



Blesses and Curses: Virtual Dissidence as a Contentious Performance in the Arab Spring's Repertoire of Contention

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Activists have fashioned nonconventional forms of repertoire and contentious performances during the recent conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Salient among these contentious performances is *virtual dissidence*. I conceptualize virtual dissidence as a political performance in the repertoire of contention between authoritative regimes and the latter's contenders. The metaphors of repertoire and performance bridge apparent conceptual dichotomies in analyzing the role of social media in the Arab Spring such as structure versus agency in the service of a relational account of it. This essay will not bring these debates to any final resolution; rather, my goal is to provide a modest yet productive intervention in the debate over the importance of Internet activism in social movements. The significance of understanding virtual dissidence as emerging from repertoire is that it frames a meso-level explanation of collective action and political change. It accounts for the constraints imposed by the macro structure and the array of innovative responses ignited by activists' determination.

Introduction

The metaphor of a "repertoire of contention" tells a story about how contentious claim-making is situated in prior societal experience and interaction with the regime. At the same time, however, the repertoire of contention metaphor is closely linked with innovation in political action. As in the theatrical or musical sense of the word *repertoire*, repertoires of contentions, according to Charles Tilly, resemble those of commedia dell'arte or jazz. Actors in collective actions, similar to performers, know the general rules of performance and vary the performance to meet the purpose at hand (Tilly, 1986, p. 390). Tilly first introduced the notion of repertoire in his seminal work *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978) to account for the array of contentious performances that are known and available within some set of political actors. The metaphor of performance is closely related to that of repertoires and also makes an appearance (albeit a much less prominent one) in Tilly's earlier work. Tilly and his collaborator, Sidney Tarrow,

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clarified that this metaphor highlighted the fact that contentious claims were made by a subject, in a particular way, for the benefit of a particular object (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 11).

In the recent demonstrations that have swept the Middle East and North Africa, activists have fashioned nonconventional forms of repertoire and contentious performances. Salient among these contentious performances is *virtual dissidence*, by which I mean the act of critiquing the government and encouraging collective actions against it openly on social media platforms. I conceptualize virtual dissidence as a political performance in the repertoire of contention between authoritative regimes and the latter's contenders. Virtual dissidence is thus only one contentious performance among several performances employed by Arab activists in the 2010/2011 uprisings.

This article offers a critical analysis of virtual dissidence within the context of the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. It starts by untangling concepts related to Internet activism, making the case for embracing the concept of virtual dissidence to describe the array of online collective actions adopted by political activists against repressive regimes. Virtual dissidence is situated within the repertoire of contention between autocratic regimes and their contenders, highlighting the modular characteristic of this form of collective action. Building upon sociologists' and historians' work on repertoires and their modularity in the 18th and 19th centuries' political contentions (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978, 1995, 1997), I highlight convergences and divergences between these historical repertoires and the repertoire of contention adopted in the recent Arab uprisings.

Using arguments from the field of political communication, I elucidate the potentials and limitations of virtual dissidence. Insights from Tilly and Tarrow's (2007) political opportunity-cum-political process approach will inform discussions regarding the resonance of virtual dissidence and the ways in which political structures influence its evolvment and limit its efficacy. The limits of virtual dissidence are further scrutinized in the concluding section, where I highlight the ways in which regimes have responded to virtual dissidence and employed the tactics identified by Evgeny Morozov (2011) to counter it. By the end of the discussion, I relate Sidney Tarrow's (1998) connotation that new repertoires become components of conventional politics to the case of virtual dissidence and post-uprising politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

The article contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of Internet activism in the Arab Spring. The metaphors of repertoire and performance bridge apparent conceptual dichotomies in analyzing the role of social media in the Arab Spring, such as structure/agency, actor/act, and determinism/contingency in the service of a relational account of it. This essay will not bring these debates to any final resolution; rather, my goal is to provide a modest yet productive intervention in the debate over the importance of Internet activism in the uprisings. The significance of understanding virtual dissidence as emerging from repertoire is that it frames a meso-level explanation of collective action and political change. It is able to account for the constraints imposed by the macro structure and the array of innovative responses ignited by activists' determination. This is conceptually important for realizing a complete understanding of political struggles and avoiding the mystification of the role of social media in these struggles.

