



“Seeds of Change” in Tahrir Square and Beyond: People Power or Technological Convergence?

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the role of social media in the Arab Spring, specifically focusing on how Twitter was used during the Egyptian uprising. Prior to discussing Twitter, however, the article situates the topic of social media and socio-political change within a larger context: The “democratic” shifts that we are witnessing today in the region are outcomes of deep and historical transformations Arab societies have been going through. These transformations can be summed up in the convergence of “technological” and “human” variables that have convulsed the Arab public sphere and led to the current democratic wave. In other terms, the article’s central argument is that the “seeds” of change are both “technological” and “human.” The case of Twitter and Web 2.0 will further support and illustrate this unprecedented convergence.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, new media, social change, counter-publics, public sphere

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The “Arab Spring” events have brought down a number of authoritarian regimes after an unprecedented mobilization of demonstrators into the streets. The role of new media in these surging popular protests involves persistent questions in political communication and media research: How have these new technological tools of communication been able to propel such impressive social and political upheavals? How is it possible to claim that this is a social media revolution when in fact it would have been impossible to achieve were it not for hardy social movements? Although these are not novel questions since they have long been embedded in the historical development of all new communication technologies, they remain central to a review of social media’s role in the radical transformation currently taking place in many Arab societies.

New media are outstripping traditional media in popularity and influence. Al Jazeera news channel and other satellite television channels have received a good deal of scholarly scrutiny for their capacity to infiltrate and revitalize the stagnant political environment in much of the Arab world (e.g. Lynch, 2006). While Al Jazeera Television’s news coverage has played a significant role in the recent political turmoil that overthrew authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, these unfolding “Arab Spring” events have raised fundamental questions about the internet’s role in speeding up the pace of political and social transformations in Arab societies. As activists in various parts of the Arab world resort to the web to organize and publicize the excesses of authoritarian Arab regimes, the need to understand these modes of internet-facilitated activism and their role in social and political change now becomes more than a luxurious intellectual exercise.

This short article investigates the role of social media in the Arab Spring, specifically focusing on how Twitter was used during the Egyptian uprising. Prior to discussing Twitter, however, the article situates the topic of social media and socio-political change within a larger context: The “democratic” shifts that we are witnessing today in the region are outcomes of deep and historical transformations Arab societies have been going through. These transformations can be summed up in the convergence of “technological” and “human” factors/variables that have convulsed the Arab public sphere and led to a promising “democratic wave.” In other terms, the article’s central argument is that the “seeds” of change are both “technological” and “human.” The case of how Egyptians wielded Twitter and other Web 2.0 tools will further support and illustrate this unprecedented convergence. The article concludes with a call for more research into the question of how this ambient technological landscape have facilitated the emergence of “Arab counter-publics”—a technologically enabled oppositional politics and movement—who played a central role in leading the “Arab Spring” uprisings.

Arab Publics and the Seeds of Change

New communication technologies’ impact on social and political change has been the subject of much research. Within this long debate, a dichotomous view of these new technological tools has pitted the “believers” against the “skeptics.” On the one hand, the “believers” underscore the centrality of new communication technologies in human life, which instigate social and cultural transformations (e.g. Carey, 1989; Eisenstein, 1979). As the advent of the Internet became a palpable reality, these scholars argued that information communication technologies [ICTs] will irrevocably influence the political process by engaging and mobilizing large swaths of apathetic citizens (e.g. Negroponte, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001; Langman, 2005; Della Porta & Mosca, 2005; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009). Some studies concluded that social media

reenergize the public sphere (e.g. Papacharissi, 2002), enhance civic engagement (e.g. Norris, 2001), and build a stronger global social movement (e.g. Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). The “skeptics,” on the other hand, emphasize the capacity of authoritarians to circumvent any internet-facilitated challenge to their control (e.g. Becker, 2004; Morozov, 2009). Boas (2006), for instance, argued that hardware and software controls have been constructed “architectural constraints” to impede citizens’ free access to the Internet.

