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Marwan Kraidy

University of Pennsylvania, kraidy@asc.upenn.edu

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The Body As Medium in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities

Abstract

This essay glosses an attempt to capture communication in the Arab uprisings through the prism of the human body. Such an approach to communication and revolution entails several challenges and opportunities. Challenges include tension between biopolitical approaches and a perspective that considers the body as an instrument of practice, the tendency in scholarship that restricts discussions of the body to discussions of gender and sexuality, and not politics at large, and the glossing over of issues of social class and geographic location, all crucial when considering the body as an instrument of communication. Opportunities afforded by using the body as a focal point include a fuller consideration of human agency that eschews technological determinism when studying power and resistance, a historically grounded analytical approach that preempts an uncritical dalliance with presentism, the body being in effect the “oldest medium,” and an analytical advantage whereby the body functions as a heuristic eye of the needle through which all empirical materials, and theoretical considerations are filtered, considered and interpreted.

Keywords

the body, revolution, arab uprisings, media determinism, presentism

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Body As Medium in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities
Marwan M. Kraidy

This essay glosses an attempt to capture communication in the Arab uprisings through the prism of the human body. Such an approach to communication and revolution entails several challenges and opportunities. Challenges include tension between biopolitical approaches and a perspective that considers the body as an instrument of practice, the tendency in scholarship that restricts discussions of the body to discussions of gender and sexuality, and not politics at large, and the glossing over of issues of social class and geographic location, all crucial when considering the body as an instrument of communication. Opportunities afforded by using the body as a focal point include a fuller consideration of human agency that eschews technological determinism when studying power and resistance, a historically grounded analytical approach that preempts an uncritical dalliance with presentism, the body being in effect the “oldest medium,” and an analytical advantage whereby the body functions as a heuristic eye of the needle through which all empirical materials, and theoretical considerations are filtered, considered and interpreted.

Keywords: The Body; Revolution; Arab Uprisings; Media Determinism; Presentism

The invitation to contribute an essay to Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies came two years after a young Tunisian immolated himself in protest against his bleak circumstances, triggering a wave of popular uprisings in several Arab countries, deposing several dictators, and setting Arab politics ablaze. Since then, as frustrating revolutionary politics continue to shake Egypt and Tunisia while the Syrian uprising grows more lethal and intractable, the chaotic events captured in the tidy notion of the “Arab Spring” have generated a wave of publications similar in output, sense of urgency, and the role ascribed to media, not to mention overall quality, to the literature engendered a decade earlier when mass murderers rammed airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. With their massive outburst of political engagement and creative expression, the Arab uprisings are an auspicious opportunity to offer preliminary reflections on the connections between the components of this journal’s title: the communicative, the critical and the cultural.

Considering these three tropes together, one is compelled to note that most of the literature on communication and culture in the uprisings has to date emphasized social media as digital technology. Though useful, this literature tends to espouse various levels of technological determinism and historical presentism. Emphasizing technology instead of users ascribes agency to machines rather than to humans. Focusing on platforms instead of processes essentially reduces “communication” to “media” in fundamentally uncritical fashion. Focusing on “new” digital media ignores “old” media -- the human body, puppetry, poetry, singing, graffiti -- that animated Arab uprisings in Egypt and Syria a century ago, and continue to thrive in recent Arab rebellions and activism worldwide. As I argued elsewhere, episodes of acutely contentious public debate are best understood as *hypermedia events* sustained by permutations of words, sounds and images circulating between a variety of interlocked media platforms -- old and new, material and virtual, local and global-- that create what I termed hypermedia space.¹

In addition to haunting academic work about the Arab uprisings, determinism and presentism have also influenced US media coverage and public discourse, contributing to a self-virtuous, technology-enamoured ethnocentrism. As the *New York Times*’s Frank Rich put it,

“[T]he talking-head invocations of Twitter and Facebook . . . take the form of implicit, simplistic Western chauvinism.”² Rich goes on to ironically exclaim: “How fabulous that two great American digital innovations can rescue the downtrodden, unwashed masses.”³ Rich’s words reflect that US coverage of the Arab uprisings was not monolithic. Nonetheless, technological determinism is aggravated by its twinning with a kind of presentism that at times gives the impression that some journalists discovered Arab politics in December 2010. The historian Lynn Hunt reminds us that “[P]resentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation.”⁴ The astonishing claims made about the role of Facebook and Twitter in the Arab uprisings do not need rehearsing here, but the less nuanced of these arguments are illustrative of the complacencies and limitations of presentism. Taken together, determinism and presentism prevent a consideration of the full range of expressive modalities of what I am calling “creative insurrection.”