A Note on Concepts: Social Media, Internet Activism, and Virtual Dissidence

The influence of online activism on toppling authoritarian regimes has been a popular trope following revolutionary efforts in Iran, Moldova, Georgia, and now across the Middle East and North Africa. Many commentators adopt binary views on the role of Internet activism and are divided among “digital evangelists” and “techno-realists” (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). Digital evangelists emphasize the revolutionary role of social media, advocating for the Internet’s emancipatory promise (Shirky, 2008, 2010). Techno-realists minimize the role of the Internet and warn of negative consequences, including its use in state repression (Morozov, 2011) and its encouragement of “slacktivism”—that is, superficial, minimal effort in support of causes (Christensen, 2011; Gladwell, 2010).

Following the recent democratic uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa,¹ several observers argue that social media was the main force behind the popular movement against authoritarian regimes in the region (Cohen, 2011; Webster, 2011). Others dismiss the role of social media and argue that the revolution would have happened without the Internet and had little to do with Twitter and Facebook (Rich, 2011; York, 2011). One way of overcoming this dichotomy is to differentiate the role of online activism from that of social media and avoid using social media as a synonym for online activism. I suggest a further refining in categories, proposing the concept of virtual dissidence as a political subcategory of Internet activism. The distinction between the role of virtual dissidence and social media is important, because virtual dissidence is predisposed to being used for revolutionary ends while social media can be used for revolutionary or counterrevolutionary ones.

I conceptualize virtual dissidence as the act of challenging the regime and organizing collective action against it online. Activists use social media platforms to launch their virtual dissidence against the regime; however, state officials use the same platform to retaliate and suppress activists. Aouragh and Alexander’s (2011) analysis of the role of social media in the Arab Spring highlights the ways in which repressive regimes and their supporters have used social media to dampen and disrupt opposition. Social media, thus, is not inherently reformist in nature. It is a means through which a myriad of activities are carried out.

¹ I acknowledge that the democratic nature of the uprising is increasingly questioned given the recent turbulence and democratic setbacks in the Arab Spring countries; however, I view the movement as democratic. The uprisings witnessed an unprecedented participation of large segments of society, raised democratic claims, and succeeded in toppling long-established authoritarian regimes and carrying out fair elections for the first time in decades. Turbulence that followed these democratic movements is evidence of the difficult, messy process of political development, especially given the inherited antidemocratic social, cultural, and economic legacies of the old regime. Historically, stable liberal democracies usually emerged only at the end of long, often violent, struggles, with many detours. Indeed, along history, every surge of democratization has been followed by turbulence and widespread questioning of the viability and even desirability of democratic governance in the areas in question.

Researchers studying the impact of the Internet on the politics of the Middle East, however, have been preoccupied with studying political cyber-activities and their consequences on politics as well as using social media as a synonym for online political activism. In so doing, they cement a skewed image of social media as mainly about political and media activism and, as Albrecht Hofheinz (2011, p. 1427) warns, overlook important questions such as what everyday Internet use does to its users and what growing up with the Internet does to the dynamics between younger and older generations. Albrecht Hofheinz (2011), in his study of the long-term sociocultural effects of the Internet, critiques this tendency, stressing that "what we need is not only to acknowledge, but also to take seriously the fact that the Internet and social media are used for much more, and primarily for other things than, political activism or citizen journalism" (p. 1424). Meanwhile, virtual dissidence-cum-Internet political activism encompasses a wide range of political actions carried out on social media platforms with the aim of challenging a current regime. It is thus more accurate to speak of and analyze the role of virtual dissidence in the Arab Spring rather than vaguely speak of the role of social media. Framing the question in terms of the role of social media fails to capture the complexities involved and overlooks the fact that social media is used by activist, reformist, and authoritarian regimes as well.