Technological convergence has maintained and transformed Arab communities newly liberated from state television monopolies (e.g. Hofheinz, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Abdulla, 2007; Seib, 2007; Warf & Vincent, 2007; Bunt, 2009). Many virtues can be stated about how the Internet extended those global bridges built through satellite television. One of the main achievements of the Internet in this regard is that police and authoritarian states found it increasingly impossible to close the borders on the flow of information (e.g. Seib, 2007). If satellite television broadcasting exposed Arab viewers to western life styles and democratic discourse, the web presented unparalleled opportunities for connecting with global movements (Hofheinz, 2005). Online activists and youth movements have found the web a more hospitable and fertile ground for galvanizing global public opinion against the excesses of Arab authoritarianism (Warf & Vincent, 2007). Blogging as a medium of expression becomes a means of seamlessly interweaving the personal with the political (Lynch, 2008; Douai, 2009). Facebook and Twitter further bolstered and empowered those “virtuous circles.”

Further, technological convergence was more pronounced in how YouTube became an effective medium in the battle waged against the region’s entrenched authoritarianism and the oppressive state apparatus (Douai, 2012). YouTube became specifically effective in galvanizing domestic and global public opinion against police abuse and corruption in many Arab countries. For instance, YouTube videos exposing police officers abusing and torturing citizens in Egypt attracted the attention of human rights activists. One such YouTube video showed Egyptian police officers sadistically sodomizing a detained citizen using a stick. The graphic video bared the ruthless power of the state security forces, an exposé that shocked even Egyptian citizens long familiar with state atrocities. Significantly, the availability of this video evidence enabled Arab satellite television channels, led by the like of Al Jazeera, to seriously take on the issue of police abuse and torture and thus publicly discussed the topic at length. This viral nature of YouTube made the convergence of traditional media and new media a potent technological feat challenging the power of Arab regimes.

From the existing literature, one cannot escape the conclusion that the seeds of change are both “technological” and “human.” If technological convergence has been emblematic of the “technological seeds of change,” it has also had a great impact on organizing protesters, and energizing the “human” seeds of change propelling these revolutions forward. By “human” seeds of change, I am specifically referring to the birth and surge of “counter-publics”—“oppositional” social forces and groups— in Arab societies that energized the region’s body politic. The overthrow of European colonialism largely left the political cultures prone to the control of authoritarian regimes. By the 1990s, repressive “national security states” in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, and other instances of Arab authoritarianism, have effectively eviscerated organized political oppositions. Brought to their knees with violent state oppression, among other means, official political oppositions became nominal accepting whatever rights these rulers deigned to confer on the populace. The decimation of genuine

opposition helped the region escape the sweeping 1990s democratic shifts burgeoning throughout the world after the collapse of Soviet communism.

However, suppression of organized political dissent and the capitulation of the elites helped resurrect alternative spheres where dissenting views could ferment and fulminate, producing “counter-publics” that somehow eluded the watchful eye of the state. What is a counter-public? How can it be identified? How is it different from dominant notions of public opinion and the public sphere? Habermas’s original conceptualization of the public sphere in his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, implies that the construction of “public opinion” takes place in a deliberative space, independent of the government and other forms of state control. Emphasizing the twin aspects of “publicness,” the “public sphere” presupposes a participatory “audience” (or an active public) and “disclosure,” attributes clearly distinct from the “private sphere” of the family, for instance (Warner, 2002). Modern mass media constitute the most recognized forum and debate platform for the public sphere, replacing the elitist European saloons of the 19th century.

The question of how inclusive and public these deliberative spaces are has been a subject of frequent critique elsewhere. Lines of criticism such as these focused on Habermas’s original public sphere concept as being male-dominated, emphatically rational and “western-centered” (see Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Fraser and others have convincingly argued that the public sphere is made up of discrete units, instead of Habermas’s ideologically coherent construct. In liberal democracies, argues Fraser, the “public sphere” can include previously marginalized social groups who form “subaltern-counter publics” (Fraser, 1990).

