The Arab Spring

The Role of ICTs

A Revolution of the Imagination

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The new forms of cultural articulation we are seeing in the uprisings of the Arab Middle East are inseparable from the recent history of mediated culture in the region. In the production, distribution, and consumption of satellite television, as well as in the use and consumption of the global Internet, a new role for the work of the imagination has transformed culture and placed individuals at the centers of their own narratives in profound ways. This has led to the rejection of the tired, official narratives that have long dominated official mediated production in the Arab Middle East, and it continues to encourages Arabs to imagine themselves as subjects (and not, as the official narratives would have it, objects) of history.

The unexpected uprisings of the "Arab Spring" demonstrate that new forms of political articulation and significantly new forms of political practice are taking root in the Arab world. In Egypt, this new relationship between government and governed—i.e., people in the streets refusing to obey the state—violates conventional wisdom about national political life. Most observers of Egypt have long argued that years of a dilapidated educational system, an ineffectual pretense of a democratic infrastructure, and the continued valorization of patriarchal culture had left Egyptians an apolitical, simple-minded, and ultimately fatalistic mass of apathetic (young) people.

What's happened to make a liar out of conventional wisdom? Although searching for a political theory to account for the sudden appearance of an independent political consciousness and practice among Arabs is tempting, it would be misleading, as it presupposes the primacy of the narrowly defined "political." In fact, what is happening in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and the Arab/Muslim cultural spheres (and eventually, throughout the whole planet, I suspect) is *not* a political revolution. It is a revolution in individual subjectivity.

Unlike 20th-century nationalistic or Islamic transformations, this change is not accompanied by or born out of strictly defined ideologies. Instead, we are witnessing the result of ongoing deep transformations in the practices of cultural consumption and production in the Arab Middle East. This change is represented and put into motion by a transformation in the ability of "regular people" (i.e., those with access to limited resources) to consume new kinds of media, as well as to produce and distribute their own media via social networking, YouTube, and other electronic distribution networks.

From transnationally-produced Arabic serial dramas that psychologize and personalize historical figures—and thus articulate alternate versions of the past—to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter which make ordinary people the stars of their own mediated narratives, to blogs which allow alternative political voices to find audiences, new ways of consuming and producing culture create new kinds of Arab subjectivities. New production and consumption bypass both the authoritarian state and trite binaries between local and global; they allow people to make connections simultaneously across the globe and across the street, and ultimately, to imagine their relationships in the world differently. These are transformations that put individual Arabs at the center of their own narratives in ways that challenge previous iterations of official Arab or Islamic cultures and personal identities. A revolution of the imagination has pushed people into the streets.

To analyze this profound shift, we must first put it into historical perspective before talking about more contemporary triggers. Although the current technological transformations are profound and jarring, historical contextualization allows us to avoid facile technologically deterministic descriptions of the power of the Internet to single-handedly transform societies. In fact, the seeds of contemporary Arab mediated subjectivities and personal identities that are now playing out across Al Jazeera and the Internet and Tahrir Square were planted in the heady days of nationalist decolonization, when Arabs, through radio, television, and film, were addressed for the first time as subjects of their own history.

Historical Perspective

The widespread rejection of official ideology characteristic of the Arab uprisings has its roots in changes in individual subjectivity set in motion in the postcolonial eruptions of the 1950s and 1960s. It was then that Egyptians and other Arabs first found themselves interpellated by political media as a cohesive whole. By seeking to mobilize Egypt and the entire Arab world for its own political benefit, the revolutionary regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser unwittingly planted the seed of the modern, personal self that has erupted with a loud "no" to contemporary Arab regimes.

From the first minutes of the July 1952 revolution, Egyptian radio was used to great effect by Nasser. Inside of Egypt and throughout the Arab world, radio and film (and later television) articulated Egyptian national and international political ambitions (Boyd, 1975). Radio was able to reach large sections of the population, both educated and illiterate, as the regime sought to legitimize their claim on power in the name of the people. By addressing Egyptian audiences as citizens of a revolutionary movement, radio broadcasts were used to create and reify a sense of nation, as well as, crucially, to address Egyptians as active subjects of the revolution. The resulting nationalism was then marshaled to create the public opinion necessary to enact controversial government "reforms," including the nationalization of private land, businesses, and the Suez Canal (see Jankowski, 2001). Communication was, in a very real way, the key to power.

