THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION THAT FAILED: LESSONS FROM THE ARAB SPRING

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Abstract: *In December 2010, when Tunisia set the tone for a wave of uprisings that shook the Middle East and overthrew two of its longest-standing and most entrenched rulers – Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Tunisia's own president Ben Ali – many scholars, pundits, and media professionals hailed the events which would later be dubbed "the Arab Spring" as the unmistakable sign that the region, long considered a hotbed for authoritarianism and dictatorship, was inexorably moving towards democracy. And media, especially social media, but also Qatari TV channel Al Jazeera, were seen as the conduit through which western-style liberal democracy would spread throughout the region – to the extent that the events were widely regarded as a genuine "social media" revolution. Yet, less two years after the outbreak of the uprisings, it was gradually becoming clear that, by and large, the Arab Spring was failing to deliver the expected democratic outcomes, despite signs of progress in Tunisia and Egypt. So how and why did the social media revolution fail? How was it possible that, despite massive and exemplary social media mobilisation and television exposure, no meaningful and lasting change occurred in most of the countries affected, some of which (Syria or Yemen) descended into bloody civil wars? These are the main questions the present contribution aims at answering, starting from the premise that, in the case of the Arab Spring, the lesson to be learned is that, although social media may have been a necessary condition to achieve a certain level of mobilisation and spread the message, it was far from sufficient in bringing about democratic change or at least in sustaining the momentum needed for such change to come about and that, overall, in retrospect, it was credited with far too much potential and it certainly proved its limitations.*

Keywords: Arab Spring; social media; Al Jazeera; Middle East; democratisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The series of popular uprisings across the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring,[1] which started in Tunisia in December 2010 led to the ousting of four of the region's most entrenched and long lasting dictators:[2] Tunisia's Zine el Abadine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh. The events were hailed, at the time, as the spark that would finally lead to the establishment of Western-style democratic regimes in a region that, until that point, had proven incredibly resilient to the export of democracy – or, to use

Leon Trotsky's dictum, they represented a case in which revolution was impossible until it became inevitable (Haas, Lesch, 2013:2). The fact that all four leaders fell after massive, cascading social protests appeared to be a clear indicator that "the people", i.e., *demos*, were finally exercising their power, i.e., *kratos*.

Traditional media (especially the Qatari-based television channel Al Jazeera) and social media (particularly Twitter and Facebook) played a crucial role in mobilising people, creating a sense of shared grievances across many different countries and social classes, and establishing a virtual space where people could communicate, organise themselves and voice their anti-government demands, to that point where the events were often referred to, by media professionals and political pundits alike, as a genuine "social media" revolution (Howard, Hussain, 2013:13; Bebawi, Bossio, 2014:1; O'Donnell, 2011). In the first half of 2011, the democratic momentum seemed unstoppable; yet, only two years after Egypt's first free, democratic

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[1] The name Arab Spring should not obscure the fact that these events were not isolated; rather, they were part of a culmination of decades-long struggles for human dignity in the region (Gelvin, 2013:241; Pollack, 2011:2).

[2] By the time of the Arab Spring, Ben Ali had ruled Tunisia for 20 years, Mubarak had been president for 30 years, Qaddafi had reigned supreme for 40 years, while Saleh had been president for 22 years when he was forced to resign in 2012 (Howard, Hussain, 2013:3).

elections which brought to power the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi, the region, far from becoming the budding democracy the world was anticipating, descended into the chaos, instability, and civil wars that had become the norm across the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area for many decades. In other words, the "social media revolution" underlying the Arab Spring failed just as quickly as it had peaked, and the reasons behind this failure baffled political and media analysts for a considerable time. The uprisings proved to be far more successful in upending the status quo than in building better alternatives, while at the same time unleashing a wave of sectarian and political violence that has profound consequences to this day (Lynch, 2016:20-21).

The present chapter aims at examining the social media and Al Jazeera coverage of how the Arab Spring unfolded (section two) in order to answer the question of why these channels ultimately failed to contribute to the establishment of democratic regimes in the MENA region (section three), while the conclusions will highlight a few lessons to be learned from this – primarily the fact that digital media is, undoubtedly, a necessary, but insufficient cause of democratisation, especially in countries with little to no historical experience with democracy. The historical overview of the Arab Spring events in each country, although very useful in understanding the cause and effect mechanisms behind the protests and their aftermath, falls outside the scope of the present contribution and, at any rate, it is widely available in a variety of print and online sources.

Prior to the outbreak of the Tunisian uprising, the internet, mobile phone and social media had transformed politics across the MENA region, especially through the online mobilisation of young people, who used this outlet to express their discontent with the authoritarian regimes present in many of the region's countries (Howard, Hussain, 2013:4). Civil society activists became well-known in the online environment, since this was largely independent of state control and many were pushed towards the internet precisely because of the inaccessibility of other forms of political communication through traditional media like radio or television, which were, for the most part, state-owned and heavily regulated.[3] In the MENA

region, internet and social media users were young, educated, urban, and more politically active than the rest of the population (Howard, Hussain, 2013:10).[4]

Despite the evident diversity of the countries affected by the Arab Spring, three elements that explain the widespread use of social media for mobilisation were present in almost all of them: most of them had been very slow to democratise, they have rapid rates of technological diffusion, and local social elites used internet technologies to protest against the political regimes and manage information flows so as to avoid state censorship (Howard, Hussain, 2013:11). All across the region, once the uprisings started, protesters used digital media to publicise their opposition to political rule, thus accelerating the pace of events and helping build a constituency; in other words, social media served as kind of "information equaliser", allowing people to tell compelling individual stories and to manage many organisational and logistic details necessary for an uprising to succeed, allowing the accomplishment of previously unattainable political goals; in turn, the regimes realised the potential of the online medium and used it widely in their counterinsurgency strategies, as I will show in section 3 (Howard, Hussain, 2013:18). The countries experiencing the most dramatic protests (Tunisia, Egypt) were among the most wired in the region, with large, young, tech-savvy civil society activists.

