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# A Cyberconflict Analysis of the Arab Spring Uprisings

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# **A Cyberconflict Analysis of the 2011 Arab Spring Uprisings**

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## **Introduction**

This chapter employs the cyberconflict perspective (Karatzogianni 2004, 2006, 2009, 2012a, 2012b) to offer a critical analysis of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, situating their digital elements within a historical, geosociopolitical and communications context. The cyberconflict framework was originally formulated to examine conflicts transferring online during the pre-social media era of digital development – ICTs used as resource or weapon in online and offline mobilization and propaganda wars, such as the anti-globalization and anti-Iraq war movements or the ethnoreligious conflicts in Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan and others. But it has proved subsequently useful to examine conflicts and resistances in rapidly accelerating hybrid media environments. For example, cyberconflict analysis in combination with world-systems and network perspectives was used in developing theory on resistance networks against state and capital and the differentiation between active and reactive network formations (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2010). Also, it was applied to theory on the impact of transformations of technosocial agency on orders of dissent in protest movements during 2011 (Karatzogianni and Schandorf 2012) and intercultural conflict and dialogue in transnational migrant networks and digital diasporas (MIG@NET 2012).

A cyberconflict perspective on the Arab Spring focuses in the first instance on the environment of cyberconflict. This includes situating the different countries swept by the Arab Spring in the world-systemic, geopolitical and international relations context, and the regional, and national socio-political and economic positions and relationships these countries have historically held. To put it simply then, this addresses the impact of the similarities and differences and identifies the common threads in the diffusion and spread of the uprisings across so many different settings. This is in addition to the obvious social media acceleration, diffusion and transnationalism hypothesis, which is offered relentlessly in the global mediascape: ‘It was the era of the revolution down through the wires: time was collapsed and geography shrunk by the use of social networking’ (McCann, 2011; also see Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011; Herrera 2011).

A second cluster of issues involves the political economy of communications in each country, and particularly e-governance issues and digital infrastructure development. Arab Spring countries were in different stages of digital development. The regimes involved took different steps to cut the digital lifelines from the protesters. Digital networked everyday media and social media networks were used in creative ways to connect the protest both internally and externally to international players, media actors and global opinion, and to plan and accelerate protest mobilizations. This is in line with previous empirical evidence and academic scholarship in the area of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their use in social movements, protests and citizen activism. Yet, the role of social media and digital networks were mediatized in the global public sphere during the Arab Spring as an unprecedented phenomenon. Here established mainstream media coverage of the events, the protesters and the governments involved is still relevant. For example, questions include: what ideologies, constructions of social and political identities, representations of and by protesters can be located, what is the level of regime censorship, alternative sources and media effects on policy, who is winning the political contest – the international buy-in, and how is this accomplished?

A major component of new media theory in conjunction with Internet studies would also have to be employed to situate the tech/digital/online/cyber activism of the Arab Spring in the wider history of protest, resistance and digital activism. Here, there is need to place this Arab digital resistance within wider networks of discontent and protest against the neoliberal capitalist order in a time of global financial crisis. This includes the use of social media, and media movements/protests in Europe against austerity in Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal and the Occupy movement assemblage. Also, questions about what type of democratization can occur in such a context: ‘the claim of US-led war and occupation unleashing the Arab Spring is the flipside of the argument that promotion of the undemocratic economic order is essential to the region’s democratic transition’ (Dixon 2011: 314).

Indeed, the debate whether digital media were a cause or just a tool in the Arab Spring is a superficial one in the context of a long history of online activism. This starts with the Zapatistas in the mid-1990s against neoliberal capitalist expansions and accumulation by dispossession in an alienating hierarchical order operating on the social logic of state and capital. It is therefore critical to probe deeper.

