



The Cultural Logic of Visibility in the Arab Uprisings

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The events of the Arab uprisings reveal a new tension in the relationship between media and space. This article situates iconic moments of the uprisings, such as large groups of people gathered in Tahrir Square in Egypt, by examining how they depend on tactics of disinformation, secrecy, and concealment. It compares two examples—footage from the Qasr Al Nil Bridge in Cairo at the beginning of the January 2011 uprising and the politics of anonymity in the case of the outing of Syrian activist Malath Al Aumran—to situate the stakes of public visibility in regimes of spatial control as they intersect with new modes of visual circulation. The article draws conclusions about our understanding of how media structured these events.

Keywords: Arab media, Arab uprisings, social media, visual culture, public space

Images of Tahrir Square in Egypt have become some of the most widely recognized symbols of the first round of the Arab uprisings. Large crowds gathered, chanting and calling for the downfall of the regime, have since become almost synonymous with the actual square and the spirit that briefly gave a positive sheen to the notion of the “Arab street.” The uprisings that have rippled through the Arab world since late 2010 have all involved a radical contestation of what it means to gather in public, in defiance of various existing social and political orders—typically, brutally enforced. The political meaning and consequence of the act of contesting public space—and the visibilities on which it depends—are part of a distinct historical conjuncture in which the relationship between media and space expresses a unique set of tensions.

How might the realities and spaces of the series of events known as the Arab uprisings be understood differently were they to be unburdened by narratives of the so-called power of new media? Conversely, how might we understand the cultural logic of visibility of street protests in regimes that criminalize such public expressions of oppositional politics? I argue that these events, so often discussed in terms of iconic moments like those in Tahrir, are better understood as depending on tactics of secrecy and disinformation, born of historical experiences with spatial control. I unpack this dynamic between public visibility and tactical concealment by analyzing two examples: footage of the battle for the Qasr Al

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Nil Bridge in Cairo on January 28 and the politics of anonymity in the case of a Syrian online activist. By closely examining the social tensions created by the circulation of images and information in these two examples, I show how they illuminate the differences between the Egyptian and Syrian contexts. Comparing quite different phenomena such as these two also helps identify commonalities in the visual culture of public gatherings and contestation across the Arab uprisings. Before discussing these examples, it is necessary to first examine their contexts and clarify the conceptual framework underpinning this analysis.

Beyond Causal Analysis

It is vital that critical inquiry into the complex relationship between media processes and space in the Arab uprisings not lapse into explanatory models shaded by an underlying technological determinism. I join others in rejecting arguments that seek to explain the "cause" of these events in terms of the "effect" that the media has had on people's political consciousness. Grounding the analysis of the uprisings in their political specificities and socioeconomic conditions should not, conversely, slide into economic determinism. Such a treatment would similarly limit inquiry into what is specific to the mediation of these events. Both of these explanatory modes tend to shift focus away from the complexity of the relationship between media and space toward seeking answers to questions of cause and effect.

It would be difficult to find a serious proponent of the idea that only media are relevant to understanding these events. There are similarly few who would overtly argue that media are irrelevant. At times, narratives that privilege political economic analysis are more the result of disciplinary focus than epistemological closure or censure per se. For example, one cannot fault a thorough study of fiscal policy for not being an elaboration on those topics and objects that get lumped under "culture."¹ Others, such as Beinín's (2011, p. 191) account of the actions of organized labor in Egypt in the decade preceding the uprising, see a complex dialectical social tension in the neoliberalization of the economy.² Owen's (2012) comparative historical analysis of the inner structures of sovereignty and control of "Arab presidencies for life" (p. 173) speculated that online spaces lower the cost of publicly expressing discontent long held in private. Such insights are important starting points.

Many scholars have pushed back against the fascination with social media in the Arab uprisings that has appeared in some popular accounts. Some have argued that in the case of Egypt, for example, the history and experience of organized labor, the April 6 youth movement (named for the date of a strike that it was created to support), the women's movement, and the Kefaya movement were all vital forces in the creation of these events.³ Others have outlined the role of online coordination between different political groups within and between these national contexts or the importance of not letting a singular

¹ For a critical account of the role of the Egyptian state's fiscal policies in shoring up elite support for the regime, see Soliman (2011), especially the conclusion and epilogue.

² See the afterword in Beinín (2011) for a political economic analysis of the Tunisian context.

