After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State

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The uprisings which swept across the Arab world beginning in December 2010 pose a serious challenge to many of the core findings of the political science literature focused on the durability of the authoritarian Middle Eastern state. The impact of social media on contentious politics represents one of the many areas which will require significant new thinking. The dramatic change in the information environment over the last decade has changed individual competencies, the ability to organize for collective action, and the transmission of information from the local to the international level. It has also strengthened some of the core competencies of authoritarian states even as it has undermined others. The long term evolution of a new kind of public sphere may matter more than immediate political outcomes, however. Rigorous testing of competing hypotheses about the impact of the new social media will require not only conceptual development but also the use of new kinds of data analysis not traditionally adopted in Middle East area studies.

On December 17, 2010, the self-immolation of a young man in a Tunisian village set off a chain of events which culminated in massive protests across the country and the fall of the long-ruling dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The riveting spectacle of these protests on al-Jazeera, widely discussed across both the online and offline Arab public sphere, soon sparked imitators across the region. The protests largely bypassed formal political parties and institutions—including Islamist parties—and mobilized millions of citizens across a cross-section of society. While Facebook campaigns and street protests rocked Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya, and many other Arab countries in the following weeks, it was Egypt where a Facebook-planned protest on January 25, 2011, bloomed into a massive, society-wide mobilization which drove President Hosni Mubarak and his regime from power. While at the time of this writing it is too soon to know whether these uprisings will have brought about fundamental transformations of any of these regimes, they have already decisively reshaped the nature of regional politics and powerfully challenged many assumptions about the power and durability of the authoritarian Arab state.

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The uprisings destabilized the findings of a sophisticated literature on authoritarian persistence which had developed over the previous decade to explain the resilience of Arab authoritarian states in the face of multiple disruptive forces, including al-Jazeera and Arab satellite television, a global trend towards democratization and demands for democracy from within and abroad, a youth bulge and a crisis of employment, transnational Islamist activism, and globalization.[1] This literature had produced a robust and closely-observed set of explanations for this resilience: access to oil and strategic rents, over-developed security forces, sophisticated strategies of dividing and co-opting opposition, and political culture. Both over time and in cross-regional perspective, Arab states seemed distinctively resistant to change even as their internal and external challenges mounted.[2]

The momentous recent events in Tunisia and Egypt should force a broad rethinking of this literature, as political scientists adapt to the sudden transformation of the political environment. These uprisings and the nature of state responses raise serious questions about the role of political parties and social movement organization, the logic of transitions and regime responses to popular mobilization, the changing logic of rentier states during an employment crisis, the shifting role of international patrons, and the rise of a political culture of protest. It may also in the end reaffirm existing arguments about authoritarian resilience, if the upheavals result in newly-configured but fundamentally unchanged military regimes.

Over the last decade, I have written frequently about the political impact of the new information environment shaped by al-Jazeera and Arab satellite television and by increasingly pervasive Internet-based new media such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.[3] The high-profile role of such new media in organizing and publicizing the events in Tunisia and Egypt would seem to powerfully confirm hopeful predictions that the new information environment would fundamentally challenge authoritarian Arab regimes by shattering their ability to control the flow of information, opinions, images and ideas. Yet in reality the lessons to be drawn from these cases are more nuanced and complex,[4] and implicate much broader debates about the impacts of the new information technologies on international politics and demands for democratization.[5]

For all their dizzyingly effective use by creative young activists, it is not obvious that these new media exclusively challenge the competencies of authoritarian states. The new media, as Evgeny Morozov's scathing new book *The Net Delusion* graphically details, can also play an important role in the political strategies of states seeking to forestall and repress such movements.[6] While protestors effectively used social media in their struggles, it is surprisingly difficult to demonstrate rigorously that these new media directly caused any of the outcomes with which they have been associated. And while social-media-based forms of political organization may be effective at mobilizing and channeling leaderless challenges to authoritarian states, since they do not have the usual array of party elites available for repression or co-optation, at the same time these political tools have major weaknesses when the time comes for negotiating the terms of democratic transition (especially in pacted transitions) and especially for dealing with the enormous challenges of governing in the wake of a change of regime.

