Connecting Electronically to the Public Forum During the Arab Spring

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Abstract

Citizens in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries connected with each other and the rest of the world using information-sharing internet websites. During political demonstrations in what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, citizens overcame the obstacles of fear of government repression, as they recorded video images of and wrote blogs about events in their countries to share with the rest of the world. In doing so, they overcame various forms of government censorship and risked being beaten, jailed and even killed. Such speaking out is the first step toward democracy and a necessary precursor to justice.

The desire for self-determination and self-governance during the 20th century accompanied the replacement of imperial colonial rule with democracies. As new sovereign nations emerged, citizens learned that successful democracies needed information which ultimately becomes available in a climate of freedom of speech, assembly and the press. Even where repression persisted for decades after colonial rule ended – e.g., the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) — people's desire for the agency did not disappear: Citizens in this region demonstrated their willingness to speak on public issues during the 2010s in a period known as the Arab Spring. Using interactive media, they shared information locally and globally as they consulted about local problems in an emergent public sphere. The birth of this public sphere is perhaps the most significant factor of the Arab Spring, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.

This article focuses on how using social media helped citizens publicize their concerns and connect with each other, eventually leading to consultation and problem-solving which can provide necessary first steps in progressive change. The theoretical framework for this discussion rests on the notion that culture exists in the collective mind: It is not the activities, rites, rituals and languages that bind groups of people and give them a sense of identity, but rather the meanings and values held in common that lead them to behave in particular ways. Symbolic interactionism theory maintains that meanings are negotiated and shared among individuals via

communication (Blumer, 1969). This concept can be readily understood by considering language and vocabulary; wherein groups share an understanding of abstract ideas like freedom, happiness, and loyalty. Such a theoretical framework casts the events of the Arab Spring as a large-scale discursive examination of cultural values and political structures. The public sphere – a conceptual space, whether face-to-face or mediated, where ideas are shared and debated – exists as a necessary condition to form public opinion in the 21st century. Public opinion matters in democratic countries where an electorate votes for its representation and in authoritarian countries whose leaders seek to gain compliance rather than use force.

As the World Wars of the 20th century ended the period of the empire, many nations moved toward self-rule. The overthrow and withdrawal of colonial rule spread across the world, often opposed by counter-revolutions as powerful interests sought to squelch democratic urges, often precluding citizen control of the press. Such authoritarian control of communication has been challenged by recent technological changes, especially interactive media broadcast over the internet. While areas freed from Soviet oppression in the early 1990s aspired toward democracy (Christiansen & Christiansen, 2013) Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya Algeria, and Yemen who had previously been freed from European colonialism, remained oppressed by governments that silenced organized political opposition (Douai 2013). The growing despair of Arab people stayed under the world's radar, so the world was surprised when these confined populations fully engaged in organized protests (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

Media: Characteristics and Restrictions

Throughout history, the ability of a vast number of people to communicate freely has been controlled and regulated by authorities, both governmental and religious. However, technological advances have continually challenged that tight grip. Literacy itself was for centuries a closely guarded art. Christian clergy limited access to their authoritative text, the Bible, and interpreted its laws and punishments to a body of believers who helplessly succumbed. The invention of the Guttenberg printing press in 1440 A.D. replaced hand-copying and allowed publication of multiple copies, resulting in increased literacy that began the slow release of citizens from authoritarian control. Along the way, however, the powerful elite regulated printing; control over the means of mass communication that has continually repeated itself as new technologies arise.

For example, during the first two decades of the 20th century, any US citizen with access to radio components could build and operate a hobby set until the government realized the political and military potential of broadcasting during World War I and sought to ensure a robust system. After that, the limits of the electromagnetic spectrum led the U.S. and other nations to reach settlements over shared air space. Such international agreements eventually fell under the auspices of the United Nations. Similar regulations on Internet use – still largely dominated by the United States (Turnstall, 2008) – are yet unsettled.

