

**ÉGYPTE**  
monde arabe

**Égypte/Monde arabe**

12 | 2015

Evolution des systèmes médiatiques après les révoltes arabes

---

## Limitations of the Social Media Euphoria in Communication Studies

Hanan Badr

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/3451>

DOI: 10.4000/ema.3451

ISSN: 2090-7273

### Publisher

CEDEJ - Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales

### Printed version

Date of publication: 25 March 2015

Number of pages: 177-193

ISBN: 9782905838858

ISSN: 1110-5097

### Electronic reference

Hanan Badr, « Limitations of the Social Media Euphoria in Communication Studies », *Égypte/Monde arabe* [Online], Troisième série, Changes in the media system after the Arab revolts: New research directions , Online since 25 March 2015, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ema/3451> ; DOI : 10.4000/ema.3451

---

## RÉSUMÉ / ABSTRACT

Les conséquences politiques des réseaux virtuels dans les pays arabes sont complexes et imprévisibles. Le corpus à ce sujet demeure fragmenté et ses résultats sont empiriques et peu conclusifs. Cela s'explique par un certain nombre de facteurs, notamment le grand nombre de disciplines et d'approches théoriques à l'œuvre pour ce qui constitue un phénomène nouveau pour les sciences sociales ; la rapidité de l'évolution et le dynamisme de cet environnement ; la quantité massive des données et les problèmes de méthodologie.

Cet article plaide pour une vision plus équilibrée et nuancée des réseaux virtuels et de leur potentiel de démocratisation. La recherche sur les réseaux virtuels dans les pays arabes, plutôt que de s'attacher à en prouver le déterminisme, devrait se pencher sur l'évolution de l'interaction entre la communication en ligne et les acteurs hors ligne à mesure que ces derniers se développent.

### MOTS CLÉS :

Réseaux sociaux, sphère publique, culture politique, médias de masse, Egypte.

The political effects of social media in the Arab countries are complex and unpredictable. The body of literature remains fragmented with inconclusive empirical results due to a number of factors like the multitude of disciplines and theoretical approaches, being a new phenomenon in social sciences, the fast developments and dynamic settings, the massive data, and questions of methodology. This article argues for a more balanced and nuanced view of social media and their democratization potential. In this sense, research on social media in Arab countries should not aim to prove certain determinism, but rather study the shifting interplay of online communication and offline actors as they develop over time.

### KEYWORDS:

Social Media, Public Sphere, Political Culture, Mass Media, Egypt.

---

HANAN BADR est maître de conférences au département Journalisme de la Faculté d'Etudes des Communications de Masse à l'Université du Caire. Après avoir obtenu sa licence et sa maîtrise à l'Université du Caire, elle a effectué ses études de doctorat à l'Université de Erfurt, Allemagne. Le sujet de sa thèse portait sur les discours du terrorisme dans la presse papier en Allemagne et en Egypte. Elle s'intéresse dans ses recherches à la communication internationale, aux systèmes médiatiques comparatifs, à la communication politique en ligne en Egypte et à ses transformations. Elle a publié récemment:

Hanan Badr/Thomas Demmelhuber, 2014, *Autoritäre Regime, Neue Medien und das "Regimedilemma"* (Régimes autoritaires, nouveaux médias et le « dilemme du régime »), *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 21, n° 1, pp. 143-160.

Hanan Badr, 2013, "Battleground Facebook. Contestation Mechanisms in Egypt's 2011 Revolution", dans: Berenger, Ralph D. (Eds.): *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*, Spokane, Washington, DC, pp. 399-422.

HANAN BADR is assistant professor at the Journalism Department, Faculty of Mass Communication, Cairo University. After obtaining her B.A. and M.A. at Cairo University, she studied for her doctoral degree at the University of Erfurt, Germany. The topic of her dissertation was discourses of terrorism in German and Egyptian print media. Her research interests include international communication, comparative media systems, online political communication in Egypt and their transformations. Her recent publications include:

Hanan Badr/Thomas Demmelhuber, 2014, *Autoritäre Regime, Neue Medien und das »Regimedilemma«* (Authoritarian Regimes, New Media and the "Regime Dilemma"), *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, pp. 143-160.

