

**The Role of Digital Media in the Arab Spring: How Online Technologies advance Democratic Movements for Regime Change.**

Clíona de Paor

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*Declaration*

I declare that the work in this research paper is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

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## ABSTRACT

This Research Paper aims to investigate the role of digital media in political movements pursuing regime change, specifically the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East that have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”. Academic discourse and mass media have focused on the role of online media in these uprisings in great abundance since the Tunisian revolution unfolded in December 2010 and sparked a wave of demonstrations. While a lot of the media coverage focused on the Internet as a catalyst or even a cause of the revolutions, this paper puts forward a more accurate discussion and depiction of the role online media played: as a tool in the process of campaigning for regime change. This paper discusses the Iranian revolution as a potential predecessor to the Arab Spring, the insight provided aims to provide further context. The democratising potential of the Internet is examined within the framework of the Habermasian definition of the Public Sphere to provide a foundation to the discussions on how to define the role of online media with regard to the civic public in subsequent chapters. The different characteristics of mobilisation and community that digital media contributes to are discussed, with the views of the Internet’s detractors and champions both taken into account. The dangers faced by the opponents of authoritarian regimes are analysed, and the setbacks the regimes themselves face when retaliating are discussed. Finally the paper considers the relationship between more traditional forms of mass media and digital media in terms of news and information sources. They are found to be reliant on one another in a variety of ways.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of digital media in political movements pursuing regime change, specifically the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East that have come to be known as the “Arab Spring”. Academic discourse and mass media have focused on the role of online media in these uprisings in great abundance since the Tunisian revolution unfolded in December 2010. While a lot of the media coverage focused on the Internet as a catalyst or even a cause of the revolutions, this paper puts forward a more accurate discussion and depiction of the role online media played: as a tool in the process of campaigning for regime change.

The initial incentive to research this topic was born from the intensive media coverage throughout 2011, and the underlying message that the outside world was witnessing a wave of unrest in a form that had not been seen in this way before. Viral videos exposing police violence, first hand accounts of state corruption and images of the protesters in action flooded the Internet and subsequently more traditional forms of mass media. What appeared to the outside world to be different about these uprisings was the widespread use of online media by citizens to coordinate their efforts and spread awareness, and the question of whether the process of documenting these efforts was responsible for the revolutions occurring in a wave across North Africa and the Middle East. It opened the floodgates for debate on whether digital media can truly enable a revolution or undermine an autocracy. The question of whether the coordination methods of movements that originate online are a viable means of mobilising citizens is broached in this paper, as

well as the struggle between aspiring democrats and territorial autocrats for control of the Internet, and finally an examination of online media's possible superiority to media of years past, yet its reliance on it nonetheless.

There are discussions as to whether the Arab Spring has failed. These discussions refer to the successful acquiring of democracy, whereas this paper will focus solely on the process of protesting for regime change and that time period, from the Tunisian revolt to the summer of 2011. Egypt and Tunisia are featured more prominently than other Arab Spring countries in this paper. The Egyptian revolt is a case that heavily involved digital media, both in terms of successfully documenting the revolt to the outside world, and in terms of Hosni Mubarak's misuse of it in retaliation. The revolution in Tunisia is significant not only because it was the first movement but because arguably it was the most successful. While Libya and Syria will feature, it will be in the context of illustrating arguments about online media, the descent of their respective uprisings into civil war will not feature. The Arab Spring is not dealt with as a case study, but as a means of providing illustrative examples alongside the arguments put forth by the paper. While the aftermath of the revolutions is touched on in the conclusion, the primary focus is on the planning and early actions of overthrowing, or attempting to overthrow, the authoritarian governments.

Islamist tensions or sectarianism within the Arab Spring countries, such as the anti-Shi'ism that was seen in Bahrain (Black, 2012, p.260) for example, are not part of this analysis. This paper also doesn't analyse the motivations of countries outside of the Arab Spring, or the agendas of western corporations and how they affect international reactions.

Additionally Wikileaks will not be discussed, while the cable leaks exposing the already well known corruption of Ben Ali were likely to have contributed to the timing of the Tunisian revolution, the motives and politics of an organisation like Wikileaks would veer off topic from the primary focus of the paper. The international community is only discussed in terms of how it responds to the digital media accounts of the uprisings and the influence these accounts can have. China is a country that has set a precedent for Internet censorship and cyber-control, but is only discussed briefly in comparison with the effectivity of cyber-control tactics ventured by authoritarian regimes of the Arab Spring regions.

Despite the fact that mobile phones are the clear predecessor to the Internet as an activist's tool of choice, this paper is only examining online media. The areas of discussion this paper concentrates on are related to large networks of people debating and mobilising as a collective movement of dissent. In terms of creating a civic community, and as a means of organising and mobilising, the Internet is a superior tool. While the merits of mobile phone use for activism in the past are undeniable, as is their current use in combination with the Internet, they will not be treated as a topic of discussion outside of their use to access the Internet.

## **Chapter Outlines**

Chapter 1 of this paper provides a background to the initial discontent and events that unfolded to become known as the Arab Spring. It also gives some insight into the preceding movement in Iran, in the hopes of providing further context. The democratising potential of the Internet is examined within the framework of the Habermasian definition of the Public Sphere to provide a foundation to the discussions on how to define the role of online media with regard to the civic public in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 considers the arguments to be made about the significance of online media in the mobilisation of a movement, both in terms of structure and coordination. Advantages and disadvantages that stemmed from its use in the Arab Spring uprisings are analysed alongside these arguments. The effectivity of the communities created online are also measured, in terms of commitment to a cause.

Chapter 3 directs attention to dangers authoritarian regimes posed during the Arab Spring, in terms of surveilling activists and infiltrating discussions, as well as their tactics to gain control over the Internet and the mistakes made along the way. The setbacks faced by authoritarian states when repressing online activism are also discussed.

Chapter 4 discusses online activism as a news source in comparison with more traditional coverage such as televised and print media. The inevitable digital surpassing of these older forms of media that has occurred is deliberated, while the disadvantages of online formats such as blogs is acknowledged. The advantages and disadvantages of western media coverage are weighted, and finally the role of Al Jazeera and the use of a culmination of media to present information about uprisings is assessed.

## CHAPTER 1

### A Contextual Background to the Arab Spring and the Internet's place within the Public Sphere

This chapter will provide a background to the origins of the 2011 uprisings, both in terms of how the initial uprising began in Tunisia and spread across North Africa and the Middle East, as well as a broad examination of the 2009 'Green Movement' in Iran, as a similarly structured uprising that preceded these events. Additionally the Habermasian definition of a public sphere will be discussed as a framework for measuring the Internet's potential to democratise through debate and organisation, with the aim of contextualising the examination of online media's role in mobilisation and battling authoritarian cyber-control policies in later chapters. Habermas' own views on the scope of the internet as a vehicle for radical change are also considered, particularly in light of his contempt for mass media in the 20th century. These views are a relevant foundation to the analysis in Chapter 4 of the relationship between online media and mass media with regard to democratic protests.