A cyberconflict analysis involves a third cluster of issues employing social movement and resource mobilization theories: the effect of ICTs on mobilization structures, organizational forms, participation, recruitment, tactics and goals of protesters, as well as changes in framing processes and the impact of the political opportunity structure on resistances. These framing processes

and opportunity structure are critical, because the wave character of the diffusion of protests in different countries resembled Eastern Europe in 1989, where the window in the structure opened with the collapse of the USSR. Also, digital media and social networking as enabling resistance through hacktivism (or diversely termed digital, tech, cyber, network activism) and information warfare would have to be discussed in a variety of settings, especially in relation to media movements, ad hoc assemblages and collectives engaging during the Arab Spring (for example, the hacktivist group Anonymous and their cyberattacks and other activities in support for the uprisings). Lastly, in relation to ethnic, ethnoreligious and cultural conflicts occurring simultaneously with the uprisings, we need to consider how group identities are constructed in relation to ethnic/religious/cultural difference or in this case also gender difference, and structural mapping of contexts. This chapter concentrates only on a few of what are – in my view – the critical issues found in these clusters of cyberconflict analysis which might prove relevant to future theorizations of the Arab Spring. Some of the threads left out can be equally critical, for example there is no space to delve into the Palestinian issue, which is at the heart of Arab concerns. Before the analysis, a very brief description of the Arab Spring is required.

## **What happened in the Arab world in 2011 and was it really a Spring?**

This so called Arab awakening is the third of its kind. The first occurred in the late 1800s with Christians, parliamentarians and lawyers seeking to reform politics and separate religion and state, while ‘the second occurred in 1950s and gathered force in the decade following. This was the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and the early leaders of the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria’ (Ajami, 2012). As Ajami describes it, the political environment in the Arab world before the revolutions materialized was sterile and miserable, with consent drained out of public life and the only glue between ruler and ruled was suspicion and fear:

There was no public project to bequeath to a generation coming into its own and this the largest and youngest population yet. And then it happened. In December, a despairing Tunisian fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi took one way out, setting himself on fire to protest the injustices of the status quo. Soon, millions of his unnamed fellows took another, pouring into the streets. Suddenly, the despots, seemingly secure in their dominion, deities in all but name, were on the run.

Tunisians occupied central squares in Tunisian cities and Ben Ali fled into exile on 14 January 2011, ending 23 years in power. His extravagant lifestyle and that of his family were documented in cables leaked earlier that year by WikiLeaks and were made available through media partners to a worldwide

audience (prompting the media discourse to originally claim the Arab uprisings as WikiLeaks Revolutions). The summer of 2010 is when what I have called the revolutionary virtual began its rapid materialization (see work on WikiLeaks in Karatzogianni 2012a). On the January 25 protesters in Egypt took to the streets enraged by the death of a blogger in a mobilization organized through a Facebook site:

On 6 June 2010 Khaled Said, an Egyptian blogger, was dragged out of a cybercafé and beaten to death by policemen in Alexandria, Egypt. The café owner, Mr Hassan Mosbah, gave the details of this murder in a filmed interview, which was posted online, and pictures of Mr Said's shattered face appeared on social networking sites. On 14 June 2010 Issandr El Amrani posted the details on the blog site Global Voices Advocacy (Global Voices Advocacy, accessed on 24 June 2011). A young Google executive Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page, 'We Are All Khaled Said', which enlisted 350,000 members before 14 January 2011 (Giglio 2011: 15)

(Khondker 2011).

Protesters took to removing Mubarak from office in sustained action for 18 days and concentrated in Tahrir Square:

On February 11, Mubarak stepped down and turned power over to the army. Waves of protest continued to develop throughout the Middle East. After Tunisia and Egypt, protest emerged in Bahrain, Algeria, Libya and then Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, Syria as well as Lebanon, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Protest is still in motion in most of these countries...In addition, this succession of unpredictable revolutionary episodes took place in what Migdal (1988) would label 'strong states and weak societies'. (Dupont and Passy 2011: 447).

The different regimes, the support and opposition they faced were not similar and so the results of the uprisings were also diverse. In Tunisia an Islamist party took over, while in Egypt Mubarak was toppled and the military took over with protests continuing till in turn democratic elections occurred with renewed occupations of Tahrir in late November 2012:

Democracy is all very well, but how do you cope when the judges belong to the old regime, the army protects its privileged position, society is deeply divided, the Christian Coptic minority are up in arms, the more extreme Salafists are snapping at your heels and a constitution has still to be written? (Hamilton 2012).