Virtual Dissidence as a Contentious Performance

It is useful to view virtual dissidence as one of the key performances in the repertoire of contention between dissidents and repressive regimes. In this sense, virtual dissidence does not substitute for traditional contentious performances such as demonstrations and sit-ins, but exists alongside them, and together they form a repertoire of contention against authoritarian governments. Underpinning my argument is a rejection of the oversimplified polarized opinions that frame the Egyptian revolt exclusively as either a "Facebook revolution" or a "people's revolution." By situating virtual dissidence within the repertoire of contention, I avoid the popular tendency to mystify its effects and overlook the deeper causes of rebellion.

In his seminal work, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*, Charles Tilly (1995) defines the repertoire of contention as "the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests" (p. 41). What distinguishes the concepts of repertoire of contention and collective action broadly is that the word *repertoire* describes "the established ways in which pairs of actors make and receive claims bearing on each other's interests" (Tilly, 1995, p. 27). The repertoire of contention concept contextualizes the forms of collective action adopted and draws our attention to the dialectical relation between actors and how this relation influences their forms of actions. It also elaborates on the ways in which "people in a given place and time learn to carry out a limited number of alternative collective action routines, adapting each one to the immediate circumstances and to the reactions of antagonists, authorities and allies" (Tilly, 1997, pp. 26-27). Thus, analyzing virtual dissidence as one of the collective action routines adopted at the time of the uprising draws our attention to the ways in which virtual dissidence influenced and was influenced by the regime it challenged.

Social movement scholars have determined from a detailed analysis of several repertoires of contentions that, at the onset of contentious episodes, innovative shifts in the locus, forms, and meaning of collective action typically occur (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 49). Innovations in the repertoires of contention do not descend from abstract philosophy. Repertoires of contention, Tilly (1978, 2008) argues, are learned cultural creations emerging from struggles. New repertoires of contentions are not only the

product of struggles or “moments of madness”—borrowing Zolberg’s (1972) famous description—but by-products of the historical interaction between a regime and its dissidents.

Charles Tilly (2008) notes that the relative efficacy of the repertoires of contention depends on “the match among tools, tasks, and users” (p. 45). In Tilly’s account, people perform repertoire in relation to particular political opportunity structures—that is, the nature of the ruling regime shapes the form of these innovations as well. The repertoire of contention available for activists in authoritarian regimes differs from the one available in democratic ones. Jeffrey M. Ayres (1999) makes a strong case for incorporating the influence of political opportunity structures in the study of Internet-inspired protests. Political opportunity structures distinguish between conditions that either support or constrain contentious activities. These political-institutional factors include the open and closed nature of the political system; the stability or instability of electoral or elite alignments, including divisions between political elites; and the existence of countermovements or the state’s capacity for repression (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). Different political regimes—such as those that are open democracies, closed autocracies, or those that are strong or weak—are likely to prompt rulers and citizens to develop distinct methods of contentious interactions (Duyvendak et al., 1995; Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi, 1989; Lainer-Vos, 2006; Tilly, 2006).

Tilly (2008) claims that prevalent forms of contention in Great Britain changed from the “18th-century repertoire” to the “19th-century repertoire”² (pp. 43–44) due to major historical transformations at the time. These historical transformations were “parliamentarization,”³ the expansion of the national state, and the expansion of the national market and capitalism (Tilly, 1997). Activists had tried different forms of contention vis-à-vis parliamentary actors and had gradually learned—sometimes after paying high human costs—that public meetings, petitions, and demonstrations worked better than burning down houses or throwing stones (Wada, 2012).

