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THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR REVOLUTION

What about the 'next generation'?

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Abstract. Research on the impact of the internet in the Middle East has been dominated by a focus on politics and the public sphere, and oscillated between the hope for 'revolutionary' change and the admission that regime stability in the region has not easily been unsettled by media revolutions alone. Obsession with the *new* and with the latest technologies has helped to obscure more long-term socio-cultural developments. This paper is a plea for a shift of paradigm: to study more seriously the social and cultural effects of internet and mobile phone use; to find out what impact the use of these media has on conceptions of the individual and its role in the construction of knowledge and values; and how these dynamics are embedded in more long-term historical developments promoting a greater role for the individual vis-à-vis established authorities.

Revolution through the ever latest technology?

Published research on the impact of internet use in the Middle East seems to be driven by a constant quest to discover some 'revolutionary' effect that the medium might have. The preeminent journal in the field, *Arab Media & Society*, was created in 2007 with the proclaimed goal of "**Reporting a Revolution**" (Pintak, 2007). Sure, those who believe unreservedly in the power of new media to change the world are mostly journalists or activists.[1] Much of the academic literature has, over the past years, oscillated between the search for revolutionary developments and the admission that all too high hopes for radical political change have not been borne out. But this admission has not killed the dream.

In the 1990s, **satellite TV** was the projection screen for optimism; *al-Jazeera* became its emblem. Towards the end of the decade, with internet penetration in the region creeping towards the one-percent-mark, some placed their hopes for rapid change on the "information super-highway"; but when the dot-com-bubble burst and

[1] Mona Eltahawy currently is one of the most eloquent of these; see http://www.monaeltahawy.com.

descriptions of the digital divide gained currency, it appeared that we were perhaps rather looking at "information without revolution" (Wheeler, 2010, 193; id., personal communication, 2004).

Change, however, was going to come. In 2005, **blogging** emerged as the new flame of hope in the Arab world.[2] After blogs in neighboring Iran had blossomed in the wake of a state crackdown on the liberal press, and shown the potential of the platform to undermine state control over information flows (Alavi, 2005), Egyptian bloggers took the lead in the Arab world by publishing reports on police brutality that not only aroused international attention, but also led to a court case and the conviction of two police officers for torture – an unprecedented event in the country (Wāʾil ʿAbbās, 2006 b; Anon, 2007).[3] In a further step, bloggers were decisive in reporting about mass sexual assault on women during a religious holiday in downtown Cairo in October 2006, with the police not intervening and other media keeping quiet for three days (Al Husseini, 2006).[4] Eventually, this led to greater public debate about sexual harassment and to a draft law to combat the problem being introduced to the Egyptian parliament in January 2010 (Abou el-Magd, 2010; Amro Hassan, 2009). While governments across the region demonstrated their nervousness by cracking down harder on bloggers, the "blogging revolution" (Loewenstein, 2008) did not topple a single régime, and by 2008, David Faris noted "a fatigue with Egyptian blogging" that he attributed to the hyper-prominence of a few (three!) bloggers which made it "difficult for new voices to be heard".

A saviour, however, had already appeared on the horizon: "Social networking sites where 12-year-old girls trade make-up secrets have become breeding grounds for revolution", the co-editor of *Arab Media & Society* proclaimed (Pintak, 2008). "**Facebook**: the next generation" was regarded as the new way out that "might work better" for organizing social action, since allegedly it was more community-oriented, not least because it reduced the transaction costs for group-formation (Faris, 2008). This new enthusiasm was ignited by what in Egypt became known as the "Facebook Party", founded, or so it was reported, by the "Facebook Girl". Where traditional political parties had failed, Facebook groups were going to succeed, even if the people behind were blissfully unaware of the momentous change the researcher was uncovering: "revolutions without revolutionaries". "Esraa Abdel Fattah probably had no idea she was going to create a global phenomenon when she started a Facebook group in March of 2008" (Faris, 2008). The group – membership of which exploded to over 70000 in a few weeks, or almost ten percent of all Egyptians on Facebook – was calling for solidarity with the 6 April strike planned by workers in Egypt's largest public sector textile company. The workers' strike was suppressed by security forces; the Facebook

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[2] Even podcasting, the latest craze in 2005, was not spared the question, "Will podcasting bring democracy to the Arab world?" "I think yes", answered Mohammed Ibahrine (2005), then a doctoral student of communication and political culture in Hamburg.