Hanan Badr, 2013, "Battleground Facebook. Contestation Mechanisms in Egypt's 2011 Revolution", in: Berenger, Ralph D. (Eds.): *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*, Spokane, Washington, DC, pp. 399-422.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA EUPHORIA IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

### FACEBOOK REVOLUTION: INITIAL EUPHORIA AT DIGITAL MOBILIZATION

The Arab uprisings generated a wave of research that insisted on the democratizing effects of social media. Literature on social media and the Arab uprisings highlighted and celebrated the revolutionary role of social media as a central tool in voicing political demands and social grievances as well as facilitating protests and organizing networks beyond the control of state and private mass media.<sup>1</sup> The massive public mobilizations and the following events that transpired in the Arab region were quickly coined the “Facebook Revolution”, a term that linked the outcome of the protests with the social network Facebook in particular. Studies on the first wave of the “Arab Spring” and online activism initially reflected a sense of victory and euphoria after the fall of Mubarak.<sup>2</sup> True, during the Tahrir protests social media and mobile networks facilitated exchanges among protesters through communication nodes.<sup>3</sup>

Even before 2011, research tended to argue that technological advancements would reinforce media liberalization; Egypt’s vibrant blogosphere had already been a focus of study as bloggers challenged mainstream media agendas and public deliberations.<sup>4</sup> The findings of these studies supported the “liberation technology” paradigm. In this context liberation technology is defined as “any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and

- 
1. For example see Khamis and Vaughn, 2011; Lim, 2012; Abdulla, 2011.
  2. For example see Abdulla, 2011; Shirky, 2011.
  3. Howard and Husain, 2013, pp. 5-6.
  4. Loewenstein, 2008; Pole, 2010.

economic freedom.”<sup>5</sup> The role of social media in revitalizing the public sphere was not only relevant to Arab autocracies. While scholars of social media in authoritarian settings focused on the shifting balance of state-society relations due to the erosion of complete sovereignty over communication<sup>6</sup>, research of social media in Western democracies witnessing a crisis of growing political disinterest dealt with online forms of public participation and civic initiatives to reclaim the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the Internet was able to revive stagnant political landscapes through the communication of ordinary citizens.<sup>8</sup>

In 2011, analysis of empirical evidence in Arab countries seemed to recognize the social media effects in the political arena. Three main arguments supported the euphoric estimations of social media effects on politics. The first and most elaborated argument is that the Internet changed and expanded the notion of the public sphere. In this regard, the public sphere theory, inspired mainly from Habermas’ seminal works<sup>9</sup>, is strongly present in the analysis of political communication during and after the Arab uprisings. Theoretically, this connects to the anti-hegemonic counter-public sphere concepts that are promoted by marginalized actors.<sup>10</sup> The argument goes that decentralized communication through social media enables wider segments of the public to openly participate in the communication process.<sup>11</sup> The Internet could then give those marginalized actors a chance to challenge the mainstream public sphere. Weak political and social actors get the opportunity to use social networking sites to promote their views or uncover events overlooked by the established media system. Online discourses seemed to fulfil “media utopian ideals”<sup>12</sup> by providing access and equality for all users. Indeed, in recent years social networking sites were increasingly used by civic society, such as advocacy groups, civic initiatives, social movements, non-governmental organizations, which otherwise would have limited access to the established media system whether due to political exclusion or weak resources<sup>13</sup>.

The second euphoric argument regards the communicative acts online as a practice of citizenship<sup>14</sup>. Hereby the communication itself

---

5. Diamond, 2010, p. 70.

6. Lamer, 2012.

7. Ghannam, 2011; Tufecki, 2014.

8. For example see Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2013, pp. 169.

9. Habermas, 1990, 1998.

10. Wimmer, 2007.

11. Lim, 2012.

12. Schmidt, 2013, p. 46.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Dahlgren, 2000, pp. 335-340.

serves as a form of civic participation or self-expression that turns the individuals from passive consumers into active producers, especially in the political arena. So the Internet would possibly enable the citizens to reclaim the colonized sphere of politics and consequently add pluralism and diversity to political civic culture, the argument goes.

Finally, the third euphoric aspect of social media influence in political communication is the inter-media agenda setting function. This term refers to the increasing ability of social media to shape traditional news media agenda, which is manifested in selection and highlighting mechanisms as well as increased frequency of coverage.<sup>15</sup> New thematic inputs from online debates can shape the news agenda of traditional media.<sup>16</sup> Online contents become more visible and accessible to wider segments of the public, even to those who lack online access. In addition, online gatekeeping processes do not operate in the classic linear sense as in journalism, which is more constrained by political and economic ties of the media enterprises. The web offers a more open potential of acquiring data and information. This does not negate a certain degree of a “digital gatekeeping process(es)”<sup>17</sup>, as evident for example in search engines that generate content for users; a process that shows in sorting and selection criteria of search results, that prioritize the browsing process and can be described as a source of “subtle power”<sup>18</sup>. Despite this less visible gatekeeping, the post-Mubarak era showed numerous examples of the responsive reaction of the mass media or an increased public awareness to online campaigns on Twitter or Facebook. Women’s rights in particular were a major focus in these online campaigns<sup>19</sup>. Social media, therefore, break the monopoly of traditional elites and successfully put neglected topics on the media agenda.<sup>20</sup> Social media trends that generate high visibility online make it onto news media, and vice versa, traditional newspapers and TV content provide information and views that feed online discussions. In this way, we can, therefore, speak of a social media and mainstream media symbiosis, because in practice they both benefit from each other, even if they operate under different selection logics.