In Libya foreign interventions helped the outing of Qaddafi. Unrest continues in various countries in the Arab world. Syria continues at the time of writing (late November 2012) to be in civil war – China and Russia will not approve intervention, while Israelis and Palestinians have had a week of war exchanging rocket attacks with dozens of people dead and the diplomatic community visiting Gaza eventually managed to negotiate a ceasefire. Remarkably, Palestine was also recognized by the United Nations as a non-member observer state.

It is crucial here to mention that the rights to social justice, dignity and democracy demanded in the uprisings against corrupt elites and incompetent governance are of what could be called a second order, with first order being the basic rights to health, education, housing and so on. The third order represents postnational rights protesting against global capitalism as an unjust exploitative system supporting transnational elites. These differences in the order of dissent reflect the modes of production and the impact of technosocial transformations on agency in communicating resistance in different contexts (Karatzogianni and Schandorf 2012).

Further, most countries saw Islamist parties take over. This in part can be explained by the loss of the population's trust in secular parties and the belief that religious parties are more ethical and not corrupt. The Islamic version of democracy is in many respects procedural and its values are Islamic values not liberal values (interview with Raphael Cohen-Almagor, Politics Professor at the University of Hull, 19 November 2012). Islam and politics are seen as historically inseparable by those framing non-religious rule as illegitimate: 'The challenge of political Islam to secular modes of government is a recent phenomenon although it is presented by its advocates as a prolongation of an extended tradition in Islamic political thought' (Al Otaibi and Thomas 2011: 138).

Consequently, it is counterproductive to think in this context about democratization and rights in western terms and the debates on liberalism, republicanism and deliberative democracy in contemporary political thought (for examples of these debates see Benhabib 1996). In this sense, it is arguable whether the Spring that brought procedural democracy with popular

sovereignty, but with Islamic values, which continues for example to place women in the home and not welcomed in politics (more about this below), can really be thought of as similar to what is understood normatively as a Western style of liberal democratic politics. It is worth keeping this in mind for the subsequent analyses.

## **World-systemic, geopolitical and international relations context**

A first question regarding the uprisings in the Arab world concerns ‘the sudden surge and stiff resistance and demonstrations’ (Dupont and Passy 2011: 447) in societies where there was fragmentation of grievances with multiple salient cleavages. Another central issue is the fact that the regimes concerned were supported economically, politically and militarily by important allies, such as the US, the EU, Russia and China (ibid.). Western governments reacted accordingly with a prescribed protocol to deal with upheavals in repressive regimes they were backing. Dixon (2011: 309) describes it like this:

With the US at the helm, high-level government officials urge ‘restraint on both sides’. When the revolts appear to be not so easily thwarted, they then call for reform. Tensions escalate and international media attention grows, the call for reform turns to an acknowledgement of the need for a new government.

As any Arab democracy is an unknown quantity (the concern being especially with the popular vote going to extreme Islamist parties and fears of links to the war on terror), Western governments are reluctant to risk security interests (Springborg 2011: 6). In the EU policy sphere there is a struggle between being a relevant actor in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and being a simple spectator, due to the strained relationship between particular country and common interests, sub-regionalism and bilateralism versus inter-regionalism and so on (Schumacher 2011: 108). Perthes (2011: 82) argues for the importance of the political signal sent through these uprisings for Europe’s democratic market-economy model in relation to China and also points out that EU policies ‘betrayed the professed European values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law rather than exporting them’.

However, when Western governments eventually accepted this new reality, this is where the appropriation of Arab revolutions begins by the Euro-Atlantic axis (Africa 2011 quoted in Dixon 2011). Examples of such discourse is Obama’s

address to Egyptians attributing the success of the revolution to their ‘ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit’, while at the same time a more neoconservative discourse even credits George W. Bush claiming that it was his policy which helped the regions’ democratic movements to flourish (Dixon, 2011: 311). A US assistance package with expertise to help involves:

(1) Microsoft will work with civil society groups to improve information and communications capacity; (2) the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) will support private equity firms and US-Arab business partnerships; (3) the administration is asking Congress to establish a Tunisian-American enterprise fund; and (4) business leaders and young entrepreneurs will connect through the US-North Africa Partnership for Economic Opportunity (Kaufman 2011 quoted in Dixon 2011: 311).

