanon say mainstream media significantly edit their press releases to censor sensitive topics (Kawzally, 2009). Online, however, the group self-publishes the unedited versions, which are more powerful; loaded with striking imagery, historical anecdotes, and emotive terminology.

Although less controversial, certain cultural and artistic initiatives often face censorship too. 'The level of censorship in films, music, literature, even theater, is surprising,' says an activist at Ashkal Alwan. 'Digital media help counteract the efforts of the General Security sensors, who still have a comfortable margin of digital illiteracy, but this continues to decrease.... We now realize that Facebook and E-mail are monitored.'

As drafts of media laws shuffle through the Lebanese parliament (Alabaster, 2011), activists eagerly await whether the outcome will allow more or less online freedoms. Meanwhile, activists are split between those who feel they have complete freedom online and those who publish cautiously, fearing increased monitoring, censorship, and repercussions.

Moreover, activists complain about the lack of freedom of information laws, despite the submission of various draft laws to parliament over the past two years (Maharat, 2010). A Nahwa Al-Muwatiniya activist complains, 'it's really difficult to get information from the government. The long procedure and rigid bureaucracy is so discouraging.' Even public information required by existing laws, such as media ownership records, are virtually inaccessible to the general public, and official registries require authorized lawyers before access is granted (Melki et al., 2012). CRTD-A once launched a project on civil marriage and nationality rights. They needed data on the number of civil marriages in Lebanon, 'but the Minister of Interior wouldn't allow us access.'

Other advantages of social media are easy access to international information sources, and the ability to quickly share local official information, for those willing to put the time and effort into acquiring it. In addition to all these advantages, social media also offer significant burdens. In fact, the majority of participants said digital tools often fail to meet activists' needs and sometimes encumber their work.

Overwhelming demands meet limited resources and skills. The ease, immediacy, and interactivity digital media offer have unavoidable consequences: the challenge to continuously respond, monitor, and update information. 'It takes time and skills, and no matter how much you follow up, there's more to be done,' complained CRTD-A's director. Most SMOs realize, without proper monitoring, digital platforms can do more harm than good (Breindl, 2010; Kahn and Kellner, 2004), and negative information can jeopardize an organization's image and undermine its cause. Moukawimoun's co-founder shared a negative discussion thread that arose when the organization posted a list of censored books on Facebook, as part of their campaign 'Stop Cultural Terrorism.' The list included *The Diary of Anne Frank*, 'and people started condemning us as Zionists and pro-Israeli, which completely derailed the conversation.'

In addition, digital activists face a constant battle with spammers (Joyce, 2010). Assistant Director of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, says failing to monitor online spaces can turn an SMO's digital platforms into 'spaces for parasitic discussions' and tools for promotion of unrelated events and products. However, most SMOs have limited resources and personnel to meet the demands of continuous monitoring. The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Women (LECORVAW) would like to incorporate more online tools, but they 'need someone who has the skills and knowledge to provide full-time assistance and work only on social media, but we don't have the budget for that.' Some solve this problem by limiting their social media presence. But even for those who can afford a dedicated media person, finding activist-minded individuals who possess digital skills and a strong background in communication remains a problem. The subsequent sections discuss the most needed skills, which in addition to digital skills include strategic communication, critical thinking, and writing and language proficiency.

Strategic communication and critical thinking. SMOs realize that simply running a digital platform does not translate into utilizing it purposefully, and although the pool of potential activists with strong digital skills continues to grow, many still lack strategic communication and critical thinking skills.

Beyond simply updating information, many SMOs express the need for a clear communication strategy, which increases the effectiveness of reaching intended audiences and managing negative feedback. One activist states, ‘many know how to use Twitter, but few can use it strategically to attract media attention.’ Social media coordinator for the road safety initiative Kunhadi admits, ‘We need training in using Twitter and Facebook to create more interaction and achieve specific purposes.’ Many SMOs suggest that universities offer digital activism courses, where students learn activism and advocacy principles in addition to digital and strategic communication skills.

Poor critical thinking abilities further compound the problem. ‘Activists lack critical thinking skills for gathering credible information... rather than spreading rumors.’ To most, critical thinking skills comprised abilities to identify reliable information sources, substantiated and attribute arguments, and counter rumors and propaganda.

Language dilemmas. Most SMOs who participated in this study use English exclusively for their online activities. None exclusively use Arabic. Only six have a complete Arabic version of their website or Facebook group, while a handful have limited Arabic content. But this conflicts with Lebanon’s language realities. While English is widely used inside Beirut and among affluent and educated urbanites, Arabic remains dominant elsewhere, particularly outside the city and among older and less-affluent demographics (Diab, 2000).

Likewise, Arabic remains the primary and official language of government and politicians. Co-founder of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM-D&R), which raises awareness of Lebanon’s violent past, asserts; ‘Our target, politicians and officials, uses Arabic. It’s ridiculous to address them in English, whether offline or online.’

But shifting exclusively to Arabic creates significant burdens. The pool of qualified activists with strong command of Arabic continues to dwindle, as English has become the preferred language of educated urbanites—the group most likely to possess the requisite digital skills. Additionally, abandoning English disconnects SMOs from their potential funders. Moukawimoun’s co-founder resolves this dilemma by ‘going trilingual,’ but few can afford this solution.

Furthermore, many migrant workers, refugees, and other disenfranchised groups neither read Arabic nor English. Initiatives targeting them in English remain ineffective. A Frontiers Ruwad activist notes, ‘Social and digital media are restricted in Lebanon to groups that are generally middle class, have access to Internet, and speak English. This excludes the beneficiaries of our work.’

Access to Internet. Limited access to the Internet presents another significant obstacle to digital activism. While SMOs rely on social media to reach audiences beyond Beirut, limited Internet access in most rural areas significantly curtails their efforts. For example, rural residents in north and south Lebanon are a prime focus for environmental preservation initiatives. A Green Line Association activist explains, ‘Many people we want to reach there aren’t social media users. Many villages still don’t have Internet, and we sometimes can’t even reach them through traditional media.’

Over-reliance on social media, Slacktivism, and the echo-chamber effect. Despite praising the benefits of social media, most SMOs stress the importance of balancing online and offline activism. Several participants referred to the Arab uprisings, criticizing terms like ‘Facebook Revolution’ that overemphasize the role of social media. This ‘social media hype’ has led to the growing trend of slacktivism: online activism that has no tangible outcome (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza, 2013). Most participants mentioned the negative repercussions of ‘click-based activism,’ noting that it can undermine the work of dedicated activists by discouraging from real engagement. Indeed, the shift towards online activism has meant a shift away from conventional activism (Morozov, 2009). ‘Re-Tweeting, liking a group, or sharing a post does not make you an activist, compared to those who are meeting with people and taking to the streets,’ complained one activist.

Most SMOs remain wary of online feedback and complain that online activism rarely generates offline results. Participants overwhelmingly pointed to Facebook's events tool. IndyACT's Communication director says, it is difficult to gauge how many attendees will show up to an event because those who confirm attendance on Facebook are substantially more than those who show up. Some activists estimate only 10% of those who click 'attending' will actually attend.

Additionally, activists complain that online activism often creates an echo-chamber effect, where communication only reaches the same narrow circle of activists. Founder of Lebanon's Time, an initiative to increase dialogue on Lebanese socio-political issues, complains, 'While you might think you're connecting online with other groups, you often end up reaching the same like-minded supporters.'

Discussion and Conclusion

Lebanese SMOs credit recent achievements, at least in part, to increased exposure facilitated by social media. SMOs recognize digital media's capacity to quickly and inexpensively reach broader and otherwise inaccessible audiences, and to effectively promote causes and increase visibility in local and international media. They rely on digital platforms to inform the civic-minded about events, create interactive dialogue, coordinate work internally, organize actions and build coalitions externally, bridge online and offline activists, and strengthen relationships with volunteers. They view the ease and breadth of communication through social media as particularly beneficial, given their ability to effectively disseminate rich information and foster engagement, while circumventing traditional channels and their censors, and accessing information that remains difficult to reach. Furthermore, some SMOs praise social media's versatility and capacity to update information live while simultaneously documenting and archiving records, which turns them into effective methods for communicating with politicians and journalists while providing immediate evidence to the public. This in-turn boosts activists' credibility both in holding officials and journalists accountable and in attracting funding.

The findings pertaining to advantages of social media are consistent with the literature, but Garrett (2006) notes few studies have focused on the disadvantages. As such, this study found that these benefits are often checked by the realities of limited resources to initiate and maintain digital platforms, by the internet's slow speed, high cost, and limited reach, and by the lack of individuals skilled not only in digital media, but also in strategic communication, language and writing abilities, critical thinking, and advocacy work. In addition, social media create a demand to continuously monitor, respond, and update information while simultaneously combating spam and rumors. Moreover, disadvantages include a growing culture of 'slactivism' that discourages serious activists, and creates a bloated impression of mass social movements online. This illusion is quickly deflated by a reality check when 'click-based activists' are called to the streets. This indirectly supports Bimber's (2001) findings that increased communication capacity does not necessarily translate into increased political participation. Some SMOs, however, devised ways to deal with this problem, and most recognize that digital media cannot replace many real-world activities (Bennett, 2003). 'In the end, activism has always been—and always will be—about people, people who show up in person' (McCafferty, 2011: 18). In addition, digital media's utility remains limited in the face of deeper structural concerns affecting all aspects of Lebanese society and largely symptomatic of the deeply rooted sectarian system. This is something all participants identified as a crucial obstacle to activism, and indirectly responsible for the rampant infighting within coalitions working on similar issues. The limitations also manifest in the fragmentation of civil society as a whole, the constant threats to online privacy and freedom of expression, and the lack of legislation and government support. Unfortunately, the majority of Lebanese still subscribes to confessional political alliances based on sectarian religious ascription (Cammatt and Issar, 2010). This makes bottom-up reform and grassroots efforts difficult, as even the most apolitical initiatives metamorphose into sectarian debates.

Based on these findings, the study proposes the following recommendations for improving digital activism in Lebanon: First, increase collaboration and formation of SMO networks. Rather than allowing competition and minor differences to deter cooperation, activists can benefit from combining their efforts via joint funding and collaborative efforts (Wehbi and El-Lahib, 2007).

External mediators, such as academics and universities, can help facilitate and act as hubs for such networks, while offering training and guidance. Second, improve strategic communication, critical thinking, and digital media skills by having universities offer courses and workshops that combine these skills. Finally, to better understand the obstacles and devise solutions, foundations and universities should encourage research revolving around digital activism. Researchers may replicate this study to other Arab countries, include quantitative methods and larger samples, and compare digital activism across countries. Longitudinal studies tracking progress of specific SMOs, such as the anti-sectarianism movement, could highlight the development of social media in activism and unveil lessons for improving future digital activism.

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A Revolutionary Role or a Remnant of the Past? The Future of the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate after the January 25th Revolution

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When the January 25th revolution swept through the streets of Cairo, the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate (EJS) remained silent. The EJS—the only journalist union permitted under the constitution—released no condemnations calling for the protection of journalists in the field, and provided no services to media workers attacked in the streets. Recalled in Egyptian journalistic lore as a fighting force for independence, the syndicate had become, by Mubarak’s fall, in the words of one prominent journalist, “hijacked”—a mere vehicle for political handouts—and isolated from real developments in the journalism field.

In the two years since the revolution, syndicate activists have rallied around calls for changes in the body’s membership, financial and legal structures; however, as in many Egyptian institutions, entrenched political and economic interests have largely prevented any substantial reforms.

In this article I chronicle the EJS’s major problems and prospects since the revolution, covering the influential events and individuals who have played a role during the SCAF and Muslim Brotherhood rule. I begin with the March 2013 mid-term syndicate elections in which, in a highly charged vote, a notable Muslim Brotherhood critic, Dina Rashwan, was elected to replace a Muslim Brotherhood supporter, Mamdouh Waly. Although conveyed in the local press as a positive step towards the syndicate’s de-politicization, I will show how these elections were still symptomatic of the syndicate’s fundamental dysfunctions. I then discuss the political, economic, and professional crises facing the syndicate, chronicle the historical development of these limitations, and assess the syndicate’s prospects for meaningful reform. Overall I report that while there is a generally open discussion about the need for change, the political and economic climate in Egypt—and in the syndicate more specifically—remains unfavorable to the fundamental reforms needed to turn the syndicate’s rhetoric of being an independent force for freedom of the press into a reality.