In this essay, I propose to reconsider the impact of new information environments on Arab politics in the light of current events. I elaborate on the complex and variable impacts of the new social media on Arab politics, arguing that these new media have reshaped the structure of political opportunity across an increasingly unified political field, but have ambiguous effects on the specific mechanisms of authoritarian state power.[7] New social media and satellite television together offer powerful tools to protest organizers, reducing transaction costs for organization and presenting rapid and powerful channels for the dissemination of messages, images, and frames. In particular, they offer transmission routes for reaching international audiences and influencing foreign perceptions of stability or of the normative desirability of particular regimes. At the same time, they do not necessarily translate into enduring movements or into robust political parties capable of mounting a sustained challenge to entrenched regimes or to transforming themselves into governing parties. Further, these same tools can strengthen the surveillance and repression capabilities of authoritarian states. The new media environment has fundamentally changed the texture of Arab politics, but Arab states may yet prove able to adapt and absorb their challenge.

For all the turbulence in recent months, the Internet's most fundamental challenge to the state will likely be generational rather than immediate, and is likely to work through widening and changing the operation of Arab public spheres rather than by directly changing the Arab state.[8] The region is only in the early stages of a much longer-term transformative challenge, and we are only now seeing events catch up with the drivers of change. The rise of networked communication and the transformed competencies of growing numbers of individuals across the region—particularly the young, educated urban elites who have traditionally played an outsized role in driving Arab politics—may be profoundly altering societal norms, religion, the state, and international politics.[9] But even such profound changes may not seriously trouble the continued domination of the Arab state, since such generational changes may be sufficiently slow that Arab states can comfortably absorb them without relinquishing the core of their power. In spite of the truly impressive surge of popular energy, the proposition that these newly empowered and informed citizens will never succumb to dictatorship remains to this point untested.

The Debate over New Media and Contentious Politics

The transformation of the information environment in the Arab world began over a decade ago, in the late 1990s, as al-Jazeera and satellite television began to open up new space for political communication, breaking the ability of states to control the flow of information, and producing a new kind of Arab public sphere.[10] Satellite television helped to unify Arab political space, focusing discourse on a set of shared Arab concerns such as Palestine, Iraq, and political reform. Al-Jazeera in particular became a source of common knowledge in Arab political life, setting the agenda and galvanizing anger over offenses to Arab issues and ideals. It also fueled political protest movements, which used the Qatari television station to spread their messages, to break through domestic censorship, and to protect themselves from the worst of regime repression.

At least in the short term, however, the effects of satellite TV on immediate core political outcomes proved to be limited. No governments were changed, no major foreign or domestic policies revised, no powerful and lasting new political coalitions empowered. After the initial shock, states started to catch up and respond—starting up their own TV stations and newspapers to compete, harassing journalists, putting diplomatic pressure on Qatar, and, more broadly, blunting the domestic political forces which might have harnessed the new media to mobilize political

pressure. Resistance to the challenges satellite television presented in the 2000s supported the "authoritarian persistence" hypothesis, as states adapted rather than surrendering to the underlying changes.

The rapid growth of Internet and smart phone penetration over the 2000s layered a new dimension onto this rapidly evolving new public sphere. What could once be dismissed as limited to a narrow slice of a largely English-speaking, cosmopolitan, and youthful elite is now distributed across wide swaths of Middle Eastern society. In some sectors of society, particularly educated urban youth, Internet access and usage is already for all practical purposes universal. Facebook by 2011 had over 21 million Arab users, more than the estimated total number of newspaper readers in the region; both Egypt and Tunisia had particularly high levels of membership.[11] The availability of cheap web-enabled smart phones allowed the uploading of even more sophisticated user-generated videos and content. The rising generation simply communicates differently, interacts differently, and has different expectations of the public sphere compared to previous generations. It is difficult to imagine that such a rapid, massive transformation in the nature of political communications could not matter in substantive ways.