[3] The two officers were released in 2009 after serving a reduced sentence, and reinstated into active service; an appeal against their reinstatement was turned down in Jan. 2010 (al-Qirinshāwī, 2010).

[4] The story became public news after it was leaked impromtu on a popular satellite TV talk show (*al-ʿĀshira masāʾan*, on DreamTV; cf. Wāʾil ʿAbbās, 2006 a).

strike – which had called on people to stay at home – was interpreted as a success by eager commentators. A few critical voices pointed out that it was not entirely clear whether Cairo streets were emptier than usual on 6 April due to a sandstorm, combined with people's fear of ending up in confrontations with the police. The Government, again, showed its wariness by arresting the Facebook Girl and pushing her into public submission. Pro-Government papers published an avalanche of articles denouncing Facebook as undermining the good morale of the Egyptian people. But activists themselves knew better. In particular, Ḥusām al-Ḥamalāwī of the International Socialist Tendency pointed out that it was grass-roots movement on the ground rather than a mouse click on Facebook what accounted for the making or breaking of a successful strike (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008 c). And he was proven right faster than he may have wanted. In the wake of their 6 April elation, Facebook activists called for a strike on 4 May, President Mubarak's eightieth birthday. When the call went unheeded, research concluded that "[t]he trouble with relying on past successes in social activism is that it often does not work the same way the second time around" (Faris, 2008). A year later, the "Facebook Revolution" was declared dead: "Facebook activism is now dismissed as useless at best, and the failure of the April 6th group to engender a lasting political movement has come to symbolize the futility of even trying" (Faris, 2009). The 'groups' that were celebrated in 2008 as the Web 2.0 improvement on political parties due to the low transactions costs of forming them were now recognized to "engender extraordinary low levels of commitment" (Faris, 2009).[5]

Again, however, "some hope" remained. The failure of 6 April was only the "end of the beginning", as a "closer look" would reveal. For Facebook was a mere digression; the "focus on Facebook also appears to have missed the apparent shift of online dissent from blogs to Twitter" (Faris, 2009). **Twitter** had already been noted in the aftermath of the 6 April 2008 events when an American student, James Buck, twittered his way out of police custody in Maḥallā. "Twitter Saves Man From Egyptian Justice" was the headline in TechCrunch, the world's leading blog on Web 2.0 technologies; CNN helped to spread the news to the whole world (Arrington, 2008; Simon, 2008). Hardly anyone commented on the fact that it was only the US citizen Buck, with legal help organized by his home university at Berkeley, who was released from the police station – his Egyptian translator stayed behind along with 42 others who had been arrested during the demonstrations. Even the otherwise skeptical Ḥusām al-Ḥamalāwī, on whose blog news of Buck's arrest were published two minutes after the original tweet (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008 a), excitedly exclaimed: "The Revolution will be Twitterized" (al-Ḥamalāwī, 2008 b)! The dream of the "Twitter revolution" (Micek and Whitlock, 2008) materializing in politics was rekindled in Iran in 2009. internet guru Clay Shirky (2009) declared: "[T]his is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media." There we have it again, the "global stage", the "global phenomenon" that Egypt's Facebook Girl was believed to have created. But note that more than about actual events on the ground in Iran, Shirky was excited about how "the whole world is watching", i.e. about how

[5] Cf. the Egyptian blogger Sandmonkey (2009) who described Facebook activism as "[a] form of masturbatory self-congratulating cyber activism that doesn't really cost you any time or effort."

