FROM ARAB STREET TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: RE-THEORIZING COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

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This article discusses the limitations of existing theorization of collective action in Arab countries, and highlights new directions for the analysis of the role of social media in the Arab spring. Underscoring the linkages between collective action repertoire, new communication technologies, and the politics of 'recognition' and 'distribution' in the region, the article discusses how new forms of political activism in the context of these countries can be better interpreted from the vantage point of a multidisciplinary approach that draws on several theoretical paradigms, mainly radical democracy theory, alternative media theory and, above all, social movement theory. It is an approach that aims at transcending technology-centered approaches, as well as cultural and social determinism in relation to Muslim-majority societies. In so doing, the article proposes various conceptual and analytical perspectives that can help future researchers deal with the multiple intersections between collective action and social media in the context of these countries.

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On 10 February 2010, Wael Ghonim, a prominent figure of Egypt's 25 January movement, tweeted 'mission accomplished. Thanks to all the brave young Egyptians.' The message became viral, not only on the micro-blogging and other social media platforms, but throughout mainstream media outlets. Western media reports were all keen on highlighting Ghonim's job as Google executive, and the pivotal role of digital media, from the Google search engine to social media, in bringing about this 'happy ending' to the first 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' revolutions. Of course the mission was far from accomplished; nearly one year after Mubarak was forced to step down, Egyptian militants are still trying to keep the flame of the revolution alive and burning by reoccupying Tahrir Square in Cairo in their pitched battles against the military junta running the country. Criticizing the overzealous praise of the role of social media in the Arab spring, Harvard professor Tarak Barkawi (2011) pointed out that these grotesque claims smack of eurocentricism because they credit the revolutions to 'western' technology rather than to the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia:

> 'To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak.'

But the media are not solely to blame for the shallow interpretations and inadequate understanding of the role of new communication technologies in political activism in the context of Muslim-majority societies. In academia, research and writing on the subject remains scant and generally inadequately theorized. In fact, analysis of collective action in the context of Muslim/Arab societies as a whole has been characterized by what Wiktorowicz (2004) qualifies as theoretical isolation since the bulk of studies in the field fail to draw on existing theoretical paradigms and limit themselves mainly to descriptive analysis of 'Muslim' politics. Indeed, until recently, public opinion and public sphere in the region have often been framed in terms of an 'Arab street', an epithet that connotes 'passivity, unruliness, or propensity to easy manipulation' (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003: 62). Moreover, existing literature on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet in political advocacy within these societies have overwhelmingly focused on fundamentalist or Islamic-oriented groups and discourses.

Addressing the above limitations, the aim of this article is to extend theoretical horizons for the conceptualization of political activism in the Arab world, and to suggest new directions for analyzing the role of social media in the Arab spring, in particular. While making a case for grounding this analysis in social movement theory, the article also points out the importance of using a multidisciplinary perspective that draws on political science, alternative media theory and network theory. Accordingly, the article starts by shedding light on the potential and limitations of current conceptualizations of

political communication in the Arab countries. It then discusses how new forms of political activism in the context of these countries can be better interpreted from the vantage point of new social movement theory, highlighting in the process the interrelationships between collective action repertoire, new communication technologies and the politics of 'recognition' and 'distribution' in the region. In the last part, the article explores various theoretical and analytical perspectives that can help future research deal with the multiple ramifications and interconnections between social movements and collective action, on the one hand, and social media, on the other, in the context of Arab countries, in general.

The 'Arab Street': The Politics of a Metaphor

The Arab spring's revolutions may have ended a plethora of deeply rooted stereotypes about Arab countries and Muslim-majority societies, in general, but they failed to put an end to one influential notion that has great currency in mainstream media and some corners of academia, namely 'the Arab street'. Thus, one National Review Online article has this to say about the Arab spring:

> Let us recall that politically significant outpourings of large crowds were by no means unheard of in the bad-old undemocratic Arab world. In January 1952, thousands of young Egyptian protesters marched on downtown Cairo, sparking mayhem and fires reminiscent of the early Cairo protests of 2011. This is why we speak of an 'Arab Street.' (Kurtz, 2011)

The Arab spring is, then, less about activists, political groups and people militating for freedom and justice than about hordes and unruly mobs 'sparking mayhem', even if the ultimate objective may be noble. Until recently, the term has been the common reference to 'native' forms of public opinion, or public sphere in the region. Regier and Khalidi (2009: 23) argue that the term sometimes denotes 'Arab public opinion', while at other times it refers to images of 'an angry potential mob, a posited subset of Arab society'. Concurring with them, Bayat (2003: 226) points out that the term invokes 'a reified and essentially "abnormal" mindset'. Along much the same lines, Eickelman (2003) explains that the 'use of the term "street", rather than "public sphere" or "public", imputes passivity, or a propensity to easy manipulation, and implies a lack of formal or informal leadership'.