With regard to contentious political action, there is a strong correlational and environmental case to be made that this new information environment empowered political and social activism. The decade of the 2000s witnessed massive popular mobilization across the region, with waves of protests over Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank in 2002 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by protestors demanding domestic political reform across much of the region. In the early 2000s, a generation of Arab bloggers learned to use the Internet as a vehicle for personal expression, political organization, dialogue with the West, and communication with colleagues throughout the Arab world.[12] And then, of course, there came the role of the new social media in Iran's 2009 "Green Revolution," and in the wave of Arab uprisings in the winter of 2010/11.

The spread and potential impact of these new social media is relevant to broader debates in political science, sociology, and media theory. In the eyes of their enthusiasts, new social media empower individuals to coordinate, communicate, and circumvent state censorship and repression to fundamentally shift the balance of social power away from authoritarian states or hierarchies of any kind.[13] Networked communication, they argue, fundamentally challenges existing social and political orders, privileging horizontal networks over hierarchical organizations such as the modern nation-state.[14] Clay Shirky argues that the Internet inevitably empowers individuals to organize outside the state, rendering the traditional nation-state irrelevant and reducing the transaction costs of all sorts of societal-level organization.[15] What such optimists have in common is a sense of the irresistible (if unpredictable) force of broad societal-level changes in the way information is produced, consumed, and shared.

But skeptics such as Evgeny Morozov have responded that these effects will not be directly translated from shifting individual attitudes, competencies and preferences into political change.[16] They will instead be mediated through the existing structures of power and control—which include massive state capacities for and experience in surveillance, repression, infiltration, and control. The role of Twitter in organizing the Iranian Green Movement protests appears to have been greatly exaggerated, with its main impact being on external perceptions of the protest rather than on internal political organization or mobilization.[17] The wave of protest activity in Egypt between 2003 and 2006 took advantage of the opening of the political opportunity structure around a series of elections and referenda. Facebook helped catch the Egyptian authorities off guard in 2006, for instance, but not in 2007, when the regime was ready and waiting for a second attempt, while in 2009 the Iranian regime was able to quickly marshal a daunting array of responses.[18] The robustness of the Arab state can be seen in the "organic, complex, . . . [and] contradictory, often oppressive forms of adjustment that are everywhere occurring."[19]

The revolutions which have unfolded in Tunis and Cairo and beyond might seem to tip the balance decisively towards the optimists, but in fact they do not offer complete validation to either side.[20] Facebook seems to have mattered quite a bit in Tunisia, but that did not drive revolution before December 2010.[21] Facebook was crucial for coordinating Egyptian protestors to emulate Tunisians starting January 25, but as an already-established national holiday, this date was an obvious focal point; also, the organizers used mosques as the hubs for most of the protests, again an obvious (and off-line) choice. Egypt's ability to almost completely shut down its Internet at the outset of the crisis in 2011 did not noticeably dent the protest momentum, suggesting the limits of the Internet's causal importance; as one youth activist calmly put it, "when the government shut down the web, politics moved on to the street, and that's where it has stayed."[22] Nor is it yet clear that the uprisings have challenged the fundamentals of the power of either state. While in both places long-standing autocrats have stepped down, political power seems to have shifted to the military establishments that had long sustained autocratic power.

The stylized debate between optimists and skeptics has reached its limit. Social media played an important role at key moments in the unfolding of those revolutionary events, but they did so within a context shaped by older media such as al-Jazeera, by political anger over heavily manipulated elections, and by material changes such as a rapidly deteriorating economic situation. Research agendas should now shift to tracing out specific causal mechanisms and analyzing the more systemic effects of these

broad changes in the production and communication of political information.[23]

Four Pathways to Change

The states of the Arab world have generally been seen as atypically over-developed and resistant to democratization.[24] Fueled by strategic rents and by the vast influx of oil revenues in the 1970s, Arab states evolved particularly large and oppressive apparatuses for state control, surveillance and repression. Bloated bureaucracies and inwardly focused militaries, along with massive intelligence services and a strong role for international patrons, have allowed regimes to long withstand challenges that might have threatened autocrats outside the region. As Bellin argues, what makes Arab regimes exceptional globally "is the stalwart will and capacity of the state's coercive apparatus to suppress any glimmers of democratic initiative."[25] These regimes clearly have not lost their will to survive, but the massive wave of protest and the spotlight cast by the new media environment has at least in some cases (such as Tunisia and Egypt) partially restrained their ability to use their full arsenals of repressive force.

