

The Role of the Media in Arab Transitions: How “Cyberactivism” is Revolutionising the Political and Communication Landscapes

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Any observer of the so-called “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening,” which refers to the massive wave of political upheaval that has been sweeping many parts of the Arab world since 2011, cannot help but notice the significant role that new media has, and continues to, play in it. This article discusses the role of “cyberactivism,” or the role played by new media in paving the way for political transitions, in the Arab world since 2011. It starts with a brief overview of the transitioning Arab media landscape, before moving on to discuss the potential of cyberactivism in these revolutions, especially how new types of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, can act as effective tools for supporting the capabilities of the democratic activists by enabling forums for free speech and political networking opportunities; providing a virtual space for assembly; supporting the capability of the protesters to plan, organise, and execute peaceful protests, as well as document these protests and government reactions to them; and providing forums for collaboration between the activists. It also discusses the contribution that cyberactivism has made in fuelling citizen journalism and civic engagement in the Arab world. Finally, it sheds light on some of the limitations of the role of social media in Arab revolutions by adopting a realistic approach that balances online and offline activism and avoids privileging the tools over the actors on the ground or the activists in the real world.

The Transitioning Arab Media Landscape

Before 1990, most media ownership in the Arab world lay largely with governments, and most media functioned under strict government supervision and control. During this era, Arab media were mostly controlled by governments, mainly to keep laypeople largely uninformed and, thus, incapable of effectively participating in ongoing political controversies and rational debates. However, a new media revolution erupted in the Arab world after 1990 inspired by the introduction of both satellite television channels and the Internet (Khamis and Sisler, 2010). In the 1990s, Internet penetration started to spread throughout the Arab world. However, the region generally suffered from being on the low end of the digital divide (Abdulla, 2007, p. 35) and thus faced many challenges, including: a lack of human and economic information and technology (IT) resources, illiteracy and computer illiteracy, a lack of funds for IT research and development, and a lack of solid telecommunication infrastructure (Abdulla, 2007, p. 35). Ironically, although many Internet websites and blogs are 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. This provides evidence of the highly ambivalent and complex relationship between media and governments in the Arab world (Khamis and 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.

This was especially the case since 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 the Internet, in particular, is one of the most important avenues through which public opinion trends are both shaped and reflected in the Arab world today. The significance of the introduction of the Internet stems from the fact that it defies boundaries, challenges government media censorship, and provides an alternative voice to traditional media outlets, which echo official government policies and views. The Internet is also a rapidly growing and expanding medium in the Arab world, especially among youth, which explains how and why young activists relying on Internet-based online communication were able to pave the way for political transitions in this region.

The Potentials of “Cyberactivism” in Arab Transitions

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 mobilisation because of the latter’s focus on planning, execution, and facilitation of actions. However, they are closely interrelated, since cyberactivism can help to foster and promote civic engagement, which, in turn, gives rise to various forms of mobilisation (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Throughout the transitioning Arab world, from a country as small in size and population as Tunisia to

a country as large in size and population as Egypt, cyber activists used new media tools and techniques effectively to express themselves politically, inform others of the abuses, violations, and corruption of their autocratic governments, organise protests and acts of resistance against authoritarian regimes, and ensure that their voices were heard and that their side of the story was told (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). In other words, new media were deployed actively and effectively as tools for protesters in the Arab world to enhance their agency, organise their actions, coordinate their efforts and capabilities, exercise public will, and amplify their voices of resistance by making sure they simultaneously reached both a national and international audience.

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One of the most striking characteristics of the Arab transitions’ movements was their loose structure and lack of identifiable leaders. In other words, they were largely grassroots, across-the-board, horizontal movements with a bottom-up, rather than top-down, structure. It can also be said that they were more about “processes” than “persons.” In other words, they were characterised by collective and effective processes of group mobilisation, both online and offline, rather than individual acts of leadership by one or more charismatic persons. That is why they were generally described as “leaderless revolutions.” The fact that these uprisings were largely leaderless is further evidence that they were a genuine expression of the Arab people’s public will. The protests were organised and in large part led by loose networks of young people, most of whom demonstrated signifi-

cant capacity for organisation, discipline, restraint, and integrity, resulting in unique youthful revolutions (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011).

