

From Organization to Coordination, the Change in the Public Spaces of Communication in the Arab World and its Connection to the Social Networks in the 2011 Movements

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza el cambio de los espacios públicos de comunicación en el mundo árabe y su conexión con las redes sociales durante los acontecimientos revolucionarios recientes, especialmente, en Túnez y Egipto. El desprestigio del poder estuvo ligado al desprestigio de los medios tradicionales de comunicación de masas que siguieron los mecanismos habituales de desinformación y descrédito. En contraste, los participantes en las revueltas respondieron con innovadoras y modernas estrategias narrativas de contra-desinformación y explicación. A los canales satelitales y los blogs de internet que prepararon la opinión pública, se añadieron las redes sociales que organizaron las acciones concretas potenciadas por twitter y la expansión del teléfono móvil. La apropiación de los nuevos soportes por parte de los jóvenes, dándoles una conciencia de grupo para galvanizar el sentimiento colectivo de frustración y su utilización como elemento de conexión inmediata entre miles de activistas, hizo triunfar un movimiento gracias a la inmediatez, la sorpresa y el encadenamiento rápido de acciones.

Abstract

In this article we shall analyse the change in the public spaces of communication in the Arab world and its connection with the social networks during the recent revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt. The prestige of power linked to the discrediting of traditional mass media, following the usual mechanisms of disinformation and discredit. In contrast, participants in the riots responded with innovative and modern narrative strategies to counter disinformation and explanation of events. The satellite channels and

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Palabras clave

Espacio público, Revolución árabe, Egipto, Túnez, Redes sociales

Key Words

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Internet blogs prepared by public opinion have been joined by the social networks, which have organised specific actions, aided by Twitter and the spread of the mobile telephone. Young people's appropriation of the new media, giving them a group awareness that galvanises the collective feelings of frustration and using them as a way of immediately connecting thousands of activists, has led the movement to prevail thanks to immediacy, surprise and the rapid unfolding of actions. The novel development has been both inter-class connection and the speed of action.

Introduction: The Loss of Prestige of the Traditional Media

The traditional media (newspapers, radio and television) controlled by the powers that have pursued their usual strategy in the recent Arab uprisings, which reflect the mechanisms of a pre-digital analogical world: at first hiding these events, then downplaying them, and finally condemning them as minority demonstrations by hot-headed violent groups and terrorists. Secondly, they accuse foreigners and other countries of organising the uprisings counter to the national spirit, which is in favour of the regime. And finally, they accuse the demonstrators of chaos were organised by the police forces or criminals released for the occasion.

The result was the total loss of prestige of the word of not needed powers that be, which was not even believed by the defenders of the regime. Everyone knew that the information issued in the traditional channels was a lie. In contrast, the entire population, even those who were at first in favour of the powers that be, ended up seeking the truth in the alternative news media made available via satellite dishes and the Internet.

Therefore, the response was also coordinated by alternative media to responds to these attacks by the official media:

1. Showing their messages in a ridiculous light
2. Demonstrating that the participants in the demonstrations were Egyptians (this required them to show their faces in videos posted on YouTube)
3. Trying as much as possible to ensure that the abuses by the government henchmen did not unleash greater evil (in Egypt the most serious case was the attack on the National Museum of Antiquities), all of this in a city, Cairo, that is usually chaotic (Rodenbeck, 1998).

In this sense, the war of information and counter-information was similar to what took place during the fall of the Eastern European regimes in 1989. However, the comparison ends here. This study points out the fundamental

differences with what happened during the fall of the house of cards in the socialist countries. There are four totally different features: the different state of the media in each case; the departure of a centralised Soviet power; the different national and linguistic situations as a whole, which did not form a unit in Eastern Europe as they do in the Arab world; and finally, the different kind of organisations behind each movement.