The complex paths of transformation in the different Arab countries that witnessed mass uprisings weakened the euphoric “big effects” paradigm that was ascribed to the Internet and social media in the

- 
15. Brettschneider, 2002, p. 635.
  16. Emmer and Wolling, 2010, p. 48-49
  17. Röhle, 2010, p. 33.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. Mourtada et al. (ed.), 2011, p.2-3.
  20. Meraz, 2009.

beginning. Recently, new literature trends emerged that normalize the view on social media, or even shed some negative light on it. The following part will elaborate more on the main counter-arguments for a euphoric notion of the social media.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA EUPHORIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

Unlike the initial assumption that social media positively affects politics, months after the uprisings more cautious analyses started to appear. Marc Lynch spoke of a “Twitter devolution” elaborating his main argument that social media can actually “harm the political landscape” in the Arab region.<sup>21</sup> On another note, Greg Burris highlighted the asymmetric power constellations of Arab bloggers when he described a dilemma he termed “Lawrence of E-rabia”<sup>22</sup>. He described the “trap” of the young Arab bloggers who are represented as using “western technology” to liberate their countries. Thus, mass media discourse tends to reproduce Neo-orientalist tendencies in the interpretations of the Arab uprising. Yet at the same time Arab online activists need Western coverage to push their demands to a global audience and exert pressure on their regime. In their article on the Fourth Arab Bloggers meeting, Enrico de Angelis and Donatella della Ratta<sup>23</sup> outlined the opposing perspectives on viewing online activism in practice on the one hand and in academia on the other. While bloggers estimate themselves as pioneers of change in society, scholars tend to highlight their limitations.

The main aim of this article is to call for a more nuanced reading of social media effects in the context of the Arab Spring. In order to do so, five elements should be taken into consideration to contextualize political communication via social media within the broader context of political, social, and media systems.

1. The first element raises concern over the initial overestimation of social media effects. The use of social media by the opposition in preparation for massive demonstrations cannot be neglected, but we cannot speak of a mere “Facebook Revolution”. True, the activists could utilize social media to construct alternative social realities and convey information and emotions to a wider, mainly apolitical, audience. But social media are not capable of changing the system

---

21. Lynch, 2013.

22. Burris, 2011.

23. De Angelis and della Ratta, 2014.

of governing rules in a given political or legal system, as the term revolution suggests. The wide-spread term "Facebook Revolution" heightened expectations from social media and opened the door to a debate on (social) media effects. Media-effects research is characterized by inconclusive empirical results and a multitude of intervening variables, like previous attitudes, knowledge, experiences, and etc.<sup>24</sup>. Balanced research on democratization and communication tends to regard the media, whether old or new, as a catalyst, not a cause<sup>25</sup>. As Jeffrey Ghannam concluded, the increasing use of social media along convergence mechanisms is expected to change the news environment and community engagement, as well as public expectations. However, social media alone, as already stated, cannot change the political system.<sup>26</sup> This means that a certain role is ascribed to the media, but this role should be contextualized within other circumstances of a political, social and economic nature.

In addition, several other empirical indicators do counter the initial simplistic stimuli-response arguments that claim that social media has a causal effect in the Arab Spring. In regards to Egypt, the working paper on World Protests 2006-2013 shows that the number of protests had increased, especially with two notable peaks in January 2011 and June 2013<sup>27</sup>. But the general upward trend of protesting does not reflect the increasingly growing numbers of social media users in a clear consecutive ascending linear pattern. Empirical indicators show that people learned about the protests primarily through interpersonal communication using Facebook, phone contact, or face-to-face conversation, at least on the first day.<sup>28</sup> Another piece of evidence for the relative effect of social media is that during the "unprecedented telecommunications black hole"<sup>29</sup> during the 18 days of revolt against Mubarak, people reverted to the use of traditional communication tools like landline phones and leaflets<sup>30</sup>. From another angle, additional factors like popular unrest, intensity of grievances or socio-economic reasons play an important role in mobilizing or de-mobilizing people. These indicators again emphasize the role of media as a catalyst, not an agent of change.

