

The Arab Spring

The Role of ICTs

Local Knowledge and the Revolutions: A Framework for Social Media Information Flow

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The essentialism implicit in Western discourses about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) plays to assumptions that there is limited possibility of indigenous democratic construction in the region. Our study analyzes the importance of local/indigenous knowledge in Tunisia and in Egypt, the specific, local contexts that have shaped the revolutions in both nations, and how social media and communication technologies were used to engage in social change. It also interrogates how change elsewhere in the region may emerge in very different ways than has been the case in Tunisia and Egypt.

As an ideal, communication technologies allow otherwise marginalized voices to be heard by generating both the opportunity and the literal space for those voices. In this way, emergent technology can act as a sort of borderland or site of parlay between local and global knowledge, but with the restrictions necessary to interact within both of these spheres. While “netizens” and “digital natives” and other inhabitants of emerging media spaces evolve with voices that resonate along channels aimed at both local and global audiences, these voices, as well as the channels themselves, are often essentialized and limited by the ways that information flow is produced, processed, transmitted, and eventually consumed.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is particularly prone to a myriad of essentializing discourses. The essentialism implicit in the Western imaginary about the MENA plays to assumptions that all citizens throughout the region are oppressed, yet either unaware of their oppression or somehow complicit with the authoritarian rule that has been in place for decades in most MENA nations. It also

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jumbles MENA citizens into a monolithic mass and fails to recognize distinct social, economic, political, militaristic, and cultural traditions in the region.

In a region predicated upon the constitutive cultural and sociopolitical differences between it and the West, the need for recognition of the local in the MENA generally (Newsom & Lengel, 2003; Zaidi, 2003), and in Tunisia and Egypt specifically, is particularly strong (Newsom, Cassara & Lengel, 2011). Challand (2008) points out that conventional wisdom in the West about the democracy deficits in the MENA reinforces notions that it is necessary for external—Western—actors to intervene to promote civil society as a step toward developing the societal fabric necessary for achievement of democracy (see also Ayish, 2003; Bayat, 2010; Newsom et al., 2011).

As this is being written, the journey of social change in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the MENA is underway, and the role of social and digital media in these processes still unfolding. What is essential to keep in mind, however, is that the stories emerging from these nations are unique, and they will continue to be so due to the distinctive nature of the governance structures that lead to the revolutions, the increasing (in the case of Egypt) or decreasing (in the case of Tunisia) press and communication freedoms (see Al-Malki, 2011, February 27; Ben Gharbia, 2010, September 17; Ben Gharbia, 2010, December 11; Kuebler, 2011) and specific nuances of political economy.

Whether democracy can itself emerge as a form of local knowledge is, within the stage of global politics, a primary concern. Rhetoric on both sides of that argument resonates in current media coverage, and within political and other debates. On one hand, the values necessary for democratic systems must arise from local efforts. For example, Sadiki (2011) argues, "Without exception, democracy is constructed locally." In contrast, Western political entities tend to place themselves within the rhetoric of democracy as mediators and guides—especially as constructed in relation to new media discourses. Specifically, in reaction to the recent historic events in North Africa, Western governments are hailing the role of new media in the MENA as a force for democracy, peace building, and moving the region along a path toward "progress" (Menkel-Meadow & Nutenko, 2009; Villarino, 2010; York, 2011; Zhang & Swartz, 2009).

The flow of information from the MENA to the West and back again, and even within the MENA itself, needs to be closely examined to better understand the actual genealogy of the knowledge produced. This is particularly important because the information transmission is so heavily through new media. While it is generally understood that texts are not static and change through mediation and contexts, the seeming immediacy of digital information creates a myth of accuracy in reception, or an assumptive lack of bias. Digital information does, however, go through stages of mediation and contextualization, and these stages need to be recognized and understood.

Further, social media are treated as organic sources of information, especially by traditional media in the way these sources are identified and presented. Yet, those with access to social media do not come by that access accidentally. Nor do the social media processes exist outside of bias and production concerns. In this study, we seek to outline the process of information flow of local knowledge through social media and onto a global stage.

In their role of reproducing the information espoused in the MENA, as well as in their performances as mediators “spreading democracy,” Western leaders have engaged in essentializing the region. Concurrently, critiques from both within and outside the region argue that the creation of an imaginary Arab world have occurred through governmental and mediated texts (see, for instance, El Olifi, 2006; Eltahawy, 2006; Newsom et al., 2011; Salameh, 2011). Nevertheless, those in the MENA engaged in building new, citizen-centered governance structures should be open to dialogue on not only what is unique among sites within and outside the MENA, but also on what is shared across emerging and mature democracies in areas, including, but not limited to, cultural, historical, political, and economic understanding and experience. By engaging in such a dialogue, “democratic visionaries should be well-disposed to tap into the global civic heritage without ignoring local knowledge and values” (Sadiki, 2011).

