Mobile Communication and Sociopolitical Change in the Arab World

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The Arab world[1] has witnessed a rapid expansion of the mobile phone in recent times. For Arabs, the mobile phone is not just for personal communication; it is also a multifunctional personal device. Mobile phones equipped with new trendy features such as Internet access, cameras, and MP3 players have become popular, particularly among Arab adolescents, who have played a very active role in adopting and appropriating multifunctional mobile communication services. Given the widespread adoption of the mobile phone within the Arab world, an important question is whether this expansion is causing communication-related social and political changes.

Introduction

Al-Jawal, Arabic for the "one on the move" (mobile phone) boomed across the Arab world in the early 2000s, after privatization undermined the monopoly of the incumbent Arab telecom companies (Nield, 2004: 26). In Arab countries, mobile penetration rates range from 3% (Sudan) to 85% (the United Arab Emirates). About 80% of mobile subscribers choose the prepaid phone cards instead of fixed-term contracts because prepaid service fits with the needs of those with lower income and education (International Telecommunication Union, 2004).

Mobile penetration, not surprisingly given the profile of users in other regions, is much higher among Arab college students and high school students than the general population (Arab Advisors Group, 2005). The mobile seems to be a nearly ubiquitous accessory for most social classes of teenagers, who favor SMS as an efficient and trendy form of personal communication. In fact, it seems that 90% of Arab teenagers claim to text more than they talk on their mobile phones (Arab Advisors Group, 2005). Youngsters and young adults, "Arab Generation Txt," use SMS for receiving notifications, chatting with friends, and voting in contests or participating in TV entertainment show polls. Since SMS was launched commercially for the first time in 1998 in Saudi Arabia, figures have gathered momentum year upon year and October 2005 marked a major text messaging milestone. Figures for October 2005, which coincided this year with the month of

1. It seems appropriate to speak of the Arab world as a religiously and culturally closed society, especially when one wishes to examine how this region is being altered by the spread of mobile communication.

Ramadan, leapt to a remarkable sixty-five million messages, the highest ever total, according to semiofficial statistics (Fawaz, 2005).

While Dubai city supposedly has the highest mobile phone density in the Arab world, Al-Jawal is spreading rapidly, not only rivaling but surpassing that of the seemingly ubiquitous communication tool, the TV. Technological improvements are continuing to place mobile phones at the forefront of emerging communication tools. It is common that Arabs use their mobile phones in places like mosques, despite a huge number of fatwas (religious edicts) prohibiting this kind of use in such places. Some Ulama (religious scholars) have issued fatwas declaring that musical ringtones on mobile phones are illicit. They argue that since music itself is un-Islamic, so too are musical ringtones. They advise mobile phone users to employ "neutral" ringtones. But it may be said that the ease and convenience of the mobile fits well with Arab culture, which stresses frequent and informal interaction among family and local groups.

Production and Distribution of Mobile Media Content by the Masses

In the Arab world, where private and public spheres are strictly divided and morally bounded, mobile communication is blurring the boundaries between the two spheres. Before the advent of the mobile phone, public spaces in the Gulf countries, for instance, were highly regulated through informal peer-based regulation and through institutional surveillance. But in an age of perpetual visual contact, with the use of camera-equipped mobile devices by just about everyone and everywhere, people can constantly take pictures in public spaces (Gillmor, 2004: 48). Since the introduction of mobile phones, the traditional nature of private relationships within the public space is in the process of being altered.

In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where camera phones have quickly gained popularity, despite an official ban, young people use mobile phones not only to contact the opposite sex and thus avoid gender segregation, but also to snap pictures. They upload these visually shareable photos and clips. It was also reported that young males downloaded obscene pictures from websites and sent them to other mobile phones (Kawach, 2003). As a result, people may suddenly receive pornographic images on their mobile phones from anonymous senders. The equipped mobile camera phones with new Bluetooth technology marked the beginning of a new virtual and seamless flirting trend characterized by a transfer of phone numbers, songs, pictures, jokes, short video clips, and sometimes hardcore pornography (Aboud, 2005). Young people in the Gulf countries have turned mobile camera phones equipped with new Bluetooth technology into a high-tech way to flirt.