Studies of the Arab public sphere have sought to address the theoretical and methodological implications of the Habermasian concept. For instance, Zayani (2008) stresses the “contentious” application of the concept in a non-European context, pointing to “social particularity” as an impediment. Lynch (2006) usefully circumvents the traditional debate and emphasizes the rise of “public argument” as part of “the new Arab public.” Douai (2009) examined how bloggers facilitate a discussion of “local issues” and invigorate the Arab public sphere. Building on earlier work, Douai (2009) compares the Arab public sphere to the transnational space enabled by satellite television. However, unlike the transnational mediated space where pan-Arab discourse tends to dominate, the Arab blogosphere is more fragmented and localized (Douai 2009, 142). In a recent contribution, Douai and Nofal (2012) discuss Habermas’ concept utility to an emerging “online Arabic public sphere.” The authors empirically examine readers’ online comments on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya news channels’ websites and how they debate global news with local relevance. Similar to Al-Saggaf (2006), the authors’ findings reiterate that the “online public sphere, such as readers’ online comments on news stories, can even challenge the power of traditional mass media.” In sum, ample evidence from published scholarship and empirical research leaves no doubt that a vibrant Arab public sphere has emerged. The evidence also points to how new media facilitate and enable a vigorous engagement of these publics. In these cross-fertilization and fermentation processes, new media have offered Arab “counter-publics” platforms that “transformed” how these “counter-publics” mobilize for social and political change, as well as offer a mode of expression in a contentious political sphere. The case of Twitter in Egypt’s uprising illustrates the convergence of these two powerful forces.

A Social Media Uprising: Tweets from Tahrir Square

The first online sparks of the Egyptian revolution took place on Facebook, as a number of activists designed “We Are All Khalid Said” Facebook page to decry and demonstrate Egyptian police brutality. Mubarak regime’s decision to “switch off” the country’s Internet connection with the rest of the globe less than three days into the revolution left no doubt that Tahrir Square demonstrators’ strategic use of this global medium was genuinely threatening the authoritarian rule’s grip on the information warfare, that is mobilizing information as an asset to be attacked or defended to defeat one’s adversary. vanNiekerk, Pillay, & Maharaj (2011) applied the information Warfare Lifecycle Model to assess how information technology contributed to toppling Egypt’s former dictator. Looking at the “Context,” “Attack,” “Consequences and Phenomena,” and “Defense,” the authors conclude that “ICTs were employed as a communication tool to disseminate information to alter the perceptions and will of both local and international target audiences in both uprisings. ICTs usage also provided a degree of co-ordination for the initial protests” (p. 1412). From an information warfare perspective, ICTs made it possible for Egyptian activists to conduct effective “psychological operations and command and control warfare” against a recalcitrant regime (p. 1412). ICTs primarily became “a transmission medium through which [activists]...spread anti-government perception and provide some organization and cohesion to the protests” (p. 1413). In the realm of political/global activism, the use of information in this “offensive” sense becomes social information warfare (Cronin & Crawford, 1999).

Empirical data regarding Egyptian activists’ reliance on social media to organize and mobilize the people against the regime might be lacking, contradictory or self-serving at best. However, some accumulated evidence suggests that the Internet was deftly used in various ways that crippled the regime’s capacity to muzzle the protests and made brutal force incapable of suppressing the people’s yearning for democratic governance. Some studies have focused on Twitter and other social media to examine how these media were instrumental to connecting and spreading information among different “networked actors,” such as activists, media professionals and outlets, and global non-governmental organizations. For instance, Lotan et al (2011) empirically scrutinize how information flows during the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, focusing on the sourcing and routing among individuals (activists, journalists...) and media organizations. The researchers’ goal was not only to understand how various social media actors use Twitter to spread information, but to gauge how successful/effective these tweets were in this task. Their Egyptian data reveal that activists, mainstream media, and reporters served as the main sources of the information flows, drawing large audiences and greater participation (p. 1389). Most importantly, as the authors observe, “while organizational actors have larger followings on average, individual actors are much more likely to play an active role in information dissemination” (p. 1390). Their data analyses highlight important differences in the information dissemination behaviors and patterns among various Twitter users. As the authors put it, “journalists and activists serve primarily as key information sources, while bloggers and activists are more likely to retweet content and, thus, serve as key information routers” (p. 1390).

