

The Alchemy of Revolution: The Role of Social Networks and New Media in the Arab Spring

by Reda Benkirane

Key Points

- *The rise of Arab bloggers and cyber activists is not the product of a spontaneous generation. The Arab Spring is rather the social outcome of decades of struggles for civil and political rights, which matured within the virtual space-time generated by an Arab media system wherein press, radio, satellite television, web and mobile telephony constitute different layers of complexity.*
- *Social networks and new media played a catalytic role in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. They accelerated local social reactions, synchronized different levels and intensities of uprisings and permitted the coverage of events through real-time footage directed to global public opinion.*
- *The Arab Spring might herald the first social revolution of the 21st century. It epitomizes the revolt of a new individual and a new collective voice against various forms of fear, control, manipulation and disinformation. Just as economic crises do, social uprisings are transversal and can propagate worldwide wherever “freedom, justice, dignity” are restricted or scorned.*
- *The role of technology will remain intrinsically ambivalent and is never neutral. It depends on political, economic, social and cultural milieu. The emerging “Intelligence” Technology can represent liberation as well as be used as spying technology. Social networks may contribute to empowering citizens, but the same technology may also be used against them for control and repression. A flourishing multibillion-dollar Western industry of digital weaponry for state surveillance and repression now represents a major threat to democratization in the MENA region and beyond.*

Thermodynamics of Real-Time Revolutions

There is a general consensus on the fact that social networks and new media played a role in the Arab Spring, particularly during the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian rulers. The key question is to identify further this critical role. It is important, in particular, to bring necessary nuances to the recurrent narrative that has fetishized Al Jazeera news channels, and understand better a social media that did not exist merely five years ago.

The Arab social revolutions took place in an unexpected and coordinated way. They played out in a manner akin to those phenomena which physicists call “phase transitions” which indicate a change of systemic nature that transforms quantity into quality and modify matter into new physical states. There had always been protests and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), yet these had gone unnoticed because they were not covered by mainstream media. They were also uncorrelated because Information and Communication

Technology (ICT) was not as socially pervasive as it has now become.

Today, any individual with a mobile phone is potentially a reporting journalist and a broadcaster. Indeed, what

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allowed the success of Al Jazeera television channels in the first phase of the Arab Spring was their reliance on citizen journalism as the main source of information. Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were followed through the live broadcast of amateur videos, audio interviews, short message service, tweets and emails sent by average citizens. In the beginnings of the Arab Spring, social networks and information feeds were used primarily for what they are intended to be used for: connecting

people on urgent issues for the sharing of vital information related to human security.

During the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, what were made available to hundreds of millions of viewers were quasi-universal services of information through satellite

news live channels, Twitter tweets, Facebook messages and Google real-time searches. What happened in Tunisia was certainly different from what was happening at the same time in Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, and so on. However, the info-technological feedback loop generated by the Al Jazeera-Tweeter-Facebook-Google real-time flow put in resonance and in network different kinds of regional and national protests that happened in different countries. These played out within different societies having specific speeds of evolution and levels of political maturation. The info-technology loop had somehow synchronized individual and collective consciousness.

If Arab unity had always failed as an ideology and as a political project, it was now fully effective and operational somewhere in the virtual space. During the first phase of the Arab Spring, social and information media have materialized a dream of unity that had no physical territory. A lot of cultural, social and political aspirations have been re-territorialized in a space of "creative conversations".¹

Learning from Arab Media

Social networks and new media are the latest newcomers in an Arab media landscape that is already quite sophisticated with a long tradition of multi-layered socio-political interaction. Recent research conducted by Tourya Guaaybess demonstrates that Arab media constitute a manifold system in terms of structural evolution (from newspapers to radio, from satellite television to the web, from social media to mobile phones) and editorial content (mainly on information, entertainment, religion and sport).² Guaaybess's findings show that from the traditional Arab press developed in the late 19th century to today's social networks, no media are in a position to cannibalize others: the Internet has not rendered radio and television obsolete and newspapers did not experience a significant decline of readership and loss of revenues as has been the case in Europe. The Arab media landscape is constituted of multiple "levels of complexity" that correspond to a variety of media in constant interaction with equally complex social dynamics.

Reaching beyond the usual storytelling about the Al Jazeera epiphenomenon, Guaaybess explains how "media confluence" is a process that was accelerated some 20 years ago with the launching of satellite television channels transgressing national frontiers and authorities. It is through the satellite waves that state power began to be significantly eroded. Paradoxically, within the Arab media's manifold system, the universe of blogs and social networks remains more associated with national spaces while the outer space of satellite television stations creates a common space-time unified by an adapted language of communication, namely the "media(n) Arabic" (comparable to basic global English). What is obvious, as Guaaybess makes plain particularly in relation to Egypt's public media space, is that if the bloggers are the latest generation of activists and communicators, their

contribution inevitably relies on and interacts with a firmly established tradition of editorial work on civil and political rights.