Technological development coupled with the geopolitical climate in the 1990s allowed huge media companies to converge video production, broadcasting, telecommunication and internet operations, resulting in a climate where six multinational conglomerates – General Electric, Disney, News-Corp, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS – control most media in the world, with a power that transcends national borders. It's a paradox in the so-called free world that these commercial companies' desire for profits in their non-media businesses, such as theme parks and retail stores, hampers their loyalty to the free flow of information. Indeed, they often face a conflict of interest when reporting the news. Nonetheless, the convergence of media businesses defines today's global media landscape. Correspondingly, television broadcasting moved from analog to digital, freeing up the electromagnetic spectrum for new uses, such as wireless communication: Digital cameras could capture images which mobile phones could send to each other or broadband networks. Not everyone can take advantage of the communication opportunities availed by this new technology as the transition from analog to digital formats has privileged those who can afford more advanced technology, leaving many poorer citizens without access (Hintz, 2012). Indeed, the poor in MENA countries, for example, feel under-represented in media and consider print media elite because their lack of access to education leaves them untutored in classical Arabic, which the newspapers use (Turnstall, 2008).

Satellite broadcasting provides another piece in the global media landscape. In the 1990s, Egypt launched a satellite on which it broadcast its domestic television shows, and in 1991 Saudi Arabia satellite television was born. Egypt, whose film stars are known throughout the Arab world, is the biggest media producer in the MENA countries, yet 26 percent of its media are produced in the United States and Europe (Turnstall, 2008). By the 2000s, 150 Arabic-speaking

satellite television channels, mostly state-sponsored, evaded state censorship as they broadcast across national borders and introduced viewers to democratic discourse (Douai, 2013). One such source that became popular during the late 1990s was the Qatari television network Al Jazeera whose news coverage refreshed and reinvigorated a stagnant political environment throughout Arab countries (Douai, 2013). Al Jazeera emerged from a BBC-Saudi Arabian satellite service that had originated as BBC radio in the 1930s (Turnstall, 2008). Satellite television channels allowed Arab viewers could access diverse and competing voices (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013).

Several MENA governments encouraged internet proliferation and accessibility to bolster economic development; it also had the capacity to refresh public discourse. The concept of the internet derived from the idea that in an attack, an entire communications system couldn't be obliterated if it were a decentralized web-like network. Such a network could persist even if an enemy destroyed parts of it. Programmers involved in its development fall into two schools of thought: those who perceive it as a venue for individuals to connect globally and those who see it as ripe for colonization for profit or power, as has occurred with earlier systems of communication media around the world. For the most part, the internet and its Worldwide Web remain free and open, though some governments seek to censor them. Such internet enterprises as Facebook (FB) and YouTube emerged that enabled individuals to share textual and audiovisual messages. Twitter soon followed, tailored to the limitations of cellular phones that broadcast over radio frequencies.

The impulse of governments to further restrict the flow of information has grown with the increase of internet use. Moreover, privately owned media companies conform to local jurisdictional laws and regulations and often support hegemonic views. The Open Net Initiative says 47 percent of Internet users experience some online censorship, with 31 percent of that censorship being substantial or pervasive. Internet access is presently one of the greatest barriers to its use (Hintz 2012). Governments used spyware and phishing to steal FB and YouTube login credentials and spied with malware embedded in the software offering Skype encryption. Governments also control content by using libel laws, requiring special fees, temporarily blocking specific services like FB and Twitter, and finding ways to imprison bloggers. Governments ally with businesses to monitor individuals' communications. The Tunisian, Syrian

and Iranian Governments used social media to identify protesters (Hintz 2012). Another arena of control is to protect intellectual property by suing for copyright infringement, which tends to commodify knowledge and remove it from the public domain (Hintz, 2012).

Corporations have assisted governments by reporting certain types of speech activity to authorities. For example, Amazon, PayPal, and others have complied with government goals by cutting off funds to such enterprises as WikiLeaks, an internet site that published thousands of leaked secret U.S. documents. Off-site spaces are known as "cloud" services that store people's personal documents have the power to deny access to information and services, and stores for software applications (apps) can censor the apps they sell. For example, Apple removed its WikiLeaks app in 2010 (Hintz, 2012). Governments also enlist internet service providers (ISPs) and search engines to help their censorship efforts. In the United States, officials required Twitter to surrender the account data of WikiLeaks activists. Google has complied with 93 percent of the requests it receives from state authorities worldwide. Google, Yahoo, and Apple have obeyed China's strict internet censorship policies (CNN, 2013).

Still, citizens demand privacy protection as well as access to the internet. For example, citizen protest in the United States successfully defeated the Stop Online Protection Act (SOPA) in 2012, which had included provisions to punish violators by blocking internet access. In their quest for free speech and to ensure their voices were heard as they protested police and government abuses, people worldwide have used anonymizing strategies for secure online communication and have successfully seen legislative change: Iceland changed its policy to include a favorable environment for media and investigative journalism, making that country a transparency haven. In the United States and Canada, citizens are pressuring regulators to take steps to maintain net neutrality – a free and open internet.