---

24. Kepplinger, 2009, p. 701-702.

25. Hafez, 2005; Ayish, 2012.

26. Ghannam, 2011, p.23.

27. Ortiz et. Al, 2013.

28. Tufekci and Wilson, 2012, p. 363.

29. Lindsey, 2011.

30. Ayish, 2012.



The overestimation of social media effects resulted in a so-called “Tahrir bubble”<sup>31</sup>, which refers to online exaggerations as well as the occasional disconnection of bloggers from the real world and their decreased public credibility amongst the wider public. This does not rule out various empirical indicators of the success, albeit limited, of social media in public campaigning, causing occasional pressure on the government, and forcing a reaction to a socio-economic demand.<sup>32</sup> Four years after the Tahrir uprising social media seemed more promising in achieving change when utilized in single-issue campaigns instead of calling for general causes of social and political change. A new perspective interprets even the successful Tahrir protests as practically a single issue campaign; it was a rare moment of a “single narrative of popular revolt”<sup>33</sup>, especially when all oppositional groups united their chants for their removal of Mubarak and his regime. The chants of the uprisings embodied the most unifying and consensual call beyond the traditional lines dividing the oppositional groups.

2. From a normative point of view democratization theory postulates that media enables deliberation and adds transparency through political communication. Theoretically, this questions the extent of political effects of social media. What transformative power of the regime and citizenry do social media have? How can social media transform the political system or the political culture, if they can at all?

As mentioned above, media have the potential to function as a catalyst to accelerate change, but they are not a sole variable in the political bargaining processes. In a recent study, Zeynep Tufekci concludes that in just a few years social media in Egypt opened the public sphere to an extent that makes it “almost chaotic”.<sup>34</sup> Neither governments are able to regain full control over information and nor can dissidents utilize the new means of communication to fully impact policy.<sup>35</sup> As in most transformation periods, systematic change needs negotiations among key players. This happens through a dialogue between social and political actors, who engage in political bargaining

---

31. Lynch, 2013.

32. A recent example is the pressure caused by social media in the Aida Seoudy case. Seoudy, a radio presenter, was fired for criticizing the acquittal of Mubarak in his second trial in 2014. Eventually, the president stepped in to reinstate her as a radio moderator. Further vivid examples showing how social media change the real world is the growing discussions on female harassment, a topic pushed by civic society into the mainstream media agenda. See Nader, 2014.

33. Lynch, 2013.

34. Tufekci, 2014, p.4.

35. *Ibid*, p.16.

to bring forth transformation processes.<sup>36</sup> In regards to Egypt, the transformation shows both “elements of rupture and stability”<sup>37</sup>, which are better analysed outside the rigid dichotomy of democratic change or authoritarian resilience.<sup>38</sup> The return to old-style repression by the regime and the polarization of the oppositions predicts an ongoing learning and adapting process for both sides, which means constant tension for the next few years.<sup>39</sup> This will have long-term effects on the changing public sphere, because until now the Arab upheavals did not fully empower either side completely. The new information environment makes the costs of repression higher by lowering the barriers and increasing visibility.<sup>40</sup>

One cannot only speak of an “active new citizenry”<sup>41</sup>, as Asef Bayat recently put it, referring to the effects of the various political moments loaded with indefinite possibilities which demanded a creative fusion of the old and new ways of doing politics.<sup>42</sup> The broad information environment, as noted by Lynch, also includes the state as an actor. However, state intervention via information and communication technology is still under researched. Technology might offer liberation, but also enables state surveillance and censorship processes.<sup>43</sup> So if the events of the Arab Spring caught the regimes off guard, it does not mean that they would not be able to learn new ways to contain dissent. By controlling and manipulating the public sphere, the Arab regimes, which usually lack vision, as well as reformative and competitive policies, have, however learned the “wrong lessons” from the uprisings.<sup>44</sup> They learned to join and beat the new medium to enhance control instead of freedoms.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Egyptian counter-revolution developed a wide range of mechanisms and strategies to interrupt and distort the information flows produced by the opposition.<sup>46</sup> Regime-loyal non-democratic groups learned to use social media in order to disseminate their pro-stability frames by copying methods originally developed by civic society.<sup>47</sup> This means that the Internet became a tool

---

36. Hafez, 2005.

37. Rivetti, 2014, p.6.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Tufekci, 2014, p.16.

40. Lynch, 2014, p. 91, p.96.

41. Bayat, 2015.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Fish, 2009, p. 44.

44. Osman, 2014.

45. Tufekci, 2014, p.16. Heydemann and Leenders speak of an authoritarian learning process: Heydemann and Leenders, 2014, p. 78.