Digital media and the Al Jazeera coverage were instrumental in bringing the news of the Tunisian and Egyptian success to the attention of people in neighbouring countries and in helping galvanise popular protests in places like Libya, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen.[5] While I do not subscribe to the view that the events of the

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[3] Moreover, the affordability of internet access and the fact that content was hosted on servers outside the reach of state censorship also contributed the growing use of

social media as a means of anti-government protest (Howard, Hussain, 2013:5).

[4] The so-called "youth bulge" was larger in the countries affected by the most powerful and widespread protests in the region, i.e., Tunisia (42%), Libya (48%), Egypt (51%) and Syria (57%) (Haas, Lesch, 2013:3). Arab youth certainly had pressing grievances against their governments, including the systematic denial of basic rights, massive governmental corruption, extreme levels of unemployment, widespread poverty, and steady increases in the cost of living. There was also a general hopelessness that none of these conditions would improve without revolutionary political change.

[5] For example, in Libya, the first assertion of the anti-Qaddafi opposition was formed online, on a website declaring the Interim Transitional National Council as an alternative government (Howard, Hussain, 2013:23).

Arab Spring were solely the result of the social media effect, I agree that its widespread use helped shape many of its outcomes: digital media were singularly powerful in getting out protest messages, in driving the coverage by mainstream broadcasters, in connecting frustrated citizens, and in helping them realize that they shared grievances and could act together to do something about their situation (Howard, Hussain, 2013:24). Moreover, they undermined the legitimacy of government forces by showcasing glaring examples of government oppression and violence through video materials shared on social media (Gupta, Brooks, 2013:8). In other words, social media did not cause the Arab Spring, but it certainly facilitated it.

Examining the unfolding of events in the first half of 2011, one can see five phases in the digital media coverage of the Arab Spring: the first is a *preparation* phase that involves activists using digital media in creative ways to find each other, build solidarity around shared grievances, and identify collective political goals. The *ignition* phase that follows involves some inciting incident, ignored by the mainstream state-controlled media, that circulates digitally and enrages the public. Next comes a phase of *street protests* that are coordinated digitally. A phase of *international buy-in*, during which digital media are used to draw in international governments, global diasporas, and especially overseas news agencies is next. This all culminates in a *climax* phase in which the state either cracks down and protesters are forced to go home (Bahrain, Iran), rulers concede and meet public demands (Egypt, Tunisia), or groups reach a protracted stalemate (Libya, Syria) and a final denouement of post-protest information in an ideological war between the winners and losers of any resulting social change (Howard, Hussain, 2013:26).

It is difficult to argue whether the Arab Spring would not have occurred in the absence of digital media – after all, popular uprisings all over the world had, in most cases, predated the emergence of the internet, yet one cannot deny that the unique narrative arc of the events, which caught many autocrats in the region by surprise, was fuelled, to a large extent, through a new kind of mobilisation made possible by the combination of social and traditional media coverage and the radically new way of communicating that digital media enabled.[6]

Social media became the scaffolding upon which the new civil society in the MENA region could grow and helped put a human face on political oppression (Howard, Hussain, 2013:34, 47, 124).

Traditional media across the world also integrated social media stories coming from the MENA region during the Arab Spring into their reporting, thus consolidating the rise of "citizen journalism", marking a shift in the investigation and dissemination of news towards "alternative journalism" (Bebawi, Bossio, 2014:2-3, 16; Bebawi, 2014:123; Zayadi 2014:25; Atton, 2002:9).[7]

2. MASS AND SOCIAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ARAB SPRING EVENTS

2.1 Social media coverage and mobilisation. As mentioned in the introductory section, the countries where the protests had the largest impact and involved the largest numbers of people (Tunisia and Egypt) were among the MENA countries with the largest and most active online spheres: in Egypt, for example, illegal political parties (the Muslim Brotherhood), radical fundamentalists, investigative journalists and discontent citizens met on social media and shared their grievances (Howard, Hussein, 2013:21; Etlig *et al*., 2014:55; Jamali, 2015:43; Rutherford, 2013:40).[8] In response, the government arrested bloggers, monitored online discussions, and shut down websites and internet access (Howard, Hussain, 2013:38).[9] The Facebook campaign to

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[6] For example, social movements social movements and collective action networks shared strategies for direct political action, created regional and international news events that drew attention and

sympathy from neighbouring countries, and inspired others to join and celebrate their causes (Howard, Hussain, 2013:116). The Arab Spring is probably the most poignant example of protest as a "communicative action" (Bossio, 2014:11).

[7] During the protests in Egypt, for example, there were many people involved in what we might call "journalistic practices": eyewitness reportage of events, analysis of those events in the larger political context, and video, audio and social media updates of information. Some were paid as journalists for Egyptian media outlets, others considered themselves "unpaid" journalists, some were collaborating with mainstream news organisations and others defined what they were doing simply as important information dissemination in a time of crisis (Bebawi, Bossio, 2014:4).

[8] For more details about Egypt's blogosphere prior to 2011, see Radsch, 2014:77, 97.