³ The essays gathered in the *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings* (Haddad, Bsbeer, & Abu-Rish, 2012) are especially useful for their grounded insight into these histories and their ability to capture a sense of the event itself.

focus on “youth” as an explanatory social category obscure important class differences (Aouragh, 2012a; Schwedler, Stacher, & Yadav, 2012, p. 41). Many of the activists most visible in global media coverage readily acknowledge the importance of groups such as labor unions in the making of the uprisings—even making an appearance in Wael Ghonim’s (2012) memoir. Rather, the idea that social media is a key explanatory factor seems symptomatic of a conceptual frame that equates connectivity with a new subjectivity or political horizontalism, which, as Fuchs (2012) and Gerbaudo (2012) have shown, is occasionally reproduced in scholarly work such as Castells (2012).

In truth, there would seem to be no inherent connection between Internet penetration rates, the resilience of political regimes, and the strength of protest movements. Prashad (2012) expresses an even deeper skepticism: “Facebook allowed for some creative organizational work amongst the literate, but it was not significant” (p. 22). Although the cultural capital required for literacy, digital or otherwise, is not to be underestimated, this might be too quick of a dismissal. On the eve of the uprisings, the five Arab countries with the highest rates of Internet usage (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon, and Kuwait) did not see a regime change. Tunisia follows closely on their heels (17.6% of the population are on Facebook, and over a third have regular Internet access) but is in stark contrast with Libya (3.7% on Facebook, 14% online) and Yemen (0.7% on Facebook, 12% online). Egypt, on the other hand, was at 5.5% on Facebook, and with about a quarter of the population online.⁴ As Aouragh and Alexander (2011) demonstrated in the case of Tunisia, the capacity to use or control media flows did not correlate to either the containment of the protests or the longevity of the Ben Ali regime.⁵ Yet for many involved in the protests as spectators, direct participants, or both, digital media seemed not only important but decisively so.

The cultural narrative of the centrality of social media, and sometimes the reaction against the fascination, seems an important part of these events. Such narratives bear the mark of the experience of a slippage (or a reaction to a slippage) between two different phenomena and subject positions. This slippage is between the experience of how images and media texts circulated for the people in the spaces on the ground and for people who experienced these events as spectators and readers from afar. The former often ended up being equated with or described in terms of the latter’s experience(s). This equation is part of a moment in which the demonstrations were, for many, experienced primarily through media. The mediated experience lends itself to the feeling that media use is vitally important to what is happening on the ground; the experience also lends itself to the projection that what is happening on the ground is in some way a product of media. One subject position inflects interpretations of the other. Of course, media includes more than images, and images are not merely visual. For many concerned viewers in the global audience, participation was defined by a sense of not wanting to miss new developments. Such involvement was characterized by the practices of constantly checking for new updates; of searching and reading Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube clips; and of comparing online commentary with mainstream

⁴ These statistics are derived from reports by the International Telecommunication Union (accessed in 2011, updated yearly), and Mourtada and Salem (2011, cited in Noueihed & Warren, 2012). These numbers should be qualified, because access is not the same as uniformity of use.

⁵ They argue that “higher levels of censorship neither prevented the spread of protests after Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation, nor saved Ben Ali’s regime” (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011, p. 1353).

news coverage. The hope that brutal dictatorships might actually fall or at least continue to be openly defied was a thrilling and chilling sight. Such practices also can lend themselves to reifying spaces and experiences on the ground as somehow untainted by media. Similar to “the local,” it cannot be assumed that “on the ground” is either unaffected by such circulation or that media circulates there in the same way.⁶ As a social practice, demonstrating in a public space is a performance predicated on a contestation of social relations, often with a distinctly visual and auditory component with a presumed connection with a much broader mediated audience, traceable both in images and digital writing.

A Conjunctural Analysis of Media and Space

What if the question of media were posed differently? What if critical inquiry sought to understand the relationship between media and space as one inextricable from current political economic transformation? Media technologies and information networks have both a geography and a history.⁷ Media technologies have also historically played a role in the production of space at a number of levels—from urban planning, to urban imaginaries, to the fundamental texture of lived spaces well before smart phones and live satellite broadcasting. It is also important to consider that spectatorial distance is not the same thing as geopolitical noninvolvement. Despite widespread debates about whether the United States should get involved in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, or Syria, the contemporary Middle East is one deeply shaped by U.S. involvement, overt and covert, with various regimes in the region.⁸ Information technology and digital media are also both important sectors in the global economy as well as key parts of its underlying infrastructure.⁹ Google and Facebook are key pillars of contemporary capitalism that are neither benign nor innocent to geopolitics. Moreover, the cultural economy of digital technology and social media is not inherently progressive, even at the level of the industry itself, nor does its use automatically surpass familiar, orientalist structures of attention and liberal identification (Aouragh, 2012a; Bady 2012, pp. 139–140). Nor can it be assumed that expression in online forums is free of social stratification, or that such practices are inherently liberating.¹⁰

The complexity of the uprisings can be more productively grasped—individually and as a felt

⁶ Edwards (2011) offers a compelling consideration of how the local itself is produced through modes of circulation, a process that also has become the object of literary reflection.