The new media, both television and Internet-based social media, posed a particular challenge to such Arab states because of the status quo ante of particularly intense state censorship and initially low (by global standards) Internet penetration. In this section I consider four distinct ways by which the new media can be seen as challenging the power of Arab states: (1) promoting contentious collective action; (2) limiting or enhancing the mechanisms of state repression; (3) affecting international support for the regime; and (4) affecting the overall control of the public sphere. While these changes are distinct, they obviously relate to one another, and depending on the situation can either reinforce one another or work at cross-purposes. Whether and how their overall effect is politically transformative is highly contingent. And while the events of early 2011 in Egypt are clearly earth-shaking, their long-term consequences are still to be seen.

1. Contentious Collective Action

The new media could affect the incidence and impact of collective action through a wide range of mechanisms. In this section, I focus on several—reduced transaction costs, informational cascades, increased costs of repression, and scale and diffusion effects—and then consider the trade-offs between mobilization and organization. Political opportunity structures matter more than technology alone: to quote a widely cited aphorism, "Twitter doesn't cause revolutions, but revolutions are tweeted."[26]

Transaction costs: The new media may facilitate protest by lowering the barriers to communication and organization while increasing the visibility of even small-scale pro-test.[27] Secure and cheap tools of communication lower transaction costs for the organization of collective action, with social media in particular allowing like-minded members to find one another and to make their true beliefs known in a semi-public setting. This helps to overcome the atomization and social isolation produced by authoritarian regimes, which enforce political conformity and silence. It also allows the small subset of users focused on politics or human rights to organize within this small, semi-public space before taking their campaigns to the wider public. The Egyptian *Kefaya* movement protesting Mubarak's authoritarian rule, for example, initially used Internet and SMS through discussion lists, and only later moved creatively to organize their protests and to gather international attention. In Bahrain, Internet forums helped galvanize human rights protestors incensed over the manipulation of elections and a clampdown on activists. Tunisian and Egyptian movement leaders privately consulted with each other about how to organize protests in the months before they erupted. Yet examples such as these, while suggestive of how the new media can lower the costs of making contact, offer no resolution to the intense debate about whether the weak ties generated by Internet relationships are more or less likely to promote contentious political action.[28]

Informational cascades: One of the most intriguing hypotheses about the effects of social media focuses on information cascades. The literature on unexpected revolutions developed by Suzanne Lohmann, Timur Kuran and others suggests that one of the major obstacles to mass protest is ubiquitous preference falsification: individuals who detest the regime refrain from making their views public out of fear of either social or official sanction. On this view, the increased public incidence of oppositional views online helps to encourage others who privately hold such views to express them in public.[29]

The Tunisian and Egypt tidal waves certainly hint at "cascade" dynamics, by which the courageous early movers sent a signal to a generally sympathetic public of the value of joining in. Throughout the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, participants spoke of "breaking the wall of fear," and most spoke of hearing of the protests or seeing them on al-Jazeera. Generally speaking, the young leaders of the protest movement who gathered in Tahrir Square were not representative of the broader population's political or social views—they tended to be far more liberal, Western-oriented, and secular. In the past this had limited their ability to spark broad-based protest, but in 2011 they succeeded in galvanizing the public expression of the shared sentiment of anger at Mubarak and a generic demand for change—particularly when joined on the first day by a wide cross-section of older participants who could be seen by others as "like them."[30] The regime in turn consistently sought to label the protestors as liberal youth,

Islamist extremists, or foreign troublemakers—but with little success in the early days because of the widespread visible evidence to the contrary.

