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# The ‘story’ of digital excess in revolutions of the Arab Spring

## ABSTRACT

*The media sphere having become increasingly crowded with the arrival of each new medium on the scene, the narrative about, or ‘story of’, the world has grown in complexity and the emergence of a unified meaning of reality seems to have become problematic. Like their counterparts elsewhere, the Arab media also are marked by such excess, with the social and mainstream media vying with each other for people’s attention. Yet, a unified and shared meaning of reality evidently has emerged there: without it, coordinated action resulting in revolutions of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 would have been unlikely. Marshalling a theory of media attention and accounts of political and media practices in the Arab world, this essay argues that a unified and shared meaning emerged in spite of an excess of mediation because the oppositional narrative, which used the social media as a conduit, had its roots in the people’s ‘real-world’ political practices and these practices had resulted in unity among people attuned to different political discourses.*

## KEYWORDS

Narrative  
social media  
political practice  
media practice  
information overload  
Arab Spring  
Arab media

(S)elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction,

1 For example, Arasmus (2011) and Marya (2011).

interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies.

(Ricoeur 1992: 114)

We live by and through stories, part fact and part imagination, our own and others'. Some, like Sugiyama (2001), believe that narrative has played an important role in our evolution though the exact nature of this role is not clear. In terms of the platforms on which these stories are told, we have come a long way from cave paintings to social media, and now an 'interplanetary Internet' is in the making – not for chatting with extraterrestrials but for connecting earthlings and robots on interplanetary missions and the like.

With the addition of every new element to the media ecosystem, 'the story' has become increasingly complex, going from a simple account of a bison or deer hunt to multiple but still manageable competing narratives to perhaps thousands and even millions of disparate accounts of the world. For the individual who stands at the intersection of these innumerable strands of history, biography and fiction, can they ever add up to a coherent picture of the world? Is it humanly possible for any individual to arrive at some kind of unified meaning of the world? As revolutions rock the Arab world in the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, we see, competing for people's attention, tens of thousands of blog posts, tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube and other videos, mashups,<sup>1</sup> text messages, etc., not to mention radio, television and newspaper stories, both in the media of their origin and through their online avatars.

Here, we refer to Ghannam (2011) for an understanding of the scale of social media use in the Arab world and the manner in which it has been incorporated into aggregate media consumption. Quoting the Jordan-based Arab Advisors Group, he notes that the number of Internet users who 'turn to online platforms to create their own diet of news, rather than rely on editors' selections' have been steadily growing and may soon exceed the number of those who depend on offline news sources (Ghannam 2011: 12). 'The number of Facebook users alone, about 17 million in the Arab world, have [sic] already surpassed the 14 million copies of newspapers sold in the region', he adds. Ghannam quotes Carrington Malin, an executive at Spot On Public Relations in Dubai, as stating that Facebook and other social media platforms had begun to define the way in which information is discovered and shared, opinion is shaped and interactions take place among people. Malin is quoted as saying that Facebook 'doesn't write the news, but the new figures show that Facebook's reach now rivals that of the news press.' As for Google, one of its senior executives is quoted as stating that news has been the most frequent search category for Egyptians, followed by images, music and audio clips.

As for Tunisia, Ghannam quotes Sami Ben Gharbia, who is director of Global Voices Advocacy and operates Nawaat, a dissident blog collective, as pointing out that Facebook had been the source of a major portion of revolution-related content that appeared in traditional media. Activists from the entire Arab world were collecting content from Facebook, translating it into multiple languages, providing context and reposting it on Nawaat and Twitter for journalists and others. This strategy was being followed because content would have reached only members of certain groups if it had been confined to Facebook alone. 'That [Facebook] was the echo chamber of the struggle on the street' (Ghannam 2011: 16), Gharbia is quoted as saying. In other words, the activists had found a way to set the agenda, at least partially, for the established

media. Hamdy (2009: 105) writes that activist bloggers view their blogs as 'a virtual extension of the street'.

Arab bloggers have found their way into the discourse of the mainstream media in another way as well. Hamdy notes that they are rarely anonymous. They give interviews, respond to e-mail, appear on talk shows, contribute to academic panels and meet with university students. 'In fact, they are also providing a role model for a generation of young Arabs who are impressed with their courage.' Many journalism programmes in the region encourage students to study trends like citizen journalism and engage in these practices themselves, and some cyber activists 'have become folk heroes to the young' (Hamdy 2009: 106).