Citizen use of the Internet for disseminating information has grown since the Global Indymedia.org network was created around 2000 with user-generated content. Eyewitness accounts available on social media make information widely available (Joseph, 2002). Individuals can observe the lives of those in distant cultures and share events they witness, which some audiences and news services want to treat as journalism. Although no universal standards

exist for journalists, some countries require licenses. Still, citizens have long challenged official and corporate news sources with such responses as commentary in magazines, community radio, and newsletters (Hintz, 2012). By 2011 the news service Agence France-Presse determined that FB and Twitter comprised part of newsgathering (Palmer, 2012). Although more people watched television during the Arab Spring, social networking reported events, provided logistical details and built a public sphere (Hintz 2012).

Arab Spring Protests

Events during the Arab Spring occurred in a climate where governments' control of media opposed citizens' desire for information. Citizen unrest at that time permeated the world, largely in reaction to a series of worldwide economic crises resulting in high unemployment, as people sensed government complicity with the financial crises and were expressing their suffering and demanding relief. Demonstrators in Barcelona and Iceland in 2004 provide examples of progressive, peaceful change (Castells, 2012). The economic crises especially hurt young people, including those of the educated class. Most of the MENA protesters were educated unemployed youth – college graduates experienced up to 21 percent unemployment (Castells, 2012).

The world was astonished to see demonstrations emerge in the Middle East, where repressive regimes had long silenced citizens. In 2009 Iranians demonstrated against what they saw as the illegitimate reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Baran, 2013). To control information about the uprisings, the Iranian government arrested or expelled foreign journalists, closed newspapers, and broadcast propaganda on state-operated stations, blaming the protests on Western agitators. But such attempts were futile when as many as one-third of the population were linked to the Internet and 60 percent owned cell phones. Circumventing the government's attempts to control the information flow, Iranian protesters used FB, YouTube and Twitter on their cell phones to publicize and mobilize daily demonstrations. They posted hours of video of police beating protesters and brutally killing young Neda Aga Sultan. Anyone in the world with a broadband or wireless connection could behold these events (Baran, 2013). Such public demonstrations seemed to spread from one country to the next.

Tunisia had been the first Arab country to connect to the Internet in 1996. It had one of the highest rates of internet and mobile phone penetration in the Arab world, with 67 percent of its urban population owning cell phones, 37 percent accessing the Internet, and 20 percent of Internet users on FB (Castells, 2012). It also practiced the harshest media controls in the Arab world. Tunisians perceived their government television station as a propaganda tool because it lacked any opposing voices. Even though the government outlawed Al Jazeera, it monitored FB and censored the internet by blocking sites related to human rights and opposition parties, politics, and news portals as well as non-political video-sharing websites. However, the presence of the internet itself, as well as satellite television, mitigated such media control (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013). Moreover, citizens devised ways to circumvent the censorship. In 2004, political blogs emerged as well as the collective dissident blog Nawaat.org (Lim, 2013). In 2005, in an online protest, President Ben Ali received international coverage during a world summit in Tunisia on the information society (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). Individuals posted on FB that they would attend the protests (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013), but few did so because they experienced a high culture of fear in their state-controlled media environment (Lim, 2013).

Three years later, a revolt against unemployment erupted in the mining area of Gaffs, lasting from January to June 2008. The affluent with internet access had not previously been attuned to working-class issues and learned about them from activists' videos on line. Still, geography and class disconnected most online activists from the offline protests (Lim, 2013). But a literal spark ignited the population on Dec. 17, 2010, when 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of a government building to protest the confiscation of his produce stand after he refused to pay police a second bribe that day (Castells, 2012). His cousin Ali, a long-time opposition activist, recorded the self-immolation on his cell phone, uploaded the recording to FB and YouTube and sent it to local broadcasters (Castells, 2012; Lim, 2013). Ali also created a narrative to go with the images, saying that Bouazizi was an "unemployed university graduate" though he had never finished high school, who had received "one slap too many" (Lim, 2013, p. 927).