In those revolutions, there was no common television station that spoke a language understood by all the inhabitants (Radio Free America spoke English, which was a language exclusive to the elites), such as Al Jazeera. This is a television station that is understood and extends from Morocco to Indonesia, with 1.2 billion potential viewers; it reports like CNN and debates like BBC, but in Arabic; it does not filter the statements of the main players and victors, rather it shows them directly, speaking in the language found in this arc stretching between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. However, most importantly, it is a television station which for the first time seeks “audience as power” before offering “power’s opinion to the audience” (Lamloum, 2006, p. 48)

Ever since this channel was created in 1996; it became a media star thanks to its coverage of the invasion of Afghanistan. “Al Jazeera competes with the Mosque, until now, the only focal point of protest in the Middle East,” says Olfa Lamloum (2006, p. 116) although these centres of oral transmission had already been affected by radio and television, major sources of legitimacy. Now, the revolution is greater, and it brings significant differences compared to these traditional pulpits, the obsession of all states because of their control, as it does compared to the traditional television and, of course, radio stations.

Al Jazeera aims to have an ‘eastern’ (premeditatedly different) or different opinion to the ‘western’ standpoint (equally premeditated). The creation of ‘west’ is implicit when continuously carving out a space of opinion that is defined as Arabic by exclusion and that bases this news scheme on the advertising slogan: “The opinion and the other opinion’. In this sense, the system is much more BBC than CNN, although it fluctuates between both due to its committed nature at times (Miles, 2005). When it follows the particular pathway of political commitment that Qatar’s foreign policy is interested in (Kawakibi, 2010) and it deforms/disfigures the information,—it follows the American model – it applies an excess of information against proven opinion, a sum of data that conceal the critical judgement – forgetting that a sphere of public opinion is not an accumulation of information but clashing opinions debating the news.

Al Jazeera is the most popular party in the Arab world because it shapes the parties and guides the changes in their language; it introduces certain electoral topics and eliminates others (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002). On

the other hand, its influence is pyramidal, triggering debate on issues that are controversial or internal in countries where it reaches its television audiences, such as crimes of honour (Jordan), ablation (in the Sahel and Horn of Africa) and the consumption of certain drugs (the *Khat* controversy in Yemen). This means that the television stations in the countries involved react to Al Jazeera's declarations or reports, triggering an internal debate.

New Media, New Behaviours, New Attitudes

The way was paved by these channels abroad and by the changes that the local channels have had to make in order to keep up with the competition. The media have paved the way for the change that produced these uprisings, but they have also triggered major changes regarding how they took place. Satellite channels and Internet blogs that prepare and manage public opinion have been joined by the social networks, which plan specific actions with the aid of Twitter and the spread of the mobile telephone.

They are faced with a scene with new media that do not exclude the old ones, yet that enhance them in unheard of ways. The new media are more effective in the following ways:

- a. The prior information that participants have through reporters situated in strategic places.
- b. The spread of instructions for demonstration and gatherings, indicating the safe routes and alternative routes via GPS.
- c. The viral spread of the action, which can be held at different places at the same time or different points in the city, even with traps and false meetings to throw the police off their track.
- d. The immediate coordination of action and information without the need for heavy transmission channels.
- e. The instantaneous transmission of what is happening on the movement's society network to cheer on the people.
- f. Transmission abroad of the events (channels like Al Jazeera which, in turn, bring the content of these reports back to the country).
- g. Graphic information (photos, videos, etc.) on victims, people who have disappeared, repression, etc.
- h. The rapid withdrawal of the members of the network called to participate.

These are the propositions of any classical uprising, but the media exponentially expand the possibilities of reporting on and managing this information.

Regarding behaviours, we can find a twofold action that radically shifts the archetype of the revolutionary towards the clearly Gandhian model: a

representation is defined of a peaceful demonstrator, and the provocations by the repressive forces are denounced. This game, which is constantly played as if it were continuously being observed by the media, is becoming increasingly widespread in specific filmed materials.

Attitudes are also changing by working within the new cultured, university-educated and international Arab youths, in which women are playing a very active role, though one apparently hidden behind the veil.

A neologism by journalist and sociologist Allegra Stratton (2009), "*muhayababes*", describes this new female aesthetic that joins the thinness of the Western model (yearned for in blockbuster films and fashion catwalks) which breaks with an entire aesthetic tradition by adding the Coco Chanel style to it, yet with the novel introduction of the veil and a new, and much more personal way of understanding religiosity.