But blogs and social media are not the only contributors to the present complexity of what we may call the 'Arab story'. According to Lawrence Pintak, founding dean of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University and former director of the Center for Journalism Training and Research at the American University in Cairo, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera television channel has been another important source of news related to the Arab revolutions. Pintak writes, 'Unlike the bland, state-owned Egyptian station, or its more conservative, Saudi-owned rival Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera has captured the hopes of the crowds gathering on the streets of Cairo' (2011, February 02),

Some would argue that the problem concerning a unified meaning of the world under these circumstances is not a question of information overload alone; that it also relates to the supposed collapse of grand narratives that had given recognizable shapes to social and political realities until a few decades ago. This 'collapse' can be visualized as having two components. One of these is the collapse of master narratives and end of ideology that postmodernists and some others thought they saw in the second half of the twentieth century; and the other is the actual collapse, at the end of the 1980s, of the Soviet Union and the East bloc, whose existence as a counterweight to the West had until then constituted the binary framework within which much of politics was conducted and global realities were understood. The absence of this framework and its partial replacement with a western democracy versus Islamic terrorism binary has introduced a layer of indeterminacy in the interpretation of the Arab revolutions that is attested to by debates in left circles (on the Z-Mag website, for instance). However, this is a level of discourse that exists above and outside what I would like to call the digital Arab street – the Arab street's counterpart in the social media and the more traditional media.

The situation of excess at this 'street level', I would like to argue, is significantly different from, and overwhelms, Habermas' model ([1964] 1974, etc.) of public opinion emerging through rational critical debate in the public sphere mediated by the mass media. It appears to me that we need a different framework to understand how a shared narrative emerges in the Egyptian situation under discussion. That such a common narrative and common understanding do indeed emerge is obvious: without these, it is safe to say, the Arab revolutions would not be taking place. After all, revolutions, which by definition challenge a more or less unified and organized entity (the state), require coordinated action, which is evident even in relatively spontaneous uprisings such as those being witnessed in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen since January 2011. No such action would appear possible (in the absence of coercion) without a common narrative, as action carried out by an autonomous agent implies initiative, which is the 'living, active, operative

present answering to the present that is gazed upon, considered, contemplated, reflected' (Ricoeur 1991: 208), that is, a response to the meaning of the present. This meaning, which has not one source (solipsistic consciousness of the thinking self isolated from everything and everyone else) or several sources but (at least potentially) sources too numerous to count, is the ground in which action is rooted. Hence the importance of understanding the production of meaning that the individual derives from the innumerable narratives that swirl around her/him in the digital age.

We may note that paying attention is the first step towards understanding. Though every single one of these innumerable stories makes a contribution towards constituting the individual's lifeworld, it is to a smaller number of narratives that she/he is directly exposed, and an even smaller number to which she/he pays attention, on account of the limited time and (in some cases) other resources available to her/him for consuming media texts. But this narrowing down alone does not explain how a common narrative can emerge: the set of stories to which A pays attention may be different from that to which B pays attention. The choice of narratives, therefore, becomes an important issue.

Webster (2011) writes, '(P)ublic attention is the result of a structural process in which institutions and users mutually construct the media environment' (43). He argues that the pattern of public attention is determined through a process in which media institutions and individual members of the audience together construct the media environment. Pivotal to this process are two types of 'public measures' (Webster 2011: 43) – on the one hand, systems for channelling market information to media institutions on the basis of which they respond to the marketplace, such as audience rating services, and on the other hand, 'user information regimes' (Webster 2011: 43), such as search engines' ranking protocols and recommendation services, which allow users to navigate the digital ecosystem and 'routinely reduce an overwhelming number of choices to a manageable "repertoire" of preferred sources' (Webster 2011: 46). This structuration process, however, is not neutral. Webster writes

Inevitably [...] public measures are social constructs, defined by their makers and subject to whatever theoretical and methodological biases that have gone into the making. They necessarily focus the attention of institutions and users in particular ways and structure decision making within certain bounds. As such, they can bias structural processes, encouraging certain outcomes and discouraging others. Furthermore, [...] public measures are 'reactive.' The very existence of the measure can affect the thing being measured. Those who rely on information regimes often understand their importance, reflect on how to use them, and occasionally attempt to manipulate the measures themselves. The construction of public measures, then, is often a political process.

(2011: 50)

An example of the biases of public measures is popularity. Webster (2011: 52) notes that search engine algorithms accord higher page ranks to more popular sites, with the result that these grow even more popular and attract even more traffic while others – including possibly some sites of high quality – languish. As for recommendation services, these depend on aggregation of rankings of and recommendations for stories across the social media like Facebook and Twitter. Since networks on the social media 'seem to coalesce around certain norms,