Chief among Nasser's ideological aims was addressing what he called "the Arab common people" (*al sha'ab al 'arab*). Nasser pursued this audience with the *Sawt al Arab* or Voice of the Arabs broadcasts, which began service in 1953, shortly after the Egyptian revolution. Presaging satellite broadcasting fifty years later, this was the first time that Arabs were simultaneously addressed as a cohesive whole.

However, while contemporary satellite broadcasting largely sees Pan-Arab audiences as a linguistically-bound group of consumers, Nasser's "voice of the Arabs" saw them as units of potential political power. It was this ideological belief in the greater "Arab nation" that allowed Nasser to declare himself the sole "voice of the Arabs." In 2011, Arabs seem to have found their own voices, though many still look back to Nasser's rhetoric of social justice.

Three broad areas of change represent a significant recasting of the individual's relationship with the wider world as a result of mid-20th century Egyptian broadcasting. Arabs found themselves addressed as a cohesive whole; listeners and producers alike were conditioned to see broadcasting's role in the service of political power as a natural one; and audiences were encouraged to think of themselves as subjects, not objects, of history.

When compared with the pre-broadcast era, this represented a marked difference in how individual and society were to interact. It was not simply that new technologies and new historical periods were producing different kinds of messages for social consumption, but that the ideas were now being consumed and reproduced by a much wider swathe of society than before. Finding themselves interpellated into a putative cohesive whole, Egyptian or Pan-Arab audiences were, for the first time, addressed as potentially active *subjects* of their own history. This genie would never go back into the bottle. Contemporary media encourage users to put the self at the center of the historical narrative, as opposed to the state or the society, but the process of thinking in grand narrative terms was learned in the 1950s.

Mediated Culture

The (inevitable) failure of the Egyptian state to control mediated reality in February 2011 is an example of how fundamentally the landscape of the Arab imagination has changed since the 1950s. In its production, distribution, and consumption, Arabic-language television production has spent the past two decades undergoing profound transformations. Emanating almost exclusively from state-centered sites of national production as lately as the 1990s, Arabic-oriented television now comes from geographically ambiguous sites of transnational production and is broadcast on multiple satellites pointed at the Arab Middle East and beyond. No longer originating solely from national television production centers and justified upon purely national political or social necessities, fictionalized and fact-oriented Arabic programs now must compete for regional Arab audiences (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Kraidy, 2002; Sakr, 2006). Arabic serials, for example, can be produced in Cairo or Damascus with Saudi or Gulf Arab money, Egyptian writers, Syrian actors, and Lebanese cinematographers, and can ultimately be delivered through satellite, terrestrial television, DVDs, and the Internet (Guaybess, 2002). Sports programming is internationally purchased and regionally redistributed at great profit (Ramadan, 2008). Turkish, Mexican, or Argentinean soap operas are dubbed into widely understood Arabic dialects and then distributed on pay satellite channels (Buccianti, 2010). Freed of having to overtly fulfill the vague requirements of "the national interest," and free (largely) of the censor's scissors, most transnational productions are produced and distributed with the goal of creating profits (Dick, 2005). Commercial television aims to attract viewers through an articulation of people's personal needs and desires, not through an articulation of the state or nation's desires. While all of this profound change does not prevent nationally oriented discussions or

appeals to patriotism from appearing in transnational television productions, the goal of maximizing audiences across national borders, each with their particular mix of expectations, changes the terms of cultural production in the Arabic-speaking Middle East. The heady days of Nasser's Arab nation are gone, and now people must make their own choices, not only in how to think, but also in what to watch.