Further, both Egypt and Tunisia were considered to be examples of the neoliberal reform agenda, and there is a direct link of the revolutions occurring against regimes, which were following that agenda (Armbrust 2011 cited in Dixon 2011: 314). In the 1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led a host of structural adjustment programmes in these countries (Mackell 2011). It is obviously myopic to think that the uprisings occurred solely against corrupted elites: ‘Corruption is more than the personal wealth “stolen”, but rather is those in power and with connections enriching themselves through legalised processes of privatisation’ (Mackell 2011).

It is tempting to think of the commonalities of the countries involved and treat the uprisings as a single movement, due to the diffusion and the domino effect of revolts against strong states by weak civil societies. It is worth entertaining this argumentation in this section, to then be able to identify how the differences impacted the diversity of revolutionary outcomes. There are various examples of such analysis. Way (2011), for example, compares the Arab uprisings to the revolutions and regime transitions after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The conclusion drawn by Way in this comparison is that more autocrats will hang on in 2011, while where authoritarian collapse occurs they will be less likely to democratize than their European counterparts were: ‘authoritarian retrenchment in Bahrain, massive repression in Syria, and instability in Libya and Yemen—illustrate the paradoxical influence of diffusion in the absence of other structural changes’ (Way 2011: 17). Byman (2011: 123), analyzing what the revolutions mean for the Israeli state, quotes an Israeli official as saying: ‘When some people in the West see what’s happening in Egypt, they see Europe 1989. We see it as

Tehran 1979'. And it is not just Israelis, who have played the democratic card against their neighbours, who think that. It is also a view held by feminist movements and women political participation activists in the region. Women have been excluded from major decision-making bodies since the fall of Mubarak, and Isobel Coleman (2011) warns: 'Arab women might soon be channeling their Iranian sisters, who have complained that Iran's Islamic Revolution has brought them little but poverty and polygamy.' It is well known also that electoral authoritarianist regimes establish multiparty elections to institute the principle of popular consent, while continuing to subvert it in political life (Schedler 2006).

Domestic food prices were another factor among the obvious commonalities in the Arab countries where revolts were experienced, beyond political repression, social media, youth unemployment and the domino effect (the opening in the political opportunity structure). Harrigan (2011) argues that the timing can be explained by the rising food crisis, and food security in the Arab world. This is also supported by Way (2011) arguing that high unemployment and rise of food prices fed mass-level discontent. And yet Way argues that in Tunisia and Egypt the countries experienced growth and were robust enough to pay the police and soldiers. Way (2011: 20) also argues that it is the nonmaterial values and ties, which will make these regimes robust. This shared ethnicity or ideology in a context of deep ethnic or ideological cleavage was not there to boost the legitimacy of the regimes and this is particularly interesting in terms of the globalization of values (more below).

In the next section, the media context of the Arab uprisings is discussed, in order to identify the extent of the role of social media activism within the digital development and e-governance environment specific to each country. Social media activism is looked at here in relation to the history of digital activism and resistance: digital resistance within wider networks of discontent and protest against a neoliberal capitalist order in a time of a global financial crisis; the effect of ICTs on mobilization structures, organizational forms, participation, recruitment, tactics and goals of protesters; changes in framing processes; the impact of the political opportunity structure on resistances; and hacktivism, cyberattacks in support of the protesters, and crackdowns over Internet dissent by the authorities.

## **Digital development and social media use: Does technology guarantee revolution?**

A second edition of the Arab Social Media Report (2011) released by Dubai School of Government offers empirical evidence on the importance of ICTs, and their political economy as an important factor in the Arab Spring uprisings.

Facebook usage between January and April swelled in the Arab region and sometimes more than doubled, with the exception of Libya. These are some snapshots of important findings of that report to set the platform for this part of the discussion. Peak usage of Twitter and Facebook in the Arab region, the consumption of news through social media more than other outlets, the online acting as a barometer of the offline and vice versa, and efforts at censorship are the significant aspects here (Huang 2011):

The most popular Twitter hashtags in the Arab region in the first three months of this year were “Egypt”, “Jan25”, “Libya”, “Bahrain” and “protest”. Nearly 9 in 10 Egyptians and Tunisians surveyed in March said they were using Facebook to organise protests or spread awareness about them. All but one of the protests called for on Facebook ended up coming to life on the streets.

