

# WESTMINSTER PAPERS IN COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

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The role of social media in the Arab uprisings – past and present

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**Lorenzo Coretti**

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TRANSFORMING ONLINE DISSENT INTO THE OFFLINE WORLD

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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Social media in the Arab world before the recent revolutions had been described as marginal, alternative and elitist, and their impact minimal because of the low penetration rates of the internet. The 2011 events across the Arab world have brought 'social media' to the forefront, with many crediting Facebook, weblogs and Twitter with facilitating the revolutions that have taken place. Yet we have not fully understood the role of social media during the recent events and the convergence of social media with not only mainstream media but also with actual street demonstrations. Moreover, the role and significance of social media during recent events across the Arab world has varied greatly. What are the cultural, technical and political variables that are conducive to using social media for mobilization? How have citizens and states used social media during the uprising and beyond? How do we research social media movements in the Arab world?

A total of six articles in this issue aim to answer these questions. Eaton's article investigates the use of internet activism in Egypt during the 2011 events. In detail, the article outlines how social media were used by Egyptian internet activists to increase mobility on the ground, starting from the Facebook campaign 'We Are All Khaled Said' and leading to the ousting of Mubarak.

Gerbaudo's article, on the 'kill switch' as a 'suicide switch', focuses on one critical event during the 2011 uprising in Egypt: the internet blackout imposed by Mubarak's regime during the first days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its effect on mobilization. Using empirical research conducted with online activists, the article reflects on the highly complex and ambivalent relation between offline collective action and social media.

Ben Moussa's article takes a step back and examines the strengths and limitations of various theoretical approaches to researching collective action in the Arab world. Critical of the common pitfalls of technological, social and cultural determinism, the author suggests a multidisciplinary approach that draws on social movement theory, radical democracy theory and alternative media theory to study Muslim-majority societies.

Marc Owen Jones turns our attention to a country largely ignored by the mainstream media, Bahrain. His 10-month virtual ethnographic study, conducted during the uprising in 2011, examines how the Bahraini regime used social media in a number of different ways to suppress both online and offline dissent. Such methods included naming and shaming, offline intelligence gathering and passive observation.

This is followed by the insights of an academic and practitioner into the use of social media during the Syrian uprising, which continues two years after the initial revolt in 2011. Harkin's article explores the changing media ecology in Syria since the uprising and focuses on how Syrian society is constructing alternative ways of disseminating information.

The article by prominent blogger Hussein Ghreer is a sober examination of the role of social media during the uprising in Syria. It highlights the importance of cultural, social and political factors that affect how and why people use internet tools. It contrasts the use of social media in Syria with social media use in Tunisia and Egypt, reminding us again of the importance of context. Unfortunately Ghreer was arrested on 16 February 2012, two days after submitting his first draft to WPCC. Online journalist, and friend of Ghreer, Maurice Aaek, comments on the article a year later, in February 2013.

# INTERNET ACTIVISM AND THE EGYPTIAN UPRISINGS: TRANSFORMING ONLINE DISSENT INTO THE OFFLINE WORLD

**Tim Eaton**

BBC Media Action

**Tim Eaton** currently works for BBC Media Action on media development projects in the Middle East. He previously completed his postgraduate degree at the University of Exeter, majoring in Middle East Studies. He is also a former researcher for Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Tim has a long-standing interest in the politics of Egypt, where he worked as a political researcher at the Ibn Khaldun Center throughout the 2005 elections.

**This article aims to investigate the role of internet activism in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings.** It suggests that the significance of internet activism in Egypt in this period was twofold: first, in its utility as a tool for activists to mobilize, organize and inspire Egyptians to take to the streets on 25 January 2011; and, second, in its use as a medium to document events in Egypt beyond the reach of the authorities. Particular attention is paid to the growth of the 'We Are All Khaled Said' (WAAKS) campaign on Facebook and its capacity to translate online dissent into the offline world. The transformation of protesters into citizen journalists through information and communication technologies, and Twitter in particular, is examined for its success in challenging the narrative set by Egyptian state media and in providing a window into events for the outside world.

## KEYWORDS

activism, Egypt, Facebook, internet, revolution, Tahrir, Twitter

**TIM EATON:** BBC Media Action

# INTERNET ACTIVISM AND THE EGYPTIAN UPRISINGS: TRANSFORMING ONLINE DISSENT INTO THE OFFLINE WORLD

Tim Eaton

BBC Media Action

On 11 February 2011, Vice-President Omar Suleiman took to the stage to announce that Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's ageing autocrat, had resigned his post as president. Only three months earlier, such an outcome had seemed unthinkable, as Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) celebrated an overwhelming victory in elections marred by widespread vote-rigging and repression. The intervening period bore witness to a remarkable mobilization, as first tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and eventually over a million Egyptians took to the streets to demand his removal. Through the use of technology, and social media in particular, these events were brought into the living rooms of people across the world, enabling them to witness events in unprecedented detail and with unprecedented speed.

The growth of online political activism, referred to in the article as internet activism, has sparked a major debate between those who see it as a powerful new weapon in the arsenal of opposition activists in the Middle East and those who believe it overblown.<sup>1</sup> The resulting discourse has, however, led to a conflation of the motivations for political actions, and the tools activists use to carry them out, in a battle over causality. Yet this is a largely artificial debate, as the motivation behind the actions of activists was opposing the repressive system of government that Egyptians rose up to protest: internet activism was no more than a tool which activists used to get their messages across and coordinate their actions.

It is suggested here that the significance of internet-based information and communication technologies (ICT) in this period is twofold: first, in their utility as a tool for activists to mobilize, organize and inspire Egyptians to take to the streets on 25 January 2011; and, second, in their use as a medium to document events in Egypt beyond the reach of the authorities. Indeed, this ability to get people to the streets – rather than its ability to keep them there – was the primary success of internet activism in this period, and its significance was reduced once the momentum of events had reached the mainstream. However, without the initial call to arms online and Facebook's ability to get thousands – though not millions – into the streets, then the demonstrations might never have reached the mainstream majority of Egyptians, and Mubarak might have survived. At the very least, it is difficult to disagree with Ahdaf Soeif in positing that without internet activism the fledgling Egyptian revolution could not have happened in the way that it did, nor for that matter at such speed (Idle and Nunns, 2011).

## **Internet Activism and its Political Uses**

Before embarking on a study of internet activism it is of course first necessary to define what is meant by the term. The one to be used here is the broad definition provided by Vegh (2003), who writes that internet activism is 'a politically motivated movement relying on the internet' using strategies that are either internet-enhanced or internet-based. Beyond this, we can divide internet activism into three categories.

The first is awareness and advocacy – also known as participatory journalism – which refers to the use of the internet as an alternative news source to counter the control of information channels opposed to the interests of the activists. The second category, organization and mobilization – also known as ‘mediated mobilization’ – is also pivotal to understanding the significance of internet activism in the Egyptian 25 January movement. This form of internet activism is used in a number of ways, but of most interest here are calls for ‘offline’ action, such as demonstrations, as was witnessed in Egypt. Finally, action/reaction activism – often dubbed ‘Hacktivism’ – is used to describe malicious attacks by activists to bring down or paralyse websites (Lievrouw, 2011). Hacktivism played a minimal role in the 25 January movement so little attention will be paid to it here.

Analysis of internet activism is a relatively new and fast-moving field due to the rapid development of the technologies in use on the ground by activists. Large gaps in our understanding inevitably remain. Thus far, academic literature in the field of communications has predominantly focused on the media landscapes of western societies and activists seeking the downfall of capitalism or mass media. On the other hand, many political scientists have heralded the importance of freedom of expression through the internet in the Middle East, though few tackle the specifics of how this may actually effect political change. This study aims to navigate between these two approaches to posit that the internet is indeed an effective tool for such a goal. While the current literature has its limitations, many of the applications of internet activism identified by communications theorists have proved to be perceptible in the Egyptian uprisings. For while the costs of opposition and problems of accessibility may be greater in an authoritarian context, the capabilities of new ICTs and processes of informational distribution are transferrable.

In his 2000 work, *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold observed that through the use of technology, people are able to create networks of communication instantly as a result of their ‘perpetual connectivity’.<sup>2</sup> Using the example of SMS distribution through mobile phones, Castells notes that, in a world of networked mass communication, ‘one message from one messenger can reach out to thousands, and potentially hundreds of thousands’ as it proliferates through the network society (Castells, 2009: 348). Buchanan has dubbed this the ‘small world effect,’ as access to each network offers the potential to reach a potentially infinite number of further networks should the receiver of information choose to further disseminate it to his/her personal network (quoted in Castells, 2009: 348).

For Castells, this form of networked distribution is key, because it means that, at every stage, the receiver identifies the information as coming from a known – and, crucially – trusted, source. This transforms the wireless communication network into a network of trust, in which the receiver is likely to show greater faith in the information.

According to his ‘communication power’ theory, these wireless communication networks and networks of trust evolve into networks of resistance, ‘which prompts mobilization against an identified target’ (Castells, 2009: 302).

It is suggested here that Castells’ model of communication power through wireless communication is clearly apparent in the context of the conduct of internet activism in the Egyptian uprisings. Just as a mobile phone user would disseminate information to people in his/her phone book, a Facebook or a Twitter user’s created content is disseminated to his/her ‘friends’ or ‘followers’<sup>3</sup> who can then choose to comment on it or forward it, at which point the information is then transmitted to their networks. This permits the creation of networks of trust and, in the Egyptian case, the fostering a network of resistance against the Mubarak regime. This study therefore seeks to illustrate how the impact of online insurgent politics of the internet activists – in the form of mediated mobilization and participatory journalism – was multiplied through communication power to create the popular base for protest in the offline world.

### **Internet Activism and Political Opposition in Egypt**

Before tackling the events of Tahrir, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the status of internet activism and internet use in Egypt prior to the demonstrations. Although the international newspaper headlines may suggest differently, the mass expression of dissent in Egypt’s streets in January and February 2011 did not come from nowhere and the use of internet activism to express that dissent was also not something that was new. There had in fact been a steady flow of political dissent aimed at dislodging Mubarak, with internet activism at the forefront. By 2005, Egypt was home to a thriving and diverse blogosphere of committed and insightful political commentators who began to challenge the narrative of the state-run media, uncovering major stories that the state-controlled sector either couldn’t or wouldn’t run (Eaton, 2011a). This first generation of internet activists was also integral to the ground-breaking Kefaya movement ahead of the 2005 presidential elections in Egypt, where they would blood many of the strategies used in the build-up to the 25 January 2011 protests. Yet, as may be expected with any technology-enabled phenomenon, the patterns of activists’ online behaviours shifted with developments in technology. The entrance on the scene of social media from 2007 onwards brought a new generation of internet activists to the fore (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). These activists were less interested in the long treatises on political developments that the blogger community had tirelessly created and were instead quick to act, exploiting the capability of social media for mediated mobilization. The staging of protests in 2008, in part coordinated through Facebook, was a sign of things to come. By the lead-up to the 2011 demonstrations, internet activism had come a long way in Egypt, and it was expressed in many forms. Although it had not succeeded in reaching the mainstream of Egyptian society, it had laid the

groundwork for the future by establishing some isolated networks of resistance within Egyptian political society and developing tactics to maximize their impact through the diffusion of communication power.

The size and representativeness of such networks should not be overstated, however. Despite breakneck growth in internet penetration in Egypt, its use remained far from universal at the time of the demonstrations. In May 2011, official Egyptian government statistics concluded that there were over 25 million internet users in Egypt, inclusive of those who use the internet through their mobile – nearly a 60-fold increase since 2000 (MCIT, 2011). Nevertheless, the penetration of the internet remained, and remains, uneven and subject to socio-economic barriers. Research by BBC Media Action carried out in March and April 2010 found that 55 per cent of Egyptian non-internet users did not know how to use a computer and that 43 per cent could not afford a computer of their own (BBC Media Action, 2010). Such numbers support the views of many scholars who have advocated caution regarding whether internet activism could be the primary driver of revolution in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, internet activism formed a fundamental cog in the machine of the opposition, as the following case study seeks to illustrate.

### **The Prelude: ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ and Mediated Mobilization of the Protests**

The brutal murder of 28-year-old Khaled Said at the hands of Egyptian police in Alexandria in June 2010 caused outrage. His death became a *cause célèbre* for internet activists. The official line that he had died while choking on a bag of drugs convinced no-one. Pictures of Said’s severely beaten corpse published by the blogger Zeinobia showed his skull and jaw with clear fractures that left the police claim that he had died of asphyxiation untenable (Zeinobia, 2010). One thousand people attended Said’s funeral in Alexandria, while activists protested outside of the Interior Ministry’s offices in Cairo (Al Amrani, 2010).

Following Said’s death, Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google executive who was working on the Mohamed El Baradei campaign, established a Facebook ‘group’<sup>5</sup> open for all Facebook members to join and campaign against police brutality. In doing so Ghonim sparked an online mobilization that ultimately led to the demonstrations in Cairo on 25 January 2011 and, eventually, Mubarak’s ouster. The group’s name in Arabic, *Kulina Khalid Said* (‘We Are All Khaled Said’ – WAAKS) expressed the sentiment perfectly, and soon caught on online. There were, and are at the time of writing, in fact two WAAKS pages: one in English and one in Arabic. The administrator for the English page was Mohamed Ibrahim, an Egyptian IT consultant, and Ghonim occupied the same position for the Arabic page, with assistance from Abdel Rahman Mansour, another activist who had contacted him through Facebook (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012).

Both groups were open to all, but only Ghonim, Mansour and Ibrahim were able to clear postings to appear on the groups’ ‘wall’.<sup>6</sup> Although the independent website for the Khaled Said cause states that the administrators had never met before embarking on the campaign (WAAKS, 2010), the symmetry of the English and Arabic versions is remarkable. From the outset, the groups’ founding in July, the WAAKS webpages remained consistent and focused upon building solidarity for the cause. On 2 August, Ibrahim wrote:

Our cause is not just Khaled Said’s brutal torture to death... We are standing up for the many ‘Khaled Said’<sup>7</sup>s [sic] who were and are still being tortured in Egypt... We will not rest until we succeed. Are you with us to the end? (WAAKS English, 2010)

From the beginning, WAAKS attempted to move its internet activism from the online to the offline world through mediated mobilization. In his recently released memoir, Ghonim noted that this was WAAKS’ ‘ultimate aspiration’ (Ghonim, 2012a). It did so initially with some success, albeit not on a nationally significant scale: four silent protests were staged across Egypt, beginning late in July, decrying the actions of the police and security forces. Ghonim estimated that approximately 300 people participated in Alexandria although a much smaller number – around 20 – in Cairo (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012). However, the cause rapidly proliferated throughout Egyptian Facebook networks. Only a month after the death of Said, the *New York Times* carried a story on the fledgling movement, reporting that the Arabic WAAKS had over 190,000 members (Fahim, 2010). By 3 August, Ghonim reported that the Arabic page had 250,000 members (WAAKS Arabic, 2010). In contrast, the English page reported that it had reached only 10,000 members in November (WAAKS English, 2010). The posts of the Arabic page therefore receive greater attention here.

Following the relative success of the silent protests in July, the groups retained their focus on the pursuit of the Khaled Said case through the Egyptian courts. Yet, as elections approached, the groups called for a ‘Day of Anger’ ahead of the presidential election. The campaign was, however, derailed as the WAAKS Arabic group was mysteriously deleted, presumably by the Egyptian security forces. The next day, 26 November, the group was resuscitated, albeit with the loss of all previous content (WAAKS Arabic, 2010). The protests went ahead, with hundreds – not thousands – taking to Cairo’s streets (Associated Press, 2010). Afterwards, and throughout the elections, many pictures, video clips and news items were listed on the walls of the Arabic and English groups.

The campaign built steadily over the next two months, although it is unclear exactly

how and when the administrators chose 25 January as the date for protest. In his memoirs, Ghonim claims that Mansour mentioned 25 January as the potential date in late December. It was at this point that Ghonim decided to discuss the idea – still under the cloud of anonymity – on an online chat forum with one of the leaders of the 6 April movement, Ahmed Maher (Ghonim, 2012a). However, it took a further two weeks for 25 January – which is National Police Day in Egypt – to be set as the date for demonstrations on WAAKS. And when it was, it was not Ghonim, Ibrahim or Mansour that first called for them. Instead, on 14 January, a YouTube interview of a former Egyptian police officer living in exile in the United States, Omar Afifi, was posted on the WAAKS Arabic site in which he called for a demonstration to show solidarity with Tunisians; the resignation of Egyptian Interior Minister Habib Al Adly; and the repeal of Emergency Law in Egypt (YouTube, 2011b). In posting the video on the WAAKS Arabic wall, Ghonim did not seek ownership, writing clearly, ‘Omar Afifi: calls on Egyptians to demonstrate on 25 January’ (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). Even when Afifi’s call was repeated on 18 January, Ghonim still made clear that this was Afifi’s call and not WAAKS’. In the one major divergence between the English and Arabic sites, Ibrahim was already calling for demonstrations – without affiliation to Afifi – on 15 January.

Regardless, it was a recording by a young Egyptian woman, Asma’a Mahfouz, posted on WAAKS Arabic on 18 January appears to have tipped the balance. ‘I am talking to you to deliver a simple message,’ said Mahfouz. ‘We want to go down to Tahrir Square, if we still want honour and to live with dignity, then we have to go down to claim our rights on January 25’ (YouTube, 2011a). Later that day, a link to register for the protests was introduced on the WAAKS Arabic site. Facebook users needed only to list a contact email address to be provided with the information and instructions from the WAAKS administrators on the plans for the protests. If anyone wanted to express his or her own views, an online form could be found to do so (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). Incredibly, it was only 11 days before Egyptians took to the streets that the protests were first advocated by Afifi, and WAAKS started to register participants only a week before that. The mobilization in the coming period was unprecedented. Within two days of the announcement, Ghonim claimed that the news had reached 500,000 Egyptians online through the reposting of information on other Facebook pages, including the 6 April movement (80,000 members), Nizar Qabany (157,000 members) and the Egyptian Sugar Cane Juice group (250,000 members). By that time, 27,000 had already signed up to physically take part in the protest (Ghonim, 2012a). By 17 January the WAAKS English page was calling for worldwide demonstrations in front of Egyptian embassies. These started with New York, London, Madrid and Bologna, where protests took place on 23 January, a Sunday (Frenchman, 2011). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that there was any sense of what was to come following the initial hours of the protest on 25 January. Ghonim’s post on WAAKS in the early hours of the day sounded hopeful: ‘If 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us... I wonder if we can??’

(WAAKS Arabic, 2011). For the next two and a half weeks the world was transfixed by the demonstrations that eventually forced Mubarak out on 11 February.

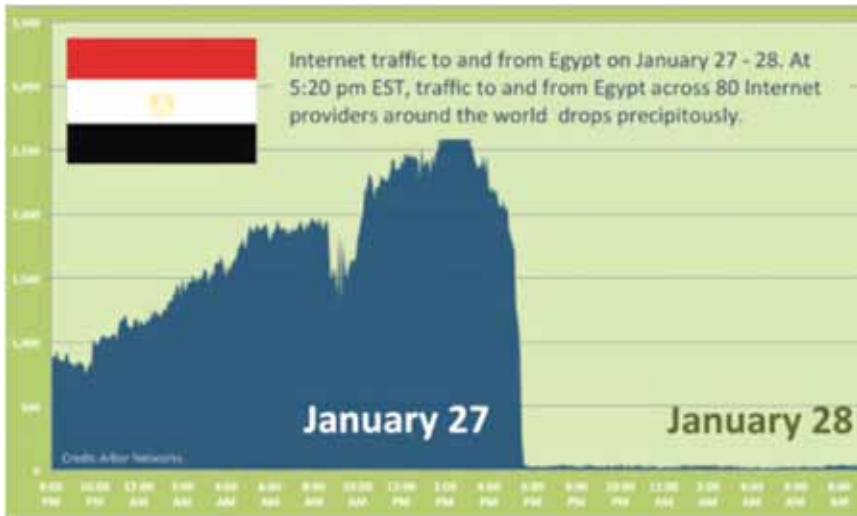
### Internet Activism During the Protests

The success of the internet in getting Egyptians into the streets in January 2011 is remarkable considering the known costs of opposition in Egypt. While WAAKS had hundreds of thousands of members – no agreed figure exists although Ghonim claims that 100,000 registered to participate (interview with Wael Ghonim, 2012) – it is unknown how many of them were in the streets on 25 January. Nevertheless, the tens of thousands that were in the square were a major increase over previous demonstrations. In fact, the determining factor of the demonstrations’ success was the ability of the activists to attract people onto the streets – something that David Faris (2010) had identified as the fundamental failure the previous protests advocated online in Egypt. This was different on 25 January, as the demonstrations that started in different areas of Cairo picked up people as they went through the streets.<sup>7</sup> And the people that they picked up were from all walks of life: middle class and working class, educated and uneducated. This success highlights the pitfalls of much of the criticism surrounding the impact of internet activism in effecting political change; for once internet activism managed to begin to mobilize society on the streets in combination with more established political opposition movements, it achieved the popular base necessary for the conduct of communication power. The fact that organization may have been started by a somewhat elitist set of activists with access to computer-mediated communication (CMC) through the internet does not mean that the impact of internet activism was restricted to the online world.

The Egyptian government’s unprecedented decision to cut off the internet on 28 January (see Figure 1) was a testament to the gravity with which it treated the threat of internet activism. But it also meant that the vast majority were unable to get online. It is important to note that WAAKS Arabic was no exception, going offline between 28 January and 2 February. While the government presumably hoped that activists would flounder once deprived of their means of communication, the opposite proved true. When the government blocked cell-phones people seemingly switched to a more traditional form of communication – word of mouth. In many ways the move appears to have enticed people from their homes down to the streets to see for themselves (interview with Sherif Mansour, 2011). Despite the blackout, many activists soon managed to find proxies to get back online, or simply sent their updates to friends and relatives outside of the country to post their updates online. Yet, the critical mass had already been reached. The argument put forward by some, that internet activism played little part in effecting Mubarak’s ouster due to the fact the protests continued throughout the blackout, misses the point: the damage had already been done.

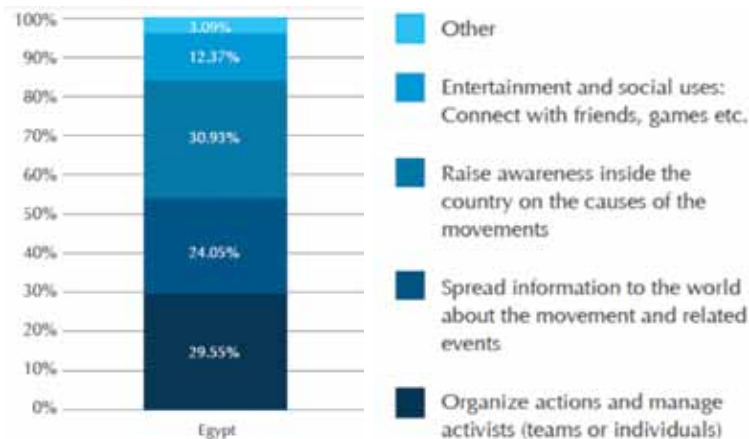


**Figure 1:** The internet blackout in Egypt on 28 January



Source: Labovitz (2011).

**Figure 2:** Main usage of Facebook throughout demonstrations



Source: Dubai School of Government (2011).

Nevertheless, the internet was not blocked for the entirety of the demonstrations: internet activism remained an important tool for the protesters. A survey by the Dubai School of Government (Figure 2) carried out in March 2011 found that Egyptian Facebook users believed that nearly 85 per cent of Facebook usage throughout the demonstrations was to promote and organize activism, raise awareness and spread information about events as they happened – the fundamentals of mediated mobilization and participatory journalism. Only 15 per cent of respondents believed that Facebook had any social or entertainment role throughout the protests (Dubai School of Government, 2011).

