

Transformation, Social Media and Hybrid Media Systems: Rethinking Counter-Issues' Media Visibility in North Africa Before and After the Arab Uprisings

Hanan Badr

Full Professor,
Communication Politics and Media Economics
Freie Universität Berlin
Lecturer, Department of Journalism
Cairo University

Today, in 2019, we need to revisit the debate on media and political transformation in North Africa and embed it into current political and media frameworks. In contrast to the 2011-2012 euphoria, the Arab public has now returned to despair and fragmentation due to the consequences of the failed Arab uprisings. The uprisings in Sudan and Algeria have recently renewed the debates on how social media connect to political transformation in multiple and unexpected ways. The internet shutdown imposed by the Sudanese government felt like a *déjà vu* of Mubarak's crumbling regime's response to the Egyptian uprisings in 2011.

How can we understand the role of social media in triggering transformation processes in North Africa? Today, internet usage and dissatisfaction rates are even higher than before 2011, but this has not led to renewed protests. Eight years ago, stagnant authoritarian regimes underestimated the online public spheres and mostly resorted to simple blocking techniques. Mubarak's iconic phrase "let the youth have fun," when asked about youth activism on Facebook in Parliament in 2010, clearly underestimated the potential of online threats. Since then, regimes have learned how this strategy can backfire, and now take online public spheres much more seriously.

A look at the dynamics between media systems and political transformation just before the collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in 2011 reveals how these autocratic systems were forced to respond to

the people and their mediated pressure. In order to understand media's role in triggering transformation processes in North Africa, we need to revisit that moment in 2011 and analyse these hybrid media systems from a comparative perspective. This will allow us to connect these dynamics to today's trajectories and help us counter the fallacy of the "Facebook Revolution."

The Current Debate on Social Media and Political Transformation

Connections between social media and transformation processes in North Africa sparked intense debates across two fields: political science and area studies, on the one hand; and media studies, on the other. Within political science and area studies, scholarship on media and political transformation is inspired by democratization processes in southern Europe, Latin America and eastern Europe. Here, transformation is viewed as a process, through which regimes evolve from autocracy into democracy across three stages: (1) collapse of the old regime, (2) negotiation of the new regime's foundations during the transition phase and (3) consolidation of democracy. A relapse into the authoritarian framework is also possible.

After the Arab uprisings, there was intense debate among scholars as to whether or not the 2011 upheavals were "democracy's fourth wave," as Howard and Hussain put it (2013). As we know from today's position, this was not the case. Most countries where regimes collapsed – except for Tunisia – fell into scenarios of polarization, political chaos and civil war, or into renewed autocracies.

The concept of "transformation" is also rooted in media studies themselves, yet with different connotations. It refers to the dramatic changes caused by digitiza-

tion processes in media spheres. Today, the omnipresent Internet renegotiates our identity practices, power struggles and self-expression. The introduction and fast evolution of the Internet has represented the most complex and disruptive technology advance in media's history after the invention of the printing press. It has contributed to an ongoing and dramatic change in media and how they operate within their cultural, political and societal contexts. The present debate on transformation and media in North Africa captures both perspectives: in terms of both regime change and the impact of digitization on political processes.

In order to understand the role of media in political transformation, this paper consists of three parts. Building on the aforementioned debates, the first part elaborates on a vivid controversy: laying out arguments for the initial social media euphoria and then counterarguments that highlight the authoritarian learning processes. The second part explains how counter-issues' media visibility brought socio-economic and political grievances to the forefront in hybrid media systems, such as Tunisia and Egypt. Finally, the third part offers some concluding remarks that aim to guide our understanding and actions in the current scenario.

Controversy in Scientific and Public Discourses: Media or Politics First?

The vivid controversy over the role of media in triggering political transformation after 2011 brought about two main approaches: the perspectives of media first vs. politics first.

Media First: Three Arguments for the Initial Euphoria

The media first approach obviously focuses on the role of media in promoting political transformation. After 2011, empirical evidence from Arab countries seemed to attribute changes in the political arena to strong social media activity. There are three main arguments behind the initial euphoria:

1. *The first and most elaborated argument is that the Internet changed and expanded the notion of the public sphere.* The "liberation technology hypoth-

esis" (Diamond, 2010) is based on the premise that increasing connectivity leads to empowerment and inclusion of marginalized actors. New media opened up spaces to challenge authorities, whether in politics or religion. Dubbed in public and media discourses as a "Facebook revolution," bloggers were hailed as heroes. This euphoric linear narrative was also enhanced by social media corporations themselves, namely Facebook and Twitter.