March 2013: Syndicate elections interrupted

A buzz swept through the crowd when Mamdouh Waly, then head of the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate and CEO of the state-run Al Ahram Corporation, tried to enter the syndicate headquarters in Cairo. It was Friday March 1, 2013 and since eleven that morning members of the EJS had been slowly trickling in to participate in the mid-term general assembly that would elect a new head and six of twelve board members.

When Waly arrived at around 1:30 p.m., he tried to make his way through the brightly colored registration tent set up outside the white syndicate headquarters walls covered with election posters. Journalists with cameras and notepads pursued him, vying for a quote from the disgruntled Al Ahram leader.

In less than two years, Waly had made himself one of the most polarizing syndicate leaders in collective memory. Elected in October 2011 in the whirl of the syndicate's first post-revolution election, by February 2013 Waly announced that he would not seek reelection, citing differences between himself and the board. In reality, under his rule the syndicate had become a virtually failed body. Close to bankruptcy and politically compromised, the syndicate was effectively a futile source of legal or professional support for journalists, despite its revolutionary slogans claiming otherwise.

Waly, allegedly a confidant of the Muslim Brotherhood (though not an official Freedom and Justice party member) spent much of his reign sparring with the largely left-leaning syndicate board. Key syndicate concerns, such as more inclusive membership criteria and ending the syndicate's financial dependence on the state, became impossible to address under his leadership. Most notoriously, on November 20, 2012 Waly sat in the syndicate's allotted seat in the National Constitutional Assembly and voted "yes" for the new Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored constitution. Journalists were shocked. Several months earlier, in April 2012, the syndicate general assembly had voted for Waly to withdraw from the Constitutional Assembly and boycott the vote, citing the constitution's restrictive press provisions. Now, the first post-revolution leader seemed to be acting just like the autocratic syndicate heads of the past, an all too common pitfall.[1]

There was also another kind of crowd waiting for Waly that day. The family, friends, and colleagues of journalist El Husseini Abu Deif stationed themselves beside the tent and news cameras, holding a large white poster with Abu Deif's face on it. Abu Deif was a photojournalist for the opposition *Al Fajr* newspaper, and one of two Egyptian journalists killed since the January 25th revolution. He was fatally shot in the head by a sniper the night of December 5, 2012 while covering clashes at the Presidential Palace. He collapsed into a coma and died a week later. Abu Deif's supporters allege that the sniper fire came from the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood side. He was targeted, they say, because he was a journalist carrying a camera—and the Brotherhood did not like this.[2]

By the time of the syndicate elections four months after his death, Abu Deif's face had been memorialized in the iconic Mohamed Mahmoud Street murals, his name a symbol of the fate that can befall Egypt's increasingly defenseless journalists in the Brotherhood era. For under Waly's watch, Abu Deif's legal case had been virtually stalled—despite the fact that by law it is the syndicate's responsibility to pursue these cases. Countless other files alleging assaults, press violations, and corruption implicating the police or former National Democratic Party (NDP) members also remained untouched.

The chanting began when Waly tried to enter the syndicate. Barra, barra! (Outside, outside!) Abu Deif's supporters shouted, as they swarmed to surround the syndicate head and keep him from entering. Suddenly a female journalist from *Al Fajr* approached and threw an item, reportedly a water bottle, which hit Waly. The situation escalated. "Dictator, dictator!" they chanted. Abu Deif supporters closed in as Waly supporters tried to hold them back. The journalists who had been interviewing Waly moments before stationed themselves somewhere in the middle, their cameras thrust forward in the incessant attempt to record everything.

The tension abruptly broke about fifteen minutes later when Waly's supporters were able to move the mass through the syndicate's front doors, from where Waly was taken to safety. In a moment, the mood outside shifted from paralysis to business as usual. The registration tent returned to its previous carnival-like state, with a "who's who" of the Cairo press, many with their

children, parading through. Candidates once again handed out pamphlets, calling out names, smiling widely, and shaking the hands of all who passed by. The loudspeaker reminded attendees to register before the mandated 3 p.m. deadline that was fast approaching. For this cadre of journalists, reared in the revolution, the commotion caused by Waly's entry was nothing unusual.

But by 3 p.m. the syndicate general assembly had not yet reached the necessary quorum of 50 percent plus one of its 6,000 members. In an unforeseen twist, in a profession and country that thrive on the unexpected, the elections were postponed until March 15. According to internal regulations, the second round of elections would require a quorum of only 25 percent plus one of its members.

Two weeks later, syndicate members gathered again at the same spot. This time Waly notably did not attend. Moments before 3 p.m., the necessary quorum was reached.

In an election framed by the Egyptian media as a measure of the Muslim Brotherhood's declining popularity, union members elected a noted critic of the Brotherhood, Daaa Rashwan , head of the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, as the new syndicate president. Rashwan, a Nasserist and early signatory of the anti-Mubarak Kifaya manifesto, won with 1,280 votes over five opponents. His main challenger, Al Ahram Managing Director Abdel Mohsen Salama (who was not a Brotherhood member but was considered the government's candidate) received 1,015 votes. The first Coptic Christian woman was also elected to the board. There remained now only one Freedom and Justice Party card carrier on the board, Mohamed Abdel Quddous, whose spot was not under contestation for another two years.

Rashwan, in statements to the press after his win, promised to "restore the union from the hands of the ruling regime" and to address key syndicate concerns.[3] Immediately following the elections the local Arabic press printed articles republishing statements from prominent journalists and politicians expressing their confidence in Rashwan as an independent reformer. Images of Rashwan, with his iconic thick moustache, smiling and raising his first in the air in victory, filled the news wires. "Journalist Elections: An Opposition

Leader and the Board without the Brotherhood,” read a headline below the fold on the front page of the private newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm*.

“To be or not to be:” A co-opted syndicate at a crossroads

The commotion attending the syndicate elections is by no means unusual for Cairo’s current political climate. But in the aftermath of the election attention, deep doubts lingered among journalists over the syndicate’s future prospects: Is the Egyptian Journalist Syndicate—after decades of regime interventions in the press’ professional norms, internal regulations, and financial services—already too broken to be fixed? And are Egyptian journalists—in particular key syndicate members—truly prepared for the sacrifices that meaningful media independence might entail?

“In reality the [election] results were nothing more than a message of anger, a political message against the Muslim Brotherhood. And unfortunately the real issues of the syndicate and the profession were absent,” argues journalist Karim Yehia, one of the leaders for reform at *Al Ahram* after the revolution. “I’m not optimistic that there is a real conversation in the syndicate around how we can rid ourselves of this past path of dictatorship and corruption.”[4]

Indeed, in interviews conducted in spring 2013 with journalists, syndicate leaders, and Egyptian media commentators, there seemed a general consensus that something needed to be done to address the syndicate’s failure to fulfill its basic tasks of accrediting journalists, defending their rights and freedoms, and promoting professional standards.[5]

“The Egyptian Journalist Syndicate has turned into a syndicate just of services,” lamented Amira Wedeh, a journalist at the *Al Ahram Arabic* portal. “It does not support freedom of expression. I think it has a negative role. I want the syndicate to be truly independent from the state, to support freedom of the press and the rights of journalists to express their opinions.”[6]

Beyond this seeming consensus, however, the steps toward reform so far have had a tepid impact, impeded by the nearly insurmountable political and economic barriers to a free press still in place in Egypt.

“Although the syndicate has started to reposition itself in practical terms in light of the new environment in Egypt, the legal framework under which it operates hasn’t really changed,” explained Toby Mendel, a media law expert. “One of the most insidious aspects of Mubarak’s packages of policies on media control was these sort of subtle dependencies that were a very useful way of controlling the profession. That’s the system Mubarak set up, and even with him long gone, they can’t really do much about it.”[7] Mendel added, “I don’t think that the syndicate has resolved basic existential issues about itself and how it should continue to operate.”

Khaled Al Balshy sat in a cushiony chair in his syndicate office and candidly addressed some of these issues. A prominent leftist writer and activist, Balshy was one of six new syndicate board members elected in March.[8] He chose to run, he explained, because he believed he could help develop the syndicate further. Now he sat without pausing for breath and rattled off the syndicate’s persisting list of ailments.

“The syndicate has a very big financial problem,” Balshy said. “There are a large number of newspapers that have closed, and more than 600 journalists in the syndicate are unemployed. The syndicate has a crisis of very old laws that don’t belong to this time, as they were made in the 1970s during an entirely different period.”[9]

The list went on. Balshy criticized the politicized and outdated way that journalists gain membership in the syndicate, a system that provides editors-in-chief significant say over who gets in, and leaves thousands without their right to association. He deplored “the level of the syndicate’s culture,” citing a high tolerance for self-censorship and corruption among poorly paid journalists with limited training. He criticized the “mixing of editing and advertisement,” and journalists who work on commission for advertisers, compromising their professionalism. He rattled off the laws on the book that limit freedom of expression, such as defamation laws and censorship, and the laws that are still notably absent, like a freedom of information law. He deplored the assaults and arrests—and deaths—of journalists at the hands of political and security forces. He sympathized with journalists who, left unrepresented by the syndicate, had tried to create their own unions, only to be thwarted by political figures and laws opposed to this diversity of association.

Above all, he harped on how the syndicate still remained only nominally independent from the state. Since the 1980s, the syndicate had relied on government funding to meet the rising costs of pensions (now at 800 EGP) and monthly stipends (now around 570 EGP) that syndicate members receive. These stipends had become an indirect way for the government to buy off journalists, as well as an incentive inside the syndicate to preserve the status quo and keep membership—and its financial rewards—to a selective group.

“It is necessary that the syndicate support those who work in the press,” Balshy said. “In reality, the restrictions for the syndicate are for an entirely different reason. It’s for appointing *muwazzafeen*, not those who work in the press.”

Balshy used the Arabic word *muwazzafeen*, which translates as “employees,” to convey a negative sense of a state employee mindlessly pushing papers and copying press releases into news articles. He believed it should be different.

State-run Middle East News Agency (MENA) Editor Ragaei al-Merghany echoed many of Balshy’s concerns. From his office window, Merghany has a bird’s eye view of the MENA editing desk below. On the one hand, he might seem an unlikely syndicate critic and freedom of the press advocate given his perch on high at a state-run news agency. But despite this seeming contradiction he is one of a cadre of journalists from state-run publications, including the big three *Al Ahram*, *Al Akhbar*, and *Al Gomhoriya*, who for decades have taken the lead against many of the same journalists with whom they work and serve. He also currently serves as the general coordinator of the National Coalition for Freedom of the Media, an alliance of human rights groups and journalists.

“The syndicate is before a fateful test,” Merghany concluded in an interview in April 2013. “‘To be or not to be,’ in that sense. Because if it is not able to bring in new blood to address the problems and challenges that journalists in Egypt face, then I fear that this great syndicate—which has supported a lot on freedom of expression and press, and went to battle against many different governments from the time of the monarchy—is at risk of dissolving and disintegrating. And this would be a catastrophic thing for the journalists.”[10]

“Co-censorship:” An overview of syndicate regulation

Located in downtown Cairo minutes from many of Egypt’s major newspapers, the syndicate’s entrance hall is enlivened by the chatter of journalists and the slogans of political posters hanging in the background. As in the 27 other official syndicates across Cairo, membership comes with a host of benefits unrelated to the profession itself, such as reduced prices at the syndicate’s cafeteria and deals on properties and other commodities available only to card carriers.

In Arabic, the word *nīqaaba*, or syndicate, is used to denote a professional body, while *gamaa’a*, or union, is generally used for trade associations. According to the constitution, the EJS is the only body statutorily recognized to represent Egyptian journalists: one profession, one syndicate, and one vote in important bodies like Egypt’s Constituent Assembly.

But the syndicate is not set up to represent all journalists. Internal regulations put in place by the 1970 Egyptian Syndicate Law and 1960 Press Law limit membership to journalists who are employed full-time in the *sihaafa*, or print press; it excludes members of the broadcast and online media, the *‘i’laam*.