Twitter cannot be said to have had the same mass impact as Facebook. It had only around 130,000 members in Egypt, against Facebook’s 7 million users in Egypt in May 2011 (Dubai School of Government, 2011). Yet, while it was not able to effect mass mobilization on its own, it was able to play a significant role in enabling mediated mobilization and participatory journalism through the facilitation of perpetual connectivity. Certain platforms lend themselves to specific tasks. As a tool for advocacy of a cause, Facebook was clearly most suited to a campaign against police brutality. Yet, while Facebook was most important in the build-up to the protests, Twitter was a far more effective tool for activists once on the ground, as they were often able to use the Twitter interface through their mobile phones. The following tweet from the well-known blogger Mahmoud Salem, sent on 11 February, offers a good example: ‘Need more protesters on the salah salem side. There are only 1000 there with thousands on the roxy side. Pl retweet #jan25’ (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 212). This short message is a perfect snapshot of the utility of Twitter. The update was sent to those protesting and following #jan25 on Twitter to communicate a weakness in the protest, circumnavigating the need for a chain of command and allowing the protesters to respond quickly to emergent threats. Moreover, the request to ‘retweet’ was heeded by 235 people, allowing the information access to 235 further networks of people. In this manner, just as through Facebook, information cascades through networks at high speed to provide activists information in almost real time.<sup>8</sup>

The 140 character limit micro-blogs on Twitter were far quicker than through the WAKS Facebook interface, which required administrator approval of postings. Furthermore, while SMS messages of similar length could be sent, the time that it takes the phone to send will increase as the number of recipients multiplies. This does not affect Twitter: contact with the entire community is nearly instantaneous. As Figure 3 illustrates, the number of Twitter posts in Egypt under the hashtag<sup>9</sup> #jan25 – which became the WAKS of the Twitter world – exploded either side of the internet blackout, and closely mirrors patterns of Twitter use in the whole of Egypt.

**Figure 3:** Daily Tweet volume and mentions of #jan25 in Egypt

Source: Dubai School of Government (2011).

Such practical information did not only come from protesters in Tahrir. Just as Egyptian internet activists had been vocal supporters of the Tunisian opposition's quest to oust President Ben Ali, their Tunisian counterparts returned the favour. Twitter acted as a base for knowledge sharing regarding a number of things, from advice on how to protect one's face from tear gas to messages of support from the outside world (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). As a result, the impact of Twitter can be seen to be greater than its number of users, or even the number of tweets, as many users utilized the platform solely as a newsfeed (Dubai School of Government, 2011). This is not to say that Twitter did not become home to an outpouring of calls to arms: 'You want Mobarak out?' wrote Monasosh, '[then] stop whining, get off ur [sic] assess [sic] and join us in the streets #Jan25' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 90). Indeed, many activists, taking advantage of their proficiency in English, used the platform to call for support worldwide. The well-known blogger Hossam el Hamalawy wrote: 'People around the world, plz [sic] picket #Egypt embassies tomorrow Friday in solidarity. #Jan 25' (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 55).

Despite the emphasis on Facebook and Twitter, new technologies and web-based applications very rarely operate in isolation: their compatibility and ability to interact with one another is demanded by their users and is a key catalyst in the proliferation of communication power. Many elements of such crossover have already been mentioned,

from the embedding of Omar Afifi's YouTube video on WAKS, to the uploading of pictures and posting of links to news stories and the use of mobile phones to access web-based platforms. This is a crucial element of the success of mediated mobilization in Egypt, and not one that appeared suddenly in January 2011. Facebook and Twitter had been used simultaneously by the administrators of WAKS, with the first call for a Twitter protest going out only a day after WAKS Arabic was set up. Indeed, the organizing sessions for the WAKS Facebook group ahead of the January protests took place on Twitter under the hashtag #jan25. Activists were able to communicate directly with the organizers and each other using the '@' reply function (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 20).

### Evaluating Mediated Mobilization on WAKS

The importance of online petitions like WAKS has been derided by many commentators. Slavoj Žižek has described them as a form of 'interpassivity' that actually reduces the likelihood of people taking 'real' action – that is, in the offline world – by allowing someone to create the illusion of doing something, when in fact nothing is being done (Hands, 2010a). In a similar vein Malcolm Gladwell (2010) declared that such petitions are mere 'clicktivism' and a distraction from the real drivers of protest on the ground. Yet, as Joss Hands illustrates, the 'clicktivism' thesis appears only to take into account immediately obvious forms of online practices, while CMC 'interlaces the online and offline worlds to the point at which it makes little sense to try and think of them as separate entities' (Hands, 2010b). In a liberalized autocracy such as Egypt, where political opposition often came at great personal cost, the act of supporting any cause that was critical of the regime – in any forum – should also not be underestimated. Of course, the cost was a great deal less in joining a group such as WAKS, which required simply the click of a button. But the crucial element was that it provided access to Facebook members and their near-infinite personal networks of friends and contacts, an element which cannot be dismissed as inconsequential. Previous political campaigns using internet activism, such as *Kefaya* and the 6 April movement, may have succeeded in mobilizing a few thousand people, but Facebook's network society offered access to millions more. There was no physical opposition movement in Egyptian civil society to rival such access.

By engaging Egyptians on an issue, which they all understood – police brutality – WAKS inspired solidarity in numbers, which enabled it to nurture an insurgent community. Journalist Jack Shenker believes this solidarity helped to cause the 'islands of resistance that were evident in Egyptian society to coalesce and explode into the mainstream' (interview with Jack Shenker, 2011). Indeed, since the major strike action in Al Mahalla in 2008, there had been a number of workers strikes in Egypt and growing discontent with the country's economic plight, but these islands of resistance had remained isolated. This was something in which the network society of social

media played a significant role. The call to arms unleashed an outpouring of emotion and solidarity with the community: responding to Ghonim's post on 18 January, Mohamed Issa wrote 'January 25th is the beginning, the days that follow will force the tyrant [Mubarak] to leave' (WAAKS Arabic, 2011). There are thousands of examples of similar sentiments; one such is shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Snapshot of WAAKS English, 20 January 2011



Source: WAAKS English (2011).

The flat leadership model also differentiated WAAKS from the attempts of other opposition movements to demonstrate. Such a model was made possible by the advancement of CMC, although it should be emphasized that this was also something that the organizers sought, not least for their own safety (Ghonim, 2012). In the past, many demonstrations were easily broken up due to the fact that they had easily identifiable leaders,<sup>10</sup> but this was not the case on 25 January. Ghonim was himself

apprehended on 27 January, and only came to the attention of most Egyptians when he gave his heralded interview on Dream TV on 7 February – he had remained anonymous while operating WAAKS for fear of arrest (Ghonim, 2012). His arrest did not cause the movement to flounder, as it was not reliant on one or indeed a few individuals to retain its momentum.

Thus, despite the emphasis of this article on the organizational qualities of social media, the flat leadership model of WAAKS determined that the demonstrations on 25 January were, at best, only loosely organized. Beyond instructing members to attend at specific locations at a specific time, no further strategic guidance was offered. This was a crucial departure from previous efforts, and a major strength in the authoritarian context. The threat was also one that the regime failed to comprehend, consequently rendering their traditional tactics of imprisoning leaders useless. Through the use of social media, WAAKS had created a movement that allowed all of its members to participate, comment and *act* within the realms of a loosely defined concept of freedom from state oppression. Rather than dictats filtering through a hierarchical organizational structure – previously the norm for both the government and the so-called 'liberal' opposition in Egypt – in-depth analysis of the posts on WAAKS illustrates that it sought to offer little more than general guidance to its members, who were largely granted autonomy to act as they saw fit.

Ghonim would later reflect that: 'This was a leaderless movement, there was no organization and no strategy' (2011). But in his memoirs, he does claim that he consulted with various other opposition personalities, including Mostafa al-Nagar, campaign manager for Mohamed El Baradei, as well as Ahmed Maher, a leader in the 6 April movement, and another activist, Mahmoud Samy, over the coordination of strategy (Ghonim, 2012). In fact, Ghonim claims that the other activists met several times to formalize their tactics, agreeing to start out in satellite locations where they would pick up Egyptians on the street *en route* to converging on Tahrir (Ghonim, 2012). No such strategy was apparent through the WAAKS page, and this perhaps illustrates that some of the more established opposition groups did follow a more organized path on 25 January.

When considering this question, it is worth pointing out that another key element of communication power was at play here, as Ghonim's network of resistance on WAAKS combined with the networks of resistance of the other more seasoned activists, boosting WAAKS' strength considerably. Such links had worked in an ad hoc fashion up to that point – with the duplication of information from WAAKS on other platforms in solidarity – but this appears to have formalized the alliances.<sup>11</sup> This is also further illustrative of the futility of trying to forge a distinction between the online and offline worlds. Maher, Samy and Nagar were communicating anonymously with Ghonim through CMC, but they were making decisions about activities on the ground. The activities of

WAAKS were never limited to networks of resistance on Facebook, but in fact offered a non-aligned hub for protest against the state. Hitherto unconnected networks were connected through WAAKS.

Nevertheless, few on 25 January appeared to have knowledge of any planning. None of the activists who took to the streets to protest on 25 January interviewed by the author knew anything of a plan to take over Tahrir Square. Mohamed Abdel Aziz, the Egypt coordinator of Freedom House, said that the organizers had only hoped for 10,000 protesters, and were surprised by the numbers that took to the streets (interview with Mohamed Abdel Aziz, 2011). It was only after the protesters had been able to repel the initial wave of police that the protesters realized their strength. Taking advantage of perpetual connectivity through mobile phones, Abdel Aziz reported how he then began calling activists protesting in other areas. Soon after, a somewhat spontaneous decision to march towards Tahrir was made. Abdel Aziz did not know where the decision had come from – certainly not from the WAAKS Facebook page – but he soon found himself in Tahrir Square. When asked about the organization at the demonstration, the prominent activist Mahmoud Salem said that he believed a ‘collective consciousness’ was fashioned in the streets that day, but knew of no real plan of action hatched anywhere (interview with Mahmoud Salem, 2011). Thus, despite the elements of planning that were apparently in place for 25 January, according to Ghonim, it is difficult to see how such a small number of activists could have provided such a large number of people with any detailed plan once boots hit the ground. In the end, it was numbers that were decisive. Gamal Eid, a leading Egyptian activist and head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (ANHRI), astutely noted, ‘You are talking about millions of people. You don’t need a plan’ (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011).

### The Role of Citizen Journalism

‘Trying to figure out what was going on [in Tahrir] was like playing with a jigsaw puzzle,’ one Egyptian told the author. Indeed, the volume of information in circulation was unprecedented. Crucially, unlike in Algeria in 1991, almost any act of aggression that the Egyptian regime directed against its people found its way on to social media and TV screens around the world: the ability to bridge the gap between new media and traditional media was crucial. It was also not in any way accidental. From the outset, WAAKS encouraged citizen journalism among protesters, featuring a short video with the title, ‘The camera is my weapon.’ In it activists were encouraged to ‘use cameras to capture every policeman who will attack peaceful protesters’ (Frenchman, 2011).

Gamal Eid was quick to realize the potential of Twitter for the dissemination of information on the protests to the international media. Understanding that few western journalists would be able to read tweets in Arabic, Eid put a call out on Twitter for Egyptians who would be able to translate the updates of his ANHRI employees. Eid

was surprised to find that 35 Egyptians soon volunteered. One such translated tweet came from the ANHRI representative in Suez, where he reported that opposition protesters had been attacked by pro-government thugs on motorcycles. Acting on ANHRI information, the story went by telephone from Suez to the volunteer to translate into English, which Eid then posted directly to the foreign news correspondents’ Twitter accounts by using the ‘@’ function (interview with Gamal Eid, 2011). The story was later covered by *The Guardian* (2011). Meanwhile, the live blogs of the major international newspapers used tweets from activists on the ground in Egypt to inform their transfixed readers of developments.<sup>12</sup> Twitter provided such readers with some of ‘the most riveting real-time coverage ever recorded’ (Idle and Nunns, 2011: 19).

Citizen journalism captured moments of triumph and despair throughout the demonstrations: the YouTube video that showed a man walking in front of an armoured vehicle with a water cannon bore striking resemblance to the man who bravely defied a tank in Tiananmen Square (YouTube, 2011d). Likewise, a video shot on the mobile phone of a bystander that showed an unarmed man gunned down in the streets of Alexandria by security forces was pronounced Egypt’s ‘Neda’ moment, drawing comparison to the YouTube video that had shown a young Iranian woman killed at a protest in Tehran in 2009 (YouTube, 2011c). Such images told a thousand stories and counteracted the propaganda that the Mubarak regime was spreading through state television. These images and videos were circulated as Nile TV informed its viewers that the protesters were foreign enemies, criminals or members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Abouzeid, 2011). There can be no doubt that the Egyptian state lost the propaganda war, which is in no short measure due to the participatory journalism of Egypt’s protesters in Tahrir Square. This goal was present from the outset, and emphasized by internet activists.

### The Significance of Internet Activism to the Demonstrations

Insurgent politics conducted through internet activism multiplied the impact of social protest in Egypt. Yet revolutions do not come out of thin air, or for that matter, cyberspace: there would have been no revolution without a cause to bind Egyptians together. Thus, to simplify the events in Egypt as a Twitter or Facebook revolution would imply a blinkered view of the realities on the ground, ignoring many crucial factors. The role of organized labour and the urban poor was integral to forcing Mubarak out. Moreover, the Cairo-centric focus of this article, as a result of its emphasis on internet activism, also fails to do justice to the fact that protests were taking place not only in Cairo but all over Egypt. We should also bear in mind, however, that seemingly there was considerable interaction between internet activists and more established opposition movements in the lead-up to the protests. To consider internet activism in this period as a solely online phenomenon would equally be a mistake, as content created online was clearly disseminated offline.

Caveats aside, then, in seeking the significance of internet activism in the fall of Mubarak, we must look to its utility as a tool for internet activists to inspire, organize, mobilize and finally to document. Different platforms and technologies were used in different ways, but there is rarely a dividing line: most were used for more than one such function. Indeed, while the roles of Twitter and Facebook have been emphasized here, it is of course true that other platforms, such as YouTube and Flickr, and the availability of mobile phones, were also crucial tools for activists.

Nevertheless, important questions remain unanswered. The most significant of these relate to the impact of ICT on participation. While it may appear logical, even obvious, to suggest that WAAKS increased the likelihood of its members participating in the demonstrations, there remains a lack of concrete evidence. While the link between online communities and participation has been identified, work in this area has thus far focused on case studies conducted in the West, and with activities and goals that are largely confined to the online world. The need for a detailed study of events in an authoritarian context is acute and would be extremely valuable to scholarship in this area.

Regardless of such questions, it is apparent that many of the concepts of the communication power theory propounded by Manuel Castells were present in Egypt's network society. Through the spread of information online, internet activists were able to establish networks of resistance within Egyptian political society. And, despite the relative weakness of the ties between members of these networks, CMC emerged as an effective tool to facilitate collective action. Perpetual connectivity of activists enabled them to have access to an infinite number of networks of trust and multiply the impact of social protest through the creation of an insurgent community. Internet activism made political action easier, faster and more universal in Egypt. But it was not, of course, a panacea.

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- 1.** For more detail on this debate, see below.
  - 2.** That is, the ability of activists to be online constantly while on the ground. This is primarily through the use of internet-based mobile phone applications. It is also known as 'Mobile-ization'. Rheingold was referring to mobile phones, in particular.
  - 3.** Accepted contacts on Facebook are categorized as 'friends' – the user must accept a request from another user to reach this status. On Twitter, a user can 'follow' the blogs of another user without permission, although they can be 'blocked' from doing so by the other user.
  - 4.** Much of the scepticism surrounding the role of internet activism relates to the representativeness of internet users in Egyptian society. Khaled Hroub (2009) proposes that 'the hope that internet activity would be a principal agent of political and social change is one thing, the reality is another'.
  - 5.** Facebook groups can be created by anyone with a Facebook account and can be created so that they are either open (any Facebook member can join) or closed (members can join only by invitation).
  - 6.** The 'wall' is a feed of microblogs to which members of groups can contribute pending the authorization one of the group's administrators.
  - 7.** This is something that Ghonim (2012a) claims was planned by Mostafa al-Nagar, Mahmoud Samy and Ahmed Maher.
  - 8.** This view is proposed by Lustick and Miodownik (see Faris, 2010).
  - 9.** Messages are organized into streams by their hashtags, e.g. #jan25, allowing users to follow conversations on a given topic from other Twitter users that are unknown to them.
  - 10.** The demonstrations in Mahalla el-Kubra in 2008, for example, were known to have been organized by Ahmed Maher and Esraa Abdel Fattah. When Abdel Fattah informed her 6 April Facebook group that she would be arriving at a fast food restaurant and described what she would be wearing it was no great shock that the police had formed a cordon around the restaurant and arrested her before she even had the chance to protest.
  - 11.** Ghonim claims that it was Maher who secured the agreement of the 'Ultra' football fans to participate in the protests: the Ultras would become a powerful vanguard for the activists throughout the clashes with Egyptian police and security forces (Ghonim, 2012a).
  - 12.** There were many newspapers that did this. Two such examples are The Telegraph and *The Guardian*.



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# THE 'KILL SWITCH' AS 'SUICIDE SWITCH': MOBILIZING SIDE EFFECTS OF MUBARAK'S COMMUNICATION BLACKOUT

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**This article discusses the effects of the Internet communication blackout, or 'kill switch', unleashed by the regime of Hosni Mubarak during the first days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution.** It argues that while the regime hoped that the blackout would stop the mobilization and disrupt the activists' internal coordination, this move ended up having more of a positive mobilizing effect than a disruptive one. This was for two main reasons. First, the 'kill switch' shattered the consensus in favour of the regime and the passivity of middle-class youth. Second, by excluding the possibility of a virtual distant connection with the protest, it forced many sympathizers to turn into supporters of the movement by physically joining the occupation in Tahrir Square. Reflecting on the implications of these findings the article concludes by asserting that the role of social media as a means of mobilization is highly complex and ambivalent, and that it has to be understood in complementarity with, rather than in opposition to, face-to-face interaction and street-level communication.

## KEYWORDS

Arab spring, communication blackout, digital activism, protest mobilization, social media

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In revolutions as in many social phenomena there are 'tipping points' (Gladwell, 2000): days or hours that, with the wisdom of hindsight, can be seen as decisive in steering events one way or the other. In the case of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the tipping point was undoubtedly 28 January. While protests began on 25 January, it was on 28 January that demonstrators won the battle with the security forces on the streets, burned down the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) and set ablaze tens of police stations all over the country. President Mubarak took another 15 days to resign from the post of president he had held for 30 years and which he intended to bequeath to his son Gamal. Yet, from 28 January the fall of his regime appeared irreversible. Through the events of that day Mubarak lost the support of a sizeable number of Egyptians, and the repressive apparatus he directed lost control of the streets. The arrival of army tanks in Cairo on the evening of 28 January graphically manifested the fact that the regime was not capable of maintaining public order.

If 28 January 2011 makes for an interesting case study for students of social movements and political science researchers, it is also a highly promising object of analysis for those media scholars interested in the impact of social media on contemporary activism. To these researchers 28 January presents a fundamental paradox that invites us to question many of the assumptions underlying contemporary debates, and in particular the idea that social media automatically have a mobilizing effect. In fact, 28 January was the first of five days of almost complete electronic communication blackout. But it was also a day that saw a huge escalation in the volume and energy of the mobilization against the dictatorial regime headed by Hosni Mubarak.

In the early hours of 28 January the Mubarak regime decided to take the ultimate step in order to disrupt the movement's communications: it pulled the so-called 'kill switch'. The Egyptian internet was shut down with only one ISP (internet service provider) left functioning – the one serving the stock exchange, as though it was vital that finance at least should go on as normal. At the same time mobile networks also stopped working, sending the country into a situation of total electronic communication blackout. However, this extreme measure failed to achieve its ostensible aims. If Mubarak wanted to limit the turnout of people in the streets by disorienting them and scaring them away he seemed to obtain exactly the opposite outcome. On that day a huge mass of people took to the streets. In Cairo alone, compared to the estimated 20,000 to 50,000 people who had taken to Tahrir on the 25 January, more than 200,000 people flooded central Cairo. Instead of being de-mobilizing as Mubarak's men had hoped, the kill switch was met by a surge in mobilization. But how was that possible? It is an established fact that internet and social media constituted crucial mobilizing devices to publicize the demonstrations of 25 January, and in motivating people to join (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). So why did Mubarak's communication blackout not achieve its aims?

In this article I want to delve into the apparent paradox of 28 January, as a case



study to explore the general question of the role of social media and mobile media as a means for social movement mobilization. Current debates have overly emphasized the positive impact of social media as means for protest mobilization (see for example Shirky, 2010, 2011). However, the events of 28 January suggest a more complex and ambiguous picture for the impact of social media on protest mobilization. Analysing 15 interviews conducted with middle-class Egyptian activists (those with the highest degree of internet connectivity and mobile phone ownership), I will argue that the kill switch turned into a 'suicide switch', which ended up giving more energy to the protests that took place on 28 January and on the following days than would have happened otherwise. This paradoxical effect is down to two fundamental reasons that will be discussed in two separate sections in the article:

- First, the kill switch shattered the consensus in favour of Mubarak of young, media-savvy middle classes, the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook* (Facebook youth) for whom internet connectivity and the use of mobile phones had amounted to a fundamental symbol of individual freedom. The move made the regime appear rash and irresponsible, and widened the gulf between the state apparatus and the population and, in particular, internet-connected young people, winning new converts to the pro-democracy movement.
- Second, the kill switch made it practically impossible for movement sympathizers to maintain a mediated interpersonal connection with what was going in the streets and to keep in contact with their friends and relatives. As a consequence, the kill switch contributed into sending these passive sympathizers to the streets, thus increasing protest turnout.

Having discussed the reasons why the kill switch proved a mobilizing factor in the protests of 28 January, the article concludes by advancing some general remarks about the ambiguous role of social media as a means of protest mobilization and its implications.

### Social Media and Mobilization

The year 2011 has been a year of protest and 'the year of the protester' as celebrated by *Time* magazine, which famously dedicated its 'person of the year' cover to the people taking to the streets from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York. In the vibrant and sometimes frenetic debate generated in the news media and in academia by this momentous wave of global protests, the lion's share has gone to the discussion about the impact of social media like Twitter and Facebook. The protest waves of 2011 were 'Facebook revolutions' or 'Twitter revolutions', pundits and journalists readily suggested, pointing to the importance these media played in organizing and publicizing the protests. These assertions often posit the existence of a positive correlation between the use of social media, with their capacity to channel information, and the volume and intensity of people's participation in protests (see,

for example, Shirky, 2011). Yet, it is precisely this casual link that has proven the most difficult to demonstrate.

Current debates about social media and activism are, like other debates about the connection between new media and society, characterized by a cleavage between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists. Among the former, particularly influential has been the work of Manuel Castells on network with its depiction of contemporary society as a 'network society' (1996). For Castells (2004), networks constitute the dominant morphology of contemporary societies, whereby the availability of cheap micro-electronics make such organizational forms more efficient than highly hierarchical 'pyramids' of the state, the military, bureaucracy and traditional corporations. While Castells' analysis has been mainly developed during the initial phase of the web – the late 1990s and early 2000s – some of his theorizing is also relevant for an understanding of the so-called Web 2.0 characterized by an emphasis on interactivity and user-generated content. Castells has tried to capture the logic of current internet communications with the notion of 'self mass-communication' (2009: 416) to express the way in which individuals and small groups can broadcast their messages to large audiences. For Castells, the advent of self mass-communication bears promises of autonomy from bureaucratic structures and increasing possibilities of flexible organizing. A similar line of thinking has been followed in recent years by social media gurus such as Clay Shirky. For Shirky, social media are new tools that make group-forming 'ridiculously easy'. According to Shirky, 'now that group-forming has gone from hard to ridiculously easy, we are seeing an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups' (2008: 54).