A movement formed as those who saw the video alerted friends and family (Lim, 2013). FB reported an uptick in Tunisian use, up to a million by 2010 from 28 thousand in 2008 and users

were spending twice as much time per visit than before (Lim, 2013). Hundreds of demonstrators came to the square to protest. Videos of the protests and police violence spread through the internet, with invitations to join the action. Protesters hung slogans in Arabic, French, and English around the square, which were visible in videos (Castells, 2012). People around the world also shared the image of Bouazizi on Twitter, using tags which operate as keywords and make the content easy to trace (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). Al Jazeera found Ali's video on the internet and reported it (Lim, 2013). Because Al Jazeera was banned in Tunisia, they couldn't send journalists there, but they had previously launched a citizen journalism portal during the Nov. 2008 protests on which they could receive video and news (Lim, 2013) by allowing mobile phones to connect to its satellite which they then broadcast (Castells, 2012). Citizen journalists sent updates to Al Jazeera, including death tolls. These reports outpaced state media (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013).

Protesters took to the streets, demanding political and press freedoms and democratic elections (Castells, 2012) and public debate in cyberspace allowed people to see how widespread was dissatisfaction with the government (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). Individuals started FB groups named "liberate Tunisia," "We are not afraid anymore," and "Mr. President; Tunisians are setting themselves on fire" (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013, p. 72). They also wrote blogs, one of which linked to the video-sharing site Vimeo to make video images more accessible. The video-sharing site YouTube had been blocked since 2007 but the blog nawaat.org had a YouTube channel where it showed streaming videos (Khamis & Vaughn 2013).). Protesters used FB, Twitter, and text messaging to share such information as where government snipers were located. Although the government did not block FB believing such a move would attract more attention to the protests, they hacked into activists' email, blocked pages containing information about the protests, and disabled blogs and FB pages. They also shut off electrical power and internet access in several towns and arrested bloggers and activists (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). But protesters circumvented government censorship by using alternate sites. When the Tunisian official press reported the protests, they called them "acts of vandalism or terrorism" (Khamis & Vaughn 2013, p. 72-73).

By the time broadcasts from Tunisia reached Egypt, protests there had been percolating since the perceived rigged elections of 2005 and women's rights struggles. Industrial workers struck at textile mills on April 6, 2008, spurring a sympathetic movement known as The April 6 Youth Movement which launched an FB page supporting the workers which attracted 70 thousand followers (Castells, 2012). Two-thirds of the Egyptian population are under age thirty, forty percent is poor, and unemployment among college graduates is ten times greater than among the less educated (Castells, 2012). This young, educated and unemployed portion of the population had found something in common with the poor working class. Although Egyptian opposition had existed for years against police brutality, high food prices, and high unemployment, most Egyptians were afraid to engage in public discourse. Police prohibited filming, monitored foreign journalists, and had become afraid to speak out or engage in political discourse. State media was seen as pro-Mubarak propaganda (Wali, 2012).

Then in 2010, Khaled Saeed was beaten to death by the police for posting a video on his blog exposing how the police divided among themselves drugs they had seized during an arrest (Castells, 2012). In response to Saeed's murder, a Google marketing executive Wael Ghonim living in Dubai, who had been active with the April 6 Youth Movement, started an FB page called "We are all Khaled Saeed." He filled the site with videos and news articles about police violence and used it to educate Egyptians about democracy movements (Castells, 2012). Ghonim who had blogged about police brutality since 2005 posted videos of police abusing and torturing citizens. The government responded by banning cell phone videotaping in police stations, a crack-down that frightened many (Wali, 2012). Ghonim also targeted distortions of official media. Ghonim set up an FB page, attracting 500,000 followers, where he publicized a Day of Silence against police brutality on Jan. 25, 2011, in Cairo that was being planned by organizers inspired by Tunisian protests (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). Within three days, more than 50 thousand people said they would attend. This FB page became a source of information about both technical and practical advice to which, according to Ghonim, everyone contributed, like Wikipedia (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). It provided links to tools that circumvent web filters and suggested that protesters bring plenty of water and only display Egyptian flags rather than political emblems, and counseled them against violence and disruption of traffic; also, activists used Twitter to communicate with pictures and information, including

Google maps marking danger areas to avoid (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). One of the April 6 Youth Movement founders posted a video blog (vlog) on her FB page, announcing that she would go to Tahrir Square in Cairo alone to hold the banner. Her vlog also appeared on YouTube where it was shared by thousands and some, like soccer fans who had a history of confrontations with police, carried the information to their physical networks (Castells, 2012). The movement had a leaderless character as groups of three or four people passed out flyers door-to-door, inviting people to attend the protest while others posted information on their FB pages, Twitter accounts, and text. (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