As a January 2013 UNESCO report, “Assessment of Media Developments in Egypt,” concluded, “Membership in the syndicate effectively, and through operation of the law, creates a two-tier status within the profession of journalism.” The report continued, “These rules are in clear breach of international guarantees of freedom of expression, as well as of association, which prohibit conditions being placed on who may work as a journalist, mandatory membership in a particular association, or measures which effectively ban individuals from working as journalists. This problem is significantly exacerbated by the involvement of government actors in the process of applying for membership.”[11]

So it is that of the 15,000 or so journalists working in Egypt, only 6,000 have membership in their profession’s official governing body. This situation leaves an array of media professionals from the increasingly multimedia field without an independent or collective voice to lobby on their behalf. Since member-

ship in the EJS is the sole source for professional accreditation, thousands of broadcast, online, part-time, and freelancing journalists are left without an official press card or access to professional resources. And despite an increasing diversity of private and alternative media, the syndicate body and representatives remain largely dominated by the state-owned presses. In a country where 50 percent of the population is under 25, the journalist syndicate, like most other formal institutions, remains dominated by a generation of men steeped in pre-revolution thinking.[12]

Several articles in the constitution (both the 2012 and 1971 versions) purport to provide freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom to access information. The practical application of these and other clauses, however, has had a generally restricting rather than liberating effect. For example, the Supreme Press Council, whose members are appointed by the government based on political calculations, regulates the press. Other laws on the books—such as defamation and libel codes—were commonly used to silence journalists under Hosni Mubarak. They have also become a particular favorite of the new ruling class: under President Mohamed Morsi, suits brought against journalists alleging defamation of the president and religion have reached new heights.

“Historically, the rules were often not applied in their strict form, but were there to be relied upon should anyone step too far out of line,” assesses the UNESCO report. “Thus, in practice the system relied largely on what might be termed ‘co-censorship’: self-censorship backed up by the possibility of direct (i.e. legal) censorship.”[13]

Within this hazardous web of silencing laws and stifling practices, the syndicate’s often politicized membership criteria are a common source of strife for journalists. Some claim, for example, that other members are not really journalists, but rather are well connected politically. More verifiable is the fact that all employees of the state-owned publishing houses, such as those that publish the state organs *Al Ahram*, *Al Akhbar*, and *Al Gomhoriya*, qualify for automatic membership. Though many do not actually practice the craft of journalism, these members help to keep the voting bloc in favor of the government.

Journalists tell numerous stories about themselves or colleagues being denied membership because of their politics, or because of the particular persuasions of the editor at the top, or the committee reading their application. “The rules give any journalist wishing to obtain a contract of employment in order to qualify for Syndicate membership an incentive to prioritize an editor’s whims over the demands of professionalism,” writes Arab media scholar Naomi Sakr in her latest book *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*.^[14] Another common practice is for newspaper editors to hire journalists on a part-time basis for years on end, thereby skirting the responsibility of paying journalists their full benefits and helping them to achieve membership. As the Egypt Independent reported, “The average salaries of full-time journalists in daily newspapers range from LE 400 to LE 2,000 per month. For internships and training, beginner journalists are typically not paid at all. Moreover, the widespread practice of employing full-time journalists on part-time contracts serves to deny these employees their right to bonuses, promotions, insurance coverage, profit sharing (when applicable), job stability and the right to join the Journalists Syndicate.”^[15]

At times, journalists have taken drastic steps to protest these conditions. In October 2008, ten journalists held a hunger strike at the syndicate’s headquarters, objecting to their being blocked from syndicate membership. One of the strikers, socialist journalist Omar Saeed, described the ordeal of being denied membership: “The membership committee asked me totally irrelevant questions, like ‘What are your political tendencies?’ and ‘Do you belong to a workers’ platform or organization?’ They asked me few professional questions relating to journalism.” He was ultimately admitted to the syndicate.^[16]

The poor salaries of journalists are further reflective of the increasing financial burdens facing Egypt’s mismanaged media institutions. According to the law, newspapers have to disclose ownership structures and publish their budgets. In practice, this is never done, as news organizations loathe transparency in a media environment in which corruption and politicized subsidies have long concealed the true cost of producing the news.

“The problem is there are wide ethical violations in the national Egyptian press,” journalist Karim Yehia lamented. “The syndicate has not opened one

corruption file. And the truth is that in the Egyptian press corruption was widespread under Mubarak and it has continued.”[17]

Indeed, journalists are quite open about the rampant ethical violations that plague the profession. Employees of the advertising divisions of newspapers, for example, qualify for syndicate membership. But it is also widely known that many of these 700 or so employees are corrupt, and take ‘bonuses’ from advertisers that sometimes equal their own initial salary. Among journalists, claims of corruption and illicit gains go largely unchecked, with business and government buy-offs, big and small, a commonly overlooked norm.[18]

The situation is further complicated by the pension and monthly stipend that the syndicate provides to members—via direct deposit by the government. The government taxes one percent of newspaper advertisements and then allots this to the syndicate fund for stipends and other benefits. However, the total taxable amount is capped at LE 20,000 (approximately USD 3,300) for national newspapers and LE 10,000 (approximately USD 1,650) for private newspapers, leading to lower revenues in practice. Small amounts of additional revenue come from the syndicate’s ownership of about 500 newspaper kiosks, membership fees, and rental of its facilities.[19]

The fund serves two main purposes: the first is as a pension for retired journalists (currently at about LE 800 a month) and the second is for what in Egyptian Arabic is called a *badal*, or a monthly stipend (currently LE 570 though said to be closer to LE 700) for all active members. The *badal* system began in 1981 as a means of providing journalists with an extra source of revenue for training and technological development. However, for many it has become either a primary or a vital secondary source of monthly cash. Each election year, candidates campaign on promises to raise the *badal* or pension rate, thereby completing the cycle of dependency among journalists, syndicate leaders, and the government and thus prolonging the corrupted status quo.

Waly reportedly won the syndicate presidency in 2011 in part because of his pledge to raise the *badal*, as well as for his other economic connections.[20] Ministries, when so inclined, will step in to fill the syndicate’s inevitable funding shortfall in the face of the continual rise of the *badal* and pension. For

example, one of Waly's last moves as syndicate head was to raise the monthly pension from LE 400 to LE 800. Before doing so, the Ministry of Finance pledged to make up the difference for the first few months. But several syndicate members allege that Waly raised the pension for purely political reasons: he knew that the burden would fall on the next syndicate head—whom he presumed would be from the opposition—to appeal to the government to help cover the unsustainable increase.[21]

Another state tactic for controlling the syndicate has been to ensure that the elected leader is also employed as the editor-in-chief or CEO of one of the state-owned newspapers. In this way, the state can ensure that the syndicate head is more likely to adhere to its rules—those of the President and his government. It hence came as little surprise to journalists when in September 2012, almost a year after Waly's election as syndicate head, the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Supreme Press Council appointed him CEO of the Al Ahram Corporation. At the time of his election, Waly had been a financial journalist with no previous managerial experience at *Al Ahram*.

"I see this as against the ABC's of the syndicate's work. It won't work if you are in such a high position, and at the same time, are supposed to support the rights of journalists who work under you," Yehia complained.[22]

Many journalists and syndicate members also cited the lack of self-regulation and effective ethics codes as confounding factors that reduce the press' authority as a reliable and respectable source for news and analysis.[23] In the profession, ethics codes are generally considered vital because of the stability and clarity they provide journalists in outlining their jurisdiction and expectations. On the other hand, co-opted ethics codes can also be used to the detriment of a free press, in practice restricting the development of the press within a politicized framework rather than fostering the institutionalization of professional norms. According to the Press Law, the syndicate is charged with developing a code of ethics. The last Press Code of Ethics was issued by decree in 1988. However, it is generally considered a mere formality on paper.

"It is not clear how it was developed, and what degree of input into it journalists had," the UNESCO report concludes. "But it goes beyond what are

considered appropriate matters for inclusion in media codes of conduct. In practice, the Code is rarely applied and does not appear to be relied upon by the journalistic profession for guidance.”[24]

No journalist interviewed at a newspaper for this article could provide the code at the time.

In a profession commonly criticized for its lack of balance, credibility, and transparency—other key fundamentals of the profession—the syndicate in theory has the power to help reshape Egyptian journalistic practices and professional norms. And there are those who in good faith do seek to effect these changes. But far too many—from the political figures at the top to the general assembly members pocketing their *badal* each month—prefer the old rules of the game in practice.

“The Hijacked Syndicate:” A history of stalled reform

In Egyptian journalist lore, the syndicate is described with a nostalgic pride as a longtime force for freedom against repressive regimes. “The cries for the fall of the rule of the [Muslim Brotherhood’s Supreme] Guide at the union building renews memories of the journalists’ resistance to the policies of Sadat and Mubarak,” ran the headline of a story on the syndicate’s history as an independent institution in the privately owned *Al Youm Al Saba*’a newspaper three days after Rashwan’s election.

Egypt’s particular brand of associational life—largely replicated across the Middle East—began during colonial times as an alternative means for Egyptian professionals to secure resources and organize politically. Under subsequent regimes Egyptian syndicates were shaped by a hodgepodge of socialist, nationalist, and then liberal ideals into a complicated network of labor-state relations.

Many journalists nostalgically recall the Anwar Sadat era of the seventies and eighties as the syndicate’s heyday of activism against attempts to curtail journalists. When Sadat came to power in 1970 he initiated a restructuring of the press that led to the imprisonment and marginalization of hundreds of jour-

nalists and political thinkers. Over the next decade, further shake-ups ensued, with the establishment of new laws and institutions, such as the Supreme Press Council, which reinforced red lines around the press.[25] In 1980, when Sadat tried to downgrade the syndicate into a union, journalists objected in powerful masses. Sadat ultimately retreated, and the EJS remained, according to the constitution, the single syndicate available to journalists.[26] The tensions between Sadat and the syndicate were also reflective of labor and class changes in Egypt at this time, with largely middle-class journalists struggling to adjust to Sadat's policy of opening up Egypt's economy (*infitah*).

Under Mubarak's rule, press regulation wavered between periods of liberalization and repression. Unlike Nasser and Sadat, however, Mubarak and his circle faced the unprecedented challenge of rapidly developing new media technologies domestically and abroad—from the establishment of the first satellite tele vision station in the 1990s to the rise of the Internet and blogging in the 2000s. As seen, these latter digital trends proved nearly impossible to contain.[27]

Amidst these media changes Mubarak instigated several confrontations with the syndicate. In 1995 he raised the syndicate's ire with a new set of press regulations that, amongst many measures, increased fines against journalists and lowered the threshold for criticism of political figures. Protests and an angry syndicate assembly ensued and the regime ultimately backed down. In 1996, however, a new press package was passed, which included many of the 1995 provisions.[28]

In the book *Hurriya'ala al-Hamish* ("Freedom on the Margins"), journalist Karim Yehia chronicles how corruption trickles down from the state to the ordinary syndicate member, undermining the syndicate and the journalism ideal. In one of the book's notable chapters, entitled "The Hijacked Syndicate: On the bureaucracy and isolated leaders" Yehia details the deterioration of the syndicate's leadership from "leaders of bridges" between the state and people in the seventies to the corrupt "nationalistic leaders" and "isolated leaders" in the eighties and through the Mubarak era. With insider deals and bribery rampant in so many other sectors, it became politically expedient for party players and regular journalists to buy into the game too. "The work of the

syndicate came to resemble [that of] a *simsaar*, or small time broker, selling the authorities to the people, and selling the journalists to the ruling powers,” Yehia writes.[29]

While Yehia places great blame on Sadat, Mubarak, the NDP, and those surrounding the center of power, he also implicates many of his fellow journalists. Criticizing their “unconditional obedience,” he describes how journalists learned to accept whatever those above said, whether it was right or wrong. By whitewashing fraudulent realities and violations of the rights of citizens, journalism became a profession trading in special services and guarantees—prized possessions in a country where it was increasingly hard to get by for the average worker.

“Thus, the competition between individual journalists for goods and services was entrenched, taking the place of collective solidarity and its sense of responsibility and mission. At the same time, journalists became convinced that they were a ‘special group’...And it was this delusion that ensured that walls of isolation went up between journalists and society,” Yehia writes.[30]

In these circumstances, syndicate activists became even less inclined to push for meaningful legislative reform: they feared both that the government and NDP would seize the chance to further restrict the syndicate, and that their key constituents would oppose the removal of this special kind of treatment under the law.[31]

Given this persistent control over the syndicate by the NDP, when the January 25th revolution broke out then-syndicate head Makram Mohamed Ahmed, the NDP pick, stayed silent. For 18 days the syndicate did not release one statement on the revolution or about the press violations facing journalists in the streets. Ahmed’s disregard mirrored the presidency’s official stance: during the first four days of the uprising *Al Ahram*’s top news on the front page concerned itself with fighting in Lebanon.