During the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, the vast majority of 200plus people surveyed over three weeks in March said they were getting their information from social media sites (88 per cent in Egypt and 94 per cent in Tunisia). This outnumbered those who turned to nongovernment local media (63 per cent in Egypt and 86 per cent in Tunisia) and to foreign media (57 per cent in Egypt and 48 per cent in Tunisia).

The flurry of tweets spiralled during the turning points of the uprisings. In Tunisia they peaked around the January 14 protest start date. In Egypt they spiked around February 11 when longtime President Hosni Mubarak stepped down. And in Bahrain they jumped in the days after the demonstrations began on February 14. The authorities’ efforts to block out information, the report said, ended up “spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organising”. (Huang 2011)

Nevertheless, other analysts of the Arab Spring do not see ICTs as a major catalyst for protest, even where multiple underlying causes are present (Stepanova 2011: 2). Underdeveloped countries would be excluded from social media activism by default owing to underdevelopment and the lack of Internet access, such as Iraq and Afghanistan or other countries such as Myanmar and Somalia. Stepanova also found that no direct regional correlation can be traced between levels of Internet penetration and other information technology (IT) indicators (such as the spread of social media networks) and proclivity for and intensity of social protest: ‘States with some of the highest levels of Internet

usage (such as Bahrain with 88 percent of its population online, a level higher than that of the United States) and states with some of the lowest levels of Internet exposure (like Yemen and Libya) both experienced mass protests' (Stepanova 2011: 2). In cases with low levels of exposure the cell phones, tweets, emails, and video clips were used to connect and transmit protests to the world. Different ICTs were used in different ways and social media did not outmatch satellite or mobile communications:

While the media utilized the term 'Twitter revolutions' for the developments in the Middle East, identifiable Twitter users in Egypt and Tunisia numbered just a few thousand, and the mobilization role of micro-blogging as a driver of protests has been somewhat overemphasized, as compared to other ICTs, including cell phones, video clip messaging (such as YouTube), and satellite television. (Stepanova 2011: 3)

Khondker (2011: 677) also thinks that to overstate the role of new media may not be helpful: 'Certainly, social network sites and the Internet were useful tools, but conventional media played a crucial role in presenting the uprisings to the larger global community who in turn supported the transformations. The new media, triggering mass protests.' Still, the difference that the images and films of two million users put on Facebook to protest in Tunisia was great in contrast to protests in 2008 (then with only 28,000 Facebook users), which were not publicized and never reached a global audience. In the Tunisian case there were only 2,000 registered tweeters and only 200 were active. Saletan (2011) does an excellent job in posing certain crucial issues in a report on the Future Tense Forum sponsored by Slate, Arizona State University, and the New America Foundation, where bloggers and activists from countries in turmoil, particularly in the Middle East, gathered to talk about how interactive media and social networks are influencing events on the ground. Here's the main points of his account summarized here and are worth exploring in further:

1. Technology does not guarantee revolution. Sometimes poverty impedes revolution by impeding access to technology.
2. The medium can lead to the message. Young people went online to keep up with their friends and youth culture. In doing so, they became politicized.
3. Online crowd dynamics mimic offline crowd dynamics.
4. The Internet facilitates repression, too.

5. Pressure causes adaptation, censorship creates activists who know how to circumvent control.
6. Geography matters, even offline (that is, the use of neighbour countries systems to circumvent censorships).
7. Think small (cell phones, text messages, CDs, flash drives, Twitter are critical to circumventing totalitarianism).
8. Beware *Animal Farm* (that is, who replaces the regimes and what type of democratization occurs?).
9. Regimes can use the Internet to keep power the right way (how the government can identify grievances online and address them).