While theorists like Castells and social media gurus like Clay Shirky (2008, 2010) are convinced that new media, and social media in particular, automatically have a positive effect on organizing and mobilizing operations, other authors are less convinced that this is the case. In recent years a number of theorists have warned of the risks involved in the use of these forms of communication. The king of techno-pessimists is the Belarusian Evgenyi Morozov who, in his book *Net Delusion* (2011), has taken aim at those authors who see widely available connectivity and devices as somehow automatically sparking street protests. He criticizes techno-optimistic visions that maintain that 'technology empowers the people who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever tool comes along each year' (2011: xii). For Morozov, new media breed narcissism and laziness, as encapsulated by his term 'slacktivism', that is activism for slackers. Moreover, through the internet and social media in particular – Morozov points out – state security can gather precious information about activist identities and doings that can be used to repress social movements. While the internet was expected to help people advance the cause of democracy it has often turned out to be yet another instrument in the hands of the repressive apparatus of the state.

If the problem with Castells' and Shirky's analysis of the current media landscape is unbounded optimism, in the case of scholars like Morozov we are instead faced with an excessive pessimism. Morozov and writers of similar persuasion, like the *New Yorker's* Malcom Gladwell (2010), are right to highlight the fact that the use of social media in activism raises a number of risks. However these scholars are excessively dismissive of the opportunities these forms of communication offer to activists. Instead of sticking to a techno-optimistic or techno-pessimistic position it is imperative to adopt a balanced view of the effect of social media on activism, considering how these forms of communication are adopted within specific social movements, rather than assessing their properties in the abstract.

We know from a number of authors (Bentivegna, 2006; Mosca, 2008) that the effects of the internet on social and political mobilization are complex, and present both opportunities and risks. This is to a great extent because, while internet-based communication and mobile media provide us with new forms of connection with distant others, they also take attention and time away from our physical surroundings (Ling and Campbell, 2011). In his research on mobile media, Ling has for example noticed how the mobile telephone 'sets up a barrier between ourselves and our physical situation', and thus contributes to the creation of 'virtual walled communities' and 'supports the development of cliques' (2004: 190). As Marshall McLuhan noted, while electronic communication extends our senses, it also numbs our perception (1964: 51) and can thus entrap us into a 'closed system' of communication in which we can lose contact with anything lying outside of it. This tension between connection and isolation that underlies mediated communication is a crucial element that must be taken into account in trying to understand the impact of social media on contemporary activism.

Besides the ambiguous role of new media in facilitating social connections while at the same time isolating people from their surroundings, we also need to bear in mind the complexity of the process of mobilization and the presence of different stages within it. Trying to capture the working of mobilization in social movements Klandermans usefully distinguishes between two types of mobilization, what he calls 'consensus mobilisation' and 'action mobilisation' (1984: 584). Consensus mobilization: 'is a process through which a social movement tries to obtain support for its viewpoints. It involves (a) a collective good, (b) a movement strategy, (c) confrontation with opponents, (d) results achieved' (1984: 586). In this context media are seen as key since, in order to confront opponents a "'paper war" is waged to promote or to discourage the mobilisation of consensus' (1984: 586).

The case is altogether different for action mobilization. This 'is the process by which an organisation in a social movement calls up people to participate' (1984: 585). Unlike consensus mobilization, this process is seen as firmly rooted in local and face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, while Klandermans observes that action mobilization is

partly independent from consensus mobilization, he maintains that 'action mobilisation cannot do without consensus mobilisation' (1984: 586). In a later essay, Klandermans and Oegema (1987) see the process of mobilization as characterized by different stages, from a 'generalised preparedness' to act in support of a certain cause, to a 'specific preparedness' to participate, ending with 'actual participation'. Comparing the two analytical schemes, one can see generalized and specific preparedness as pertaining to the category of consensus mobilization, leaving actual participation to cover what Klandermans in his previous essay calls 'action mobilisation'.

Building on Klandermans' model, the question to be asked when discussing the influence of social media and of modern technologies of communication in general is which of these different stages – 'generalised preparedness', 'specific preparedness', 'actual participation' – are we talking about when positing the existence of certain effects of social media on patterns of participation. In other words, when people claim that social media were key in sparking a specific social movement are they arguing that they were important for preparing people 'in general' and 'specifically' for the mobilization? Or that they had an effect in sending them to the streets, or both? The kill switch provides us with something akin to a reverse case study, allowing us to assess this question and to see whether the unavailability of social media on 28 January really constituted an obstacle for mobilization as techno-optimistic accounts would lead us to believe.

### **Sending Egypt Back to the 1980s**

On the night between 27 and 28 January 2011 the Egyptian government took an unprecedented move, switching off all internet communications in the country. Just after midnight, in a matter of minutes, all the major service providers of the country – Telecom Egypt, Link, Etisalat and others – were shut down. To do this, the government exploited the presence of a series of infrastructural bottlenecks in the Egyptian network and its own ownership of the cables that carry most Egyptian electronic traffic. The technical details of how the government performed this operation is still an object of debate among researchers and engineers, and has also been the subject of a trial, in which Mubarak and other personalities of the regime have been fined tens of millions of dollars in damages. Only one ISP, Noor Data Networks, which served the Egyptian stock exchange, was unaffected by the attack, in order to allow the Egyptian 'Bursa' to continue its operations. On top of the internet blackout, in the morning of the same day mobile phones were also shut down (Vodafone, Mobinil and Etisalat) in most areas of the country and, in particular, in urban areas, virtually sending Egypt back to the 1980s, when the internet and mobile phone yet had to make their appearance as mass consumer services.

The communication blackout unleashed by the government was in some ways unprecedented. Governments of authoritarian countries like China and Iran are well known for their careful censorship and monitoring of internet communications, for their adoption of ways of filtering, and for the temporary or permanent blocking of specific

websites that they believe will affect national security. Yet never had a government of a major country carried out such an all-encompassing electronic communications shut-down for such an extensive period of time. While the reasons for the Mubarak government's actions were clear, the decision proved to be counter-productive. Having been confronted with the rise of a social movement that had skilfully used the internet as a mobilizing and coordinating platform, the regime had legitimate reasons to believe that by shutting down electronic communications it would strike a fatal blow.

The action performed by Mubarak government was one aimed at neutralizing what in military terms is called C4 (command, control, communications and computers) capabilities. In the military field, in the time of the so-called 'information society', destroying the enemy communication infrastructure has become one of the fundamental priorities of fighting armies, as recently demonstrated in the 2003 war against Iraq, and before then in the 1998 NATO strikes against Serbia. In both cases, the military gave priority to targeting the enemy's telecommunication system in the very first phase of the attack in order to stop it from acting in a coordinated fashion. In the social movement field communication has become of similar importance for ensuring the coordination of collective action (see for example Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001) and it is therefore unsurprising that state authorities attempted to target movement communications. By severing the communicative links allowing the pro-democracy movement to move coherently, as one body or, to use a metaphor often employed by contemporary activists, as one swarm of bees (Hardt and Negri, 2004), the regime hoped to deprive it of its capacity to act coherently. But as we will see in this article, this did not turn out to be the case.

To contextualize the impact of the kill switch, it is important to bear in mind that this action did not take activists completely by surprise. This was due to a number of reasons. First, for all its shocking proportions, the action taken by the government the night before 28 January was just the culmination of a strategy of communication disruption that the regime had set in motion since the very first day of protest. On the afternoon of 25 January, when protesters were in Tahrir Square for the first time, the government shut down Facebook and Twitter for several hours. But activists quickly reacted by using mirroring services, and the government decided to restore access to both social media websites later that evening. Furthermore, some activists had made contingency plans to counter the possibility of such an occurrence by collecting email addresses of peers, or by setting demonstration meeting points well in advance on the movement Facebook pages. For example, Ahmed Samih, director of a human rights non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cairo, recounts he had 'prepared an action plan about what we were going to do when internet and mobile phones are cut off. It was not a surprise that in one day they would cut the internet and mobile phones' (interview with Ahmed Samih, Cairo, 17 July 2011). Thus, while the action taken by

Mubarak's government caused much disruption, as testified by the accounts of many of my interviewees, who struggled to get in contact with their friends and comrades, people took measures to mitigate its impact.

Bearing this point in mind we can now move to assessing the impact of the kill switch on mobilization and coordination operations within the Egyptian revolutionary movement by looking at the testimonies of participants in the protest. The analysis draws on interviews conducted in Cairo between June and August 2011 with 15 middle-class activists (refer to the Appendix for details about the nature of the sample). The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling and the interviews lasted for around one hour. In the following two sections I use passages from these testimonies to assess the impact of the kill switch, first on 'consensus mobilization' and second on 'action mobilisation' (Klandermans, 1984).

### **Alienating the Internet Youth**

The use of the kill switch ordered by Mubarak government had a positive effect on the mobilization, first and foremost because it alienated from the Mubarak regime the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook*, the 'Facebook youth' or 'internet youth', thus acting as a source of consensus mobilization for the pro-democracy movement. This Facebook youth was a section of the population that the same regime had carefully tried to accommodate in previous years and, in particular, under the premiership of Ahmed Nazif. Nazif who was premier from 2004 to 2011, had previously been Minister of Communication and had put much effort into improving internet connectivity and the internet penetration rate during his time in power had increased from 9 percent to 24 percent of households (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). The minister himself vaunted his effort as one aimed at opening spaces for democratic expression. For example, when heckled by a group of 6 April activists at Cairo University, he replied that they 'are the same young people who used the Internet to express their opinions!' (Shapiro, 2009).

The promises of political liberalization that Mubarak's regime had made had been to a great extent tied precisely to promises of media reform, as exemplified by the limited degree of interference of the regime on the internet in Egypt (Hofheinz, 2005). Therefore when the regime decided to curtail both internet and mobile phones in order to halt the surge of the pro-democracy movement, this move quite understandably produced a reaction of disdain from that same internet youth that Nazif had tried to win over. The decision of the government to shut down the internet basically deprived a crucial sector of society of the medium of communication with which it had identified its desire for modernity and economic and cultural advancement, and which it used in its everyday life for both work and personal purposes. By shutting down internet communications the government made many people who, up to that point been in the ranks of the undecided, tilt towards 'generalised' and 'specific preparedness' to participate in the pro-democracy movement, to use Bert Klandermans' (1984) categories.

The type of psychological mechanism triggered by the government's action is well explained by Noor Ayman Noor, the son of Ayman Noor, who stood against Mubarak as a presidential candidate in 2005.

Over the last several years the former regime had gotten us so addicted to our mobile phones, so addicted to our computers, and to the internet and so many things ... and suddenly we wake up one morning and we have nothing. Many people, also those who were not planning on going down, decided that they had to come down and join the others. (interview, Cairo, 14 September 2011)

Young middle-class people felt humiliated to be deprived of one of the small rewards the regime had given them to maintain their loyalty or at least to defuse their antagonism. Furthermore, many perceived the government's action as utterly irresponsible. 'What if there is an emergency and I cannot call an ambulance? What if there is someone dying and I cannot get a doctor to come down?' (interview with Mustafa, Cairo, 5 September 2011) were some of the questions going through many people's minds. Finally, understandably, the government's action did not go down well with business and, in particular, with telecommunications firms. The communication shut-down meant an almost complete standstill for many enterprises in the country for several days. All in all, the decision appeared as one taken in a rush, without any official explanation, making the government look not only repressive but also incompetent. As a consequence the action contributed to eroding the consensus in favour of the government while at the same time winning new sympathizers to the pro-democracy movement.

The working of the process of conversion facilitated by the kill switch is illustrated in the testimony of Nora Rafea, an activist based in Cairo. Nora recounts how the kill switch made her cousin, who had previously criticized the revolutionary movement to switch sides and join the protests:

My cousin was initially very sceptical of the revolution. Before the 28th he really criticized us and wrote on his status: 'Are you guys joking? A revolution through Facebook? What the hell, there is no hope.' And then the moment they shut down the communications this person turned 180 degrees and said OK, this is too much, I am going to take to the streets. It was a changing point for him. He found that action ridiculous and he joined the streets. And in the morning I saw his wife and she told me that he had gone to the demonstrations. And I couldn't believe it. (interview, Cairo, 18 July 2011)

For Nora's cousin as for many other people the kill switch was the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back. If discontent with Mubarak's regime was widespread, few people thought that things could change and that the regime could fall. The fact that the government wanted to shut down social networks became evidence not only of its ruthlessness but also of the fact that it was scared of the capacity of common people to self-organize. The show of force made by the government in using the kill switch paradoxically cast in a clear light its actual weakness. If it was so strong, why would it feel was necessary to resort to such an extreme action?

The action taken by Mubarak's government also created serious inconsistencies in the official version circulated by the regime's propaganda. Until 28 January, when the demonstrations had become so widespread that it was impossible to conceal their existence even for those living away from central metropolitan areas, state-owned newspapers and television channels had continued to pretend that nothing serious was happening on the Egyptian streets. On 26 January the governmental *el-Ahram* daily newspaper had reported that the people who had gathered in Tahrir Square had done so in order to congratulate the police forces. The day chosen for the first demonstration was in fact 'Police day', a national holiday across Egypt, but it had been picked to denounce police behaviour rather than to celebrate it. As Sally Zohney, a 27-year-old activist points out the regime was in a state of 'complete denial'. According to Mustafa Shamaa a 20-year-old student of Nile University: 'the action of the government made people really angry. How come you are doing this? On state TV you are saying that there is no protest and then you are switching off the internet and mobile phones?' (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011).

The kill switch made evident the moral bankruptcy and bad faith of the Mubarak's regime. It was a stark demonstration that the state-owned media were spreading false propaganda and at the same time it revealed in the clearest way possible that some of the claims of the demonstrators about the regime's wickedness were true. Thus the event contributed to the movement's 'consensus mobilisation', attracting new sympathizers to the protests, some of whom would immediately make the leap from 'general preparedness to participate' to 'specific preparedness to participate', to 'actual participation' by taking to the streets the following day. Thus the action taken by the government contributed to alienating a constituency that was crucial in maintaining the balance of consensus in favour of the regime. This sudden shift in the balance of consensus to which the kill switch contributed among several other factors, including police repression, was decisive in facilitating the fall of Mubarak's regime.

### **Sending People to the Streets**

Whenever there is a demonstration it is always understood that the turnout of people on the streets does not exhaust the total number of those in favour of a specific cause. In

social movements there always tend to be more sympathizers than actual participants, and the passage from general 'sympathy' to actual participation is not automatic at all. In fact, often sympathizers end up not participating, given the costs associated with actual participation, including, in the case of revolutionary action, the risk of being seriously wounded or killed (Oegema and Klandermans, 1994). To use a technical terminology widely adopted among social movement theorists, only a section of the 'mobilisation potential' of a social movement is transformed into 'actual mobilisation'. The extent to which this transformation takes place depends on a number of factors, including the degree of one's connection to thick social networks of friends and comrades, and one's reception of media and movement messages.

At a time of 24-hour live news coverage, live tweeting, and video streaming, sympathizers of a cause have a number of possibilities that can allow them to earn a vicarious experience of participation without taking directly to the streets. In fact, some of my interviewees who had not taken to the streets on 25 January – often because their parents would not let them go – recounted how they spent the day glued to their computer screen following events on the internet, while continuously ringing their friends who were in Tahrir Square. This availability of information and of mediated personal connections arguably does not automatically facilitate actual participation as some techno-optimists seem to believe. In fact, it can also set the conditions for a pure spectatorship of a movement's action in a way that can hinder actual protest turnout and thus prove counter-productive for social movements. This situation strongly resonates with the idea of 'slacktivism' as used by Morozov (2011) to talk about a form of online activism that is never transformed into physical participation in the streets.

The pulling of the kill switch by Mubarak's government precluded the possibility of that distant and personalized spectatorship of protest action. All the channels of communication available in a normal situation were not working. Live reporting on the internet was shut down and no contact with friends and relatives on the ground was available. The only available source of information about events on the ground was through television reports. But apart from Al-Jazeera, which was initially taken by surprise by the unravelling of events, the kind of extremely biased pro-government reporting offered on the national channels, was becoming less and less believable by the hour. If one wanted to get an understanding of what was going on, one had to take himself to the streets. Thus, on 28 January many people were drawn to the protests out of sheer sympathy and 'curiosity' as Noor Ayman Noor suggests, saying 'curiosity kills the cat'. An example of this phenomenon is the story of Kamal, a 23-year-old accountant who initially was very reluctant to join the protests: 'but then I heard that there were many people in the streets ... and I decided that I had to join ... that I had to come down and see what was going on there' (interview, Cairo, 2 August 2011).

Apart from curiosity, what led many people who did not intend to take to the streets in

the first place, was concern about their own friends and relatives. The kill switch made it practically impossible to be reassured as to their safety and thus forced many who were worried about the condition of their loved ones to take to the streets. Abdallah a 24-year-old militant supporter of the football club Al-Ahly, for example, recounts:

Some of my friends they ran into the protests because the phone was off and they couldn't get in touch with their brothers and sisters. So they went to the protests to look for them and they made the numbers increase. I know a lot of people who did that. (interview, Cairo, 24 July 2011)

Similarly Marwa, a 33-year-old journalist, recounts how:

On the 28th many people participated because of what they saw and heard about Facebook. But on the 28th they participated and I guess a lot of people were there just because there was no telephone. Some people went out on the streets to see what was happening, to look for other people. (interview, Cairo, 24 July)

Because of the unavailability of mobile phones, for many, finding their own friends in the protests proved to be an almost impossible task. Many of my interviewees report having found their friends or relatives only in the midst of Tahrir Square. One of my interviewees recounts of having looked for several days for his brother who was also in the protests. The communication blackout thus meant that many of the people who were in the streets ended up being by themselves for much of the time. But this situation did not seem to bother people too much, since, as Mohammed, a student of political science sums up, 'we are all brothers, we are all Egyptians. You don't know the others by name, but in the square it was as though everybody knew Mustafa, knew Mohammed, knew Ali. Everybody acted as though he knew everybody else.' To make up for the disruption of the forms of 'microcoordination' (Ling, 2004) offered by mobile media and new media alike impossibility people 'made do' by supporting one another in the square regardless of whether they knew each other.

For all the practical problems the communication blackout unleashed, it was remarkable for me to find out how, for many people, the event proved to be an exhilarating experience that made them aware of their over-reliance on communication technologies. The shut-down of electronic communications was taken by many as a chance to concentrate fully on what was going on in the protests, rather than being constantly distracted by distant people and events. An example of this experience is offered by Mustafa a student and activist at Nile University in Cairo:

Of course I wanted to know about other people, for example about marches coming from Giza. I wanted to know what was going on and I wanted to.... My dad and my mother wanted to call me and they couldn't. And my dad was supposed to arrive that night at 12. He didn't know that phones in Egypt were off. He kept calling and calling. But I don't think that having phones would have fastened [sic] things up. This was the day that ended this battle. I don't think it would have made things faster. It would have been the same. (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011)

Sally, similarly reflects how:

It felt weird at some point. I want to ... oh I don't have my phone! I want to call people ... oh! But then you just.... It is just bigger than the person. The whole situation is just beyond, you feel protected. You don't need to call anyone. Even if at times I was alone and my father was elsewhere I don't need to call him. You trust the trust and the unity and everything was beyond expectations. (interview, Cairo, 22 July 2011)

As Sally's quote suggests, the absence of mobile phones and internet connections created an immersive experience of protest, in which the fact of not being engaged in mediated connections, liberated energy to dedicate to an immediate context of proximity, and in which to regain a sense of locality. Some people drew from that day some lessons about the importance of focusing on what you have at hand, rather than continuously worrying about what happens elsewhere, as illustrated by the testimony of Mustafa:

When I am in the protest, sometimes people call me and tell me come back ... and this leads me to think what should I do? Should I continue or should I leave? But since the phones were switched off I was just doing one thing and I am concentrating on what I am doing and there is no distraction I continue until the end ... and sometimes when I go to protest I turn my phone off ... (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011)

The kill switch facilitated the development of a thick face-to-face experience that was crucial in sustaining collective action for several days in Tahrir Square and central Cairo, in which it did not seem to matter too much to people that they did not have internet connection or working mobile phones. If social media had been important in launching the protests they did not seem to be necessary in order to sustain it.

## Conclusion

In this article I have analysed the consequences of the communication blackout during the Egyptian revolution. I have demonstrated how, counter to the assumptions of techno-optimists like Castells (1996, 2009) and Shirky (2011), this extreme action did not negatively impact protest participation. In fact, as we have seen, on 28 January participation was much higher than on the previous days of protest. This paradoxical result was the came about for two different but connected reasons. As we have seen in the course of the empirical analysis proposed in this article, the kill switch worked as a means of 'consensus mobilisation', alienating the middle classes from the government and pushing them into the arms of the pro-democracy movement. Moreover, it worked as a means of 'action mobilisation', pushing many people to take to the streets in order to get in contact with their friends and relatives, or out of curiosity, to see what was going on with their own eyes. Because of these two reasons, the kill switch turned out to be a 'suicide switch': a move that strongly contributed to accelerating Mubarak's fall.

Instead of disrupting the movement's mobilization and coordination operations, the kill switch contributed to convincing those who were still undecided to sympathize with the movement, and in pushing passive sympathizers to actively join street demonstrations. By taking this extreme measure, Mubarak's regime escalated the situation, which turned out to be to its own detriment. In fact, less than 24 hours after pulling the kill switch the regime had been virtually defeated, and would from that moment experience a slow collapse, culminating with Mubarak's departure on 11 February. Authoritarian regimes like Iran and China that might in the near future be confronted by a crisis similar to the one confronted by Mubarak will now think twice before pulling their own kill switch.

Having now summed the argument of this article and the different claims involved, it is important to make clear its limitations and implications. Saying that shutting down communications had a positive effect on protest participation does not entail asserting that social media have in general a negative effect or no positive effect on protest participation. It has been widely documented that social media like Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter played an important role in the phase of preparation of the protests in Egypt as in other countries (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). The paradoxical effect of the kill switch on the level of participation needs to be understood in the context of a movement that had already taken to the streets for three consecutive days and had been preparing for a big day of protest eventually supported also by established organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. Arguably, at that point in its trajectory of mobilization, the revolutionary movement no longer needed to resort to the power of electronic communication, given that its ecology of communication had shifted drastically from the internet to the streets. As Osama Nooh, an activist of the 6 April movement, one of the key organizations in the revolutionary movement, puts it, 'Before the 25th it was 80 percent Facebook, 20 percent face to face, after the 25th it was 80

percent face to face, 20 percent Facebook' (interview, Cairo, 13 January 2012).

The consequences of the kill switch are thus instructive regarding the ambiguous and complex relationship between social media and activism. They highlight how, as already suggested by Ling (2004), our mediated connections go hand in hand with isolation from our physical surroundings, a phenomenon that can negatively impact actual participation in street protests. While providing information about protest events, services like Twitter and live streaming can also allow sympathizers to maintain the position of passive spectator, without having to participate directly in street protests. The sudden breaking of mediated connections, as took place on the night of 28 January, while severing us from mechanisms of collective mobilization and coordination, also pushed people to regain contact with their physical surroundings, thus possibly acting as a mechanism facilitating protest participation.

Apart from considerations about issues of strategic effectiveness, it is also important to remark here how the case study considered in this article highlights the great symbolic power of social media, and their capacity to invoke an imaginary of participation. As we have seen, in the course of the article, the kill switch particularly angered middle-class youth who had seen in the internet a promise of political emancipation and individual freedom. Young people felt betrayed by the Mubarak's regime, which had used the relative degree of internet freedom as a small 'carrot' to win their support during previous years. By depriving young people of internet connections and mobile communication, the government's action contributed to eroding its support within a section of the population whose acquiescence was crucial for maintaining its grip on power.

Finally, the paradoxical effects of the kill switch are testament of the fact that, despite the increasingly important role played by modern communication technologies, protest continues to be, to a great extent, an 'immediate' activity, that is, an activity in which participants are deeply immersed in the surrounding physical environment and which is heavily dependent on face-to-face communication. The move taken by the government revealed the extent to which the thickness of face-to-face interactions in Egyptian society (Bayat, 2009) can quite easily make up for the elimination of forms of electronic 'microcoordination' (Ling, 2004). It is telling that, according to the Tahrir media project, the medium that was most important for mobilizing participants in the Egyptian revolution was word of mouth, whose importance was scored as over 90 per cent compared to 40 per cent assigned to Facebook (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). If the government wanted to stop participants from communicating it would have had to stop them talking to one another face-to-face rather than posting messages on Facebook. While this might well be the ultimate dream of authoritarian governments, they have yet to invent a kill switch capable of shutting down not only internet communication but also people's mouths.