A change in the nature of the regime forced contenders to change their forms of collective action. Thus, it can be argued that there exists an affinity between regime type and repertoires of contention. A new repertoire emerged in the 19th century because users found the available tools inadequate to their problems and abilities under the new regime. In the case of the Arab Spring, the authoritative nature of the regimes constrained and pushed activists to use virtual dissidence as a less confrontational form of contentious performance. Donatella Della Porta and Lorenzo Mosca (2005) argue that Internet-based communication technology is an important additional resource for social movements implemented by “resource poor” actors, offering a means for mass communication that previously may have been restricted by financial, *political*, or spatial constraints. Building upon Della Porta and Mosca’s argument, Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest (2011) propose the incorporation of social media as an important

² The 18th-century repertoire was composed of various ways of claims-making, including food riots, blocking, touring, threatening, parading, forced illuminations, attacks on public figures, breaking windows, and taking advantage of authorized public ceremonies to voice preferences (Tilly, 2008, pp. 79, 133). The 19th-century repertoire included public meetings, petitions, and demonstrations and, according to Tilly (2008, p. 79), became modular by the 1830s. It is important to note that Tilly uses these labels to describe relative tendencies rather than disjunction.

³ Parliamentarization in this particular context was a shift in the location of political power away from the hands of royalty, the Crown, great lords, and nobles into the hands of Parliament.

resource for collective action and the organization of contemporary social movements in the Middle East and North Africa.

The dual public/private nature of virtual dissidence, I suggest, has situated virtual dissidence as an adequate form of contention against the despotic governments in the region. Due to the public nature of virtual dissidence, it appears as a testing technique to assess the government's response. It evaluates the government's tolerance level. If the early participants or key organizers do not face a crackdown by the regime's security forces, participation in demonstration and in virtual dissidence might heighten. In a study assessing the influence of social media on the Arab Spring, Philip N. Howard and his colleagues argue that by the time that Wael Ghoneim—one of the administrators of the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page—was arrested, his Facebook group topped 300,000 people and the revolution was well under way, so his imprisonment did not deter protestors to participate in the demonstrations (Howard et al., 2011, p. 16).

Although Internet activism did not start in Egypt with "We Are All Khaled Said,"⁴ the success of this Facebook group in mobilizing people on January 25, 2011, is due to its administrators' ability to articulate a master frame for participants. Recent trends in contentious politics studies have focused on the importance of articulating new or transformed master frames of meaning and ideologies in social movements to justify and dignify collective action carried out by them (Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992; Steinberg, 1995; Tarrow, 1998). Through frames, challenging groups construct the rationale for collective action and the political and moral bases for their claims. These master frames typically arise among dissatisfied groups, which was how the Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said" provided a strong symbolic representation and an iconic figure to fight against the authorities.

The story of Khaled Said's death exemplified the injustice and brutalities of the Mubarak regime and thus intensified emotions of dissatisfaction (Lim, 2012). As the American Egyptian activist and journalist Mona Eltahawy articulates it, the "juxtaposition of pictures of Said alive and dead" encapsulates what living under Mubarak's Emergency Law might mean (Eltahawy, 2010, para. 14). Using Khaled's story as a reference point, the group was able to unify its followers by providing a solid "schemata of interpretation" that enabled individuals "to locate, perceive, identify and label" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) what had happened. Marlyna Lim (2012), studying the relationship between social media and political change during the Egyptian uprising of early 2011, argues that by propagating the message that "we" are all Khaled Said, the group was successful in identifying the "we" who could make change. It also named, I believe, "our" challengers. It built a collective identity around the participants' victimized position, framed their grievances within the injustice frame, and identified their target to be the security forces who were responsible for Khaled's death. This is why the January 25 protest was organized to take place on National Police Day and was, in essence, staged against police brutality.