The term, in fact, adheres to a neo-orientalist stance, holding that Arab/Muslim countries' social and cultural structures are incompatible with liberal values and democracy, a view that has often been used to explain why the majority of Muslim countries are still undemocratic today (see, for instance, Harik, 2006; Stepan and Robertson, 2003). These interpretations constitute a real obstacle to a proper understanding not only of the recent political transformations in the region but also of the role of new communication technologies in these changes. Luckily, however, the last

few years have witnessed a burgeoning academic interest in the issue of democratic development and transition within the Arab world. According to Sadiki (2004: 3), 'the study of Arab democracy has recently come into vogue, moving from near occultation to prominence'. The bulk of this literature has centered on the diffusion and use of new communication technologies, mainly satellite television and, to a lesser extent, the internet, and their implications for political and social change in the region. But despite the rapid spread of internet usage over recent years,[1] and the central role it now plays in the political sphere, the medium remains conspicuously under-researched and largely ignored by successive works in this field (see Seib, 2007; Zeiri and Murphy, 2011).

The Arab Public Sphere: Potential and Limitations

The literature on the use of the internet in Muslim-majority societies is clearly under-theorized in the sense that only a very limited number of theoretical paradigms available have hitherto been applied to this subfield. This is not limited to the study of the internet but extends to political communication and political advocacy in the context of Muslim-majority countries in general. As Wiktorowicz astutely remarks, 'the study of Islamic activism has, for the most part, remained isolated from the plethora of theoretical and conceptual developments that have emerged from research on social movements' contentious politics' (2004: 3). The concept of the 'public sphere' dominates much of the theorization of online political communication in the region. This is not surprising given the centrality of this notion in communication studies. Bentivegna (2006: 336) contends that any 'study of the impact of ICTs on politics cannot be undertaken without dwelling on the concept of the public sphere'. Without a doubt, the concept provides a powerful framework linking communication to politics and deliberative democracy. Central to this notion, discussion and deliberation between citizens, either face-to-face or through a medium, constitute the cornerstone of modern representative democracy.

Compared to the wide currency of this notion in the literature, surprisingly few studies provide in-depth discussion thereof and exploration of the way it can be applied to Arab/Muslim societies. A rare exception is el-Nawawy and Khamis' (2009) study of online Islamic discourse. The authors point out that Habermas's original distinction between the private and the public sphere reflects a eurocentric bias that does not necessarily apply to the experience of Muslim-majority societies and to Islam as a religion that questions any rigid division between the two realms (2009: 30–2). Apart from this reservation, however, the authors adhere to Habermas's interpretation, arguing that the aim of their study is to explore the extent to which the 'virtual Muslim' public sphere facilitates 'rational and critical' thinking and discussion.

To elaborate, not only does the conceptualization of online political communication in Arab countries fail to use the vast theoretical possibilities available in the literature,

but even the use of the notion of public sphere remains insufficiently problematized. Indeed, one major criticism leveled at Habermas's interpretation is that it does not make room for understanding the public sphere as a communicative space built on premises other than those of rational dialogue and deliberation. Various commentators have argued that the deliberation model tends to ignore key issues of power imbalances and exclusion in society (Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 1999). Moreover, the criterion of 'rational dialogue' is an unsuitable one by which to judge online communication. Holt, for instance, suggests that online conversations are most often expressed 'in the vulgar register, with slang, abbreviations, and profanity, and their composers frequently seem to delight in disregarding traditional "rules" such as those governing syntax, conventional logic, evidence, and idea development' (2004: 78).

Contrary to the deliberative model of democracy, the radical or agonistic perspective views politics as intrinsically conflictual and non-consensual, and thus places difference and contestation at the heart of the democratic system. The dominant ontology of 'consensus' within liberal democracy, according to Mouffe is bound to fail, because 'consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and … always entails some form of exclusion' (1999: 756). Hence, building democratic politics on consensus and reconciliation 'is not only conceptually mistaken, it is also fraught with political dangers' (Mouffe, 2005: 2). For this reason, Mouffe argues, politicians and theorists should instead aspire to creating 'a vibrant "agonistic" public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted' (2005: 3). This requires an approach that places the questions of power, antagonism and adversarial relationships at its very center. The role of democracy, however, is to turn antagonism into agonism:

> While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are adversaries, not enemies. (2005: 20)

Drawing on this model, various commentators have argued that the internet's main contribution to democracy is its promotion of agonistic politics (Atton, 2002; Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007; Kahn and Kellner, 2005). As an affordable, non-hierarchical and interactive communication medium, the internet has allowed antagonistic politics to mushroom, as countless oppositional and often persecuted groups and individuals have been able to voice dissenting opinions online. But the internet also has the potential to link adversaries through webs of hyperlinks, thus facilitating the development of agonistic politics. The agonistic potential of the

internet has been clearly demonstrated during the Arab spring, through the role of various online platforms in fostering subaltern and oppositional politics, and, simultaneously, in supporting linkages between different political groups. This notion is also better suited to analyzing the type of discourse supported by social media, where communication and interactions often expressed in soundbite format rarely rise to the level of genuine deliberation and discussion.