## Appendix: Interviewees

	Name	Surname	Age	City	Group	Profession
1	Hannah	El-Sissi	25	Cairo		Student
2	Marwa		32	Cairo	/	Journalist
3	Ahmed	Samih	38	Cairo	/	Human rights activist
4	Noor	Ayman Noor	25	Cairo	/	Musician and activist
5	Kamal		28	Cairo	/	Accountant
6	Mohammed	'Mido'	22	Cairo	/	Journalist
7	Nora	Rafea	25	Cairo	/	NGO worker
8	Nora	Shalaby	32	Cairo	Socialist	Archaeologist
9	Sally	Zohney	27	Cairo	/	NGO worker
10	Mahmoud	Al-Banna	42	Cairo	Socialist	Architecture student
11	Mustafa	Shamaa	21	Cairo	/	Student
12	Ahmed	Sabry	41	Cairo	/	Event organizer
13	Osama	Nooh	42	Cairo	6 April	Unemployed
14	Abdallah		26	Cairo	El-Ahly supporter	Accountant
15	Salma	Hegab	36	Cairo	/	Fundraiser

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# FROM ARAB STREET TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: RE-THEORIZING COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

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**This article discusses the limitations of existing theorization of collective action in Arab countries, and highlights new directions for the analysis of the role of social media in the Arab spring.** Underscoring the linkages between collective action repertoire, new communication technologies, and the politics of 'recognition' and 'distribution' in the region, the article discusses how new forms of political activism in the context of these countries can be better interpreted from the vantage point of a multidisciplinary approach that draws on several theoretical paradigms, mainly radical democracy theory, alternative media theory and, above all, social movement theory. It is an approach that aims at transcending technology-centered approaches, as well as cultural and social determinism in relation to Muslim-majority societies. In so doing, the article proposes various conceptual and analytical perspectives that can help future researchers deal with the multiple intersections between collective action and social media in the context of these countries.

#### KEYWORDS

agonistic public sphere, alternative media, Arab spring, internet, social media, social movements

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On 10 February 2010, Wael Ghonim, a prominent figure of Egypt's 25 January movement, tweeted 'mission accomplished. Thanks to all the brave young Egyptians.' The message became viral, not only on the micro-blogging and other social media platforms, but throughout mainstream media outlets. Western media reports were all keen on highlighting Ghonim's job as Google executive, and the pivotal role of digital media, from the Google search engine to social media, in bringing about this 'happy ending' to the first 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' revolutions. Of course the mission was far from accomplished; nearly one year after Mubarak was forced to step down, Egyptian militants are still trying to keep the flame of the revolution alive and burning by reoccupying Tahrir Square in Cairo in their pitched battles against the military junta running the country. Criticizing the overzealous praise of the role of social media in the Arab spring, Harvard professor Tarak Barkawi (2011) pointed out that these grotesque claims smack of eurocentricism because they credit the revolutions to 'western' technology rather than to the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia:

'To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak.'

But the media are not solely to blame for the shallow interpretations and inadequate understanding of the role of new communication technologies in political activism in the context of Muslim-majority societies. In academia, research and writing on the subject remains scant and generally inadequately theorized. In fact, analysis of collective action in the context of Muslim/Arab societies as a whole has been characterized by what Wiktorowicz (2004) qualifies as theoretical isolation since the bulk of studies in the field fail to draw on existing theoretical paradigms and limit themselves mainly to descriptive analysis of 'Muslim' politics. Indeed, until recently, public opinion and public sphere in the region have often been framed in terms of an 'Arab street', an epithet that connotes 'passivity, unruliness, or propensity to easy manipulation' (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003: 62). Moreover, existing literature on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet in political advocacy within these societies have overwhelmingly focused on fundamentalist or Islamic-oriented groups and discourses.

Addressing the above limitations, the aim of this article is to extend theoretical horizons for the conceptualization of political activism in the Arab world, and to suggest new directions for analyzing the role of social media in the Arab spring, in particular. While making a case for grounding this analysis in social movement theory, the article also points out the importance of using a multidisciplinary perspective that draws on political science, alternative media theory and network theory. Accordingly, the article starts by shedding light on the potential and limitations of current conceptualizations of

political communication in the Arab countries. It then discusses how new forms of political activism in the context of these countries can be better interpreted from the vantage point of new social movement theory, highlighting in the process the interrelationships between collective action repertoire, new communication technologies and the politics of 'recognition' and 'distribution' in the region. In the last part, the article explores various theoretical and analytical perspectives that can help future research deal with the multiple ramifications and interconnections between social movements and collective action, on the one hand, and social media, on the other, in the context of Arab countries, in general.

### **The 'Arab Street': The Politics of a Metaphor**

The Arab spring's revolutions may have ended a plethora of deeply rooted stereotypes about Arab countries and Muslim-majority societies, in general, but they failed to put an end to one influential notion that has great currency in mainstream media and some corners of academia, namely 'the Arab street'. Thus, one National Review Online article has this to say about the Arab spring:

Let us recall that politically significant outpourings of large crowds were by no means unheard of in the bad-old undemocratic Arab world. In January 1952, thousands of young Egyptian protesters marched on downtown Cairo, sparking mayhem and fires reminiscent of the early Cairo protests of 2011. This is why we speak of an 'Arab Street.' (Kurtz, 2011)

The Arab spring is, then, less about activists, political groups and people militating for freedom and justice than about hordes and unruly mobs 'sparking mayhem', even if the ultimate objective may be noble. Until recently, the term has been the common reference to 'native' forms of public opinion, or public sphere in the region. Regier and Khalidi (2009: 23) argue that the term sometimes denotes 'Arab public opinion', while at other times it refers to images of 'an angry potential mob, a posited subset of Arab society'. Concurring with them, Bayat (2003: 226) points out that the term invokes 'a reified and essentially "abnormal" mindset'. Along much the same lines, Eickelman (2003) explains that the 'use of the term "street", rather than "public sphere" or "public", imputes passivity, or a propensity to easy manipulation, and implies a lack of formal or informal leadership'.

The term, in fact, adheres to a neo-orientalist stance, holding that Arab/Muslim countries' social and cultural structures are incompatible with liberal values and democracy, a view that has often been used to explain why the majority of Muslim countries are still undemocratic today (see, for instance, Harik, 2006; Stepan and Robertson, 2003). These interpretations constitute a real obstacle to a proper understanding not only of the recent political transformations in the region but also of the role of new communication technologies in these changes. Luckily, however, the last

few years have witnessed a burgeoning academic interest in the issue of democratic development and transition within the Arab world. According to Sadiki (2004: 3), 'the study of Arab democracy has recently come into vogue, moving from near occultation to prominence'. The bulk of this literature has centered on the diffusion and use of new communication technologies, mainly satellite television and, to a lesser extent, the internet, and their implications for political and social change in the region. But despite the rapid spread of internet usage over recent years,<sup>1</sup> and the central role it now plays in the political sphere, the medium remains conspicuously under-researched and largely ignored by successive works in this field (see Seib, 2007; Zeiri and Murphy, 2011).

### **The Arab Public Sphere: Potential and Limitations**

The literature on the use of the internet in Muslim-majority societies is clearly under-theorized in the sense that only a very limited number of theoretical paradigms available have hitherto been applied to this subfield. This is not limited to the study of the internet but extends to political communication and political advocacy in the context of Muslim-majority countries in general. As Wiktorowicz astutely remarks, 'the study of Islamic activism has, for the most part, remained isolated from the plethora of theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from research on social movements' contentious politics' (2004: 3). The concept of the 'public sphere' dominates much of the theorization of online political communication in the region. This is not surprising given the centrality of this notion in communication studies. Bentivegna (2006: 336) contends that any 'study of the impact of ICTs on politics cannot be undertaken without dwelling on the concept of the public sphere'. Without a doubt, the concept provides a powerful framework linking communication to politics and deliberative democracy. Central to this notion, discussion and deliberation between citizens, either face-to-face or through a medium, constitute the cornerstone of modern representative democracy.

Compared to the wide currency of this notion in the literature, surprisingly few studies provide in-depth discussion thereof and exploration of the way it can be applied to Arab/Muslim societies. A rare exception is el-Nawawy and Khamis' (2009) study of online Islamic discourse. The authors point out that Habermas's original distinction between the private and the public sphere reflects a eurocentric bias that does not necessarily apply to the experience of Muslim-majority societies and to Islam as a religion that questions any rigid division between the two realms (2009: 30–2). Apart from this reservation, however, the authors adhere to Habermas's interpretation, arguing that the aim of their study is to explore the extent to which the 'virtual Muslim' public sphere facilitates 'rational and critical' thinking and discussion.

To elaborate, not only does the conceptualization of online political communication in Arab countries fail to use the vast theoretical possibilities available in the literature,

but even the use of the notion of public sphere remains insufficiently problematized. Indeed, one major criticism leveled at Habermas's interpretation is that it does not make room for understanding the public sphere as a communicative space built on premises other than those of rational dialogue and deliberation. Various commentators have argued that the deliberation model tends to ignore key issues of power imbalances and exclusion in society (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999). Moreover, the criterion of 'rational dialogue' is an unsuitable one by which to judge online communication. Holt, for instance, suggests that online conversations are most often expressed 'in the vulgar register, with slang, abbreviations, and profanity, and their composers frequently seem to delight in disregarding traditional "rules" such as those governing syntax, conventional logic, evidence, and idea development' (2004: 78).

Contrary to the deliberative model of democracy, the radical or agonistic perspective views politics as intrinsically conflictual and non-consensual, and thus places difference and contestation at the heart of the democratic system. The dominant ontology of 'consensus' within liberal democracy, according to Mouffe is bound to fail, because 'consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and ... always entails some form of exclusion' (1999: 756). Hence, building democratic politics on consensus and reconciliation 'is not only conceptually mistaken, it is also fraught with political dangers' (Mouffe, 2005: 2). For this reason, Mouffe argues, politicians and theorists should instead aspire to creating 'a vibrant "agonistic" public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted' (2005: 3). This requires an approach that places the questions of power, antagonism and adversarial relationships at its very center. The role of democracy, however, is to turn antagonism into agonism:

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are adversaries, not enemies. (2005: 20)

Drawing on this model, various commentators have argued that the internet's main contribution to democracy is its promotion of agonistic politics (Atton, 2002; Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007; Kahn and Kellner, 2005). As an affordable, non-hierarchical and interactive communication medium, the internet has allowed antagonistic politics to mushroom, as countless oppositional and often persecuted groups and individuals have been able to voice dissenting opinions online. But the internet also has the potential to link adversaries through webs of hyperlinks, thus facilitating the development of agonistic politics. The agonistic potential of the

internet has been clearly demonstrated during the Arab spring, through the role of various online platforms in fostering subaltern and oppositional politics, and, simultaneously, in supporting linkages between different political groups. This notion is also better suited to analyzing the type of discourse supported by social media, where communication and interactions often expressed in soundbite format rarely rise to the level of genuine deliberation and discussion.

Despite the importance of the notion of the public sphere, and the many venues it opens for exploring various intersections between media, politics and citizens, it still has several key limitations. First, the concept allows us to shed light on the role of communication and media in politics; it does not allow us, however, to explain the link between mediated political discourse, on the one hand, and direct forms of contention and political transformation, on the other. While this link is often assumed or taken for granted in the literature, it is rarely explained or theoretically grounded. Stated differently, how can we conceptualize and analyze the role of media and communication in online and offline collective action? How can we go beyond viewing the internet, and social media in particular, as other, albeit sophisticated, 'vehicles' for public sphere communication? How can we transcend the instrumentalist perspective on the role of media inherent in the concept of the public sphere to explore much deeper intersections between communication, material resources and organizational structures on the one hand, and the ideational and symbolic dimensions of collective action on the other? To explore these issues, social movement theory, applied concomitantly and consecutively with other theoretical perspectives derived from political science and media studies, can be used to highlight the multiple intersections between new forms of communication technologies and platforms and collective action structures, strategies and frames that have led to the ongoing Arab revolutions.

### **From the Public Sphere to Social Movements: A New Paradigm**

The theorization of collective action as 'social movements' began in the 1960s with the appearance of new forms of collective action and protest groups that were unaligned with traditional civil society organizations, such as trade unions. Initially, social movements were mainly associated with feminist, civil rights, anti-war groups and student protest groups. In the decades that followed, many social movements emerged, including human rights movements, gay and lesbian rights movements, and environmentalist movements. Consensus over the definition of 'social movement', however, is yet to be reached within the existing literature. As de la Piscina maintains, 'the wide-ranging typologies of social movements that currently exist complicate the ability to offer one definition that results in a consensus' (2007: 65). Despite conceptual multiplicities, Snow et al. (2004: 6) assert that it is possible to organize existing definitions of social movements around five main axes: (1) 'collective or joint action'; (2)

'change-oriented goals or claims'; (3) an 'extra- or non-institutional collective action'; (4) a 'degree of organization'; and (5) a 'degree of temporal continuity'.

One common feature shared by the social movement theories is that they have been articulated mostly to analyze forms of collective action that emerged in industrial and postmodern societies. Thompson and Tapscott (2010: 2) point out that despite the vast literature on social movements that extends over almost a century, 'it remains a truism that by far the bulk of the writing and theorizing in this field has been oriented to the analysis of movements in the global North'. In the same vein, Shigetomi (2009: 6) holds that 'few researchers take the context of developing countries seriously in an attempt to identify the salient features of and approach to social movements'. The scarcity of scholarly works on social movements in southern countries is even more noticeable in the context of Muslim-majority societies. With the exception of a few scattered studies that have appeared over recent years (Ben Moussa, 2011, 2012; Sidi Hida, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004), surprisingly scholars have for the most part shunned the application of social movement theory in studying collective action in these countries.

Furthermore, scholars have called for the development of a comparative theoretical paradigm that takes into consideration the particularities of social movements in southern countries. Assessing the usefulness of social movement theories to the study of collective action in Latin America, Escobar (1992: 63) has observed that within developing countries, social movements have emerged largely 'in response to the failure of development'. Accordingly, social movements in these countries should be placed 'within a reinterpreted context of the crisis of development and modernity, [so] it becomes impossible to see them only in economic or political terms' (1992: 64). As an alternative, and complementing the existing theoretical paradigm, Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009: 36) propose a multidisciplinary approach that highlights the 'interaction between structure and action' that can 'connect the micro level of individual protesters with the meso level of social movements, and macro level of national political systems and supranational processes'.

### **The Arab Spring through the Lens of Social Movement Theory**

The emergence of oppositional social movements in the region is not a recent occurrence. Contrary to some neo-orientalist claims, Muslim-majority/Arab countries have never been bereft of civil society institutions and movements that are outside the sphere of state authority and power (Eisenstadt, 2002). In modern times, an array of social movements has marked the political sphere in many of these countries, from trade union movements, nationalist and leftist ones, to Islamic/fundamentalist movements. While these movements have had different degrees of success and impact

on Arab societies, the majority failed to survive either state repression or insufficient support and access to resources. There are, however, numerous characteristics that distinguish the recent social movements behind the Arab spring from those that were active in the past. Unlike in past decades, where oppositional political activism revolved around highly structured forms of collective action, mainly trade unions, political parties and, increasingly during the last decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the ongoing revolutions are marked by the participation of groups and individuals mobilized around very broad coalitions and networks that escape rigid hierarchical structures and institutions.

These new trends in collective action can be related to socio-political and technological transformations at the local and global levels. Givan et al. (2010) argue that the diffusion of any social movement at a specific time can be linked to two primary causes: behavioral and ideational. While '[t]he behavioural dimension involves the diffusion of movement tactics or collective action repertoires', the ideational one includes 'the spread of collective action frames that define issues, goals, and targets' (2010: 4). At the behavioral level, the diffusion of new communication technologies, from satellite television, transnational TV channels and mobile telephony to the internet and social media, have revolutionized social movements' collective action repertoires and permitted the development of new organizational structures marked by translocal linkages, horizontal communication and highly flexible and non-hierarchical configurations. The changes at the behavioral level have direct implications for transformations at the ideational level in the sense that when 'people make collective claims, they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 16). Thus, the new repertoires have facilitated the formation of collective action strategies and modes of thinking favoring coordination, coalition and alliance building, and networking that do not necessarily follow rigid ideological paradigms and organizational structures. These new paradigms in collective action can be best conceptualized through new social movement theory. Unlike classical social movements, new social movements 'tend to lack clear organizational structures and internal bureaucracies, and effectively function by coalescing political identities and agendas both nationally and globally' (Thompson and Tapscott, 2010: 4).

If new social movement theory is to be used to interpret the Arab spring, however, it must be recalibrated to the setting and realities of Arab societies. Indeed, new social movements represent 'a specific progression in civil society organization in the post-industrial North' (Thompson and Tapscott, 2010: 4). But while new social movements in post-industrial societies mark 'a shift from conflicts over material well-being to conflicts over cultural fulfillment' (Habermas, 2008: 193), conflicts in Arab countries and the developing world are still deeply shaped by struggles for social and economic justice.

Nonetheless, these struggles have shifted from being predominantly class-related and oriented towards economic justice to ones in which material and cultural fulfillments are increasingly seen as intrinsically interconnected and fused, and in which the achievement of one does not occur without the attainment of the other. In other words, new social movements in the Arab world can be best seen through Fraser's (1995) distinction between politics of 'recognition' and 'redistribution', whereby she questions the reductive attribution of injustice to either cultural or economic causes alone.

So far, the majority of commentary and reports on the Arab spring have interpreted the latter as revolutions against tyranny, corruption and social injustice. What is absent from this analysis is the role of identity politics in sowing the seeds of revolt and building the momentum for the continuing popular uprisings in the region. In fact, the Arab spring is equally about various expressions of collective identities that have been suppressed under nationalist, religious, ethnic and patriarchal ideologies and cultural trends for decades, and even centuries. This regime could not persist in the age of globalization and network society. As sociologist Manuel Castells (2004: 2) explains:

along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism, we have experienced, in the past twenty-five years, the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. These expressions are multiple, highly diversified, following the contours of each culture, and of historical sources of formation of each identity.

As one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse regions on the globe, the Arab world has been deeply affected by these transformations. In the last two decades, we have seen an intensification of identity-based collective actions and claims, some of which have turned violent, while others have been awaiting the right time to go public. Since the beginning of the Arab spring in December, many of these movements have gained momentum, from the Islamic-oriented movements and the Amazigh movement in North Africa, to minority movements<sup>2</sup> in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Lebanon, among many others. In addition to these traditional identity movements specific to the region, there are others that are equally rooted in local and global cultural trends, namely the feminist and youth movements. The most prominent and influential of these new movements in recent decades are, of course, the Islamic-oriented movements, a perfect embodiment of the close interconnection between the politics of recognition and redistribution. Sociologist Manuel Castells points out that 'the explosion of Islamic movements seems to be related to both the disruption of traditional societies, and to the failure of the nation-state, created by nationalist

movements, to accomplish modernization' (2004: 17).

Another new social movement that has played a prominent part in the Arab spring is the 'youth movement'. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the Arab spring is the young people's spring. Young people constitute the backbone of the movements that overthrew Ben Ali's, Mubarak's and Gaddafi's regimes, and form the vanguards of those that are now threatening other autocratic regimes in other countries. It was the act of a 26-year-old Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself, that ignited the uprising in Tunisia. In Egypt, the majority of the prominent figures and symbols of the 25 January uprising are young. In Yemen, the journalist and Nobel Prize winner Tawakol Kerman became a symbol, not only of the country's peaceful revolution, but of all young Arab women who 'have been and often remain at the forefront of those protests' (Cole and Cole, 2011), struggling for democracy as well as for gender equality.

Youth movements in Arab countries are not necessarily represented by structured NGOs or institutions, nor do they form homogeneous groups; they are social movements in the sense of 'a set of opinions and beliefs in a population representing preferences for changing some elements of the social structure or reward distribution, or both' (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 20). Broad coalitions, such as the 6 April movement in Egypt and 20 February movement in Morocco, may provide some loose structures for these movements. By and large, however, youth movements are characterized by a high level of cross-membership and fluidity of structures insofar as many of the people who belong to them are members of various existing NGOs and political parties that do not necessarily subscribe to the same ideologies. In many cases, young people and youth sections inside political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces party in Morocco, defied their senior leaders to join the protests in the streets. Moreover, while the youth movements are marked by an intense level of ideological diversity, young people still share common beliefs and opinions rooted in demography, world vision and everyday life experience.

There is more than just economic dispossession behind the younger generation's deep resentment of existing regimes and systems, however. In most Arab countries where revolutions took place, mobilization and protests were led by highly educated, middle-class young people who were not necessarily suffering from the hardships of unemployment and social marginalization. The youth movement in the region is, in fact, an outcome of the confluence between identity politics through which young people are trying to make their voice heard, and distribution politics, as they seek a better life commensurate with their education and aspirations. As such, young people are as much rebelling against unemployment, tyranny and corruption as they are against political, social and cultural conservatism and stagnation, as well as older generations' and elites' preference for the status quo and compromise.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, 'there are also deeper cultural factors at play in a region where respect for elders is a sacrosanct value and where young people feel their ideas, their creativity, their energy is stifled' (Shenker et al., 2011).

The contribution of communication technologies to this process is not insignificant. Young people constitute the majority of internet users in these countries, which has deepened generational divides (Ben Moussa, 2012). The internet and social media, in particular, have allowed young people to become exposed to global cultural flows and, more importantly, to express themselves in unprecedented and creative ways that reconstructed collective and individual identities and questioned rigid dogmas, interpretations and discourses. Such creativity has been given a full public display during the ongoing uprisings as reflected in the slogans, music, actions, arts, body language and clothes in the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Sanaa and Casablanca during the last year.

The role of new media and the internet in paving the way for the Arab spring is typical of new social movements' formation, where the potential for the production of action becomes increasingly contingent on 'the ability to produce information' (Melucci, 2008: 219). According to Melucci (1994: 101), conflicts now 'tend to arise in those areas of the system that are most directly involved in the production of information and communicative resources but at the same time subjected to intense pressure of integration'. In the context of Arab countries, new communication technologies have allowed various segments of society not only to access free and uncensored information, but also and more importantly to compete in the production of information, narratives and frames that are recreating collective identities and the meanings of personhood and citizenship. In so doing, they are also reshaping power relationships between gender, ethnic and religious groups and generations. This process is most likely to intensify in the coming months and years, and the need to understand and analyze it as a social and political and cultural phenomenon is more urgent than ever, and this is an endeavor to which social movement theory can immensely contribute.

### **The Arab Spring and the Role of Social Media**

The Arab spring has clearly signalled a major shift in collective action within Arab countries. The key question that remains to be investigated is the extent to which the internet and social media, in particular, have generated this shift. There is no doubt that the profound transformations in collective action in the region are intrinsically linked to the fast and ubiquitous diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in these countries during the last two decades. The impact of technological innovations on social movements and collective action in general is well discussed in the literature (Castells, 2001, 2004; Downey and Fenton, 2003). Garrett identifies within the literature three types of 'mechanisms' linking the technology to social movements, namely 'reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community' (2006: 204). Similarly, Stein (2009: 757) summarizes existing literature on the subject and points out the internet's six functions for social movements: (a) providing information; (b) assisting action and mobilization; (c) promoting interaction and

dialogue; (d) making lateral linkages; (e) serving as an outlet for creative expression; and (f) promoting fundraising and resource generation.