Egyptian television, which once offered two or three stations to viewers, must now compete for audiences with over 400 satellite broadcasters, most offering their shows free-to-air. Even the working poor in Egypt can afford to purchase a satellite dish and receiver for approximately $45 in order to receive hundreds of free-to-air stations broadcasting in Arabic, English, French, Turkish, Tamazight, Kurdish, and multiple other languages. These stations range from banal low-budget, single-camera shopping channels, to music video channels, to low-budget, easily digestible soap operas, to the high-production splendor of Al Jazeera or transnational big-budget historical epics like *Malek Farouq* (Ali, 2007). Also rebroadcasting state television feeds from all of the Arab nations, as well as American and European first-run programming, Arab satellite television is a cacophony of ideologies and genres.

Despite the critical role of the Internet and mobile telephony in furthering the trend of putting Arab people at the subjective center of their own history, television still retains a central place in Egyptian and Arab societies. In Egypt, where literacy is problematic and poverty is rampant, broadcasting is a space where almost all elements of society can share common issues and feel themselves to be members of a common public. Television is still that space that Horace Newcomb called a "cultural forum" (Newcomb, 1994, p. 508). What's changed is the amount of direct state control over that cultural forum.

Comparing the sputtering, fact-challenged official state television coverage of the revolutionary demonstrations with international broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN dramatically illustrated that Egyptian television was no longer able to impose its preferred reality upon its citizens. Egyptian state television has to deal with the realities of competition with the hundreds of Arabic-language channels being broadcast on satellite television throughout the entire Middle East, as well as with the masses of people creating their own media truths on YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and other Internet sites. As state television showed scenes of the Nile flowing comfortingly, calmly through central Cairo, as it has always flowed, Al Jazeera English and Arabic were broadcasting from inside Tahrir Square when violence broke out between government thugs and demonstrators. Meanwhile, middle-class demonstrators were posting their videos and tweets online. Repeated attempts by the Egyptian government to shut Al Jazeera down, either through violent or technical means, failed. Their attempted shutdown of the Internet and the mobile phone networks in the entire country resulted in an outcry from the world—who was watching— and from neutral Egyptians. It was never clearer that reality was no longer solely in the hands of the state. It also became clear that, just as the state had failed Egyptians in terms of job creation, human rights, education, the environment, and everything else, it had also failed in its ability to dictate cultural reality.

Similar to U.S. FCC Chairman Newtown Minow (1961), many Egyptian cultural critics continue to dismiss television and new media as a cultural wasteland that distracts society from supposedly *real* cultural production (Adel, 2011). However, as Arjun Appadurai points out, electronic media—regardless of their supposed quality or subject matter—serve as resources for "experiments with self-making" and open

spaces to imagine new kinds of self as "an everyday social project" (1996, pp. 3–4). In this light, changes made possible in Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world since the mid 1990s by satellite broadcasting and the Internet are deep: increased access to political information and entertainment, an increasing shift in the mode of address from that aimed at citizens to that aimed at consumers, and increased competition for transnational Arabic-speaking audiences. These changes have already affected the articulation of culture, and thus politics and social life in the region—up to and including what's now being called the Arab Spring.

The New Arab Self in the Imagined World

By expanding access to political, social, and spiritual narratives beyond the control of the state, satellite broadcasting and the Internet have encouraged different ways of relating the self to the culture at large, and in so doing, they have offered the building blocks for individuals to imagine themselves as part of the wider world in ways never before possible. Both a reflection of and a catalyst for the globalization and regionalization of culture, the flood of information, entertainment, and mediated experience of the wider world forces Arabs to live in the larger narratives of global modernity. It is within this context that the masses of young people in Egypt refused to accept any longer the reality imposed upon them by the regime of Hosni Mubarak.