Local Knowledge, Communication Technologies, and Civil Society

While the role of communication technologies in generating resistance and political and social change in the MENA is clear, the impact of these changes being instigated by local knowledge articulated through communication technologies is a story currently unfolding. Along with analyzing the mitigating factors that impact the construction and dissemination of local knowledge, it is also critical to understand the concepts surrounding it. Local or indigenous knowledge refers to the social, historical, and cultural experience of individuals within a distinct culture or locality and differs from Westernized/scientific epistemology that often “excludes local knowledges, ignores cultural values, and disregards the needs of local communities” (Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples Network, 2003; See also Salas, 2005). The local experiences, identities, and definitions of citizenship and nation that are not tied to essentialized, global categories need to be encouraged and empowered. Reliance on local knowledge is seen as a necessary ingredient to truly sustainable development (Feldman & Welsh, 1995). While there is an acknowledgement of the importance of local knowledge emerging from Tunisia, most notably in such as areas as women’s traditional agricultural practices and expertise (Nasr, Chahbani, & Ben Ayed, 2000; Nasr, Chahbani, & Kamel, 2006), very little has yet been written on local knowledge and communication technologies (Newsom et al., 2011). This special features section is an important step in charting the trajectory of local knowledge as it impacts broader developments of civil society and democratic practices in the region, especially as it is revealed through new media technologies.

Local knowledge performs as original material that becomes consumed behavior in social and digital media. The individual voices represented by citizen journalism, through social media—most notably Facebook—and other means of voicing local knowledge are not the construction of the Tweeters, bloggers, and other speakers themselves, but instead they are the construction of a series of influences. Take, for example, a revolutionary speaking up about injustices in her or his hometown. The need for access to Internet technologies must not be overlooked. Under the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governance, speaking one’s mind has resulted in a wide range of serious issues and occurrences (Lengel, 2004). At best, users who say anything critical against their nation or government may be silenced in subtle ways, such as having “problems” with their telephone lines or Internet Service Providers (ISPs), or confiscation of computer equipment. Many MENA governments such as that of Tunisia have constituted Internet-specific legislation in keeping with established controls on critical speech in other media and in the public

sphere. At worst, users who are even just suspected of saying anything critical online have been subjected to imprisonment, disappearance, torture, or murder.

An additional layer of analysis is required to more fully understand what may happen to the voice of a MENA activist by the time it reaches a wider audience. Has that resistant voice been reprinted on resistance websites, altered by government sources, picked up and retransmitted by NGOs and other global structures? After this voice has undergone so many moments of translation and retransmission, is it still the voice of the speaker? If we were to Tweet back with a reply indicating we understand the what/why/how of their arguments, would the speaker recognize her own voice in others' interpretations? Or are MENA voices merely translated by Western media and governmental hegemonic discourses into stereotypical categories to make sense to global audiences?

Civil society promotion precludes autonomy on the part of the people who are theoretically the beneficiaries since it "translates into the imposition of norms, values, or institutions that do not fit the ways in which a given civil society would like to imagine itself" (Challand, 2008, p. 399). Analyzing feminisms in Islam, for example, Jad (2008) argues that the spread of universal women's rights discourse, based on the individual notion of rights, potentially ignores different contexts in which "indigenous" forms of resistance by feminist movements takes place and risks sidelining some important knowledge and gains that have been achieved by these movements and their impact on the development of civil society. This can be seen in the role of women in the revolutions (Tansim, 2011). Both online and in the streets, Nadia Marzouki (2011) commended the "impressive visibility of women" in the Tunisian demonstrations and how the recent acts are situated in contrast to "stereotypes about the 'Arab street' that propagate the image of a male-dominated public space" (p. 37).² Reclaiming the public space were Mannoubia and Samia Bouazizi, the mother and sister, respectively, of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid triggered the protests throughout the nation (Labidi, 2011). April 6 Youth Movement activist Asmaa Mahfouz also positioned herself in the public sphere when, early on in the mobilization efforts in Egypt, she announced on her Facebook wall that she was headed to Tahrir Square and urged others to join her there to save Egypt (Tansim, 2011, February 21).