This explains why and how new media were used as effective tools for coordination and organisation in these movements: their ability to reach widely dispersed and highly diverse segments of the population within each country, in addition to vast global audiences across cultural, linguistic and geographic boundaries, aided the process of grassroots mobilisation and paved the way for democratic reform and political transition. The fact that these movements were largely led and orchestrated by youth across different Arab countries also accounts for the significance of the role played by social media, since youth make up almost 70% of the overall population in these transitioning Arab societies and are the segment of society that is most eager for political change, capable of grassroots organisation, and technologically savvy when it comes to mastering new media tools and techniques.

“Cyberactivism” as Fuel for Citizen Journalism and Civic Engagement

One of the significant ways through which new media aided political transformation in the Arab world was through the spread of citizen journalism. The importance of citizen journalism stems from the fact that social media allows citizen journalists who are dissatisfied with the traditional media’s version of events to tell their own stories and that “these patterns of political expression and learning are key to developing democratic discourses” (Howard, 2011, p. 182). Most importantly, this pattern of reporting by ordinary citizens holding handheld devices, such as cell phones and digital cameras, not only reaches a local or domestic audience, but also has the capacity to reach a broad international audience, thanks to the amplifying effect of transnational satellite channels, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, which disseminate this type of media content globally by asking citizens to send their videos and upload them online.

The value of this widespread coverage by citizen journalists lies not only in the fact that it increases awareness about a regime’s brutality, corruption, excessive use of force against protesters and viola-

tions of human rights, but also in that it encourages hesitant or undecided citizens to come out and protest. As Freeland (2011) explains, “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.” The marriage between satellite television channels and social networking sites has made it easier to let individuals know that their views are shared by enough people to make protesting worthwhile and safe (Freeland, 2011).

Another equally important role played by new media in these revolutions was promoting civic engagement, which refers to the process through which civil society is invited to participate in ongoing political, economic, and social efforts meant to bring about positive social change (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). This played an important role in terms of awakening the largely dormant, unengaged, and marginalised civil societies in the Arab world, thereby facilitating a shift in the role of new media from being mere “safety valves” to becoming effective “mobilisation tools.” This took place through the ability of these new media to act as effective catalysts and accelerators for change in society, thereby filling the gap between online and offline political activism.

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Additionally, cyberactivism enabled the activists from different Arab countries to become more networked, both online and offline. For example, Egyptian and Tunisian activists exchanged useful knowledge, technical know-how, everyday on-the-ground experiences and practical advice on what, and what not, to do when confronting security forces on the streets during popular protests (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). Similarly, Syrian activists connected with other political activists abroad and with Syrian opposition leaders in the diaspora to come up with detailed strategies and effective plans to resist the Assad regime (Khamis, Gold and Vaughn, 2012). In brief, so-

cial media empowered activists to associate and share ideas with others globally, enabling collaboration between activists in different Arab countries, as well as between protesters and other Arabs in the diaspora, democracy activists in other countries, and Internet activists worldwide, who assisted them in their struggles.

The Limitations of “Cyberactivism” in Arab Transitions

Despite the significant potential and opportunities offered by new media in the realm of political activism in transitioning Arab societies, we also have to acknowledge the limitations of cyberactivism efforts to bring about the desired results in terms of actual political change on the ground, which always requires the physical presence of large numbers of people out on the street who are willing to face the high risk of personal injury, arrest, or even death. In other words, it can be argued that the phenomenon of cyberactivism is a necessary, but insufficient, factor in bringing about actual political change and that social media should best be viewed as “catalysts” and “accelerators” for political change, and not some sort of “magical tool” able to bring about such change on its own. This makes it especially important to avoid mistakenly calling the Egyptian revolution the “Facebook revolution,” calling the Tunisian revolution the “Twitter revolution,” or calling the Syrian uprising the “YouTube uprising,” since such labels overshadow the role of the activists and protesters on the ground, without whose courage, bravery, sacrifice and even martyrdom, these revolutions and uprisings would not have been possible. In analysing the limitations of social media in Arab transitions, it is equally important to acknowledge the fact that they are simply platforms that reflect the political and social dynamics of the societies in which they are being used. In other words, the great roles that these mediated platforms played in grassroots mobilisation, networking, and coordination during these revolutions and uprisings were simply a reflection of the overall sentiment of unity and solidarity that prevailed in these Arab societies in their struggle to oust dictators from office and to overthrow corrupt regimes. However, many of the transitioning Arab societies today are characterised by

division rather than unity, fragmentation rather than solidarity, and plurality rather than uniformity.