Yet while preference falsification may have been operative in Tunisia, which was one of the most heavily censored states on earth, this does not seem to fit the Egyptian case. The success of the Kefaya movement in the early 2000s was precisely to bring mass discontent with Mubarak into the public sphere and to alert others to the existence of widespread dissatisfaction. The campaign against the succession of Gamal Mubarak dominated Egyptian politics for half a decade, to the point where few could have been unaware of its widespread existence. The recent upsurge in Egypt appears to have been due more to altered calculations about the possibility of success after the flight of Ben Ali in Tunisia, the imitation of specific repertoires of contention, and the successful recruitment of non-activists into the early protests, which sent a signal of a widespread societal consensus. While there may have been information cascades, they seem to have had only a secondary importance.

The costs of repression: The new media may also increase the prospects of collective action by raising the costs to authoritarian regimes of repression, especially early on, by documenting atrocities and increasing international attention. Social media in the Middle East have developed a robust infrastructure for publicizing police abuse of protestors. Al-Jazeera cameras and activists uploading videos of police brutality to YouTube can matter to regimes reluctant to have their worst abuses recorded and exposed. This publicity does not prevent abuses, obviously, but it is not implausible to suggest that it has raised the costs to would-be repressors, who had to factor in the possibility of galvanizing international censure or local anger. The televised unleashing of government-backed thugs on Tahrir Square on February 1, 2011, may have ultimately cost the Egyptian regime more in international outrage than it gained in intimidation. One hypothesis is that regimes dependent on and unsure of U.S. support are more sensitive to these costs, as both Egypt and Tunisia largely exercised a restraint not seen in Bahrain or Libya.

Scale and Diffusion: Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow have argued that the media play a vital role in scaling local protests up into broader movements and in localizing broader episodes.[31] The new information technologies have proven particularly potent at moving discourse and protest forms across the entire Arab political space, like the protests against the Iraq war in 2003 or the mass protests for political change in 2011. The ever-more-unified Arab political space also creates distinctive dynamics of diffusion and contagion: The Egyptian revolutionary wave followed heavy news coverage of the Tunisian revolution, which clearly shifted the beliefs of protestors about their

possibility of victory—such that the January 25 Facebook protest succeeded where numerous earlier attempts at organizing such a protest failed. More broadly, almost every Arab country saw protestors adopting similar language and protest methods and competing for the same al-Jazeera cameras.

Movement organization: Finally, there is a deep tension between protest mobilization and political organization. The leaderless, network structures which can hold together a disparate coalition of millions of protestors around a single, simple demand—"Mubarak must go"—are typically far less effective at articulating specific, nuanced demands in the negotiation process which follows success. The Internet may prove to be poor at building warm social networks and trust that are the heart of civil society. It could even be depoliticizing, as people remain at home with their computers rather than getting out into the streets or doing the hard work of political organization.[32] Or, it could degenerate into constant mobilization against the status quo, remaining outside of political institutions and unable to project pragmatic agendas. There are as yet few workable models for new-media-fueled movements making the transition to normal politics—which does not mean that it is impossible, only that the literature to date offers us little confidence either way.

2. The Mechanisms of Repression

At the same time that the new media may empower contentious collective action or inhibit the naked exercise of brute repression, they also create new resources available to authoritarian states. Authoritarian regimes as well as activists have learned to use the new powers of the Internet, especially once their potential has been graphically demonstrated in a particular event.[33] In Steve Heydemann's felicitous phrase, Arab authoritarianism has "upgraded" rather than withering away.[34] As Larry Diamond argues, "authoritarian states . . . have acquired (and shared) impressive technical capabilities to filter and control the Internet, and to identify and punish dissenters."[35] Despite the inability of Arab states to contain the recent upsurge of popular protest, the race between protestors and wealthy, determined regimes neither automatically nor permanently favors the people.[36]

Arab regimes have developed a wide range of techniques for maintaining their control. State responses have ranged from technical ones, designed to limit or shape access to the Internet, to selective repression and overt intervention in online communication flows.[37] Their repertoire is well-known: dividing opposition; surveillance; torture and abuse; censorship; large military and security apparatus; patronage and state employment; enforced social compliance.[38] Cairo responded to the scheduled protest of January 25, 2011 with a globally unprecedented complete shutdown of the Internet and mobile phone network.[39] In many Arab

countries, the Internet has become a focus of the *mukhabarat,* with special units devoted to monitoring, infiltrating, and disrupting online communities.[40] What is more, authoritarian states cooperate with each other, trading "best practices" on surveillance and repression, and have been able to negotiate deals with leading Western companies for further assistance.[41]