Eight years ago, stagnant authoritarian regimes underestimated the online public spheres and mostly resorted to simple blocking techniques. Since then, regimes have learned how this strategy can backfire, and now take online public spheres much more seriously

The argument is that decentralized communication through social media enables wider segments of the population to participate openly in the public debate. The Internet gave marginalized actors a chance to challenge the mainstream public sphere. These political and social actors had the opportunity to use social networking sites to promote their views and uncover events overlooked by the established media system. Online discourses seemed to fulfil utopian ideals by providing access and equality for all users, and caught the stagnant regimes off guard. Social media were increasingly used by civil society actors, such as advocacy groups, civic initiatives, social movements and non-governmental organizations, which otherwise would have had limited access to the semi-controlled media system, whether due to political exclusion or scarce resources.

2. *The second euphoric argument describes online communication as a practice of citizenship.* In this regard, communication itself serves as a form of civic participation and self-expression that turns individuals from passive consumers into active producers of information. Therefore, the Internet could potentially enable citizens to reclaim the politically colonized pub-

lic sphere and consequently add pluralism and diversity to civil political culture.

3. *Finally, the third euphoric aspect of social media influence in political communication is the intermedia agenda-setting function.* This refers to the increasing ability of social media to shape traditional news media agendas, as manifested by topic selection and highlighting mechanisms, and also in the coverage intensity regarding certain issues. This is a sign of how journalists have lost their monopoly over gatekeeping processes, through which media decide what gets published. New thematic inputs from online debates now shape the agenda of mainstream media. Online discourses become more visible and accessible to wider segments of the public, even to those who do not have internet access.

Critique and Need for Regional Contextualization

The 2011 uprisings shifted our perceptions of North African countries from stagnation to dynamism. This perception temporarily replaced the tradition of enduring authoritarianism, before events turned our eyes again to autocratization processes. This shift to dynamism had a fundamental flaw, which was that the region was viewed from the perspective of “exceptionalism”: either it was an exception from the democratization paradigm seen throughout the whole world, or the uprisings were an exception from the enduring authoritarianism in the region. The lens of exceptionalism when looking at media and transformation in North Africa is part of a lingering colonial legacy and a persistent Western gaze when studying the *unpredictable* Arabs. Perceiving non-Western contexts from the perspective of exceptionalism reflects a central epistemic dilemma in knowledge production.

These arguments primarily pushed a Western-centric narrative that reproduced linear Orientalist perceptions in framing Western technologies as liberators. This research wave overemphasized the importance of new media over old media. It neglected the interlinkages between digital and non-digital formats and overlooked the complexities on the ground. Critiques of the “liberation technology” narrative go beyond this particular paper and reflect structural flaws in our knowledge production on media and transformation.

As soon as the transformation processes in North Africa failed to establish new democratic systems,

the “liberation technology” claim, as well as the generous research funding lines supporting it, subdued. Only a handful of researchers went on to theorize on the limitations of the Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Arab contexts and their role in surveillance and authoritarian learning. This prevented scholars from further studying the role of hybrid media systems in the prelude and aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the role of media during the transitions themselves.

At the same time, the media-first narrative overlooked the fluidity and hybridity of non-structural elements in transformation processes and media environments. Coined by Andrew Chadwick, the “hybrid media system” concept (2017) refers to the need to look at the interlinkages within media systems holistically, without dividing them into either old or new media, in order to analyse them together.

Politics First: Three Limitations of Social Media in Transformation Processes

The second strand of research on media and transformation argues that politics, not media, come first (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheaffer, 2013). While new media may strengthen marginalized voices under certain conditions, they are not context-free, absolute empowerment tools. In fact, without real-life grievances pushing for mobilization, access to new technological tools alone would not cause a revolution. They amplify concerns. Mattelart criticized “technological determinism” and called for the demystification of the new digital world’s empowerment virtues. Not only are social media practices cause for concern due to increasing online incivility and polarization, data manipulation and privacy leaks, but also authoritarian regimes quickly learn how to adapt to the new challenge. In Egypt, the authoritarian learning included three strategies:

1. *Censorship 2.0.* Power holders learned to upgrade the classic media censorship strategies beyond confiscation of printed materials and closing newspapers. Even the infamous firewall nicknamed “Ammar 404” under Ben Ali’s Tunisia sounds benign when compared to today’s blatant censorship through advanced blocking methods.