#### **The Arab Spring**

It was on 17th December 2010 that Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire outside the governor's office in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid. A street vendor by trade, Bouazizi attempted to appeal to the police, town representatives and finally the governor following the confiscation of his wares and the subsequent humiliation he suffered at the hands of

security officials. After his protests fell on deaf ears Bouazizi set himself alight on the street, and by the time of his death on January 4th a series of countrywide demonstrations had begun. The news of Bouazizi's self immolation caused outrage throughout the country and spurred the Tunisian people to inform themselves and share common grievances, through blogs, text messages, online international news outlets and most importantly by communicating amongst each other. As well as spreading information and ideas, the citizens used online media as a means outside of state control to make plans to rally together with the common aim of overthrowing their autocratic ruler. By the 14th January, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was deposed, fleeing into exile.

The rapid and effective movements in Tunisia activated a domino effect in the region, spreading across North Africa to the Middle East and coining the term 'Arab Spring'. The most widely documented of the subsequent uprisings has been the events in Egypt, which evolved from an online youth-oriented call for democracy into the largest protests seen in Cairo in thirty years. While Hosni Mubarak was successfully removed from power in February 2011, Egyptians are still not united in what they want Egypt to become. The Muslim Brotherhood successfully elected Mohammed Morsi to the Egyptian presidency in June 2012 but further protests following a decidedly undemocratic leadership resulted in Morsi's removal from power in July 2013.

The demonstrations of 2011 have had varied success in their outcomes. Tunisia and Egypt managed to overthrow dictators that had ruled for 24 and 29 years respectively. While Tunisia is subsequently experiencing a shaky but determined route to democracy, the

situation in Egypt is still unstable and politically divided. Both Libya and Yemen also managed to oust their autocratic governments but not without significant struggles, with civil war breaking out in Libya and violence springing from the protests in Yemen ignored by then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. While the 2011 wave of protests at least put the journey towards democracy into motion, these countries still have a long way to go to attain a balanced democracy. After a ruthless crackdown the monarchy in Bahrain held on to power despite protests but had to concede considerable economic and governmental changes, while in Syria the citizen protests of 2011 escalated to armed rebellion and the civil war that followed is ongoing. Despite the different aftermaths that the countries involved in the Arab Spring have experienced, a common factor throughout the initial regime upheavals of 2011 was the use of online media.

The reasons for discontent in the countries involved in the Arab Spring were varied and copious prior to the Tunisian revolution. Declining economic production and output, high unemployment, uneven distribution of wealth and low living standards for the majority were all real-world explanations for dissent. But as Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain point out, noting the presence of economic and social factors does not diminish the contribution of digital media: “For years, discontent had been stirring, but somehow the drivers of protest never proved sufficient until mobile phones and the Web began pervading the region.” (Howard and Hussain 2011, p.116) The autocratic governments besieged by protests clearly saw online mobilisation as a threat, censoring websites, repressing bloggers and even shutting down the Internet in the case of Egypt and Libya.

## **2009-10 Iranian Election Protests**

The events dubbed ‘Arab Spring’ by the western media were not the first example of attempts at democratisation that made use of online media. The most direct comparison would be the Iranian revolution of 2009. While Egypt has been widely described as a ‘wired civil society’ (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.113) and has a more widespread use of ICTs than other states in the region, its population is actually second to Iran in terms of Internet usage (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.113). In July 2009 protests broke out in Iran over the presidential election results, as it was suspected that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory had been rigged. While anger with the Ahmadinejad regime had been simmering in Iran for decades, this outcry was similar to the 2011 Tunisian uprising as there was a particular human-interest incident that sparked outrage. Neda Agha-Soltan died at the hands of regime snipers during post-election demonstrations in Tehran. The incident was caught on camera and shared online. Online media gave the protests momentum internationally, with external news sites such as the Huffington Post (2009) and the New York Times (Mackey, 2009) posting real time updates taken from Iranian bloggers and social media.

The reaction of western media to the 2009 Iranian protests was similar to their treatment of the Arab Spring in some ways. On the one hand it was supportive of Iranian efforts to achieve democracy, influencing the US government to go as far as to request that Twitter reschedule their maintenance downtime in order to prevent the Iranians from being without

access to social media (Twitter, 2009). On the other hand this same incident illustrates the international media's overestimation of sites such as Twitter, as Twitter usage in Iran and during these protests was actually only carried out by a small minority (Yahyanejad & Gheytonchi, 2011, p.141). Twitter is widely used in English-speaking regions of the world and is also easy to collate data from, so it would be an appealing – if not wholly accurate – way for western news outlets to attempt to interpret the uprising (Yahyanejad & Gheytonchi, 2011, p.141).

The strength of online media as a tool for mobilisation and exchange of ideas in Iran could be measured in terms of the variety and combination of digital tools. This combination consisted of blogs for broadcasting ideas and dissent, Youtube and BBC's Voice of America service for exposing violence and the everyday protester's experience, aggregator site Balatarin for discovering the most popular sites in Iran, and the use of Facebook for conversing and strategising following the ban on Facebook being lifted prior to the presidential election (Yahyanejad & Gheytonchi, 2011, p.142; Daragahi, 2009). It was also its usage in combination with mobile phones that helped the protests to materialise (Yahyanejad & Gheytonchi, 2011, p.142). Online media was certainly used effectively in 2009 to spread information and form civilian dissent into what came to be known as the Green Movement, led by opposition leaders Medhi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi. However the Green Movement stalled in 2010 as the regime repressed civilian efforts on the streets and their planning online (Tait, 2010). The planned demonstrations on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in February 2010 were a disaster because the regime's authorities were prepared with overwhelming security forces for any dissent in

the Azadi Square of Tehran, where Ahmadine was to make a speech (Time, 2010). Mehdi Yahyanejad and Elham Gheytonchi acknowledge that online media undoubtedly acted as “liberation technology” during and after the 2009 election in Iran, but that flaws within the movement itself stalled its effectiveness:

While social media worked effectively to mobilize protesters in a grassroots nonviolent social movement, better organization and planning will be needed if the Green movement is to be victorious (Yahyanejad and Gheytonchi, 2011, p.151).

The 2009 Iranian protests are an interesting example of a potential prelude to the Arab Spring. The Green Movement was unable to overturn the regime in 2009-10 and the resurgence of their protests following the ousting of Ben Ali and Mubarak resulted in further oppression, with Mousavi and Karroubi being placed under house arrest. Unlike Iran, Egypt and Tunisia succeeded in overthrowing their respective regimes, despite the turmoil that followed. The role of social media in their effective 2011 protests will be examined in closer detail in Chapter 3.

### **The Internet and the Public Sphere**

An analysis of the movements of 2010-2011 that followed the Iranian uprising requires that these movements are contextualised within a concept Habermas identifies as the “Public Sphere” (1989). According to German sociologist Habermas, the public sphere “appears as a specific domain – the public domain versus the private” (Habermas, 1989, p.2). This domain is a place where public opinion can be formed, as opposed to merely consisting

of a public crowd or a publicly voiced view. The public sphere must involve the exchange of ideas, and is representative of and tantamount to a democratic society: As Papacharissi argues, “the value of the public sphere lies in its ability to facilitate uninhibited and diverse discussion of public affairs, thus typifying democratic traditions” (2009, p.232). Habermas divides the public sphere into two sections, “The private realm and the sphere of public authority” (1989, p.30). A public sphere existing within the private realm is the “world of letters”, consisting of institutions such as salons and coffee houses which form the most important element within Habermas’s public sphere (1989, p.36). It is significant for its two democratic qualities of “heterogeneity and rational criticism” (Habermas, cited by Tiwari, 2006, p.642).