These functions, however, do not provide enough theoretical insights into the link between social media and social movements. They should, therefore, be further grounded in social movement theory. Resource mobilization theory, for instance, pays greater attention to institutional and organizational factors within collective action. Resource mobilization theory theorists consider grievances as one such factor and place more emphasis on the conditions under which grievances are translated into action, and the resources and external support that are needed to sustain such action (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 16). The existence of particular injustices and grievances is not enough to explain the development of social movements; in fact, 'control over actual and potential resources is a more important determinant of the emergence as well as the likely success of collective action' (Buechler, 1993: 221). Thus, a key question that needs to be answered from the perspective of this theory is the extent to which social media have enhanced the capabilities of social movements and allowed them to master enough resources to lead successful campaigns against repressive regimes. Contrary to the much celebrated virtues of social media, the post-Mubarak clashes between protesters and the army in Egypt, and the poor results achieved by secular political parties in the elections have demonstrated that social movements can only achieve long-lasting impact by mastering various types of resources, an objective that only Islamic-oriented movements have been able to achieve in an effective manner so far.

The use of social media in the political sphere in the region does not date back only as far as last year, however. 'Social media' is a generic term that comprises a large number of technologies and platforms sharing some key characteristics, mainly allowing users to connect with others and share with them a variety of data, including their connections online. While Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are among the platforms that were used most during the Arab spring, many others pre-date them and are still widely used by activists, including blogs, email-lists, forums and instant messaging platforms. These technologies and platforms have, in fact, played a critical role in expanding the limits of agonistic public spheres and collective action repertoires over the last decade. In Egypt, for instance, where the use of the internet in political activism has developed faster than in any other Arab country, there is a genealogy of online activism that has contributed to the success of the 25 January revolution. A case in point is the Egyptian Movement for Change commonly known as Kifaya, launched in 2005, that paved the way for the emergence of the 6 April movement that spearheaded the revolution against Mubarak regime. Oweidat et al. (2008) succinctly point out that it is possible to attribute the relative success of Kifaya movement to two main factors: one is its ability to unite diverse political groups under its banners; second, its efficient use of ICTs, particularly mobile SMS and the blogosphere (Oweidat et al., 2008).

Thus case studies and longitudinal approaches are necessary to examine not only the development of social movements, but also the contribution of various social media platforms and technologies to the eruption of the Arab spring.

In fact, in the domain of democratic media and political activism, media are rarely used as single platforms. Indeed, notwithstanding the importance of their role, social media are not stand-alone tools in the Arab spring; rather, they have only been effective because they operated in synergy and complementarity with a huge array of media, from placards, leaflets and graffiti to digital cameras and 3G mobile phones. Thus, even when the internet service in Egypt and Tunisia was completely shut down or severely curtailed, the revolutions continued as people resorted to other more conventional media, as well as to offline societal networks and interpersonal communication. Moreover, state surveillance of social media platforms compelled activists to use alternative media and tools of communication. During the Egyptian uprising, for instance, activists resorted to distributing leaflets asking 'recipients to redistribute it by email and photocopy, but not to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which are being monitored by the security forces' (Black, 2011). In addition to small digital media, print media and interpersonal communication, mainstream media, mainly satellite television, such as Al-Jazeera, played a critical role in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Al-Jazeera's 24-hour coverage of Tahrir Square in Egypt broke through the media blackout imposed by Mubarak's regime, and perhaps enabled the revolution to escape brutal repression by the army. As such, an important issue that needs to be investigated at this level is the multiple configurations of media convergence and complementarity, and the position of social media within them. Are social media replacing older media and platforms, or are they merely redefining their role and contribution to the media ecosystem as a whole?

Grasping the full complexity of the implications of the internet and social media for new social movements in the Arab world, however, requires researchers to move beyond the study of users and their immediate practices to include the study of national, regional and global contexts and structures shaping this use. In fact, the link between technology and social change is neither automatic nor linear. For this purpose, social movement theory, particularly political process theory can shed light on the interconnections between social media diffusion and appropriation, on the one hand, and the political and social conditions under which these media can contribute to social and political change. The theory of 'political process' designates 'the degree of openness or closure of a political system in a way that might facilitate or discourage the rise of social movements' (Ruggiero and Montagna, 2008: 139). Instead of focusing on the role of organizational resources in generating collective action, the political process model stresses the historical context and political environment that can either empower social movements to or hinder them from 'getting access to established polity' (Diani, 2000a: 158).

Thanks to this perspective, the focus can move away from investigating the technology-centered question of how social media generated the Arab spring to probing the political and social contexts and conditions, both at the local and global levels, under which successive technology innovations have contributed to political and social change. Unlike in the context of northern countries, where research focuses on the political structure at the national level, social movement theory analysis in the context of developing countries needs to adopt multidisciplinary perspectives that account for various processes, including economic, social and cultural disparities and divides, in addition to technological divides. Thus, issues of media censorship, media ownership, access to hardware and networks, problems of software and language, costs and skill of usage, and gender divides should be investigated to see how they shape the role and use of social media in Arab countries. Commentators, for instance, have noted that digital divides and sustainability are two major issues shaping the use of the internet and informatics systems in developing countries (Merkel, 2005). Accordingly, an important part of understanding the role of social media in the Arab spring is to explore their impact on various forms of divides and variables shaping diffusion of ICTs in the context Arab societies in general.

A multidisciplinary approach is also needed to examine a fundamental dimension shared by social media and the internet on the one hand and social movements on the other, namely networking. According to Castells, the internet:

fits with the basic features of the kind of social movements emerging in the Information Age... The Internet is not simply a technology: it is a communication media, and it is the material infrastructure of a given organizational form: the network. (2001: 135–6)

The parallelism between the two stems from the fact that both the internet and social movements can be described as 'networks of networks', where rapport between nodes/members is built on non-hierarchical, non-linear and highly flexible structures. According to the latter view, social movements can be defined as 'networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues' (Diani, 2000b: 387). Combining social movement theory and network analysis is thus essential to shed much needed light on how social media affect, transform and support networks that are primordial to the development of social movements and collective action. One of the merits of such an analysis is that it can account for socio-political and structural factors shaping collective action, while underscoring human agency by identifying the location and contribution of each individual within online and offline networks and relationships.



### Social Media as Alternative Media

It is impossible to study the linkages between social movements and social media without looking into 'alternative media' scholarship (Atton, 2001, 2004; Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Downing, 2001). Alternative media are often defined by comparing them with and contrasting them to mainstream media and to what the latter stand for. The emphasis on the form of organization and process of work rather than just on the content is a widespread argument among critics of mass media who contend that mainstream media are undemocratically organized and at the same time they are predominantly commercialized. One of the first critics in this field was Raymond Williams who argued that communication is 'the means by which social relations are constituted and practiced', and therefore, the alternative media 'must also enable alternative communication, which together make possible the articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant' (quoted in Hamilton, 2000: 362). It serves no purpose to change just the content of the message as Baudrillard contends (1981); if an alternative communication is to be established, the receiver/reader must be empowered to escape 'the trap of controlled communication' (1981: 183).

Accordingly to be able to promote democracy and social justice in society, media must embrace a different form of organization. Carroll and Hackett (2006: 84) formulate this idea clearly by differentiating between two distinct but related concepts, namely that of 'the democratization of the media' and that of 'democratization through the media'. While the first demarcates a field in which media activists try to promote different or 'alternative' forms of organizing media, the second is not limited to the latter but can also be the aim of governments and civil society bodies and institutions that try to promote democracy within society.

Commentators have equally observed that social movements make strategic use of mainstream media in their action 'to broaden the scope of conflict' (Gamson and Wolsfeld, 1993: 116). However, because of the asymmetrical relationship between mainstream media and social movements, social movements have to use alternative communication strategies and tools to bypass mainstream media, in order to support their struggles and communicate with actual and potential constituents. Scholars have argued that alternative media involve more than just bypassing mainstream media. Hamilton, for instance, maintains that if communication is 'the means by which social relations are constituted and practiced', alternative media 'must also enable alternative communication, which ... make[s] possible the articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant [one]' (2000: 362). In the same vein, Carroll and Hackett (2006) point out that the use of alternative media by progressive and oppositional social movements involves two key processes. On the one hand, these movements use alternative media to achieve various objectives in domains

outside the mainstream media sector. On the other, they endeavor to democratize the media themselves by implementing and incorporating non-commercialized and non-professionalized communication practices and structures that challenge those of mainstream media.

The role of mainstream and state media in supporting and perpetuating autocratic regimes throughout the Arab world has been much discussed in scholarly studies and media reports. That is why when the Arab spring broke out, symbols of state-controlled or - funded media, such as the Maspéro building in Egypt, hosting state radio and television, were among the main targets of militants and activists because they were always considered among the most visible tools of oppression. But building a democratic media system requires more than dismantling state propaganda apparatus and ensuring the independence of media outlets and their functioning. For social movements, the main guarantee for such a system to flourish is the use of alternative media capable of fostering democratic communication and culture, and resisting the infringements of the state and capital. As such, studies of the role of social media in Arab spring should definitely aim to explore not only how they were used to achieve social movements' objectives in political change, but also the extent to which they are contributing to constructing more participatory and democratic communication. A main issue in this subfield of enquiry is to examine the use of social media to promote dialogical discourse and a multiplicity of voices through full interactive communication that forms the basis of an agonistic public sphere and pluralistic democracy. For McMillan (2006: 213), full interactivity only happens when there is a 'mutual dialogue' which is not only 'responsive' but 'also gives more egalitarian control to all participants so that sender and receiver roles become indistinguishable'.

Alternative media theory can also shed light on new forms of collective action where the bulk of activism involves online groups and communities that do not necessarily have offline structures and presence. Prior to the eruption of street protests and popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, social media, mainly Facebook, were the main arena of political dissent and mobilization. Facebook pages, such as the one launched by Wael Ghonim to protest against the torture and killing of activist Khaled Said, amassed tens of thousands of members located in Egypt and the diaspora, thus forming an online community that extends over geographical and political borders. One useful interpretation of this phenomenon is provided by Carroll and Hackett (2006), who propose analyzing media activism through the lens of new social movement theory. They argue that democratic media activism, in general, shares with new social movements a number of features, since the latter '[contest] not only the "codes" of communication but the entire complex of social relations and practices through which the codes are produced and disseminated' (2006: 95). Consequently, democratic media activism can itself be portrayed as 'an archetypically new social

movement: a reflexive form of activism that treats communication as simultaneously means and end of struggle' (2006: 96).

### Conclusion

To sum up, while the notion of the 'Arab street' dominated scholarly and non-scholarly writings on collective action in the context of Arab countries for a long time, recent scholarly works have widely adopted Habermas's concept of the public sphere to analyze political activism and the implications of new communication technologies for it. Existing literature, however, is marked by numerous lacunas, chief among them an insufficient number of studies in the field, their overly descriptive aspect, and the excessive focus on religion-oriented political groups and discourses.

To address these shortcomings, and in order to better conceptualize and analyze the role of social media in the Arab spring, multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives built around social movement theory are a very strong alternative. First, interpreting collective action in Arab countries through the lens of social movement theory can better shed light on the social, cultural and political rootedness of political advocacy and activism. It can also link collective action to local and global transformations marked by heightened transnational interconnections, as well intersections between recognition, or identity politics, on the one hand, and redistribution, or social and economic justice politics, on the other. Second, the social embeddedness of new communication technologies, particularly social media, and their use necessitate moving away from a mainly instrumentalist interpretation of these media to one that explores complex linkages between technology, collective action, and their local and translocal settings. In this sense, social movement theory provides a better approach through which to theorize and analyze the link between political groups' organizational structure, access to resources and framing strategies in relation to technological innovation and the adoption of social media. Such an analysis can be further supported through other theoretical paradigms, such as alternative media theory and network theory. Scholars interested in studying collective action and the role of social media in the Arab spring, whether from the perspective of communication studies, sociology or political science, have a huge gap to fill, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Not only is there a need for many more studies dealing with the implications of new media technologies in political and social transformations in the region, but, perhaps more importantly, such research has to try to end the conceptual isolation characterizing this sub-area by engaging with vast theoretical paradigms that have developed in social sciences and humanities. The importance of this task transcends the mere need to analyze current political events in the Middle East and North Africa. Fulfilling this task will undoubtedly contribute to deconstructing centuries-old hegemonic representations of Muslim-majority societies and countries.

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1. Arabic is the fastest growing language on the web, for instance (worldinternetstats.com).
  2. In the case of Bahrain, and Iraq, the Shi'a movements represent the majority.
  3. For a detailed discussion on the origins of the youth movement and culture in the Arab world, see Herrera and Bayat (2010).

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# SOCIAL MEDIA, SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN THE BAHRAIN UPRISING

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**Marc Owen Jones** began his PhD at the University of Durham in 2011 after securing a studentship from the North East Doctoral Training Centre. He worked briefly as a graduate research assistant at Leicester University following the completion of an MSc in Arab World Studies from Durham University in 2010. This two-year MSc was funded by the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World and involved a year of intense Arabic tuition at both the Universities of Edinburgh and Damascus. He received his BA in Journalism, Film and Broadcasting from Cardiff University in 2006 before spending a year in Sudan teaching English. He tweets and blogs regularly on Bahrain and his research interests include critical security surveillance, cultural geography, public space, social justice, systemic control, policing and social media.

**This is a study of how the Bahraini regime and its supporters utilized Facebook, Twitter and other social media as a tool of surveillance and social control during the Bahrain uprising.** Using a virtual ethnography conducted between February 2011 and December 2011, it establishes a typology of methods that describe how hegemonic forces and institutions employed social media to suppress both online and offline dissent. These methods are trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering and passive observation. It also discusses how these methods of control limit the ability of activists to use online places as spaces of representation and anti-hegemonic identity formation. While there is considerable research on the positive role social media plays in activism, this article addresses the relative paucity of literature on how hegemonic forces use social media to resist political change.

## KEYWORDS

Bahrain, Facebook, social control, social media, surveillance, Twitter

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On 14 February 2011 thousands of pro-democracy activists took to the streets of Bahrain to demand political and social reform. While such unrest is not new, the sheer scale was unprecedented, as was the brutality of the crackdown, which as of 16 April 2012 has resulted in the death of up to 76 people (Bahrain Centre for Human Rights – BCHR, 2011) and the incarceration of an estimated 2929 (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Report – BICI, 2011: 409). Despite initial support for the pro-democracy activists among both Sunni and Shia (Ulrichsen, 2011), the resulting crackdown has led to the increased polarization of Bahraini society. This is now primarily articulated along a pro-government versus anti-government divide, and the question ‘Are you pro- or anti-government?’ has become both a conversation starter and, inevitably, a conversation stopper.

Irrespective of political stance, both government supporters and activists alike turned to social media and the internet to follow unfolding events. The number of Twitter users in Bahrain shot up (*Al-Wasat*, 2011), and dozens of Facebook groups materialized, the majority of which were posting updates, information, photos and events related to the revolution. Indeed, media coverage of the Arab spring tended to popularize the social media aspect of the struggle, with many news outlets focusing on the role of Twitter and Facebook in the revolutions. Much of their discourse subscribed to the ‘technological utopian’ position, which views social media and the internet as a positive force that democratizes information, reinvigorates citizens’ political engagement, encourages freedom of expression and brings people together (Castells, 1996; Grossman, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Saco, 2002).

Others were somewhat cynical, arguing that social media were merely a tool, and not necessarily integral to the efficacy of the revolutions as whole. Few, however, fully assumed the ‘technological dystopian’ or ‘Neo-Luddite’ position, which posits that technological developments such as the internet simply serve to ‘confound the problems of space, access and interaction by alienating people from each other and even themselves’ (Saco, 2002: xv). In addition to fears that technology may actually work against integration, the dystopian position describes the fear that Web 2.0 technologies may be used to as part of the ‘informational-control continuum’, and thus shape media content through ‘propaganda, psychological operations, information intervention, and strategic public diplomacy’ (Bakir, 2010: 8). The dystopian potential of technology has recently been examined by Evgeny Morozov (2011), who highlights the failure of cyber-utopians to predict how authoritarian regimes would use the internet as a tool for propaganda, surveillance and censorship.

The internet cannot be reduced to a simple dystopian versus utopian binary, however. Instead, one must acknowledge that it can work simultaneously as a tool of both empowerment and control – depending on who is using it and what objectives they are seeking to achieve. As Rebecca MacKinnon (2012: 27) states:

People, governments, companies, and all kinds of groups are using the Internet to achieve all kinds of ends, including political ones.... Pitched battles are currently under way over not only who controls its [the internet’s] future, but also over its very nature, which in turn will determine whom it most empowers in the long run – and who will be shut out.



Examining the nature of these 'pitched battles' on a case-by-case basis is a useful endeavour, as temporal and contextual factors influence the manner in which the internet and social media are used. This statement is not an implicit rejection of technological determinism, but rather an acknowledgement of the importance of social constructivism, which is important in examining the influence of power relations and socio-historic factors in influencing internet use (Franklin, 2004). In this respect, regional case studies can help us determine the uses and outcomes of social media in specific cultural and political environments. How social media is used in Bahrain might differ markedly from how it is used in Egypt for example.

Given that the uprising in Bahrain has not succeeded in achieving regime change, it makes sense to focus on how hegemonic forces have utilized social media to subjugate both dissent and dissenters in the months following 14 February. This article therefore focuses more on the dystopian potential of technology, and looks at how social media, and in particular Twitter and Facebook, have assisted the Bahraini government, hegemonic institutions and those representing the hegemonic order in maintaining their position of dominance. In particular, it examines how hegemonic forces use social media for the purposes of surveillance, censorship and propaganda. The results are arranged according to the following typology: trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering and passive observation.

This article concludes by discussing how attempts to marginalize dissent in cyberspace mirror similar processes in urban space, which are aiming to render public spaces in Bahrain ahistorical, safe and generic. These processes, which range from the destruction of Shia mosques to the demolition of the Pearl Roundabout, all represent attempts to limit the ability of 'resistance identities' to flourish through the evisceration of both symbols and places (Castells, 2004). Indeed the uprising in Bahrain is also a war on symbols, one which is being fought in both cyberspace and urban space in an attempt to limit the existence of what Foucault (1986) described as heterotopias, that is, places that challenge 'safe space' and allow for the flourishing of new, potentially dangerous identities that challenge the existing order. These heterotopias, which are spaces of crisis, deviance, abnormality and transformation (Kern, 2008: 105) embody a threat to the production of safe space if they are unregulated and uncontrolled. Political protest, which by its very nature poses a challenge to hegemonic order, appropriates space and in it creates crisis and abnormality. Thus the control of space, whether it be urban space or cyberspace, is fundamental to ensuring the longevity of any authoritarian regime.

### Space, Surveillance and Control

Ever since the internet arrived in Bahrain, it has been used by political activists as a space for resistance. Forums such as bahrainonline.org were used to post photos of rallies and acts of government oppression carried out by the state security apparatus

(Desmukh, 2010). Since the start of the protests all of these forums have assumed either a pro- or anti-government identity. In a very real sense, Bahraini cyberspace has become segregated. This segregation is not formalized, yet the nature of interactions in Bahrain's forums is very much based on political and social loyalties, and as such there are often implicit expectations of what one should and should not say.

Twitter, however, is a different format, and its functionality made it an extremely useful tool in the Arab spring. The surge of users generated by protests on the street resulted in a proliferation of interactions online, the basis of which was often the political context that inspired the user to join. Unlike forums however, Twitter is not a closed community. As a result, interactions between those of opposing opinions and political allegiances are not restricted. On the contrary, they are common. In Bahrain, the resulting interactions were often characterized by volatility, hostility and aggression. Despite these aspects, Twitter is perhaps the most effective place for activists and Bahrainis to communicate in real time with both local and global actors who might be outside their immediate networks. This is especially important in light of the state's tight control of the national media, which increased during the 2011 crackdown. Indeed, the regime temporarily closed down *Al-Wasat*, which was the only Bahraini newspaper that was remotely critical of the regime. Its editor Mansoor al-Jamri was charged by the general prosecutor for publishing false information that 'harmed public safety and national interests' (Trade Arabia, 2011). Opposition figures have also been excluded from the state media, which creates 'frustration ... and results in these groups resorting to other media outlets such as social media' (BICI, 2011: 422).

This inability to seek representation through official media outlets inevitably increases the importance of digital spaces and social media. This was especially apparent following the declaration of the National Safety Law in Bahrain on 15 March 2011 (Bahrain News Agency, 2011). The law, which was the precursor to a broader crackdown, saw the destruction of important political and religious structures, as well as a clampdown on public gatherings of any sort. Examples of this include the demolition of the Pearl Roundabout, which was Bahrain's 'freedom square' and the symbolic location of the uprising. In addition to this, at least 30 Shia religious structures were torn down. While the government claimed that the buildings were illegal, 'five of them had both the requisite royal deed and building permit' (BICI, 2011: 328). In all cases, the government of Bahrain 'did not follow the requirement of the national law concerning the notice and issuance of a judicial order for demolition' (BICI, 2011: 328). Instead, it simply relied on the National Safety Law, which essentially gave *carte blanche* to carry out repressive measures in the name of national security.

The demolitions symbolize the destruction of important representational spaces for Bahraini activists, many of whom are members of the country's Shia community – a community that, despite being the majority, has long been marginalized politically and

economically (Cordesman, 1997; Khouri, 1980; Shanahan, 2008). Having said that, the uprising included both Sunnis and Shia, and consequently represented a major threat to the Al-Khalifa regime, who are never more fearful than when both sects come together to unilaterally oppose specific policies or measures (Khouri, 1980). Despite the government's attempts to paint the uprising as a Shia-inspired, foreign-backed sectarian coup, the demolition of such structures seems to be indicative of sectarianism among Sunni hardliners in the loyalist camp. The destruction and regulation of public space illustrates an attempt to marginalize resistance and dissent. By regulating and exercising control over urban spaces the regime are eliminating important spaces in which identities of resistance can form.

The same is true of digital spaces, which are new frontiers for activism, and are the location from which people can challenge the homogenizing power of authoritarianism. In order to counter the threat embodied by these digital spaces, the Bahraini government and those representing the hegemonic order are employing tactics to control them. These tactics are numerous, yet can generally be seen under the umbrella of 'surveillance', for they are all attempts to instil normative and acceptable repertoires of behaviour through both observation and creating a fear of observation.

### Surveillance versus Sousveillance

Surveillance is the process by which organizations and governments observe individuals or groups of individuals. It is an asymmetric process that affords power to the observer but not the observed, and is therefore a process by which the surveiller asserts his domination over the surveilled. The means by which an organization conducts surveillance is multifaceted, yet technological developments have facilitated the speed and efficacy of the process, allowing for more efficient and pervasive observation. Indeed, the rise of what Jan van Dijk (1991) first termed the 'Network Society' has given both organizations and the state unprecedented opportunities to carry out surveillance. As Lyon (2001) argues, the information society is also the surveillance society.

The historical role of technology in surveillance is perhaps most famously illustrated by Bentham's Panopticon, a buildings whose geometry allowed a prison guard to watch the inmates without them knowing. Timothy Mitchell (1991: x) describes the Panopticon as the 'institution in which the use of coercion and commands to control a population was replaced by the partitioning of space, the isolation of individuals, and their systematic yet unseen surveillance'. Mitchell's (1991) work on Egypt draws heavily on the work of Michel Foucault, who outlined the importance of the power differential within the context of the 'unseen'. Ben and Marthalee Barton (1993) summarize Foucault's (1983) argument, stating that the 'asymmetry of seeing-without-being-seen is, in fact, the very essence of power', and the 'power to dominate rests on the

differential possession of knowledge'. As well stressing the importance of asymmetry, Foucault states that: '[the] major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (1977: 201). He adds that surveillance should be 'permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (1977: 201). In other words, it is not just being watched that is enough to induce obedience to authority, but rather the possibility of being watched.

An example of such an apparatus could be seen in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, where a mosque with an unusually high minaret was built in order to keep track of the Shia in Karbala (Bakir, 2010, 17). The Hassan mosque, itself a modern-day Panopticon, functioned alongside a highly repressive state intelligence apparatus (*mukhabarat*), which is a common presence in the majority of Middle Eastern countries. Bahrain is no exception and, although it is a liberal state by regional standards with fewer restrictions on internet access (Hofheinz, 2007: 60), it still suffers from many of the same repressive measures that serve to limit both dissent and political mobilization. Even before 14 February Bahrain had blocked websites deemed to be politically controversial and arrested on a number of occasions the well-known blogger Ali Abdulemam (Desmukh, 2010).