⁷ Tawil-Souri (2012b) demonstrates that missing this more fundamental consideration of the geography of media networks and the history of spaces of protest is symptomatic of “the way in which media scholarship has itself been caught in a myopic whirlwind which the Arab uprisings nicely unveiled” (p. 87).

⁸ As Bady (2012) puts it “this pose of the disinterested interest of the detached spectator has represented a colossal historical amnesia...The pose of nonintervention—the pretense, for example, that the Fifth Fleet’s location in Bahrain is compatible with the Department of Defense ‘closely watching developments’ there—aggressively asserts a nonintervention that is contradicted by the facts” (p. 140).

⁹ See Schiller (2011) on the relationship of media and information technology industries to the financial crisis.

¹⁰ See Marwick (2013) for a critical account of micro-celebrity in social media, the cultural capital that it and related practices entail, and the ideology underpinning the development of Web 2.0 platforms and user experiences.

unity—by understanding them as part of a conjunctural shift. Writing about the relevance of conjunctural analysis, Hall and Massey's (2012) critical model (outlined in a different moment of crisis decades before the 2008 financial crisis) asserted:

A conjuncture is a period when different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society and have given it a specific and distinctive shape come together, producing a crisis of some kind. The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another. These are two distinct conjunctures, separated by the crisis of the 1970s. A conjuncture can be long or short: it's not defined by time or by simple things like a change of regime—though these have their own effects. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, "fuse in a ruptural unity." Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing (Thatcher to Major?), or to a somewhat transformed version (Thatcher to Blair); or relations can be radically transformed. (p. 55)

Hall and Massey's (2012) dialectical understanding of culture and economy offer a productive historical lens through which one can consider the mediation of the uprisings. A conjunctural analysis points to the necessity of grasping a historical moment in its distinctness, paying close attention to how the social, cultural, ideological, and economic become intertwined. Considerations of media should thus contextualize historical events while critically determining what becomes visible within such "ruptural unities." Such an epistemological and methodological shift opens many avenues of inquiry, not all of which can be fruitfully explored here. One dimension that it helps shed light on is the cultural logic of visibility in the uprisings. Approaching the question of the intersection of media with spaces¹¹ of protest in this way opens up a different set of questions about the modes of visibility that characterize these events.

If media are part of the event of the uprisings, then what social and political tensions characterize this historical conjuncture? Bayat's (2010) prescient argument about "social non-movements" in the Middle East quite precisely grasped the distinct social logic of creative adaptation to and long-simmering awareness of political blockages of the subaltern and urban poor in their everyday attempts to scratch out a living in this historical juncture. In social non-movements, awareness and resistance are not the same thing, especially if either is considered incommensurate with complicity. Rather, Bayat (2010) argues that what characterizes social non-movements at a mass level is a keen appreciation of the limitations placed on everyday life by oppressive systems, necessary for surviving in them and the

¹¹ My use of the term *space* is closer to that of the critical geographic tradition and differs from Aouragh's (2012b) "Internet as a space," a term used to analyze how "the Internet has two sides, it is a *tool* for activists (survival, operational continuity) and a *space* for activism (expanding networks)" (Aouragh 2012b, p. 530).

informal economies that result.¹² Ironically, there is much that is re-silenced and misunderstood when the efficacy of social media is considered to be the prime mover of political awareness or organization, particularly when analytically isolated from a broader media culture in which satellite broadcasting is far more common. Writing prior to the uprisings proper and on the basis of ethnographic study in Egypt, Bayat (2010) showed that, although social media was used with some success in coordinating actions in support of striking textile workers in April 2008, "this channel is too exposed and contained, and thus vulnerable to police surveillance, when compared to the fluidity and resiliency of 'passive networks'" (p. 23). This insight was confirmed by the resilience of such social ties in various uprisings when regimes tried to pull the digital plug. It also confirms that media (presumably the news media) plays a role not confined solely to the realm of representation, especially if grasped only in terms of an influence on public opinion or the imaginary. One of the contradictions of the visibility of protests is that, despite the importance of circulating images in making them intelligible as an event, there are generally low levels of Internet penetration even in those places that saw a "successful" uprising.