Habermas treats that those who take on open and accessible tools of expression become a public, and the existence and growth of a coordinated public increases the pressure on undemocratic rulers, simultaneously increasing the agency of that public sphere. Agency is of importance as a public sphere ought to have an influence on politics in order to be defined as such. His enthusiasm for the Internet’s potential for activism and mobilisation is limited to the context of authoritarian regimes:

The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of

isolated issue publics. (Habermas, 2006, p.423)

The use of online media during the Arab Spring's initial stages certainly brings this view to life in many ways. It can be argued that firstly it is an egalitarian movement in terms of debate and mobilisation, and it was utilised to undermine authoritarian regimes, to varying success.

The structure of the Internet is uninhibited by geography and therefore offers unlimited opportunities for discourse regardless of social status, making it an inevitable suggestion as a revitalised form of the public sphere. Habermas's firm stance is that it is not a public sphere nor does the web itself produce public spheres (Jeffries, 2010). His severe treatment of digital media builds on his contempt for traditional mass media such as newspapers and television corporations, and what he sees as the commercial takeover of public opinion:

Ever since the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section, the press... became an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere. (Habermas, 1989, p.185)

Rather than only promoting specific agendas, the advent of the Internet has the means to make both people and arguments that were formerly without a platform more visible to the public. As Papacharissi notes, "the proliferation of online public spaces that are part commercial and part private suggests a new hybrid model of public spaces, where consumerist and civic rhetoric co-exist" (2009, p.232). This suggestion is that online media

is a new form of public space, a compromise between the ideal non-commercial public sphere that Habermas envisions, and the inevitable commercialism of popular contemporary media. Even if the Internet was to be defined as a public space rather than a Habermasian public sphere, it is this co-existence of consumerist and civic rhetoric that changes citizens' relationship with the public sphere. Even if Habermas is skeptical of the Internet's potential for debate and discussion, this structure of a community that not only consumes but produces and contributes to a political discourse has been central to Habermas' thinking. There is a good argument to be made that in this regard the Internet emulates the 18th-century public sphere that Habermas idealizes, as well as resembling the gloried "World of Letters" aspect of his envisioned public sphere in terms of inclusiveness, where opinions "became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence" (Habermas, 1989, pp.33-34).

The distinction between a public space and a public sphere does not diminish the role of online media in political activism. The use of online media in political activism is not diminished by being defined as a public space or a public sphere. Benkler refers to it as a "networked public sphere", that is "not made of tools, but of social production practices that these tools enable" (2006, p.219). The way that online media facilitates this networked public sphere will be measured by specifically examining mobilisation with the goal of regime change in Chapter 2, by assessing both positive and negative views of online media as liberation technology, and examples of these arguments in action will be given within the context of the Arab Spring.

## CHAPTER 2:

### The Issue of Mobilisation

This chapter discusses the arguments that surround the structure and organisation of democratic movements with online origins. It also considers the importance of community in civil movements as well as the notion of strong ties at the root of these movements, and whether online forums can create a sense of community. The Gladwell-Shirky debate that unfolded through 2010-2011 regarding the benefits of digital activism forms the foundation for the discussion of the various opinions that have been voiced on digital mobilisation. Gladwell (2010) first argued that the media had exaggerated the effects of Twitter and Facebook as tools for collective political action. His primary criticisms of digital activism—which he was sceptical of as a concept—were the sprawled structure of online networks and what he viewed as “weak-tie” movements. His views contrasted sharply with those of Shirky, who believed in online technologies’ capacity and potential for political action and change. Shirky views the role of online media as a tool for mobilisation and group formation, and an improvement on the tools of the pre-Internet age (2011).

#### **Structure and Leadership**

One of the primary arguments pitted against social media and Internet technologies as a means of enacting political change is the issue of internal structure. A movement formed online through the exchange of ideas may generate enthusiasm, but once this enthusiasm

is taken to the streets, who is in charge? Despite prominent figures emerging throughout the various uprisings, a commonly stated observation throughout the coverage of the Arab Spring was the unusual lack of discernible leadership (Howard & Hussain 2011, p.118 ). Gladwell (2010) argues that peaceful strategic protests require hierarchical structures for planning and successful execution. He directly argues against Shirky's view in *Here Comes Everybody* that this newly emerging decentralised form of activism is an improvement, emphasising the flawed structure of a movement framed via social media. His view is that a civil movement needs an internal authority structure in order to successfully mobilise itself, and that the sprawled make up of social networks will inevitably suffer in an activism context from a lack of discipline. In light of this viewpoint, it is interesting to note that in the case of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was the group among the protesters who had the most traditionally hierarchical structure, and this stood to them in the aftermath of Mubarak's ousting as they managed to successfully attain leadership. However Howard and Hussain (2011, p.114) observed that what took Egyptian authorities and the rest of the world by surprise was how quickly the protesters scaled up; such speed in mobilising against Mubarak was unexpected. This swift action could be seen as weakening the Gladwell argument that social media cannot work as a platform to plan a well disciplined movement.

Not everyone thinks this lack of hierarchy is a bad thing. When discussing the lack of prominent leadership in the uprisings of 2011, Diamond (2012, p.xxii) takes a measured approach in his analysis but does describe the execution of the movement in Tunisia as a 'fluid and leaderless revolution' in the face of government arrests. Rather than viewing

the lack of hierarchy involved in the Arab Spring protests as a flaw, Marwan Bishwara argues that this new, networked structure is in fact beneficial to the young Arab digital activists of 2011 in terms of equality (2012):

Theirs is a newfound egalitarianism that contradicts the intrinsically hierarchical and inhibiting sociopolitical system. Paternalism was replaced with collegial relations; censorship was replaced by free expression. Internet citizens were not judged according to gender, ethnicity, age, or class - but on individual contributions, ability, and wit.

An egalitarian medium such as the Internet is an appropriate mode of expression for technology-savvy young people, and in Egypt an overwhelming fifty-four percent of its population consists of the under-twenty-four demographic (LaGraffe 2012, p.72). In most Arab countries more than half of the population is less than twenty-five years of age (LaGraffe 2012, p.69, citing Zakaria).

Howard and Hussain point out that this was a network of “relatively liberal, peaceful, middle-class citizens”(2011, p.114), and it could be argued that the social composition of this network weakens Bishwara’s championing of the Internet as an egalitarian platform. However about twenty five percent of Egypt’s population are college educated, so this network of protesters was not a minority of elites (LaGraffe 2012, p.73, citing Camplin 2011). Perhaps this is just indicative of the fact that educated citizens are the most likely to pave the way for revolution in any context. What is certainly egalitarian is the accessibility of the online landscape following the advent of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as now any civilian can become an activist or orchestrate a movement without having to be

particularly educated or adept with computers.