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In Saudi Arabia, unrelated men and women caught talking to each other, driving in the same car, or sharing a meal risk being detained by the *mutawaeen* (Authority for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice). Despite these risks and barriers, female and male teenagers have used the Bluetooth technology in public spaces because connecting by the Bluetooth technology is much better, easier, and safer than exchanging or throwing mobile phone numbers to the girls in shopping malls or even through car windows at traffic lights (Aboud, 2005). It was reported that a number of young people use Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones

as their favorite method to arrange meetings without being intercepted and detained by the *mutawaeen* (Aboud, 2005).

In the Gulf countries, young people are using their camera phones, for instance, in shopping malls, where the sex segregation is either not strictly imposed or laxly enforced. In such places, *mutawaeen* have often warned young men not to surreptitiously photograph female shoppers, and have sometimes arrested them for doing so. In some shopping malls, signals and announcements are made every few minutes specifying limitations on mobile phone use because it is illegal to photograph people in these shopping malls. For security agents, controlling people from taking pictures with their camera phones of female shoppers has become an additional security problem (Kawach, 2003). To address the rising possibility of mixing, some segments of the Bahraini Islamist movements have called for segregated shopping malls (Doussary, 2006).

In the age of mobile-based peer-to-peer imaging and reporting, even private social gatherings have become subject to a new kind of censorship

In 2006, the Bahraini Parliament passed the first law of its kind in the Gulf region outlawing the use of Bluetooth wireless technology. The new law includes lighter prison terms (three months in prison) and fines (100 dinar, or about USD 266). This law is primarily designed to prohibit young males from sending unsolicited e-mails or text messages to females on their mobile phones (Doussary, 2006). The question remains open as to whether this new ban will affect mobile phone use among young men. In 2004, three men produced a clip containing obscene images of a rape and posted it on the Internet. The mobile phone footage, which reportedly showed one of the three men raping a teenage girl, caused a scandal. The rape scandal broke out after the men reportedly circulated footage of the assault through mobile phones equipped with cameras. The young men accused of orchestrating and filming the rape were arrested and if convicted will face the death penalty.

While public places are highly regulated, private spaces have not been subjected to social control. Social gatherings among females in Saudi Arabia, for instance, were free from such regulation. But in the age of mobile-based peer-to-peer imaging and reporting, even private social gatherings have become subject to a new kind of censorship. Mobile phones are being confiscated from guests attending private weddings. A wedding party in July 2004 turned violent after a female guest was caught using her mobile phone to take digital photographs of other women at the segregated celebration and send them to people with sentimental captions. These photos were trafficked first among peers but posted later on the Internet for wide circulation. The woman was reportedly hospitalized after being badly beaten by other female guests. Photos are newsworthy among friends and families and often serve as the topic of conversation. Sharing photos has become a popular practice among teenagers. Photos of the opposite sex are the subject of everyday talk: some of the photos are sent to others but because of economic considerations were generally posted on the Internet on personal blogs, making a visual archive of photos. There are few moblogs, which are personal, but their potential for building networks of people and disseminating news cannot be underestimated. Ito argues that "the moblog thus became a site of shared knowledge" (Ito, 2005: 3). Arab blogs were full of private photos taken by mobile phone cameras, which could be viewed by anyone. In Morocco, "made-in-Morocco," a popular blog among young Moroccans, has enraged a number of people including human rights activists and liberal journalists,

who are calling for a law to protect the private sphere. Similarly, in Bahrain there has been a discussion to issue a law that prohibits taking photos of private people and posting them on the Internet without their consent.

However, the more dramatic change was brought about by the mobile phone because it makes communication much more convenient than the fixed phone does. Via Al-Jawal, a great number of adolescents in Arab countries are able to operate in virtual isolation and are also capable of escaping parental surveillance as well as the demands of existing social structures. Students use Al-Jawal to call each other during class and to photograph teachers and schoolmates (Geledi, 2005). Since SMS messages and images cannot be intercepted by other friends or teachers, students send each other indecent text messages (Al-Qarani, 2005).

