The Arab Spring
The Role of ICTs

The Arab Spring and the Role of ICTs
Editorial Introduction

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The wake-up call for millions of people in Arab countries is now. It began with the events of the Tunisian uprising in December 2010 and proliferated, leading to similar revolts later, in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and other Arab nations.

While resistance movements and confrontations between the state and the rebels are ongoing in most of these countries at the time of this writing—namely in Libya and Syria—the focus of this feature section is limited to Tunisia, the initiator of this revolutionary wave, and to Egypt. Both revolutions happened almost simultaneously, and they share a number of similarities regarding communication technologies' role in shaping the outcome of the uprisings. This collection of articles is meant to shed light on the role of new media during these revolutionary events. In Tunisia and Egypt, we have witnessed a new genre of revolution whose distinguishing feature lies in its organization by networks and particularly in social networks, which played an important informational and organizational role. Neglecting the complexity of these transformations, the media first attributed the overthrow of Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak to digital media, particularly social media and Facebook. Claims and attributions such as "This is a Facebook revolution" were common in the media and in the street, whereas deep problems of corruption and dysfunction in most of the Arab states were toxic. Tunisians and Egyptians decided to put an end to years of humiliation, corruption and deprivation. Having used Facebook, mobile phones, YouTube, or just word-of-mouth, a number of people—computer literate and analphabetic alike—gathered in the streets, protested, and some eventually died. But they won their peaceful and unarmed uprising; they won their revolution.

If we learned political leadership and coalition building from the Russian Revolution and popular initiative from the French Revolution, the Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrated the power of

networks. People did not assemble in the streets to espouse their political views or opinions nor to demonstrate solidarity with their political parties, the leaders they followed, or the gatekeepers they trusted. Instead, they mobilized for two other reasons, the first being the pain they shared due to difficult socioeconomic conditions: Unemployment, the high costs of living, inequalities among classes, censorship, and so forth were at the root of people's humiliation and frustration. Deplorable economic conditions, political deprivations, corruption, and social repressions are ubiquitous among most Arab countries and represent the motivating factors for these revolutionary actions. The second reason, as important as the first, is the flow of networks to which people belong: networks of friends, family, work, school, and others of interest (such as the media). These networks create a space, or in Bowles terms (2006), territories for interaction and *strong reciprocity* based on an altruistic sharing behavior. The Arab movements proved the motivating power of social relations for social activism. The solidarity among members of networks challenged dictators, their online censors, and the offline police. Members of networks created revolutionary content on their mobiles and digital media, and they distributed this same content to their friends, families, and members of other networks. This content distribution reached the mainstream media and satellite channels, some of whom, namely Al-Jazeera, played an important role in redistributing this content to the majority of the Tunisian people who had no access to the Internet.

These people aligned themselves against their enemy, the president, and their attitudes and beliefs changed due to their political engagement. Suddenly, old and young found or discovered themselves to be both patriotic and in revolt. Some did so through the power of the communication technologies they used for informing and freeing themselves; others by responding to the call for taking to the streets. Communication technologies empowered citizens, some of whom used these technologies spontaneously and not strategically.

Looking at the virtual organization of these events from Castells' network perspective helps to understand the structure of this cyber revolution and emphasizes an examination of the links that structured Tunisian or Egyptian cyber activities. Social networking pages that were used to help distribute information and content did not work independently; they were supported by blogs, networking sites, and media institutions. For instance, shadow groups such as Anonymous provided strategic assistance in the protection of the virtual territories of struggle. When the Tunisian government—through the Tunisian Internet Agency and its 2,000 online police officers—practiced censorship by massively blocking Facebook pages, curbing the distribution of videos and photos, and blocking the websites of foreign media that were covering the events, Anonymous and Hacktivism (Reporters Without Borders, 2011) attacked government websites, relayed antigovernment information, and provided fax bridges to enable news to spread despite online censorship. When governments blocked and censored opposition websites, Internet hosts were moved to other countries; for example, Tunisians offered hosting to Egyptian pages and sites. Castells (2007) argues that this helps in shifting the power from the state to the network society, and Howard (2011) notes,

> The power to control information no longer resides exclusively with the institutions of the state; it resides in media networks; and media networks are constituted by social relations and communication technologies. So Castells argues that in contemporary network society the power residing in media networks is stronger than that residing in states. (p. 20)

This network perspective should be subject to empirical research that would help us to understand the different roles in this cyber mobilization, as well as the linkages among the different actors—be they individuals or organizations, within countries or outside. This would put an end to the fuzzy claims that Facebook made the revolution.