At first, international users rather than those within the MENA countries led much of the Twitter activity. In Egypt, the National Coalition for Change sent messages on Twitter, FB, and YouTube saying "tell your friends" and "look what is happening in Tunisia. This is how people change their country" (Khamis & Vaughn 2013, p. 75). Activists also used Twitter to send lists of phone numbers to journalists around the world (Douai 2013), and citizen journalists in Cairo tweeted live reports (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). Further, Twitter was used to send the satellite frequencies of Al Jazeera which governments had been disrupting. (In fact, in Bahrain, Twitter is one of the few means to question official news [Axford, 2011]). The demonstration resulted in tens of thousands appearing in Tahrir Square. Three protesters were killed, and 400 were jailed (Castells, 2012).

Discussion on social media related local issues to transnational ones. For example, the story of female protesters being sexually assaulted went global, with international feminist organizations expressing solidarity with the women and international media linking the Egyptian assaults with gang rapes in Delhi during the same period. Events had gained more international interest by the time Mohamed El Baradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, led a rally in Alexandria on 25 June 2010, against the police abuses and visited Saeed's family to offer condolences (Wikipedia).

The governments of both Tunisia and Egypt tried to suppress internet and cell phone access (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013). Egypt aggressively impeded social media access, shutting off internet and phone services to the whole country starting Jan. 27, 2011, for a one-week blackout

(Hintz, 2012; Castells, 2012). They also asked ISPs to turn off connections; and they deleted most or all the IP addresses connecting through each provider so no one either inside or outside the country could reach Egyptians which caused Cairo's stock exchange to go offline when 93 percent of internet traffic in or from Egypt was eliminated (Castells, 2012).

The demonstrators had allies throughout the world who helped tell their story. The international internet community of "hackers, techies, companies, defenders of civil liberties, activist networks such as Anonymous" took notice and came to the rescue (Castells, 2012, p. 62). Service providers in France, Sweden, Spain, the United States and other countries organized modems that received international calls in order to communicate with the protesters. Some companies assisted by waiving connection fees. The world community provided information on how to foil communication controls inside Egypt and encouraged protesters to use Fax machines, ham radio, dial-up modems (Castells, 2012). Activists set up file-transfer protocol (FTP) accounts to send videos to international news organizations and used landlines with dial-up modems to connect to the internet in neighboring countries (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013). Any information received was distributed by people on the ground who circulated instructions on how to use various media. (Castells, 2012). Both Google and Twitter created a program that automatically converted a voicemail message left in an answering machine accessed by a landline into text that could be transmitted on Twitter. Telecomix received and decoded amateur radio messages sent on frequencies recommended by the group of activists. Thus, protesters circumvented the blackout by reverting to old forms of media: Old-fashioned technology helped overcome government censorship. (Castells, 2012).

Egyptian and Tunisian activists shared experiences, advice, and tactics. Some Tunisians offered practical advice about protesting on Egyptian blogs and FB pages, urging Egyptians to continue fighting for their rights. Also, Egyptians in the diaspora uploaded YouTube videos showing how to conduct peaceful protests (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). When Egypt lifted its internet blackout, cell phone videos were directly uploaded to YouTube (Burns, 2013). On the one hand, as argued above, the black-out was circumvented in many ways with the help of the world's Internet community. On the other hand, it had been imposed too late to have a paralyzing effect on the protest movement (Castells 2012). By April 5, 2011, the total number of FB users in the Arab

world was nearly 28 million– about twice that of the previous year (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). Individuals grew more self-confident and less afraid of speaking out when they saw that the government was frightened enough to threaten to shut down FB (Lee, 2011). Some demonstrators realized they had tolerated oppression because their fear had weakened them (Tayel, 2011). When they saw on FB pages that others shared their same feelings which had never been discussed in the official media, their confidence grew. The spiral of silence theory explains the phenomenon of people being afraid to speak out: When media do not report events, viewers tend to believe they are isolated in their feelings and keep silent, but when media reflect their opinions, they become emboldened (Noelle-Newman, 1993).