With regard to the Arab Spring uprisings it appears that not only were there few leaders in the traditional sense (Howard & Hussain 2011, p.118). However the uprisings were not without prominent voices. Wael Ghonim was working as a Google executive from Dubai in 2010 when he made a Facebook page that was to be liked by over 250,000 Egyptian civilians within the first three months (Ghonim 2012, p.113). The page was in memory of a young man named Khaled Said, who had been beaten to death by Egyptian police forces (BBC, 2011). “We are all Khaled Said” had a unifying effect and evolved into more than just a memorial, first becoming a page that kept track of and protested against police corruption and violence, then developing into a space where Egyptians would discuss their ideas and plans for street protests in Cairo and Tahrir square. While Ghonim was the creator of the page, he was purposely anonymous and not even living in Egypt, so he was hardly a leader.

Ghonim has said that while it became a forum where everyone was free to share their views, some ideas were better than others. There was certainly a systematic and democratic approach to ideas, with some ultimately being vetoed and others voted on. Ghonim (2012, p.93) let the page’s users cast a vote on whether they approved of an English language version of their site, and the vote ultimately was affirmative. Ghonim’s account of how political goals were identified and agreed upon in January and February of 2011 showcases a certain collective intuition, a group instinct as to what needed to be done in the preparation phase of deposing Mubarak. Of course, this collective intuition ultimately was

shattered when the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular nationalists ended up ideologically clashing following the removal of Mubarak.

Blogger and activist Patrick Meier (2011) argues in favour of Shirky's views, maintaining that the features of social media are compatible with the components and organisational nature of civil society groups and non-violent movements (2011, p.57). He makes a strong case for why the lack of discernible leadership was not a hindrance, but was actually advantageous for the uprisings. This case is made on two fronts: Firstly, when there aren't immediately identifiable leaders or figures in a movement, it is more difficult for repressive regimes to arrest people and therefore effectively suppress dissent and spread fear. Most of the activists working online during the 2011 uprisings found methods of eluding the authorities, as the lack of individual leaders meant authorities were monitoring sites such as Facebook and Twitter closely. In Syria, the Assad regime unblocked Facebook and Twitter as protests mounted, in all likelihood to entrap activists (Howard & Hussain 2011, p.118). Wael Ghonim had been working anonymously as the moderator of his "We are all Khaled Said" page for months before he was detained by the regime on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January (Ghonim 2012, p.197). It is clear from his encounter that he would have been detained earlier had the regime been more successful in uncovering his identity and their information control efforts (Ghonim 2012, p.200).

Meier's second defense of the networked structure of digital activism focuses on the contrasting structure of repressive regimes. He argues that the hierarchical framework of an autocratic regime is a roadblock in terms of that regime keeping up with the pace of

planning and mobilisation that digital activism can achieve (2011, pp.55-56, citing Garrett). The Egyptian regime's attempts to tackle online dissent are an example of a slower response rate ultimately resulting in failure. Many viewed the blackouts as too little too late; Diamond (2012, p.xx) argues that the Egyptian regime's mistake was to underestimate the power of the Internet, unlike China whose censors are very well versed in cyber control technology. Additionally, Mubarak disabled Egyptian broadband facilities but left satellite and landline links alone. Rather than viewing the digital activism network as being a shortcoming, Meier views it as the future. A networked structure is part of a changing environment that regimes will have to adapt to in order to successfully quell the outcry of their citizens. "Ultimately it is a battle of organisational theory" (Dobson, Newsweek, 2010).

### **Organisational Advantages**

After Gladwell's direct challenging of the ideas in *Here Comes Everybody*, Shirky countered Gladwell in a series of exchanges in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* (2011). On the issue of a need for a more hierarchical structure he argued that the cost-efficient and time saving nature of online mobilisation compensated for any flaws in terms of discipline:

Digital networks have acted as a massive positive supply shock to the cost and spread of information, to the ease and range of public speech by citizens, and to the speed and scale of group coordination. As Gladwell has noted elsewhere, these changes do not allow otherwise uncommitted groups to take effective political action. They do, however, allow committed groups to play by new rules. (Shirky, 2011).

That online planning can reduce the coordination costs of civic movements is clear. Garrett argues that ICTs allow smaller contributions to be more effectively utilised than in the past, resulting in lower costs overall (Garrett, 2006, p.7). Through lowered costs, participation levels have the potential to rise:

By reducing costs associated with publishing and accessing movement information, ICTs have the potential to alter the flow of political information, to reduce the cost of conventional forms of participation, and to create new low-cost forms of participation, ultimately contributing to an upsurge in participation (Garrett 2006, p.5, citing Leizerov 2000).

The accessibility that online media provides is of great importance in authoritarian countries where political dialogue is repressed. Political dialogue was practically non-existent in traditional Egyptian and Tunisian public forums prior to the 2011 uprisings (Meier 2011, p.163; Calingaert, 2010). While Shirky's argument is that the advantages to coordination that online media provide outweigh the possibility of structural issues within the movement, he acknowledges the importance of control within a civic group in *Cognitive Surplus* arguing that "the more a group wants to take on hard public or civic problems, the greater the internal threats of distraction or dissipation are and the stronger the norms of governance need to be" (2010, p.179),

## **Strong Ties vs. Weak Ties**

Gladwell's initial criticisms in the *New Yorker* of social media activism built on the argument laid out in Doug McAdam's article *Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer* (1986). The article assesses the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, a campaign as part of the civil rights movement to get as many African-Americans in Mississippi registered to vote as possible. The white students who had been recruited to coordinate the projects experienced so much vitriol, harassment and threats of danger and violence that many of them opted out of the project. McAdam compares the Freedom Summer dropouts with the participants who stayed, and this example is used as a backdrop for the crux of his argument that what truly motivates participants to act in a movement is not ideology but personal connections, or "strong ties". Gladwell (2010) dismisses online activism as based on "weak-tie" connections primarily because he sees it as merely an exchange of ideas that does not translate into action:

Shirky considers this model of activism an upgrade. But it is simply a form of organizing which favors the weak-tie connections that give us access to information over the strong-tie connections that help us persevere in the face of danger.

McAdam associates the strength or pull of these ties with both cost and risk, but makes sure to distinguish between the two:

While the *act* of signing a petition is always low *cost*, the *risk* of doing so may, in certain contexts—during the height of McCarthyism, for example—be quite high. Similarly, organizing among the homeless may be costly but relatively risk free (1986, p.67).

Gladwell is quick to equate digital activism with McAdam's description of low risk movements, but the 2011 uprisings are an example of movements that were low cost in terms of initial online strategies and high risk when these strategies were enacted on the streets. Meier argues that online technologies facilitate community creation (2011, p.45). He looks to Garrett's framework (2006, p.5) for analysing the link between technology and participation in social movements: "reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community." Garrett argues that "[o]nline community members report that their experiences with these groups significantly reinforce existing social networks, while simultaneously allowing them to connect with those who hold different views (Garrett 2006 citing Norris 2004 pp.6-7). The point Gladwell doesn't appear to acknowledge is that a lot of commentators praising social media are viewing it as a tool that advances already existing ideas and communities, rather than replacing them. In fact in the case of Egypt, there was already a political online community in place that was then influenced by the Tunisian uprisings into taking action. As mentioned earlier, Ghonim's Facebook page had garnered 250,000 members by September 2010. Because of the regime's monitoring of public media any dissent about corruption was published online. The Internet "emerged as a haven of relatively free speech in otherwise restrictive media environments" (Calingaert, 2010).