[9] Online protests, both in Tunisia and Egypt, allowed human rights abuses and government corruption to be more well-documented and broke the taboo against openly criticising political leaders (Howard, Hussain, 2013:40). In Egypt, the Kefaya Movement (translated as "Enough!"),

commemorate a murdered blogger, Khaled Said, started by a regional Google executive, Wael Ghonim, provided the catalyst necessary for Egypt's online protesters to coalesce (Rutherford, 2013:38).[10] The first occupants of Tahrir Square were aware of the mobilisation and achievements of their Tunisian counterparts (brought to the streets by widely disseminated social media images of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010 (Doran, 2011:42-43) and formed a like-minded community: underemployed, educated, eager for change, but fed up with government corruption and repression. They found solidarity through digital media and used their mobile phones to call their social networks into the streets. Protests escalated quickly. Both government analysts and outsiders were surprised that such a large network of relatively liberal, middle class, peaceful citizens would mobilize against Mubarak so rapidly. The traditional Islamists, opposition parties, and union organisations were there, but liberal and civil society voices dominated the digital conversation about events and the public stages in squares around Cairo during the igniting phases (Howard, Hussain, 2013:21). Aware of the efficiency of this type of mobilisation, the Mubarak regime tried to disconnect the activists from the global internet infrastructure in the last week of January 2011, with relatively little impact on the protests. Soon afterwards, the Egyptian security services began using social media to obtain information in order to mount a counterinsurgency strategy and identify the protest leaders – a method used by regime authorities in other countries affected by the uprisings (Algeria, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Oman).

It was not just the deaths of Bouazizi and Said that brought people to the streets of Tunis and Cairo, it was also the desire to share news about what was happening at a time when state-run broadcast media censored all information about the protests and help TV stations like Al Jazeera and

Western media to bring the events to the attention of the wider regional and world public. Most of the protests in most of the countries analysed here were organized in unexpected ways that made it difficult for states to respond. Demonstrators were relatively leaderless and not dominated by unions, existing political parties, clear political ideologies, or religious fervour. The street phase of social protest involved a strategic use of Facebook, Twitter, and other sites to identify the times and locations for civic action. Regimes sometimes adapted to this kind of planning and used the very same social media sites to track who would be mobilising where or to block particular pages and applications at chosen moments. For instance, Syria has blocked Facebook and Twitter on and off since 2007, but the government opened access in the midst of political protest, possibly as a way of tracking and entrapping activists (Howard, Hussain, 2013:28). More often than not, the state simply mismanaged information technologies in ways that allowed savvy activists to perform creative workarounds. Mubarak disabled Egypt's broadband infrastructure but left satellite and landline links alone, which did not seem to diminish the scale of the protests (Lynch, 2014:96). Gaddafi tried to disable his country's mobile phone networks (Markovitz 2014:9), but with multiple decentralised home-location registers, including a key node in the eastern city of Benghazi, rebels were able to reinstate the national registry showing which phone numbers linked to which phones.

By early January, the protestors' appeals for help and clumsily recorded mobile phone videos were streaming across North Africa, and protests in Algeria and other countries started to appear. By the time Ben Ali fled Tunisia on January 14, 2011, active campaigns for civil disobedience against authoritarian rule were growing in Jordan, Oman, and Yemen. In other countries such as Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, minor protests erupted on a range of issues and triggered quick concessions or had little impact. But even in these countries, opposition leaders appeared to draw inspiration from what they were tracking in Tunisia (Howard, Hussain, 2013:49). The wave of information on Al Jazeera helped raise the public's expectations about the success of the popular uprisings, as evidenced in the cascade of tweets about political change and the topical evolution of blog posts all over the region: a large number of people were following events live on Twitter as they unfolded, which made this social media platform a key tool in coordinating national and

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the leading articulation of political protest, started online in 2004, being one of the first examples of widespread anti-Mubarak digital protests (Radsch, 2014:84).

[10] Using this Facebook page, Ghonim and others organised popular demonstrations on January 25, 2011. The stated purpose of the protests was fourfold: ending poverty, placing a two-term limit on the presidency, firing the autocratic interior minister, and annulling Egypt's emergency law, which had been in place nearly continuously since 1967, and gave the government the right to imprison and interrogate Egyptiansfor up to six months without a warrant or attorney (Culbertson, 2016:828; Marcovitz, 2014:25).

regional strategies, especially among the more educated and wealthier Twitter users in most of the MENA region, who were more likely to become opinion leaders (Howard, Hussain, 2013:49).[11]

Many tweets involved personal stories of suffering at the hands of a tough and incompetent regime, something that could be called "affective news", because most of the content included links to personal photos and narratives (Papacharissi, Oliveira, 2012). Some involved links to critical documentaries on YouTube or made reference to Facebook groups and news stories that did not paint the regime in a flattering light. With the earliest available records of Twitter feeds (January 2011), there are clear waves of political consciousness that connect key events, political sentiment, and protester turnout. Before the resignation of Ben Ali, more than 1,000 Tunisians were tweeting every day about political change in the country; as soon as he resigned, the interference of security forces with communication networks resulted in a steep decline in Twitter activity. What is surprising is, at least in the early days of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, a lack of mentions to traditional political parties and ideologies in the online sphere, where the names of Khaled Said and Bouazizi, or topics like liberty and human dignity, appeared far more often than those of opposition political leaders or references to Islamic precepts or Sharia. At the peak of events in Tunisia, there were 2,200 tweets about Ben Ali's resignation from outside Tunisia (but within the region). In the subsequent months, the hashtags associated with conversations about political change in particular countries were often used by people in neighboring countries. In other words, people in countries throughout the region were drawn into an extended conversation about social uprising. As street protests arose in Tunisia and Egypt, then Yemen and Bahrain, and eventually Algeria and Morocco, people across the region tweeted in real time about big events (Howard, Hussain, 2014:54). This shows how the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian protesters' political

demands influenced others across the region, and all over the world, to pick up the conversation about freedom and human dignity.[12] Thus, for instance, international pressure for Mubarak to resign started to mount after Twitter and Facebook helped raise awareness about the events in Egypt all over the Western world.