In Egypt, blocking and filtering technologies banned the public from reading more than 500 websites, including Arab and non-Arab sources and even gen-

eral publishing platforms like Medium. New legislations target online dissident activities under the new Anti-Cybercrime Law, passed in 2018, according to which website and social media managers may face imprisonment.

2. *Emulating social movements' techniques and strategies.* New media are platforms of expression, which serve both protestors and regime-loyalists alike. In Egypt, Mubarak supporters engaged in the "battle-ground Facebook" (Badr, 2013) by emulating the activists' techniques to counter-mobilize and counter-frame the uprisings in terms of chaos and foreign conspiracy. Already during the 18-day-long Tahrir protests, in 2011, loyalists launched a Facebook page called "We are sorry, President Mubarak!", discrediting the demonstrations as misbehaviour against the father of the nation. The emulation strategy developed further into sophisticated and more professional campaigns. The distortion of news, by spreading rumours and fake news, led to an increasing de-politicization of online discourses and the digital public sphere. Active campaigning includes the spread of paid electronic committees to securitize all societal and political discourses (the translation of the Arab term equivalent to click farms).

3. *State-of-the-art surveillance technologies.* By using the arguments of stability and national security, Arab regimes learned to justify cyber-security surveillance to a fatigued public. Beyond monitoring, systematic hacking activities target human rights NGOs and civil society organizations. Irresponsible sales of surveillance technologies by private Western companies – despite calls by the EU Parliament to stop exports of monitoring equipment – do not only contradict the declared European human rights agenda, but also help foster the authoritarian and nationalistic argumentation that renders security a priority. They threaten civil society initiatives and undermine partnerships with media and civil society in the region. Under these constrained circumstances, the rise of social media usage among youth does not automatically generate protests, particularly when civil society actors perceive circumstances as hopeless and too risky/costly.

Counter-issues' Visibility in the Media

To overcome this binary construction of the media first vs. politics first approaches, the concept of counter-

issues' visibility helps us understand media and transformation. Counter-issues are massive socio-economic and political grievances that regimes want to prevent from reaching the public. They are raised by counter-elites like opposition and civil society organizations. Counter-issues delegitimize regimes and are not welcome to receive media attention. They address the regimes' breaches in terms of values and norms – like human rights violations, torture or corruption – as well as their socio-economic dysfunctions – like housing problems, low wages, crumbling health care, and a general sense of malaise. This paper's central argument is that counter-issues' visibility in the media triggered the transformation processes of 2011 in North Africa. Actors publicly delegitimized the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, within a framework of hybrid media systems. Regimes' responses failed to contain the effects of new media practices and activists' strategies. Thus, asymmetric relations – moral and functional breaches of regimes' legitimacy –, and not social media activism alone, triggered political transformations. At the same time, the media transformed these relations and did not transmit ideas in a linear fashion. Media technology alone has no relevance if there are no agents of change, whose discourses, actions and access to media overcome the imposed restrictions.

Four Arguments for Contextualizing Media Visibility

1. *Interdependencies between media and their political and societal fields.* Looking at the interdependencies between media and their contexts (politics, culture, society) explains media's potential to prompt transformation processes. As media attention is a scarce resource in an oversaturated mediated world, activists used media visibility strategies to create so much attention that it could not be ignored. Social media accelerated information flows and dramatically compressed time and space, transcending spatial and media borders. By highlighting common counter-issues, civil society actors connected with the wider public and inspired them to stand up for their dignity. The media provided them with visibility, and power holders failed to effectively suppress or counter that visibility. Repression gave rise to even more mobilization.

The evolution of anti-torture activism in Egypt since the mid-2000s is a perfect example: the media vis-

ibility given to police brutality was epitomized by the case of Khaled Said, the young Alexandrian man who was beaten to death by plainclothes police officers in June 2010. This tragic incident – among other counter-issues – destabilized the moral foundations of Mubarak’s rule in the last months of his regime.

In Tunisia, police shootings against protesters boosted their media visibility and further fuelled the moral agitation over this injustice. Rising awareness about police torture and abuses led to widespread outrage and mobilized the masses. This awareness would not have been possible without opposition actors pushing for more media visibility.