46. Badr and Demmelhuber, 2014, p. 156.

47. Badr, 2013, p. 401.

for diffusing autocratic views as well. In fact, the ongoing dynamics in the public sphere still do not offer meaningful conclusions on the long-term effects of social media on political life.

Instead of being caught up within a utopian or dystopian determinism, a promising concept, the “Fifth Estate”, offers a new theoretical perspective for analyzing the public sphere. The concept was developed by William Dutton to describe the growing networking effects of the Internet on the public sphere. The basic hypothesis is that the outcome of online political communication is not pre-determined. Instead, the Internet serves as a significant political resource that enhances the communicative power of citizens and other institutions. Accordingly, online political discourse is not a linear tool of liberation, but rather a changing pattern of governance across multiple sectors. The effects of the Internet are not inevitable or an inherent feature of the technology. No single actor is in control of the Internet; it is rather “a pluralistic interplay among a complex ecology of multiple actors”<sup>48</sup>. Dutton hence suggests the term “Fifth Estate” to describe these dynamics along other judicative, legislative and executive estates as well as the press as a Fourth Estate.<sup>49</sup> Using this concept in the research field of social media and political effects in the Arab countries is helpful because it offers open-ended categories for empirical analysis. It fits the evolving public sphere in the current transformation period.

3. The growing role of Facebook in political dialogue for young Arabs can be described as a communicative breakthrough. At the same time, the increased use of online platforms for political communication reflects weaknesses and blockages of the established media system. In other words, the rising popularity of Facebook for expressing political opinions reflects the inability of mass media to address public needs and demands. In the Egyptian case, the media market (still) shows a number of restrictive characteristics: a high degree of state intervention (for example in media ownership or licence policy and requirements), a long tradition of limited freedom of expression, media enterprises facing economic difficulties, an underdeveloped professional culture of journalists, limited media credibility, lack of objectivity in media practice, and finally a high party press parallelism showing external pluralism and media bias.<sup>50</sup> The unfolding events since 2011 only aggravated the media polarization and the severity of the legitimacy crisis. Thus, while

---

48. Dutton, 2013, p. 42.

49. *Ibid.*

50. For a full account of the characteristics and problems in the Egyptian media system see UNESCO, 2013; El-Issawy, 2014; El Gody, 2009, pp. 731-751.

the Internet offered platforms for new public discourses, the media system at large still harboured asymmetric and unfavourable conditions that might have blocked bargaining and communication processes that are necessary for the transition period. Mubarak's old elites made use of their extensive media control of various private TV channels to counter the liberalizing messages instead of being impartial mediators<sup>51</sup>.

4. The initial euphoria of social media overlooked factors limiting the role of social media as a free marketplace of ideas. The so-called "normalization thesis" argues against the liberation hypothesis and contextualizes online discourses within social and political structures. It postulates that the emerging free public spheres resemble more and more the established spheres in the offline world. Accordingly, the online sphere would evolve to be just an extension of the traditional political sphere, where the strongest offline, due to political or economic or institutional resources, would be also the strongest online.<sup>52</sup> According to Nick Anstead and Andrew Chadwick normalization processes happen through commercialization, fragmentation, acquiring new skills by users or online communities, and finally the increasing regulatory body<sup>53</sup>, the latter often imposed by state institutions. Here the main focus lies in the commercialization processes. Social media show an increasing role in commercial communication since the network character is utilized by public relation departments, spin doctors or marketing specialists. Scholars draw attention to the "social contagion" in a non-political setting. Social media are regarded as a form of electronic word-of-mouth by businesses and brands.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the information diffusion is not as spontaneous as ideally assumed by the public sphere theory. On the contrary, advertisements and sponsored posts follow the commercial logic. At the same time, business corporations use people's opinions and ideas for market analysis. A growing share of commercial messages can colonize the online public sphere just as much as the offline one. Hence, a commercialization of the online sphere takes place.