From Saudi Arabia's demand that Research in Motion, Ltd., the proprietors of the popular Blackberry phone, allow its messenger service to be screened by state security officials, to the Iranian state's use of Facebook and Twitter pages to identify regime opponents, the authoritarian state can thus benefit as well as suffer from the pervasive effects of new media. Arab intelligence agencies have actively used the Internet to identify their adversaries and trace their networks.[42] During the years following the failed Facebook protests of the late 2000s, the punchline of a widely circulated grim joke had then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak congratulating his intelligence chief Omar Suleiman on Facebook, his greatest invention. Facebook, where individuals wear their political affiliations proudly alongside a list of their friends and contacts, presented many vulnerabilities—especially since many people did not carefully screen their new friend requests during the heady days of rapid expansion. Vodafone, the mobile phone network in Egypt, collaborated closely with the Egyptian government, providing details on subscribers and sending out pro-regime text messages during the crisis.[43] Googling passengers arriving at airports has become a standard practice, with border police demanding to see supposedly private Facebook pages and other personal information which may reveal political activity.

As the successful protest wave of 2011 demonstrates, state uses and abuses of the Internet do not guarantee the success of repression, any more than changes empowering contentious collective action ensure successful opposition. In each case, the new information environment creates opportunities and offers powerful tools which can shift the balance of power or determine the timing and extent of political openings.

3. International Attention and Alliances

A third causal pathway for the Internet to challenge the Arab state is through effects on international attention and attitudes. Arab authoritarian regimes are deeply embedded within a unipolar but rapidly shifting international system, and depend on international, primarily American, support for their survival. Should the new media somehow undermine that support, it could prove devastating to regime survival.[44]

During the mid-2000s, activists were able to draw on the public commitments of the Bush administration to democracy promotion to compel the United States to put some pressure on Arab regimes to open up political space.

During the Iranian protests of 2009, the U.S. had no such leverage, but Twitter and other social media did help shape American views of events. The swing of international support from the Egyptian regime to the protest movement in Egypt may be the most dramatic example to date of the new media actually changing important alliances or regional divisions. Still, the U.S. understandably seems more interested in seeing uprisings in Libya and Iran than in its allies such as Bahrain or Jordan, and American sympathy with Egyptian protestors may prove to have been an aberration.

The shifting American position towards the Mubarak regime was clearly influenced by the powerful images broadcast on al-Jazeera and circulated through social media networks. Crucially, the transmission via social media was not generally from mass public to mass public. Instead, those on the ground—including Western journalists and English-speaking local activists—communicated information and opinion from inside the country to an informed and highly-focused expert audience abroad. Those specialists then filtered the information and presented it to local media and policy circles, shaping perceptions of what was happening on the ground. The videos and information produced by social media users during these protests shaped television coverage at a time when mainstream journalists faced severe restrictions and al-Jazeera's own bureaus were intermittently shuttered.[45] Those images helped raise the salience of the issue in American and international politics, while the increased attention generally was channeled through a frame favorable to the protestors rather than to the regimes.

4. The Public Sphere

A final area where state control might be fundamentally challenged is in its ability to control and dominate the public sphere. Here, longer-term shifts in individual competencies and in the broad information environment—rather than the more immediate "tools" of political combat—matter most.[46] Whatever immediate changes result from the 2011 uprisings, the impact of the Internet over the longer term will be to empower and to transform the nature of the public sphere in authoritarian Arab societies. This creates the conditions by which demands for accountability and transparency and citizenship long denied by the authoritarian Arab state can be effectively pressed.[47] A focus on the systemic impact of longer-term transformations of the public sphere has the advantage of capturing the sense that the new information environment is driving massive changes in societal organization, even if those changes remain frustratingly vague and resistant to empirical investigation.