In fact, the role of the (very active) worker's movement and the growth of independent unions in organizing a tremendous number of the strikes leading up to the Egyptian uprising require one to qualify Bayat's (2010) claims of passivity even within that country.¹³ The prominent role of worker movements in the events of 2011, and their experience with civil disobedience, are a reminder that the everyday is always a plural affair, made to seem otherwise. Bayat's (2010) argument about non-movements in Egypt grasps the everydayness of coping with oppressive and disenfranchising political systems, making them only *seem*, from some perspectives, to be nonexistent social passivity. Rancière's (2004) notion of the division of the sensible, which refers the social distribution of speaking positions of those who can make sensible claims to the political, can help us grasp the social textures that Bayat describes. In systems of power that visualize the social to better control it, the aesthetic (or what is sensible) becomes political. Rancière (2004) illustrates this concept with the example of the Roman senators on the hill, who, upon asking the crowd gathered nearby about their political demands, responded that all they could hear was unintelligible noise; there was no way for the Senate to respond to insensible speech. Political formations are tied to aesthetic regimes that naturalize sensible ways of seeing and feeling—against which the eruption of the people demanding the downfall of the regime only *seems* to come out of nowhere, even as rulers continue to insist on the impossibility of the demand itself. Radical politics begins when people start to claim the rights they are otherwise denied. The people refuse to carry on with the status quo and begin to act as though they already possess the rights that should be theirs. They do so by demonstrating even though—or perhaps because—they know full well that doing so invites the heavy hand of the state. They claim what Mirzoeff (2011) describes as the right to look when the state apparatus does so. Whatever else they might result in, attempts to bring about the downfall of regimes (revolutionary or

¹² Bayat (2010) argues that "many resistance writers tend to confuse an *awareness* about oppression with *acts* of resistance against it. . . . Such an understanding of 'resistance' fails to capture the extremely complex interplay of conflict and consent, and ideas and action, operating within systems of power. Indeed, the link between consciousness and action remains a sociological dilemma" (p. 53).

¹³ See Alexander (2010, 2012) for a historical analysis in the changes in leadership structure of these movements, and the increasing frequency and intensity of strikes in the years leading up to the Egyptian uprising.

counterrevolutionary) by relatively peaceful means or by internationally supported armed struggle, are a restaging of the shape of the political since formal decolonization. As Hall and Massey (2012) remind us, there are no guarantees as to the resolution of such conjunctural shifts.

Regional topologies of power played a role in structuring media flows and blockages, even as their broader texture and cultural logic escape the intentions of even the most brutal dictator. Before moving on to the examples taken from the Egyptian and Syrian contexts, it is necessary to first mention a few common factors pertaining to regional media and political protest. There has been no single Arab uprising, but rather a series of different uprisings, which have each taken a different course according to the intersection of domestic politics with what some have termed the new regional "cold war" between the U.S. and Iranian spheres of influence (Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). Although Tunisia's success was an inspiration for Egypt, and both probably emboldened people in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain (and Saudi Arabia, which is discussed much less frequently), each began to and continues to unfold within and against a distinct sociopolitical context. Although there are commonalities, the uprisings were by no means a coherent unit. The foreign policy of Qatar aside, Al Jazeera's protest coverage—which was trenchant in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria but virtually nonexistent in Bahrain—was an important part of the visual form of these events. The focus on dramatic happenings, such as massive gatherings in Tahrir to the exclusion of other key sites of protest, can in part be attributed to the compatibility of live feeds with spectacle, even as much of Al Jazeera's coverage of Libya and Syria (and other events) consisted of user-uploaded material (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, & Freelon, 2012).

Generally speaking, it is more accurate to think in terms of the social relationships forged between different media forms and institutions rather than attributing organizational outcomes to technical capacities. In the case of Egypt, the largest demonstrations happened well after the authorities threw the Internet and telecom kill switch, and the largest spike in new Facebook users occurred after it was turned back on.¹⁴ This is not to say that online flows and blockages are ever total. For example, it is more accurate to conceive of Twitter's actual role as one way that activists and others connected to a global audience elsewhere or as a means by which established news organizations, activists, and citizen-journalists connected than as a mass mobilizer of people on the ground, much less a source of newfound political understanding.¹⁵ Many protests spread to a mass audience and between countries as a result of coverage on pan-Arab satellite television, and a potentially global audience assuredly reinforced the hopes of many protestors. Satellite broadcasting and social media played one role in Tunisia and another in Egypt, but an altogether different one in Libya, where Al Jazeera shifted focus to the NATO-backed

¹⁴ Aouragh and Alexander (2011) cite 100,000 new Egyptian Facebook users on February 2, but also argue that "the value of Facebook as an organizer is lower where one can meet face-to-face . . . when authorities shut down the Internet, it severely disabled the activists on the level of citizen journalism and coordinating the protests, but it did not have dramatic consequences in terms of mobilization" (p. 1351).