On the first point – technology and revolution – in terms of the stage of digital development and the impacts of use in varied political contexts and the issue of high or low use, Stepanova (2011: 3) argues that ICTs can have a more critical impact in countries where the regime has little or no social base. In the case where the regime has partial social support or legitimacy there are limitations on what social media can achieve. Stepanova also believes that ‘for ICT networks to succeed, the younger, relatively educated generation, which represents the most active Internet-users, should make up not only the bulk of activists, but also a sizeable percentage of the population at large’. In this analysis the pattern with high social media use is the likelihood to have fewer violent protests, while where there is low or minimal social media use this corresponds with more violent escalations (Stepanova 2011: 6).

On the second point of the medium influencing the message: social media created a common thread where a young educated mass produced (not just users also producers, hence ‘producers’) themselves to the point of organizing a revolution, and social media brought together groups that would not collaborate in the offline world, and where there was no strong civil society (Howard and Hussain 2011: 41). This coming together in organized protests through internetted movements in rhizomatically organized sociopolitical networks has been a frequent occurrence in mass mobilizations since 1999 in Seattle with the anti-globalization movement. The use of social media and ICTs during the Arab Spring was not a surprise for scholars of digital activism, hacktivism and cyberconflict. It is a well known empirically proven fact that ICTs and especially networked media have transformed organizational forms, enable the acceleration of mobilization, force transformation on framing and much faster grasp of the opening in the political opportunity structure (for a detailed analysis on the Iraq war mobilizations see Karatzogianni 2006; also indicatively see on radical politics and internet Dahlberg and Siapera 2007).

It is not wise to look at the Arab uprisings in a homogenous manner, but since they were mediatized in the global public sphere as sudden, spontaneous

unpredictable events, it is worth asking whether they were sudden and whether the usual ‘elements usually associated with revolutionary processes (pre-existing networks, power fragmentation, cross-class coalitions, etc.)’ (Dupont and Passy 2011: 448) were present. Another issue frequently brought up is how groups with such different values and contradictory ideologies, identities and strategies come together in a short period of time. Again this was the case with both with the global justice movement and especially relevant to the anti-war mobilizations in 2002-3, where diverse groups joined in protests without obvious ideological coherence or leaderships (Karatzogianni, 2006). Again, this is not new and it is observed with the Occupy movement and other media enabled networked protest movements. It is also known that ‘the use of interactivity and networking on the websites contributes to micro-mobilization, and also to enhancing internal cohesion and bonding, rather than to building dialogic communication and solidarity online’ (Moussa 2011: 81). Different platforms accomplished different functions and levels of applicability for countries and societies in diverse digital infrastructures. During the anti-Mubarak protests, an Egyptian activist put it succinctly in a tweet: ‘we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world’ (Global Voice Advocacy 2010 cited in Khondker 2011).

In certain respects, whether social media was a crucial or just a facilitating factor is not a question worth posing. For anyone paying half attention, it is obviously a key factor in transforming how social movements operate and it has been so over a decade now. To be posing this question again, only means that commentators will be asking it every time there is a revolution or a social media movement of any description, especially in the developing countries. This is not meaningful as such for media policy or e-governance or advancing theory on the various literatures. Obviously suddenly knowing that others feel the same as you in their thousands and are willing to mobilize, having access to the information that the regime is weak and trusting the leaders of the protest to know that a potential mobilization will be successful is all bound to the use of social media to exorcise fear and uncertainty that a protest will not be met violently by the regime. This is a reason certain uprisings succeeded and others did not, and this is a reason why in Iran and China the regimes are still able to hold on to power (for an example on Chinese dissidents, see Karatzogianni forthcoming).

Further, on political opportunity and diffusion questions for future research in relation to social movement and resource mobilization theory in the cyberconflict framework include:

Did ruling elites play a crucial role in opening up this window of opportunity? Were ruling elites divided and split into rival factions

as was the case in communist East Germany? For example, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya were initiating power transition processes. Relatives of the strong men in power had been groomed for succession...Did these succession plans fissure the unity of powerholders and open up a breach for contenders? And what was the role of the army in these authoritarian countries? Did revolutionary episodes follow patterns of diffusion, and if this is the case what are the channels of this diffusion: networks and ties binding protestors across countries, traditional media such as Al Jazira, social and virtual networks such as Facebook or Twitter, or still other channels allowing for the spread of protest throughout the region? And what was diffused: action strategies, tactics to avoid repression, organizational models, symbolic action frames, or still other elements? (Dupont and Passy 2011: 449).