In *Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2010), Philip Howard argues that democratic change in Islamic countries is conditional upon the use of communication technologies. He refutes claims that say the low connectivity rates in these countries preclude communication technologies from reaching enough of a mass audience (p. 31) and thus curb their transformative role. He explains that Internet use is rapidly increasing, whether that usage is from the home, school, work, or cybercafés. Rather than via mass communications, content is being distributed, he contends, between networks of family and friends. One can note here that the emerging force of Arab youth is articulated to the development of communication technologies in these countries and to the creation of content. Arab youth have triggered online activism and online participation for many years now, challenging all practices of censorship. For example, the Tunisian journalist and blogger Zouhair Yahiaoui was the first online activist to be imprisoned (sentenced to two years of prison in 2001), and he died soon after he was released. Sami Ben Gharbia is a key figure in cyber activism not only in Tunisia (with the Nawaat blog), but also in the Arab world, through the blog Global Voices. Thus, one can see the grassroots of the Arab revolutions not only in Bouazizi[1] setting himself in fire, but also in recognizing the preparatory work of cyber activists over the previous decade.

The popular mobilization, both in Egypt and Tunisia, is still simmering. Calls to continue the revolution and cleanse both countries of the figures and symbols of the old regime are ongoing. While the Mubarak trial in Egypt has mollified the population, protests in Tunisia against the juridical system continue. Judicial proceedings are accused of being biased and of not observing the independence of the system itself. Additionally, while the Egyptian press has some experience in freedom of speech, the Tunisian press has none. The chaotic situation of the Tunisian press has no precedent, and media narratives are still unsatisfactory, which rather proves the patterns of crisis. The long history of state-run media, the absence of education concerning the freedom of the media, and the incompetency of some

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[1] The heroic role of Bouazizi is exaggeratingly attenuated; his name has even been removed from streets and central places in Tunisia and in France, for example, at Place des Soldats. It is said that Bouazizi, poorly educated and drunk at the time, attacked the police agent who arrested him, and the court has cleared the agent from any charges.

media professionals are all challenged by an audience that is young, liberated, and thirsty for a powerful and significant change. Journalism is expected to preserve and serve the democratic interests people aspire to. As Carey (1996) states,

> Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; rather they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely the constitution of a democratic social order. (online)

In Tunisia, a new press law is being drafted, and the National Independent Authority for the Information and Communication sector is working on regulatory frameworks for the October 2011 elections. Article 19 of the draft decree "calls for an improved framework that would fully incorporate relevant international standards on freedom of expression, right to political participation and to guarantee the respect for freedom of expression and media freedom during the election process" (Bellezza, 2011, online). Plurality is one of the democratic values that Tunisians are experiencing for the first time. State censorship was abolished March 2011, and the restriction on Internet access seems to have been lifted, with the exception of pornographic content. These are signs of a revolutionary success, but that success remains conditional to the ongoing vigil on the part of civil society and citizen journalism. This can no longer occur without communication technologies and digital media.

On a Political level, Tunisia and Egypt Have Undertaken Different Paths

For more than 23 years, Ben Ali and his Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party dominated political life in Tunisia, reaching into every level of governance. Since Ben Ali's dismissal on January 14, 2011, the interim government has been the target of antigovernment demonstrations demanding a replacement of ministers affiliated with the now-dissolved old regime's party. On February 27, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi—a relic from Ben Ali's regime—stepped down and was replaced by Béji Caïd Essebsi, an elder statesman from founding President Habib Bourguiba's era. Other ministers have followed suit. Most recently, a prominent figure of the revolution, Slim Amamou, blogger-turned-Secretary of State for Sport and Youth, resigned the week of May 25 to protest the return of censorship of websites under the interim government. Unlike Egypt, which only ratified a modified constitution by referendum, Tunisia has chosen to draft a new constitution. However, the election for a National Constituent Assembly has been rescheduled for October 23. Furthermore, recent reports, notably the one presented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture, dampen hopes of a smooth transition. According to the UN report, more than 300 Tunisians died in the uprising. Furthermore, the political future of the country is still open. A recent poll asking Tunisians which political party they would vote for in the upcoming constituent assembly elections found a wide ideological spread, with a preference for the main Islamic party followed by the main left-wing party. In fact, among the roughly 100 registered political parties, the Islamist Ennahda is the only one holding nationwide rallies to gain support. In addition, structural problems such as the high unemployment rate continue to put a heavy strain on Tunisian society.