values, or affinities', Webster notes, '(t)hese modes of recommendation may bias consumption in the direction of ever more agreeable entertainment and information (and) (i)n the extreme, they can promote processes of polarization' (Webster 2011: 53). In other words, these systems may be leading, if not to a polarization of the audience into mutually exclusive communities of interest, then at least to a certain 'dumbing down' of news, which the traditional media have been frequently accused of in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Lee and Carpini (2010: 1) offer another interesting insight into online news consumption patterns, noting that 'people's online news consumption behaviors largely mirror their offline news consumption habits (i.e., newspaper readers predominately visit newspaper websites)'. Thus, the stories that are recommended by people in social media like blogs, Facebook and Twitter are stories that have appeared on the websites of traditional media. Therefore, the combined effect of the phenomenon noted by Lee and Carpini, and those noted by Webster is that stories that appear in the traditional media are the ones that are more likely to 'go viral' than others as these are read and recommended in social networks and given high ranks by search engine ranking algorithms, leading to a situation in which the Internet actually increases the reach of established, traditional media rather than offering alternatives and bringing diversity into the news. Dreams of digitally contesting dominant ideologies, which some have been dreaming since the advent of the Internet, thus seem to be shattered.

Returning to the mode of meaning production in a situation of media excess, we note once again that this excess is in fact removed from the individual's sphere of attention through mechanisms of 'public measure'. There is therefore nothing to help the story transcend the horizon of the dominant ideology and to be understood through any framework other than extant mythologies. Against this backdrop, the role of Facebook, Twitter and blogs in mobilizing resistance in Egypt and Tunisia appears to present an anomaly, as they point towards the attainment of salience by oppositional discourse. In the discussion below, we will see that there may in fact be no such anomaly, as the social media did not somehow produce oppositional narratives on their own. The opposition's social media practices were integrated within a set of political practices, and it is the latter that produced an oppositional political discourse that was amplified and disseminated by the social media.

Hirschkind (2011, February 12) has noted the important role played by the social media in Egypt since 2004, but his account also shows that the decisive moment was not their arrival. It was the coming together of Islamist and secular (including leftist) wings of the opposition over common demands in opposition to the Mubarak regime. Arising in the Islamist revival of the 1970s, the chasm between the two wings had grown so wide that secular lawyers would not publicly defend Islamist political detainees and vice versa, and Hosni Mubarak capitalized on this divide. But there came a time when cooperation on the ground became a reality: secular lawyers, for instance, were now defending Islamist detainees and vice versa. It is this unity (albeit on a limited set of issues) that allowed the social media to be successful in helping to mobilize the masses.

A fact that needs to be noted is that the social media played the role they did in Egypt under certain special circumstances. The fact that an important segment of the mainstream media was under government control made the blogosphere attractive to the people as a source of anti-government news and views. Nine months before the Tunisian revolution triggered Egypt's uprising, Fahmy wrote:

- 2 One outcome of the systems of page ranking, social media-based recommendations and other techniques used to draw the user's attention to stories is the negation of certain fundamental conditions of rational critical debate in the Habermasian public sphere. Quoting Surowiecki (2004), Webster writes that while 'wisdom is achieved when large numbers of diverse individuals make decisions or predictions independently', these principles are usually violated. 'Aggregating and reporting what other visitors to a website have performed or what members of a social network recommend introduces powerful signals about social desirability for those who follow (e.g. Salganik, Dodds and Watts 2006; Stroud 2008). If autonomous judgements produce the best outcomes, contagions and cascades are anathema to reaping wisdom of crowds' (p. 54).

- 3 From the above, it can be understood that it is necessary to receive with some caution/qualification the valorization of social media evident in the use of terms like 'Facebook Revolution' by *Time* magazine (Hauslohner 2011, January 24) and others, and Google executive Wael Ghonim's terming (2011, February 11) of the Egyptian uprising as 'Revolution 2.0' in recognition (as he saw it) of the role of Web 2.0 (please see O'Reilly 2005) as the driving force of the revolution. Ghonim became almost iconic of the Egyptian revolution when his Facebook page helped spread the word about resistance to the Mubarak regime and he was taken into custody during the uprising, to be released after several days under international pressure. Also called social media, Web 2.0 entails services like blogs, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, etc., which are animated by six 'big' ideas (Anderson 2007): individual production and user generated content, harnessing the power of the crowd, data on an 'epic scale', architecture of participation, network effects and openness.

Blogging is [...] considered a weapon against the restricted flow of information enforced by the state, to control the mass media. This expresses a shift in the media's influence in society, as people now take information from alternative sources rather than the traditional ones. Political blogs reflect what people on the street are saying and suffering from.

(2010: 3)

Thus, the social media were able to occupy the narrative space of a large section of Egyptian society on account of its own responsiveness to the people's needs, with which the traditional media's unresponsiveness was in stark contrast, and the success of the secular-leftist and Islamist wings of the opposition to forge a certain degree of unity. These factors helped an oppositional narrative to emerge and overwhelm the official narrative. The point to be noted here is that this narrative arose from 'the street', from the people's lived experience, and hence there was no need to look outside it for its meaning.<sup>3</sup>

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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