Social Networks: Adapted Contexts and Idioms

Regarding the role of the social media in the Arab Spring, an instructive study on the micro-blogging tool Twitter's use during the Tunisian revolution, has been released by the University of Amsterdam.³ Kaouther Darmoni and Thomas Poell conducted an in-depth analysis of a sample of 100,000 tweets (short messages) with the hashtag #sidibouزيد (a reference to the city where the Tunisian revolution was unleashed) posted between December 2010 and January 2011. The conclusions of their study show that social networks cannot be understood without factoring in their contexts and without identifying *who* actually uses Twitter, and *what* users write about and in *which language* they communicate. Researchers found out that the #sidibouزيد tweets were written in no less than twenty-five languages with three dominant ones – English (36 per cent), French (32 per cent) and Arabic (25 per cent). It also emerged that these language spheres were not disconnected. In reality, the top Twitter users alimending the hashtag #sidibouزيد were the spheres' vital connectors who used multilingual communication in order to reach different audiences and to treat different issues. Tweets in English were used for report on facts and data, French was used more to criticize France's involvement in support of Ben Ali, while median Arabic allowed for reaching a larger Arab audience and the Tunisian dialect was used for provincial matters and humour. Extraordinarily, these multilingual subtleties and modalities were expressed within Twitter's 140-character-per-message limit.

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Among the most active cyber activists of the Arab diaspora network involved in the Tunisian revolution is Nasser Weddady who was interviewed for the University of Amsterdam study. Working from Boston for the American Islamic Congress, this Mauritanian activist tweets in five languages (English, Arabic, French, Spanish and Hebrew). He follows and reports on what happens on the ground "everywhere, all the time" from Nouakchott to Cairo, Hama, Manama and Sana'a. "We have power because the news cycle needs stories", he says. "We interpret the events and context in a way the media understands. It's connecting dots and playing chess. Three-dimensional chess".⁴ Weddady's level of chess game has allowed him to work towards the release of several imprisoned social activists. He and his colleagues of the Arab blogosphere knew that, during exceptional historical circumstances, by transforming protests on the ground into real-time uprisings, the power of multitudes might defeat dictators. These circumstances were met in 2011 when millions of Facebook and Twitter users in Tunisia and Egypt formed a social grid massively parallel that sustained the revolutionary waves in Tunis and Cairo's main streets and suburbs as well as in the secondary towns of the countryside.

1 P. Lévy, *The Semantic Sphere 1. Computation, Cognition and Information Economy*, Wileys, London, 2012.

2 T. Guaaybess, *Les Médias arabes. Confluences médiatiques et dynamique sociale*, CNRS éditions, Paris, 2012.

3 K. Darmoni and T. Poell, "Twitter as a Multilingual Space: The Articulation of the Tunisian Revolution through #sidibouزيد", *European Journal of Media Studies*, Amsterdam University Press, Spring 2012.

4 K. Leigh, "Behind the Arab Revolts, An Activist Quietly Pulling Strings from Boston", *The Atlantic*, 25 January 2012.

Nomads and Monads of the Arab Digital Sphere

Nomads and Monads are the actors of the digital *Oumma* (community): not defined by what they are but by what they do and the role they play within the virtual semantic sphere. Three-dimensional chess players, pollinators of social networks and new media, connectors of online global/local communities, acupuncturists of its vital points, cognitarions of the information age, etc. There are many such metaphors that may describe the multidimensionality of their actions and the multiplicity of their belongings.

Involved in social revolutions, they do not intend to represent a political force or to organize themselves in a political party. They represent “all the time, everywhere” a wide spectrum of political, social and cultural sensitivities. Though they are collectively powerful, they do not seek power but want it to radically generate change.

Those educated, multilingual and often unemployed young adults are the cognitive nomads and monads (i.e., basic entities, units, elements) of the new Arab consciousness. They are moving fast from an immemorial ontology of *being* towards a post-modern ontology of *becoming*. They are independent intellectual agents of a new kind, acting and searching for alternative futures. Those newcomers denounce, on the one hand, violence and extremism and condemn, on the other, the abdication of an Arab intelligentsia that prostrated itself (*inbitah*) to the political establishment, in the name of realism. They challenge prominent political opponents as well as media intellectuals and religious clerks patronized by petromonarchies. Instead, they appear to look ahead and “think collectively” about possible futures towards a state of “Its Majesty the People”.