The key to most arguments about the transformative effects of the Internet is that new individual competencies and networked forms of communication will aggregate over time into systemic change. For instance, Manuel Castells

argues that the rise of networked communication challenges and transforms the possibilities of power exercised by the territorial nation state by undermining its ability to legitimate its rule.[48] The confident, wired youth of Tahrir Square embody this vision of new competencies aggregating into political change. By becoming producers of information and circumventing the editorial control of state censors and mass media outlets, these individuals will become new kinds of citizens, better able to stand up to the instruments of state control.[49] Their horizons extend beyond the nation-state, and they demonstrate great impatience with the traditional "red lines" of Arab politics. Deborah Wheeler argues that transformative power of the Internet lies in these youth: "their sheer weight as a social force, their innovative communication strategies and Internet savvy, as well as the fact that youth sub-cultures contain the seeds of future social norms."[50]

One more specific competency individuals can gain is the ability to evade state surveillance and control—to access information, to communicate and organize, to learn, to express and to engage. One competency is simply Internet fluency, including the ability to access anonymizing software and evade censorship. As many Arab youth learn to evade state firewalls, bans on Bluetooth, and other restrictions, it is not a leap to see those skills transferring to a more fundamental ability to evade state controls over communication and information.

The rise of such new citizens and a transformed public sphere could have ambiguous and contradictory effects, however. Slow, long-term changes offer ample opportunities for authoritarian regimes to adapt and absorb the challenge. The uneven distribution of such new competencies may create an intense digital divide, widening the gap between cosmopolitan, wired urban elites and the mass populations lacking such skills. The tension between restless, expressive protest politics and the mundane business of political organization and governance could pose a serious challenge to the stability of regimes even if they do become more democratic, transparent and accountable. A new public sphere will fundamentally change the conditions of political possibility, but the direction of that change remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Few predicted the wave of contentious politics which rocked the Arab region in 2010–2011, and we should approach its interpretation with a considerable dose of analytical humility. Most attention thus far has focused on the immediate upheavals of unexpected, potentially revolutionary change. But the strongest case for the fundamentally transformative effects of the new media may lie in the general emergence of a public sphere capable of eroding the ability of states to monopolize information and argument, of pushing for transparency and accountability, and of facilitating new networks across society.

Technology is only one of many drivers of this change, and states are able to mobilize those technologies to their own end. Still, it seems impossible to miss the extent to which the new information environment has already changed the texture of politics in many Arab countries—the way that the give and take between regime and opposition proceeds—even if core state functions remain intact. The evolution of new forms of citizen engagement and new political dynamics, along with the transformation in the personal competencies of some number of individuals, have already played a role in mobilizing a fundamental challenge to the authoritarian Arab state. The question of whether that authoritarian state can adapt to this challenge, as it has to others in the past, should shape our research agenda in the coming years.

More broadly, these events should push debates about the effects of new media away from stylized arguments between optimists and skeptics and towards more careful empirical testing of specific mechanisms and claims.[51] Part of this new research agenda will involve the harnessing of new methods to analyze the vast amounts of data available on the Internet. It will require analysis techniques which have not to date been seen as relevant by many Middle East specialists, given the relative paucity of high-quality quantitative data. Such research can begin to test the empirical claims lurking behind sweeping arguments, by documenting the flows of information and answering specific, empirical questions: Did new media report on an issue before mainstream media? Were there differences in the coverage across partisan divides? Who links to whom, and what kinds of information pass through those links? Does information travel across language barriers? How do ideas and repertoires scale up, or diffuse across national borders? Are there generational divides in the reception and processing of new information?

The harvesting and analysis of data is only the first step, however. Theorizing the effects of this new information environment will require sophisticated and careful thought about both causal and environmental impacts. Those focused on specific causal mechanisms will attempt to isolate discrete variables, such as the introduction of new information into a political arena or the widespread adoption of a new social media platform, and attempt to show their causal impact on some attitudinal or behavioral outcome. Such analysis will likely prove frustrating given the turbulent and rich cases in question, however. More promising will be theorizing the new information environment in structural terms, showing how the shift from old to new affects entire categories of attitudes, political opportunities, relationships and behaviors. Here, the opposite problem will prove daunting, as impact becomes frustratingly vague and pervasive. But the challenges are also opportunities, and political scientists who hope to contribute to

the emerging debate will need to grapple with such data, methods, and theory.