2. An holistic understanding of media interlinkages in hybrid media systems. The interplay between new and old media explains the relation between media and transformation processes in North Africa from a holistic perspective, without overemphasizing or isolating new media only. This holistic approach suggests that digital and non-digital media interact to boost counter-issues’ media visibility within a system of interdependencies. Overlooking the hybridity of the media system neglects wider surroundings, such as agency, culture, society and politics. Locating the media in their entirety within dynamics that aspire to promote change gives contextualized results. Different forms of media were connected and contributed to increase counter-issues’ media visibility during the 2011 uprisings. New media certainly helped, but they were not alone.

Returning to the case of Khaled Said in Egypt, analysis of media visibility shows how privately-owned newspapers and TV stations played a crucial role in pushing for justice, until the regime put the accused police officers on trial and media attention dropped dramatically.

Focusing on social media alone – for example the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” – cannot explain the high media visibility of police torture. This particular counter-issue was picked up by countless NGOs and activist networks and had a prehistory in non-digital media. This known case reminds us not to overlook the intermediate spirals of media visibility that played a decisive role in pushing for change. As the tragic incident took place in front of countless witnesses in broad daylight, it caused a stir in Alexandria for a couple of days before it was even published in the media. During the coverage delay, the

leaked gruesome picture of the young man’s corpse circulated first among a small circle of bloggers. An opposition presidential candidate picked it up on his Facebook account, inspiring the creation of the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said.” The calls for regular silent stands in black, an act of non-confrontational defiance, quickly spread to Cairo during the summer of 2010 and attracted numerous supporters who had previously not known each other.

The print media could no longer ignore the event: once the silence was broken the media visibility of the counter-issue generated enough attention to eventually set the agenda for evening talk shows on TV, thereby reaching even wider de-politicized audiences. Khaled Said became a posthumous icon as a martyr and his face became a symbol of the revolution. Mainstream media owners prompted that visibility. Private professional media, and their declared commitment to the media logics of serving audiences and making profits within a liberalized media landscape, pushed the margins of freedom under semi-authoritarian settings. This gives us proof of the importance of supporting classic journalism institutions today, and explains why authoritarian regimes try to control the political economy of the media industry.

3. Uprisings have a process and are not sudden “exceptional” moments. Most of what has been written about the uprisings in North Africa has framed them in an unpredictable moment in history. Describing these mass movements as a mere surprise overlooks a prehistory of resistant micro-practices in media and the unsustainable socio-economic conditions before the Arab uprisings.

When we compare Egypt and Tunisia we see both overarching similarities and differences. Both countries had long been under authoritarian rule, with no clear paths of transition in power and hushed succession plans after Ben Ali and Mubarak. The massively flawed social contract and imported neo-liberal socio-economic reforms failed to uphold the promises of modernity and prosperity for the people. A deep legitimacy crisis caused by socio-economic, political and human rights grievances stirred up public unrest. In addition, the growing youth bulge was neither heard nor included in the decision-making processes.

Despite the seemingly stagnant situation, the transformation underwent a process that harboured the regimes’ inner dissolution and gradually opened windows of opportunity within hybrid media systems.

A context-sensitive analysis of micro-practices from North African countries provides proof of the long processuality behind these transformations and deconstructs the black-white binary narrative, as follows:

- a) When opposition actors face harsh repressive consequences, they adopt subversive media tactics to challenge their regime's legitimacy. They often work anonymously in clandestine organizations to avoid jail and torture or they operate from exile through secret mailing lists. However, before 2011, activists also used regimes' margins of toleration. In Egypt, the economic liberalization of the mid-1990s opened up the political and media frameworks to a certain extent; a confluence can be seen between literary genres, cinema and mass media during this period. For example, the counter-issue of police torture received media visibility in the novel *The Yacoubian Building*, later turned into a film. Youssef Chahine's critically acclaimed film *The Chaos* depicted the protagonist as a corrupt police officer abusing his power in the neighbourhood. Through cultural discourses, political issues could trickle down into the public spheres. The fictional narratives were inspired by true stories, unveiled by bloggers and documentary filmmakers. However, literature and cinema opened up spaces of media visibility to wider non-politicized audiences, going beyond direct state control.
- b) The second example shows how journalists revealed a survival tactic in the newsrooms that enabled them to cover protests and other counter-issues. In the much more restrictive Tunisia, before 2011, journalists at opposition newspapers used to bury critical coverage in small type font, under the news section. However, their readers knew where to look, as the former editor-in-chief of a leftist newspaper has stated.