¹⁵ Wilson and Dunn (2011) demonstrate that Twitter was both seen and used by activists as a means to communicate with a transnational audience. For a closer analysis of the relationships that emerged between journalists and activists, see Lotan et al. (2011).

insurrection, minimizing coverage of the concurrent uprising in Bahrain.¹⁶ Although Bahrain had some of the highest Internet penetration rates at the time and a long-standing political movement, the regime combined a swift military crackdown with a more careful approach to managing media. This included crowd-sourcing the identification of protestors on social media, and even turning away some journalists distantly affiliated with the channel on arrival at the airport.¹⁷

Keeping Out of Sight

What, then, is the relationship between the politics of public demonstrations and the circulation of images and texts of street protests? Forgoing causal explanations of analytically isolated factors regarding the emergence of protests opens up the consideration of a different dimension of these events. Examining the materiality of public space and media processes in this way brings to light a crucial dimension of these events—namely, the role of strategies of deception, disinformation, and concealment in Egypt and Syria. This also helps make the social experience of repressive institutions and surveillance more legible. In the context of large numbers of people facing down riot police—and in some cases prevailing in street battles against violent state coercion—online agitation appears to be just one of the more readily traceable signs of decades of oppression. Every iconic image of protestors facing down the police implies an enabling system of concealment, destabilizing the idea that emancipatory politics is limited to the question of how to get a message out. It also broadens the analytic focus to include the way that the regimes themselves are capable of mobilizing digital and social media to track dissenters and disseminate pro-regime messages, including images of the torture that awaits those who dissent. I examine here two different cases that clarify this tension between public visibility and concealment: the *Al Masry Al Youm* footage of the battle for the Qasr Al Nil Bridge in Cairo on January 28 and the case of Malath Al Aumran in Syria in the spring of 2011.

One of the organizational roles played by online organizing in the events in Cairo on January 25, 2011, was to falsify meeting times and locations of the protests to throw off security forces (El Ghobashy, 2011; Lindsey, 2012; Sowers, 2012). While different groups had announced online their commitment to demonstrations on January 25, the real times and locations of where would-be protestors were to converge were disseminated by telephone (mobile and landline) the morning of the protest. The SMS message had long been part of the on-the-ground, on-the-fly coordination that is key to battles over public space. The strategy (which worked to varying degrees of success) was to gather other protestors on the way to more central locations, arriving along side streets in far greater numbers than could easily be controlled. As recounted by one participant regarding January 25, many bystanders simply joined groups of chanting protestors as they moved through residential neighborhoods to central locations (Abdel Ghaffar, 2011). The massive crowd in Tahrir was perhaps the most iconic image of the protest. But it is probably better understood as the result of a tactics of evasion—of groups of people knowing how and

¹⁶ Prashad (2012) powerfully argues that the counterrevolution and co-optation of the uprisings could probably be dated to the beginning of the Libyan episode, when rebel groups became violent in part due to the degree to which a significant portion of the military remained loyal to Qaddafi.

¹⁷ For the experience of a freelance journalist who had at one time worked at Al Jazeera, see Omar Chatriwala's (2011) account.

when to assemble, disperse, and reassemble—rather than the people’s ability to hold fast (as in Tahrir) or overwhelm police positions. In truth, the sheer number of people who showed up or joined spontaneously far exceeded the expectations of organizers and police alike. The turnout testifies to the deep wellspring of popular discontent beyond online discussion, as does the targeting of police and National Democratic Party buildings.¹⁸

Other than Tahrir, one of the most symbolically resonant events of January 28 was the battle for the Qasr Al Nil Bridge, where thousands of protestors attempted to cross the river from the west to join other protestors in Tahrir. State security forces eventually dispersed protestors attempting to spend the night in Tahrir, but the days after saw nearly continuous street action across Egypt. Protests and police violence escalated on the “Day of Rage” on January 28, when many gathered for Friday prayers. Internet service had been cut off since the evening of January 27, and by January 28, mobile phone service also had been shut down, actions that signaled to many that the regime felt threatened. The *Al Masry Al Youm* (2011) footage of the events that transpired shares many qualities of one type of video made during the uprisings in that it is shot from above street level. Balconies and rooftops became common locations from which professionals and nonprofessionals could film. While user-uploaded video and satellite broadcasting were key to putting images of the protest into broad circulation, it should not be forgotten that filming from balconies and rooftops in this way is an action that takes place in constant tension with the punitive eye of the regime. Images from this vantage point are different from those created at street level, and they capture a view of the space of the street or square at a partial remove. Images such as these are shot from a point that is a part of the space while not being *in* it in quite the same way.