These revolutionaries are fully aware of the leverage-power based on networks’ flexibility and the wisdom of crowds. They use ICTs as an Intelligence Technology. They mobilize collective, connective and cognitive intelligence for the service of the greatest number. Among them, the digital natives often have an instinctive knowledge of these emergent communication properties that go beyond the sum of their parts.

One of the most arresting outcomes of the Arab Spring is that its social revolutions are rather devoid of ideology and leadership. With neither leaders nor followers, the political horizon of the uprisings was not spiritual but rather rhizomatic (see Box 1). On this social side, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze had envisioned, thirty years ago, that the concept of rhizome (i.e., an image of thought that accommodates multiplicity and connectivity) might help to apprehend social groups, individual “desiring machines”, political decentralized power and the adjacent historical possibilities. Similarly, on the technological side, the Arab Spring is the first major empirical demonstration of the “next social revolution” announced a decade ago by US researcher Howard Rheingold in his work on “smart mobs”.⁵ The transition from the one-to-many communication (press, radio, television) to the many-to-many communication (web 1.0 and 2.0) is a considerable change of scale. “More” is irreversibly “different”. With already 350 million mobile phone subscribers and 83

million Internet users in MENA; the region is witnessing a significant digital massification that is just at the beginning of its exponential growth (see Annex). A power factorization is likely to happen with the rise of the phenomenal mobile telephony that already represents a universal remote-control device for individual and social lives, both on the physical and the digital worlds.

Box 1: The Rhizome, an Operating Metaphor

Long before the digital revolution, the network modelling was conceptualized in philosophy. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari are the first thinkers who ever focused their reflection on a horizontal fractal form of growth and power that may be an alternative to the supremacy of the vertical and hierarchical order prevailing in socio-political constructions. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they propose the concept of the rhizome as an alternative to the dominant paradigm of the tree:

“We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes”.

Their prophecy on the similarity between rhizomes and neurons was established well before the World Wide Web and its cognitive implication in the emergence of a virtual “global brain” (hypercortex):

“Many people have a tree growing in their heads, but the brain itself is much more a grass than a tree”.

Deleuze-Guattari’s prediction of an immanent form of power and growth is now triumphing not only in the digital universe and its artefacts but also within contemporary societies:

“Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order (...). A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things... The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and... and... and...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’”.⁶

Digital Surveillance and Repression

In many regards, the socio-political events that took place in 2010-11 in the Arab world may signal the beginning of the first revolution of the 21st century. This revolution reflects a mental upheaval against different kinds of tyranny (political dictatorship, religious authority, financial determinism, market fundamentalism and mediocracy) that is now emerging among the youth worldwide. For all their respective specificities factored in, such evolution lets us foresee what may be the next forms of democratic struggles that are already spreading to Southern Europe and North America around the *Indignados*, “Occupy London”, “Wall Street” movements and the Maple Spring in Canada.

5 H. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs. The Next Social Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 2002.

6 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 7 and 25.

In an interdependent world where communication is transmitted at the speed of light, financial crashes, economic crises and social uprisings are epidemic. Consequently, a heuristic approach should focus on the power law of “cross-impact” socio-political events in major world capitals and cities and, specifically, on the common patterns between various social movements that played out throughout the 2000s. In this regard, it is important to note that the Iranian protests of June 2009 were the first strong signal of what was going to happen 18 months later in MENA. The transversal frame of these leaderless, Internet-enabled movements may explain why certain governments from Asia fear a contagion effect and consequently deploy a massive effort to filter information feeds related to the revolutionary events in the MENA region.

Yet, if 2011 was a year of Arab collective psychological therapy whereby ICTs’ role facilitated the liberation process, 2012 proved to be the year of psychological depression and political regression/repression due to the control made possible by the same ICTs. To the extent that social networks and new media ecosystems encompass a non-exhaustive list of online tools (Gmail, Youtube, Skype, Wordpress, Blogger, etc.), a whole industry working on the security sector has come to provide digital surveillance of these informational ecosystems to authoritarian governments of the region. For example, French Bull Group technology company Amesys allegedly provided the Gaddafi regime, from 2007, a surveillance system to monitor online communication of the Libyan citizens.

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Similarly, the publication by Wikileaks of the “Spy Files”⁷ revealed, through detailed tools, brochures and manuals, the breadth of a digital spying and surveillance industry mostly developed and sold by Western companies. The trade of digital weaponry that has reportedly come to represent a global market of some USD 10 billion is a cause for concern.