At Ahmed’s behest, police blocked the syndicate entrance at the start of the uprising. No one could enter without his permission. Journalist Yehia Qalash and other syndicate activists reportedly tussled with police when denied

entrance to their own building. Ahmed, fearing for his safety, moved syndicate meetings to the Arab Union of Journalists building in Talat Harb Street. No one entered the syndicate building until February 8, when in a tension-filled meeting, Ahmed pretended to pay lip service to the memory of Ahmed Mohamed Mahmoud, the first journalist killed in the uprising.[32]

In the days that followed, syndicate journalists tried to mobilize around the momentum for change felt throughout the country. In Tahrir Square they raised banners in support of freedom of the press. Karim Yehia and several colleagues prepared drafts of a new press ethics code and other demands. On February 12, *Al Ahram* printed its now infamous edition, the front page of which completely reversed its past coverage of the events, declaring: "The People Have Toppled the Regime." By February 22, ten days after Mubarak's fall, Ahmed had submitted his resignation, citing poor health. The syndicate had been preparing a vote of no confidence should he fail to step down. In a revolution forged in labor unrest, Ahmed's defeat was a sign of changing times.

Hopes were hence high that the revolution's ideals would reach inside the syndicate. But concrete change was slow, and by March several key syndicate board members resigned in protest over the lack of progress. The revolution had been interrupted. "There was a moment [for change] during the days of the revolution," Yehia recalled. "But [afterwards] the biggest problem is that the people who tried to make things better were not united. And secondly their ability to influence change was limited." [33]

The first post-revolution syndicate elections, held in October 2011, reflected this stagnation. In a tight race, Qallash lost to Waly, reportedly because of Waly's closer ties to the hand that fed. It was feared Qallash, not from the *Al Ahram* ranks, would be less likely to ensure the continuation of the syndicate benefits.

"A starving syndicate:"

Problems under SCAF and Muslim Brotherhood rule

Immediately following Waly's confrontation with the crowds at the syndicate entrance on March 1, a private Egyptian newspaper posted a series of photos

and shaky video clips of the event online, making the harassment of the CEO of *Al Ahram* available for all to see. But the *Al Ahram* Arabic portal (Bawaba) did not put up any visuals to accompany its coverage—despite the fact that there was a heavy presence of *Al Ahram* online and print journalists on hand that day to document developments. The following day the print edition of *Al Ahram* summed up the event in only one paragraph. Presumably the editors at *Al Ahram* still felt that there was some news that was best left unreported.

This discrepancy in coverage between the private and state-owned press is emblematic of the ways in which the syndicate's media environment has been fundamentally altered since the revolution—and in other ways has remained constrained by the same laws and individual proclivities.[34]

Under SCAF, the level of freedom of the press fluctuated wildly, with moments of unprecedented coverage coupled with brutal repression. As the 2012 Freedom of the Press report concludes, “Egypt improved from Not Free to Partly Free as a result of the flourishing of new, independent media outlets, less self-censorship, and some loosening of centralized editorial control.... However, by year's end there were worrying indications that these gains were being reversed.”[35]

Indeed, after the revolution, the ceiling of acceptable topics to cover—or red lines, as journalists call it—rose dramatically: while still subject to censorship (and in particular the taboo of discussing the military), journalists recall the euphoria of the first few months when it seemed the system was really changing. A wave of privately owned satellite channels like ONTV and CBC embraced this new space, with lively debates among citizens, activists, political and business figures becoming the new nightly norm.[36]

At the same time, the laws on the books remain much the same, as does the mindset of the men at the top controlling the legislative process and the Supreme Press Council. This persisting problem trickles down to many workers within state-run media's aging newsrooms who, some *Al Ahram* journalists are quick to point out, have simply replaced their unquestioning support for Mubarak with support for Morsi. Long accustomed to making a certain kind of news, this bloated and politically hard-to-fire cadre of workers has received

neither the training nor instructions to do otherwise. In a newsroom culture where obedience reigns supreme, the old proverb rings true, “The King is dead, long live the King.”

Relations between SCAF and the media—especially the private and independent media—began their descent as the military took an increasingly hard line against political expression and the press who was reporting on it. With these battles, media coverage began to take a notably more polarized flavor, with state media parroting the official line and the private and independent press assailing the government. A slew of Salafi and religious satellite channels added to the politicization.[37]

“After the revolution the margins of freedom of expression and publication throughout society expanded to an unprecedented level, but also a not protected level,” explained MENA editor Merghany.[38] Many journalists lamented not only the rise in assaults on and threats to journalists but the emergence of yellow journalism that seemed to sensationalize the news in response to these threats.

With hopes for legislative change increasingly deferred, the syndicate struggled to address the limited safeguards for journalists in the field and in the newsroom. There was a concerted effort to increase professional and safety training to meet the changing times; but with limited resources to work with, these programs had a limited impact.[39]

The climate for journalism training also did not improve. In December 2011, when security forces raided the offices of 17 NGOs (including two media development organizations) citing foreign funding violations, the international journalism development community received a serious blow. Journalism training programs offered by foreign NGOs had long been viewed with suspicion by the Mubarak regime (and some journalists themselves); now SCAF was acting on these same fears by trying to delegitimize the intentions of these programs and cast doubt on calls for change.

The NGO raids further strengthened the entrenched interests resisting syndicate reform, in particular innovative training and development initiatives. In

Transformations in Egyptian Journalism, Sakr notes, “the episode highlighted the urgency of resolving legal contradictions over freedom of association as well as those affecting freedom of expression. It demonstrated once again the difficulty of institutional capacity building for the media in authoritarian settings....”[40]

The past year has seen an even more adverse approach to media freedoms by the government. When former Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi defeated former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq in the presidential run-off in June 2012, there was initial hope for the prospects of democracy in Egypt. But there were also deep fears over what kind of rule and regulations would follow. In the critical months since, both sides have claimed the moral high ground, painting a picture of stark contrasts between the government and opposition. The Morsi administration, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s party, have praised the *nahda*, or renaissance, that Egypt has undertaken: in January 2013 Morsi told the Arab Union of Journalists that Egyptian journalists had never been freer.[41] In response to these kinds of blanket statement, the view from the other side is expressed in similar absolutes. “This is the most critical period in the history of the syndicate,” said syndicate undersecretary Gamal Fahmy. “It is fighting a ruling group that has now proven beyond doubt that it opposes freedoms.”[42]

Echoing Fahmy’s sentiments, Yehia Qallash argued that the trajectory of press freedoms under Morsi’s government is particularly concerning in the long term. “When we talk about the Brotherhood, we are talking about a state,” he said. “SCAF was a temporary situation, while the Brotherhood are building institutions. There is a big difference.” He added, “All of their [MB] statements are in opposition to freedom of the press. They don’t represent the revolution.”[43]

In other words, while the Muslim Brotherhood are not unique in their press repression, incorporating techniques from SCAF and the former regimes, it is the institutionalization of these practices under the first democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood-led government that is the most worrying for media freedoms in the long term.[44] While the court system has become the main battleground in which the government persecutes journalists, the

Muslim Brotherhood online, print, and satellite channels have also vilified certain mediums as “black media”—with their own propaganda serving as the “white media” counter-model. In spring 2013, protests at the Moqattam Muslim Brotherhood headquarters between Morsi supporters and opponents degenerated into chaotic clashes in which journalists themselves became targets alongside the sparring sides.

For syndicate leaders like Fahmy and board member Abeer Saadi, the frustration is felt not only in the violence in the streets, but also in the lack of progress on the legislative front. “We believe that this constitution is not supporting freedom of expression,” said Saadi, who since 2011 has been responsible for syndicate training and development.[45] In 2011, when the syndicate officially came out against the constitution, a fistfight at a general assembly meeting ensued between those supporting it and those against it.

Saadi, a foreign affairs editor at *Al Akhbar*, expressed her particular dissatisfaction with several constitutional clauses, among them an article making it possible for media houses to be closed with a court ruling. She also deplored the lack of independence of the National Media Council (which is set to replace Sadat’s Supreme Press Council as the main body overseeing the Egyptian press). For Saadi, the constitutional process was also emblematic of the way that syndicate leaders have been marginalized from important decision-making processes. For years, for example, the syndicate had been advocating for a freedom of information law. But when the Muslim Brotherhood-controlled Shura Council (which oversees legislative work in the absence of a parliament) began to discuss such a law, they did not ask for or include any input from the syndicate. Syndicate leaders have also requested reform of the current *badal* and taxation system to increase their own independent revenue sources. The syndicate has proposed that 20 percent, rather than one percent, of the newspaper advertisement tax go directly to the syndicate for it to distribute, rather than have the government supplement shortfalls through handouts. The Shura Council, however, has refused.

“They are putting the syndicate on the edge of a very big financial and economic cliff,” Saadi said. “It’s really halting us. We know it’s not sustainable.... They don’t want us to be independent. We think that they want to put us

under starvation and to put us under pressure to stop opposing the president and the ruling party against freedom of expression.”

Saadi and other syndicate members say that, backed by their new head Rashwan, they will continue to push for these reforms nonetheless.

“Can they take the responsibility?”

The rhetoric and reality of reform

For leftist journalist Wael Tawfik, the EJS has long been too broken to fix. In 2007 he joined with several other similarly disgruntled journalists to form a new association, the Independent Journalist Syndicate (IJS). The aim, he explained, was to do what the EJS no longer could do: independently organize and support journalists in Egypt. The status quo, Tawfik explained, was for him no longer an option. Following the revolution, it seemed that many others agreed.[46]

Seated in a popular downtown café filled with cigarette smoke, Tawfik apologized for his tired demeanor. He had just returned from a friend’s funeral. The day before, the IJS’s lawyer, Sayed Fathy, had suddenly passed away, stricken by a heart attack at the age of 55. Fathy was a renowned human rights lawyer revered for his work with labor activists, revolutionaries, and the poor. Tawfik worried about how Fathy’s loss might affect his struggle.

The IJS is facing an uphill battle. In the first place, it is technically not a legal entity. The EJS’s official lawyer has filed several lawsuits against it, on the basis that its existence transgresses Egypt’s “one syndicate, one profession” policy. (To bypass this restriction, the IJS can try to register as an association rather than syndicate.) The IJS also lacks a steady source of funding (and therefore does not provide unemployment insurance or have an emergency fund) and does not yet have a permanent headquarters.

But what Tawfik’s association does provide, he says, is a progressive alternative for the profession. “We know we will succeed in the end,” he says.

The IJS purposely does not provide its 600 or so members a monthly *badal*, a practice that Tawfik dismisses as “bribery.” The membership criteria are also

intentionally more inclusive. Membership is contingent upon a substantial archive of journalistic work, whether print or online. Tawfik explained that the aim of the syndicate should be to help the journalist achieve meaningful employment—not to require the journalist to enter into a faulty contract in order to qualify for membership. “Employment is an aim and not a means for the syndicate,” he said.[47]

In a notable break with tradition, newspaper owners can become members of IJS but cannot have voting rights. According to Tawfik about 70 percent of the association’s members work in the private press, reflecting the general trend in Egyptian media. Unlike the EJS, the independent syndicate also accepts foreign journalists as members.

The Independent Journalist Syndicate is one of several alternative journalism associations to sprout up in recent years. For decades the state has tightly controlled labor organizations, but movements for labor reform began to gain strength in the years preceding the revolution. Since the uprising, over 30 fledgling independent unions have attracted around 300,000 members.[48] The Independent Online Journalists Syndicate, created in 2011, is another such body trying to create a new space for marginalized Internet reporters. On the broadcast front, members of the state-run Egyptian Radio and TV Union (ERTU) have been trying to organize an alternative space for government- and privately affiliated broadcast journalists that is independent of state control.[49]

Opponents of a variety of syndicates often cite the constitution as a support for their position: under the law, they say, only one syndicate is allowed—and it is hard to change that law with an absent parliament. But media law expert Mendel argues that with a degree of creativity an adequate middle ground can be reached through a federation of associations under one syndicate umbrella. “Within the framework of the constitution I think it would be perfectly possible, with a little bit of imagination, to open up in practice the organizational framework for journalists,” he said. “All of the journalists could organize in different associations that represented their interests and they could coalesce in a framework, single syndicate that would meet the constitutional requirement, for example.”[50]

As noted, Egypt is a signatory to several international labor conventions that provide for freedom of association. Yet the EJS continues to ignore, and even blocks, demands for a more pluralistic syndicate system. The most vocal opponents within the journalist syndicate are former NDP and FJP members who no doubt view a pluralistic labor force as harder to control.