McAdam and Gladwell are talking about motivating factors as well as participation. Where Gladwell may have a point is the question of whether online communities are actually motivating people to take action and protest, or merely updating those that were already committed actors, and spreading awareness to those who remain uncommitted. As discussed above in terms of cost saving, Garrett claims that the use of Internet technologies makes a difference with regard to smaller donations to movements or organisations. This means lower levels of participation or contribution can be of more use than in movements prior to the advent of online media. He argues that this can lead to a greater sense of obligation on the part of the donating actor, "...having contributed to a movement, an individual is likely to feel more committed to the issue and more certain that action was required." (Garrett 2006, p.7) A large part of Meier's doctoral paper discusses the Ushahidi platform, a leading initiative in the growing trend of crisis mapping technologies. Ushahidi is an open-source, crowdsourcing tool that gathers and analyses real-time data during a crisis. It was originally founded as a means for Kenyan activists to submit and collate information about the disputed presidential election in 2007 and the violence that followed the civilian outcry (Shirky, 2010b). During the uprisings of 2011 Ushahidi was a resource that was of great use in documenting and assessing public struggles in terms of the immediacy of the information. It was an "easy and public way for everyday Egyptians to be included" (Meier 2011, p.171), by sharing information on the scenes of violence and corruption they encountered. Meier (ibid, p.172) writes that "one activist noticed that the technology allowed more people to "make small, low risk contributions, like sending SMS or an email". Meier sees this option to participate in small amounts as a sort of upgrade, as an opportunity for people who may have contributed nothing to be given a feasible way to

at least do something.

This chapter has addressed the critical arguments advanced against online media's ability to be used effectively in the early stages of activism, specifically the process of mobilisation. While there are undoubtedly advantages to a hierarchical structure within civic movements, the wave of digital activism that has swept the Middle East in the last decade has heralded a new type of mobilisation in the form of the decentralised network. That this structure exists and has achieved results for democratic movements must be acknowledged. Additional advantages to this form of mobilisation such as swifter and cheaper coordination have been discussed, and the concept of new forms of community being created online has been contended. Structure and organisation are important factors when measuring the actions and outcomes of these movements seeking regime change. How the regimes in question handle these actions will be assessed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Emerging Struggle for Internet Control

Morozov argues that to truly understand the impact of the internet on authoritarianism, it needs to be examined not only in the context of how opponents of their country's governments use it to undermine authoritarian rulers, but also how it is used to boost the legitimacy of modern authoritarian rule as well (2011, p.86). This chapter will investigate the tactics regimes of the Arab Spring used, and the problems authoritarian regimes face when tackling digital activism and the growth of democratic ideas online amongst their citizens. Additionally the dangers faced by protesters, namely the Arab protesters of 2010-2011, are discussed, and the growing conflict for control of the Internet is arrived at.

#### **Infiltration and Surveillance**

One of Morozov's cautionary arguments is the infiltration of online media under authoritarian regimes. He points to the blogosphere in countries under authoritarian rule, and the large amount of extreme nationalist sentiment and xenophobia present, "sometimes so poisonous that official government policy looks cosmopolitan in comparison" (Morozov, 2011, p.86). While Morozov acknowledges that the effect this radicalisation of nationalism could have on the government's reputation is hard to predict (2011, p.86), it is very plausible that propaganda of this sort could feed into already underlying fears of foreign invasion in certain countries (Ibid.). Garrett also warns of the dangers of unreliable

sources online:

While removing filters makes useful information available, it simultaneously makes it more difficult to differentiate accurate information from fabrication: conspiracy theories may be as prominent as well-substantiated claims (Garrett, 2006, p.22 citing Wright, 2004 and Gurak & Logie, 2003. )

Gladwell (2010) echoes Morozov's concerns regarding this sort of authoritarian infiltration, and these concerns were certainly justified in the context of the Arab Spring. According to Meier, the Ministry of Interior in Egypt was well aware of the changes taking place in the politics and activism of young citizens, and as a result took steps to combat the dissent on social media 'by adopting a strategy more similar to that of digital activists' (Meier 2011, p.164). Prior to the events of December 2010 breaking out in Tunisia, on July 1 2010 the Egyptian Ministry reportedly established a department specifically to monitor Facebook content and activity in Egypt (Raouf, 2010). The key aim of this department was to publish social media pages and reports that would interact and disagree with any criticisms of Mubarak and his son Gamal. Moreover groups of young people were recruited to create Facebook groups in support of Mubarak and the National Democratic Party.

Another danger digital activists face is surveillance. While uploading crisis maps, videos and twitter updates can quickly spread information on a worldwide scale, this means the information is also available for the authorities to track. The Tunisian Regime had accelerated their surveillance and hacking exploits in the run-up to the revolution that would ultimately overthrow Ben Ali:

Security officials regularly broke into the e-mail, Facebook, and blogging accounts of opposition and human rights activists, either deleting specific material or simply collecting intelligence about their plans and contacts (Kelly & Cook, 2011).

Following the fall of Mubarak, protesters stormed the offices of Egyptian National Security and among the findings was a security report on the U-shahid project with names and contact details of many activists including skype information (Meier 2011, p.201). Meier sees this as encouraging, reading the Egyptian regime's concern as validation of the platform's relevance.

### **The Challenges and Pitfalls of Censorship**

Online platforms such as the U-shahid project are in more danger of being targeted by regimes than autonomous social networks by virtue of being political in their mission of crisis mapping regions of conflict. Because global sites like Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are all—at least outwardly—apolitical in their missions, it is more challenging for authorities to justify shutting them down. This makes them incredibly advantageous as platforms, as the depth of their content makes it difficult for the protesters to be suppressed or caught out by their monitoring regimes. Ethan Zuckerman coined a phrase for this advantage known as the “Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism” in 2008 (Shirky, 2011). The phrase stems from the fact that if apolitical users of sites like Facebook are interrupted from viewing pictures of cute cats or other online popular culture, they will become outraged and the dissent faced by the regime in question will then grow. Additionally,

social networks that are used worldwide are impossible for non-democratic rulers to decisively suppress. It could be argued that the Egyptian blackouts were an illustrative manifestation of the Cute Cat Theory, the blackouts were not enforced early enough and thoroughly enough in 2011 to suppress the uprising, but shutting off the internet caused outrage in formerly apolitical bystanders, and did nothing to curb demonstrators (Dunn, 2011, [v]). Ushaidi were prepared in the event they were shut down, as they had made efforts to connect all their data to Facebook and Twitter: being so strongly linked to more autonomous social media sites made them stronger (Meier 2011, pp.178-179).