Citizen journalists reported from places where international media couldn't access. They shared YouTube videos exposing police abuse in Egypt, enabling Al Jazeera to take on this issue (Douai, 2013). Witnesses connected with each other and to journalists who helped them publicize their experience. Indeed, some Al Jazeera journalists were participant-observers as well as reporters (Robertson, 2013). Moreover, the protesters were communicating with Al Jazeera and receiving reports by landline telephone. Also, other Arab satellite TV networks offered Al Jazeera their satellite space. The social communication and coordination helped increase the numbers in Tahrir Square and to counteract the censorship. Moreover, it connected people of Egypt with rest of the Arab world. Activists planned protests on FB, coordinated via Twitter, spread via text messaging, and webcast them live on YouTube where established media especially Al Jazeera could find them (Castells, 2012). By making their actions known, offline social networks had taken over the role played by Internet networks during the inception of the protests (Castells, 2012).

The first stirrings of the Syrian uprising occurred Jan. 26, 2011, when Asan Ali Aklih from al-Hasakah set himself on fire. Neither this event nor the February candlelight vigil in Damascus in solidarity with Egyptian demonstrators sparked widespread protests (Seigneurie 2012). The defining moment arrived when the arrest of boys under age 15 on March 6 escalated into the torture and death of a 13-year-old boy who died while in custody. An FB page honoring his death drew more than 100K, and his name became a rallying cry (Seigneurie, 2012). Within weeks, Syrians were engaged in sit-ins and protest rallies which were met by tanks and another

armory (Leenders, 2013). An unlikely site for direct conflict with the Syrian government occurred in the tiny, remote village of Da'ra, where strong social networks interlinked with the family and clan structure. Moreover, frequent migration of workers from Dar'a to Lebanon, the Persian Gulf and Jordan created a steady cross-border traffic that connected Syrians inside the nation to relatives and associates outside (Leenders, 2013). These networks and border traffic allowed news from Syria to get out. Da'ra succumbed to a siege in April and May when security forces attacked protesters who had been joined by army deserters. The demonstrators retaliated and grew increasingly militaristic during the summer until by the end of the year up to a dozen deaths per day were suffered (Zisser 2012).

During the conflict, internet coverage inside Syria was down or heavily monitored, but truckers, taxi drivers and "bahara" crossed border to smuggle out footage of the protests on memory cards that were uploaded by relatives in alRamtha or emailed to internet activists from Dar'a in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen (Leenders, 2013, p. 281). Although some YouTube footage may have included "false testimonies" and "misleading accounts," it shows that protest marches, demonstrations, and regime violence occurred in remote villages throughout Syria (Leenders, 2013, p. 283). Indeed, YouTube removed a video they claimed was too graphic, as it showed the battered body of a boy who allegedly had been tortured and killed by authorities (Youmans & York, 2012). The company posted its policy which said, "This video has been removed as a violation of YouTube's policy on shocking and disgusting content." It was restored after a journalist from The Nation protested to YouTube staffers. Syrian activists advised users to erase FB contacts with names that sound Islamic, to prevent detection by authorities. (Youmans & York 2012)

In Libya, protesters revolted against Qaddafi in Feb 2011 and were resisted as the government fought back against armed activists. The incident that fueled increased public demonstrations was the arrest in Benghazi of a lawyer representing relatives of political prisoners massacred by the military years earlier. (Aghayev, 2012). This arrest set off a revolution that morphed into a civil war that unseated Qaddafi (Palmer, 2012). Because of the British news station, the BBC had no correspondents in Libya; its only reports came from citizen journalists in Libya who comprised the opposition (Aghayev, 2012). Online media were not so important inside the

country but were mostly driven by people outside (Burns, 2013). The information came out that was never verified: An Al Jazeera reported that Qaddafi had distributed Viagra to the military who then raped victims was disseminated, but investigators including Amnesty International found no evidence of rape victims (Aghayev, 2012). Still, the United Nations Security Council authorized the use of force for civilian protection in Libya in March 2011 (Aghayev 2012; Garwood-Gowers 2013). YouTube news managers told a video poster from Libya that although guidelines called for removing violent content, they made decisions on a case-by-case basis which allowed them to make an exception for education, documentary or scientific content; they granted an exemption to videos during Arab uprisings (Youmans & York 2012). Other MENA nations in the region – acting through the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization of the Islamic Conference – condemned Qaddafi's use of force and suspended Libya from these organizations (Garwood-Gowers 2013). Members of Qaddafi's government defected, including the ambassador to the UN, who condemned the violence against protesters (Garwood-Gowers 2013).