This is applicable in both countries where the revolutionary efforts resulted in the overthrow of corrupt, autocratic dictators, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, as well as countries where the struggle for freedom, dignity and democracy is still ongoing, such as Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. In the first category, that of post-revolutionary countries, it is becoming more and more evident that it can be easier to oust a dictator from power than to decide what to do next, which is oftentimes the real challenge. This is mainly due to divisions of opinion among various political groups as to how the country should be managed and how its affairs should be run, which makes it harder to reach the type of consensus that was reflected in most online media platforms during these revolutions (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). In the second category of countries, the struggle for freedom either turned bloody and violent, as in the case of Syria, faced repression and marginalisation at the hands of both the regime and outside forces, as in the case of Bahrain, or did not yield the expected results or desired outcomes, as in the case of Yemen. In every case, the significant challenges faced, the conflicts of interest that prevailed and the insurmountable obstacles posed made it very difficult for any form of media, old or new, to bridge the divides, close the gaps, and cement the differences to bring about unity and reconciliation. This highlights one of the main limitations of new media, which is the fact that they can act as catalysts for political change and social reform only if the overall environment in the country allows for a reasonable degree of consensus-building and is conducive to constructive dialogue and civil discourse, which are essential prerequisites for nation-building. However, in the absence of such an environment and prerequisites, new media alone cannot fill this void and are not capable of generating the needed consensus-building on their own.

Another important factor to bear in mind when discussing the limitations of new media and the process of cyberactivism in bringing about the desired forms of political transformation and transition in the Arab world is the fact that many Arab countries are still suffering from a number of economic, technical, educational and infrastructural constraints and limitations, which hinder the proliferation of new media

technologies on a massive scale and pose challenges with regard to the degree of accessibility, availability, and outreach (Abdulla, 2007). All the above factors combined make it necessary to avoid exaggerating the contributions of new media to the ongoing wave of transitions in the Arab world, whether by ascribing too much power to them in triggering these revolts or assigning too much credit to them in revolutionising the political and communication landscapes before, during and after the uprisings.

Concluding Thoughts

In the seesaw battles between the rulers and the ruled that have been taking place in the Arab world since December 2010, balances of both political power and media power have been shifting relentlessly and unpredictably. However, one fact that cannot be denied is that the will and determination of the Arab people to implement changes in their countries by putting an end to dictatorship, autocracy, and corruption have been the main driving forces behind the revolutions and uprisings that have swept the Arab region. However, they have been augmented and accelerated by the deployment of new media, which have acted as catalysts, mobilisers and organisers of political actions on the ground (Khamis, Gold and Vaughn, 2012). This suggests that “technology does not cause political change... but it does provide new capacities and impose new constraints on political actors” (Howard, 2011, p. 12). In other words, it is the political actors themselves who can bring about actual political change, aided by the deployment of new media tools and effective communication strategies.

Therefore, it is crucial to adopt a balanced approach and a realistic perspective in analysing the role of new media in shaping, orchestrating, organising, and amplifying the various efforts undertaken by political activists and protesters in many parts of the Arab world by avoiding the bi-polar extremes of “technological determinism” and “sociological determinism,” which tend to favour the tools at the expense of the actors or vice versa (Khamis, Gold and Vaughn, 2012). Rather, it is mandatory to adopt a middle position that acknowledges the capacities and contributions of both online and offline efforts,

as well as various manifestations and forms of activism in the virtual and real worlds.

In fact, it is always the combination and intersection of these myriad complex factors that ultimately dictates how and when political transformation can take place in a given country. Despite the fact that many of the factors that determine the form, direction, speed, and scale of transformation and transition in different Arab countries remain unpredictable, one thing is certain: in all of these countries, the struggle for political transformation has started, and it is not going to stop until the goals of freedom, dignity and democracy have been fully realised. Likewise, the process of cyberactivism, which contributed significantly to these political transitions and transformations, has started, and it, too, will not stop until all these goals have been successfully achieved.

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