Another factor in the success is that activists and their innovative use of technology and social media 'increased the potential political costs that the military would incur if it sided with the regime and violently attacked civil resisters. Since the whole world was watching, this type of crackdown would surely have elicited international condemnation and the potential end to diplomatic relations, trade agreements, and aid' (Nepstad 2011: 490). Nevertheless, over-reliance on the social media and ICTs as the crucial factor risks ignoring others, such the role of the military in influencing the outcome of a revolt. Nepstad (2011) argues that the military and its decision to remain loyal to the regime or to side with civil resisters played a critical role in shaping the outcomes of these Arab Spring uprisings. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the nonviolent movement won the support of the regime's military and achieved regime change. In the case of Syria, this was not so, and Nepstad argues that the likelihood is low the military will side with the opposition in the case it is ethnically and religiously diverse, while if there are defectors from the military is more likely that there will be a civil war (ibid.)

Nonviolent disruption and discipline, meant that the military was more likely to side with the protesters, as it is difficult to shoot reasonable civilians with reasonable demands. Making social media absurdly the cause or the main factor in the uprisings, by terming them the Twitter, Facebook, WikiLeaks revolutions misses important elements and treats them as homogenous protests bound only by the common thread of networked everyday digital technology. Intersectional conflicts and a more specific quest for rights is examined below.

## **Intersectional conflicts and the demands for rights**

In this last section, it is worth posing the question of how group identities are constructed in relation to ethnic/religious/cultural difference and also gender and class difference in intersectional conflicts occurring during the uprisings. For instance Wael Ghonim who created the Facebook page, 'We Are All Khaled Said', and one of the leaders of the Egyptian uprising, is a Google executive for the MENA region and left his home and swimming pool in an affluent neighbourhood in the United Arab Emirates to join the revolution. There are various class issues to be explored in terms of who was leading the protests using social media who was leading the protests using social media and the issue of the digital gap. The latter refers to the impact of those with no access, the digital have less and the hyper-connected elites for example. Although this and the religious and minority factions and conflicts are worth exploring in the Arab uprisings, the focus in this limited chapter is on women, pointing to the debate generated about women and social change and women's parliamentary participation (Al Otaibi and Thomas 2011: 139).

However repugnant, the cases of female reporters from UK, French and American media raped and molested in Tahrir square, are obviously not the only reason to be concerned about the role of women during and after the uprisings. For instance, examples of the military in Egypt carrying out 'virginity tests' during a demonstration on March 8, International Women's Day, which 'attracted a few hundred women but was marred by angry men shoving the protesters and yelling at them to go home, saying their demands for rights are against Islam' (Coleman 2011).

As mentioned earlier (Cohen-Almagor 2012), Islamic parties are proving the winners in post-revolutionary countries, as they are seen as less corrupt, which means that it is Islamic values with a certain view on the place of women in political life which would inform the new Arab democracies. In the past decade the prejudices and discriminations are more pronounced among the younger generation of the voter sample. Al Otaibi (2008 quoted in Al Otaibi and Thomas 2011: 139) found in the case of Bahrain: 'This may be due to their being impressionable and thus easily influenced by religious extremists. It is noteworthy that an Islamic fundamentalist trend in terms of segregation and sectarianism has recently re-emerged in Bahrain.'

Ebadi (2012) has also argued strongly on this case questioning the term Spring: 'I do not agree with the phrase "Arab Spring." The overthrow of dictatorships is

not sufficient in itself. Only when repressive governments are replaced by democracies can we consider the popular uprisings in the Middle East to be a meaningful “spring”.’ A proliferation of Islamic parties might mean Islamic values informing Arab democracy in a way that will not necessarily improve the social and legal status of women in the Arab world. Ebadi (2012) encourages interpretations of Shariah law toward a conception of being a Muslim and enjoying equal gender rights, which can be exercised while participating in a genuine democratic political system. She also recommends using legal tools such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, so in the case of Iran that ‘the international community can play an important role in urging Iran to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ while her recommendation is that ‘Arab women familiarize themselves with religious discourse, so they can demonstrate that leaders who rely on religious dogma that sets women's rights back are doing so to consolidate power’.