Between November 2010 and May 2011, the amount of content produced online by major Egyptian political actors increased significantly as they reacted to events on the street and adjusted strategy to compete for the affinities of newly freed Egyptian voters. Some observers have been sceptical of social media's relevance to the evolution of political conversations in Egypt. But we find that in Egypt, Facebook and Western news media were central to online political discourse. Egypt's major political actors often linked to social networking and news services. In fact, major Egyptian political websites were far more likely to link to Facebook or Western media sites like CNN than they were to each other (Howard, Hussain, 2013:56; Bossio, 2014:17, 25). YouTube was also a very important tool for spreading information about the Egyptian uprising around the world, after the first videos started going viral on January 25, 2011, and contributed to heightened moral outrage in the Middle East and around the world (Bossio, 2014:28; Lynch, 2016:125).

Even based on the few examples provided above, one can easily see that social media played a crucial role in the political uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. First, social media was pivotal in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. Second, a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the

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[11] Throughout January 2011, there were in total 13,262 Tweets using the hashtag most prominently associated with Tunisia's political uprising: #sidibouzid. By scanning the structure of content and links of the Tunisian blogosphere, we can chart the progress of the idea of political reform. Many Tunisian bloggers wrote in French and Arabic. Moreover, distinct keywords and themes regarding economic grievances and democratisation arose preceding the popular uprising (Howard, Hussain, 2013:51).

[12] #egypt became a space which supported a domestic and regional issue public tracking continuing developments in the country's transition, at the time, towards free and democratic elections – an issue public whose interactions were predominantly in Arabic, with a smaller number of mainly English-language participants also participating and remaining linked loosely but notably to the Arabic mainstream of the community. #libya, by contrast, hosted a mainly English-speaking community which discussed events in that country's continuing civil war from the outside and which contained few domestic or regional predominantly Arabic-speaking voices – or where it did, such voices remained marginal and disconnected from the English-language centre. If domestic and regional issue publics which were concerned with the situation in Libya at the time existed, they did so elsewhere – using hashtags other than #libya on Twitter, or indeed (and more likely) using channels of communication other than social media (Bruns, Highfield, 2014:53).

ground. Third, social media helped spread democratic ideas across international borders. But perhaps the most powerful evidence that digital media mattered in the Arab Spring comes from activists themselves. In both countries, Facebook users were of the opinion that Facebook had been used primarily to raise awareness within their countries about the ongoing civil movements, spread information to the world about the movements, and organize activists and actions. Surveys of participants in Tahrir Square demonstrations reveal that social media in general, and Facebook in particular, provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success. People learned about the protests primarily through inter- personal communication using Facebook, phone contact, or face-to-face conversation. Controlling for other factors, social media use greatly increased the odds that a respondent attended protests on the first day, and half of those surveyed produced and disseminated visuals from the demonstrations, mainly through Facebook (Howard, Hussain, 2013:65). The Tunisian blogosphere provided space for open political dialogue about regime corruption and the potential for political change. Twitter relayed stories of successful mobilisation within and between countries. Facebook functioned as a central node in networks of political discontent in Egypt. During the protests, YouTube and other video archiving centres allowed citizen journalists, using mobile phone cameras and consumer electronics, to broadcast stories that the mainstream media could not or did not want to cover (Lynch, 2014:101). The ease of sharing on the video platform and the gritty quality of the footage contributed to the idea that the images presented an authentic, unadulterated view of events (Iskandar, 2014:262). Social media alone did not cause political upheaval in North Africa. But information technologies, including mobile phones and the internet, altered the capacity of citizens and civil society actors to affect domestic politics (Howard, Hussain, 2013:66).[13] In a sense, they became part of the essential toolkit used to protest for freedom and demand respect for human

rights which shifted from the online environment to the streets during the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring events constituted both a "social media" revolution and a genuine revolution: what brought down Ben Ali, Mubarak, Saleh and Qaddafi was neither Facebook nor Twitter, but rather millions of people in the streets, standing up and ready to die for what they believed in (Friedman, 2011; Seib, 2014:182; Howard, Hussain, 2014:31). The catalyst sparked on social media would have most likely fizzled out and died in the online environment, had it not been accompanied by actual action in the streets and squares of the MENA region, so one should be careful about not assigning a more prominent role to social media beyond its very useful means of mobilisation and information, especially in the early days of protests. The revolutions were, ultimately, not about social media or technology, but about people acting to make changes on the ground (Culbertson, 2016:66).