The origins of this transformation can be found in earlier forms of shared experiences of nationalism, famously described by Benedict Anderson as the "imagined community" (1991). Anderson theorized that the political economy of the then-new technology of printing, the passing in importance of liturgical high Latin, and a reconceptualization of the organization of time itself as empty and homogenous (as opposed to ordained and filled by God) encouraged people to begin reimagining their relationship to community. These reimaginings gave birth to a set of communal hopes and desires encapsulated by the term nationalism. The kind of centralized nationalism described by Anderson, where people could read a newspaper in Luxor and imagine a communion with someone simultaneously reading that newspaper in Alexandria, is the kind of imagined national community that Egypt's 1952 revolution would have recognized. Nasser and his cohorts put the nation at the center of public discussion and marshaled the media of radio, television, film, and newspapers to further that discussion. The 2011 revolution arose because something else is now at the center of social discourse: the self.

The "Arab Spring" suggests that Arabs are actively creating themselves as new kinds of subjects experiencing a new kind of community. From secret cell phone videos of Egyptian police torturing young people posted on YouTube (Muhammedabdelha, 2007) to historical television serials such as 2007's majestic, big budget biopic *Malek Farouq* (Ali, 2007), new kinds of narratives, both large and small, invite Egyptians to put themselves at the center of experience in a way that the older version of national television never did. Social networking sites and mobile telephony encourage people to form proximate and global relationships in ways that never would have been possible or permissible under strictly state-controlled regimes of communication. The torture videos encourage Egyptians to envision and articulate a different kind of adversarial relationship between the self and the previously imagined patriarchal and benign state, while *Malek Farouq*, the story of King Farouq (1920–1965), the overthrown monarch of Egypt, unfolds in a way that asks the readers to sympathize and identify with a king from his own

perspective, and not that of the military state which replaced and loathed him. Instead of the autocratic Mubarak political scene, the series showed a dynamically democratic Egypt in the pre-revolutionary 20th century.

Transnational television and Internet production thus represent and embody a change in how the nation is narrated, and this shift in the shared narrative represents a transformation in how its people imagine themselves in relation to both one another and the rest of the world. Instead of being within the control of the Egyptian state, contemporary mediated articulations of the nation and other forms of once-localized cultural identity have become transnational—which helps to explain why the uprisings have spread so quickly.

Unlike 20th-century, state-approved articulations of the nation, these new iterations are subject to other-than-nationalist demands, including the capitalist requirements of Pan-Arab television production, as well as new narrative and aesthetic demands and expectations of Egyptians that have increasing experience with American, European, Turkish, and other transnational narrative structures. In addition to the aesthetic and economic imperatives of the new imagined community, there are also geographical considerations. The potential members of a given imagined community have increased exponentially. Articulations of Egyptian Pan-Arab and Egyptian national cultural identities are shared simultaneously by groups of people that extend far beyond the borders of the Egyptian state—people that once would not have been considered Egyptian—and yet still have a stake in the modern history of Egypt. Due to Egyptian centrality in 20th-century Arab history—its role as a central producer of cultural works, including television, film, and song, as well as its leading political role—what happens in Egypt remains relevant to the Arabic speaking world. With the increasing amount of emigration from Egypt since the 1960s, a huge number of second generation Egyptian-Britons, Egyptian-Australians, and Egyptian-Americans (including myself) also have a stake in the definition of the Egyptian nation.

Appadurai describes these new factors of identity formation as "scapes." We are in a time, Appadurai argues, where, instead of being a diversion, imagination has become central to all forms of agency. It is a key component of the new global economic and political order (1996, p. 31). Instead of looking at the unities of imagined communities, Appadurai proposes that we look at the disjunctive interactions of "scapes" in our imagined *worlds*. The interactions of these ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (ibid., p. 33) form the building blocks of our identities and interactions with other people. In our contemporary moment, the combined interactions between media and finance, for example, or travel and technology, or ethnicity and ideology are much more relevant to one's immediate life and sense of self than older forms of officially received nationalism. An Egyptian with a cousin in New Jersey and a fiancé working for a media company in Dubai has a necessarily different way of imagining the world than would someone from the previous revolutionary generation of the 1950s, as that person's entire life experience was likely bounded by strictly Egyptian social life. So, too, does an Egyptian peasant farmer whose brother has illegally immigrated to Greece, a country one can now learn of from watching Al Jazeera documentaries, and now periodically sends Euros and good wishes from a once impossibly faraway land.