Despite the importance of the notion of the public sphere, and the many venues it opens for exploring various intersections between media, politics and citizens, it still has several key limitations. First, the concept allows us to shed light on the role of communication and media in politics; it does not allow us, however, to explain the link between mediated political discourse, on the one hand, and direct forms of contention and political transformation, on the other. While this link is often assumed or taken for granted in the literature, it is rarely explained or theoretically grounded. Stated differently, how can we conceptualize and analyze the role of media and communication in online and offline collective action? How can we go beyond viewing the internet, and social media in particular, as other, albeit sophisticated, 'vehicles' for public sphere communication? How can we transcend the instrumentalist perspective on the role of media inherent in the concept of the public sphere to explore much deeper intersections between communication, material resources and organizational structures on the one hand, and the ideational and symbolic dimensions of collective action on the other? To explore these issues, social movement theory, applied concomitantly and consecutively with other theoretical perspectives derived from political science and media studies, can be used to highlight the multiple intersections between new forms of communication technologies and platforms and collective action structures, strategies and frames that have led to the ongoing Arab revolutions.

From the Public Sphere to Social Movements: A New Paradigm
The theorization of collective action as 'social movements' began in the 1960s with the appearance of new forms of collective action and protest groups that were unaligned with traditional civil society organizations, such as trade unions. Initially, social movements were mainly associated with feminist, civil rights, anti-war groups and student protest groups. In the decades that followed, many social movements emerged, including human rights movements, gay and lesbian rights movements, and environmentalist movements. Consensus over the definition of 'social movement', however, is yet to be reached within the existing literature. As de la Piscina maintains, 'the wide-ranging typologies of social movements that currently exist complicate the ability to offer one definition that results in a consensus' (2007: 65). Despite conceptual multiplicities, Snow et al. (2004: 6) assert that it is possible to organize existing definitions of social movements around five main axes: (1) 'collective or joint action'; (2)

'change-oriented goals or claims'; (3) an 'extra- or non-institutional collective action'; (4) a 'degree of organization'; and (5) a 'degree of temporal continuity'.

One common feature shared by the social movement theories is that they have been articulated mostly to analyze forms of collective action that emerged in industrial and postmodern societies. Thompson and Tapscott (2010: 2) point out that despite the vast literature on social movements that extends over almost a century, 'it remains a truism that by far the bulk of the writing and theorizing in this field has been oriented to the analysis of movements in the global North'. In the same vein, Shigetomi (2009: 6) holds that 'few researchers take the context of developing countries seriously in an attempt to identify the salient features of and approach to social movements'. The scarcity of scholarly works on social movements in southern countries is even more noticeable in the context of Muslim-majority societies. With the exception of a few scattered studies that have appeared over recent years (Ben Moussa, 2011, 2012; Sidi Hida, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004), surprisingly scholars have for the most part shunned the application of social movement theory in studying collective action in these countries.

Furthermore, scholars have called for the development of a comparative theoretical paradigm that takes into consideration the particularities of social movements in southern countries. Assessing the usefulness of social movement theories to the study of collective action in Latin America, Escobar (1992: 63) has observed that within developing countries, social movements have emerged largely 'in response to the failure of development'. Accordingly, social movements in these countries should be placed 'within a reinterpreted context of the crisis of development and modernity, [so] it becomes impossible to see them only in economic or political terms' (1992: 64). As an alternative, and complementing the existing theoretical paradigm, Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009: 36) propose a multidisciplinary approach that highlights the 'interaction between structure and action' that can 'connect the micro level of individual protesters with the meso level of social movements, and macro level of national political systems and supranational processes'.

