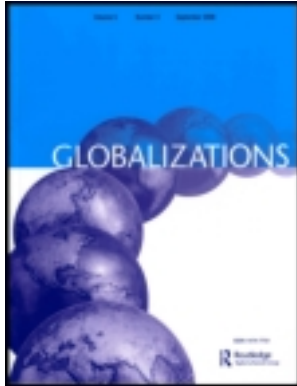


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Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the role of the new media in the ‘Arab Spring’ in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It argues that although the new media is one of the factors in the social revolution among others such as social and political factors in the region, it nevertheless played a critical role especially in light of the absence of an open media and a civil society. The significance of the globalization of the new media is highlighted as it presents an interesting case of horizontal connectivity in social mobilization as well signaling a new trend in the intersection of new media and conventional media such as television, radio, and mobile phone. One of the contradictions of the present phase of globalization is that the state in many contexts facilitated the promotion of new media due to economic compulsion, inadvertently facing the social and political consequences of the new media.*

Keywords: new media, social movement, globalization, Middle East

Globalization as a complex social, economic, and technological process can be viewed in terms of the spread and wider availability of communication technology which intensifies connectivity. Such connectivity is as vital for facilitating business transactions as it is for social interactions and mobilizations. There is an inherent contradiction in this process since it is often the government, aided by corporate interests, that promotes the new media thus inadvertently creating a space for civic activism. Thus, as the new communication technology spreads to wider arenas, new uncertainties are introduced. As Roland Robertson argues in some contexts, growing surveillance technology—an aspect of new, invasive information technology—threatens an open society leading to a syndrome of open society and closed mind (Robertson, 2007). Drawing on his metaphor, it can be said that, in other contexts, it may create a tension between closed society and open mind. New information technology has clearly the transformative potential to open up spaces of freedom. The recent political transformations in the MENA

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region provide us an opportunity to examine both the limits and potential contributions of the new media in paving the way for freedom and openness.

On 6 April 2008 when the Egyptian authority locked up Kareem Al Beheiri, a worker turned labor rights activist and blogger, for allegedly instigating riots, the news was picked up by the conventional media but neither hogged the headlines nor stayed in the media limelight for long. The news of his protest was subsumed under the broader protests and demonstrations against the rising food inflation in Egypt and a number of other developing countries. Beheiri was tortured in custody and later released. His cyberactivism was part of a growing movement, albeit gradual, where new media was used effectively to mobilize people against a regime in power for three decades. Cyberactivism in Egypt had emerged since 2004 as it began to spread in other parts of the Middle East, marking the ushering of cyber-civil society, and a virtual replacement for the muzzled media. Since 2008, in the face of a global economic crisis and enhanced political repression, Egypt has seen growing protests where various forms of new media have played a crucial role. How significant the role is, however, a matter of some contention. When Wael Ghonim, a major figure in cyberactivism in Egypt, stated in an interview with CNN days before the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, 'If you want to free a society just given them internet access' (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011, p. 1) he was probably exaggerating. Gamal Ibrahim, a young parent, named his daughter 'Facebook' in recognition of the role of the social media in bringing about the revolution (CNN, 2011). The exuberance is understandable given the timing of her birth. But it was at best an example of exuberance. Is the Internet or Facebook or Twitter or their combined effect good enough to cause social revolution leading to freedom? What about the use of the same instruments of the new media by the political power as tools of repression? What are the ancillary factors that may tilt the contest one way or the other?

Sociological discussion on the potential of the new media in shaping society began in earnest with Manuel Castells's ground-breaking work, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) and more recently, *Communication Power* (2009). A number of writers in the last decade of the twentieth century recognized the potential of the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating democracy (Poster, 1995). More recent writers have identified the nuances as well as limits to the role of the new media in politics (Howard, 2011). The discussions on this subject are divided between those who emphasize the controlling role of the new media, as a new tool of repression in the arsenal of the dictators, and those who see it as a tool for democratic openness. Even in democratic societies, as some writers point out, the new technology poses a grave threat to the freedom and privacy of citizens. Other writers often get somewhat carried away with the potential role of the new media in shaping politics, opening up a new public sphere, especially in societies where a real public sphere is absent. There are, however, some writers who have presented a more balanced view of the pitfalls and potential, of the controlling as well as emancipatory role of the new media.

In Tunisia, when the fruit-seller, Mohamed Bouazizi resorted to self-immolation to protest the price hike and political repression, the event became national and eventually international news thanks to the combined effects of conventional media and the new media. Television networks such as Al Jazeera and Facebook both played a significant role in disseminating information and mobilizing the masses of protestors in Tunisia. Both virtual and real revolutionaries came out in droves to protest.

Mr Khaled Koubaa, the president of the Internet Society in Tunisia reported that of the 2,000 registered tweeters barely 200 were active users but before the revolution there were two million users of Facebook. 'Social media was absolutely crucial', says Koubaa. 'Three months before

Mohammed Bouazizi burned himself in Sidi Bouzid we had a similar case in Monastir. But no one knew about it because it was not filmed. What made a difference this time is that the images of Bouazizi were put on Facebook and everyone saw it' (Beaumont, 2011). Stressing the role of the new media, Zeynep Tufekci (2011) makes the point that in Tunisia protest movements were crushed in 2008 without a significant backlash. Part of the reason was that at that time there were only 28,000 Facebook users in Tunisia. In other words, the new media penetration was low. In December 2010, the news of the self-immolation of Bouazizi in a small town was transmitted by the new media, triggering mass protests.