The footage depicts the give and take of territorial contestation on the bridge between police and protestors that transpired over the course of the afternoon. The camera highlights a series of dramatic exchanges, such as police vehicles swerving to hit protestors, protestors tossing tear gas canisters into the water, charging riot police, and close-ups of injured protestors. By the final police retreat near the end of the clip, the afternoon sunlight of the opening scenes fades to dusk. The “nonlethal” crowd dispersal measure of the water cannon, presumably meant to demonstrate restraint on the side of the police, is in turn visually redirected in dramatic scenes of protestors quickly lining up in prayer, including at the foot of bridge once it was taken. The public performance of prayer in the midst of onslaught, like other parts of the battle for the control of space, should be understood as a tactic of both nonreprisal and nonretreat.

The arresting scenes of the events that transpired on the bridge captured in this footage highlight a number of important ways that media were integral to the uprisings. The footage highlights the politics of moving in and out of view at the level of the street, and the degree to which such moments become overshadowed by events like Tahrir. The balcony/rooftop perspective aesthetic is a quality shared by much of the live coverage of iconic scenes at Tahrir, but it is unlike the user-uploaded clips—which are often shot with a cell phone—or the interviews with protestors in the thick of it. It is also unlike the now-iconic images of space occupied by massive groups (live or not, street level or not) in that it depicts the determined movement of protestors through space. Demonstrating at major locations is better understood

¹⁸ See Mona El Ghobashy’s (2011) exceptional account for a detailed explanation of how these events unfolded.

as a media event that results as an *outcome* of a fight for space previously tightly controlled, a process that also depends on running and hiding. This clip is also one of various media forms that created a potentially global circulation of images of bodies that in turn contested existing systems of control—of space and media.

The footage of Qasr Al-Nil also highlights the spatial conditions of the act of creating images. More importantly, this example diverts attention from Tahrir to the way that media were central to a process that included disinformation and spatial contestation, in which secrecy and concealment were as important as dissemination. Attempts to control access to the Internet and cellular networks in Egypt, and even attempting to jam Al Jazeera's live broadcast from and into Egypt, demonstrate the extent to which local, regional, and global spaces intersected to give the event a sense of coherence. This example reveals the space of the uprisings as one in which the creative adaptation of Bayat's (2010) everyday social non-movements congeals, and highlights how remaining unseen retains a tactical advantage in a global, visual culture. In some moments, even the creation of images (or circulation of images already captured) depends on a surreptitious act concealed from security forces. The footage from Qasr Al Nil also gestures to the very tangible politics of contesting space by gathering in and moving through the street, near the simultaneous creation and circulation of images of such events.

This crossing of spatial scales—from street to city to region and beyond—leads to a second example from the Syrian uprising. If Egypt has come to symbolize the thrill of the downfall of the dictator and the ensuing ups, downs, and co-optations of a different political opening, then the Syrian uprising represents a spiraling fall into an abyss with no clear outcome. There are many ways in which Syria differs from Egypt: at the level of the political economic structure, its media landscape, and the social underpinnings of the early stages of the uprising. In one sense, it would seem that Syria shared some features with Libya, in that the state's control of the military and its willingness to use it against its own citizenry made for a very different sort of dynamic. Another similarity between Syria and Libya is that the global and regional powers inserted themselves into the armed phase of the uprising in a much more direct way, albeit less one-sidedly and less uniformly in Syria. While these two examples yield insight into different aspects of what I call a cultural logic of visibility common to the Arab uprisings as a whole, the particularities that make them distinct also demonstrate the plurality of these events.

The Syrian regime exercised a different form of control in the years leading up to the uprising. There was no comparable tradition or social infrastructure of public protest in Syria, where civil society organizations face even tighter restriction than in Egypt. Illustrative of this is the gradual introduction of Internet access during Bashar Al-Assad's rule. Since the ascension of the younger Assad in 2000, Syria has been marked by the inauguration of a set of policies meant to extend the logic of economic (neo)liberalization begun in the 1990s. This was accompanied by the extension of state power into newly privatized areas of the economy (Haddad, 2012). It was also accompanied by the regime's promotion of a rhetoric of "openness," with the young and "modern-looking" first couple at its head. This rhetoric was accompanied by the growth of new cultural forms such as locally produced, dramatic television serials,

which became a new arena of the controlled negotiation of permissible criticism (Della Ratta, 2012).¹⁹ The fine line between what would be censored versus what would invite imprisonment or worse was mirrored by the Assad regime's cautious oversight of the staged introduction of Internet access in the early 2000s. The word *oversight* should be taken quite literally, as the regime quite clearly designed Internet activity to be monitored from the beginning. As documents uncovered by Reporters Without Borders demonstrate, the Syrian government designed surveillance systems into its Internet infrastructure from the start. The regime also appears to have been diligent in keeping its systems up to date, as evidenced by its deployment of technologies capable of advanced "man-in-the-middle" attacks.²⁰ Yet Syrians clearly have also been finding work-arounds since before having an e-mail account was legal, leading to cat-and-mouse exchanges.²¹ At the same time, allowing for small amounts of public dissent online also provided useful cover for a regime eager to demonstrate its "permissiveness" to the world at large.