The Arab Spring through the Lens of Social Movement Theory

The emergence of oppositional social movements in the region is not a recent occurrence. Contrary to some neo-orientalist claims, Muslim-majority/Arab countries have never been bereft of civil society institutions and movements that are outside the sphere of state authority and power (Eisenstadt, 2002). In modern times, an array of social movements has marked the political sphere in many of these countries, from trade union movements, nationalist and leftist ones, to Islamic/fundamentalist movements. While these movements have had different degrees of success and impact on Arab societies, the majority failed to survive either state repression or insufficient support and access to resources. There are, however, numerous characteristics that distinguish the recent social movements behind the Arab spring from those that were active in the past. Unlike in past decades, where oppositional political activism revolved around highly structured forms of collective action, mainly trade unions, political parties and, increasingly during the last decade, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the ongoing revolutions are marked by the participation of groups and individuals mobilized around very broad coalitions and networks that escape rigid hierarchical structures and institutions.

These new trends in collective action can be related to socio-political and technological transformations at the local and global levels. Givan et al. (2010) argue that the diffusion of any social movement at a specific time can be linked to two primary causes: behavioral and ideational. While '[t]he behavioural dimension involves the diffusion of movement tactics or collective action repertoires', the ideational one includes 'the spread of collective action frames that define issues, goals, and targets' (2010: 4). At the behavioral level, the diffusion of new communication technologies, from satellite television, transnational TV channels and mobile telephony to the internet and social media, have revolutionized social movements' collective action repertoires and permitted the development of new organizational structures marked by translocal linkages, horizontal communication and highly flexible and non-hierarchical configurations. The changes at the behavioral level have direct implications for transformations at the ideational level in the sense that when 'people make collective claims, they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 16). Thus, the new repertoires have facilitated the formation of collective action strategies and modes of thinking favoring coordination, coalition and alliance building, and networking that do not necessarily follow rigid ideological paradigms and organizational structures. These new paradigms in collective action can be best conceptualized through new social movement theory. Unlike classical social movements, new social movements 'tend to lack clear organizational structures and internal bureaucracies, and effectively function by coalescing political identities and agendas both nationally and globally' (Thompson and Tapscott, 2010: 4).

If new social movement theory is to be used to interpret the Arab spring, however, it must be recalibrated to the setting and realities of Arab societies. Indeed, new social movements represent 'a specific progression in civil society organization in the post-industrial North' (Thompson and Tapscott, 2010: 4). But while new social movements in post-industrial societies mark 'a shift from conflicts over material well-being to conflicts over cultural fulfillment' (Habermas, 2008: 193), conflicts in Arab countries and the developing world are still deeply shaped by struggles for social and economic justice.

Nonetheless, these struggles have shifted from being predominantly class-related and oriented towards economic justice to ones in which material and cultural fulfillments are increasingly seen as intrinsically interconnected and fused, and in which the achievement of one does not occur without the attainment of the other. In other words, new social movements in the Arab world can be best seen through Fraser's (1995) distinction between politics of 'recognition' and 'redistribution', whereby she questions the reductive attribution of injustice to either cultural or economic causes alone.

So far, the majority of commentary and reports on the Arab spring have interpreted the latter as revolutions against tyranny, corruption and social injustice. What is absent from this analysis is the role of identity politics in sowing the seeds of revolt and building the momentum for the continuing popular uprisings in the region. In fact, the Arab spring is equally about various expressions of collective identities that have been suppressed under nationalist, religious, ethnic and patriarchal ideologies and cultural trends for decades, and even centuries. This regime could not persist in the age of globalization and network society. As sociologist Manuel Castells (2004: 2) explains:

> along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism, we have experienced, in the past twenty-five years, the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. These expressions are multiple, highly diversified, following the contours of each culture, and of historical sources of formation of each identity.

As one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse regions on the globe, the Arab world has been deeply affected by these transformations. In the last two decades, we have seen an intensification of identity-based collective actions and claims, some of which have turned violent, while others have been awaiting the right time to go public. Since the beginning of the Arab spring in December, many of these movements have gained momentum, from the Islamic-oriented movements and the Amazigh movement in North Africa, to minority movements[2] in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Lebanon, among many others. In addition to these traditional identity movements specific to the region, there are others that are equally rooted in local and global cultural trends, namely the feminist and youth movements. The most prominent and influential of these new movements in recent decades are, of course, the Islamic-oriented movements, a perfect embodiment of the close interconnection between the politics of recognition and redistribution. Sociologist Manuel Castells points out that 'the explosion of Islamic movements seems to be related to both the disruption of traditional societies, and to the failure of the nation-state, created by nationalist

movements, to accomplish modernization' (2004: 17).

Another new social movement that has played a prominent part in the Arab spring is the 'youth movement'. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the Arab spring is the young people's spring. Young people constitute the backbone of the movements that overthrew Ben Ali's, Mubarak's and Gaddafi's regimes, and form the vanguards of those that are now threatening other autocratic regimes in other countries. It was the act of a 26-year-old Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself, that ignited the uprising in Tunisia. In Egypt, the majority of the prominent figures and symbols of the 25 January uprising are young. In Yemen, the journalist and Nobel Prize winner Tawakol Kerman became a symbol, not only of the country's peaceful revolution, but of all young Arab women who 'have been and often remain at the forefront of those protests' (Cole and Cole, 2011), struggling for democracy as well as for gender equality.