Twitter allowed international media users the breathless feeling of receiving and forwarding minute-by-minute updates on unfolding events. Revolution here is in danger of being reduced to a mere media event. Meanwhile, régimes in Egypt, Iran, Moldova, China, Burma etc. have not been revolved away from power. – Hope, however, dies last. After the Twitter revolution has proven mostly a revolution for Twitter (Forte, 2009), I will not be surprised if the next technological innovation engenders as much excitement and revolutionary expectation as the previous ones.[6]

A preoccupation with the 'new' and the 'political'

Why do I dwell on this for so long? Because I think that there is a pattern to how we have come to look at media impact in the Middle East, and that we need a shift of paradigm. The elusive quest for revolutionary effects of new media, where hope and disappointment alternate in rapid succession, is tied to a preoccupation with the ***new***, exemplified in 'new' technologies and 'new' media, and a preoccupation with the ***political***. Long-term developments reaching far back into history, and private and personal dynamics tend to fall off the radar in this view.

If we survey the main focus of extant research on the impact of the internet in the region, we find that it has mostly concentrated on

(1) political action (be it for democratization or for militant, and here chiefly Islamist militant, opposition); and

(2) news reporting: "Analysis on the role of new media in the Middle East has largely centered on how 'citizen journalists' can now set the agenda for news outlets, and how social media users repackage, comment on, and distribute content in innovative ways" (Ward, 2009). "[B]logs […] have challenged the privileged role of professional journalists by giving ordinary citizens platforms for mass dissemination, whether for a moment or a lifetime. In recent years the medium has also become a form of protest and activism, a type of alternative media, and a source for mainstream media" (Radsch, 2008).

In other words – and simplifying a little for the sake of clarity – research was initially driven by a hope that the internet would be a decisive factor in changing *politics* in the region. When that hope did not materialize, research turned its attention to the '*public sphere*'. This is in line with the recommendation by Marc Lynch, one of the foremost Middle East media scholars, whose words on blogging may be generalized to include other internet forums: "Rather than focus on whether blogs alone can deliver democracy or a political revolution, analysts should explore the variety of ways in which blogs might transform the dynamics of Arab public opinion and political activism" (Lynch, 2007).

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[6] Cf. Faris (2008): "It might be necessary for [opposition activists] to constantly innovate, using new technologies, […]".

Taking serious the social dimension of social media

So politics and the public sphere have dominated research on the impact of the internet in the Middle East, and the quest for revolution has been focussed on fundamental change in politics and the media itself. Meanwhile, the influence of the internet in the ***social and cultural*** domains has been less in the limelight. One finds occasional observations on how mobile communication and social networking threaten established models for appropriate gender relations, and recently we have begun to see work on how literature (belles lettres) fares when published and consumed on the net. But overall, Walter Armbrust's (2007) plea has so far remained largely unheeded: "The last thing I would like to see is a repetition of the sterile debate over the political effects of al-Jazeera carried out in academic analyses of blogs." An "old and familiar concern for politics" structures much of Middle Eastern studies, including media studies, and has come "at the expense of the rest of the content" that is being communicated on the media. At a minimum – and still with an eye for public politics – Armbrust called to look at the internet "as a new phase in a long evolution in hierarchies of authority" and to investigate its complex effects on the social construction of authority in the region. These remarks are of prime importance if we want to address what Armbrust termed a "stagnation in the study of Middle Eastern media".