5. The fifth and final issue on the limitations of social media is the fragmentation processes accelerated by the Internet. Studies on social media and democratization processes focussed on the assumption that the online public sphere achieves Neo-Kantian values like inclusion, accessibility, deliberation, and orientation towards the public good. Much has been written on the potential role of social media to expand

---

51. Roll, 2013, p. 20.

52. Anstead and Chadwick, 2010, p. 58.

53. Ward and Gibson, 2010, p. 34.

54. Wu, Sun & Tan, 2013, p. 272.

the public sphere. But the quality of the online public sphere and online deliberation within Arab countries received little scholarly attention until now. This is relevant because online political communication does not rule out a certain degree of exclusion<sup>55</sup> as well as fragmentation. The Egyptian case of online communication via social media illustrates how characteristics of the radical polarized political culture shaped online communication patterns. Mutual exclusion processes, fragmentation mechanisms, and non-responsive communication took place online. In social media, hashtags and existing networks function as channelling mechanisms that can further fragment the exposure to online media instead of facilitate a common online experience<sup>56</sup>. Social media can actually increase selective exposure and further push the divisions, not only along the (shrinking) lines of the digital divide, but rather among those connected users who access the technology but choose different content and networks<sup>57</sup>. This results in the fragmentation of the public sphere and the retreat to the preferred ideological camp<sup>58</sup>. The Facebook group of Salafyo Costa is an exemplary case to illustrate how the social medium eventually failed in building a consensus among a heterogeneous group. Founded in March 2011, in order to help overcome the divisions between Salafi Islamists and liberal seculars, the group's credo was tolerance and co-existence.<sup>59</sup> Unlike other Facebook groups the administrator team was greatly involved in facilitating online discussion forums by a rigorous set of rules for posts. The lack of a common religious and ideological ground among Salafyo Costa members shifted the focus towards "non-mobilizing"<sup>60</sup> contents as well as social and charity issues. Inspired by religious conservative worldview, the Facebook group's facilitation was highly restrictive. For example, rules included limiting the use of English language, banning offenses or verbal abuse, prohibiting mocking religions or missionary messages, etc. The group's administrators usually responded accordingly either by banning members, deleting posts, or limiting visibility, etc. Yet, caught between two fronts, Islamists and liberals, the heterogeneous background of the group resulted in clashing political views and growing polarization regarding the rule of Morsi, and eventually became an obstacle for the group's internal communication. In July 2013 Salafyo Costa officially declared that they would withdraw

---

55. Trénel, 2009.

56. Sunstein, 2009.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Lynch, 2013.

59. Salafyo Costa operates autonomously from the traditional Salafi sheikhs and their networks, although some sheikhs remain as a source of religious and moral inspiration. Salafyo Costa participated at sit-ins in Tahrir Square even when prominent Salafi sheikhs had forbidden this.

60. Interview with Mohamed Tolba, co-founder of Salafyo Costa, June 2012.

from participating in or commenting on political events because it became impossible to overcome the divide. These developments show how online deliberation was affected by the radical polarized political culture. The strict rules on the online platform helped little in facilitating the dialogue. In this case, political divisions were too deep to ensure the minimum consensual framework for online communication. Access to social media alone does not enrich the public sphere if participants do not adhere to democratic values. So, online communication does not overcome the political and socio-economic difficulties per se.

## CONCLUSION: BEYOND SCEPTICISM AND EUPHORIA – THE NEED FOR SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH?

The political effects of social media in the Arab countries are complex and unpredictable. The body of literature remains fragmented with inconclusive empirical results due to a number of factors like the multitude of disciplines and theoretical approaches, being a new phenomenon in social sciences, the fast developments and dynamic settings, the massive data, questions of methodology, and training of communication researchers. This article argues for a more balanced and nuanced view of social media and their democratization potential. The above outlined issues that would lead to more balanced research on social media in the context of the Arab Spring. As Comunello and Anzera point out, it is essential to view the role of social media beyond dichotomous optimistic or pessimistic determinism<sup>61</sup>. In light of the above-mentioned issues, there is a need to move away from deterministic approaches, and towards conducting more in-depth research and integrating middle-range theories into a coherent meaningful study. Social media can strengthen communicative interactions, but the outcome is neither a direct result of the online medium nor necessarily causes a liberating effect. In Egypt both the regime and citizens learned and adapted ways to utilize the social media, and continue to do so in a new information and political environment. Here, the concept of the Fifth Estate is helpful because it offers open categories for analysis of networks of institutions and individuals in a way that considers the multitude of actors. At the same time, this concept connects social media to mass media, since they show symbiosis mechanisms. In this sense, research on social media in Arab countries should not aim to prove certain determinism, but rather study the shifting interplay of online communication and offline actors as they develop over time.