Communication scholars, political communication researchers, and social scientists should not underestimate the mobile phone's ability to help effect large-scale political change

Respondents even suggested a ban on the use of camera phones in places such as high schools, swimming pools, public bathrooms, hospitals, clinics, and beauty centers (El Baghdad, 2006). The Saudi Ministry of Education, for example, plans to ban mobile phone camera usage in schools, colleges, and universities. Mobile phone camera policies and regulations have already been issued warning students carrying mobile phone cameras on campus with a SR 500 fine and three-year suspension (Geledi, 2005). To demonstrate the seriousness of the phenomenon, a woman was expelled from the university in March 2004 for taking pictures of unveiled colleagues with a camera-equipped mobile phone and posting them on the Internet (Geledi, 2005). In 2002, the Lebanese channel LBC began Star Academy, an Arab talent show. During Star Academy's third season, in 2005, young Arab viewers voted by sending fifteen million text messages.[2] The use of SMS for voting purposes in entertainment is widely believed to be superior and effective compared with using the voice telephone service and e-mails. A young Saudi became a national hero (Hammond, 2005) after winning the song contest; his victory seems attributable to his wealthy countrymen and women who generated vast numbers of supporting votes. In May 2005, the Ulama, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in other Arab countries, condemned the popular show and issued fatwas prohibiting the participation in the show either as an actor or as a voter. Despite these fatwas, the next year young Saudi males and females managed to vote via the Internet, bypassing the regime servers that not only control access but filter messages intended to block them (Hammond, 2005). The Saudi government banned the use of mobile phones to vote for Star Academy. Under combined constraints of the Saudi government and opinion leaders, Saudi and Emirati mobile firms operating in the Saudi mobile phone market announced that they would block customers and users from text-message voting for Star Academy's fourth season in 2006. These companies feared a brand damage that the Star Academy may cause them given its infamous reputation among conservatives, traditionalists, and Islamists who constitute the wealthiest segments in the Arab world (Hammond, 2005).

Though physically separate, females and

2. "Arab Satellite Television: The World through their Eyes", *The Economist*, February 24, 2005. Available at http://www.economist.com/PrinterFriendly.cfm?Story_ID=3690442.

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males are able to exchange through mobile-based technologies popular sentimental images featuring babies, blowing kisses, animated cartoons doing belly dances, or dreamy and sappy Arabic songs. According to anecdotal evidence, Al-Jawal has become a hotbed for dating (Al-Qarani, 2005). Castells argues that mobile phones have significantly enhanced the autonomy of their users (Castells *et al.*, 2005: 237). As the "back door of personal communication" (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen, 2002: 171), mobile phones and SMS help Arab females and males explore new forms of dating and flirting, one of the thorniest taboos in these religiously embedded societies.

Mobiles, Mobilization, and Arab Mobs

In an attempt to frame the potential of the mobile phones, Katz and Aakhus argue that communication scholars, political communication researchers, and social scientists should not underestimate the mobile phone's ability to help effect large-scale political change (Katz and Aakhus, 2002: 2). Recent scholarship has demonstrated the role of the mobile phone in the mobilization of marginalized groups at critical political events in some newly established democracies such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Spain, where the outcome

of the political use of the mobile phone was radical and revolutionary (Castells *et al.*, 2005: 221; Suárez, 2005). It has been argued that key features of the mobile phone, particularly the flexibility and hyper-coordination, would nurture personal relationships that may not have otherwise developed and would allow greater freedom for collective expression. The mobile phone's ability to continually synchronize movements may turn out to be a challenge for authoritarian regimes and their repression arsenals: "Everything is virtual until the parties, the places and the moments come together to make it real" (Plant, n.d.: 61). This increases the flexibility for the persons involved, and there is total control of the preparation and arrangement taking place before the demonstration.

The mobile phone has a potential in coordinating political action, and increases the functional capacity of collectivities, organizations, and individuals during demonstrations

Richard Ling distinguishes between two uses of the mobile, namely the instrumental and the expressive form. The instrumental use of mobile phones is referred to as "micro-coordination" while the expressive mobile phone use is termed "hyper-coordination" (Ling and Yttri, 2002). Micro-coordination involves using a mobile phone for logistical purposes, such as confirming the place and time of a meeting or asking a family member to stop by the store on their way home. Hyper-coordination, on the other hand, involves using a mobile phone to communicate emotion or generally maintain social relations. Hyper-coordination has arguably augmented people's social interactions. While Ling points out that the mobile phone has contributed to the coordination of social interaction, I argue that the mobile phone has a potential in coordinating political action, and increases the functional capacity of collectivities, organizations, and individuals during demonstrations. In the political field, Ling's notion of hyper-coordination stressed the functional dimension as opposed to the affective dimension inherent in the expressive use of mobile phones.