According to Saadi, the EJS has made some concessions. It has granted some online-only journalists syndicate membership, as long as they have a contract with a print organization. She expressed interest in opening up the syndicate to include online journalists officially, and supported the right of broadcast journalists to independently organize.[51] But she did not endorse the idea of a competing journalist syndicate such as the IJS. “We opposed the creation of a second syndicate for print journalists but it would be OK to have another syndicate for people working in a different part of the media,” she told Sakr in *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*. [52]

Balshy, on the other hand, is one of the few who openly support alternative syndicates. “If you don’t change these laws, then these people have the right to go and make their own syndicate that represent them and protect their rights,” he said.[53] But among those in power his ideas are still, it seems, too revolutionary.

On the transnational level, the EJS is also somewhat resistant to reform. It refuses to be part of the International Federation of Journalists because Israel is a member; participation in the IFJ’s training and conferences would violate the syndicate’s anti-normalization stand. The Federation of Arab Journalists is in theory another source for funding and training, but in practical terms journalists consider it a merely symbolic body, constrained by domestic and regional Arab politics.[54] “It’s a big collective of failures,” Saadi complained. “It puts all of the Arab syndicates with all of their problems together. I don’t think that they can do anything.”[55]

The question of the syndicate’s independence is hence interconnected with Egypt’s larger political and socio-economic transformations. Since the revolution, media and political analysts have questioned whether the limits on freedoms of the press and expression in Egypt have been raised, or just rear-

ranged. As the syndicate demonstrates, the latter is unfortunately the far more accurate story. Shaped by the legal system, political pressures, economic conditions, and individual proclivities, entrenched interests, big and small, have proven a persisting barrier to the enactment of reforms that reflect the ideals that once ignited an uprising.

“The heart of the slogan of the revolution was freedom,” said Qallash. “And in our opinion, the opinion of the Egyptian people, that means the right to a free and independent press. But what happened in the last two years is that this slogan has not been achieved on the ground.”[56]

IJS member Tawfik paused before answering a final question: was he optimistic about the future of the syndicate since the revolution?

“Look,” he said. “There have been three major changes in the syndicate since the revolution.” He continued to list them: the removal of many supporters of the old regime, small changes in the way that those applying for membership are treated, and improvements in the rhetoric and tone of syndicate leaders, in particular since the election of Diaa Rashwan. “But unfortunately this change has not been seen in a direct way on the ground,” he concluded. So no, he was not optimistic.[57]

Tawfik attributed this mixed report on syndicate reform to a simple fact about the Egyptian revolution. “It was a change in society not a change in laws,” he said. And unfortunately in the case of the syndicate, he added, both the laws and the culture have been slow to change.

Saadi does not deny this problem either. Seated in *Al Akhbar* foreign affairs newsroom, she is quick to blame the Muslim Brotherhood and political cronies for the syndicate’s sickened state. They hold the power, after all, and are wielding it recklessly. “The situation of the country, and the situation of the syndicate, is going in the wrong direction,” she said. “People have given up in this country. They are fed up and really frustrated.”

But she admits that the failures of leadership trickle down to the members of the syndicate. “To be truthful, there are a lot of things that need to be not just

reformed, but changed. And change is not easy even on the personal level, so what about an entity that is 72 years old? ... If the syndicate is not able to change itself this year, and I mean 2013, then we are not going to survive strong. We are going to survive, yes, as a building, etc. But as a truthful entity that deserves to stay and sustain itself, we are not."

Referring to Rashwan's election, she touched upon a challenge facing journalists across Egypt: the challenge of not falling back into the corrupted practices of the past.

"At that time we knew, and everyone knew, that they [MB] did not present any candidate for the Chair position because they knew that they are hated in the syndicate," she explained. "And unlike in other syndicates they've never been a majority, but an organized minority... The battle was formed by the Nasserists and the leftists because they wanted people to come vote in these elections. That's true. And now the syndicate is theirs... But this is actually a very big responsibility. Can they take the responsibility and not rely on the government?"

Reforms in a post-Mubarak era are indeed not easy in the face of decades of entrenched interests; but changes in the EJS membership and financial structures are an imperative for meaningful reform going forward. As this article has reported, however, small developments alone are not enough. Egyptian journalists have the right to freedom of association and no government—revolutionary or not—should be able to deny this right unchecked.

Indeed, while Egyptian journalists face numerous obstacles two years after Mubarak's fall, the most dangerous remains avoiding the pitfalls of the past. "There is a need for public acknowledgment that good journalism is not possible in corrupt environments," concludes Sakr in *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*. [58] For those in the syndicate calling for freedom of the press and expression, avoiding the gulf between rhetoric and reality is indeed a great responsibility—and increasingly consequential. A strong syndicate system can provide the backbone for such a transformation—but a co-opted one can also deeply stall progress. The question hence still remains, can they take the responsibility?

Notes

[1] Miriam Berger, "With new journalist syndicate president, hopes for a profession in transition," EgyptSource, March 19, 2013, <http://www.acus.org/egyptsource/new-journalist-syndicate-president-hopes-profession-transition>.

[2] Rana Muhammad Taha, "Abu Deif's family allege assassination," Daily News Egypt, December 9, 2012, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2012/12/09/abu-deif-family-allege-assassination/>.

[3] Salma Shukralla, "Brotherhood losses in Egypt Press Syndicate Suggest Waning Popularity," Al Ahram Online, March 18, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/66989/Egypt/Politics-/Brotherhood-losses-in-Egypt-press-syndicate-polls-.aspx>; Heba Afify, "Journalist syndicate polls reveal anti-brotherhood bloc, but many challenges lies ahead," Egypt Independent, March 26, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/journalists-syndicate-polls-reveal-anti-brotherhood-bloc-many-challenges-lie-ahead>

[4] Karim Yehia, interview by author (Arabic), Cairo, April 2013.

[5] As part of a larger study on Egyptian print media and the Internet, about fifty journalists at private and state-run papers were asked about their views on the syndicate.

[6] Amira Wehdeh, interview by author (Arabic), Cairo, February 2013.

[7] Toby Mendel, interview by author (English), Skype, April 2013.

[8] Balshy is the former editor-in-chief of Al Badeel newspaper, which was abruptly shut down last year; Mai Shams Al Din, "Stuck between state and corporate owners some journalists seek another way," Egypt Independent, March 10, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/stuck-between-state-and-corporate-owners-some-journalists-seek-another-way>.

[9] Khaled Balshy, interview with author (Arabic), Cairo, May 2013.

[10] Ragaei al-Merghany, interview with author (Arabic), Cairo, March 2013.

[11] UNESCO, Assessment of Media Development in Egypt based on UNESCO's Media Development Indicators, 2013, 33 <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002207/220742E.pdf>

[12] As an Egypt Independent story reported, the 1970 law states that the syndicate "should spread socialist and nationalist thought among its members," and it still refers to Nasser-era jurisdiction of several institutions and positions that no longer exist. See Noha El Hennawy, "Accusations fly as faction moves to restrict journalists syndicate membership," Egypt Independent, August 8, 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/accusations-fly-faction-moves-restrict-journalists-syndicate-membership>.

[13] UNESCO, Assessment of Media Development, 15

[14] Naomi Sakr, Transformations in Egyptian Journalism (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) 76.

[15] Jano Charbel, "Job security, financial problems and dangers plague journalists," Egypt Independent, April 25, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/final-issue-job-security-financial-problems-and-dangers-plague-journalists>.

[16] Charbel, "Egypt's journalists battle to organize independently," Egypt Independent, March 6, 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypts-journalists-battle-organize-independently>.

[17] Karim Yehia, interview by author (Arabic), April 2013.

[18] A recent case captures this complexity. One week before the March 2013 election, Rashwan and his opponent Salama threatened to stop the elections because the Illicit Gains Authority detained two journalists from Al Gomhoriya over claims of illicit dealings. According to syndicate by laws, the authority should have brought the case first to the syndicate, which would then initiate legal action. The candidates expressed their stance in support of the Al Gomhoriya journalists as a sign of syndicate solidarity against political interference. But, as several journalists interviewed noted, at the same time they did nothing to address the corrupt advertising case. Regardless of whether the government acted inappropriately, the problem still remained.

[19] UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development*, 32; Merghany, interview by author, Cairo, April 2013.

[20] Yehia, April 2013.

[21] Merghany, April 2013.

[22] Yehia, April 2013.

[23] Naomi Sakr, interview by author (English), Cairo, April 2013.

[24] UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development*, 63.

[25] In 1975 Sadat created the Supreme Press Council to license newspapers and to implement a code of professional journalist ethics, among other elements. In 1976 he passed a decree allowing the creation of political parties, and their subsequent party newspapers, thereby in theory, opening up the press. (Nasser had nationalized the press in 1960, silencing a previously cacophonous field.)

[26] Sadat's signing of the 1978 peace treaty with Israel is another critical moment in shaping the syndicate's perception of itself as a politically oppositional force. Already angry with Sadat over a number of domestic decisions, the syndicate decried what they saw as Sadat's abandonment of the Palestinian cause. They enacted new by laws that forbade "normalization" with any Israeli—journalist, politician, or average citizen—as well as visits to Israel. (The Camp David Accords called for the normalization of relations between the two states.) Journalists were further incensed when syndicate leaders put in by the NDP visited Israel—in blatant disregard of the syndicate's rules. Until today, the syndicate's anti-normalization stand is recalled by members as a source of pride and professional identity—and seen as congruent with calls for a free press.

[27] The first state-owned satellite communications company, Nilesat, was launched in 1996. In 2001 the government licensed Dream TV, the first private satellite channel that set the stage for a new array of opinion, commentary and entertainment (private television channels are prohibited from broadcasting news). In 2005 the Mubarak government allowed the licensing of the first private newspaper in Egypt, *Al Masry Al Youm*, a phenomenon considered one of the first in the series of events that enabled the revolution.

[28] Karim Yehia, *Hurriya 'ala al-Hamish* (Alexandria: Ain Publishing, 2011) 155-166.

[29] Yehia, *Hurriya*, 163.

[30] *Ibid*, 155.

[31] Shaden Shehab, "Change at Press Syndicate," *Al Ahram Weekly*, August 7-13 2003, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/650/eg5.htm>. For a moment in 2003 it seemed that there was a window for change when prominent Nasserite writer Galal Aref beat the government's candidate, *Al Ahram* columnist Salah Montasser. For the first time in decades, Aref was the first syndicate leader that did not belong to state-owned media or publication houses. Syndicate members attributed Aref's win to the significant anger among journalists that the regime—despite its hegemony in syndicate affairs—had still failed to improve their working conditions. However, by the next round of elections, the syndicate proved unable to maintain the advance in the face of entrenched interests: in 2008 members elected government-selected Makram Mohamed Ahmed, former head of *Dar Al-Hilal* publishing. In another election held in 2009, Ahmed won again in a tight election against Rashwan. Journalists at state-run newspapers and agencies, however, reported a concerted, and quite costly, effort at intimidating and enticing them to vote for Ahmed. In a move typical of the previous regime, NDP supporters also tried to frame Rashwan as a former Nasserist turned supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, or the "banned organization," as it was then called in the press.

[32] Karim Yehia, *Tamarrud Fi Al-Thakana (Rebellion in the Barracks)* (Cairo: Gazirat Al Ward Publishing, 2012) 174-183.

[33] Yehia, interview by author, Cairo, April 2013.

[34] Adel Iskandar, "A Year in the Life of Egypt's Media: A 2011 Timeline," *Jadaliyya*, January 26, 2012. http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3642/a-year-in-the-life-of-egypts-media_a-2011-timeline

[35] "Egypt: Freedom of the Press 2012," Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/egypt>

[36] The image of writer and political thinker Alaa Al-Aswany challenging former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq on ONTV became emblematic of the new kind of accountability that the media could seek on the airwaves.