The Tunisian revolution spilled over into Egypt. In both cases, the new media played a key role. The revolution was labeled the Jasmine Revolution in part because it was not as violent as it could have been—as it unfolded in Libya months later. Given the dominant role of the new media, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have been called Facebook or Twitter revolutions. There is no question that the social networking applications played a vital role in organizing and publicizing social protests. Control of conventional media made the role of new media more relevant. During the anti-Mubarak protests, an Egyptian activist put it succinctly in a tweet: 'we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world' (*Global Voice Advocacy*, 2010). However, to overstate the role of the new media may not be helpful. Certainly, social network sites and the Internet were useful tools, but conventional media played a crucial role in presenting the uprisings to the larger global community who in turn supported the transformations.

The Egyptian revolution was well organized, coordinated, and civil (Abaza, 2011; Bamyeh, 2011) and at every step the new media played its part. On 6 June 2010 Khaled Said, an Egyptian blogger, was dragged out of a cybercafé and beaten to death by policemen in Alexandria, Egypt. The café owner, Mr Hassan Mosbah, gave the details of this murder in a filmed interview, which was posted online, and pictures of Mr Said's shattered face appeared on social networking sites. On 14 June 2010 Issandr El Amrani posted the details on the blog site Global Voices Advocacy (*Global Voices Advocacy*, accessed on 24 June 2011). A young Google executive Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page, 'We Are All Khaled Said', which enlisted 350,000 members before 14 January 2011 (Giglio, 2011, p. 15).

On 17 June 2011 when Maha al-Qahtani, a 39-year-old Saudi woman, decided to drive a car in Riyadh, a conservative city, with her husband in the passenger seat, she was arrested and later released. However, her defiant protest received wider media attention and got traction in the new media. Ms Manal al-Sharif, a 32-year-old IT consultant who set up a Facebook campaign called women2drive, was arrested on 21 May (Allam, 2011). Her Facebook site remains a space for cyberactivism. A woman posted a picture of a woman driving while wearing an *abaya* (a black dress covering the entire body) on this site, which now carries the name of Manal and Bertha. More and more women and men—Saudis and non-Saudis—continue to express solidarity posting various contents one of which includes a message of support for the freedom-loving Saudi women from the US Secretary of State, Ms Hillary Clinton. The Facebook site has also hosted a YouTube video clipping made from television coverage of an earlier protest of similar nature when 47 Saudi women representing a cross-section of society broke the taboo by driving their cars in defiance of a government ban of 6 November 1990. New comments and contents taken from televised news are being added to the women2drive site almost on a daily basis.

Whether these gestures mark a new beginning or not is a moot question. The incipient cyberactivism in Saudi Arabia may not herald an Arab spring, at least, in the near future. The outcomes of the spread of the new media are likely to remain uneven in different parts of the

MENA region. Despite the uneven outcomes, there seems to be no holding back the march of cyberactivism in this region. Cyberactivism has been defined as ‘the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline’ (Howard, 2011, p. 145). In Egypt digital media was used to tell stories of police brutality, violence, and blatant injustice. In the end, the new media helped protestors mobilize specific political outcome such as the removal of President Hosni Mubarak.

As the cyber protests signify a window of change in Saudi society thanks to the new media—assorted tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Internet-based communication, etc. There are also websites created by conservatives in order to vilify these women. Thus, the new media becomes a contesed site. It is impossible not to pay attention to two points. First, the new media is a tool, a means rather than the end of social movement. Hence, the role of new media is contingent on the movements on the street. And the new media has been a contesting site of resistance for all the interest groups in the twenty-first century (Ho et al., 2002). The debate over the competing role of the conventional media versus new media has been a false debate. Even before the uprisings in the MENA region, it was argued that ‘horizontal networks of communication, such as the Internet, to have significant impact on the majority of the population they need to be relayed by the mass media, as was the case in the diffusion of the pictures of torture in the Abu Ghraib’ (Arsenault and Castells, 2006, p. 303).

There is no question that social media played a significant role in the political movements in Tunisia and Egypt, but one should not overstate the role. The role of conventional media, especially television (e.g. Al Jazeera), was crucial. However, the most important underlying factor was the presence of revolutionary conditions and the inability of the state apparatus to contain the revolutionary upsurge. In this schema, social media was a vital tool—a necessary condition—especially in the face of a muzzled conventional local media, but a tool nevertheless. It was not a sufficient condition. Stressing the role of Al Jazeera in Arabic as well as the BBC, France 24, Al Hiwar, and other channels in presenting the news of the Arab spring, Manuel Castells states,

Al Jazeera has collected the information disseminated on the Internet by the people using them as sources and organized groups on Facebook, then retransmitting free news on mobile phones.

Thus was born a new system of mass communication built like a mix between an interactive television, internet, radio and mobile communication systems. The communication of the future is already used by the revolutions of the present. . . .

Obviously communication technologies did not give birth to the insurgency. The rebellion was born from the poverty and social exclusion that afflict much of the population in this fake democracy, . . . (Castells, 2011; emphasis in the original)

The new media’s role can be likened to the historic role of print media in fostering nationalism through what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls ‘print capitalism’, or the role of literacy in raising consciousness in pre-revolutionary eighteenth-century France as the works of Robert Darnton (1982) and John Markoff (1986) illustrate. Markoff shows that in regions with higher literacy, revolutionary activities were more organized compared to those in low literacy regions. However, revolution did not wait for the even spread of literacy.

Social network or not, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain were ready for revolutionary movements due to an assortment of politico-economic conditions. Similarly, to what extent these revolutions will be successful or not depends on several factors—some known and some yet unknown, in which social networks may play a supportive role at best.

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