In the final analysis, technology is a *pharmakon*, i.e., a remedy that can heal and a poison that can kill. As catalytic agents, infotechnology tools can accelerate or inhibit a social reaction. Social networks and new media can transform information sharing into creative ways of knowledge production. But they can also be used for control and manipulation of citizens. Mass media can be used in many ways as arms of massive distraction/destruction that affect the deep cognitive attention of the citizen and his/her capacity to act and think autonomously. Flocking behaviours can activate, with the same rudimentary binary (yes/no) rules (but with different technological contexts and mechanisms), either patterns of swarm intelligence or gregarious attitudes. In the second year of the Arab Spring, it is the latter solution that political regimes want to impose by all necessary means, including digital arms.

Nevertheless, one of the hopeful signs of the times is the growing empathy around the Arab Spring. After decades of war and terrorism in the MENA region, time has come to build new forms of politics and solidarity on the immanent soil of such global empathy.

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⁷ Wikileaks, The Spy Files, 1 December 2011, accessed at <http://wikileaks.org/spyfiles/>

NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

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About the project “Revolution and Reform: Political Transitions in the Middle East and North Africa”

Conducted under the auspices of the Middle East and North Africa Program at the GCSP, this project is an initiative to examine trends in the emerging political liberalization and democratization experiences of the countries of the region in the wake of revolutionary and post-revolutionary phases. The objective is to investigate how transitions to democracy can proceed successfully in the region through a comparative assessment of the multifaceted challenges that are arising.

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Annex: State of Digital Inclusion

Facebook and Twitter Accounts by Country (Spring 2012)

Country	Facebook Users	Facebook World Ranking	Facebook Penetration (% population)	Twitter Users
Egypt	10,743,780	20	13.65	215,000
Saudi Arabia	5,372,640	30	20.88	393,000
Morocco	4,318,600	38	13.65	33,400
Algeria	3,433,040	45	9.93	7,840
UAE	3,216,840	46	64.65	175,000
Tunisia	2,984,920	48	28.19	10,800
Jordan	2,194,880	57	34.26	36,900
Iraq	1,655,640	65	5.58	10,800
Lebanon	1,415,740	69	34.32	45,500
Kuwait	970,640	81	34.80	235,000
Palestine	910,600	82	36.21	15,500
Qatar	550,400	93	65.45	43,000
Yemen	526,280	95	2.24	4,850
Syria	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	8,590
Sudan	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	4,510
Libya	514,160	96	7.79	4,450
Oman	471,760	100	15.90	6,550
Bahrain	351,680	110	47.65	58,200
Mauritania	85,440	151	2.67	383
Somalia	81,940	153	0.81	1,550
Djibouti	43,320	165	5.65	570
Comoros	13,460	191	1.74	259

Sources: *Arab Media Report*, Dubai School of Government, 2012; and *Socialbakers*, 2012.

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Connectivity in the MENA region (2010/2011)

Country	Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (% , 2010)	Internet Users Dec. 2011	Internet Penetration (% population)	Population (2011)	Adult Literacy Rate (% , 2010)
Egypt	87.1	21,691,776	26.40	82,079,636	66.4
Saudi Arabia	187.9	11,400,000	43.60	26,131,703	86.1
Morocco	100.1	15,656,192	49.00	31,968,361	56.1
Algeria	92.4	4,700,000	13.40	34,994,937	72.6
Syria	57.8	4,469,000	19.80	22,517,750	84.2
Sudan	40.5	4,200,000	9.30	45,047,502	70.2
Tunisia	106.0	3,856,984	36.30	10,629,186	77.6
UAE	145.5	3,555,100	69.00	5,148,664	90.0
Yemen	46.1	2,609,698	10.80	24,133,492	62.4
Jordan	107.0	1,987,400	30.50	6,508,271	92.2
Oman	165.5	1,741,804	57.50	3,027,959	86.6
Palestine	n.a.	1,512,273	58.90	4,225,710	94.6
Lebanon	68.0	1,367,220	33.00	4,143,101	89.6
Iraq	75.9	1,303,760	4.30	30,399,572	78.1
Kuwait	160.8	1,100,000	42.40	2,595,628	93.9
Bahrain	124.2	694,009	57.10	1,214,705	91.4
Qatar	132.4	563,800	66.50	848,016	94.7
Libya	171.5	391,880	5.90	6,597,960	88.9
Somalia	7.0	106,000	1.10	9,925,640	n.a.
Mauritania	79.3	100,333	3.10	3,281,634	57.5
Djibouti	18.6	61,320	8.10	757,074	n.a.
Comoros	22.5	37,472	4.70	794,683	74.2

Sources: *WorldInternetStats*, 2012; *Human Development Report 2011*, UNDP; and *International Telecommunication Union*, ITU 2012.