A key difference between the Egyptian and Syrian cases is that Syria did not develop a protest movement with a truly mass basis from the outset. Although the welfare state had been gradually stripped down in both countries, the beginning of the uprising in Syria is telling. The uprising began in the rural area of Dar'a, in response to a perceived sign of disrespect between local notables' good-faith attempts to negotiate with the regime over the release of two women arrested for speculating over the phone about the arrival of an Arab uprising in Syria. As Leenders (2012) documented, the group of schoolchildren that then spray-painted antiregime slogans popularized in other Arab uprisings was in part a reaction to this perceived gendered affront, not simply in imitation of satellite television coverage. The protests that then erupted in the region and across the country soon spiraled into a steady cycle of heavy-handed repression and ever-widening and escalating conflict. The significance of the emergence of the protest in Dar'a to this analysis is twofold. First, the region's (sometimes quasi-legal) social connection to people living outside Syria created a pipeline of support into the country once the uprising began as well as a way for media to cross borders before going online (Leenders, 2012). Second, it signifies a geography of contestation—which did not spread to major cosmopolitan urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo until later. It also lends support to Wedeen's (2013) analysis (following Berlant, 2011) of the attachment to an ideology of "the good life," tied to both "aspirations to economic well-being but also fantasies of multicultural accommodation and domestic security, and a sovereign national identity . . . while continuing to tether possibilities for advancement to citizen obedience and coercive control" (Wedeen, 2013, p. 842). As evidenced by narratives such as James Harkin's (2012) description of the challenges of reporting on the civil conflict that has resulted in Syria, violence and torture play a key role in shaping what journalists can access, regardless of their country of citizenship.

It is understandable, then, that many opposed to the Syrian regime sought to keep their identities secret or assumed fake online identities to safeguard against reprisal. One case in particular

¹⁹ As miriam cooke's (2007) study demonstrates, the fine line between tolerated criticism of the regime in literature and the arts has a much longer history, inflected by the experience of the spaces of Syrian prisons.

²⁰ See Reporters Without Borders (2013) for details of early tender requirements for the construction of the national Internet network as well as details of the involvement of numerous IT firms.

²¹ See Shaery-Eisenlohr and Cavatorta (2013) for more on Internet use in the early 2000s in Syria.

highlights the spatiality and political stakes of online activism and speaks to the contours of the circulation of media and information. Malath Aumran was a profile created by the activist Rami Nakhla to coordinate online activity, taking care to mask the connection between the online profile and the person behind it. Doing so made it possible to disseminate information and images gathered from a broader network of antiregime actors in Syria, especially to document collective action in public and the evidence of the violence of the regime's reprisal usually denied by state-controlled news media. While the connectivity of Facebook and Twitter were mobilized to disseminate such evidence, other technologies such as Qik and Skype became vital components in a secretive and fluid media infrastructure. Qik in particular enabled live streaming that could be relatively surreptitious but archivable.

The discovery of the person behind the false online profile highlights the geography of media use. After Malath Aumran's true identity was discovered, Nakhla speculated in a CNN interview that an intelligence officer was able to identify him in an earlier televised interview by voice alone, despite being visually masked. However, it is very possible that the regime was able to trace him through his online activity, as it had with other activists that it was able to capture.²² Whatever the case may be, it is reasonable to conclude that Nakhla's increasingly high profile (framed by the attractiveness of the topic of cyberactivism in the international press) made him an increasingly important target for the Syrian regime. Nakhla began receiving threats via his online profile soon after, including ones directed at his family. In this case, Rami Nakhla went across the border and into hiding in Beirut to continue to serve as a social and technological conduit between his allies in Syria and other media spaces. Funneling content out of Syria became a way to bypass regime control, a moment where "the conjuncture of media and mediated events ends up collapsing the spatial reach of the regime" (Tawil-Souri, 2012a, p. 162). It also marks a role played by amateur or citizen journalism quite unlike that during the communication blackout of the 1982 Hama massacre.²³ Documentation of both atrocity and public demonstrations circulate increasingly beyond the control of the regime. However, new media forms are not the sole purview of antiregime activists. The Syrian regime and its supporters also have documented horrific acts perpetrated by antiregime forces, circulating evidence of punitive violence as a warning to others as well as actively posting pro-regime propaganda.²⁴

Malath Aumran demonstrates that not all kinds of visibility are a journalistic revelation of hidden truth, nor does "getting the truth out" constitute a political victory in and of itself, especially if it is assumed that the utility of doing so is to motivate or wake up apathetic people presumed to be unaware of their own condition. No shock of the new is needed to produce awareness of what all too many already know to be true, even if the process of sharing common experiences and grievances can foster political ties and sentiments. Yet if we consider decades of bodily violence such as torture (or virginity testing) to

²² Reporters Without Borders (2013) discusses how this transpired in the case of Taymour Karim, whom the regime had traced through Skype.