Youth movements in Arab countries are not necessarily represented by structured NGOs or institutions, nor do they form homogeneous groups; they are social movements in the sense of 'a set of opinions and beliefs in a population representing preferences for changing some elements of the social structure or reward distribution, or both' (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 20). Broad coalitions, such as the 6 April movement in Egypt and 20 February movement in Morocco, may provide some loose structures for these movements. By and large, however, youth movements are characterized by a high level of cross-membership and fluidity of structures insofar as many of the people who belong to them are members of various existing NGOs and political parties that do not necessarily subscribe to the same ideologies. In many cases, young people and youth sections inside political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces party in Morocco, defied their senior leaders to join the protests in the streets. Moreover, while the youth movements are marked by an intense level of ideological diversity, young people still share common beliefs and opinions rooted in demography, world vision and everyday life experience.

There is more than just economic dispossession behind the younger generation's deep resentment of existing regimes and systems, however. In most Arab countries where revolutions took place, mobilization and protests were led by highly educated, middle-class young people who were not necessarily suffering from the hardships of unemployment and social marginalization. The youth movement in the region is, in fact, an outcome of the confluence between identity politics through which young people are trying to make their voice heard, and distribution politics, as they seek a better life commensurate with their education and aspirations. As such, young people are as much rebelling against unemployment, tyranny and corruption as they are against political, social and cultural conservatism and stagnation, as well as older generations' and elites' preference for the status quo and compromise.[3] Indeed, 'there are also deeper cultural factors at play in a region where respect for elders is a sacrosanct value and where young people feel their ideas, their creativity, their energy is stifled' (Shenker et al., 2011).

The contribution of communication technologies to this process is not insignificant. Young people constitute the majority of internet users in these countries, which has deepened generational divides (Ben Moussa, 2012). The internet and social media, in particular, have allowed young people to become exposed to global cultural flows and, more importantly, to express themselves in unprecedented and creative ways that reconstructed collective and individual identities and questioned rigid dogmas, interpretations and discourses. Such creativity has been given a full public display during the ongoing uprisings as reflected in the slogans, music, actions, arts, body language and clothes in the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Sanaa and Casablanca during the last year.

The role of new media and the internet in paving the way for the Arab spring is typical of new social movements' formation, where the potential for the production of action becomes increasingly contingent on 'the ability to produce information' (Melucci, 2008: 219). According to Melucci (1994: 101), conflicts now 'tend to arise in those areas of the system that are most directly involved in the production of information and communicative resources but at the same time subjected to intense pressure of integration'. In the context of Arab countries, new communication technologies have allowed various segments of society not only to access free and uncensored information, but also and more importantly to compete in the production of information, narratives and frames that are recreating collective identities and the meanings of personhood and citizenship. In so doing, they are also reshaping power relationships between gender, ethnic and religious groups and generations. This process is most likely to intensify in the coming months and years, and the need to understand and analyze it as a social and political and cultural phenomenon is more urgent than ever, and this is an endeavor to which social movement theory can immensely contribute.

The Arab Spring and the Role of Social Media

The Arab spring has clearly signalled a major shift in collective action within Arab countries. The key question that remains to be investigated is the extent to which the internet and social media, in particular, have generated this shift. There is no doubt that the profound transformations in collective action in the region are intrinsically linked to the fast and ubiquitous diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in these countries during the last two decades. The impact of technological innovations on social movements and collective action in general is well discussed in the literature (Castells, 2001, 2004; Downey and Fenton, 2003). Garrett identifies within the literature three types of 'mechanisms' linking the technology to social movements, namely 'reduction of participation costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community' (2006: 204). Similarly, Stein (2009: 757) summarizes existing literature on the subject and points out the internet's six functions for social movements: (a) providing information; (b) assisting action and mobilization; (c) promoting interaction and

dialogue; (d) making lateral linkages; (e) serving as an outlet for creative expression; and (f) promoting fundraising and resource generation.