---

61. Comunello and Anzera, 2012, p. 466.

REFERENCES

- ABDULLA, R., 2011, "The Revolution Will Be Tweeted", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Issue 3, pp. 41-49.
- ANSTEAD, N., CHADWICK, A., "Parties, election campaigning, and the internet: toward a comparative institutional approach", in CHADWICK, A., HOWARD, P. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, New York, Routledge, pp. 56-71.
- AYISH M., 2012, "New Media in the Arab Spring Demystified! A Study of Satellite Television and Social Networks' Role in Arab Political Transitions", in SCHMIDT, C. (ed.), *The Arab World: The Role of Media in the Arab World's Transformation Process*, Berlin, Vistas, pp. 97-116.
- BADR H., DEMMELHUBER T., 2014, "Autoritäre Regime, Neue Medien und das Regimedilemma" (Authoritarian Regimes, New Media and the Regime Dilemma), *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, pp. 143-160.
- BADR, H., 2013, "Battleground Facebook. Contestation Mechanisms in Egypt's 2011 Revolution", in BERENGER, R. (Ed.), *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*, Spokane, Washington, DC, pp. 399-422.
- BAYAT, A., 2015, "Revolution and Despair", *MadaMasr*: <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/revolution-and-despair>
- BRETTSCHEIDER, F., 2002, "Agenda-Setting", in JARREN, O., SARCINELLI, U., SAXER, U. (Eds.), *Politische Kommunikation in der demokratischen Gesellschaft* (Political Communication in the democratic society), Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 635-636.
- BURRIS, G., 2011, "Lawrence of E-rabia: Facebook and the New Arab Revolt", *Jaddaliyya*: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2884/lawrence-of-e-rabia\\_facebook-and-the-new-arab-revo](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2884/lawrence-of-e-rabia_facebook-and-the-new-arab-revo)
- COMUNELLO, F., ANZERA, G., 2012, "Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, n°. 4, pp. 453-470.
- DAHLGREN, P., 2000, "The Internet and the Democratization of Civic Culture", *Political Communication*, Vol. 17, n°. 4, pp. 335-340.
- DE ANGELIS E., DELLA RATTA, D., 2014. "Mind the Gap: Bridging Knowledge and Practices of Activism' at the Fourth Arab Bloggers Meeting", *Jadaliyya*: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18040/mind-the-gap\\_bridging-knowledge-and-practices-of-a](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18040/mind-the-gap_bridging-knowledge-and-practices-of-a)
- DIAMOND, L., 2010, "Liberation Technology", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, n°. 3, pp. 69-83.
- DUTTON W., 2013, "The Internet and the Democratic Accountability: The Rise of the Fifth Estate", LEE F., LEUNG L., QIU J.L., CHU, D. (Eds.), *Frontiers in New Media Research*, New York, Routledge, pp. 39-55.

- EL GODY, A., 2009, "Das Mediensystem Ägyptens", in MATZEN, C. (Ed.), *Internationales Handbuch Medien (International Handbook Media)*, 28th Edition, Baden-Baden, Nomos-Verlag, pp. 731-751.
- EL-ISSAWY, F., 2014, "Egyptian Media Under Transition: In the Name of the Regime...In the Name of the People? A Report of the Research Project", *Arab Revolutions: Media Revolutions*, at the Media and Communications Department, London School of Economics (LSE).
- EMMER, M., WOLLING, J., "Online-Kommunikation und politische Öffentlichkeit" (Online-Communication and political public sphere), in SCHWEIGER W., BECK, K. (Eds.), *Handbuch Online-Kommunikation*, Wiesbaden, VS Verlag, pp. 36-58.
- FISH, E., 2009, "Is Internet censorship compatible with democracy? Legal restrictions of online speech in South Korea", *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law*, Vol. 10, n°. 2, pp. 43-96.
- GHANNAM, J., 2011, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*, Washington, Center for International Media Assistance, pp. 42.
- HABERMAS, J., 1990, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Structural transformation of the public sphere), Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.
- HABERMAS, J., 1998, *Faktizität und Geltung* (Facticity and validity), Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.
- HAFEZ, K., 2005, "Internet und Demokratisierung in der arabischen Welt: Eine Zwischenbilanz" (Internet and democratization in the Arab world: interim result), in KERNER, M., MÜLLER, T. (Eds.) *Gespaltene Welt? Technikzugänge in der Wissensgesellschaft*. Köln, Böhlau Verlag, pp. 115-127.
- HEYDEMANN, S., LEENDERS, R., "AUTHORITARIAN LEARNING AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION", in LYNCH, M. (Ed.) *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, pp.75-92.
- HOWARD, P., HUSSAIN, M., 2013, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- KEPPLINGER, H. M., 2009, "Wirkungen der Massenmedien" (Mass Media Effects), in NOELLE-NEUAMMN, E., SCHULZ, E., WILKE, J. (eds), *Fischer Lexikon Publizistik Massenkommunikation*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, pp. 651-702.
- KHAMIS, S., VAUGHN, K., 2011, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance", *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 14: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=769>
- LAMER, W., 2012, "Twitter and Tyrants: New Media and its Effects on Sovereignty in the Middle East", *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 16: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=798>
- LIM, M., 2012, "Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004-2011", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, n°. 2, pp. 231-248.