Among Arab youth, "*muhayababes*", are a swath of the population which music and television executives target, and they are a new political and religious force to be reckoned with. The images in her book that reflect these girls smoking a cigarette, wearing a veil in a flirty way as they listen to a religious speech from a blend of an imam and television preacher whom they follow; like fans of a band represents one way of reaffirming tradition without losing sight of modernity (Stratton, 2009). This is a change which respects tradition and "the pride of belonging to a cultural-religious community", yet it is novel in all its attitudes and behaviours, which are liberating and clearly anti-patriarchal.

Unlike in the Western world, mainly dominated by male Internet users, the Arab world offers quite a different perspective: the massive presence of blogging women with intense political activities and an active social presence. This group's output boasts an extremely high intellectual level and examines controversial topics – often related to the struggle against patriarchal culture – treated with refined irony. This is a movement that should be not disassociated from, but inextricably intertwined with an overall shift in the image of women in the Arab world, which entails a break with the traditional Islamophobic clichés (Martin & Bessis, 2010).

Two events have fostered women's presence on the web: the more reserved and family-oriented status of women in certain countries – which is even more accentuated in the middle and upper classes – means that their presence at home leads to free-time activities related to the new technologies. Coupled with this, the higher unemployment rates among female university graduates leads to the presence of a vast contingent of

highly educated females in this collective of Internet users and clarifies the high intellectual content of their contributions.

This night-time world of silent women blogging, crying into the darkness of their computers, is a wonderful image of a more general change in women in the Arab world, but it is not the only one. The change has been unconsciously or consciously hidden by the Western media, creating false controversies such as the one on the veil, that continued a perverse form of propaganda triggered upon the intervention in Afghanistan.

The case of Ghada Abdel Aal was significant. In 2006, she began to write a humorous blog¹ that recounted her attempts to not marry the potential grooms that her mother and aunt found for her. The blog became one of the most widely read in Egypt, leading to a book and a television series. The blogger became a writer at the newspaper *Al-Shorouk* and published her book *I Want to Get Married* (Ghada Abdel Aal, 2010) in several countries.

A new, completely different kind of individual is being born (young male Internet users and young female bloggers). The new youth that was taking shape reflected not only the baby boom but also the new media conditions in which they were raised, widespread education – at least through primary school – that enabled them to share messages and widespread expectations of frustration with each other.

The Inter-Classism Promoted by Cyber-Cafés

Mobile and Internet connections were not accessible only two years ago; and they have made virality (spread of an action like a computer virus) possible to an extent unimaginable (Fauad, 2010). The analysts were wrong – and, by the way, they have once again erred in more recent days – when claiming that the presence of the Internet in homes is much lower than in the West. They have not taken into account the fact that most of the young Arab population uses cybercafés, when makes web diffusion practically universal. What we have instead is a development in mobile telephones comparable to the West – with a vast market for cards that are affordable for the majority – which have made possible Twitter connections and exponentially, multiplies the success of calls for participation in events and the speed of information minute-to-minute.

Cybercafés, the place where people without Internet at home, and many who do have it gather together are social meeting places and true hubs of communication (one street in Amman, Jordan, has entered the Guinness World Record for this reason). These meeting points for unemployed youths – or workers living in low-income homes – allow these young professionals with little money, to pirate the music and films that they like, as well as to

¹ زوجتاً قزيعاً 1 [I want to get married]. (n.d.). Retrieved January 25, 2011, from <http://wanna-b-a-bride.blogspot.com/>

stay in touch with their friends via the social networks, and open themselves up to larger networks that encompass the entire Arab world (for those who express themselves in Arabic) and practically the entire planet if they are skilful in English.

The young Khaled Said, who unleashed the events in Egypt with his death at the hands of the police, was arrested when he was at a cybercafé in Alexandria that had been turned into a holy site of the new times. Two hours later, his photo with his face totally destroyed raced around to millions of people, who in turn showed and sent it.

The bloggers in the Arab world are not the members of the idle generation of unemployed Western youth who have endless possibilities for rubbish-entertainment like the ones afforded by the Western neoliberal societies. Here we do not find macro-discos, drunken street parties, weekends that begin on Thursday, etc. Many of them are married and have a family, just like the Google professional who took up the torch left by the deceased Khaled Said.