These functions, however, do not provide enough theoretical insights into the link between social media and social movements. They should, therefore, be further grounded in social movement theory. Resource mobilization theory, for instance, pays greater attention to institutional and organizational factors within collective action. Resource mobilization theory theorists consider grievances as one such factor and place more emphasis on the conditions under which grievances are translated into action, and the resources and external support that are needed to sustain such action (Zald and McCarthy, 1987: 16). The existence of particular injustices and grievances is not enough to explain the development of social movements; in fact, 'control over actual and potential resources is a more important determinant of the emergence as well as the likely success of collective action' (Buechler, 1993: 221). Thus, a key question that needs to be answered from the perspective of this theory is the extent to which social media have enhanced the capabilities of social movements and allowed them to master enough resources to lead successful campaigns against repressive regimes. Contrary to the much celebrated virtues of social media, the post-Mubarak clashes between protesters and the army in Egypt, and the poor results achieved by secular political parties in the elections have demonstrated that social movements can only achieve long-lasting impact by mastering various types of resources, an objective that only Islamic-oriented movements have been able to achieve in an effective manner so far.

The use of social media in the political sphere in the region does not date back only as far as last year, however. 'Social media' is a generic term that comprises a large number of technologies and platforms sharing some key characteristics, mainly allowing users to connect with others and share with them a variety of data, including their connections online. While Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are among the platforms that were used most during the Arab spring, many others pre-date them and are still widely used by activists, including blogs, email-lists, forums and instant messaging platforms. These technologies and platforms have, in fact, played a critical role in expanding the limits of agonistic public spheres and collective action repertoires over the last decade. In Egypt, for instance, where the use of the internet in political activism has developed faster than in any other Arab country, there is a genealogy of online activism that has contributed to the success of the 25 January revolution. A case in point is the Egyptian Movement for Change commonly known as Kifaya, launched in 2005, that paved the way for the emergence of the 6 April movement that spearheaded the revolution against Mubarak regime. Oweidat et al. (2008) succinctly point out that it is possible to attribute the relative success of Kifaya movement to two main factors: one is its ability to unite diverse political groups under its banners; second, its efficient use of ICTs, particularly mobile SMS and the blogosphere (Oweidat et al., 2008).

Thus case studies and longitudinal approaches are necessary to examine not only the development of social movements, but also the contribution of various social media platforms and technologies to the eruption of the Arab spring.

In fact, in the domain of democratic media and political activism, media are rarely used as single platforms. Indeed, notwithstanding the importance of their role, social media are not stand-alone tools in the Arab spring; rather, they have only been effective because they operated in synergy and complementarity with a huge array of media, from placards, leaflets and graffiti to digital cameras and 3G mobile phones. Thus, even when the internet service in Egypt and Tunisia was completely shut down or severely curtailed, the revolutions continued as people resorted to other more conventional media, as well as to offline societal networks and interpersonal communication. Moreover, state surveillance of social media platforms compelled activists to use alternative media and tools of communication. During the Egyptian uprising, for instance, activists resorted to distributing leaflets asking 'recipients to redistribute it by email and photocopy, but not to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which are being monitored by the security forces' (Black, 2011). In addition to small digital media, print media and interpersonal communication, mainstream media, mainly satellite television, such as Al-Jazeera, played a critical role in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Al-Jazeera's 24-hour coverage of Tahrir Square in Egypt broke through the media blackout imposed by Mubarak's regime, and perhaps enabled the revolution to escape brutal repression by the army. As such, an important issue that needs to be investigated at this level is the multiple configurations of media convergence and complementarity, and the position of social media within them. Are social media replacing older media and platforms, or are they merely redefining their role and contribution to the media ecosystem as a whole?

Grasping the full complexity of the implications of the internet and social media for new social movements in the Arab world, however, requires researchers to move beyond the study of users and their immediate practices to include the study of national, regional and global contexts and structures shaping this use. In fact, the link between technology and social change is neither automatic nor linear. For this purpose, social movement theory, particularly political process theory can shed light on the interconnections between social media diffusion and appropriation, on the one hand, and the political and social conditions under which these media can contribute to social and political change. The theory of 'political process' designates 'the degree of openness or closure of a political system in a way that might facilitate or discourage the rise of social movements' (Ruggiero and Montagna, 2008: 139). Instead of focusing on the role of organizational resources in generating collective action, the political process model stresses the historical context and political environment that can either empower social movements to or hinder them from 'getting access to established polity' (Diani, 2000a: 158).

Thanks to this perspective, the focus can move away from investigating the technology-centered question of how social media generated the Arab spring to probing the political and social contexts and conditions, both at the local and global levels, under which successive technology innovations have contributed to political and social change. Unlike in the context of northern countries, where research focuses on the political structure at the national level, social movement theory analysis in the context of developing countries needs to adopt multidisciplinary perspectives that account for various processes, including economic, social and cultural disparities and divides, in addition to technological divides. Thus, issues of media censorship, media ownership, access to hardware and networks, problems of software and language, costs and skill of usage, and gender divides should be investigated to see how they shape the role and use of social media in Arab countries. Commentators, for instance, have noted that digital divides and sustainability are two major issues shaping the use of the internet and informatics systems in developing countries (Merkel, 2005). Accordingly, an important part of understanding the role of social media in the Arab spring is to explore their impact on various forms of divides and variables shaping diffusion of ICTs in the context Arab societies in general.