What we need is not only to acknowledge but to ***take serious*** the fact that internet and social media are ***used*** for much more, and primarily for other than, political activism or citizen journalism. While researchers and activists dismissed Facebook after the failures of 2009, the platform has been steadily rising in popularity and is now the second or third most popular web site after Google across the Arab world — just as in the rest of the world.[7] And it is ***primarily for maintaining and extending social relations*** and for ***entertainment*** that Arabs go on Facebook – just like the rest of the world. To maintain and extend social relations and seek entertainment has been a prime reason for starting to use the internet long before Facebook; in the old days, it was common to hear complaints that internet use was "80% chatting", or cliché juxtapositions such as that while the West made good use of the net for learning and business, Arabs were wasting it for entertainment (Sāmiḥ M. Fahmī, 2006; arablibrarian, 2007). And who did such dismissive ideas come from? It was people of authority – parents, educators, 'responsible' journalists and researchers, police officers, etc.[8] My point here is not that the observation that a lot of people were using the net for chatting and entertainment was *wrong*; it is the dismissive attitude towards this type of use. This is an attitude that attaches greater importance to the 'serious', the public, the political than it does to the private and the personal. It is an attitude that may be shared by people in authority, activists in opposition, and political scientists alike. It is an attitude that is betrayed even in innocuous statements such as in this quote from an

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[7] This is according to Alexa. In Feb. 2010, Facebook was the second-most popular web site after Google or other search engines in Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and Bahrein. In Algeria, Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Yemen, it came third after search engines and YouTube. In Tunisia, it was the most popular site of all. Only in Syria, where Facebook has been subject to filtering for years, it lagged behind, at rank 10.

[8] Hofheinz, interviews during field work in Egypt and Morocco, 2002-2005.

Egyptian blogger: "In most of other Arab countries blogs are personal not activist, Egypt is exceptional".[9] – Is this really a correct description of the Egyptian blogosphere? I posit that it would be more precise to say that in Egypt, the politically active bloggers have gained more political weight and attention than in many other Arab countries, but that doesn't mean that the majority of blogs there are activist. Courtney Radsch (the researcher quoting the Egyptian blogger I just mentioned) must have realized this herself when she distinguished three phases in the development of the Egyptian blogosphere: after experimenting with the new medium (2003-05), activists exploited its full potential in particularly propitious political circumstances (2005-06); when these circumstances changed and the user base grew, the blogosphere after 2006 diversified and fragmented into a wide variety of 'circles' that included "citizen journalists, non-denominational activists, leftists, Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, culture and art enthusiasts, open source technology activists, English language political commentary and strictly personal." However, even as she acknowledged that blogging became "commonplace", Radsch continued to focus almost exclusively on the activist part of the blogosphere, thereby cementing the skewed image that the blogosphere is mainly about political and media activism.

And this is the problem. We acknowledge that chat, blogs, Facebook, not to speak of mobile phones, are increasingly becoming 'commonplace' in the Middle East. But in our research, we largely focus on a small subset of activist users while ignoring what chatting and facebooking do to the majority. We despair over the glacial pace of political reform (al-ʿUmrān, 2008) but do not know nearly enough about what the internet does to the dynamics between children and their parents, between younger and older generations, between individuals and authorities. Here is a quote taken from the world of literature to illustrate what Facebook does far away from politics. A publisher complained to BBC Arabic: "Dealing with the new writers, there's a problem with them. But do the problems get addressed in the proper way? […] In the old days […] one would go to the publishing house, and the director of the publishing house, and if there was a problem, one would talk to the director. And if one couldn't come to a solution with the director, then one would try and figure out what other options one had. But now we no longer have any of that. Now everyone as soon as they have a problem, they always go and put it on Facebook!" (Yaḥyā Hāshim, 2009).