Social media are the reason we have such good documentation of events: in the hands of activists, they became some of their most powerful weapons, also marking a shift in media power whereby mainstream journalists increasingly relied on social media in order to cover the events and access eyewitness accounts (Bebawi, 2014:136). More importantly, they are the reason that Egyptians had such excellent live coverage of what was going on in Tunisia, and also the reason that Moroccans, Jordanians, and Yemenis had coverage of what was going on in Egypt, just as Libyans and Syrians had coverage of what was going on in those countries, and so on (Bebawi, 2014:131; Culbertson, 2016:692; Ryan, 2014:112; Doran, 2011:40; Brooks, Gupta, 2013:5). In other words, it was social media that brought the narrative of successful social protest across multiple, previously closed, media regimes. When things did not go well, as in the case of Bahrain and Libya, activists in the continuing cascade took note and applied these lessons (Howard, Hussain, 2013:120). Arguably, there were three great effects of this new media environment: i) the free flow of information and the explosion of public discourse and open debate have shattered one of the core pillars of the authoritarian Arab systems that evolved over the 1970s and 1980s: their ability to control the flow of ideas and to enforce public conformity; ii) it has given today's activists and ordinary citizens new skills, expectations, and abilities. They operate within a radically new information environment, expect different things from their states and societies, and are able to act

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[13] However, this observation should not be overgeneralised as, for instance, in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, countries with some of the highest levels of connectivity, there was hardly any offline mobilisation during the Arab Spring uprisings.

in new ways to demand them. Finally, it has unified the Arab political space, bringing together all regional issues into a common narrative of a shared fate and struggle. This new Arab public sphere is highly critical of most ruling regimes, extremely pan-Arabist in its orientation, and self-consciously celebratory of the power of a long-denied Arab street (Lynch, 2012:36-37).

All the crucial events of the Arab Spring were digitally mediated and the digital infrastructure represented by smartphones, computers, and social media is an integral part of the complex historical narrative of the events. The different outcomes of the protests across the region certainly do not diminish the impact of this digital scaffolding and prove that countries where this is consolidated are significantly more likely to experience successful democratic popular movements.[14]

2.2 Al Jazeera coverage. Together with social media, Qatar-based TV station Al Jazeera, established in 1996, was instrumental in covering the Arab Spring protests and in raising awareness about the events both throughout the Middle East and in the Western world.[15] Al Jazeera is an interesting case study in how traditional news media helped create new linkages among civil society actors within and between countries. Unlike many Western news cultures that socialise journalists to maintain a healthy distance from the subjects of their coverage, news cultures in North Africa and the Middle East operate more nimbly and cooperate with citizen journalists (Howard, Hussain, 2014: 90). Al Jazeera has brought a great deal of change and openness to a region where traditional media served as the anodyne mouthpiece of autocratic governments. It challenges authoritarian Arab regimes as well as U.S. policy. Well before the Arab Spring protests, Al Jazeera was instrumental in opening up free debate in the Arab world, fomenting demand for more democratic accountability (Culbertson, 2016:663).

Especially Al Jazeera English (AJE), founded in 2006, has a far greater reach than its Arabic counterpart and plays a significant role as a regional public diplomacy player, shaping the news agenda of the Middle East: by early 2010, it reached more than 100 million households in 100 countries around the world, despite not being available in major markets such as the US, and it established itself as a credible, objective source of information (Seib, 2014:183).[16] AJE uses YouTube, Livestation and Twitter, as well as its own website (Al Jazeera is probably the most widely read single online news source in the Arab world), to reach viewers (Culbertson, 2016:663). Both AJE and its Arabic counterpart have a large audience among the Arab-speaking diaspora around the world, helping forge a sense of community between Arab viewers overseas and Arab culture.[17] During the Arab Spring, AJE became a functionally independent, transnational news medium generating content even in countries where it was not welcome.

Al-Jazeera played a decisive role in covering the Arab Spring events throughout the region although in unequal measure, linking together disparate national struggles into a coherent narrative of popular Arab protests against both foreign intervention and domestic repression. Its talk shows became an open forum for regionwide discussion and debate about shared issues and concerns, while its news coverage crafted a coherent master frame, making sense of the cascade of events across the entire region. Al Jazeera became the televised face of the revolution both in the Arab world and in the West (Lynch, 2012:179, 216, 286).

Unlike state-run national networks, which censored information about the uprisings and tried to support the failing regimes of Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qaddafi (at least until it became clear the dictators were on the losing side of history), Al Jazeera broadcast live the large-scale popular demonstrations in Tahrir Square, thus contributing to the cascading effect that the Egyptian Arab Spring had across the region; at the height of protests, activists pleaded with Al Jazeera to continue broadcasting, arguing that the live news coverage was protecting the uprising and their own lives (Bosker, 2011; Youmans, 2014:56; Culbertson, 2016:670). As in Tunisia, Al Jazeera provided a focal point for audiences everywhere to share in revolutionary protest. Egyptians now watched themselves changing the world, and the

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[14] For data about social media usage in Arabic countries at the time of the Arab Spring, see Jamali, 2015:7-8.

[15] During the Arab uprisings, Al Jazeera became the default go-to source on the matter for many other news organisations, including CNN, BBC, the *New York Times*, Reuters or the *Huffington Post*.

[16] For example, in 2008-2009, AJE provided the only on-site reporting from an English-language channel during the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. Unlike state-run media in the Arab world, AJE is dominated neither by geopolitical concerns nor by commercial interests (El-Nawawy, Powers, 2014:193).

[17] AJE has four broadcasting centres (Qatar, UK, Malaysia, the US) and 21 supporting bureaus in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

messages and images that once reached a few thousand Facebook users now reached tens of millions of ordinary citizens (Lynch, 2012:286; Lynch, 2016:128; Patel, Bunce, Wolchick, 2014:67; Rutherford, 2013:41).