Where the mass media is tightly controlled, human rights activists have added mobile phone functions (texting and imaging) to the technologies at their disposal, such as mass e-mails, the Internet, and blogs, to organize actions. True, the mobile phone performs the mobilization function much more efficiently than other communication channels, but not anytime anywhere. In current Arab political settings, fundamentally at odds with spontaneous grassroots mobilization, the potential of the mobile phone to mobilize smart mobs is extremely limited. Authoritarian regimes do not allow spontaneous demonstrations. Throughout the Arab world, freedom of assembly is virtually nonexistent and ad hoc political groupings and demonstrations are unlawful (Goldstein, 1999). In such authoritarian contexts, it is the hyper-coordination rather than smart mobs that make political sense in mobilizing people into the street. The mobile phone is regarded as a means of coordinating the activities of protesters. While the notion of smart mobs puts emphasis on the ad hoc groupings dimension, the term hyper-coordination places premium on contacts within the face-to-face interactions or within the networks of the organization.

While smart mobs can potentially have a strong impact on the political process in established democracies such as the United States or developing democracies such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Spain, established networks of organizations benefiting from "hyper-coordination via mobile phones" (Ling and Yttri, 2002: 139) can have some political impact on authoritarian regimes. Recently, instances of grassroots sociopolitical mobilization were identified in a number of Arab countries

including Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Morocco (Coll, 2005; Glaser, 2005a, 2005b; Howeidy, 2005). An illustrative case of the significant role played by mobile communication is the Egyptian presidential and parliamentary election of 2005. Mobile phones were empowering and mobilizing marginalized groups at this critical political moment by increasing the range of alternative actions available to individuals, opposition forces, and civil society groups, particularly those consisting of a strong network of students, activists, and young professionals. *Eid* (Islamic new year) SMS greetings are enormously popular in Egypt. Since about 2002, many of these greetings have taken on an increasingly political color. At first they were often generally critical of the Mubarak family. Over time, however, they have become more directly mocking of the government, especially Hosny Mubarak's preparations to have his son succeed him.[3] It is difficult to assess whether these messages are a relief valve or, more likely, an attempt to spread and voice political dissatisfaction in preparation for more active expressions of political dissent.

Activists have amassed a large database of photo and video galleries documenting the various abuses, including torture. In this way, they have revealed the regime's brutality to the whole world

Civil society groups and human rights activists used their mobile phones, including text messages, to call a rally on the day of the May 2005 referendum. Their aim was to demand political reform and open space for democratic political actions. The police attacked demonstrators who supported multiparty elections. While taking part in the demonstration in the streets, Egypt's human rights activists photographed incidents using their camera-equipped mobile phones, in particular of police attacking and beating the demonstrators (Glaser, 2005b). Being aware that their actions were being photographed and knowing the photographs could later cause alarm among the population and harm to Egypt's image abroad, the police attempted to confiscate these mobile phones to contain the photos. But in most circumstances, human rights activists managed to send and distribute their photos, which have also served as evidence in court against the police. Afterwards, photos were posted on the Internet, which then reached a wide audience. In due course, activists have amassed a large database of photo and video galleries documenting the various abuses, including torture. In this way, they have revealed the regime's brutality to the whole world.

Conclusion

Mobile communications point to a future that offers a wealth of knowledge and information to Arab communities. The production and distribution of mobile media content by and for the masses has transformed mobile phones into a remarkably effective channel for mass communication (Gillmor, 2004; Koskinen, 2004). These changes in communications lead, in turn, to subtle changes in the communication practices and expectations that accommodate the mobile phone in private and public life. The growth of mobile phones has created the space for a range of social interactions to occur beyond the place-specificity of the home or school. For women in Arab culture in particular, the mobile phone enlarges peripheral layers

3. E-mail interview with Amira Howeidy, assistant editor-in-chief at the authoritative Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly,* January 12, 2006.

of social relationships; it also substitutes for face-to-face relationships between teenagers of different genders. The political use of the mobile phone is still in its infancy, but due to its flexibility and accessibility it is posing a serious threat to the existing Arab authoritarian regimes where information and dissent is strictly controlled. The mobile phone is empowering some at the expense of others: users at the expense of nonusers, younger at the expense of older generations, females at the expense of males, and the non-state actors at the expense of state actors. As the mobile phone becomes part of the mainstream in Arab communities, it constitutes perhaps the greatest challenge yet to traditional forms of interpersonal, public, and political communication.

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