This censorship indicates the threat that new technologies pose to regimes around the world. They must therefore adopt new methods of observation, ones that preferably permit coercion with minimal resort to violence. While such observation was traditionally carried out via the naked eye, 'surveillance techniques have increasingly become embedded in technology' (Mann et al., 2003). Oscar Gandy (1993) and Mark Poster (1990) argue that the growth of information technology and databases has led to an asymmetrical monitoring of behaviour. This surveillance allows particular organizations, whether they be corporate or bureaucratic to 'not only commodify the personal information of those observed, but also use such information to inform practices of social control and discrimination' (Humphreys, 2011: 576). Facebook and Twitter are therefore a potential opportunity for organizations to extract information which can be used to further the agenda of the particular institutional body collecting the data.

So, just as the Panopticon allowed the asymmetric observation of a prison's inmates, the modern-day neo-Panopticon (Mann et al., 2003: 332) can be seen as the use of observational technologies to discourage certain forms of behaviour in a wide range of places, from malls to high streets, to forums and social media. While the essence of this surveillance is based on the fact that it is asymmetrical, the use of new technologies by individuals to observe those in authority represents a sort of inverse Panopticon, one where citizens can challenge the government's monopoly on information (2003: 333).

This idea is described as 'sousveillance', 'from the French words for 'sous' (below)



and 'veiller' to watch' (2003, 332). 'Sousveillance', itself a form of 'reflectionism', is a term invented by Mann (1998: 93–102) to describe the process of using technologies to confront organizations by documenting their actions or the consequences of their actions. In other words, it gives those who are observed the power to become the observer, and the power to resist the authority of the state. Mann also discusses the idea of 'personal sousveillance', which is the use of technology such as social media to document one's own day-to-day experience. An example of this might include Bahraini activists who photographed themselves at the Pearl Roundabout. However, such seemingly banal 'personal sousveillance' can be re-appropriated by the regime and its supporters and used as part of its own surveillance apparatus (Bakir, 2010; Mann, 2002; Mann et al., 2003). This is nowhere more evident than in Bahrain, where the increasing polarization of society has resulted in citizens using social media as a tool of peer-to-peer to surveillance.

## Methods

In order to assess how hegemonic forces are attempting to use social media as a tool of surveillance and social control, a virtual ethnography was carried out. A virtual ethnography is similar to a traditional ethnography and can:

involve the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (Hine, 2008: 259)

Doing this on 'social media' is not an easy task and, for months, involved the daily monitoring of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (the subjects of the study). Integral to this virtual ethnography was Twitter, which served as both a locus of interactions and conduit of vital information that led to relevant news, videos and images. Conducting this virtual ethnography moved beyond just 'lurking', and very much involved becoming part of Bahrain's online community. In some ways this was for the sake of establishing trust and credibility, but it was also an inevitable part of online activism, of which I have become a part.

The importance of building trust within what can only loosely be termed a Twitter 'community' cannot be overstated, for it formed the basis of establishing relationships that led to interviews, discussions and chats. It was also these relationships that developed through the virtual ethnography that formed the basis of investigative collaborations that were important in identifying potential surveillance tactics used by hegemonic forces. This is particularly true of the information regarding the company

Olton and Liliane Khalil, both of which will be discussed later. Through a combination of observation, participation and interviews spanning an 11-month period (February 2011–December 2011), it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the potential role of social media as tools of surveillance and social control. The most notable factors highlighted have been categorized as trolling, naming and shaming, passive observation, intelligence gathering and offline factors.

The ethical considerations for this research are, of course, voluminous: not only in the sense that people in Bahrain are fearful of the potential ramifications of speaking out about politically sensitive issues, but also because this research is fundamentally about surveillance and privacy. Indeed, Marc Smith (1999: 211) makes a point about new technologies that is still pertinent today, and asks if the analysis of such data is simply the extension of the means of surveillance that is already a disturbing trend in the information age. In his succinct paraphrasing of Mark Poster, Smith (1999: 211) suggests that observing such interactions can 'uncover social spaces, subjecting them to a kind of Panoptic surveillance'.

While it impossible to allay all of these concerns, measures have been taken to preserve the privacy of those involved. All information received in confidence has been anonymized and only included with the express consent of those who provided it. Furthermore, information disclosed in private has only been accepted from those whose identity I have verified. This stems from what is perceived to be a huge proliferation in anonymous accounts, the implications of which will be discussed in the findings of this study.

## Findings

### *Trolling or Flaming*

Broadly speaking, trolling can be defined as a form of aggressive internet communication where people using anonymous accounts engage in abusive behaviour towards other users. It is a form of what MacKinnon (2012) calls 'cyber-harassment', and can vary in severity, ranging from provocative comments to outright bullying. Contrary to Yochai Benkler's (2006: 374) suggestion that 'flame wars'<sup>2</sup> might dissipate as people become more familiar with new technologies, they have shown little sign of abating in Bahrain.

Trolling in Bahrain ranges from spiteful personal comments to death threats. For example, one Twitter user feared for the safety of her child when an anonymous troll started tweeting about how he (the troll) knew where the child went to school. He even named the school and gave details of its layout and location. Another activist reported how trolls created five parody accounts, all of which were dedicated to ridiculing her. In an attempt to rectify this, the victim had to send to Twitter on each occasion proof of identity to get rid of the anonymous accounts. Tiring of this, Twitter eventually suggested

she just tweet under a separate or anonymous identity, essentially admitting defeat at the hands of the troll(s).

Bahrain's Twitter trolls have acquired such a reputation that they have prompted many international journalists or activists reporting on Bahrain to write/blog about them, including Jillian York, (2011) David Goodman (2011) and Brian Dooley (2011). Following the release of the BICI report on 23 November 2011, Al-Jazeera reporter Gregg Carlstrom tweeted: 'Bahrain has by far the hardest-working Twitter trolls of any country I've reported on'.<sup>3</sup> Global Voices editor for the Middle East and North Africa Amira Al Hussaini tweeted:<sup>4</sup> 'Yawn: cyberbullying = censorship! Welcome to the new era of freedom in #Bahrain'. A number of people told me how trolling stopped them from tweeting politics, with one user stating:

Don't know how long Marc, my heart is heavy. Even my moderate views get attacked by trolls.

Few people who engage in trolling have accounts that reveal their true identity, and it is precisely this anonymity that makes many people suspicious. There are perhaps thousands of anonymous accounts, all of which have very few followers, and usually have an avatar that symbolizes their support for the regime (such as a picture of one of the Royal Family). Despite the fact that the regime enjoys some degree of legitimacy in Bahrain, there is a belief that many of these accounts are created by the security forces or PR companies to bully activists and give the illusion of widespread support for the government (Halvorssen, 2011).

Given that the US military is developing software that will allow it to 'secretly manipulate social media sites by using fake online personas to influence internet conversations and spread pro-American propaganda' (Fielding and Cobain, 2011), it comes as no surprise that the private sector might seek to profit from it. Indeed, it was revealed that BGR Gabara, a British PR firm reportedly working for the Bahraini government, planned to organize a 'Twitter campaign' on behalf of Kazakh children (Newman and Wright, 2011). This exacerbated fears that they were conducting similar operations in Bahrain.

What these findings illustrate is that trolling can result in people changing their tweeting habits. A number of people interviewed said how they were less likely to tweet anything against the regime after being trolled. Others changed their Twitter privacy settings so that their tweets would not be seen by the global public. This demonstrates how hegemonic forces can use social media to influence the flow of anti-government rhetoric, thus contributing to the state's censorship apparatus. Dissuading people from tweeting also creates an informational vacuum, one that can then be filled with pro-regime propaganda/PR.

### *Name and Shame*

Perhaps one of the most pernicious things to come out of the uprising is the Hareghum Twitter account. Hareghum, which literally means 'the one that burns them', is a self-proclaimed defender of Bahrain, and spends his days disclosing information about traitors in Bahrain. This includes posting photos of people seen at anti-government rallies, circling their faces, disclosing their addresses, their places of work and their phone numbers. Unfortunately, the account has achieved such notoriety that it has become well known in Bahrain. An example of his impact was revealed to me by one informant, who said:

My friend she left the country after her husband who works in a bank became a target of this 7araghum [sic]. I don't think she'll ever come back.

While many have tried to unveil Hareghum's identity, no one has been successful. It is believed to be a number of people taking it in turns to manage the account. Hareghum has become an institution in itself in Bahrain, with people using it both to 'report' suspected 'traitors', and also to find information about 'traitors'. One such example was provided by someone whose father used to have a high position in a Bahraini company. He was contacted by someone who had information about a potential 'traitor' working in the company.

this guy sends a message to my Dad pasted from Hareghum about an [insert company name] employee.... He was sending it to my dad because my dad is still well connected, so can make things happen.... So he was telling my dad 'Do the needful' (i.e. get him fired).

The climate of fear that existed when this message was sent should not be underestimated, for it was a time when thousands of Bahrainis were being fired from work for taking in part in strikes, even though the strikes were 'within the permissible bounds of the law' (BICI, 2011: 420).

Prior to Hareghum, there were other examples of people with anonymous Twitter accounts receiving messages disclosing their name and identity. (e.g. imagine you had gone to great lengths to protect your identity on Twitter and then someone you don't know contacts you and tells you your name, phone number and address). On describing Hareghum, the Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (2011) stated:

In some cases, a photograph of a protester was posted with a comment asking for the name of the person, and other Twitter users then posted the requested information. Witnesses reported to the Commission that persons who had been named or identified by Harghum [sic] would then avoid sleeping at their home address for fear of an attack. Harghum [sic] also allegedly advertised a Mol [Ministry of the Interior] 'hotline', which people could call in order to report on persons engaged in anti-government activity. (BICI, 2011, 381)

The Harghum [sic] Twitter account targeted anti-government protesters and even disclosed their whereabouts and personal details. Harghum [sic] openly harassed, threatened and defamed certain individuals, and in some cases placed them in immediate danger. The Commission considers such harassment to be a violation of a person's right to privacy while also amounting to hate speech and incitement to violence. (BICI, 2011: 391)

As of November 2012, the government have done nothing about the account, even though the Commission stated that Hareghum 'produced material that international law requires to be prohibited and which is in fact prohibited under Bahrain law'. It is interesting to note that similar 'name and shame' groups existed on Facebook (al-Qassemi, 2011; Facebook 'used to hunt down Bahrain dissidents', 2011; Reuters, 2011), yet it is easier to have Facebook remove these groups. Twitter, on the other hand, makes it hard to remove such groups unless they are reported for spam. What this has led to is many pro-government supporters leading campaigns where they get people to report human rights activists such as Nabeel Rajab and Maryam al-Khawaja for spam. Despite Facebook's more sympathetic policy in getting rid of such groups, it was reportedly used to identify the workplace and home of 20-year-old poet Ayat al-Qurmezi, who angered authorities by reading out a poem that criticized King Hamad. Visitors to this Facebook page were told to write the 'traitor's name and work place'. Soon afterwards masked men arrested her (Al-Jazeera English, 2011; Facebook 'used to hunt down Bahrain dissidents', 2011).

#### Offline Factors

'Offline factors' refers to a number of pressures that do not necessarily occur online, but still work to encourage self-censorship by discouraging people from using social media. In March a photo of 'web terrorists'<sup>5</sup> was circulated on Twitter. This included Manaf al-Muhandis, Mahmood Yousif and Mohammed Maskati – all prominent Twitter users or bloggers who were subsequently arrested (Reporters without Borders, 2011). They were all detained for varying lengths of time, and none of them tweeted anything

controversial or very political for a considerable time following their release. Prominent blogger Ali Abdulemam, who is currently believed to be in hiding, was sentenced *in absentia* to 15 years in prison for 'spreading false information and trying to subvert the regime'. In addition to this, blogger Zakariya Rashid Hassan Al Asheri was tortured to death in prison on 9 April 2011 (BICI, 2011: 238). As a result of the above arrests, important representatives of the activist community disappeared, further diminishing the visibility of credible online activism, and also prompting much fear among other online activists, who were far more reluctant to tweet anything critical of the regime. The death of Zakariya also resulted in Reporters without Borders putting Bahrain on a list of 'enemies of the internet' (BBC, 2012). Other offline factors include family pressure not to use social media (particularly Twitter), and widespread fear that the government is able to hack accounts and access personal information. One informant stated:

I used to tweet but then when some of my friends got arrested my father sat me down and gave me a looong [sic] talk, guilting me into deleting all my tweets.

The fact that the Tunisians used phishing techniques to obtain the Facebook account details of political activists strengthened this anxiety (Ryan, 2011).

#### Intelligence Gathering

Other, perhaps more sinister elements faced by activists are the clandestine operations undertaken by companies such as Olton, a UK-based intelligence-gathering/PR firm that has a contract with the Bahrain Economic Development Board. One activist told me:

There's this British company called Olton. I don't know exactly what they do except that they employ Bahrainis loyal to the regime to do something with social media. The person recruiting them is ex-UK military.

Despite the government of Bahrain's Tender Board's description of Olton's work being 'to develop an electronic system to track international media', one of their employees is known to have worked for the Ministry of the Interior, the body responsible for Bahrain's security forces (Desmukh, 2011a). Furthermore, Olton was at the IDEX Arms Fair in Abu Dhabi where the company was reported to be marketing its 'web-trawling' software as something that could head off unrest in the Middle East. It would do this through monitoring social media in order to identify ringleaders (Desmukh, 2011a).

Fears that Twitter and Facebook were being monitored were further exacerbated after at least 47 students were dismissed from Bahrain Polytechnic for 'participating in unlicensed gatherings and marches'. This was 'based on evidence mostly obtained

from social media pages like Facebook' (Yasin, 2011) Some were dismissed for simply 'liking' an anti-government post on Facebook (Yasin, 2011). Many reported that they were dismissed after authorities showed them printouts of their Facebook pages.

Blurring this line between propaganda, PR, 'data-mining' and intelligence gathering was 'Liliane Khalil', a hoax journalist who used blogs, Twitter and email to build up a convincing online persona. Although she had claimed to be the US editor of a pro-government blog called the Bahrain Independent, an investigation revealed that she was a hoax (Jones, 2011). Although Liliane Khalil's exact identity remains unknown, there is evidence that links her to Task Consultancy, a Bahraini company that was paid by the Bahraini government to formulate a PR plan (Desmukh, 2011b). Liliane Khalil also interviewed a number of activists on the understanding that she wanted to hear 'their side of the story'. However, several of those interviewed reported that she passed on their personal information to a pro-regime Twitter user – who then broadcast it on Twitter stating that the interviewees were traitors.

#### 'Passive' Observation

In anticipation of the protests, the Bahraini government created a number of Twitter accounts, most notably one for the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) – the body responsible for Bahrain's security forces. While the MoI's account tended to publish news without interacting with other people, this did not stop people from interacting with the MoI. Between the months of February and April, it was common for pro-regime supporters to use Twitter to 'report' people they thought were traitors to the MoI. The following tweet is an example of this:

@hussainm89 Dear @moi\_bahrain can you please arrest this MOFO  
Hussain Mirza born 1989, he is a traitor

Although it is doubtful that the ministry takes such complaints seriously, the impact that the potential threat of surveillance has is very real, as someone once made clear.

Be careful Marc. Don't argue a lot. A lot of people from Moi on Twitter.  
And if you mention the king justice etc, you might be unable to enter the  
country. Just be careful plz.

#### Discussion

For activists, using social media as a tool for activism or representation is fraught with danger. The tactics adopted by hegemonic forces in Bahrain contributed to a climate of fear and distrust, one that disrupted social media space by assimilating it as part of the regime's surveillance apparatus. Trolling, for example, is not only a form of social control that exercises its power through intimidation, but also serves as a reminder that one's

behaviour is always being watched, and that any potential dissent will never be without fear of observation. Even the mere presence of an MoI Twitter account was enough to regulate some people's behaviour by reminding them that they were being monitored. The incarceration of key online activists also reminded Bahrainis of the potential costs of utilizing social media for dissent, and thus asserted that the transgression of a certain set of normative behaviours (in this case acquiescence) would not be tolerated.

The impact in Bahrain of trolling and naming and shaming illustrates the dangers of these forms of 'cyber-vigilantism', which will only become more detrimental as social cohesion in Bahrain is further eroded. Hareghum is a particular worry, for it has become a quasi-official institution, one whose continued existence and endorsement by some supporters of the regime represents tacit support of its utility as a method of social control. Just as plain-clothes thugs operate alongside the police in suppressing protests, accounts like Hareghum's worked alongside the regime's intelligence-gathering apparatus, appropriating citizens' 'personal sousveillance' and using it to persecute, vilify and threaten. Although Hareghum's identity still remains unknown, the opaque way in which the regime has so far conducted the crackdown, and the blurring of lines between law enforcement and state-endorsed vigilantism have heightened the suspicions of activists, many of whom believe that Hareghum actually operates with MoI approval. Whether or not this is the case is in many ways, irrelevant. This is because perception plays a fundamental role in surveillance – for what we perceive and what is actual form the underlying mechanism of the Panopticon, which seeks not only to watch, but to make people *believe* they are being watched.

Another alarming trend is the clandestine role played by predominantly western PR and security firms, many of which are 'exploiting the burgeoning but unregulated surveillance market' (Doward and Lewis, 2012). Bahrain also enlists the services of companies like Nokia Siemens, whose SMS monitoring technology was used by the state's security apparatus to intercept the communications of suspected dissidents (Silver and Elgin, 2011). Olton, the British company offering expertise in social media, also offers a 'reputation management' service. This aims to promote 'positive' online commentary while 'mitigating the negative' (Olton, 2012). The fact it is also an 'intelligence-gathering' company has serious implications for freedom of speech. As I have stated elsewhere:

The threat posed by unscrupulous PR companies to freedom of speech should not be underestimated. It is bad enough that they distort the public sphere in exchange for money, yet it is the rise of companies like Olton that is the most alarming, for when does intelligence gathering become evidence gathering? Furthermore, when does 'reputation management' involve facilitating the silencing of those narratives that oppose the desired rhetoric of the paying client? (2012)

The recent revelation that that British PR firm Bell Pottinger was offering to help

companies hijack citizen petitions in order to influence European Union law raises questions about a similar incident that occurred in Bahrain last year (Rawlinson, 2012). This involved the circulation of a petition on Twitter that claimed to be a proposal listing the demands of Bahrain's youth for an upcoming reconciliation initiative called the National Dialogue. Over a thousand people signed it, though many of the signatories were anonymous, sock-puppet accounts. The following day the National Unity Gathering (Bahrain's new pro-government political party) used the petition as a basis for determining what Bahraini youth wanted (unsurprisingly, they did not want political change – just security) (*Gulf Daily News*, 2011). The notion that anonymous online accounts might be rubber-stamping policies in order to give them a veneer of democratic legitimacy illustrates the ease with which social media can be used to manufacture consent. Although this might seem like the stuff of Orwellian fantasy, one must not underestimate the dangers of a growing surveillance industry, one that capitalizes on the desire of authoritarian regimes around the world to monitor, control and suppress dissent.

### Conclusion

Through trolling, naming and shaming, 'passive' observation, intelligence gathering and offline factors, the hegemonic order is able to utilize social media in a manner that serves its own interests. Specifically, it helps the government and its supporters to preserve the status quo through extending the means by which they conduct surveillance. Such methods are attempts to impose normative forms of behaviour in spaces that allow for the performance of identities that challenge the hegemonic order. These spaces, which include Shia religious structures, the Pearl Roundabout and social media, all represent what Foucault (1986) described as heterotopias, that is, places that challenge 'safe space' and allow for the flourishing of resistance identities that challenge the hegemonic order. This capacity of social media to function as a space of resistance did not go uncontested in Bahrain, and hegemonic forces also used it to enhance and 'mobilise identities to facilitate the extraction of resources from the society to confront the external (and in Bahrain's case, internal) threat' (Saideman, 2002: 170). So while social media allows activists to 'overcome the powerlessness of their solitary despair ... and fight the powers that be by identifying the networks that are', it also allows hegemonic forces to resist change (Castells, 2009: 431). Furthermore, Bahrain illustrates how it is not simply faceless authoritarian regimes that resist political change, but citizens too, especially those who benefit both economically and socially from maintaining the status quo. Indeed, just as those advocating political change can use social media to create networks of resistance, those representing the hegemonic order can mobilize their own networks of domination.

Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of all this was how information shared amid a climate of optimism, such as photos of peaceful protesters at the Pearl Roundabout, was

re-appropriated by the likes of Hareghum and re-framed within a context of treachery, terrorism and betrayal. Such abuses of social media not only remind Bahrainis of the potential costs of sharing information publicly but also demonstrate how trust is an increasingly scarce commodity. The nature of this breakdown of trust was nowhere more evident than on Facebook, and numerous interviewees shared stories of how they purged their 'friend lists' through both anger at their newly developed political outlook, and through fear that that person might gain access to potentially 'incriminating' photos or information. The erosion of trust is itself a crucial part of the effects of surveillance, for the inability to trust others promotes increased isolation of the individual, which can work against social cohesion and discourage the formation of strong networks that may potentially pose a threat to the incumbent order.

Although it must be emphasized that these negative effects are very real, they by no means undermine the importance of social media as a tool for sousveillance. It is an instrument of both *empowerment* and control, yet the extent to which it functions as either depends very much on the cultural, geopolitical, technological and temporal context in which it is being used. The role of social media is ambivalent, and although it has been an incredibly positive force in Bahrain, documenting its successes would necessitate a separate article.

As it stands, pro-democracy activists still face a great many obstacles when it comes to finding spaces from which to represent themselves. The brutal daily crackdowns in the villages, the destruction of the Pearl Roundabout, the demolition of mosques all represent attempts to control space and render it ahistorical, conformist and safe. For the regime, these are all spaces of crisis, transformation and change, or heterotopias. Social media are no different, and can also be regulated and controlled. As the struggle for democracy continues in urban space, so does it in cyberspace. In many ways, the battle is *for* cyberspace, for it is a battle between the principles of empowerment and control, the continuation of which underlines the argument that social media are a tool of both emancipation and repression.

1. In this case hegemonic is as defined broadly as the dominant political and social order, which in the case of Bahrain is the Al-Khalifa family and their predominantly Sunni support base.
2. 'Flame wars' is a term used to describe incendiary arguments between users on online discussion forums.

3. See: <https://oauth.twitter.com/#!/glcarlstrom/status/139315984212303873> (accessed 11 November 2011).
4. See: <https://twitter.com/#!/JustAmira/status/133469983308124160> (accessed 7 November 2011).
5. See: <http://www.wata.cc/up/2011/3/images/w-cf9fa6ca9a.jpg> (accessed 31 March 2011).

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# IS IT POSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

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**The aim of this article is to explore a renewed and radical 'media culture' that has developed in the extraordinary conditions of the Syrian revolution.** The article quickly dismisses the focus on the technology and platforms while using small-scale ethnography to examine social networking sites like Facebook and to underscore the diversity of content being produced by Syrians. It notes how the Syrian media revolution is clearly well under way and how radical, alternative forms of media production are flourishing.

#### KEYWORDS

media, radical alternative media, revolt, semi-published, social media, social networking sites, Syria

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The Arab revolutions have reminded the world that radical change can be effected by the people, rather than by top-down regime change or 'transitology' models that have prevailed in much academic literature (see critique in the Latin American context by Sparks, 2010). For Syrians irreversible transformations happened in the maelstrom of the revolt; they did not wait for the regime to fall or for discussion to commence about media reform blueprints.

The revolution has resulted in some important changes to the Syria media landscape. Research undertaken for this paper suggests that there has been a continuing growth in the use of social networking sites by Syrians (see Preston, 2011), with over 400 Facebook groups focused on Syria as of November 2011. Also, user-generated content produced by Syrians and disseminated on social networking sites such as Facebook and content-sharing platforms such as YouTube have been major sources for international media outlets reporting on Syria (Harkin et al., 2012).