There was a lot of merit in concerns regarding authoritarian infiltration and surveillance of digital activism during the acceleration of the Arab Spring in 2011. But despite the practice of these repression tactics, not all of the tactics were successful. One course of action that the Arab regimes took that was sometimes executed poorly and frequently misguided was their attempts at censorship. Specifically, the blackouts in Egypt at the end of January 2011 were an example of censorship use that was arguably too little too late. Mubarak's attempts to disconnect Egyptians from their digital networks was "a desperate maneuver with mixed impact" (Agarwal, Howard & Hussain, 2011). The Libyan Internet shutdown was implemented in February during a peak period of violence amongst protesters and Gaddafi supporters on the street, but the violence had broken out prior to the Internet shutdown, which did nothing to curb the fighting (Los Angeles Times, 2011). When it comes to censorship, Morozov believes that there are more effective ways of undermining online organisations and communities, such as shutting down sites periodically in order to undermine their reliability, or force sites to pay for better hosting services (Morozov 2011b,

p.52). A big part of Mubarak's mistake was not viewing the internet as a threat in the same way other authoritarian states such as Iran, Tunisia and China did (Kelly & Cook, 2011). 6 months prior to the Tunisian uprising, Daniel Calingaert wrote of the systems these countries had in place:

They maintain extensive, multilayered systems of censorship and surveillance to stifle online dissent. These systems place severe limits on politically sensitive content that citizens can access, post on the internet, and transmit via mobile phones. Surveillance of internet and mobile phone communications is pervasive, and citizens who criticize the government online are subject to harassment, imprisonment, and torture. (Calingaert 2010).

Tunisia had less of an online political culture than Egypt in 2010, due to repression:

The internet is blocked, and censored pages are referred to as pages “not found” – as if they had never existed. Schoolchildren exchange proxies and the word becomes cult: “You got a proxy that works?” (Ben Hassine, 2011, p.216)

### **The Dictator's Dilemma**

Authoritarian regimes are faced with a predicament when uprisings unfold on social media, a problem described as ‘The Dictator's Dilemma’ (Shirky, 2011; Wintrobe, 2002, pp.2-3). The dilemma is that when violence and atrocities against protesters are documented online, suddenly the world is watching. This makes it a lot more difficult for the authorities in question to continue their regime without addressing these incidents and actions, as they

are no longer being left to their own devices but face international pressure and scrutiny. In the context of the Arab Spring this dilemma produced two problematic outcomes for authoritarian regimes.

The first problem autocrats face in regards to being observed by the international community is that repression in the form of censorship and blackouts is made more difficult because of globalisation and global markets; they are economically obliged to keep the country's communication borders open. This is not to say that authoritarian governments haven't been working on measures to control the internet and repress dissent while still maintaining an economically viable cyberspace, but the economic evidence of the 'Dictator's Dilemma' argument can be seen in the context of Egypt:

Egypt lost at least US\$90 million to Mubarak's only partly successful efforts to cut off digital communications. Perhaps even more damaging in the long run, this episode harmed the country's reputation among technology firms as a safe place to invest. (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.119)

In contrast to the Egyptian uprising, in Tunisia it was actually the activists who did the most economic damage, by hacking the national stock exchange. (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.119)

The second outcome of the Dictator's Dilemma is that online documentation of repression and violence inflicted on protesters can provoke international outrage and even intervention. This is arguably the most important direct effect of digital activism, the

spreading of awareness. Utilising social media is an effective way to spread awareness on a worldwide scale of possible injustices or atrocities. It fosters a sense of accountability in the worldwide community via transparency. Persistent use of Social Media was essential during the 2011 uprising and subsequent crisis in Libya. Despite Gaddafi's Internet shutdown in March 2011, digital activists were heard by the worldwide community. In the same month the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor sited social media as a primary influence on the ICC's decision to intervene in Libya (Schubert, 2011).

Looking to the future, Larry Diamond warns that "there is now a technological race underway between democrats seeking to circumvent Internet censorship and dictatorships that want to extend and refine it." (Diamond, 2012, p.xiii) Daniel Calingaert explains that in the coming years the actions of the worldwide community, and democratic governments in particular, will be very important in terms of the outcome of this race, for example providing Internet access and restricting authoritarian attempts at advanced filtering or surveillance technologies (Calingaert, 2012, pp.169-170). These democracies also have to be cautious in advancing their own Internet regulations so as not to make it easier for authoritarian governments to justify their more drastic cyber-control policies. Morozov views the future with a wary foreboding, warning of democratic governments "creating an enabling environment for authoritarian governments" (Morozov, 2011b, p.58) as well as acknowledging the burgeoning amount of software being developed specifically for the purpose of mining citizens' private data:

Whether the use of such software could be limited only to democratic states and business contexts remains to be seen; in the worst-case scenario, such tools may end up strengthening the surveillance apparatus of authoritarian states. (Morozov, 2011, p.58)

The danger in the authoritarian regimes overtaking the activists in terms of Internet literacy and repressing free and democratic communication online is that already oppressed regions would then face the “networked authoritarianism” that China has so skillfully mastered (MacKinnon, 2011, p.79). However despite the challenges ahead, digital activists should feel validated by the effect their mobilising and documenting has had, “as prodemocracy protests erupted in Egypt in January 2011 [...] Sina Weibo, China’s version of Twitter, blocked the word “Egypt” from its search engine” (Quiang, 2011, p.73). It is certainly arguable that the Arab Spring played a prominent role in accelerating this “arms race in cyberspace” (Deibert, 2012, p.33).

## CHAPTER 4

### The Relationship Between Online Media and Traditional Mass Media

This chapter examines the relationship between online media and traditional forms of mass media in the context of digital activism, specifically with examples of how they interacted during 2010-2011 of the Arab Spring. Particular focus is given to comparisons between the respective media during crises as well as the relatively symbiotic relationship the older media has with the newer media. Traditional international mass media organisations in democratic states are examined, and the consequences that can follow the coverage from these organisations for digital activism is analysed.

#### **A Digital Overshadowing**

In 1958, Norton Long described the influence of newspapers as setting “the civic agenda” (p.260). However the advent of Internet reporting, with the immediacy of online information and cost efficiency of citizen journalism, has produced a rapidly transforming Fourth Estate for the 21st century. Online media has surpassed traditional forms of media in popularity in relation to immediate news stories such as political crises and also for independent news reports from regions where freedom of press is not a reality. For long-established news organisations to survive in democratic states, they must successfully evolve to include digital content. The use of youtube videos, tweets and first-hand blog accounts are now commonplace in televised news reports, particularly when it comes to

covering events that are unfolding as the broadcast takes place (Al Jazeera, 2011). The use of social media and online accounts of events are now an essential component in the production of televised news reports, not only to provide immediacy into an event—such as an uprising or a riot—as it unfolds but also as a means of getting a first hand account of events from the citizens on the ground. Katz and Lazarsfeld (2009, p.309) map out a two-tier system of political opinion when discussing how actors become committed to a cause. The first step is what the actor learns from mass media, the second is what they hear friends, family and colleagues echo and opine about information from the media. Shirky argues that this second step is where political opinions are formed, and where the Internet makes the difference, as this process of digesting the information and subsequently the conversation is achieved in a faster and safer manner with online media (Shirky, 2011).