The connection between both kinds of demands (economic-social and political) makes an inter-class alliance possible: middle class youths with fundamental political demands yet with an empathetic relationship with societal demands; working class youths who do not limit themselves to a traditional “daily bread uprising” rather include political demands as necessary to attain this objective. This alliance, would not have been possible without the success of the cybercafés, which allow working-class youths to access the Internet and reveal how deceitful the access figures shown by statistics based on the home computer, not on real users, are.

Several years ago, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi developed the idea of the *cyber-umma* (Valenzuela, 2003) to define the virtual space of debate that was being created in the Arab world and its inter-class nature. This space was determined by the combination of the new satellite technologies in Arabic, the social networks on the Internet, and the novelty of mobile telephones, all of which helped to shape the new system.

From all of this, we can extract a shared definition of Internet users common to all citizens that appropriate and use – and are used by – the new technologies: a person who is alone and yet connected at the same time (Perceval & Simelio, 2006). A new kind of rugged individualism with some sort of empathy that flees from grand ideologies – the ‘light causes’, as Lipovetsky (2013) puts it – but rejects the imposition of the system by creating new heroes from hacker culture like Lisbeth Salander and Julian Assange, on the boundary between the legal and the illegal. This schizophrenic relationship with the new media leads to a reasonable loss in the sense of reality that the

powers that be fabricate (the famous thesis of 'the order of things' espoused by Foucault (1966), a philosopher who is being revived in these circumstances where the order of the discourse has become a series of neurotic utterances).

The Empathetic Detonators and Virality of the New Web Media

The new technological media have not created the revolution, they have not caused the underlying unrest and even less are they the heroes that have triumphed over the dictatorships in the first technological revolution in history as some media have declared. The heroes/heroines are those who have fought in the shadows, using these media, until they have achieved the downfall of the tyrants.

The appropriation of the new media by young people, giving them a group consciousness beyond the sociological mark of being the desperate children of the Arab baby boom, their practice – unheard of in the West – of galvanising the collective sense of frustration, and using it as an element of immediate connection among thousands of activities, has indeed led the movement to triumph, achieving this through its immediacy, surprise and the rapid unfolding of actions. At the same time, the Internet movement has triggered an effect of inter-class cohesion which we shall now study, joining – in a way that did not happen in France in '68 (Gallissot, 1990) – economic and social demands with political ones. (Bessinger et al., 2013)

Not only have the dictatorial powers that were overcome by the movement, caught by surprise, so were the very opposition politicians themselves, purportedly organised in their respective countries – including the Islamists in particular, Arab and Western thinkers, the Western political regimes – including Israel, with pathetic action by the European dis-Union. At the same time, the speed of these events has meant that the countries in the zone have adopted contradictory postures at each moment which fit in with a movement that is somehow reminiscent of the revolutionary waves in Europe in 1830, 1848 and 1870.²

What was clear was the general sensation of dissatisfaction by intellectual elites constantly cast aside by Europe in their aims to instigate democratic changes under the excuse of realpolitik (Perceval, 2007) (authoritarian regimes in exchange for barriers to Islamism, corrupt dealings with these regimes and xenophobic-ethnocentrist disparagement of a possible internal democratic revolution).

2 At that time, the progressive bourgeois elites communicated through correspondence and a very fragile network of printed newspapers.

History is necessary, and it has been the detonator of the start, the transversal that has joined people and the final symbol. Symbolism has been very present from the start, providing the uprising with emotional content, aiding in the adhesion of those absent, shaping a mythology of the nascent revolution. This has been expressed by shrugging off the bureaucratic partisan language of the traditional leftist organisations or Islamists far from the new models, and replaced by a media-oriented, empathetic language of a TV series or CNN news, sometimes, however, alternating with a tragicomic humour.

This cocktail is what has existed from the start as the engine and coordination – no, organisation – of the uprising, putting an end to the old schemes: traditional parties, religious or secular human rights organisations; trade unions and civil organizations... overcome by this rash of grassroots economic-social claims and ideological claims from the university bloggers.

The novel development has been both the inter-class connection – need to shift from a simple subsistence uprising to a revolution that aims to change the prevailing power system – and the speed of the action. This has only been possible thanks to the virality made possible by the digital system and the multiple devices used in it. It does not matter if an uprising occurs in an isolated place if it is connected with the overall network of the uprising.