This high visibility and use of social media has served to foreground it in much analysis on the causes of the so-called Arab spring, including the Syrian revolt. But if the notion of a top-down transition to democracy seems out of step with the lessons of the 2011 Arab revolutions, it would also be foolhardy to suggest that isolating social media as a unit of analysis is possible or desirable in understanding the Syrian revolutions.

A few scholars are rightly employing a healthy scepticism and problematizing the idea of 'putting the internet central in our analysis' (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Lawson, 2011). Important too are critiques of the implicit or explicit neo-orientalist tendencies in the 'Facebook revolution' narrative (Burris, 2011). As David Gauntlett (1996) has pointed out, media researchers seeking to link cause and effect in society never managed to prove it.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, convincing evidence has not been forthcoming in the immediate studies into the role of social media in causing or amplifying the Arab uprisings (as exemplified by Dubai School of Government, 2011a, 2011b; Howard et al., 2011; Lotan et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, this article argues that if we situate the (social) media in their historical and political milieu, social networking sites can be one of a number of online and off-line sources for researchers seeking to understand the Syrian uprising. This brief study is an exploration into examining content from social networking sites without making technologically determinist assumptions or, even more problematically, taking an Orientalist stance that Arabs could not possibly rise up against tyranny without the help of tools made in the USA.

In the form of a small-scale ethnography, as well as drawing on secondary material and informal interviews with media practitioners and Syrians outside their country, this article explores the changes in Syria's media ecology and the role of social media as a publishing platform and communication tool. In doing so the author acknowledges the limitations of drawing on material from social networking sites – necessitated in part by the difficulty of foreigners travelling to Syria but also by the dangers for Syrians inside the country to talk to

foreign researchers. Some of the ethical dilemmas for researchers in conducting research on social networking sites are considered in the methodology section.

Alongside ethnographic research, this article draws on John Downing's (2001) work on radical alternative media and concludes that the revolt has nurtured some small-scale but important revolutionary media production which privileges people rather than elite power and rejects the dominant power structures of the state. As will be shown with examples in this article, the creative currents in the Syrian uprising and their survival strategies are evocative of Guy Debord's Situationists, who influenced the *enragés*' student occupation groups that emerged in 1968 (Viénet, 1968),<sup>2</sup> in their utter rejection of the established order. In some small ways a state of anarchy does exist in Syria and the efforts of some Syrians to grow the 'intellectual culture' of their society is happening in the eye of the storm.

### Research Methodology

Utilizing computer-mediated-communication (CMC) as defined by Hine (2010), mainly through the social networking site Facebook, but also through blogs, Twitter, content-sharing sites such as YouTube and websites, I observed how Syrians are producing rebellious 'cultural artifacts' offline and online (Durham and Kellner, 2006), and disseminating them via social media platforms. The research for this article was conducted through a small-scale 'virtual ethnography' and in doing so recognizes and concurs partly with Hine's assessment that such research might be 'necessarily partial and inauthentic because it only focuses on the online aspect' (Hine quoted in Kozinets, 2011: 5). I observed content posted on public Facebook pages during September to November 2011; content surveyed was random and not a representative sample. This tentative exploration served rather to gain insight into the kind of content being posted on social networks in relation to the uprising. This limited study could be developed further drawing on the research methodology set out by Kozinets, who convincingly argues that online ethnography which follows a 'specified, distinct, common set of methodological procedures and protocols that have been agreed upon by a community of scholars' should be regarded as a particular practice which he terms 'netnography' (2011: 60–1).

More research on Syria needs to be done to pursue some of the questions raised in this article; this would necessarily encompass field ethnography that would engage face-to-face with Syrians using the internet to disseminate information (as in Aouragh's extensive and detailed online and offline research for *Palestine Online*, 2011a). So, it is important not to over-interpret the observations made in this study but rather to use them to point to possible further avenues of research.

Despite the limitations set out above, Facebook is being used on a number of levels and it is useful to outline some developments here. Social media sites have been a platform for contestation between Syrians with opposing and differing political positions

on the revolt. Discussions, far removed from a Habermasian ideal on many levels, are reflected through status updates, extensive comment strands posted on walls and notes shared by friends in the network.<sup>3</sup> I had originally wanted to communicate with journalists and writers inside Syria, via my own established online social networks, to discuss their 'semi-published' (see below, Bruckman quoted in Kozinets, 2011: 145) discussions on the pages of Facebook and to seek their 'informed consent' (Rutter and Smith, 2010) to use this material. Ethically I felt it was not the right time to be contacting Syrians inside the country to conduct academic research, not least because I was unsure of how safe communications would be (see York, 2011), during the period of my online research, so I necessarily had to shift my research focus.

The dilemma of privacy is nicely illustrated in relation to an exchange between the prominent political commentator Asad Abu Khalil and Syrian dissident Yasin Haj Saleh. In articles published in a left-leaning Lebanese newspaper, Yassin admonished Asad for quoting his private status update from Facebook in his article.<sup>4</sup> Facebook has become a site of intense political debate, as opposed to a social chat site (MacManus, 2011; Salem, 2011) and so there are rich pickings but real ethical and security concerns too (as well as challenges for virtual archive research). In the age of the internet, this grey zone which Bruckman (quoted in Kozinets, 2011: 145) termed 'semi-published' has made binary distinctions between published and unpublished 'obsolete'. As well as the research ethics there are also the considerations of corporate policies on privacy; Facebook's stated privacy policy is that those wishing to take content from their friend's pages must approach them, explain what they want to do and then get express permission to use friends' content on Facebook before they disseminate it to the wider public (this was before Facebook introduced more open functions in September 2011, which offered users the option to have public subscriptions).

The second level at which Syrians have actively been using Facebook, and the focus of this article, is the very publicly listed groups and publications that appear to have mushroomed as a result of the intensifying repression of public demonstrations and civil disobedience in Syria during 2011. The social networking sites on Syria looked at here provide merely one small way to gain information on changes to Syria's information ecology, given that the Syrian community in and outside of Syria is using it as a communication and media tool.

I highlight here some of the most popular Facebook pages, measured by the number of people who have *liked* them (members) and how active the comments section of the wall has been when I accessed these sites during September and November 2011. All these pages are set up as 'public' and anyone can 'like' them. With certain caveats (no citation of individuals), researchers can treat this content as 'published'.<sup>5</sup> As with the established media, it can be assumed that social media platforms and content might also suffer from an elite bias, reach only a tiny amount of the population, and

present only one or a small number of the possible narratives for how Syrians are living through the uprising. Additionally, in the case of the internet and Syria, there is little easily available data on who is using the social networking sites and from where – so many of the groups discussed here might be populated with conversation strands and the views of expatriates, exiles or refugees – this smallness of scale and geographical diversity does not detract from the significance of the content and I argue that it is reflective of revolutionary changes for the Syrian media landscape.

### The Syrian Revolt and Media, in Context

To properly situate Syria's media, in the context of the 2011 uprising, it is useful to think about the media landscape in historical context. Some of the writings of the revolution evoke Syria's political and cultural history and yearn for the perceived expressiveness and political activity that preceded the Ba'ath regime. Syrians remember a lost sense of citizenship, as detailed in Amal Hanano's (2011) series on Syria's former leaders and in Mohammed Atassi's (2011) opinion piece in the *New York Times*. Numerous articles have detailed the activism of Syrians inside and outside their country (Abu-Assali, 2011; Allaf, 2011; Marrouch, 2011; Zeitouneh, 2011b).

Despite some notable periods of increased freedom for the press since the Syrians achieved independence in 1946 (Provence, 2005: 24–5), the Syrian media has mainly been characterized by its state control and the advent of a 'hybrid' private media (Harkin, 2009) established under Bashar al-Asad. As with business and political elite networks (documented by Haddad, 2012; Heydermann, 2004; Perthes, 2004), media owners and elites are also tied into the political structures and obtain economic and political benefits, including licences to operate and distribute their publications, favourable advertising deals and more freedoms, because of their connections to prominent members of the government, army or security (Kawakibi, 2010). Nominally 'private' publications have become mouthpieces for the regime during the revolt and newspapers like *al-Watan* have been burnt by demonstrators in YouTube video clips,<sup>6</sup> others, like the web news site [www.syria-news.com](http://www.syria-news.com), have been at pains to try to represent the views of the demonstrators as well as the regime – a dangerous task for journalists working inside Syria and, some might argue, a futile one.

Studies of Syrian cultural production have sought to understand the human relations involved in the 'negotiations' between the state and cultural producers (Dick, 2006, 2007; Harkin, 2009). Research has indicated that state-led changes can have some positive *unintended* consequences, as well as the more negative aspects of self-censorship and compromises necessary to maintain operations (Harkin, 2009). The regime's decision to allow internet news sites to operate, mostly focusing on the economy, allowed new kinds of journalistic practices for internet news sites – such as writing original copy rather than taking it from news agencies, having on-the-ground

reporters doing local stories from all the provinces, and encouraging less bureaucratic editorial and management processes (Harkin, 2009). But these changes did not herald any real political or media freedoms. Commentary on Syrian Ramadan dramas has raised important issues around the negotiation of freedoms and the chances for boundaries to be pushed in ways that might be irreversible (Dick, 2006). Generally, the argument boils down to the extent to which people might subvert or seek to challenge or change the system from within (Kawakibi [2010] sets out the structural confines for private media).

In other analyses of Syrian cultural production, relative freedoms have been seen merely as instances in which the regime is allowing *tanfiseh* (letting air out, or letting off steam), as problematized by Wedeen (1999) and Cooke (2007). Both Wedeen and Cooke recommend caution about 'licensed criticism' and 'commissioned criticism' as only serving to create a 'democratic façade'. These arguments do not account for unintended outcomes and neither do they give enough room to the role of human agency; in any case, such arguments have been superseded by the Arab revolutions of 2011, including Syria's, in which the role of human agency and a person's potential to 'act otherwise' (Pleasants, 1997) is firmly back in the picture.<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian state's strategy of placing very severe restrictions on foreign media and persisting in a brutally repressive crackdown certainly has had some unintended consequences. In Syria, while the old propaganda machines of the state were increasingly creative in spreading misinformation (an early example being the state-supported Duniya TV claim that Al-Jazeera Arabic had built a Syrian film set in Qatar so it could fabricate videos of protests),<sup>8</sup> new forms of media took shape. In the context of the uprising we now need to look at more radical models for media and communications in times of change. We can see similar intellectual struggles at play in Egypt in its revolutionary phase, where counter-hegemonic media outlets have been launched, for example the web television service 25TV and Tahrir newspaper.

### Syria Online

Syrians have had access to the internet since 1997 but this was only extended to the general public in 2002 (Eid, 2004). By 2004 there were approximately 500 internet cafes in Syria and all these small-scale internet access points were monitored by the Syrian authorities (Eid, 2004). There are two licensed ISPs (internet service providers) in Syria, both controlled by the government, or by those with close family ties to those with power, such as Rami Makhlouf (Ismail, 2009), who owns Syriatel and has the monopoly on telecommunications in Syria. In terms of access to PCs at home, estimates in 2004 put the number of PCs in Syria at 300,000, mainly owned by the organs of state (Eid, 2004).

The Arab world has seen a significant growth in the signing up to and use of social networking sites. In 2010 the most common use of the internet was to access email, closely followed by logging on to Facebook (SpotOn PR/Effective Measure, 2010). A report by the Dubai School of Government (2011a) tracked Facebook penetration in the Arab world<sup>9</sup> using Facebook's official data. It showed there had been 78 percent growth from 11.97 million in January 2010 to 21.36 million in December 2010 (2011a: 4) and by June 2011 there were nearly 30 million Facebook users in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the 2004 US technology sanctions<sup>11</sup> on Syria (which pre-date the 2011 sanctions and have since been part rescinded to allow certain technology inflows), figures from Facebook's advertising arm are not available for Syria. For its 2010 figures, the Dubai School of Government works to an estimate of 241,859 Facebook users in Syria, based on undefined internet sources. That would be a 1 percent penetration in 2010, compared to just over 23 percent in Lebanon in the same year. It could be argued that Facebook penetration in Syria is now significantly higher than this figure. First, Syria follows the regional trend, which has witnessed huge growth in the number of people using social networking sites and a youth demographic which has an affinity for social networking sites like Facebook. Second, the Syrian regime lifted a formal ban on Facebook on 8 February 2011 (this was *not* to allow more freedoms but to make social media easier to monitor – the common practice in Syria of using proxies to access banned sites hindered government monitoring). Nevertheless, perhaps knowing that the ban was formally lifted encouraged new users of Facebook and other social media in Syria. Indeed the Dubai School of Government May 2011 report shows a significant spike in YouTube (as Facebook data is not available) use from Syria soon after the ban was lifted (2011b: 2). Also, as a result of the Syrian government's decision to shut down broadband in Syria, users resort to dial-up facilities and there is also a growing use of 3G mobile technology, where it is accessible (Kassab and Lane, 2011). Where it is not accessible some activists have used satellite phones (such as Thuraya). In summary, it seems clear there have been marked increases in the use of social media sites in Syria after February 2011,<sup>12</sup> but that access is uneven inside Syria, suggesting an urban bias.

A search, in Arabic text, on 10 November for 'Syria' groups on Facebook revealed over 400 'pages' or groups dedicated to the political, cultural, academic and leisure spheres. Further observation of the Facebook sites that are engaging on the topic of the Syrian revolt revealed that the social network is a growing source for Syrians inside and outside their countries. Views represented range from the pro-regime sites *liked* by over 1000 users such as We Are All Shabiha<sup>13</sup> to sites set up by anti-regime groups including We Are All the Child Martyr Hamza Ali al-Khatib<sup>14</sup> which had over 362,000 *likes* at the end of 2011 and by August 2012 had over 570,000 *likes*. I will elaborate on some of these virtual groups in the remainder of this article.

### Syria's Media and Information Ecology

In seeking to understand how people attempt to circumvent hegemonic discourses to get radical and alternative information out, this article draws on the work on radical alternative media undertaken by John Downing (2001). In seeking to define exactly what radical media is, Downing offers a typology that sets the radical alternative media apart from mainstream, dominant media forms. Radical alternative media all share one thing in common: 'they break someone's rules' (2001: ix). This might be operationalized by expressing opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly against the power structure and its behaviour, as well as building support solidarity and networking laterally against policies, or even against the very survival of the power structure. Importantly, Downing notes that radical alternative media is often small-scale, underfunded and unnoticed, ridiculed or feared (or both) and might be short-lived or last for decades. Key to an understanding of such forms of media is the necessity not to look at and judge in a given moment but to consider it in the 'slow burn' of time (Downing, 2001: 6).

While it is too early to make pronouncements on Syria's growing radical media sphere, it does pose the question as to whether the Syrian use of social media during the uprising might fit Downing's conception of a radical alternative media. In itself Facebook, as a commercially supported platform, is not radical and alternative at all. But context, as well as consequences are important to Downing, and perhaps help in avoiding the trap of falling into a binary separation of mainstream or radical. As can be seen in this article, in the review of the Syrian media, context can take a seemingly benign action and transform it into a radical departure from the (enforced) norms in society. With questions about form and meanings for radical alternative media in mind, this article will now make some observations about the ways in which Syrians are using social media platforms to communicate, network, debate ideas and publish information.

A vibrant albeit small-scale production of weekly newspapers, published via blogs, Facebook groups, as well as in print form, has been a significant development during the Syrian revolt that started in March 2011. Publications such as *Hurriyat*,<sup>15</sup> which was established in August 2011 and edited by a Syrian living in Europe, are effectively tapping into the ideas and actions of the demonstrators and activists. Of course the newspapers reflect differing political positions, with some leaning more towards what has been grouped as the 'internal' Syrian opposition and others that have a clear agenda which supports opposition groupings such as the Syrian National Council. The content is mainly in Arabic and the newspapers seem to have genuinely local content from their activist contacts around Syria. *Hurriyat's* Europe-based editor-in-chief, Kareem Lailah (he uses a pseudonym), indicates the mobilizing nature of the publication in an interview with France24, in which footage was shown of newspapers

being delivered anonymously to Syrian residents – trying to reach out to the ‘silent majority’.<sup>16</sup> Other newspapers have joined *Hurriyat*, including *al-Haq* (The Truth) in postings on YouTube and Facebook, as well as a website that has been established for *al-Badeel* (The Alternative).<sup>17</sup> On 26 September 2011 *Souriatna* (Our Syria), a weekly newspaper, was launched and available in multiple formats for download via a Wordpress blog and on its Facebook page.<sup>18</sup> The site announced that it was in the service of the revolution and that it was produced by the Free Syrian Youth. Its front cover hosted a colour picture of *shahid* (martyr) Ghaith Matar and a poem dedicated to his memory. Ghaith was a very visible signifier of the values of the peaceful protest movement – he was known for handing soldiers flowers and urging his fellow demonstrators to ensure the protests stayed peaceful. Each week *Souriatna* dedicates a column to an historical figure from Syrian history. These have included Khalil Mardam Bey (1895–1959), Sa’ad Allah al-Jabri (1891–1948), Hashim al-Atassi (1875–1960) and Adeeb al-Shishikli (1909–64). *Souriatna* also publishes updated figures for civilian deaths city by city, commentary on the wider Arab spring, revolutionary and anti-Asad graffiti in Syrian cities, commentary by established human rights activists such as Razan Zeitouneh (e.g. Zeitouneh, 2011a) and views about the external opposition meetings taking place regarding the formation of the Syrian National Council.

These new e-magazines and social media groups are meeting a latent need for Syrians to be able to publish their narrative on the revolt, as well as the practical sharing and dissemination of information. The limited – in terms of access to the internet and security considerations – social media context in which I am reviewing published and semi-published information suggests that we are seeing only a small part of an ever-changing and dynamic process. New groups and initiatives are constantly emerging, such as the new Syrian Writers Association,<sup>19</sup> announced in January 2012, followed by the announcement of a new independent journalists association.

There has also been the formulation of alternative news sources from Syria, which have become more organized over the course of the revolt and have become a main source for the international media covering Syria, mainly from afar. Chief among the various groups is the Sham News Network, which has its own YouTube channel as well as Facebook group.<sup>20</sup> With nearly 200,000 Facebook followers by November 2011, it remains a major source for the Arab satellite channels (its logo can be seen regularly on air) and many other international media outlets. It was joined by a now equally ubiquitous news source in the form of a news agency called Ugarit,<sup>21</sup> providing footage from within Syria.

Another leading Facebook group, now a highly organized activist and political network that also launched a humanitarian fund in December 2011, is the Syrian Local Coordinators Committee (LCC)<sup>22</sup> – with around 14,300 likes in November 2011. This site posts daily YouTube videos of demonstrations from around Syria, information on

martyrs and figures for those killed, injured, kidnapped, tortured or arrested across Syria. There are also committee and media groups on Facebook for all the major towns which have been the most active in the revolt, including Hama, Idlib, Homs<sup>23</sup> and Dera’a.<sup>24</sup> This committee system is reminiscent of the writings of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (2006 [1963]).

However, there have been concerns about the veracity of the information posted at different times. One of the activists involved in posting content from sources around Syria has been based in Beirut, in hiding. Omar Edelbi was interviewed for *al-Akhbar* newspaper in Lebanon and explained how he had fled from Homs but continued to keep in touch with a network of activists to get content straight from the demonstrations. Edelbi said he refused to post any footage of protesters calling for international military intervention as this was not in the interest of the revolution (Marrouh, 2011). So it should be noted that, not surprisingly, activist communication is not necessarily benign or without an agenda. Edelbi is now a member of the Syrian National Council, which represents particular positions of some parts of the Syrian political opposition. Some Syrians interviewed during the writing of this article also say that the Sham News Network is influenced by Islamist and Salafi currents. While it is difficult to see how a loose network of activists can be labelled as ‘Islamists’ it is clear that some caution is required in dealing with user-generated content. Because of the situation in Syria there are ethical considerations in contacting committees/activists for academic research purposes to discuss these issues in more detail (the risk of exposure for the Syrians, the time constraints and need for activists to prioritize getting information into the mainstream media rather than an academic journal), but if the conditions were right it would be a rich research project.

Political alignments in communication and media are to be expected, but the new sense of plurality and an attendant idealism is to be welcomed in any case. On 9 November, the Facebook site Liberal Intellectuals for a Free Syria posted an article by Samera Tayara (2011) entitled ‘Optimistic’. In it she describes how she is now ‘free’. The revolt is not only against an authoritarian system, but also a rejection of the notion of the Arab state as a body worth mediating with at all. In small ways Syrians are ‘acting otherwise’ (Pleasants, 1997);<sup>25</sup> for example, by placing recordings of revolution singer Ibrahim Qashoush, the *martyr* whose throat was hacked open before his dead body was dumped in Hama, in dustbins blaring out his song<sup>26</sup> in Damascus’ souqs and thoroughfares. Syrian citizens communicate their messages to Syria’s ‘silent majority’.<sup>27</sup> On 5 October 2011 Syrian activists filmed a fountain coloured with red dye to represent the Syrians murdered by the security forces and army; the activists were in a car driving around the roundabout at close range to film, at great personal risk. The footage was posted on the Facebook page of the Coordinators for the Syrian Revolution in the District of Midan (Damascus).<sup>28</sup> Other acts of defiance have included

hoisting Syria's historic independence flag (see programme on Al-Jazeera,<sup>29</sup> in Arabic, for the significance of the flag) on major buildings such as universities, or releasing balloons<sup>30</sup> in a Damascus suburb, Kafar Souseh, and the commercial capital of Aleppo and Idlib.<sup>31</sup> Activists have filmed the dangerous delivery of revolutionary newspapers in Syria.<sup>32</sup> All these expressions are representative of 'cultural artifacts' (Durham and Kellner, 2006) that present at once a reconnection with a pre-Ba'ath revolutionary past (Provence, 2005) and a return to civil disobedience and dissent, as evidenced by the calls for strikes that have taken place in some towns and cities.<sup>33</sup>

Leading Syrian intellectuals, such as Burhan Ghalioun and Suheir Atassi, can be followed on Facebook's new *subscriber* pages and Syria's other ageing but respected dissidents, such as Michel Kilo and Hussein Odat, have 'semi-published' social networks on Facebook, sharing publications, information and views within their own social networks and on some of the sites mentioned in this paper. The Syrian Library<sup>34</sup> is another example of this renewed flurry of intellectual discourse. With over 2000 members, it is a pro-revolution site that gives links to pertinent information, such as a 2010 book for download on Bashar's Syria, by long-time dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh, as well as day-to-day commentary by Syrians such as Rosa Yassin Hassan, Faras Atassi, Hisham al-Hamawy and Ala Malas (some writers are using an alias), as well as Lebanese writer Elias Khouri and the editor of *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper, published from London, Abdel Bari Atwan.

Alongside established names, who get coverage in the international media, are less well-known views from human rights activists, liberal intellectuals, students and other segments of the uprising inside Syria. The Facebook group for Liberal Intellectuals for a Free Syria,<sup>35</sup> carries detailed expositions of, for example, visions of a more equitable society, as written by Anwar al-Bunni, president of the Syrian Centre for Legal Studies and Research. It is worth noting that al-Bunni, a lawyer who represented the Damascus Declaration signatories in court, was writing from inside Syria, as are many others who publish via social networks.

In a similar vein, the Syrian Intellectuals and the Voice of Syrian Thinkers<sup>36</sup> Facebook group had over 7700 members during the period of research and re-publishes articles calling for support of revolutionary causes, such as the resumption of a trial of Syrian intellectuals who were arrested on 13 July 2011 for demonstrating without a permit from the Ministry of the Interior. This group included well-known intellectuals and elites such as film-maker Nidal Hussan (since kidnapped and then released in December 2011) and actress May Skaf (arrested and released at time of writing).