Besides providing a space for dissidents to articulate and legitimate their master frame beyond the immediate control of the despotic governments, virtual dissidence is an effective contentious performance against authoritarian regimes due to its private nature. Since online activists can remain

⁴ Indeed, blogs such as Wael Abbas's Egyptian Awareness, Nael Atef's Torture in Egypt, and Bloggers Against Torture were already known.

anonymous and hide their personal identity, some users can assume a revolutionary persona and gain legitimacy that they would not be able to gain in the physical world. I am not implying that the private nature of virtual dissidence allows it to be deceptive; rather, I am suggesting that virtual dissidence can enhance the revolutionary aura. Furthermore, virtual dissidence has the potential of garnering further support because it is easier to recruit and gain support from citizens who might otherwise fear openly criticizing the government. This raises the problem of free riders—a classical dilemma in collective action (Olson, 1965)—but the problem of free riders arises in both online and off-line forms of collective actions (Weismuller, 2012).

Virtual dissidence proved to be, borrowing Sidney Tarrow's term, a *modular* repertoire of contention. Takeshi Wada (2012, p. 545), assessing the modularity of the British 19th-century repertoires of contention, elaborates that repertoires are specific to relational contexts such that a repertoire of contention emerges out of contentious relationships between particular power holders and claimants (e.g., between capital and labor, between landlords and peasants, between police and residents). Some repertoires are not limited to these specific contentious relationships and are, instead, employable across multitudes of diversified relational contexts. These repertoires are called modular.

A modular repertoire is a form of contentious performance that, once its strategic advantages are known, can be used for various purposes, unify people with different aims, and be diffused to various types of confrontation with authorities (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1998). For instance, strikes and demonstrations were invented by a minority of pioneers in Europe, and they were perceived as disruptions of established ways of doing politics. Today, these forms are part of a repertoire that is generally known and understood by a majority of citizens in most modern states (Croizat, Meyer, & Tarrow, 1997). Like strikes and demonstrations, I argue that virtual dissidence became a modular repertoire in the repertoire of contention between governments and their contenders, particularly in the context of authoritarian regimes.

Not only did the authoritarian nature of the regimes shape the form of contention that dissidents have adopted, it also contributed to legitimizing virtual dissidence and constructing it as a virtual replacement for the "muzzled media" (Khondker, 2011, p. 676). Howard and his colleagues remind us that, because media censorship—direct or by proxy—is one of the defining characteristics of repressive regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, individuals have a strong incentive to turn to the Internet for credible sources of information (Howard et al., 2011, pp. 5–6). In "Tweets from Tahrir," Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle (2011) document the tweets posted by activists during the 18-day uprising in Egypt, explaining the importance of these tweets in relaying news and information. According to them, one of the features of the Egyptian uprising was the gradual undermining of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalists began to resign as the public saw the "ludicrous coverage" offered by the official media (Nunns & Idle, 2011, p. 20).

In fact, several observers have noted the ways in which the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have altered the media landscape. Adrienne Russell (2011), in her study of the role of social media in the January 25 uprising in Egypt, has noted that the purpose or main task of traditional news outlets shifted. In covering the story of the Egyptian revolution, independent national and international news agencies turned not to their own reporters to relay events on the ground, but to what "networked participants in the drama" (Russell, 2011, p. 1238; see also Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Harlow & Johnson,

2011) were reporting. In Tunisia, Ben Wagner (2011) has observed that the regulatory regimes of media and communication technologies have co-evolved with the protests. As expression about public protests became increasingly pervasive within the media, efforts to control the flow of information became increasingly difficult.

Not only does virtual dissidence influence state institutions through its mark on the media landscape, the significance of virtual dissidence is evident as well in its role in constructing critical citizens and modeling new forms of citizenship (Hofheinz, 2011; Lynch, 2007; Wall & Zahed, 2011). It encourages more critical attitudes toward established authorities and the long chain of hierarchies that used to structure decision making. In 2007, Marc Lynch, a foremost Middle East media scholar, observed that many citizens in the Middle East are no longer unquestioningly accepting what authorities decide, but are slowly starting to check for their selves, come to their own conclusions, and make their own decisions. Following the 2010/2011 uprising, Albrecht Hofheinz (2011) eloquently explained the ways in which virtual dissidence challenges authorities and contributes to the construction of a critical citizen. Authorities, Hofheinz (2011) explains, construct their authoritativeness through social processes such as civic education in schools and censoring media and information outlets. This is becoming increasingly difficult with the spread of independent "social networks of knowledge construction" (Hofheinz, 2011, p. 1428) that challenge established authorities.