Before Web 2.0, before the Internet, before television, before newspapers, there was the human body. cursory readings about how activists and ordinary people used media in, for example, the French Revolution in 1789 or the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, reveal that not only were revolutionaries adept at using a variety of old and new media of those days in an integrated system of communication, to further their cause, but also that the human body was central to the ways revolutionaries represented themselves and their opponents.⁵ More recently, Durham argued, after Haraway and others, to pay attention to the “joinings” that bind bodies and media.⁶

Informed by these considerations, I have been trying to understand the wide array of insurrectionary media that activists have deployed in fierce propaganda wars against repressive regimes, through the analytical lens of the human body. My project’s central argument is that the human body is the indispensable medium, a nexus of discourse and action, a pivot articulating materiality and virtuality, a linchpin of communication and revolutionary change. Briefly stated, the project I am embarking upon seeks to understand the Arab uprisings through the prism of the human body.

Downing and his co-authors remind us that the “story of radical media is all too often one of survival . . . in the face of vehemently, sometimes murderously hostile authority.”⁷ Under life-threatening conditions such as those in revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia and especially in Bahrain and Syria, the latter being one of the most dangerous places on the planet to be a political activist, insurgents use the most basic media to openly defy deadly foes. In such situations of existential threat and scarce resources, the human body is the elemental medium of political defiance.

Bodily, transgressive actions punctuate the Arab uprisings. Indeed, when Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated to protest repression and poverty in Tunisia; when Alia-al-Mahdy posted nude pictures and transgressive text on her “A Rebel’s Diary” blog in Egypt;⁸ when peaceful Syrian protestors demonstrated bare-chested to prove they were not concealing weapons; they all used their bodies as media in brazenly political behavior that violated social taboos and political red lines. Technology publicizes corporeal dissent, but as I aim to demonstrate, the human body is the indispensable political medium.

An approach to communication and revolution that puts the body front and center entails several challenges and opportunities. Challenges include, first, tension between biopolitical approaches and a perspective that considers the body as an instrument of practice; second, the tendency in scholarship that considers the body, in communication studies and other fields and disciplines, to be restricted to discussions of gender and sexuality, and not politics at large; and third, the glossing over of issues of social class and geographic location, which are crucial when

considering the body as an instrument of communication, especially when one considers the manifold ways in which bodily metaphor infuses political humor. Opportunities afforded by using the body as a focal point include first, a fuller consideration of human agency that eschews technological determinism when studying power and resistance; second, a historically grounded analytical approach that preempts an uncritical dalliance with presentism, the body being in effect the “oldest medium;” and third, an analytical advantage whereby the body functions as a heuristic eye of the needle through which all empirical materials, and theoretical considerations are filtered, considered and interpreted.

The body is indeed constructed through discourse, but the body is also an instrument for action that is not always necessarily captured by discourse, and even when such a capture occurs, it is rarely complete. After decades of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, corruption, and political dependence on the United States, Egypt and Tunisia were poster cases of dystopian biopolitical arrangements, with bodies managed at once by fear and faith, hunger and consumerism, intimidation and indulgence, in secular and sacred spheres shot through with proliferating discourses of self-improvement, a hallmark of the lived experience of neoliberalism. Yet in late 2010 and early 2011, citizens shook their corporeal docility, broke the threshold of fear, and took over public space, using their own bodies to seize political agency. Bodies-as-subjects self-immolated, posed naked, sprayed graffiti, enacted street theater, confronted police and regime goons, and occupied urban squares and boulevards. They were women and men who challenged prevailing regimes of truth and power, moving their bodies from a condition of passive dissatisfaction to a posture of active resistance.

The body haunts various registers of cultural and political expression spawned by the Arab uprisings. For example, bodily allusions and metaphors are manifest in political humor. The Arab uprisings spawned vibrant, multi-media, revolutionary humor, much of it contrasting bodies of dictators with those of rebels. The web video series *Top Goon-- Diaries of a Little Dictator* is such a crossbreed, lampooning Bashar al-Assad by miniaturizing his body through the pathetic, arthritic finger puppet Beeshu. Mubarak was long mocked through the trope of *The Laughing Cow*, reducing him to a heavy, dumb, regurgitating bestial body. Revolutionary graffiti dotting the walls of Cairo, Tunis, Manama and Beirut, contrast grotesque bodies of dictators with heroic bodies of revolutionaries. Through time-honored strategies like performative prowess, symbolic inversion, stealth communication, and what Hariman called “carnavalesque spectatorship,” these insurrectionary messages spread from bodies to streets to screens and back, gaining followers and opponents with every reiteration.⁹