A multidisciplinary approach is also needed to examine a fundamental dimension shared by social media and the internet on the one hand and social movements on the other, namely networking. According to Castells, the internet:

> fits with the basic features of the kind of social movents emerging in the Information Age.... The Internet is not simply a technology: it is a communication media, and it is the material infrastructure of a given organizational form: the network. (2001: 135–6)

The parallelism between the two stems from the fact that both the internet and social movements can be described as 'networks of networks', where rapport between nodes/members is built on non-hierarchical, non-linear and highly flexible structures. According to the latter view, social movements can be defined as 'networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues' (Diani, 2000b: 387). Combining social movement theory and network analysis is thus essential to shed much needed light on how social media affect, transform and support networks that are primordial to the development of social movements and collective action. One of the merits of such an analysis is that it can account for socio-political and structural factors shaping collective action, while underscoring human agency by identifying the location and contribution of each individual within online and offline networks and relationships.

Social Media as Alternative Media

It is impossible to study the linkages between social movements and social media without looking into 'alternative media' scholarship (Atton, 2001, 2004; Carroll and Hackett, 2006; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Downing, 2001). Alternative media are often defined by comparing them with and contrasting them to mainstream media and to what the latter stand for. The emphasis on the form of organization and process of work rather than just on the content is a widespread argument among critics of mass media who contend that mainstream media are undemocratically organized and at the same time they are predominantly commercialized. One of the first critics in this field was Raymond Williams who argued that communication is 'the means by which social relations are constituted and practiced', and therefore, the alternative media 'must also enable alternative communication, which together make possible the articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant' (quoted in Hamilton, 2000: 362). It serves no purpose to change just the content of the message as Baudrillard contends (1981); if an alternative communication is to be established, the receiver/reader must be empowered to escape 'the trap of controlled communication' (1981: 183).

Accordingly to be able to promote democracy and social justice in society, media must embrace a different form of organization. Carroll and Hackett (2006: 84) formulate this idea clearly by differentiating between two distinct but related concepts, namely that of 'the democratization of the media' and that of 'democratization through the media'. While the first demarcates a field in which media activists try to promote different or 'alternative' forms of organizing media, the second is not limited to the latter but can also be the aim of governments and civil society bodies and institutions that try to promote democracy within society.

Commentators have equally observed that social movements make strategic use of mainstream media in their action 'to broaden the scope of conflict' (Gamson and Wolsfeld, 1993: 116). However, because of the asymmetrical relationship between mainstream media and social movements, social movements have to use alternative communication strategies and tools to bypass mainstream media, in order to support their struggles and communicate with actual and potential constituents. Scholars have argued that alternative media involve more than just bypassing mainstream media. Hamilton, for instance, maintains that if communication is 'the means by which social relations are constituted and practiced', alternative media 'must also enable alternative communication, which … make[s] possible the articulation of a social order different from and often opposed to the dominant [one]' (2000: 362). In the same vein, Carroll and Hackett (2006) point out that the use of alternative media by progressive and oppositional social movements involves two key processes. On the one hand, these movements use alternative media to achieve various objectives in domains outside the mainstream media sector. On the other, they endeavor to democratize the media themselves by implementing and incorporating non-commercialized and non-professionalized communication practices and structures that challenge those of mainstream media.

The role of mainstream and state media in supporting and perpetuating autocratic regimes throughout the Arab world has been much discussed in scholarly studies and media reports. That is why when the Arab spring broke out, symbols of state-controlled or - funded media, such as the Maspero building in Egypt, hosting state radio and television, were among the main targets of militants and activists because they were always considered among the most visible tools of oppression. But building a democratic media system requires more than dismantling state propaganda apparatus and ensuring the independence of media outlets and their functioning. For social movements, the main guarantee for such a system to flourish is the use of alternative media capable of fostering democratic communication and culture, and resisting the infringements of the state and capital. As such, studies of the role of social media in Arab spring should definitely aim to explore not only how they were used to achieve social movements' objectives in political change, but also the extent to which they are contributing to constructing more participatory and democratic communication. A main issue in this subfield of enquiry is to examine the use of social media to promote dialogical discourse and a multiplicity of voices through full interactive communication that forms the basis of an agonistic public sphere and pluralistic democracy. For McMillan (2006: 213), full interactivity only happens when there is a 'mutual dialogue' which is not only 'responsive' but 'also gives more egalitarian control to all participants so that sender and receiver roles become indistinguishable'.