[37] The October 2011 Maspero demonstrations (in which 27 Coptic Christians were killed by police while protesting outside of Maspero, the state broadcasting headquarters) came to epitomize the state media at its worst: during the violence, a state-TV broadcaster urged Egyptians to come out to defend the police and in the days that followed, state newspapers portrayed biased accounts of the event. Maurice Chammah, "The Scene of the Crime," *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 15, Spring 2012, http://www.arabmediasociety.com/articles/downloads/20120408132709_Chammah_Maurice.pdf.

[38] Merghany, April 2013.

[39] In late 2011, the syndicate held a series of training sessions and conferences with UNESCO aimed at developing a code for self-regulation. UNESCO eventually published a report outlining key professional ideals, but the larger conversation about professional identity in the post-revolution context is still lacking in many newsrooms.

[40] Sakr, *Transformations*, 85.

[41] Al Masry Al Youm, "Our journalists have never been freer, Morsy proclaims," January 11, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/our-journalists-have-never-been-freer-morsy-proclaims>.

[42] Afify, "Journalist syndicate polls reveal anti-Brotherhood bloc, but many chal-

lenges lie ahead.”

[43] Yehia Qallash, interview by author (Arabic), Cairo, March 2013.

[44] Noha El-Hennawy, “Thursday Papers: Black media, bears, and commandments,” *Egypt Independent*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/thursday-s-papers-black-media-beards-and-commandments>.

[45] Abeer Saadi, interview by author (English), Cairo, May 2013.

[46] Wael Tawfik, interview by author (Arabic), Cairo, May 2013.

[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Sakr, *Transformations*, 77.

[49] Mai Shams El Din, “Maspero workers delayed salaries highlight institution’s dire finances,” *Egypt Independent*, April 8, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/maspero-workers-delayed-salaries-highlight-institution-s-dire-finances>.

[50] Mendel, April 2013.

[51] Saadi, May 2013.

[52] Sakr, *Transformations*, 79.

[53] Balshy, interview by author, Cairo, May 2013.

[54] Yehia, *Tamarrud*, 196.

[55] Saadi, May 2013.

[56] Qallash, March 2013.

[57] Tawfik, May 2013.

[58] Sakr, *Transformations*, 93.

The Scene of the Crime: October 9th, Maspero, and Egyptian Journalism after the Revolution

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Maurice Chammah

On October 9, 2011, violence broke out in front of the Maspero building in downtown Cairo, turning a peaceful march into clashes that resulted in the deaths of over twenty protesters. Immediately, accusations targeted the state-owned media, claiming that it had reverted to Mubarak-era practices of provoking inter-religious violence and had failed to acknowledge the possibility that the military had purposefully killed protesters. While covering the story, independent journalists found themselves working out their relationship to activists as they tried to build a credible case against the state-sanctioned version of the events. This is the story of the march, its aftermath, and the way it was covered, along with brief forays into the history of Egyptian media, offering a broad look at Egyptian journalism a year after Mubarak's fall from power.

The march was to begin shortly before sunset at Shubra square, in the largely Coptic Christian neighborhood of the same name, and proceed to downtown Cairo, ending in front of the Maspero building, the headquarters of state-owned television studios. At the same moment, another group of protesters were already gathering near Maspero, on the east bank of the Nile, and would join the march as it arrived.

For months, many in Egypt's Coptic community had been denouncing both attacks on their churches and the state-run media's coverage. Shortly after midnight on January 1, 2011, a church in Alexandria had been bombed, resulting in the deaths of over twenty worshippers. In March, a church in the southern outskirts of Cairo was torched. When Christians protested the burning in front of Maspero, they were attacked by a mob, and then agreed to disband when the military agreed to rebuild the church.

Even with Mubarak gone, this trend did not change substantially. In May, another church was attacked in Imbaba, a working-class neighborhood across the Nile from Shubra, after rumors spread of a Christian convert to Islam being held hostage. On September 30th, the Mar Girgis church in the southern village of El-Marinab was attacked by thousands and torn down after months of bickering over renovation plans.

I have used the passive voice in describing the attacks, because in many cases investigators failed to find culprits. The reasons for these failures were widely debated; some activists went so far as to accuse the Ministry of the Interior of purposefully bungling the investigations, and former president Hosni Mubarak of fanning the flames of sectarianism to ensure that he would be seen as a protector of the Copts. They accused state media of collusion in the plan. Others accused the state media of simply ignoring the myriad problems facing Copts at the hands of Islamic extremist groups and the government's inability or unwillingness to protect them.

"Both state-affiliated and independent newspapers consistently misreported the circumstances of the church burning [in El-Marinab] and its immediate aftermath," wrote Mariz Tadros of the Middle East Research and Information Center "raising serious questions about the ethics (or perhaps the skills) of journalists in the post-Mubarak era and suggesting, again, that the SCAF's penchant for censorship and press intimidation is on a par with that of the deposed regime." [1]

These were several of the reasons that members of the Coptic community planned yet another march to the Maspero building. An *Ahram Online* reporter later described the march as it began at Shubra square: "People walked peacefully, holding flowers, crosses and singing Christian hymns. There were lots of priests there as well: some of whom stood in the beds of pick-up trucks with microphones and speakers." [2] In the meantime, buses carrying army personnel began to arrive on the two bridges north and south of Maspero. Protesters began to chant: "We thought you would unite us, but you actually divided us." [3] In a later account for *Al Masry Al Yom*, journalist Sarah Carr wrote, just as she foreshadowed: "In the front row was a group of men in long white bibs, 'martyr upon demand' written on their chests." [4]

At 6 p.m., as the sun was setting over the Nile, the march proceeded down El-Galaa Street, passing the headquarters of the state-owned newspaper *Al Ahram*, which had once supported Mubarak uncritically. “A single rock was thrown at the door,” Carr recounted, “likely a comment on its coverage of violence against Copts.” The demonstrators began to chant, “Here are the Coptic Christians. Where is the press?”

Al Ahram was actually founded by two non-Coptic Christians, the Lebanese brothers Beshara and Salim Taqla, in 1875, out of a small office in Alexandria. Ten years later, they moved the operation to Cairo and over the course of successive generations of editors, mostly drawn from the Taqla family, *Al Ahram* grew into Egypt and the Arab world’s most widely read newspaper. In 1950, scholar Helen Kitchen called *Al Ahram* “The ‘Times’ of the Arab World.”[5]

“On the most minor domestic issues,” she admired, “*Al Ahram* plays the part of the wise old man, giving a gentle prod here and a mild hint there, uncolored by either sectarian or partisan bias.” During World War II, both the Allied and Axis sides tried to get the paper’s editors to sell their editorial opinions to the highest bidder. When the editors refused, both sides accused them of supporting the other. In the late 1940s, the paper’s circulation jumped from 30,000 to 80,000 copies.

Some Egyptians were bothered, however, that the most powerful newspaper in Egypt was not run by Muslims. In 1957, Muhammad Hassanein Heikal, now undoubtedly the most famous journalist in recent Egyptian history, took over *Al Ahram*. He wrote a report to the board of directors in his best literary Arabic only to find out that the board, in keeping with its Christian-Lebanese roots, largely spoke French.[6]

Such a situation would not last for long. In 1960, President Gamal Abdel Nasser oversaw the nationalization of the Egyptian press, and Heikal became his close advisor. “Heikal was Nasser’s alter ego,” wrote Louis Awad, a literary editor jailed during the period. “When Heikal contradicted him, Nasser was in fact having a dialogue with himself.”[7]

Heikal focused on technological innovation and his personal taste for cleanliness became legend. One impressed observer wrote of “immense marble reception halls, adorned with gouache paintings and ceramic sculpture” which “lead to antiseptic rooms where technicians in immaculate smocks tend electronic perforators, American computers, and British typesetting machines.”[8]

At the same time, the content of the newspaper slowly became a reflection of the Nasser administration’s desire to control information, a trend that succeeded Nasser himself. “I want freedom of the press,” President Anwar Sadat said after withdrawing and then reissuing press licenses in the early 1970s to keep journalists in line. “At the same time I want it to be a dedicated press.”[9]

“The Egyptian editor feels under no obligation to print the full text of yesterday’s speech by the president of the Republic,” explained former ambassador and media scholar William Rugh, “although he frequently does.”[10]

The early Mubarak years were marked by optimism about press freedom. Rugh wrote that “in 1983, the International Press Institute stated that the Egyptian press under Mubarak had achieved the highest level of freedom since the fall of the monarchy in 1953.”[11]

But over the next decades of Mubarak’s rule, overt censorship plagued the newly founded independent newspapers, while self-censorship pervaded the state-owned publishers. *Al Ahram* and its peers continued to be accused of marginalizing Coptic concerns and whitewashing attacks on the Coptic community carried out by Muslims. The criticism was not that they were consistently wrong, but rather that their coverage always reflected the government’s interests.

“Journalists are banned from addressing issues such as the problems of copts [sic] in Egypt and issues related to the armed forces,” explained editor and journalism professor Mahmed Habeb.[12] In early 2010, after the murder of eight Copts by a Muslim gunman in Nag Hammadi, Coptic activist William Wissa declared: “State media, which is actually a publicity tool in the hands of the regime, is used to violating the most basic professional rules when covering news about crimes against Copts in particular.”[13]

On October 9th, after the Coptic marchers passed the *Al Ahram* building, they were joined by a number of Muslims in solidarity as they continued to make their way to Maspero, home of state-owned television. A monument to Nasser's dreams of state centralization, the Maspero building rises up on the east side of the Nile, visible from a wide swath between two bridges, its smoothly rounded base giving way to a sharp rectangular central tower upon which rests a thinly protruding collection of satellite dishes. Since January, the building had been surrounded by several thick rings of barbed wire, where soldiers stood ready to meet the coming march.

Several protesters and journalists wrote on Twitter that the scene around them was still peaceful as they approached Maspero at dusk. "A tiny old lady walked among them," wrote Carr, "waving a large wooden cross," while chanting "God protect you my children, God protect you."

What exactly happened next is largely a matter of whom one chooses to believe. No two reports are precisely the same. Many protesters later described rocks raining down from above as they passed under a bridge. Gunshots rang out. Tear gas was thrown. The army moved towards the groups of civilians, although who was attacking whom and why, was still unclear. "At a traffic underpass at the end of Shubra Street," wrote Carr, "...there was the sudden sound of what sounded like gunfire." [14] Egyptian blogger Zeinobia added that the march "was met by rocks hurled and gunshots in the air by some people." [15]

"As I neared the crowd, scores of mostly young Muslim men pushed their way past me carrying large wooden sticks and whatever rudimentary weapons they could fashion out of household kitchen items," wrote Reva Bhalla for the intelligence company Stratfor. [16] "Walking in groups of three or more with a confident swagger, they told everyone along the way that Copts were killing Muslims and soldiers and called on others to take revenge."

In the meantime, Central Security Forces and military police raided several offices in the Maspero building itself, including those of two independent stations, 25TV and Alhurra TV, smashing windows and forcing the former to go off the air. Alhurra is funded by the U.S. government, and a presenter

remained on air, trying to speak with soldiers searching the studio. He grew increasingly frantic, shouting repeatedly “I’m Egyptian, I’m Egyptian!” [17]

Several groups of people did not have to wait until later that night for a news story of what had happened, much less until the next day for print. I became an unintentional member of one of these groups: the small community of Egyptian and American journalists, local activists, and other users of the social media platform Twitter and the myriad blogs to which it often leads. Tweets and blog posts spilled out continually almost as soon as the violence started, with people at the scene instantly communicating what they saw and others far away culling and curating the information into longer, more cogent writings.

“What we are seeing in #Egypt is a clash between military & civilians, not Muslims and Copts,” tweeted reporter Reem Abdellatif. “But of course,” wrote Tony Karon in a blog post, as if responding, with instant analysis, “the sectarian issue itself is one easily manipulated to create a specter of chaos -- and make the argument for Egypt to be ruled by a strong hand.” [18]

The Twitter and blog conversations were as speculative as they were reactive, and often I read the commentary before I read the facts. I came across a tweet asking, “How come there isn’t a single photo or video of a Copt with a gun?” I had to quickly imagine that someone else must be accusing Copts of having weapons, which would mean that they, and not the army exclusively, were responsible for the violence, and that this tweet was trying to combat that accusation by asking for evidence.