This in turn will force a rethinking of Arab authoritarian resilience in the new information environment, both from within and in broader comparative perspective. Does information affect Arab politics in distinctive or particularly intense ways compared to other parts of the world? Is control over information and the flow of opinion and images essential to the capacities of the authoritarian state, or is losing such control something to which such regimes can adapt? Will the new media environment affect all authoritarian Arab regimes in similar ways, with rapid contagion effects and predictable protest dynamics, or will it refract through specific national institutions in unique ways? Will this new environment produce transitions to stable, pluralist democracies, or will it usher in an era of perpetual unrest and turmoil on "streets" whose demands cannot realistically be satisfied? These will be rich research agendas, of great relevance to the development of satisfying theories of both social and political change and of continued authoritarian survival. After decades of frustrating stasis in the region they study, Middle East specialists should now be ready to adapt their theories and methods to the arrival of interesting times.

Notes

1 On Arab authoritarianism, see Bellin 2004, Pripstein-Posusney and Angrist 2005, Halliday 2003, Ayubi 1996, and Brownlee 2007. For an alternative view of state strength, see Wedeen 2008.
2 For comparative perspective, see Levitsky and Way 2010 and Slater 2010.
3 See Lynch 2006 and 2007.
4 Aday et al. 2010.
5 Howard 2010, Zuckerman 2011.
6 Morozov 2011; for discussion, see Diamond 2010, Calhoun 2011, and Shirky 2011.
7 On political opportunity structure, see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001.
8 On the Arab public sphere, see Lynch 2006, Eickelman and Anderson 2003, and Salvatore 2010.
9 Wheeler 2006, Dhillon and Yousef 2009, Eickelman and Anderson 2003, and Bunt 2009.
10 Hafez 2008, Sakr 2007.
11 Salem and Mourtada 2011.
12 Lynch 2007, Wheeler 2006.
13 Eltahawy 2010.
14 Castells 2008, Benkler 2007, and Shirky 2011.
15 Shirky 2008 and 2011.
16 Morozov 2011, Diamond 2010.
17 Esfandiari 2010, Aday et al. 2010.
18 Shapiro 2009, Faris and Heacock 2009, and Aday et al. 2010.

19 Murphy 2009, 1123.
20 Levinson and Croker 2011.
21 Zuckerman 2011.
22 Quoted in Schenker 2011.
23 Howard 2010, Bayat 2009.
24 Luciani 1990, Ayubi 1996.
25 Bellin 2004.
26 On "political opportunity structures," see McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001 and Tarrow and Tilly 1996.
27 McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, Tarrow 2005.
28 Gladwell 2010.
29 Kuran 1991, Lohmann 1994.
30 Lohmann 1994 in particular emphasizes the importance of the protestors being seen as "like us," rather than as outsiders or marginal youth.
31 McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, Tarrow 2005.
32 Langhor 2004.
33 Morozov 2011.
34 Heydemann 2007.
35 Diamond 2010, 70.
36 Compare Shirky 2011 and Morozov 2011.
37 Deibert et al. 2008.
38 Lust-Okar 2007, Bellin 2004, Ayubi 1996, and Wedeen 1999.
39 For a graphical representation of this shutdown, see (http://www.ianschafer.com/2011/01/28/egypts-internet-traffic-visualized/).
40 Morozov 2011.
41 See Morozov 2011 for details; also see Milani 2010 and Latar, Asmolov, and Gekker 2010.
42 Morozov 2011, Gallagher 2011.
43 Greenberg 2011.
44 Bellin 2004, 27.
45 A collation of these users' content for NPR is online at Carvin 2011.
46 Shirky 2011.
47 Anderson 2003, Eickelman and Anderson 2003, Eickelman 2005, and Bunt 2009.
48 Castells 2008.
49 al-Malky 2007.
50 Wheeler 2003 and 2006.
51 For one attempt to set out such a research agenda, see Aday et al. 2010.

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