Alternative media theory can also shed light on new forms of collective action where the bulk of activism involves online groups and communities that do not necessarily have offline structures and presence. Prior to the eruption of street protests and popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, social media, mainly Facebook, were the main arena of political dissent and mobilization. Facebook pages, such as the one launched by Wael Ghonim to protest against the torture and killing of activist Khaled Said, amassed tens of thousands of members located in Egypt and the diaspora, thus forming an online community that extends over geographical and political borders. One useful interpretation of this phenomenon is provided by Carroll and Hackett (2006), who propose analyzing media activism through the lens of new social movement theory. They argue that democratic media activism, in general, shares with new social movements a number of features, since the latter '[contest] not only the "codes" of communication but the entire complex of social relations and practices through which the codes are produced and disseminated' (2006: 95). Consequently, democratic media activism can itself be portrayed as 'an archetypically new social

movement: a reflexive form of activism that treats communication as simultaneously means and end of struggle' (2006: 96).

Conclusion

To sum up, while the notion of the 'Arab street' dominated scholarly and non-scholarly writings on collective action in the context of Arab countries for a long time, recent scholarly works have widely adopted Habermas's concept of the public sphere to analyze political activism and the implications of new communication technologies for it. Existing literature, however, is marked by numerous lacunas, chief among them an insufficient number of studies in the field, their overly descriptive aspect, and the excessive focus on religion-oriented political groups and discourses.

To address these shortcomings, and in order to better conceptualize and analyze the role of social media in the Arab spring, multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives built around social movement theory are a very strong alternative. First, interpreting collective action in Arab countries through the lens of social movement theory can better shed light on the social, cultural and political rootedness of political advocacy and activism. It can also link collective action to local and global transformations marked by heightened transnational interconnections, as well intersections between recognition, or identity politics, on the one hand, and redistribution, or social and economic justice politics, on the other. Second, the social embeddedness of new communication technologies, particularly social media, and their use necessitate moving away from a mainly instrumentalist interpretation of these media to one that explores complex linkages between technology, collective action, and their local and translocal settings. In this sense, social movement theory provides a better approach through which to theorize and analyze the link between political groups' organizational structure, access to resources and framing strategies in relation to technological innovation and the adoption of social media. Such an analysis can be further supported through other theoretical paradigms, such as alternative media theory and network theory. Scholars interested in studying collective action and the role of social media in the Arab spring, whether from the perspective of communication studies, sociology or political science, have a huge gap to fill, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Not only is there a need for many more studies dealing with the implications of new media technologies in political and social transformations in the region, but, perhaps more importantly, such research has to try to end the conceptual isolation characterizing this sub-area by engaging with vast theoretical paradigms that have developed in social sciences and humanities. The importance of this task transcends the mere need to analyze current political events in the Middle East and North Africa. Fulfilling this task will undoubtedly contribute to deconstructing centuries-old hegemonic representations of Muslim-majority societies and countries.

1.
Arabic is the fastest growing language on the web, for instance (worldinternetstats.com).

2.
In the case of Bahrain, and Iraq, the Shi'a movements represent the majority.

3.
For a detailed discussion on the origins of the youth movement and culture in the Arab world, see Herrera and Bayat (2010).

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SOCIAL MEDIA, SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN THE BAHRAIN UPRISING

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Marc Owen Jones began his PhD at the University of Durham in 2011 after securing a studentship from the North East Doctoral Training Centre. He worked briefly as a graduate research assistant at Leicester University following the completion of an MSc in Arab World Studies from Durham University in 2010. This two-year MSc was funded by the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World and involved a year of intense Arabic tuition at both the Universities of Edinburgh and Damascus. He received his BA in Journalism, Film and Broadcasting from Cardiff University in 2006 before spending a year in Sudan teaching English. He tweets and blogs regularly on Bahrain and his research interests include critical security surveillance, cultural geography, public space, social justice, systemic control, policing and social media.

This is a study of how the Bahraini regime and its supporters utilized Facebook, Twitter and other social media as a tool of surveillance and social control during the Bahrain uprising. Using a virtual ethnography conducted between February 2011 and December 2011, it establishes a typology of methods that describe how hegemonic forces and institutions employed social media to suppress both online and offline dissent. These methods are trolling, naming and shaming, offline factors, intelligence gathering and passive observation. It also discusses how these methods of control limit the ability of activists to use online places as spaces of representation and anti-hegemonic identity formation. While there is considerable research on the positive role social media plays in activism, this article addresses the relative paucity of literature on how hegemonic forces use social media to resist political change.

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