Conclusions: From Identity to the ‘Pride of Being’, from Organization to Coordination

There has been a shift from identity to the “pride of being or belonging to a community”, from tradition as interpreted by secular or religious leaders to a modern, liquid personality that is respectful of memory. An appropriation has been made not only of the new technological media but also the religious traditions and thinking. The underlying inferiority complex of victimhood and the aggressive dynamic of the claims have been banished.

From an Arabism with a persecution complex (obsessed by the Western conspiracy, imperialism or Zionism) there has been a shift to a practical Arabism of a generation that writes and thinks in Arabic, handles it skilfully and applies it to their literary or musical, religious or political, professional or everyday creations. There has been a shift from sacralised language to practical, creative speech.

Coordination without organization does not mean disorganisation; it can be the polar opposite. The strategy pursued in the Egyptian revolution demonstrates this:

3 “We are all Khaled Said” (n.d.). Retrieved January 25, 2011, from <http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk>

On the 25th of January 2011, there was a group that already knew what it wanted and had a specific strategy. The group, called “We are all Khaled Said”³, whose visible head is the Google executive Wael Ghonin, spearheaded a committee made up of the liberal professionals from the 6th of April Movement, the most mature members of the El-Baradei Campaign, the organization of the Democratic Front and Justice and Liberty Parties along with the youth groups from the Muslim Brotherhoods.

The coordination took place on three fronts: the internal cohesion of the group, attempts to encompass all the sensibilities to the utmost, and the staged representation of this consensus to put an end to the tyranny and bring forth democracy.

The initial meetings scheduled on Facebook took shape in specific plans of actions to be conducted. The day of the large demonstration, the different groups carried maps with different routes to prevent failure owing to the police forces. At the same time, rumours were spread about demonstrations at Mustafa Mahmud mosque in the upper-middle class neighbourhood of Mohandisin, which threw the police off their track. In addition, the action was focused on encouraging the adhesion of the different working class neighbourhoods in Cairo in order to get them to join it by launching slogans about the high cost of living, the rise in food prices and salaries.

The displays of national unity, which were inter-class and inter-religious, pacifistic and moderate, were perfectly articulated. It was necessary to counteract the counter-information and manipulation being issued by the powers that be, via the traditional media they controlled. The way Tahrir Square was distributed, the geolocation of the different aspects in specific places – which could be visited and portrayed – the perfectly orchestrated, utter order that worked to project what was taking place there.... At the same time, each group had to moderate its tendency or partisan expressions: not only did the Islamist hallmarks vanish, so did those of the Marxist, liberal or traditional union groups. Everything was planned as a display of legitimacy: the new Egypt was in the square, the square was a microcosm of Egypt. The cleaning of the square at the end was the peak of this display which moved the entire world. What was surprising was the success of this threefold action. Where hundreds of people were expected, thousands showed up.

Young people, who the media started by describing as “*depoliticised*”, had orchestrated a political change. They were not depoliticised but non-organized in the traditional sense of the word (in parties or social movements with hierarchical chains of command), and they still are. They have united around a shared objective. What has made these movements triumph is a cocktail

of inter-classism, an overcoming of the old ways (old party structures and human rights organisations) and sound coordination. It seems that these ingredients are not working in some places and yielding results in others.

The shift from 'organization' to 'coordination' does not mean chaos and can be highly disciplined. Sometimes organisation can kill or slow down action. Coordination is more consensual; it unites diverse groups and allows for flexibility around specific objectives that are an end unto themselves and not milestones along an organisation's longer trajectory. Sociological change would be allowed by the general consensus of this cyber-*umma* that Fatima Mernissi (2007) spoke about, which is much less ideological, very lightly tinged with Arabism but much more powerful because of it as it is transversal and consensual in interests with all the young people with middle and higher education from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf (Valenzuela, 2011).

The old slogans of the powers that be against the foreign 'other' have ended. There is an overall consensus that democracy (or more accurately, social democracy, which is a state governed by the rule of law and a welfare state) is the only pathway to development after years of the merger of the authoritarian kleptocracy and economic neo-liberalism.

A poster in Tahrir Square bore a message in the '68 style of many of these slogans: "We are not the Others, we are You". Perhaps that is a good summary of what these young Internet users who have organised the revolutionary movement have striven for – and achieved.

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