The research findings sampled above represent one way of approaching the manifest effects of social media in the “Arab Spring.” Twitter has been found to seamlessly integrate and facilitate the twin goals of inspiring and organizing for social change during the uprising. In an ongoing study of how Egyptian activists used Twitter, I used open-source software freely

available from websites, such as JustTweetIt.com, Twellow.com, and TwitterPacks.com, to gauge the influence of Egyptian Twitter users. The compiled Twitter analytics data led to a short list of Egyptian activists who had the highest number of followers. The short list includes: @Sandmonkey, @waelabbas, @RamyRaouf, @3arabawy, and @alaa.@Ghonim, which belongs to Mr. WaelGhonim, was added to the list because this user had emerged as an “influential” voice and face of the Egyptian uprising during the protests.

Analysis of these users’ Twitter activities and behaviours during the uprising focused on two broad categories of “influential” Twitter users during the uprising: The accidental “influential” is one of the most influential Twitter users and refers to those activists who don’t start trends, yet they wield greater influence due to their inspirational story. Their strength is to inspire, rather than organize for, social change. Twitter and other social media’s open platforms work well in disseminating their “inspirational” Tweets. The Egyptian uprising revealed @Ghonim to be one of these “accidental influentials,” whose media savvy and social media training/expertise helped him wield these tools more strategically.

The “veteran cyber activist” category represents the second main typology of influential Twitter users. Unlike the inspirational influential, these activists have been working for social change and have a strong track record of political activism. For these Twitter users, tweeting becomes more of a tactical and organizing tool in a hard fought campaign against a ruthless regime. From the available data, we classify @Sandmonkey and @Alaa within this category, as two well-known veteran cyber activists who have tactically used Twitter. In sum, Egyptians harnessed Twitter both as a strategic and tactical tool. As a tactical tool, tweeting facilitated organizing and mobilizing the people into the streets. As a strategic tool, Twitter messages served to discredit the regime’s narrative, and amass wider public support for the revolutionary cause.

Conclusion: Ambient Technological Landscapes

The Arab Spring’s momentous achievements and the greater visibility of social media in the region are thus firmly rooted in the ambient technological landscape coming out of the explosive introduction of satellite television. That myriad channels have become available to Arab audiences was unplanned, breathtaking and irreversible. On the television dial, the list has become endless and dizzying: from hundreds of political shows to religious programming (e.g. the Saudi sponsored Iqra’); from business broadcasters (e.g. Dubai business television) to children programming channels (e.g. Space Toon). Western popular shows have been cloned (e.g. LBC’s Star Academy or MBC’s Arab Big Brother), or dubbed in Arabic (e.g. MBC’s the *Simpsons*). State-sponsored satellite channels (e.g. Algerian TV, Morocco’s RTM TV) co-exist with “privately” owned Al-Arabiya and Al Jazeera TV stations, only to bitterly see their audiences dwindle.

Finally, what is worthy of further research scrutiny is how these developments relate to the rise of a new politics, popular movements that are technologically enabled and fomenting the formation of potentially new counter-publics. Arab “counter-publics” refers to those arenas of citizen association and discourse operating without the supervision of the state, invigorated and inserted in the public debate through new means of communication. “Counter-publics” may include those “oppositional” segments of the “public sphere,” the so-called “Arab Street.” Led

mainly by a media savvy young generation, Arab “counter-publics” include the resistant remnants of the labor movements, the new rights movements, and other repressed voices mingling with “new” Islamists who have abdicated violence as a means of achieving political power. Future research needs to shed light on how these counter-publics fomented a new spring in Arab politics.

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