It turned out that the tweet was not a response to an accusation made on Twitter, but rather to one made on television. Shortly after 8 p.m., on state-owned Channel One, presenter Rasha Magdy was reporting live on air about the events outside the Maspero building. “Three martyrs have fallen, as well as 20 injured, all are army soldiers,” she said. “And by who? Not by Israelis, or an enemy but by the very hands of a certain class of this nation’s citizens. This is the army that protected the revolution; the army that refused to fire a single gunshot at its citizens, is getting fired upon, at this moment.” [19]

With rising distress in her voice, Magdy then called upon “honest” or “honorable” Egyptians (“erroneously, without evidence, and possibly with malignant intent,” suggested Thanassis Cambanis of *The Atlantic*[20]) to come out into the streets and protect the military from the protesters. Meanwhile, Nile TV, another state-owned station, began to echo the report that several soldiers had been killed.

“State television has behaved thus far tonight much as it did during the 18 days of the Egyptian uprising,” observed Issandr El Amrani on his popular blog *The Arabist*. “In other words, it has deployed propaganda, unverifiable allegations, talk of ‘foreign agendas’ and ‘outside hands’, and extremely partial reporting. It has repeatedly used sectarian language, with presenters referring to protestors as ‘the Copts’ and using sentences such as ‘The Copts have killed two soldiers.’”[21]

Just as outrage began to spread among Twitter and blogs about the likelihood that the military had sparked the violence, so too did disbelief at the state television coverage, being produced right above the violence, which suggested that the Copts were to blame. The stream of accusations, reactions, and images of blurry violence had turned the usual pathway between producers and consumers of media and reporting into an impassable maze of information, disinformation and commentary.

The next day, the state-owned newspaper *Al Akhbar* reported that the protesters “attacked military police with machetes and Molotov cocktails.”[22] Another state-owned paper, *Al Gomhurriya*, printed a question in large bold letters: “Who is Setting Egypt on Fire?” and quoted a military source as vaguely, yet ominously, suggesting “the events were planned.” *Al Wafd*, which is run by one of the country’s older political parties, printed the headline “A Bloody Disaster in front of Maspero” and described protesters attacking soldiers with “metal chains, daggers, and Molotov cocktails.”[23] It informed its readers that “groups of Coptic youths managed to seize automatic weapons from the soldiers but chose not to use them.” The independent *Al Dustur* wrote that the attacks were carried out by “criminals,” but that before the violence broke out, “50,000 Coptic protesters launched an armed protest, unprecedented in the history of the church.”[24]

Al Ahram, both in English and Arabic, largely held off from swinging accusations at first, focusing instead on the military's immediate promises to investigate, on condemnations from domestic and foreign leaders, and calls for reconciliation. On Tuesday, October 11th, *Al Ahram* called the events the "Maspero incident," while other papers used words in their headlines like "massacre," "tragedy," "bloodbath" and "conspiracy." *Al Masry Al Youm*, in an ostensibly sober press review, sarcastically noted the "slasher-film sensibilities" of its competitors.[25]

The next morning, *Agence France-Presse* reported that the Coptic Church officially blamed "strangers" who "infiltrated the demonstration and committed the crimes for which Copts are being blamed." [26] The Muslim Brotherhood released a statement claiming "America is planning to occupy Egypt by inciting sectarianism." Politician (and now presidential candidate) Mohamed Selim Al Awa thought that the peaceful protest was taken over by "trained and hired" forces.

In the independent newspaper *Al Tahrir*, editor Ibrahim Eissa asked "If the SCAF has been aware for a while now of the existence of a conspiracy, why did it wait until the protest to send in armored vehicles, instead of subverting the counter-revolutionaries at an earlier opportunity?" A veteran of jail time for his publications under Mubarak, Eissa knew to paint his misgivings with subtlety. "If the Maspero events were the result of a conspiracy," he asked the military, "did you not contribute to its success by spilling the blood of protesters?" [27]

Only a few, openly anti-regime outlets reported immediately on events that would later be recognized as the most horrific that night. On widely dispersed YouTube videos, armored personnel carriers (APCs) could be seen in grainy, shaky images, wildly careening through crowds of running protesters, overtaking many and trapping them.

"All of a sudden we saw a speeding APC zigzagging towards us, from the street onto the sidewalk," said protester Vivianne Magdy in a television interview not long after.[28] "The next thing I remember was the APC knocking Mosad [her fiancé] off the ground. He was thrown onto the other side of the

street, and his skull and leg were broken. His leg was almost separated from his body, and his head was bleeding. Then a group of military officers gathered around him and kept beating him while he was trying to breathe.”

Western newspapers and agencies largely held off at first from laying blame squarely on the military. *The Guardian* reported only “Coptic Christians clashed with security forces.” “Clashes broke out,” was the BBC’s subject-less version. [29]

At the same time, some Western publications indirectly hinted at their position about the truth by placing descriptive weight on the grief of the victims, the anger of the Coptic community, and the firm belief by some of the protesters that they had been attacked by soldiers. “Women in Cairo’s Coptic hospital wailed for their dead on Monday and Christians accused Egypt’s generals of failing to protect them from strict Islamists,” wrote Tamim Elyan for *Reuters*. [30]

“An angry crowd of thousands gathered at the largest cathedral here on Monday to mourn the death of two dozen Coptic Christian demonstrators killed the night before in clashes with security forces,” began David Kirkpatrick for the *New York Times*, “as liberal activists lamented the military’s increasingly tight hold on power.” [31] Online, the *New York Times* also published a blog post by Robert Mackey titled “Social media accounts of violence in Cairo challenge official narrative.” [32] Tom Gara, who writes for *The National* lamented on Twitter “Egyptian propaganda managed to turn a massacre of protesters into a two-way deadly ‘clash’ with deaths on both sides.” [33]

On Wednesday, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) held a press conference, where they denied any military role in the deaths of the Coptic protesters. They had already called upon the civilian leadership to form a committee to investigate the events. That same day, the state-owned Middle East News Agency cited a military source claiming that the army had buried some number of soldiers killed on Sunday. [34] SCAF member General Adel Emara said that “while he could not deny that some people might have been hit, it was not ‘systematic’.” David Kirkpatrick, in the *New York Times*, quoted Emara’s account of the situation he thought the soldiers, all of whom were quite young, found themselves in that night:

“I want you all to imagine, as parents would,” Emara told a sea of microphones, “the soldier in his vehicle who sees the scene and wants to run for his life. He sees a car burning, and if people jump out, the crowd beats him up severely, so this is not safe either.”

“What can he do,” the General asked rhetorically, before answering himself, “other than try to drive his car out of this hell to safety?...He wanted to get away with his car; he must’ve been traumatized.”[35]

Kirkpatrick refrained from joining the chorus of Egyptian journalists by then adamant that the army and state media were to blame. Still, his assessment invariably seeped out. From many possible anecdotes, he chose to conclude his article with a few paragraphs on Vivianne Magdy.

By then, Magdy had become an icon after going on television on Tuesday, still raw with grief, and describing how her fiancé was run over and killed by one of the military vehicles. Kirkpatrick placed Magdy’s experience at the end of his article, leaving the reader with a harrowing image of a woman holding the hand of her fiancé, dead in the hospital. The takeaway was clear.

On Thursday, I attended a press conference held by several youth organizations to present a counter-narrative to the SCAF’s statements the day before. I climbed several flights of stairs to get to a small pair of rooms, the offices of *Al Tahrir* newspaper, and struggled to make my way in among thick crowds of journalists and activists. The conference room, really a foyer, was so small that journalists had to take turns getting good positions to film and hear the speakers, who took turns stepping into the fluorescent haze of the cameras, positioning themselves in front of microphones rigged into staplers and held in the air by arms protruding anonymously from the mass of people.

Every few minutes, the murmurings of cameramen jostling for space and reporters making quiet phone calls were enough to overtake the speaker’s voice, at which point the organizers would scream at everyone to quiet down. As the activists, many of whom were journalists themselves, described their experiences on Sunday night, the reporters scribbling down notes and holding up cameras often tossed in their own comments, on occasion even interrupting

the speaker to correct what they felt to be a missed angle or a hidden issue. An American journalist commented on some footage being shown on a small laptop screen. “It’s just so dark,” she said skeptically. “Sorry,” the speaker, who had shot the video, responded, “It’s from my mobile phone.”

A 25-year old journalist named Lobna Darwish stood to speak. Her memories were full of the scattered, incomplete impressions of violence that everyone seemed to have of Sunday night. She stressed that the march was initially “full of families.” “Things were fine,” she said, “until we reached the Shubra underpass,” at which point “rocks were thrown at us.”

“At first when I saw the first truck, I thought it was an individual case of a military officer who went crazy,” she said, in *Daily News Egypt* reporter Heba Fahmy’s translation. “But there were four armored personnel carriers running over the people again and again.”[36]

By the third hour of the conference, the crowd had thinned. Some of the activists who spoke late in the afternoon shortened their accounts into tight takeaway points for the tired reporters, who still dutifully jotted notes and held their microphones in the air. One activist showed a video depicting a military officer riding a public bus following the clashes, who announces, “I shot one of them with three bullets” and receives applause.

In a room next door and on the street outside, the witnesses repeated their stories in front of different television cameras. Their narratives gradually became less scattered and hazy, and congealed into consistent, persuasive, and passionate accounts. The most damning and clear evidence, however, was not in pictures, but buried deep past the lead in some of the independent press. Manal Khaled, who works at the Maspero building, was quoted in the *Daily News Egypt* as saying that military police told employees at Maspero to leave the day of the violence by 2 p.m., and that the military police “told us that armed Copts would come to the TV building and [violent clashes] would erupt.”[37]

As I prepared to leave, a woman handed me two pages in English, a translation of the press conference’s official statement, which wove Sunday night’s

violence into the broader struggle of the revolution. It went farther than prior analyses, calling the violence a “full-fledged conspiracy” by the army.

Around the same time, a group of activists and journalists collected their accounts on a website called Maspero Testimonies. In both English and Arabic, they are filled with accounts of vivid brutality, jumping between short, reportorial sentences and longer, more speculative interpretation. This excerpt from Bishoy Saad’s piece is a good example of the cinematic tone found in many of the testimonies:

“All at once all the lights went off and I heard the sound of a car grating on the ground. I looked and saw an army tank coming from afar at insane speed with a solider at the cannon opening machine gun fire in every direction. People were running like madmen in every direction and the tank was crushing anyone in its path. The light was very faint and almost no one could see in front of them...we could just hear screams and the window glass in the building next to Maspero shattering from the gunfire.”

Many of the writers quoted the Qu’ran: “And do not conceal what you have witnessed—for he who conceals it is sinful at heart.” Others mentioned Twitter as the way they initially heard about the events, which spurred them to rush to the scene with the kind of impulsivity found equally in activists and war correspondents. Many of those writing the testimonies were both writers for an independent newspaper as well as members of a revolutionary organization. Manar Ammar, a journalist who described herself as a “neutral observer,” wrote “we were attacked by the army and the extremists who had believed the state media.” Ahmed Magdy, a journalist for *Al Tahrir* as well as a member of the Alliance of Socialist Youth, peppered his account with his personal reactions. “Somebody called me and told me to turn on national TV because the demonstrators were setting fire to Maspero,” he wrote. “No one would believe how glad I was, because that building needs to be set on fire 20 times in a row and it might still be the official building of fraud and deception.”

After the violence on October 9th, the community of independent journalists in Egypt found that they had become advocates for the narrative favored

by activists, and could do little to affect the overwhelming narrative printed by the state-owned press. At the same time, some independent newspapers simply continued their prior tendency to side with the ruling powers, either by choice, because the editors and publishers are connected in various ways to the leadership, or by force, because they have been fired or put in jail in the past.[38]

The scene for such a situation had been set long before the uprisings last January. “As an independent journalist you’re cornered,” Sarah El-Sirgany, managing editor of the *Daily News Egypt* (DNE) told me over lunch one day several weeks later. “You’re classified as anti-regime right away, no matter how objective you are.” [39] Amira Salah-Ahmed, the business editor at DNE, agreed. “When your independence entails bringing out the truth, and the truth is very, very ugly, and it’s always against the current regime and the status quo, then you’re instantly opposition,” she explained. “So you’re always put in this position, unwillingly maybe, and sometimes unintentionally, of opposing the regime, when in fact what you’re doing is a completely objective portrayal of certain situations.”[40]

When I asked her about October 9th specifically, she was quick to defend the independent journalists and indict the state press. She singled out Rasha Magdy, the presenter who called upon “honorable Egyptians” to come to Maspero and defend the army. “It kicked off at 5:30 or 6 and she was on the air at 8, and she’s in the Maspero building. All she had to do was look outside her window. It’s not an excuse,” Salah-Ahmed told me, shifting into the second-person to accuse Magdy. “You’re part of the problem. You’re part of the scene of the crime as it’s happening. Look outside your window or ask someone to find out what’s actually happening, rather than just reading the script and not thinking of the consequences of that. Because even if that were true, let’s say that the Coptic protesters were attacking the military, what good is it going to do for you to tell more unarmed citizens to go to the streets and go protect the military?”