A lot of hope is placed on how the political changes across the Arab world in 2011 might result in radical social change of fortunes for women in politics and with social media as a tool of liberation: ‘The future prospects for women’s representation in politics in Bahrain as elsewhere in the Arab world lie with such social media in the masterful hands of a younger politically-astute generation’ (Al Otaibi and Thomas 2011: 152). Nevertheless Mohamed Ben Moussa, who looked at websites used as tools of liberation in the Arab world, points out what is also true about digital activism in the rest of the world: its potential is always embedded within local and transnational power relations. The discourses and power relations are in turn always reproduced in the digital virtual environment. ‘In traditional conventional religious cultures, women are perceived to be less qualified than men to run for, achieve and hold public office... The reasons for women’s disempowerment and male dominance are in his view three-fold: economic looting; sexual looting; and ideological looting’ (Al Otaibi and Thomas 2011 145). No matter how social media are mobilized and connect demands for rights in incredibly creative ways across the Arab world, these are residual structural factors and will remain hard to change, the fact that women ‘score high as mothers and very low as political participants’ (Mustapha Higazi, cited in *ibid*).

## **Conclusion**

The short-term picture is that this Facebook generation has yet to create a political platform and indeed there is resistance in getting involved in institutional politics, with activists divided as to whether they should even be seeking to form or support institutionalized political parties. Springborg (2011)

argues that 2011 will be more like the 1948 failed revolutions than 1989 and captures the critical issues. It is worth quoting in full here:

How the globalised Facebook generation can convince large numbers of struggling Egyptians that their economic needs and demands can be addressed more effectively through democratic institutions than through access to patronage in an authoritarian system, remains to be seen... The poster children of the Arab Spring, Tunisia and Egypt, do not seem well equipped to imitate the success of Eastern European countries following the collapse of communism. The context in which Egyptian reformers are seeking to democratise their country is not nearly as conducive as was that in say Poland, largely because the security concerns of global and regional powers are thought by them to be better served by at best a very cautious, tentative democratic transition. (Springborg 2011: 12)

More optimistically, in what is a ground-breaking account using Deleuzo-Guattarian logic to theorize the interplay of digitality, orality and cultural diversity, Alakhdar (2012) argues that the connectivity of the online world does not have to reduce cultures into one singular form. Rather, the Internet has the potential to promote traditional cultures as much as it promotes market culture. Reinventing spaces, these producing e-immigrants and e-nomads, 'take energy and flow from their real lives, expand and negotiate their cultures online then borrow from it to re-assemble their real worlds'. And elsewhere: 'Islamic cultural interaction online revitalizes the goal of global connectivity known of Islamic traditional culture' (Alakhdar 2012: 221). And still the questions remain what happens to cultures that are not produced online and 'how far are traditional cultures themselves rhizomically open for development across speed and mobility?' (Alakhdar 2012: 221).

This perspective and these questions are critical in understanding the long-term future of networked everyday media in the Arab world and their importance, not as a trendy tool which overtook the MENA region like a storm, as the mainstream media would have it. This is also about appropriating the uprisings, creating scenarios for the region's future and what Grusin calls premediation (Grusin 2010). This premediation does not only involve manipulating populations, but also creating spaces of peace enabling political and social transformation in these societies, as well as initiating a creative discourse, which links Islam to civil, human and gender equality rights discourses.

The Arab uprisings are occurring at the same time as protests and massive mobilizations against austerity measures in southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal), in which digital media and activism are recognized as a key facilitating factor (but not the cause of mobilization). This recognition dates from 1999 with cyberactivism on Seattle, the anti-Iraq war mobilizations, and now the Occupy movement that has spread around the globe in a postnational demand for reform in radical opposition to transnational corporate control of politics, economics and society. The so-called Arab Spring and accompanying media movement is part of this story, even if the demands had a patriotic and nationalist character, which mostly did not link directly to anti-capitalist movements and resistances. It will be truly exciting to see what lies in the political future when even more connectivity and more media creativity in demanding rights and social justice is the order of the day in societies dissenting against transnational capital, the neoliberal order and the local, national and transnational elites serving this order.

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