This article has set out to illuminate the smaller-scale cultural production by activists and demonstrators who have recorded and disseminated history, as well as taken part in it. These patterns of 'media culture' (Durham and Kellner, 2006) are forming in reaction to the existing media structures, which is now not only a means of propaganda

but also nurtures rumour as a 'means of control' (Sharabajee, 2011). The deepening repression of the Syrian regime (Human Rights Watch, 2011; United Nations General Assembly, 2011) has highlighted how a diverse resistance, from farmers to doctors and young students (see Al-Zu'bi, 2011) are creating what Downing (2001) describes as 'radical alternative' media; people seeking ways to disseminate information under the extraordinary conditions that prevail in Syria.

Although Syria may lack the more established activist structures that had been well established in Egypt prior to its revolution (Beinin, 2001; Pratt, 2007), my research suggests a resolutely growing engagement and organization in Syria of new activist committees, intellectual and political groupings and protest movements, as well as pro-regime<sup>37</sup> social media activity. Syrians are taking advantage of the uncertain environment to create counter-hegemonic intellectual and activist currents online (Barney and Grimes, 1997) and offline.

## Conclusion

The notion of revolutionary communications during Syria's 2011 revolt opens a connection with its history of revolt against colonial rule. More research is needed on how demonstrators and civilians in isolated Syrian towns and cities are communicating and sharing information. This will of course be difficult to do in the foreseeable future. It would be interesting to compare what happened in 2011 with past revolutionary forms of disseminating information. We can see examples from history re-emerging in today's Syria.

In looking at forms of 'media culture' it seems we need to expand our conceptions of media, from its narrow sense of broadcast and print media, to include radical and diverse forms of cultural production and information dissemination. Certainly the kind of grassroots cultural production that has been explored in this study requires us to think about how we understand radical and revolutionary media forms. This might help us to get a clearer picture of the potential for where Syrian 'media' might be heading.

The danger is that, when populations revolt and topple authoritarian regimes, resort to neoliberal and liberal media models will crush any hope of a truly free and unfettered media culture, thus stunting the growth of the people's revolution.

The Arab world has had a wholly negative experience of a media that has been situated within or controlled by the state structures. The revolt has required activists to seek alternatives to this under the most extreme conditions. Under the brutality of the regime fight-back there has been an ironic renaissance of cultural, artistic and political trends that might eventually agitate against the imposition of a 'media system', either from within or from without.

**1.** The author acknowledges Henry Allen for pointing out Gauntlett's work on media and effects.

**2.** I am grateful to Nuno Coelho for discussions about the Situationist International.

**3.** Both pro-regime and revolutionary social networking sites users have stoked some vitriolic and, in some cases, dangerously sectarian discussion strands on Facebook groups. See for example a posting which lists the names of doctors accused of killing protesters admitted into hospital in Homs, together with the comments strand. See: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150588031215727&set=t.905090606&type=3> (in Arabic; accessed August 2012).

**3.** Both pro-regime and revolutionary social networking sites users have stoked some vitriolic and, in some cases, dangerously sectarian discussion strands on Facebook groups. See for example a posting which lists the names of doctors accused of killing protesters admitted into hospital in Homs, together with the comments strand. See: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150588031215727&set=t.905090606&type=3> (in Arabic; accessed August 2012).

**4.** See: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/18516> (in Arabic; accessed December 2012).

**5.** The research methodology is somewhat contested, with differing interpretations on what constitutes public (and therefore freely citable) and private when posting content online. In sum, researchers should err on the side of caution to avoid ethical and legal pitfalls. Kozinets (2011) summarizes the main arguments well.

**6.** This video was posted on Facebook by Syrian activists and can be accessed on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS-Hgkapxcl> (accessed August 2012).

**7.** The author is grateful to Dr Rupert Read for introducing her to this literature.

**8.** See the report posted on YouTube on 17 September 2011 (in Arabic) at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGZgZpl3gNI> (accessed September 2011) and other clips at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc0Ql6Qfn9k&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc0Ql6Qfn9k&feature=player_embedded) (accessed September 2011).

**9.** Definitions can vary slightly, refer to specific reports. It should be noted that the data includes GCC countries such as the UAE and Qatar, which include majority expatriate communities. The Dubai School of Government's (2011a) report 'analyzes data on Twitter and Facebook users in all 22 Arab countries, in addition to Iran and Israel'. Its May 2011 report (2011b) includes data from Turkey as well.

**10.** For a summary and update of the statistics see: <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&Pri/MenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat> (accessed August 2012).

**11.** For more information see: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/syria.aspx> (accessed August 2012).

**12.** A look at Google data from 2010 to December 2011 further illustrates the rise in use of Google and access to YouTube from February to June 2011, with a drop from June 2011 onwards (presumably due to deeper electricity and telecommunications cuts): <http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/traffic/?r=SY&l=YOUTUBE&csd=1295947800000&ced=1298367000000> (accessed December 2011).

**13.** This page was accessed via a Facebook account at [www.facebook.com/kollana.shabbaha](http://www.facebook.com/kollana.shabbaha) (accessed August 2012) but it was removed before the publication of this article.

**14.** This page can still be accessed via: <https://www.facebook.com/hamza.alshaheed> (accessed August 2012).

**15.** The Facebook group is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/syrian.hurriyat?sk=info> (accessed August 2012).

**16.** The article and video clip can be viewed at: <http://tinyurl.com/74f24ph> (accessed August 2012).

**17.** Not active by the time of publication; not to be confused with the Egyptian publication of the same name.

**18.** There have been changes in accessing the content and <http://souriatna.wordpress.com> has access to earlier publications while latest editions are available via [issuu.com/souriatna/docs](http://issuu.com/souriatna/docs) and at <https://facebook.com/souriatna> (accessed August 2012).

**19.** See: [www.syrianswa.org](http://www.syrianswa.org) (accessed August 2012).

**20.** See: <https://www.facebook.com/ShamNews> (accessed August 2012).

**21.** See <https://www.facebook.com/UgariitNEWS> (accessed August 2012).

**22.** Available at <https://www.facebook.com/LCCSY> (accessed August 2012).

**23.** Access via <https://www.facebook.com/7omsrevolution?sk=info> (accessed August 2012).

**24.** Group information at <https://www.facebook.com/DaraaCoordination> (accessed August 2012).

**25.** See this round-up, which discusses activists planning for strikes and the dangers from security monitoring their social networks, published on Aljazeera.net: <http://tinyurl.com/d35t25n> (accessed December 2011).

**26.** Hosted on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAWvylhQ1g&noredirect=1> (accessed August 2012).

**27.** There is a pro-revolutionary Facebook group called Syria's Silent Majority, <https://www.facebook.com/SyriaSilentMajority> (accessed August 2012).

**28.** The Facebook group is at: <https://www.facebook.com/Midan.Revolution> (accessed August 2012).

**29.** The programme has been posted on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chSl5pQdG3s> (accessed August 2012).

**30.** Footage available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hC6l1EajY> (accessed August 2012).

**31.** See the image (red balloons with the word irhal, which means 'Go!' or 'Step down!') from Idlib at: <http://tinyurl.com/7f9ttgy> (originally posted on 6 November on the Facebook site E.N.N.; accessed August 2012).

**32.** Posted on YouTube at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=izLhLPjNonk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=izLhLPjNonk) (accessed August 2012).

**33.** See footage at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHgMY851eE0> (accessed August 2012). These strikes have been called since at least October 2011, gaining common ground and media coverage by the end of the year as 'dignity strikes', which resulted in security forces attacking any shops that observed the strikes.

**34.** The Facebook group is at: <https://www.facebook.com/TheSyrianLibrary> (accessed August 2012).

**35.** The site now has a website at: <http://www.free-syrians.net> (accessed August 2012).

**36.** Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Free-Syrian.Intellectuals> (accessed August 2012).

**37.** A good example is the Facebook group for the satellite TV channel addounia, at: <https://www.facebook.com/addounia.channel> (accessed August 2012).



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# SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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**Editors' note:** Syrian blogger Hussein Ghrer wrote the first draft of this article on 14 February 2013, shortly after he was released from his first arrest for 37 days in December 2011. In it the writer sheds light on the role that social media have so far played in the Syrian revolution. Two days later, on 16 February 2012, Ghrer and 15 of his colleagues at the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) were arrested during a raid on their office by the Syrian security forces. Over a year has now passed without trial, indictment or court referral. Maurice Aaek, a friend and Syrian online journalist, added his comments as an afterword in February 2013, a year later.

HUSSEIN GHRER: Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

Hussein Ghrer

Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression

Social media played a substantial role in the Arab spring, with some going so far as to call the events across the Arab world the Facebook revolutions, in reference to the crucial part social media played in them. In an attempt to put things in perspective and give the factors involved their proper weight, I would like to pose a question: would there have been revolutions if there were no social media? The answer to this question is a step towards giving the factors that were part of starting the revolution their proper significance.

History has documented a number of revolutions where dictators were toppled without the aid of social media. The Arab revolutions have been no different. The natural progression of things led to the day when people raised their voice against dictatorial regimes and corruption, and gave great sacrifices in the name of freedom, dignity and social justice. When Bouazizi burnt himself he wasn't planning on getting his footage on YouTube nor to start the Tunisian revolution, and when Wael Ghonim started his page 'We are all Khaled Saeed', his specific goal was to shed light on the inhumane practices of the police apparatus in Egypt and to pinpoint responsibility for Khaled Saeed's death.

Since the oppressor and the oppressed are the main elements in these revolutions, the media played the key role of portraying the sense of injustice and mobilizing the people against the oppressor or tyrant to become the defenders of the oppressed. Previous revolutions used flyers and held secret meetings to ask people to protest and to disseminate the news of the protests. Are the social media a propaganda tool or are they used simply to convey the news?

## **Tunisian Revolution Model**

As the story goes, a policewoman slapped Mohammad Bouazizi, so he burnt himself, which was in turn filmed by someone on his phone and uploaded on YouTube. Consequently, some of the residents of Sidi Bouzid, the remote city where Bouazizi lived, protested over what had happened to that young man; likewise someone shot a video of the protest and uploaded it on the internet. Activists circulated these videos among themselves while the protests started to build momentum in the forgotten southern area of Tunisia. This is the story of a revolution.

As activists we followed the news out of our own interest in what is published on social media networks but none of us knew that this would be the beginning of the first Arab revolution in modern history.

The Tunisians were able to attract media attention through uploading and circulating videos of the protests, and commenting on them through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Since traditional media, and particularly audiovisual media, are more widespread than social media, every home was watching these events unfold, which resulted in the protests spreading to more cities and fuelling a revolution against Bin Ali's regime.

### **The Egyptian Revolution Model**

In mid 2010 activist Wael Ghonim started a page on Facebook called 'We are all Khaled Saeed' to shed light on the routine torture and violent practices of the Egyptian security apparatus, using Khaled Saeed's case to highlight this violence. After the fall of Bin Ali's regime in Tunisia, Egyptian activists felt that the time was ripe to call for mass protests against the Ministry of Interior and the practices of the Egyptian security apparatus. The location and time were chosen and the invitation to protest spread exponentially, with hundreds of thousands of Egyptians interacting within social media networks, especially Facebook. And since there is more freedom in Egypt compared with Tunisia and Syria, activists were also able to distribute flyers, and even use certain interested traditional media outlets that discussed and/or promoted the idea.

The protests started and videos flooded the internet. Soon, activists started to report the news live from the streets, mainly using Facebook and Twitter, with even the media using activists' live accounts, since they were considered reliable sources with backgrounds as former activists and bloggers using their actual names. This escalated throughout 18 months until Mubarak finally stepped down.

In reviewing the evolution of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and the use of social media we must differentiate between (a) using these media to promote an idea before turning that idea into action and (b) using them as a tool to convey these actions. In the Egyptian case, social media were used to spread the idea of protesting against the inhumane practices of the Egyptian security forces and encouraging activists to come down to the streets in addition to broadcasting news of the protests. As for the Tunisian revolution, social media were used mainly as a tool to convey details of the protests and in helping the people to interact as a response to suppression of protests by the Tunisian regime.

### **Social Media and the Syrian Revolution**

Many say that Syrian activists did not use social media in their revolution against the regime, but the opposite is true. I believe that whoever said this considered the Egyptian revolution a standard model for using social media, and their beliefs were substantiated by the protests in Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States that were successfully organized via social media. However, the Syrian revolution is considered to be unique in that it was innovative in its use of social media, and this in itself should be examined. I am not implying that the Syrians are unique or different, but simply stating that necessity is the mother of invention, and that due to the cruelty and oppression of the Syrian regime in addition to media blackouts, the Syrians invented new ways to use social media to their benefit and to serve their revolution.

### *The Syrian Reality before the Revolution*

The Syrian regime, from the days of Hafez Al Assad, was intolerant of any opposition with regard to political, security or even economic viewpoints, and did not allow media freedom or freedom of speech. Even when private media institutions were founded they belonged, directly or indirectly, to prominent figures in the country and were controlled by the security apparatus and, by default, by the security forces of the presidential palace.

When social media surfaced all efforts were made to block them. Bloggers who criticized the regime directly or indirectly, myself being one of them, had to write using aliases to avoid being arrested and tortured.

Intolerance was the main characteristic of the regime. Any window to freedom of speech, however small, was shut down lest it become a threat. Diligent efforts were made not to support the developments of the internet's infrastructure or disseminate it among the citizens, citing exorbitant costs as the reason for this, in addition to blocking sites that seemed threatening to the government, including YouTube, Facebook, blogs and many other social media sites. This enabled the regime to minimize activists' effects on the people, shutting them away from each other and from society at large.

### *In the Beginning*

In line with the Egyptian model, a Facebook page called for people to protest throughout Syria on 5 February 2011. The attempt failed for various reasons, but mainly because the page's owner was anonymous. Also, he did not live in Syria. However, a small group of activists pursued the concept by suggesting the most suitable methods to spark the protests and attract the widest audience base. To this end, a Facebook page was launched calling on people to protest against Bashar Al Assad's regime, and Tuesday 15 March was announced as the revolution's start date, while the following Friday was named 'Wrath Friday'.

Indeed about 150 men and women came out in front of the Umayyad mosque in downtown Damascus on the day, not as a direct response to the invitation to protest but in the hope of gathering as many as they could. As expected, the number of people was small, and the reaction of the security forces was harsh as they started beating and arresting protesters.

The protest on 15 March was the spark of the revolution, but the actual birth of the revolution took place in Daraa, on 18 March, when parents demanded the release of their children who had been arrested by intelligence forces after they had written several statements against Bashar Al Assad's regime on their school's walls, in response to the Syrian Revolution Page.

It is worth noting that the attempt to imitate the Egyptians by calling people to protest against the Syrian regime through Facebook failed because the situation was different.

Here we elaborate on this failure.

### *The Social Media 'Weapon' Against a Tank*

On 15 March I went to the Umayyad mosque half an hour prior to the protests starting. I prepared my mobile phone and my fake Twitter account, and told my friends who live outside Syria to follow the news that I would be posting from that account.

The police were everywhere; there were around 150 people confronted by more than 500 policemen. They were staring at our faces, trying to distinguish and memorize the faces of the protesters. A young man shouted: 'Syrians will not be humiliated.' This was the key statement that started the protest, which was able to get through two streets before the police forces, disguised as civilians, started beating the protesters and arresting them.

I raised my mobile to start filming the protest, as did a number of others, but the policemen started insulting us, clearly following strict orders that taking photos or videos was prohibited. The policemen were looking for anyone using mobile phones. I remember one of them shouting at a woman who was trying to shoot the protest from her office window above.

The Syrian regime benefited from previous revolutions and knew not to have any authentic footage published. Bashar Al Assad admitted this to a delegation from Jubbar: 'The thing that annoys me in the protests is those people who take photos and videos to send them to hostile TV stations!'

The Syrian regime was keen to isolate Syria from the media. When I was arrested on 24 October 2011, I noticed that those prisoners who had taken photos and videos and sent them to the TV stations were treated harshly and tortured more than others.

They accused me of conspiring with the BBC to train the activists to photograph or take videos of the protests, and of forging them, as well as using satellite mobile phones prior to the revolution breaking out. This was because I was a supervisor at 'Araa Academy', a project funded by BBC Media Action in Syria to train journalists on how to use social media tools effectively.

The Syrian regime targeted people who photographed the protests and killed them; we saw so many videos in which the cameraman was killed or injured while shooting. One of them was the martyr Ahmad, who was shooting the tanks shelling the houses in Rastan, Homs, and who we saw dying while covering with his final words the crimes of the Syrian regime against the Syrian population. He was shot by soldiers from within a tank.

### **Every Citizen Is a Journalist**

From the very beginning of the revolution, the Syrian regime enforced a full media blackout across Syria by restricting journalists and reporters, and arresting some of

them, such as the former Reuters reporter and the Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* reporter. They also broke into *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* offices in order to prevent their staff working. Having seen this, the Syrians realized early on that they were on their own facing the regime's cruelty. Therefore they decided to fight the media battle themselves. That is how we came to see a number of people taping the protests and others uploading these videos on YouTube, and then sending them to the 'coordination committees'<sup>1</sup> and news stations, often within 15 to 30 minutes.

Some of my acquaintances in the region considered me an internet guru and asked for my assistance at times, but within two months many had mastered taping, uploading and sending videos themselves. I was happy they became independent, and happier with the fact that the citizens' media culture had started to spread.

Through their persistence and perseverance, the Syrians managed to break the media blockade which was forced upon them by the regime to black out what was happening in Syria, especially after Saudi Arabia and Qatar ordered *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* to cover the revolution in Syria. Yet the activists faced suspicions regarding the photos they posted of protests, and the eyewitness testimonies of the events, because there was no way to validate those photos by a special independent media body, since the regime deliberately broadcast fabricated videos, uploaded them and sent them to news stations, then revealed their falsehood in order to accuse the activists of lies and fraud. But this did not deter activists who continued uploading a huge amount of videos, which helped convey a much clearer picture of the reality in Syria.

The constant doubt regarding photos of protests forced Syrians to develop their own tools to prove the credibility of what they broadcast by holding signs that specified the date and place, in addition to taking photos of obvious locations to conclusively show the sites of protest. They also used local newspapers for the first time in Baniyas in late April, when one of the activists started the video with a shot of a local newspaper to show the protest's date, so that the regime's media couldn't claim that the activists repeated broadcasts of the same protests on different days.

On the other hand, the communications blackout and the targeting of photographers made the activists constantly look for alternatives in order to continue working, so they used the communications networks of neighbouring countries in the border regions, such as Daraa and Idlib, in addition to using internet devices and satellite phones to overcome the blockade. Most importantly, the activists came to utilize small cameras hidden in shirt buttons, pens, ties and glasses for instance, and installed them in cars, shop doors and activists' clothes so as to be able to tape the policemen's violations close up; some of them walked among the security forces while taping their actions. In the absence of traditional media tools, the citizen with a mobile or camera has indeed become a journalist or official speaker.

## CLOSING PARAGRAPHS TO HUSSEIN'S ARTICLE

written by Maurice Aaek

### Where are the Bloggers and the Old Activists?

A follower of the Syrian blogosphere would have noticed a clear gap or lack of bloggers' interaction regarding the Syrian revolution, especially during its earliest months, although a lot of these bloggers are known for their outspokenness in several fields, such as women's rights, treatment of disabled people, etc. That is why a lot of those who knew them wondered about their absence and assumed that they had shut themselves down and were not playing any part in the Syrian revolution.

While some bloggers sided with the Syrian regime in confronting its people under many pretexts, the majority of bloggers supported the revolution fully from day one. Bloggers living in Syria could not openly announce their support of the people's demands through their blogs, through fear of arrest or maltreatment by the security forces, and the same went for some bloggers abroad, who feared for their families in Syria. The bloggers were not able to play a major role in the revolution as bloggers because even those who participated in the protests and were arrested could not post the news of these protests using their real names or write their own personal accounts.

I recalled how, when the Egyptian regime blocked Twitter and Facebook and cut off the internet from some areas in Cairo, I stepped up, along with a group of Syrian bloggers, to help them reach out to the rest of the Egyptian population and the world by creating a special blog that posted the news of what happened in Cairo around the clock. The blog received tens of thousands of hits daily. It pained us not to be able to play the same role in Syria, as conditions there were completely different from those in Egypt.

We, the bloggers and the old activists, so to speak, had to lie low as bloggers so as not to expose our identities, but we participated in the revolution and purposely incorporated ourselves within different work groups to serve it. This was not the case for all bloggers, as many of them, specifically those living abroad, were capable of writing publicly and openly, but they were few and that undermined their direct effect.

It is worth mentioning 'collective blogging' when talking about the role of bloggers in the Syrian revolution; individual blogging was replaced by groups of bloggers creating several blogs, in which they could post their opinions without risking their lives; the most important of these – <http://the-syrian.com/><sup>2</sup> – has been read widely and has links on many Facebook pages.

Work groups were also created that specialized in monitoring and analysing everything presented by the government's media. These groups managed to reveal the fabrications of the video showed to journalists by Walid Al Mu'alim at the end of November 2011, in addition to analysing all the photos of the explosions in Kafr Souseh and Al Maydan in Damascus, proving conclusively that they were created by the regime itself.

### A Military Turn to Social Media Activism

In the year following the writing of this article, an increase in the number of online pages created by Syrian activists continued across different social networks. This has played an important role in advocating for the revolutionary movement. However, the expansion has for the most part been more about an increase in numbers rather than in effect and quality. Nevertheless, some varied and diverse ways of using social media have sprung up in the past year.

Whereas some pages focus on posting pictures only, others try to provide online radio shows, in addition to pages that try to publish monthly or bimonthly pdf magazines that can be printed and distributed manually to reach new readers outside the internet circle. All of these attempts also rely on team work by activists and media professionals, something that has become the prevailing trend in the Syrian social media over the last few months.

With the increase in the numbers of Syrian emigrants, the role of providing aid and relief to Syrian activists increased, and social networks were used to organize and coordinate this role and highlight the places that need assistance.

On the other hand, and with the revolutionary movement in Syria turning into a military movement during the last few months, all of the armed groups fighting the Syrian regime created pages and accounts on social networks, and invested heavily in those internet tools to cover the news of their battles with the regime. In many stages of the struggle, the news of the armed clashes and battles posted online by those groups attracted the attention of Arab and international media more than the news of the peaceful civil movement that the coordination committees had been reporting on since the beginning of the revolutionary movement.

The pages of those armed groups used multimedia to cover and document most of their military movement and field news. In the past few months, the traditional media's interest in the online sites of the Syrian coordination committees was limited to broadcasting the names and numbers of victims, and those arrested or missing as documented by these pages. Many pages related to the coordination committees simply copied news from the sites of the armed group, mainly the Free Syrian Army.

As a result of this military turn, the role of social media sharply declined in terms of raising political awareness, or even general and open national discussion about many issues relating to politics, rights and national identity which had prevailed in the first year of the public movement. It is worth mentioning here, that those named by Hussein Ghrer (bloggers and old activists) had attempted through social media to fight for the 'peacefulness' of the public movement by highlighting the risks and disadvantages of 'militarizing this movement'. Later, they continued to emphasize that this 'militarization' is only an 'incidental phenomenon' that was forced on the public movement by the regime's violence. They also played a unique media role in rectifying what they called 'the revolution's mistakes and pitfalls'. They probably meant rectifying the mistakes of the armed military movement, by criticizing some of its practices at times and

reminding people of the foundation it was based on at other times, without withdrawing 'the legitimacy' of the movement.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some of the youth groups who support the regime also used social media networks as a media tool to advocate for the regime and defend its practices. These groups have also shifted their focus in the last few months to broadcasting and commenting on the news of the battles. They 'publish the victories of the regime's army or 'expose the allegations of the Free Army'. Although the social media that have rallied to the Syrian regime have not departed from reproducing the regime's official discourse in general. However, the particularities of writing for social media networks to some extent have broken through the rigidity of the regime's traditional media and its stereotypical tone of preaching.

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**1.**  
The 'coordination committees' emerged at the start of the Syrian uprising in May 2011. They consist of a network of young volunteers who began to organize, report on and photograph protests, and to post their reports and photos online and disseminate them to pan-Arab and international media.

**2.**  
An English version of the site is available at:  
<http://english.the-syrian.com>



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