As Appadurai points out, in the near past, the bounds of a locality or tradition limited possible lives and "imagination and fantasy were antidotes to the finitude of social experience" (ibid., p. 52). Now, however, cinema, television, and video technology, and the interactivity of the Internet have moved imagination from the margins to a more central place in social life.

> In the past two decades, as the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas has taken on new force, this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies. (ibid., pp. 53–54)

Recognizing this change in the role of imagination and fantasy pushes us to view contemporary Arab cultural production in a different light. It would be easy to dismiss the independently produced 2008 television series *Gamal Abdel Nasser*, (Al Khatib, 2008) for example, as another hagiographic fantasy that works by referencing a happier, simpler past. The show's simplistic deification of the late Egyptian Arab-Nationalist president and his revolutionary Free Officers was the stuff from which hero narratives have always been made. However, if we see the show not as a diversion or a temporary escape from reality, but instead, as a part of the *social practice* of imagining a different kind of political, social, or even personal life, then the terms change. The Egyptian state, with its record of allergic reactions to criticism, recognized this on some level when it initially banned the production before relenting but banishing it to a minor channel with limited reach. Instead of deflecting viewers from the reality of contemporary life, then, a show like *Nasser* can offer alternative bases upon which to *construct* new kinds of realities. Even if the show is reflecting the same old stories of traditional 20th-century Egyptian nationalism, its portrayal of an infallible heroic leader in the temporal context of an ever-weakening Egypt led by a fallible, less-than-heroic (now former) president created the potential for a dangerous kind of social imagination.

Thus, instead of dismissing the imaginary as a diversion from the reality of life, or as a substitute for *real* or material work, we might understand the "Arab Spring" better if we recognize that imagination, as an "organized field of social practices," has *become* work. And this kind of work, which everyone engages in, is potentially powerful, in that it has become a "form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31).

Imagination is central to all forms of agency, and thus, it is a key component of the new global order. This leads Appadurai to argue for imagined *worlds*, as opposed to Anderson's *communities* (ibid., p. 53). Unlike Anderson's historical "imagined communities," which, by definition, limited the imaginary to territorialized nations, this new imaginary, distributed by new forms of media that aren't necessarily *mass*, comes from many places simultaneously, and it is unbound from the traditional legal, economic, or political structures of "nation." Instead of the boundaries of nations, we can simultaneously inhabit multiple imagined worlds that are born out of "historically situated imaginations" of people across the globe (ibid., p. 33). The fact that people are living in *multiple* imagined worlds, and not solitary communities, allows for something that Anderson doesn't address, the ability to "contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them" (ibid., p. 33).

This new understanding of imagination as a social practice informed by deterritorialized inputs compels us to recognize a shift in the way humans reproduce culture. No longer intrinsically tied to the specificity (and social, legal, and political restraints) of a locale, new forms of cultural reproduction necessitate new ways of understanding the relationship between power and place. Most certainly, the hundreds of thousands of people that eventually filled Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo in February 2011 were reimagining a new relationship between that place and the power of the state to rule it.

To conclude, new forms of distribution, production, and consumption of mediated culture encourage people to put themselves at the center of personal narratives in ways that ultimately lead to defiance of official national narratives. As subjects of their own history, Arabs are less willing to accept the broken promises of authoritarian Arab regimes, with their 20th-century-style insistence on state-centered nationalism, as we have seen in the "Arab spring." However, political, economic, and social problems run deep in the Arab world. Politically, there is little contemporary experience with democratic governance, and the broken education systems have left societies with a populace that is not accustomed to rational debate. Corruption, lack of natural resources, and inept bureaucracies have crippled economic output. No one can predict the future of the uprisings. What is clear, however, is that things cannot go back to "normal." Changes in the way people communicate, along with the new relationships that stretch beyond borders and outside the reach of official narratives, cannot be pulled back. Encouraged by new media, a modern sense of an individuated self as the subject of history—and not the nation—is poised to fundamentally change social life in the contemporary Arab world.

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