4. *More inner-Arab comparisons for regional differentiation.* North Africa, a region that shares similar linguistic, historic and cultural factors, still has nuanced intra-regional differences and diverse media and political dynamics. It is interesting to note how similar dynamics, such as the youth bulge or the emergence of ICTs, interact within their specific contexts to shape "different yet similar" processes. Particularly after the Arab uprisings, the diverse trajectories of the two North

African countries covered in this article show how different media landscapes, elite pacts and connections to regional and international players contributed to create divergent outcomes.

After the Arab uprising, the trajectories of Tunisia and Egypt show how different media landscapes, elite pacts and connections to regional and international players contributed to create divergent outcomes

Massive asymmetries still shape the political and socio-economic lives of millions of people. Inequalities and socio-economic grievances remain, and have become even worse for the average citizen. The root causes for the workers' strikes in both Egypt and Tunisia in 2008 still exist today, and the post-2011 regimes have been unable to meet their demands. A comparison with the 2008 moment reveals some interesting patterns. In both countries, workers suffered from asymmetrical wealth distribution and precarious labour conditions, and their regimes were challenged: in Egypt, workers complained about savage deregulation, while in Tunisia they protested against unemployment and underdevelopment. However, the geographic location of the demonstrations at that point played a role in creating different media visibility in two similarly centralized countries. The strikes in the Gafsa mining basin, a remote area in the centre of Tunisia, and the ones in the highly populated Nile Delta city of Mahalla, a textile industry hub close to the Egyptian capital, received very different media attention and thus led to distinct regime responses. The restrictive Tunisian system was less responsive, as the strictly censored media landscape kept the protests in the margins and they were only pushed forward by radical media with limited circulation. The Egyptian regime, however, was more responsive, in particular as the connection between workers' leaders and the urban youth resulted in short-lived cross-class solidarity. Different kinds of media visibility in hybrid media environments dictated different regime responses through

the interplay between old and new media, and traditional and innovative protest techniques.

Concluding Remarks

The Arab region still faces multiple challenges in terms of justice and social inclusion. As the current circumstances are not sustainable in the long term, counter-issues' media visibility, even if constrained to the mainstream media, still tends to spark outrage over persistent failures and injustices. Regimes have learned not to underestimate the online public sphere anymore. Against this background, how can the concept of media visibility help us to understand the relation between social media and political transformation in regional contexts?

First, by focusing on interactions between diverse media formats in a dynamic and hybrid context, this concept overcomes the divide between online and offline media. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of hybrid media systems allows us to recognize that authoritarian media systems do not tend to control only old media, and that new media are equally monitored.

Second, this paper calls for prompting intra-regional comparative media research, instead of using case studies alone. Comparative approaches overcome the binaries between North and South – since social media and digital public spheres show convergent dynamics at a global scale, as demonstrated by fake news and manipulative practices – while providing intra-regional differentiation by highlighting similarities and acknowledging diverse prehistories and trajectories.

Third, learning from the Arab uprisings, we need to acknowledge the processuality of subversive tactics. Despite the current patterns of returning to authoritarian regimes and a growing sense of despair, we know how difficult it is to accurately predict regional

events. Despite the brain drain, self-exile and shattered biographies of multipliers relevant to the 2011 mobilizations, research still indicates that younger, better-educated males with higher rates of internet usage tend to be more engaged in public events. Under restrictive frameworks in media and publishing industries, educated youth channelled their creative energy through the overlooked, less confrontational cultural and social fields. This is important to deconstruct the dichotomy between the liberation and non-liberation approaches when looking at the role of media in times of transformation.

References

- BADR, Hanan. "Battleground Facebook: Contestation Mechanisms in Egypt's 2011 Revolution." In BERENGER, Ralph (ed.), *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter* Spokane: Marquette Books, 2013, p. 399 -422.
- CHADWICK, Andrew. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- DIAMOND, Larry. "Liberation Technology." *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (July 2010): 69-83.
- HOWARD, Phillip and HUSSAIN, Muzzamil. *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- TUFEKCI, Zeynep. "Not This One: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 2013): 848-870. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369>.
- WOLFSFELD, Gadi, SEGEV, Elad and SHEAFER, Tamir. "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (March 2013): 115-137.