For Salah-Ahmed, Magdy’s behavior was more than just a one-time mistake. It was indicative generally of state media, which in her mind is “the exact opposite of what good journalism is—what we do.”

El-Sirgany also criticized state media personnel, but in a more personal vein. “You have two different types of people working there,” she said. “You have the people who realize it’s a job they have to do to put money on the table and that’s it, and others who actually, by working there long enough, believe everything the state media does.” El-Sirgany’s comments to me had been common among critics in the days after Maspero. “It’s probably almost unfair to expect them [state media] to suddenly become real journalists,” writer Ashraf Khalil said on Al Jazeera’s Listening Post program. “They exist to support the power structure.”[41]

In 1979, William Rugh, one of the seminal scholars of contemporary Arab media, made the same point less caustically, finding a way to grant state media workers a status a bit higher than that of cogs in a sycophantic bureaucracy. He described the Egyptian media as a “mobilization press,” meaning that the purpose of journalists and their editors was to rally readers to the cause of nationalism by explaining and defending the policies of the country’s leadership. In some countries, he argued, the privately owned press always loyally supported the regime, but in Egypt and other countries where the business had been nationalized, the press “does not criticize the basic policies of the national government,” but “may carry stories and editorials critical of government services on the local level.”[42]

While the “lower level bureaucrat rather than the national leadership is held responsible,” he explained, “the criticism serves a pedagogical purpose for the leadership as well as providing an outlet for very limited debate.”

The state-owned newspapers received more freedom during the 1960s and 1970s, but the question became whether anyone was reading them. In 1960, about a month after newspapers like *Al Ahram* were brought under state control (“organized” was the official term[43]), Nasser oversaw the opening of a new television headquarters. Named for the famous French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero, the building was inaugurated on the eighth anniversary of the 1952 revolution. Three channels began broadcasting six hours a day, joining with state-controlled radio stations, which since the 1930s had reached Egypt’s vast illiterate population.[44] Both radio and TV featured far less criticism of government policy than newspapers. In 1970, Nasser, in his final

days, established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU). ERTU consolidated the control of media under the authority of the surreptitiously named Ministry of Information (which had once been more optimistically named the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance).[45]

Long-time media scholar Abdallah Schleifer put it thus: “Arab television, which came into being during the high tide of republican police states, did not even attempt journalism. Its photographers covered only occasions of state, and there were no correspondents, since it was ‘information’ not news that was sought. Anchors could do the job of reading state news agency wire copy describing these ceremonial occasions while unedited footage was transmitted.”[46]

Part of the explanation also had to do with the perceived necessities of war. “Steeped in a culture of perennial confrontation shaped by the conflict with Israel,” explains Lawrence Pintak, dean of the Edward R. Murrow School of Communication at Washington State University, in his recent book *The New Arab Journalist*, “the patriotic fervor so often seen among reports in countries at war became a permanent fixture of Arab media.”[47]

Perhaps more crucially, the Maspero building and ERTU became part of the vast state apparatus that proliferated during Nasser’s rule. Unlike the historical lineage that led to mainstream television news in the U.S. and Europe, the bureaucratic form of Nasser’s revolutionary government led to a situation in which state media workers were more akin to their counterparts in any other ministry than to the kind of journalists that had once been cultivated at *Al Ahram*.

When the Egyptian uprisings began in January 2011, many observed that the headquarters of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party were allowed to burn while the Maspero building, with its over 30,000 employees, was fortified quickly and heavily. To this day, the area surrounding the building looks like a military compound, with multiple layers of barbed wire, tanks, and armed soldiers in full gear. During the revolution, several state-owned stations told viewers that protesters were being given money and a meal from Kentucky Fried Chicken (there is a branch at Tahrir square), by “foreign entities,” while others showed footage of pandas and tranquil views of the Nile.

The day after the violence at Maspero in October, the English-language version of independent paper *Al Masry Al Youm* published an article quoting Rasha Magdy, the presenter who had called upon “honorable Egyptians” the night before. Magdy defended herself primarily by attacking the independent media. “Unlike state media that is owned by the people,” she said, “private channels have their own agendas, working against Egypt’s democratic transition for the sake of a scoop.”[48]

Over the year since Egyptians forced Mubarak from the presidency, articles have trickled out, in both independent newspapers and *Al Ahram*’s English online version, reporting that Maspero workers were angry with their superiors’ actions during the revolution and afterwards. Many workers at the building protested against how their stations had covered the uprisings and wanted to see changes in leadership. Some took indefinite leave while others formed organizations with like-minded colleagues.[49] Still others, like the well-known presenter Shahira Amin, spoke angrily to other press, both domestic and foreign. Amin, who herself received harsh criticism for interviewing Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after his release, had resigned from her position on state TV on February 3, 2011.

In late November, Minister of Information Osama Haikal (no relation to the former *Al Ahram* editor) spoke about October 9th to *Al Masry Al Youm*. [50] He had appointed a committee to investigate the state media’s coverage and appeared on talk shows.[51] “There was a real revolution in January and we seek to establish its goals,” he said. He answered questions with questions, and chalked the events up to “professional mistakes,” arguing “the campaign against us is unjustified:”

“On 9 October they accused us of incitement. Does incitement precede the event or does the event happen and then the incitement occurs? We were covering with great balance and no other television station was covering because it was right downstairs. The real problem is that some presenters were overwhelmed by the situation and started to defend [the military]. Some people said we didn’t mention the number of Coptic deaths but the question is who gave this number before us?”

Asked the pointed question “Should there be a Ministry of Information in a democracy?” Haikal equivocated. “No,” he said. “I myself was opposed to the Ministry of Information in the past and when it was abolished I objected to its sudden abolishment. It will be abolished sooner or later, but things must be put in place before doing that.”

The forensic truth of what happened on October 9th, and the wide gap between state and independent coverage represented a dynamic that had been growing steadily for several years. Ever since the eighteen days of uprisings in January and February that resulted in the end of Mubarak’s rule, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had slowly begun to rely on the structures of media production and consumption that defined the Mubarak years. “Suffice it to say that the gulf between state and private media has never been wider than it was between April and December 2011,” argued media scholar Adel Iskandar on the website *Jadaliyya*. “The state media’s superior terrestrial reach in Egyptian homes and its advantage over private satellite networks has given the military the assurance that the majority of Egyptians will watch their shows. Additionally, SCAF has also gambled on the Egyptian people’s loyalty and respect for the armed forces through decades of indoctrination in the media and education.”[52]

By allowing this gap in coverage to widen on October 9th, the military council had succeeded as well in pushing the revolutionary activists and their independent journalist colleagues politically away from the majority of the Egyptian public, which would later be dubbed the “Silent Majority.” Reading the news, not just reporting it, became a difficult, time-consuming enterprise simply not possible for the majority of Egyptians, and the SCAF assumed that most Egyptians would take at face value the state-owned media’s narrative. They assumed Egyptians would trust that their leaders had acted in good faith, just as they had in the days of Nasser.

Independent journalists and activists attempted to counteract this narrative by holding their own alternative press conferences and organizing initiatives like the *Maspero Testimonies* website, but they simply could not compete with the organizational power and institutionalized reach of state-owned media. The lines between activists and journalists had blurred, to the degree that the

journalists' presence at the scene of the crime made their accounts, counter-intuitively, less plausible to those already predisposed to blame the protesters for the violence, especially as there was increasing talk of a return to stability and an end to political agitation.

Al Ahram's English coverage, which often presents a more skeptical, anti-regime perspective than its Arabic counterpart, declared that October 9th was the first time a military attack on protesters was documented on video, and yet such compelling visual evidence failed to make an impression on the wider Egyptian public, which continued to tacitly to support the SCAF's rule.

In the days and weeks that followed October 9th, the reality of the events only became more obscure amidst a web of investigations. Some Western outlets reported that Nile TV retracted its story that Coptic protesters had shot soldiers. Stratfor, the U.S. intelligence company, reported instead that "a journalist not affiliated with Nile TV was in the studio and stated on-air that there was no evidence of Coptic involvement in the soldiers' deaths" but that "there was no retraction; state media stood by its story."

As if on cue, the sectarian pot-stirring that the original march was meant to protest returned in full, if subtle display. Makram Mohamed Ahmed, the head of the Journalists' Syndicate (to which many independent journalists do not belong, as their newspapers have foreign publishing licenses), explained in *Al Ahram* that he believed Coptic intellectuals and public figures were accusing military rulers of committing genocide against Copts.[53] In the party-owned *Al Wafd* paper, an op-ed accused a priest of "calling for the killing of Aswan's governor, who some accuse of igniting the violence." [54] Of course, the problem is that accusing someone of fomenting sectarianism often opens one up to criticism of having done the same thing.

The discussion of what really happened on October 9th gradually shifted from the media to a military investigation, where, as with Mubarak's ongoing trial, it would wallow in bureaucracy. It was also overtaken by the violence at Tahrir in mid-November, which would once and for all cement the distance between Tahrir and the "Silent Majority" that had been tested by the military on October 9th. "Maspero cristallized [sic] the rejection of SCAF that many

revolutionaries have felt and that is being echoed widely on the Internet these days,” wrote Issandr El Amrani. “But we forget that it may have also cristalized [sic] the majority of Egyptians in another direction: that of supporting the army, and condemning challenges to it, precisely because they believe the best way to avoid a worsening of the situation is reducing tensions.”[55]

On February 2, 2012, nearly four months later, violence again broke out at a soccer match in Port Said, leaving over seventy Egyptians killed and hundreds wounded, and renewing questions about whether the SCAF had fomented violence in order to assert the necessity of their rule. By then, much of the independent press had given up its qualms about directly accusing the SCAF and even some of the state media had felt free to suggest a conspiracy, citing the poor response of official security forces in the stadium. Much of this accusatory coverage took the form of quoting politicians who were suspicious of the SCAF, and who thus represented a critical bloc of public opinion-makers not as available to the press back in October.[56]

“It’s not about the absence of facts or the lack of facts,” El-Sirgany of *Daily News Egypt* told me. “The facts are out there. It’s what type of reality Egyptians want to believe. And you can see there is a collective state of denial...for them to acknowledge that this is happening, this brutality, it means that they have to go out now in the streets and say down with the military. They’re not ready to do that.”

While the events of October 9th represented a point on a timeline rather than a radical break, they clarified a set of dilemmas facing independent journalists in the post-revolution period. In press conferences and online networks, the increasingly tight-knit relationship between these journalists and the activists they cover affected their ability to reach a greater audience than those predisposed to believe them. If these journalists represented themselves as impartial observers, but then clearly sided with anti-regime activists, who would believe them? What reason would anyone have to believe them? The tragedy was that these anti-regime journalists, by aligning themselves so closely with activists, gave up the tool they had wielded with more pride than any other: their claim to impartiality.

Journalists, activists, and a wider community of analysts began after October 9th to speak more openly and lucidly about the failures of the “revolution,” broadly conceived. They began to fill blog posts, articles, tweets, and conversations with the idea that ensuring the successful legacy of the eighteen days of January and February that brought down Mubarak would involve far more than the formalities of a power transfer from the SCAF to a civilian government. It would involve more than a new constitution and the removal of various “remnants” of the Mubarak era from the positions of influence they still occupied.

The revolution’s success would also demand a fundamental change in the cultures of state institutions and among the employees who work for them. This necessity was clearer in the context of state media than any other state institution, and clearer on the night of October 9th than ever before. The Ministry of the Interior and others may have continued to operate after the revolution as they did before, in secrecy, with exact hierarchies and lines of authority kept murky to outsiders. But the state media, despite the anger of its critics, continued its work in the tall, cylindrical monument to state centralization on the Nile, its transmissions and hence its opinions in full view.

Notes

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[11] *Ibid.*

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