Media in the Wake of the Arab Spring

Ben Silsbee

Commentators and pundits, creatures of the media by trade and disposition, have long lauded the role of the media in shaping major world events. Analyses lauding the crucial role played by 'social media' platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in the so-called Arab Spring mark the latest assertion of the argument that the media not only informs viewers about the news, but participates in its creation. The images of young Tunisians sending 140 character messages to each other on their mobile phones via Twitter about the latest protest action, and Egyptian youth taking twenty-four hour shifts at an internet cafe under the guidance of Wael Ghoneim, the "Facebook commander," have become part of the legend of the Arab Spring. Editorials and news columns ran tweets as quotes both to illustrate the unfolding events and as a signifier of their own technological savvy.

Yet this technology has also been used by governments to suppress protest movements. The protests of Bahraini Shi'a against the Sunni Al-Khalifa monarchy were brutally repressed by Bahraini police, backed by Saudi security services. Activists allege that the arrest and torture of dissidents was facilitated by software manufactured by Siemens and Nokia, which intercepted SMS, email, Facebook, and Twitter messages, scanning the text for indications of anti-regime sentiment and organizing. In other words, the very tools lauded for launching the "Facebook revolution" in Egypt and Tunisia helped to stop the revolution in Bahrain dead in its tracks. The attempt by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to completely shut down Egypt's internet access was stymied only because his regime lacked the tools necessary to separate economically vital information such as stock market and bank records from politically dangerous messages.

Who owns the news?
As for the conservative Gulf monarchies, they understood early on how the media, old and new, posed potential danger to their rule and acted accordingly. Al Jazeera and MBC, the highest grossing Arabic language satellite channels, are bankrolled by the monarchies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia respectively. The House of Saud has built up an impressive media empire, primarily through the financial holdings of Waleed ibn Talal, who runs the Saudi Royal Media Group (SRMG), which has joint control with MBC over the Lebanese broadcasting company LBC, and publishes several

Lebanese newspapers. The Doha-based Al Jazeera is recognized across the region for its wide range of coverage of events that state media often ignore or spin differently. But when it comes to the Qatari government, the station suspends its critical faculties. The replacement of longtime station manager Wadah Khanfar in September 2011 by Sheikh Ahmed bin Jassim Al Thani, of the Royal Family, provides definitive evidence that, for all of its anti-authoritarian posturing about freedom, the network is at heart a tool of Qatari public diplomacy and foreign policy.[1]

Of the five leading Arabic-language news services, Al Jazeera remains the most popular, though according to the 2011 Brookings Institution Arab Public Opinion poll its popularity has steadily eroded. Television remains the primary source of international news, though the internet and newspapers/magazines have made inroads. The official state media has, of course, always been tightly controlled by the ruling regime, save for Lebanon, where sectarian considerations have further compartmentalized media offerings. It remains to be seen whether the post-revolutionary governments in Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia will continue the practices of the *ancient regimes*, which were generally accompanied by restrictive press laws and access limitations for local and foreign journalists.

Town Square or Echo Chamber?
Internet news sites and social media networks were initially thought to be capable of bypassing traditional news sources. Alternative reporting figures and citizen journalists could attract readerships to their blogs and personal websites, thus breaking the large media organizations' monopoly over the news agenda. Western liberals and local democracy advocates hoped that with the power of the internet, a new generation of citizen-journalists circumventing press restrictions would lead to an increase in governmental transparency and democratic practices. News readers could be more easily exposed to viewpoints, forming a more accurate understanding of politics and events. However, this hope was at best premature.