²³ The 27-day siege of Hama by the Syrian armed forces aimed to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, and was accompanied by a near-total communication blackout (see Fisk, 2001, pp. 165–187).

²⁴ For analysis of these competing claims, see Barriaux (2012), <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=53877>

be an inscription practice, then we can arrive at a different understanding of the videos that circulate as a result of strategies of concealment. This raises questions about the materiality of the performance and embodied spectatorship that accompany the visceral nature of street celebrations, as in the case of online videos from Syria that show large groups dancing the *dabkeh*.²⁵ Might media archaeological approaches, for example, find new challenges in examining these events?²⁶

The everyday was already heavily policed, gendered, and interwoven with media technology and popular texts, so the mobilities and immobilities that composed the everyday gave form to the protest.²⁷ The humorous self-reflexivity present in many protest signs is part of this re-appropriation of the mundane and everyday that claimed public visibility in full view of the surveilling eye. If some demonstrations are about the affirmation of a collectivity against systems of power, then it is imperative to understand digital media in terms of their relationship to these older forms of mediation.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by these two examples, the relationship between media and space in the Arab uprisings is illuminated by considering its configuration within what Hall and Massey (2012) described as a historical conjuncture. The structures of visibility created by the circulation of images that characterize these events are defined by modes of secrecy and concealment as well as public visibility. The examples from the Egyptian and Syrian contexts highlighted different dimensions of the paradox of the cultural logic of visibility that has defined these events. Although generalizations are sometimes difficult to make, the quite different contexts from which these examples derive serve to illustrate the intersection of space, social and technological networks, and regimes of power that define the cultural logic of visibility of the Arab uprisings. The Qasr Al Nil footage gestures toward the multiple spaces and mediations of the uprisings. The contestation of the bridge is one of many spaces that made mass congregations in central locations such as Tahrir possible. This, in turn, depended in part on online organization and disinformation, but more crucially on the frustrations and experiences of its participants. The sights and sounds recorded from the nearby building serve as one type of testimony defining the politics of global visibility of these events. It also demonstrates that one cannot assume that the performance of contestation is either isolated from or dependent upon a broader audience, even as very local issues are made to speak to very global audiences. Seeing an event on a television or handheld screen is not the same as being there. But perhaps being there is a sensory event that is itself also mediated—whether by live global broadcast, by clothing, by the effects of tear gas on the body, or by fantasy. What holds true for the body also holds true for public space. Seeking to understand these uprisings as a politicization of the everyday, or public space being politicized by instrumental actions of public expression, misses the key role of state violence in shaping collective life long before people mobilized across the lines it draws.

²⁵ Salti's (2012) first-person reflection is a commentary on the Levantine folk dance typically performed at celebrations, and the modes of spectatorship that such clips engender.

²⁶ Parikka (2012) gives a useful overview of differing approaches that how knowledge and techniques derived from these events might impact the development of future media technologies and cybersecurity.

²⁷ For examples of ethnographic investigations of the place of media in Egypt, see Armbrust (1996) and Hirschkind (2006).

The Syrian example demonstrates the extremely high stakes of anonymity, of keeping out of sight, and of new geographies of citizen journalism that remain deeply defined by coercive systems. The example of Malath Aumran/Rami Nakhla reinforces the idea that citizen journalism and activism, which at times partner with established media organizations to circulate material beyond the reach of oppressive regimes, have long understood the need for secrecy. The most overlooked, but perhaps most crucial, dimension of the uprisings is not just new contours of public visibility but rather strategies of remaining undetected, or of deliberately creating false positives (intentionally misleading self-identification) in network cultures. To the extent that a political order depends on spatial control, and to the degree to which networks of informants and surveillance support that control, acting in secret is a vital tactical advantage. Knowing when and how to evade the police, when to circulate disinformation, and when to remain concealed is just as important as the actions taken by brave people to create more visible moments of display. Modalities of concealment may not be new, but they now exist in relation to an emergent tension between potentially live media circuitries and public space. To equate the most visible moments of the uprisings (or the most affecting personal expressions of protest) with their tactical importance misses the full stakes of spatial contestation. This is evidenced by the blood that was shed when protestors and the state resorted to pitched street battles, or when nonviolent movements (or non-movements) became armed conflicts.

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