While Tunisia is being led by a strictly civilian interim government, the historically powerful military has taken over in Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak, after 18 days of protest, ended his 30 years of autocratic rule. On the surface, many claims of the demonstrators have been met, such as the abdication of the president, the dissolving of Parliament, the cessation of government-owned media propaganda, and the dismantling of the State Security Investigations Service. In May, Mubarak was ordered to stand trial in connection with the killing of unarmed protesters during the revolt; furthermore, his sons face corruption charges. His trial is the first in the Middle East in which a ruler, overthrown by his own people is put on public trial. Tunisia's Ben Ali, who fled to Saudi Arabia, has been tried and convicted in absentia. On the whole, however, because a military ruling council is in charge, Egypt cannot be said to have undergone regime change (yet), as the nation has been run by the military since 1952. The council has promised to hand power over to an elected government in Fall 2011, but the military has political, economical, and social vested interests in maintaining the current system. In fact, the army has enjoyed, until now, high autonomy. Its budget has never been under parliamentary scrutiny: the military manages enterprises in sectors such as olive oil, bottled water, hotels, construction, petrol industries and hospitals. Another factor is that of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist group considered Egypt's best organized political force. Although officially outlawed for the last 50 years, the Muslim Brotherhood has, contrary to Ennahda in Tunisia, been able to participate in political life by campaigning as independents and by building a strong social network of hospitals, pharmacies, and schools among others. While the movement has vowed to refrain from picking a presidential candidate from among its ranks, the struggle for power between the movement and the army is one of the big challenges that Egypt faces in the aftermath of the revolution.

Developments are ongoing in both Tunisia and Egypt, so it is premature to attempt to assess the success of either revolution. More time, further research and careful examination of these events in relation to the history of both countries is needed to understand the complexity of the recent uprisings. Nevertheless, the collection of articles in this special section initiates a discussion on the role of digital media in the current Mid-East social transformations. Authors have worked within a very short time frame to present their initial thoughts and make sense of the ongoing changes in the Arab world.

Albrecht Hofheinz appeals to researchers to search beyond the political and the public sphere for more long-term sociocultural developments created by new media. He calls for the study of the social and cultural effects of Internet and mobile phone use and how this affects power relationships between the individual and established authorities.

Victoria Ann Newsom, Lara Lengel, and Catherine Cassara discuss how information flows—helped by modern information technology—transport local knowledge from a very specific local context onto a global stage.

Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest analyze use of social media during the recent social movements in light of resource mobilization theory. They argue that social media played an instrumental role in the success of the antigovernment protests and call for further examination of the proposed incorporation of social media as an important resource for both collective action and the organization of contemporary social movements.

Miriyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander set out to deconstruct the debate about the role of the Internet in mobilizations for political and social change, distinguishing between the Internet as a *sphere of dissidence* and as a *tool* in the Egyptian protests. They show the dialectical relationship between online and offline political action, as well as how activists used both digital and nondigital communication tools according to the circumstances.

Ben Wagner sheds light on how regulatory regimes of media and communications technologies, such as Internet, television and mobile phones in Tunisia, have coevolved with the protests while efforts to control them gradually become increasingly restrictive over that period.

Eike M. Rinke and Maria Röder propose a new model of political communication in contemporary Arab societies more generally, relying on three components to grasp the Egyptian regime change: the media ecologies, communication culture, and temporal-spatial unfolding of events.

Brett van Niekerk, Kiru Pillay, and Manoj Maharaj analyze the recent events in Tunisia and Egypt from an information warfare perspective through the use of the Information Warfare Lifecycle Model, extracting the functions that the relevant ICTs performed in the uprisings and the attempts by the two governments to subdue protestors.

Rolf H. Weber elucidates the legal framework for the Internet to assess under what circumstances a governmental shut-down would be justified. He identifies the issue of shared responsibilities of states to preserve the Internet—both infrastructure and cross-border traffic—as a means to safeguard freedom of expression and access to information.

How the Internet Affects Journalism Coverage

Adrienne Russell stresses the end of monopolization on political news information with the advent of digital networked-era journalism as a response to censorship in Egypt, as well as to traditional international media outlets turning to citizen journalists and networked participants to relay the events.

Elizabeth Iskander highlights the specific context in Egypt to explain why new media played a crucial role during the protests and how the connection between new and traditional media can create a new channel for political debate and activism in the long term.

Summer Harlow and Thomas J. Johnson compare Egyptian protest coverage from three sources—*The New York Times*, the Twitter feed of *Times* reporter Nick Kristof, and the citizen media site Global Voices—to test whether the delegitimizing *protest paradigm* found in mainstream media is replicated in social media and blogs and what impact their protest coverage has on their credibility.

Empirical Data Sets

Gilad Lotan et al. provide a glimpse of the information flow during the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions through a set of tweets, analyzing patterns of sourcing and routing information between media outlets and individuals, as well as the distinct roles that particular user types appear to have played.

Christopher Wilson and Alexandra Dunn present empirical data on media use by protesters, coordinators, and transnational audiences during the Egyptian protests. A preliminary analysis suggests that social media use was not dominant in demonstrations, but did play an important, yet complex, role in connecting and motivating protesters.

Analysis of the Contribution of Specific Websites/Online Practices

Melissa Wall and Sahar El Zahed examine a series of video logs that were highly influential during the Egyptian protests to ponder the ways that participatory and social media may be changing or influencing protest and dissent in non-Western settings.

Michela Ferron and Paolo Massa show how the online encyclopedia Wikipedia functions as an online setting in which collective memories about controversial and traumatic events are built in a collaborative way.

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