A change of attitude: individuals vs. authority

There you have it. It's the *attitude* that changes, the ***attitude of individual users towards authority***, a disrespect or disregard for the long chain of authority, for established hierarchies that used to structure decision making. We find this attitude all over the Arabic internet; it is deplored by people in authority and positively asserted by ever more young users themselves. In the realm of religion, to take another domain, more and more people are asserting – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – their right to question and dismiss religious authorities. Like for example the "global mufti" al-Qaraḍāwī, arguably one of the most high-profile and popular Islamic scholars of our

[9] Egyptian blogger Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud, quoted in Radsch (2008).

time (a position he owes not least to the satellite TV station al-Jazeera) (Skovgaard-Petersen and Gräf, 2009). He may be very popular, but his *authority* is in no way undisputed. "You mentioned Sh. Qardawy's statement. Who is Sh. Qardawy? Isn't he one like many others, since we have no clergy in Islam?" (Sameh Arab, 2001). Such attitudes are increasingly expressed as a matter of course on the internet. "Praise be to God – religion has been established by God and not by al-Shaʿrāwī or al-Qaraḍāwī [the two leading Islamic TV scholars since 1980], and if al-Qaraḍāwī and al-Shaʿrāwī err it doesn't mean that the whole Islamic community follows them in their error" (Muṣṭafà ʿAbd al-Khāliq, 2009). Al-Qaraḍāwī himself bemoans a "tragic disappearance of wise and knowledgeable *ulama* [scholars] capable of properly basing their arguments on accurate testimony from the Koran and the Sunna. Their absence has given rise to inexpert, unqualified religious scholars and to disingenuous clerics […]. Under such anarchy anyone can sell himself as an Islamic sheikh, and such men have begun to give a religious verdict without scruple even on the most complex issues" (Polka, 2003, 7). Authority is threatened by increasingly being called into question, not by fellow authorities but essentially by 'everyone'. "Kullu man dabba wa-habba aṣbaḥa yatakallamu fī 'l-dīn" – every Tom, Dick and Harry, every Aḥmad and Dīna have come to dabble in things religious, as critics complain (Yāsir, 2009). If everyone can read the Scriptures, everyone can use them to measure presumed religious authorities by the standards of these Scriptures – in practice, that is, by one's own understanding of these standards. And this is what's happening in internet forums every day, uncountable times. The attitude coming to expression there is one of no longer unquestioningly accepting what authorities decide but to check for oneself, come to one's own conclusions, make one's own decisions. This attitude is fostered by the structure of interaction on the net. On the net, it is the individual user who is doing the selection, who is choosing what to see and what not, and choosing what to forward and what not. This may be purely copy and paste, and if you will, completely unoriginal, but this copy and paste is what is increasingly important in today's attention economy, and it does shape the cultural horizon of people, the horizon under which they act. It shapes what news they read and what they discuss and what they think is authoritative – all this is increasingly shaped by what links are forwarded to them by their friends on Facebook and what stories are dug on Digg, or what flies by them on Twitter. And so these forums, these arenas are places that we need more research on as far as Middle Eastern users are concerned in order to understand the precise dynamics going on there. But we can already see the structural elements that are important here and that are inherent in the code that structures communication on the net. Since it is individual users who do the picking and choosing and forwarding, they thereby become more important elements in the construction and reconstruction of cognitive and normative content – content pertaining to their social worlds, to religion, to culture, and yes, also to politics. Even those who are not adding their own voice but merely picking and forwarding, thereby become more important elements and more important actors in the social construction of knowledge than the likes of them have been before. "I'm a maker – not a taker" is a slogan spread by the "Life Makers" campaign of the televangelist ʿAmr Khālid, star among the young. This widely successful campaign draws on and aims to strengthen the attitude that 'I can actually make a difference', I can change things, at

least in my own immediate circle, and the first thing I can change is the attitude that we can't change anything anyhow.