Virtual dissidence, like traditional modulators of contention, presented a tool to pressure the regime and a site of dissidence, despite the associated risk. In sites of dissidence, Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston (2005), writing on strikes and demonstrations, elaborate: Dissidents built and expressed solidarity, demonstrated their challenges, sought external support, and negotiated their differences with opponents. They are, however, quick to point out that, in the absence of grievances, people would not participate in these conventional collective actions. The same is true in the case of virtual dissidence. Moved by core causes such as unemployment and state repression, people take part in virtual dissidence. Through their participation in virtual dissidence, they pressure the government while articulating and legitimating their demands. Injustices that provoke shared resentment and anger are necessary to overcome barriers of fear and trigger actual participation in collective action (Yang, 2000). Only then does the leap from virtual dissidence to off-line protest take place.

Virtual Dissidence as a Site of Governance, Surveillance, and Closed Minds

Sidney Tarrow (1995, pp. 106–107) points out that authorities are quick to realize the modular character of a new repertoire of contention and are often quick in responding to it with varying degrees of success. Reacting against virtual dissidence, repressive regimes and their supporters use social media tools to dampen and disrupt opposition. As already discussed, while virtual dissidence encapsulates reformist and revolutionary activities against the state by anti-regime activists, social media platforms are used by activists and authoritarian regimes alike. In this sense, social media represents a site of both dissidence and governance. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) have observed that repressive regimes demonstrate learning curves when it comes to limiting the usefulness of social media for activists. In quelling virtual dissidence, Morozov (2011) identifies three tactics used by governments to stifle communications among activists online: censorship, surveillance, and propaganda.

Among the Egyptian regime's efforts to quell the January 25 demonstrations were shutting off Internet access nationwide as well as some SMS and mobile phone services. As Mark Lynch rightly puts it, the Egyptian regime realized that the Facebook pages and blogs were an integral part of the protest movement, and clearly expected that the shutdown would cripple the communications and organization of its challengers (Lynch, 2012, p. 90). In Tunisia as well, the government tried to ban Facebook, Twitter, and video sites such as DailyMotion and YouTube. While Morozov's (2011) contention that, faced with the threat of revolution, an embattled government would simply pull the plug on the Internet proved to be correct, the communications shutdown in Egypt and Tunisia had minimal effect on people's mobilization.

Within few days, the Tunisian hacker communities of Anonymous and Telecomix crippled government operations with their Operation Tunisia denial-of-service attacks and by building software that allowed activists to get around state firewalls (Howard et al., 2011, p. 8). Media reports detail the ways in which many Egyptian activists could still upload to Twitter and YouTube via direct satellite uplinks and dial-ups on their mobile smart phones and could work around the Internet cutoff by piggybacking on the services in luxury hotels—which the regime did not dare to cut off for fear of alienating foreign businesspeople and tourists (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011; Daily Mail Online, 2011; Lynch, 2012). Activists set up file transfer protocol accounts to send videos to international news organizations; used landlines to connect to Internet services in neighboring countries by calling international numbers with older dial-up modems; and circulated alternative message center numbers, which allowed some locals to continue texting and using services such as Twitter (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011; Seibt, 2011; Sigal & MacKinnon, 2011). Some websites and Egyptian blogs posted information on how to circumvent the blackout and dial up using a mobile, Bluetooth, and a laptop (Seibt, 2011; Daily Mail Online, 2011).