### **The Quality Control Issue in Online Media**

However that is not to say that online media and social media in particular deliver information flawlessly, nor are they entirely independent of more traditional media. The effect that online media can have on the mobilisation stage of uprisings has been discussed in Chapter 2. However its use in an earlier stage of the protest process, discussions surrounding socio-political issues, will now be considered. According to Jodi Dean (2009, p.43) these interactions online merely provide “an imaginary site of action and belonging” that don’t develop into actual debates. Previously passive information consumers can now enter the online realm as producers. With blogs anyone can have their story heard, and with social media their opinion. However not all of these producers will be of high quality.

Fisher argues that the “interpassive simulation” and “network narcissism” of social media participation results in a very repetitive and conformist ideological output (2009, p.75). Additionally Papacharissi claims that many blogs are more representative of a personal diary than of engaging political commentary (2010, p.145). The personal format of a blog is both its strength and its weakness: blogs can be a very accessible way for newcomers to absorb information that is less likely to be agenda-driven than mainstream media, and to enter a dialogue with people they can identify with. Benkler emphasises the interactive potential, “the end product is a weighted conversation, rather than a finished good” (2006, p.217). Shirky (2011) believes that access to conversation is more important than access to information, making blogs of great importance. However blogging is also a medium that is prone to subjectivity, inaccuracy and incoherence. Dean believes anyone can make a blog, and the abundance in production “misdirects some critical theorists away from the structure of real networks” (2009, p.30).

Ultimately while online media is less respectful and beholden to corporations and governments than traditional forms of mass media, it also lacks the professional production and editorial structure present in long-established media. It raises the question of whether online media needs to be covered by more traditional forms of media in order to be considered legitimate and for the message of dissent to be heard and supported. In Chapter 3 the danger of government infiltration into digital activism networks was discussed. This problem can result in initial uncertainty surrounding online sources, and such uncertainty provides a new need for the performance of the traditional role of mass media news organisations, as a conduit between producer and consumer that clarifies the validity of sources:

In such an environment, news organizations may be transformed from gatekeepers to brokers that use their expertise and credibility to link information consumers and producers. (Garrett, 2006, p.22)

### **Dangers of Democratic Mass Media Coverage**

It is important at this point to distinguish between the more traditional forms of mass media in democratic states and nondemocratic states. When it comes to groups seeking democracy such as the movements that formed the Arab Spring, online media was used as an accessible alternative to state controlled media such as televised news and mainstream printed newspapers:

Activities of non-governmental organisations such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, Young Lawyers Association, the Tunisian Bar, the Association of Democratic Women, the Tunisian Trade Union and the Tunisian Journalists Association, to name a few, do not get reported in the state media (Al Jazeera, 2011b).

In the Arab Spring region, particularly in Egypt, the Internet “emerged as a haven of relatively free speech in otherwise restrictive media environments” (Calingaert, 2010). With regard to the same forms of media in democratic states, however, coverage and discussions of the Arab Spring that were spread by these news outlets were of considerable benefit to the movements in terms of expanding the audience for the activists. But there can be disadvantages to the coverage from traditional mass media in democratic states.

While the coverage can lead to intervention in the crisis state in question, there are often instances of interventions exacerbating the situation. A disputed example of this was the Nato intervention in Libya. With the violence in Libya heightening, Milne claims that the Nato-backed forces on the ground “dwarfed the death tolls in this year’s other bloody Arab uprisings, Syria and Yemen.” and all the while “Nato leaders and cheerleading media have turned a blind eye” (2011). Clark countered Milne’s claims by contesting his death toll figures, claiming he excessively blamed Nato for the death toll and that “The new Libyan leadership would find it hard to resist pressure from an international community that has just delivered it to power” (Clark, 2011).

The USA has faced criticism (Meier, 2011, p.63, citing Gharbia 2010 & Morozov 2011) for lauding online activists in their televised and print media coverage while allegedly supplying the governments of the same Arab countries with funds and guns. This behaviour makes the narratives published by the American mass media suspect. Meier makes a good point regarding American initiatives that aim to make ICTs a more embedded part of civic dialogue and policy on a worldwide scale, remarking that these initiatives are problematic when American funds are also being distributed to cyber-controlling regimes, and that a good place to start improving civic use of ICTs would be to curb foreign aid to these regimes (2011, p.217).

The double standards of Western media (Meier, 2011, p.217) praising the digital activists whilst funding their oppressors is not the only issue. These news sources will often form their own narratives that don’t necessarily represent the countries they are covering, a

specific example is that western media is prone to exaggerating the role of social media when analysing the catalyst of the Arab uprisings, and in doing so refuses to acknowledge the decades of oppression and years of unemployment and corruption endured in North Africa and the Middle East (Douglas, 2012). This focus on social media is a form of romanticising the revolutions, with international mass media organisations dubbing the movements “the facebook revolutions” (Hauslohner, 2011). The danger of viewing events solely through a western prism is the hailing of western technology companies such as Facebook as the root cause of the Arab uprisings and as heroic western saviours of civil society from autocratic states.

### **Al Jazeera and a Culmination of Media**

When considering the evolution of 21st century journalism, Mason argues that this era’s equivalent to the phenomenal change that accompanied new journalism of the 1960s will not be looked on with awe in the same way, not the same “grand reportage”, “Rather, it is the combined input of thousands of people into the freely accessible public record of social media” (2012, p.3). He is correct that it is the quality of a combined input that strengthens the identity of 21st century news and information systems.

ICTs allow the creation of a flexible information environment, in which an individual may tailor how he encounters content so that the experience best suits his learning style (Jones and Berger 1995). For example, content may be provided in a range of modalities, including text, images, audio, and video, and with a variety of levels of interactivity, from static documents and reports to dynamic user-controllable models (Garrett 2006, p.8).

This quality also lends itself to the culmination of online media with traditional mass media. Benkler believes that Internet communications can “complement the mass media and alleviate its worst weaknesses” (2006, p.210). Shirky goes a step further and claims traditional 20th century mass media that manages to successfully incorporate online media into its coverage should no longer be defined as such:

ICTs can no longer be analyzed in opposition to, or even apart from, changes in the ‘mainstream’ media environmental—[Al] Jazeera both consumes and produces digital content at such a high rate and across such a large spectrum of sources and recipients that it defeats any attempt to treat it as ‘TV’ in the 20th century sense (Meier 2011 p.8, citing Shirky 2011).

A potential positive side effect of this collaborative media would be the possibility of closing the generational divide between older people who cannot use the latest information technologies and their younger counterparts. Mass media that incorporates digital information could bridge this divide.

An interesting question posed at the beginning of 2011 regarding the potential for dissent following the Tunisian uprising was “Will social media play the role of al-Jazeera this time?” (Lynch, 2011). Lynch was comparing the Tunisian movement with the brief uprising in Beirut in 2005. This question is noteworthy in hindsight because of Al Jazeera’s reliance on online media and their production of online content during the Arab Spring. Al Jazeera is an interesting example of traditional media in that it relied heavily on digital

media during the Arab Spring, and alternatively their abundant use of real time accounts, information and social media updates was of great help in terms of spreading the message of the online activists to a worldwide public.