The weight of individuals: a generational evolution

And it is here that we need to take serious the metaphor of '***the next generation***'. A breathless focus on the latest and newest technologies, often coupled with scarcely taking into account historical dynamics before the emergence of the 'new media' in the 1990s, works to obscure the more long-term evolutionary developments. These are developments that happen over many generations, human generations. And what happens through generational change certainly is reflected by, and may be propelled by, new media technologies, but it has many more dimensions to it (Hofheinz, 2005). So what we need is to look beyond the latest in technologies and beyond politics and news reporting when it comes to assessing the influence the internet and mobile communication might have in the Middle East. And we need to think of the next generation in human terms at least as much as we think software generations. We need to look at what growing up with the internet does to the dynamics between younger and older generations. How it helps to increase the relative weight of communication with peers, and how that strengthens more critical or distanced attitudes towards established authorities. Implicitly but often also as consciously expressed by themselves, internet users develop

- the feeling of being in greater control over what they want to read and look at
- the ability to judge sources of information and authorities ('I have the option, and the ability, and the right, to judge by myself')
- the opportunity to express themselves publicly, to be active participants in opinion-forming.

This means that there appears to be a development towards a ***greater role*** [or at least: a greater (self-)perceived role] ***for individual users*** in the constitution of factual and normative knowledge.[10] This is structurally reinforced via the mode of interaction with friends and peers in social networks, including social networking sites, and it means that the social self-evidence of established authorities becomes more volatile. Of course, authorities have at all times had to construct their authoritativeness through social processes; they have had to negotiate and legitimate their authority and prove it to the social groups that they wanted to influence. Today, the 'crowds' they need to take into

[10] And lest we forget: these individual users are not one-dimensional entities, but human beings with multiple, negotiated, and performed identities. If we take this seriously, we need to make analytical room for the fact that Muslims, for example – and this includes Islamists –, do not only act as Muslims. This may sound like a truism, but in practice our research often focuses too exclusively on the religious dimension of actors in the religious field, and thus risks to over-simplify a more complex reality. Take for example the 16-year old Egyptian who was among the first to post a video of a TV talk show where the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar was condemned for wanting to forbid the face veil – previously, this young man had commented positively on romantic music videos (http://www.youtube.com/user/mastk333). This is in line with young users on Facebook who have no qualms declaring themselves fans of both Mohammed and Madonna.

account are becoming larger and faster than ever before. In other words, the general fact that crowds and authorities are in a mutually dependent dynamics has not changed, but the *weight* of crowds, and of the individuals that make up the crowds, has grown. So with the increasing spread of social media and mobile communication, the social networks of knowledge construction are becoming not only vastly bigger and quicker and less limited by space and locality than they had been before, but also less hierarchical.

A development with roots in the eighteenth century

However, when we look at what the internet does to the 'next generation' in human terms, we should not only have a longer breath but also a ***longer historical perspective*** than has hitherto been the rule in internet studies in the Middle East. Evolutions – which, as I am arguing, are more important here than short-lived revolutions – take time. They happen over the course of generations. And here I am not only talking about the future. I am talking about dynamics that can be traced back over the past three centuries of Islamic intellectual history. For the deconstruction of scholastic hierarchies and the ***promotion of a greater role for each individual*** believer is something that ***began*** to spread in earnest ***in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*** already. Muslim preachers (using, by the way, the new technologies of the time, like pamphlets and vernacular language) tore down a key concept that had dominated the conception of religious authority for five centuries: that "the believer must be in the hands of his teacher like a corpse in the hands of the one who washes it", and therefore obey and comply even if the teacher gives an order ostensibly in conflict with the prescriptions of the Divine Law, the *sharīʿa*. This was no longer acceptable to eighteenth-century reformers who worked to spread the idea that every believer had the right and duty to hold up presumed authorities to the standards of the Scriptures, and therefore encouraged everyone to go back to the Scriptures instead of relying on secondary sources. It dates from that time that growing numbers of people are actually reading the Qurʾān and holding up the Scriptures against established authority (Hofheinz, 1996). So what happens on the internet today is a continuation of a much older story, where individuals are encouraged to judge authorities by a generalized standard accessible, in principle, to everyone. Placed in such a wider historical context, the internet may loose some of its 'revolutionary' mystique – but this may be just what is needed to gain a more sober understanding of its impact in the Middle East.

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