In contrast, in Libya and Bahrain, where the station's journalists were present in much smaller numbers, the protests were less successful and considerably more violent. In fact, the station was criticised for its very light coverage of the violent repression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain, its next-door neighbour, as well as for the fact that it very rarely covers events inside Qatar (Culbertson, 2016:673; Lynch, 2012:67, 450; Lynch, 2014:103). As soon as the protests started in Tunisia, AJE sent in broadcast teams to provide rapid updates and a large amount of news for its live blogs. Unlike other services waiting patiently to verify and double-check information, AJE did both: posting information as it came in onto the live blogs, then doing extended articles and in-focus stories on information that was double-checked and verified. With this combination of rapid reporting and in-depth coverage, a diverse set of viewers' needs was addressed. First, online and offline activists were able to coordinate with a quick under-standing of successes, failures, and dangers experienced by others like them in neighbouring countries. Second, the 150 million households in 100 countries could learn about a rapidly escalating and complex cascade through AJE's deep coverage (Howard, Hussain, 2014:100).

During its coverage of the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera had an exceptionally innovative new media team that converted its traditional news product for use on social media sites and made good use of the existing social networks of its online users (Youmans, 2014:63, 65). But a key aspect of its success was its use of digital media to collect information and images from countries where its journalists had been harassed or banned (Howard, Hussain, 2014:31). AJE used social media and user-generated content to supplement its correspondents' coverage. Its live blogs on the website were examples of quintessential networked journalism in action. This kind of online-gained content brought more diversity to the typical breaking news filler routinely populated by experts and other talking heads. Displaying Twitter and Facebook messages, as well as activists and others' videos, made the rolling coverage richer and brought in some diverse views (Youmans, 2014:74; Bebawi, 2014:131).

Although it claims to be apolitical, AJE – especially after Mohammad Morsi's 2013 election

as president of Egypt – found itself subject to increasing criticism for what was perceived to be its biased coverage in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood – something hardly surprising, after all, considering that the Qatari royal family, who sponsor the TV station, are known supporters of the Islamic organisation (Seib, 2014:185; Culbertson, 2016:664, 668; Lynch, 2012:405).[18] The politics of Al Jazeera had actually been evident before, during its initial coverage of the Arab Spring protests: its coverage of Syria, for instance, had a pronounced political bias, clearly opposed to the Assad regime's attempts to retain power. The channel's reports from elsewhere in the region reflected the reality of the tense marriage between journalism and public diplomacy. The government of Qatar, and by extension Al Jazeera, proceeded cautiously as the old order was being upended in Tunisia and Egypt and threatened in Bahrain and elsewhere. The Arab Spring was not just a new political period; it was a new universe in which old rules evaporated and new alignments were cautiously created (Seib, 2014:185).

Throughout the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera was instrumental in constructing a news audience in two ways. First, it covered stories that the national news media in many countries would not, particularly at times when citizens wanted those stories. Second, as an independent organisation it remained active and "live" as a news agency when governments shut down domestic news agencies. Third, Al Jazeera actively cultivated content from citizens, providing fresh, local content that news consumers wanted (Howard, Hussain, 2014:91).

As an event, the Arab Spring had two primary consequences for the political economy of journalism in the Arab world. First, citizens demonstrated, using social media, that they could make news in creative ways using digital tools and their social networks. Second, Al Jazeera's position in the region as a credible, responsible, and responsive news organisation was solidified. News about the Arab Spring came from social media and cell-phone videos uploaded on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and other

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[18] After the military coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government, Al Jazeera was the only major network giving significant air time to the leaders of the MB, while the new Egyptian regime sent three Al Jazeera journalists to prison on fabricated charges of supporting terrorism and spreading fake news (Culbertson, 2016:672; Lynch, 2016:320). There are voices that argue Al Jazeera is rather an instrument of Qatari foreign policy than an independent Arab media voice (Lynch, 2012:405).

sites, but they were effective because pan-Arab satellite networks such as AJE rebroadcast them with amplifying effects that mobilised and enraged regional and international publics (Howard, Hussain, 2014:102).

3. WHY DID THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION FAIL?

As I have argued in the introduction to the present contribution, despite the significant role that social and mass media played in mobilising people, informing them and sharing their grievances, it is improper to label the events of the Arab Spring as a "Facebook revolution", a "Twitter revolution", or a "social media revolution". All the conditions for the outbreak of a revolution existed in the Middle East even in the absence of internet access: oppression, corruption, poverty, unemployment, the rising cost of food, and the half-hearted efforts of a sclerotic regime to solve these problems. All these and more were underlying causes of the revolution and alone had been enough to spark revolutions in other countries at other times (Doran, 2011:39, 44; Bossio, 2014:23). It is often argued that nobody predicted the Arab Spring uprisings, and so their outbreak came as a complete surprise to the world; yet, the crumbling foundations of the Arab order were visible to all who cared to look. Political systems that had opened slightly in the mid-2000s were once again closing down, victim to regime manipulation and repression. Economies failed to produce jobs for an exploding population of young people. As the gap between rich and poor grew, so did corruption and escalating resentment of an out-of-touch and arrogant ruling class (Lynch 2012, 10).

While social media and the Al Jazeera coverage were able to create a clear momentum, especially by helping mobilise people in unprecedented mass protests leading to the overthrow of four dictatorial regimes, the aftermath of the events demonstrated that the social media momentum was not enough to start these countries (with the possible exception of Tunisia) onto the path of genuine democratic reforms: for example, the result of Egypt's first free elections in its millennia-long history was quickly negated by the authoritarian tendencies of the newly-elected Morsi regime, and soon afterwards, by the forceful intervention of the army which deposed him – something that proves, once more, that free elections are not, by far, sufficient to transform an authoritarian regime into a functional democracy. Just like social media is, by itself, clearly insufficient in bringing about authentic democratic reforms in the absence of historical tradition, political will and culture, and the institutions to support and implement them.