Digital Media: Shaping the Future of the Public Forum

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Arab Spring was the entering of MENA citizens into the global discussion. Not only did protesters express their distress at an economic crisis that had affected all the MENA countries, exacerbating the disparity of wealth and poverty there, they also simply wanted agency over their lives. Evidence of citizens' wariness about speaking in an atmosphere of government control over public discourse is apparent throughout these accounts. The internet proved a useful tool that enabled citizens long banished from participation in public discourse to overcome fear, knowing not only that their citizens shared their views, but also those others around the world would see and hear their story. They discussed common problems across national borders and actively helped each other to protest oppressive governments. It wasn't just Arabs in MENA countries and the diaspora who joined these discussions. Witnesses all over the world expressed support, such as the women's organizations that cried out against the abuse of women and helped create political pressure. The Arab Spring even resonated in the United States where the Occupy Wall Street Movement began in 2012 to protest the disparity

between wealth and poverty. A realization began to emerge among citizens around the world that governments ultimately exist only by their consent.

There are several reasons that made communication during the Arab Spring remarkable. First, the existent rudimentary world organizations are restrained by hegemonic geopolitical hierarchies that privilege powerful interests and often fail to consider alternative perspectives. Geopolitical ideas about what a stable Middle East is supposed to look like didn't include an active public yearning for democracy. Also, because people tend to internalize prevailing dominant values, often held by the powerful elite, reporters often stick to stories that make sense within a given political system. Although older forms of media still have authoritative voices, they have been displaced as venues for public forums. The use of social media during the Arab Spring challenges the role of traditional media which are too often used as tools of the wealthy and powerful to dominate the conversation. Dominant media before the Arab spring had been heavily censored in Arab countries and didn't report such stories as Bouazizi's self-immolation. That this story spread across social media illustrates how citizen access to the internet weakens a regime's ability to repress information (Axford, 2011). Citizen production of news aligned with the capacity of the new technology of smartphones to converge with other forms of media (Palmer, 2012). Even state-owned media after the demonstrations found the new confidence to speak out (Tayel, 2011). The events clearly showed how established media channels could benefit by drawing on the experiences of eyewitnesses, especially in areas difficult to access.

Eventually, Arab Spring events brought down authoritarian regimes (Douai, 2013) by opening up communicative spaces. The period illustrates how what seem to be cultural walls were shattered as people found that local issues contained lessons that are widely understood around the world. The events showed power relations between individuals and institutions shifting for the individual (Hintz, 2012). Individuals feel inclined to speak out when they've held grievances for a long time, experienced an emotionally salient event that underscored the grievance, feel free to air the grievance, and have access to a venue for doing so (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, 2013). Twitter especially provided such a venue for discussion about freedom and democracy, raising expectations for success (Khamis & Vaughn 2013). As well as they connected with mainstream

media like Al Jazeera and CCNi, citizens adopted the watchdog role journalists play in democracies (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012).

Social media allowed people to feel they were part of a movement by increasing awareness, courage, sympathy and counteracting misinformation (Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012). Neither the movement in Tunisia nor Egypt had a clearly defined leader (Khamis & Vaughn, 2013). The Arab Spring revealed how interconnected the world is, at a time when nations are looking for solutions to vast global problems. The reports coming out of MENA countries also tended to humanize a population that many in the West stereotype as political extremists. Ideas and values reside in the symbolic human world, which can only effectively be accessed through discussion. The hegemonic way of dealing with conflict – of making demands and rigidly standing by them – too often results in violence. The peaceful collective action that works toward mutually beneficial goals must be based on discussion, but participants need to know they have access to all necessary information, and that the information is being reported truthfully. Truthful information is the fuel for discussions and conflict resolution, and the foundation for progressive action. Successful conflict resolution inevitably rests on certain truths: Peace cannot occur where there's injustice, and justice cannot exist without considering all perspectives, which requires all peoples' voices to be heard. Solving problems like poverty, hunger, and environmental pollution requires knowing the facts, thus accessing information. Because access to information is so fundamental to human welfare, governments need to seriously consider the benefits and risks involved in censoring it. Freedom of speech, assembly and the press are necessary for educated communities and, as in other forms of education, access to information may be considered a fundamental human right. Social media, or any public internet forum that can transcend national boundaries and involve diverse populations working together, provide tools for the public to assemble, consult and problem-solve.

Speaking out in a democracy is a right for which people hunger. But such freedom also requires a willingness to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship and to participate in developing the solutions that emerge in consultation. Citizens who enjoy freedoms must pay for them by voluntarily behaving in lawful ways, lest they become the oppressors they once criticized.

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