The shutdown in Internet access and television coverage brought many people to the streets to see for themselves. Amira Maaty, a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy, asserts that in the absence of the Internet, people were afraid there would be a massacre, and so they took to the streets in large numbers to protect each other (Maaty, 2011). And when young activists were not able to find their friends and counterparts on Facebook, they went to Tahrir Square to meet them there. Therefore, it could be said that, in this particular case, the lack of information in the virtual world fueled activism in the real world instead of halting it.

In contrast to the Egyptian regime's strategy of censoring virtual dissidence, the Syrian regime chose to surveil it to prosecute its initiators. Recognizing the failed approaches of the Egyptian regimes, Syria's leader Bashar al-Assad, chose to *unblock* Facebook, Blogspot, and YouTube (which had been blocked since 2007) to increase surveillance. This move, Aouragh and Alexander (2011) contend, was shrewd, showing how a government can use social media to repress.

Besides surveillance and censorship, Morozov (2011) has observed that repressive regimes and their supporters use social network platforms to combat protests through countermobilization and propaganda. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) cite the hacking activities of the pro-Assad "Syrian Electronic Army" group as a manifestation of this strategy. According to Aouragh and Alexander, the group brings down, defaces, or otherwise targets sites that host anti-regime content. The group denies affiliation with the regime of Bashar al-Assad, claiming on its Facebook page that its founders are ordinary Syrians

fighting against “fabrications and distortions of events in Syria.” In addition to posting pro-regime messages, the group has targeted Oprah Winfrey, journalist Nicholas Kristof, and President Barack Obama; conducted denial-of-service attacks aimed at bringing down the websites of news organizations; and defaced many others with pro-regime images and texts (Bayona, 2013; York, 2013). The army’s actions led President al-Assad to thank them in a speech, hailing them as a “real army in virtual reality” (al-Assad, 2011).

As repressive regimes become more experienced with the limits and effects of virtual dissidence, they invent subtle strategies to control it and incorporate these policies and tools in conventional politics. For instance, one of the early steps taken by the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces during its transitional rule was to join Facebook. Through its Facebook page, members of council communicated messages, videos, and statements to the masses. Sidney Tarrow (1998, p. 42) points out how, over the years, parts of the repertoire have become components of conventional politics. For instance, strikes are now part of institutional bargaining, and demonstrations are regulated by laws. Like strikes and demonstrations, virtual dissidence is becoming part of traditional politics. For instance, the former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi—the Muslim Brotherhood candidate—hosted regular question-and-answer sessions on Twitter (Kingsley, 2013).

In addition to governments’ subtle online strategies that could succeed to varying degrees in quelling virtual dissidence, the success of virtual dissidence is limited by its virtual character. To carry out virtual dissidence, activists need to demonstrate a degree of literacy and familiarity with the Internet, and they need to own or have access to digital devices such as computers, laptops, and smart phones. Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle (2011) have observed in their study of tweets from Tahrir Square during the January 25 uprising that those who discussed the events online were “the more affluent in the society” (p. 15). They were people with laptops and smart phones and among whom communicating in English is quite common. Indeed, Christopher Wilson and Alexander Dunn (2011) report that 96% of the tweets coming from Tahrir Square covering the January 25 demonstrations were communicated in English, and only 1% of the tweets were in Arabic. The predominance of English tweets demonstrates that virtual dissidence during the January 25 uprising was restricted and accessible to a particular socioeconomic class. For the unemployed and those living on two dollars a day, Nunns and Idle (2011, p. 22) point out, Twitter and Facebook were the last things on their minds.

It might be argued that activities were intentionally communicated in English to generate international attention and interest in the revolution and embarrass the regime on the international scene. Regardless of the language of the tweets, Eike M. Rinke and Maria Röder (2011) emphasize that oral communication remains important to spread revolutions, especially in authoritarian contexts. In their study of the role of social media in the 18-day Egyptian uprising, Rinke and Röder (2011) have noted the importance of oral communication in building solidarity with the large illiterate and poor segments of the society and establishing trust and confidence among participants.