Moreover, the forceful responses of many of the regimes that the protesters were trying to overthrow also help explain the failure of the social media revolution. Therefore, despite the ample evidence illustrating the role of digital media in the Arab Spring, it would be a mistake to suggest the democratic potential of information technologies without considering the important roles that regimes play in managing or limiting their applications. Perhaps the best evidence that digital media were an important causal factor in the Arab Spring is that dictators treated them as such. The months during which the Arab Spring took place had the most national blackouts, network shutdowns, and tool blockages to date. But just as activists had a longer history of using digital media, authoritarian regimes had a history of responding to the political communication occurring over digital networks (Howard, Hussain, 2014:69). When unexpected political turmoil arose, they developed responses that ranged from jailing and beating bloggers to more sophisticated strategies, such as asking loyalists to identify protesters in photos posted on Facebook, creating domestic surveillance programs forcing citizens to monitor one another's activities, and more. In these instances, regimes used activists' spaces against them

The majority of Arab governments responded to the new information technologies in consistent ways: censorship strategies were developed with similar objectives of cultural control, internet service providers were held legally responsible for the content that flows over their networks, and government agencies worked aggressively to support (often "Islamic") cultural content online (Howard, Hussain, 2014:12). In Tunisia, for example, following the publication of videos showing Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation, the regime initiated a heavy censorship of YouTube, Facebook and other online apps (Marcovitz, 2014:34).[19] Before the advent of the Internet, Bouazizi's story could not have reached so many households so quickly. Nor could it have had the same explosive impact. His story was able to rouse thousands of people to immediate action because it fit seamlessly into a pre-existing narrative (Doran, 2011:42; Lynch 2016:97). Despite the ban, within a few days SMS networks

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[19] There, the regime had a long history of monitoring and targeting individuals engaged in online political activism.

became the organising tool of choice, which helped keep the momentum of the protests going. Less than 20 percent of the overall population actively used social media websites, but almost everyone had access to a mobile phone. Outside the country, the hacker communities of Anonymous and Telecomix helped to cripple government operations with their "Operation Tunisia" denial-of-service attacks, and by building new software to help activists get around state firewalls (Howard, Hussain, 2014:19).

Mubarak's regime followed the Tunisian example soon after the start of the protests in Tahrir Square, even kidnapping Ghonim once they realised the mobilising potential of his Facebook group. When the Libyan government blocked Facebook, activists took to Muslim dating websites and used the romantic language of courtship and dates to mask their planning for face-to-face meetings and protests. When state officials in Syria started spreading misinformation over Twitter, activists used Google Maps to self-monitor and verify trusted sources (Doran, 2011:43). In the past, authoritarian Arab regimes easily controlled broadcast media in times of political crisis by destroying newsprint supplies, seizing radio and television stations, and blocking phone calls. It is certainly more difficult to control digital media on a regular basis, but there have been occasions when these states have disabled a range of marginal to significant portions of their national information infrastructure (Howard, Hussain, 2014:71). Security services in Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria observed how democracy advocates were using social media in Egypt and Tunisia, and they developed counterinsurgency strategies that allowed for surveilling, misleading, and entrapping protesters, despite jeopardising their own capacity to respond to the crisis. Additionally, limiting the internet access of the population inevitably raises the question, "what could have been on the internet to make the regime want to cut access to it?" The limitation imposed increases the eagerness of the public to learn about what is going on in society via the Internet, which leads to the development of political knowledge (Jamali, 2015:34).

Undeniably, information infrastructure *is* politics. And the political culture that we now see online during elections comes not just from political elites but also from citizens: using social media, documenting human rights abuses with their mobile phones, sharing spreadsheets to track state expenditures, and pooling information about official corruption. Perhaps the most lasting impact

of digital media use during crises is that people get accustomed to being able to consume *and* produce political content. One of the things authoritarian regimes did consistently during the Arab Spring was to block citizens from reading international news and activists from reaching international journalists (Howard, Hussain, 2014:87). The Arab Spring did not fail because Arabs were not ready for democracy or because Islamists cunningly exploited the naiveté of hopeful liberals. The Arab uprising failed primarily because the regimes they challenged killed it (Lynch, 2016:27).

An interesting point to consider here is whether the widespread use of social media during the Arab Spring led to any visible increase in critical thinking among the populations of the affected countries. Sadly, the answer is negative: the people used social media as a place to express their government criticism anonymously and as a means to mobilise and communicate (Jamali, 2015:38),[20] yet the people's behaviour in the aftermath of the uprisings does not lead one to believe that there was any significant increase in the levels of media literacy – which could explain why the protests were, ultimately, short-lived and without any major tangible results. Ultimately, digital tools have the most profound effects in states where the public sphere and civil society already check the actions of an undemocratic regime.