Most everybody is carefully watching everyone else to see what's going to happen, with news traveling across borders and within countries through an ever-growing role for social media layered on top of (not replacing) satellite television and existing networks (Lynch, 2011).

Al Jazeera helped capture popular attention to the protests and inspired further mobilisation. It also enjoyed the highest profile and the most influence regionally (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.120). As Plunkett and Halliday put it:

The Qatar-based channel's acclaimed coverage of the Egyptian crisis has been referred to as the broadcaster's "CNN moment", doing for al-Jazeera English what the first Gulf war did for CNN, pushing it to the forefront of the public's consciousness. Put simply, must-see TV. (Plunkett & Halliday, 2011)

The relationship between long-established forms of media and online media has to be examined in the context of democracy. In democratic states, online media is now an essential source of information for news outlets covering uprisings in authoritarian states. It is also a source treated with caution, due to the potential for authoritarian infiltration, fabrication, trolls or merely inaccurate information. But in nondemocratic states online media is often a viable alternative to mass media outlets, primarily because it is harder

for governments to control it or silence it. On the one hand online media is becoming the replacement for print and televised media as this century unfolds, but on the other it is reliant on these accessible media to widen its audience. It is fair to conclude that the relationship between the two is one of give-and-take, and the relevance of more traditional media has not yet been obliterated.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis contained in this paper endeavoured to explore the question of how online media can be implemented in political uprisings, specifically uprisings that are in pursuit of democracy and demanding regime change. The Arab Spring uprisings were chosen as a focal point because the wave of demonstrations unfolded so vividly in real time all over the world, to an extent that had not been realised before. This paper has aimed to be measured and objective in its attempts to present the various arguments surrounding the role of online media in democratic movements. It has sought to avoid a limited, utopian adulation of revolutions that utilise the Internet, while simultaneously not falling into the trap of excessive scepticism and pessimism. The aim was to weigh up the valid points that both the champions and detractors of digital activism have to make.

### **Chapter Outcomes**

Chapter 1 of this paper provided a background to the events of the Arab Spring, and additional context was given by presenting the Iranian Green Movement for consideration as a relevant predecessor. The Habermasian model of the Public Sphere was outlined to provide a background to the debate surrounding the democratising potential of the internet in subsequent chapters. This framework was also used to consider how the open source and networked anatomy of the Internet can be defined, either within the Public Sphere

or existing as a new type of Public Sphere in its own right, a Networked Public Sphere (Benkler, 2006, p.219).

Chapter 2 examined the notable characteristics of the structure of the Arab Spring movements, the lack of leadership and yet the advantages in coordination were both considered in light of digital media usage. The advantage of a hierarchical structure in political movements is acknowledged, but ultimately the response to detractors of the decentralised structure of digital activism is that it is an inevitable transformation that not only has organisational advantages but has produced new outcomes for movements, such as smaller-scale participation levels and greater egalitarianism through the structure of online networked forums.

Chapter 3 presented the dangers faced by activists navigating the online landscape, dangers posed by the authoritarian regimes in retaliation. The tactics that are employed by authoritarian regimes were deliberated, followed by an assessment of some of the miscalculated cyber-control attempts to suppress the Arab Spring uprisings. The problems that the authoritarian regimes face when attempting to control Internet communications were confronted and the concept of the Dictator's Dilemma was discussed. Ultimately the strength of digital activism when contesting a retaliating autocracy is that it is the ideal medium for spreading awareness, resulting in a garnering of support abroad and a unification of dissenting movements throughout the country. The chapter concludes that there is currently an information race between authoritarian regimes and dissenters pursuing democracy, and that the Arab Spring accelerated this race.

Chapter 4 investigated the way that digital media interacts with more traditional forms of mass media. The advantage and disadvantages of online media as an information source were treated, and the consequences of digital activism being covered by western mass media is dissected. The strength in online media as an information source is when its audience is widened and its content is consolidated by mass media organisations, and more traditional mass media is strengthened by embracing digital media. The coverage of Al Jazeera during the Arab Spring period covered in this paper exemplifies this relationship.

## **Conclusion**

While three years have passed since the young Egyptian protesters ousted Hosni Mubarak, it is still difficult to make any assessments of the potential for democratic longevity in the Arab Spring Regions. The Arab Spring had a larger and longer lasting effect on North Africa and the Middle East than the 2009 Iranian revolution had, and despite the current crackdowns on digital freedoms in Iran (Panah, 2013) it is likely that the level of Internet use in Iran—the highest in this region—is related to an extent to their uprising occurring earlier than the revolution in Tunisia where social media use is relatively low (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.113). While there is ongoing violence in many of the primary countries that revolted in 2011, particularly in Syria, it is worth noting that a significant amount of political change occurred in other states without heavy violence:

In Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, civil society leaders found that the security services showed a remarkable reluctance to move aggressively against protesters

[...] Could this hesitancy have had anything to do with the large numbers of mobile-phone cameras that demonstrators were carrying? (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p.122)

What can democratic mass media learn from the Arab Spring and its digital aspects?

Coverage of uprisings is strengthened by the integration of online media into a coherent presentation, many news organisations would benefit from following in the footsteps of Al Jazeera by embracing the future of digital media and as a result being a point of consolidated real-time information that could genuinely help activists. With this in mind, however, a negative impact social media has had on the communication of information is inaccuracies. Information is now garnered so rapidly as a result of digital media that it makes news organisations competitive in the effort to stay ahead of the story, resulting in the publishing of inaccuracies. This is clearly a lesson the western media has still not fully learnt, for example approximately three years on from the Arab Spring uprisings an emotional picture of a young Syrian refugee child who crossed the desert into Jordan completely alone was impulsively distributed online that later proved to be false (Fossett, 2014). In addition this examples arguably highlights the narratives western media could do well to avoid without knowing the facts.

It is important to take into account that in the last decade of the Internet pervading society on a worldwide scale, there have been many breathless predictions that online technology would result in the liberation of some of the world's most oppressed countries. Online technology is a democratising technology, but it does not initiate democracy. It is a tool with democratic potential, that can be used against pro-democracy activists as much as it

can be used for their movements. The outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings show that online media will not define the outcome, but it will be of significant use if the conditions are right. As Howard observes, “new information technologies do not topple dictators; they are used to catch dictators off-guard” (Meier, 2011, p.62 citing Howard, 2010).

Social Media was undeniably a useful tool for the 2011 uprisings and as a result the world will never go back to using tactics without it. This justifies the examination of it even if democracy is ultimately not achieved in the region. As a tool, it is not undermined by a failure to establish democracy, as its primary uses are for mobilisation, spreading awareness and using these two things to bring about a change such as overthrowing a dictator. Long term change such as establishing a national political identity, a stable democracy and an uncorrupted, networked public sphere is a more complicated and lengthy process. Only time will tell if these goals can be cemented effectively in the Arab Spring regions.

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