Most importantly, oral communication forces political activists to step outside their familiar virtual space to communicate with not like-minded individuals—individuals whom the activists did not choose to friend on Facebook or follow on Twitter. In their study of the genealogy of digital knowledge produced during the Arab spring, Victor Ann Newsom, Lara Lengel, and Catherine Cassara (2011) note that digital

information does not exist outside of bias and production concerns. From the mass of available sources on social media, the users select the pages, groups, or tweeters they want to follow. As such, while the virtual space is open, it can be a space for the construction of closed minds. The structure of interaction on social media platforms allows users to decide what to follow, read, and discuss. As Albrecht Hofheinz (2011 states, "what they [participants] think is authoritative is increasingly informed by what links are forwarded to them by their friends on Facebook, or by what flies by them on Twitter" (p. 1426). As such, the narrative that forms in the protestor's mind is an amalgamation of similar perspectives, excluding counternarratives.

Conclusion

In international relations, social scientists often think in metaphors, using them to describe their own work and that of others. As part of aping the natural sciences, scholars have historically used physics metaphors such as billiard balls, balances, and bandwagons to conceive contention and order. Inspired by this tendency, I use Tilly's metaphors of repertoire and performances to inform my conceptualization of virtual dissidence in the context of the recent democratic uprisings that have swept the Middle East and North Africa. As this article has demonstrated, such a conceptualization seems more coherent and better able to deal with the fundamentally relational character of conflicts and political struggles.

Using the metaphors of repertoire and performance, the article provides a rich narrative of the role of social media in the recent Arab uprisings. A nuanced distinction is drawn between the role of social media and virtual dissidence. I coin the term *virtual dissidence* to describe the array of online collective actions carried out by activists against the political regime. Underpinning this distinction is an understanding of social media as a platform for both dissidence and repression; meanwhile, virtual dissidence is conceptualized as predisposed to reformist political activities.

Building upon Tarrow and Tilly's work on contentious politics, I position virtual dissidence as a key performance in the repertoire of contention between repressive regimes and their contenders. This positioning performs several important functions. It acknowledges the significance of virtual dissidence, yet it does not omit the important role of off-line traditional contentious performances—such as protests, oral communication, and sit-ins. In so doing, I avoid the oversimplified polarized opinions that frame the Arab uprisings exclusively as either a "Facebook revolution" or a "people's revolution" and the popular tendency to mystify the effect of virtual dissidence and overlook the deeper causes of rebellion (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Cohen, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Rich, 2011; Shirky, 2008, 2010; Webster, 2011; York, 2011).

Analyzing virtual dissidence as a contentious performance in the Arab Spring's repertoire of contention complicates the analysis and reveals the influence of political structures on the evolvment and efficiency of contentious performances, particularly on virtual dissidence. In Tilly's account, political opportunity structures influence the form of repertoire and performances adopted and their efficiency. In their seminal work *Contentious Politics*, Tilly and Tarrow (2007, p. 57) elaborate on this point, arguing that contentious repertoires vary by regime type. This account thus emphasizes the role of social institutions such as regime type in limiting the repertoire and vice versa. Once the new repertoire is diffused and becomes modular, using Tarrow's (1998) terminology, it in turn influences the government's response and, in the long run, Tarrow attests, becomes part of the conventional politics. This can be seen

in the post-uprising politics, in which several regimes are incorporating social media platforms as a site of governing.

To conclude, conceptualizing virtual dissidence as a key performance in the repertoire of contention during the Arab Spring provides a rich narrative of these political struggles. The metaphors of repertoire and performance bridge various tensions between structuralist, rationalist, and culturalist modes of analysis. They link the acts with contexts and agents with purposes. Although the analysis is only informative—because there are numerous angles from which to deconstruct this immense topic—it draws our attention to important questions of consciousness, creativity, interconnectedness, and resonance. These questions can inform future studies on the role of virtual dissidence in inundating corrupt regimes.

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