Efforts to reclaim citizens' space across the region have not fared nearly as well as they have in Tunisia and Egypt (see, for instance, Sanna, 2011; Vaez, 2011), however, communication technologies have been important tools to mobilize and engage. Just 18 months prior to the Mahfouz's call to action, there was another woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, from another youth-led movement (in this case the Green Revolution), whose tragic death during a post-election protest in Tehran on June 20, 2009, was captured by mobile phone, mobilizing thousands and touching millions. When protesters in Iran made their voices globally recognized through communication technologies, particularly social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, these and other spaces became sites for the exchange of information and the organization of both on- and off-line social movements. Similar to the protests in Iran in 2009, voices and images of the emerging "citizen journalists" in Tunisia and Egypt were then picked up and promoted by

² The impact of the revolutions on enhancing gender equality has been questioned by feminist scholars and activists (see, for instance, Bibars, cited in Bohn & Lynch, 2011, March 2; Brown, 2011, March 8; Fathi, 2011, June 12; Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2011, February 24; and Younis, 2011, March 9).

traditional news media outlets. As support for the protesters grew internationally, the regimes worked to shut down and control the information flow, and simultaneously, global political entities did what they could to promote the outflow of information—particularly that which supported a growing desire in all three of these nations for democratic change.

For some people utilizing communication technology in the MENA, this may play out as a type of passport for themselves or the information they are providing to the West, as it allows the traveler to become legitimized in the political regions where entry is permitted. Thus, while it is clear that there is a lot of temporality in the localized presence of the media technology, these spaces still allow the potential for voices from the MENA to speak, be heard, and become valuable on a global stage that might otherwise silence them. Therefore, we must look to what (if any) has been the specific, unique impact of communication technologies-focused events and developments in Tunisia and Egypt.

Certainly, the spotlight placed on Tunisia leading up to and since November 2005, when it hosted Phase II of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (UN WSIS), must be considered (Awar, 2006; Lengel, 2004; Sreberny, 2004). Those of us who attended and analyzed both phases of the summit (Phase I in Geneva on December 10–12, 2003 and Phase II in Tunis on December 15–17, 2005) and the preparatory conferences leading up to each phase anticipated, however optimistically, that the summit would serve as a call to the Ben Ali regime to lighten up the excessively tight control of the press and the utter lack of freedom of communication in Tunisia. Instead, the regime tightened its reins and, despite the presence of more than 1,200 media practitioners and hundreds of civil society representatives at the summit, media journalists reported there were no representatives from the Tunisian government to brief them. The journalists had scope, therefore, to focus on the presence of civil society activists and organizations, including Shirin Abadi, Reporters sans Frontières, and the International Federal of Human Rights (Awar, 2006). They also covered the launch of initiatives such as the “Ben Ali, Fock! Ben Ali, Yezzi!” [Ben Ali, enough is enough, Ben Ali!] campaign organized by l’Association Tunisienne pour la Promotion et la Défense du Cyberspace (ATPD), whose “Freedom of Expression in Mourning” announced, “if there’s a stake in the World Summit on the Information Society, it should not only be about reducing the ‘digital gap,’ but it should be about reducing the evil that corrode peace in the world which is the ‘democratic gap’” (ATPD-Cyberspace, 2005; See also McKinnon, 2005). The ATPD-Cyberspace campaign may have been influenced by the increase of the blogosphere in Egypt that emerged after the increased liberalization of the press there between 2000 and 2005 (Kuebler, 2011).

The focus of the world on the Iranian protests of 2009 is another example of the significance of presumed local knowledge on a global stage. While the very different endpoint to the Iranian protests is just one indicator of the limitations of essentializing the MENA, there are similar communicative contexts that are worthy of note. First, the ideal that voices are shared and heard in these spaces is hampered by the fact that these spaces are themselves restricted by the power structures of the Internet and off-line cultures that dictate who and how many people actually have access to these Internet spaces. To better understand this issue, the path of knowledge and information flow within needs to be examined. To do this, we construct the following schema of information production and consumption of “citizen journalism” in communication technological spheres:

- Individuals speak out.
- Resistance leaders reframe individual voices to suit their needs.
- Resistance rhetoric is disseminated into the local area.
- Government gets hold of rhetoric, reframes to their needs.
- Reframed rhetoric is disseminated on a larger scale.
- West receives rhetoric and reframes it to suit itself.

The above framework illuminates how the flow of information through digital and social media can be negotiated at numerous stages by various agents. Local knowledge, or what is assumed to be such, once entered into this process, becomes open to constant manipulation and bias. The knowledge thus produced and reproduced may not travel directly through the many different levels of gatekeeping highlighted by the cited framework.

As a means of promoting democracy building in the MENA, the reframing and reshaping of local knowledge may be a necessary process so that it will have a greater impact as it approaches a global stage. Whether it is logical to label the resulting information as "local" knowledge by the time it reaches a global theatre is uncertain. What is certain is that an analysis of the information flowing from the MENA through digital and social media requires an interrogation of perceived impact of this information, as well as an understanding of distinct histories and local sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

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