- LINDSEY, U., 2011, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Egyptian Media*: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021511>
- LOEWENSTEIN, A., 2008, *The Blogging Revolution*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, London, Routledge.
- LYNCH, M., 2013, "Twitter Devolutions, How social media is hurting the Arab Spring", *Foreign Policy*: <http://foreignpolicy.com/201307/02//twitter-devolutions/>
- LYNCH, M., 2014 "Media, Old and New", LYNCH, M. (Ed.) *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 93-109.
- MERAZ, S., 2009, "Is There an Elite Hold? Traditional Media to Social Media Agenda Setting Influence in Blog Networks", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 14, n° 3, pp. 682-707.
- MOURTADA, R., SALEM, F., AL-DABBAGH, M., GARGANI, G., 2011, "The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment", *Arab Social Media Report*, Vol. 1, n° 3, pp. 1-25: <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR%20Report%203.pdf>
- NADER, A., 2014, "President intervenes to reinstate suspended radio presenter", *Daily News Egypt*: <http://www.dailynewsegyp.com/201403/12//president-interven-es-reinstate-suspended-radio-presenter/>
- ORTIZ, I., BURKE, S., BERRADA, M., CORTÉS, H., 2013, *World Protests 2006-2013*, Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Working Paper: [http://policydialogue.org/files/publications/World\\_Protests\\_2006-2013-Complete\\_and\\_Final\\_4282014.pdf](http://policydialogue.org/files/publications/World_Protests_2006-2013-Complete_and_Final_4282014.pdf)
- OSMAN, T., 2014, "Imagining An New Arab Order", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*: <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articledetails.aspx?aid=712>
- POLE, A., 2010, *Blogging the political: Politics and participation in a networked society*, New York, Routledge.
- RIVETTI, P., 2015, "Continuity and Change before and after the Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco: Regime Reconfiguration and Policymaking in North Africa", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, n° 1, pp. 1-11.
- RÖHLE, T., 2010, *Der Google-Komplex: Über Macht im Zeitalter des Internets (The Google-Complex: On Power in the Age of the Internet)*, Bielefeld, transcript, 266 pp.
- ROLL, S., 2013, *Egypt's Business Elite after Mubarak: A Powerful Player between Generals and Brotherhood*, SWP Research Paper, Berlin, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 28 pp.
- SCHMIDT, J., 2013, "Onlinebasierte Öffentlichkeiten: Praktiken, Arenen und Strukturen, (Online-based Public Spheres: practices, arenas and structures), in FRAAS C., MEIER S., PENTZOLD C. (Eds.), *Online-Diskurse. Theorien und Methoden transmedialer Online-Diskursforschung*, Köln, Herbert von Halem, pp. 35-56.

- SHIRKY, C., 2011, "The political power of social media: Technology, the public sphere and political change", *Foreign Affairs*: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>
- STROMER-GALLEY J., WICHOWSKI A., 2013, "Political discussion online", in CONSALVO, M., ESS, C., (Eds.), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, Malden, Wiley-Blackwell, pp.168-187.
- SUNSTEIN, C., 2009, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 272 pp.
- TRÉNEL, M., 2009, "Facilitation and Inclusive Deliberation", DAVIES, T., GANGADHARAN, S. P. (Eds.), *Online Deliberation: Design, Research, and Practice*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 253-257.
- TUFEKCI, Z., 2014, "Social Movements and Governments in the Digital Age: Evaluating A Complex Landscape", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 68, n°. 1, pp. 1-18.
- TUFEKCI, Z., WILSON C., 2012, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square", *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, Issue 2, pp. 363-379.
- UNESCO, 2013, *Assessment of Media Development in Egypt based on UNESCO's Media Development Indicators*, Paris, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002207/220742E.pdf>
- WARD, S., GIBSON, R., 2010, "European political organizations and the internet: mobilization, participation, and change", in CHADWICK, A. HOWARD, P. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, New York, Routledge, pp. 25-39.
- WIMMER, J., 2007, *(Gegen-)Öffentlichkeit in der Mediengesellschaft: Analyse eines medialen Spannungsverhältnisses* (Counter-public sphere in the media society: Analysis of a tension relation), Wiesbaden, VS Verlag.
- WU, J., SUN H., TAN, Y., 2013, "Social Media Research: A Review", *Journal of Systems Science and Systems Engineering*, Vol. 22, n°. 3, pp. 257-282.