With the introduction of internet-based media sources, the emphasis in journalism shifted from access (a news organization's awareness of ongoing events and ability to report in a timely fashion) to that of *authority*. The constant stream of information on a system like Facebook or Twitter is designed to showcase trends in what users are talking about. Trending topics receive more promotion from the services, and users tend to cluster around popular topics in what network theory calls the "attachment effect." In theory, this makes the task of a news editor much easier – if thousands of Twitter users are commenting on something, it will likely make a good news story. Yet Twitter, Facebook, and other networks suffer from a problem of not being able to verify the accuracy of the information. There is almost no way to know if a user is who he or she claims to be aside from tracking their posts over a period of time. Even this method is not foolproof: the author of 'A Gay Girl in Damascus', a long-running blog about the travails of a lesbian blogger named Amina Arraf, was later revealed to be Tom McMaster, a master's student at Edinburgh University who wrote the blog for over five years before reader fears over Amina's supposed arrest at the hands of government forces lead to his exposure.

Social networks resemble a town square in the sense that secrets and rumors can be passed quickly from person to person, galvanizing them to action on the basis of

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[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/sep/20/al-jazeera-wadah-khanfar-replaced

information that may be falsified. While a traditional news media source may issue a correction or a retraction, the teeming masses on a social network can offer no such apology. Media which is caught up in online trend-following can easily find itself at the mercy of clever hoaxers such as McMaster. A recent report by CNN indicates that, according to internal metrics, 8.4% of all Facebook users are fake.

Concurrent with the town square of social networks, the online news ecosystem can also be described as an 'echo chamber,' a place where one's own views are reinforced, rather than challenged by the diversity of viewpoints present. Current sociological and psychological research indicates that for most people who are given a number of news sources with different political leanings, the vast majority pick ones with a political alignment closest to their own, often to the point of mistrusting the basic reportage of other sources. In contrast, fewer news sources lead to an increase in contestation and debate of newsgathering practices and a more informed public.

In countries with vast sectarian and ethnic divides, the phenomenon of the 'echo chamber' contributes to the undermining of state cohesion. Many sectarian communities in Lebanon maintain their own newspapers; the ease of starting online publications and communal forums has enabled minority groups in other countries, such as Kurds in Syria or Copts in Egypt, to strengthen their ethno-communal and even separatist sentiments.

Perhaps the most overlooked factor in the ongoing discussion of Arab internet and social media use is the question of access. According to the 2011 Arab Public Opinion poll, only 20% of respondents across the countries surveyed indicated that the internet was their primary source of news. Of those with internet access, 40% have had internet access for five years or more, while 27% gained access within the last year. It is difficult to conduct more accurate surveys, but if general technological adoption trends hold true, the long-time access group is likely to be affluent and internationally connected – hardly representative of the struggling middle- and working-class crowds who formed the mainstays of the protests. The cost of a computer can be prohibitively expensive for the chronically unemployed and underemployed. As of 2011, Egypt's official unemployment rate stood at approximately 8%, and the unemployment rate among youth was 16%. Unemployment statistics do not include those who are no longer seeking employment, such as graduates who have moved back with their family or those who have found work in the informal sector. And while computer access for the struggling middle and lower classes remains scant, smart phone ('mobile terminal') internet penetration has reached only 26% of the population. Though Google and Twitter enabled SMS interfacing with the Twitter service, allowing users with 'dumb phones' to post and read tweets, this service lacks the agility of the fully featured application accessible on browsers and smart phones and is widely considered less useful.

The Media Revolution?
The idea that the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and ongoing violence in Syria were facilitated by the new media is a construct of the old media. Facebook profiles, events, and crowd-sourced pictures and video, while informative and titillating, do not necessarily translate into protest actions or even drive the formation of real-world organizations. For the moment, a lack of access and a narrow band of usership means that organizers making use of online tools of organization were speaking primarily with each other and an international audience. This conclusion is intended

in no way to denigrate or belittle the role of activists who made use of the internet, but rather to indicate that online activism and satellite TV coverage were relatively minor mobilization factors.

As smart phone penetration increases, social services and new media will become vastly more important for organizing purposes. But greater utilization of internet technology comes with a cost as well: the interception of confidential messages becomes much easier over networks. Reports from Syria indicate that security services have already begun to track SMS, Facebook, and Twitter messages from activists, which has allegedly lead to their abduction. At bottom, then, the new media and technology arena has become one more site of struggle between regimes and opposition forces.

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