4. CONCLUSIONS: WHAT LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE?

Few voices would argue today that the Arab Spring has failed: Tunisia's ability to sustain a shaky consensus on democratic institutions can hardly compensate for the shattered remains of Egypt's paradigmatic revolution, the violently collapsed states in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, or the brutally constituted autocracy across much of the

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[20] In the countries of the Middle East, the wave of social media technology did not come about by incremental improvements, but arrived quite suddenly, so there was no time to develop a technological culture. The great potential of social media for people to express thoughts freely and yet remain hidden behind a changed identity has led to many people living under oppression enjoying only one of the benefits of a social media, while being unable to enjoy all of their applications (Jamali, 2015:78). Additionally, the potential of social media to effect meaningful change may have also been undermined by "slacktivism", i.e., slacker activism. Armchair militants, the sceptics claim, "like" a political cause on Facebook and then congratulate themselves for having changed the world (Doran, 2011:40).

rest of the region. If democracy was the goal, then it has manifestly not been achieved. But while consolidated democracy would have certainly been the best outcome by far for the popular uprisings in the Arab world, there was always far more to the Arab uprisings (Lynch, 2016:498). The Arab uprisings of 2011 were only one episode in a generational challenge to a failed political order. Protesters won some battles in 2011, and regimes won them in the following years. Many of the conflicts, especially Syria's and Yemen's, have had no winners at all.

The Arab Spring also shattered several important myths that had previously held sway both in the region and outside it. The first of these was that the Arab populations were largely apathetic. The Arab Spring (arguably, along with the birth of the Green Movement in Iran in 2009) demonstrated, across the region, that the people of the Middle East were no longer willing to simply accept their misery. Rather, they were willing to take to the streets and risk their lives to demand change. Indeed, a critical corollary is that the Arab people themselves have had, in many cases, found that when they take action, they could change their own circumstances. The second myth that the Arab Spring shattered is that the Arabs did not understand or want democracy. This claim was always spurious, and there was tremendous evidence to the contrary long before the crowds gathered in Tahrir Square. But it persisted until the people took to the streets and proclaimed their demands for democracy, not just in name but also in practice and in all its particulars (Pollack, 2011:6-7).

Since 2000, technology proliferation has been particularly rapid in the Arab world. This has resulted in improved informational literacy, particularly in large cities. Digital media became a proximate cause of political revolution precisely *because* a significant community of users was already comfortable using digital media before the crisis began. For the residents of Tunis, Cairo, and other capitals, it is the ubiquitous presence of mobile phones that makes technology a proximate cause of revolution (Howard, Hussain, 2014:27; Hudson, Iskandar, 2014:1).

Arguing whether the revolutions would have happened without digital media is, of course, speculative; on the other hand, we also know that the MENA region, despite the relatively large number of democratic activists, has had very few successful protests to date – so one should by no means discount the mobilising and motivational power of social media and the Al Jazeera television coverage. Unlike previous waves of democratisation, however, the Arab Spring had several unique features. For the amount of political change that has occurred, there has been limited loss of life. In Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, civil society leaders found that state security services were noticeably more reluctant to move in on protesters precisely because most of the protesters had mobile phone cameras. In Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, security services did move on peaceful protests, but good documentation of police abuse made its way to the international community (Howard, Hussain, 2014:33).

Social media were instrumental in the outbreak of the protests, first in Tunisia, then in Egypt, and undoubtedly contributed to the cascading effect across the region, but they alone did not cause the political and social disruptions throughout the area. Later on, they served as a useful tool for the amplification of news events, as evidenced by the vast amount of attention to social media content about the uprisings visible outside the Middle East Region (Bossio, 2014:28).

Generally speaking, social media have several kinds of impact on local systems of political communication. First, social media provide new opportunities and new tools for social movements to respond to conditions in their countries. It is clear that the ability to produce and consume political content, independent of social elites, is important because the public sense of shared grievances and potential for change can develop rapidly. Second, social media foster transnational links between individuals and groups. This means that network ties form between international and local democratisation movements, and that compelling stories, told in short text messages or long-form video documentaries, circulate around the region. The inspiration of success in Tunisia was not just a fast-spreading contagion, for civil society leaders in neighbouring countries also learned effective strategies of successful movement organising through social media (Howard, Hussain, 2014:66; Zayani, 2014:24).

In North Africa and the Middle East, relatively new youth movements were themselves surprised by the speed, size, and success of protests they have organised over social networking websites. Over several years, prior to the Arab Spring, they had found their political voice online and held their meetings virtually. Each of the dictators in these countries had long had many political enemies, but they were a fragmented group of opponents. During the uprisings, these opponents did more than use broadcast media to highlight their claims. They used social media to identify goals, build

solidarity, and organise demonstrations. During the Arab Spring, individuals demonstrated their desire for freedom through social media, and social media became a critical part of the tools used to protest for freedom.

The new Arab public sphere, unified by Al Jazeera, Facebook, and Twitter ultimately bound together all the different national struggles into one coherent narrative of the Arab uprisings, for the first time in history: the common language, shared identity, focus and communication across countries helped forge a unique regional configuration. Unfortunately, this proved to be insufficient: despite the diffusion of protests and common grievances, the aftermath of the Arab Spring proved that meaningful political change in the MENA region cannot be brought about by social media mobilisation alone and televised protests. In other words, despite the fact that the revolution was tweeted (to paraphrase Gil Scott-Heron's famous 1970 poem, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*), it ultimately failed. It takes a certain level of democratic political culture at grassroots level, as well as the creation of strong institutions and mechanisms such as the rule of law, checks and balances and the separation of powers, to build the foundations of a genuine, stable democratic regime.

So far, sadly, these ingredients have been largely lacking in the Arab world. The Middle East today still presents many of the characteristics that led to the 2010-2011 uprisings, but now there is the added danger of radical, entrenched sectarianism. Therefore, I believe that the future Arab Spring, whenever it may arise, will be a far bloodier affair, if the present is any measure at all.

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