We know that corporeal metaphor and public spectacle played a vital role during the French Revolution through acts, constructions and interpretations, of the human body.¹⁰ My project uses the Arab uprisings as an auspicious opportunity to build on these studies, complementing them with analyses of actual uses of the body as a medium of insurrectionary activism. Doing so, as I have been learning, entails a balancing act between analyzing at once macro-processes and micro-practices-- a consideration of biopolitical power regimes in tandem with an analysis of individual, subjective, embodied, daily political acts that sometimes reaffirm but at other times disrupt prevailing arrangements of biopolitical power. My aspiration is to strike a balance between political subjectivity and systemic power through a theoretically informed analysis of primary sources, and to execute an analysis that considers the body as central to politics at large.

Methodologically, the body is a useful organizing, heuristic device. Living in Beirut and traveling throughout the Middle East between June 2011 and August 2012, I interacted with

Egyptian, Tunisian, Syrian, Bahraini, Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese creative activists, took numerous photographs of revolutionary graffiti, murals, and political banners, mined newspapers, magazines, and television programs, witnessed various marches and demonstrations, participated in many meetings, workshops, and conferences with activists and academics, and collected a variety of material and digital artifacts. For someone confronting an eclectic, multi-national, multi-media trove of materials produced by creative insurgents, the body provides a unifying framework.

Having established that the human body, as the primary nexus of political subjectivity and systemic power, would also be my principal optic for interpreting the uprisings, enables me to articulate close readings of the various insurrectionary artifacts described in the preceding text-- graffiti, body acts, puppet shows, blogs, videos, jokes, and songs--to broader theoretical concerns, historical considerations, and geopolitical issues. So far, the back-and-forth between materials and theory has for the most part confirmed the workability of my theoretical framework: as tool, metaphor, and prism, the body is the medium through which struggles for power, identity and legitimacy are physically fought, socially constructed and ideologically refracted.

Focusing on the body as a key analytical trope has also enabled me to pay attention to style and poetics in creative insurrection. The ubiquity of the body as poignant icon, viral meme and compelling metaphor for human agency, fuels the peculiar aesthetics of insurrectionary media, cutting at once through the thick fog of raging propaganda wars between regimes and rebels and through the largely incompetent global media coverage. If, as Warner wrote, the “differential deployment of style is essential” to the making of publics,¹¹ then understanding the aesthetics and poetics of mediated resistance is crucial to grasping its politics. Whether serious or humorous, direct or ironic, sarcastic or poignant, the insurrectionary artifacts I am considering are connected by the human body as icon, meme, and metaphor. At once art and politics, insurrectionary artifacts of the Arab uprisings illustrate the unavoidability of considering how various modalities of resistance always already confront differentiated uses of power. In other words, they underscore the imperative to think critically and culturally to understand communication in revolutionary times.

Notes

[1] M. M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[2] Frank Rich, “Wallflowers at the Revolution,” *The New York Times* (2011, February 5), <http://www.nytimes.com>

[3] Ibid.

[4] L. Hunt, “May. Against Presentism,” *Perspectives* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2002).

[5] See A. De Baecque, *Le corps de l’Histoire (1770-1800)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993); and Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[6] M. Durham, "Body Matters," *Feminist Media Studies*, 11, issue 1 (2011), 53_60.

[7] J. D. Downing (with T. Villarreal Ford, G. Gil, and L. Stein). *Radical Media* (London: Sage, 2011), 19.

[8] See M. M. Kraidy, "The Revolutionary Body Politic: Preliminary Thoughts on a Neglected Medium in the Arab *Uprisings*," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5(1) (2012), 68-76.

[9] R. Hariman, "Parody and Public Culture," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 94, issue 3 (2008), 247-72.

[10] See, for example, A. De Baecque, *Le corps de l'Histoire (1770-1800)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993).

[11] M. Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14 (2002), 77-78.

Marwan M. Kraidy is Professor and Director of the Project for Advanced Research in Global Communication (PARGC) at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Kraidy has published six books, including the multiple-award-winning *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). This essay was conceived when Kraidy was a Guggenheim Fellow and the Edward Said Chair in American Studies at the American University of Beirut, spending the year researching digital activism, music video, graffiti, political humor and the human body as political medium, for a book on creative insurrection in revolutionary times. Correspondence to: Marwan M. Kraidy, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA. E-mail: mkraidy@asc.upenn.edu.