

The Future of Politics

The Two Faces of Digitalization in Politics: The Role of Social Networks in Political Mobilizations and the Threat of “Digital Authoritarianism” in the MENA Region

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The past two decades have seen rapid digitalization in much of the Middle East. While smartphone penetration, social media usage and internet adoption have all increased, the region is widely unequal in its access and deployment of digital technology. The wealthier Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are among some of the world leaders in 5G adoption, while countries like Yemen are reported to have one of the lowest internet speeds in the world. This belies the starkness of the digital divide in the MENA region. Indeed, mobile subscription penetration is around 90% in Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain, while the number is only around 40% in Yemen. Similarly, countries in the GCC often hover around 100% internet adoption, while in Egypt, it is around 50%. Arab media and ICT infrastructure share similarities in terms of governance and socio-political context, but they are far from homogenous, especially in terms of resources and reach.

The impact digital technologies have had on the region from a socio-political perspective has been profound, even if there is disagreement on their efficacy in generating and sustaining political mobilization. 2010-2011 were watershed years in mobile digital technology use in the Middle East. The early days of the Arab uprisings were infused with hope, partly spurred on by a sense of technological utopianism. This had come on the back of the so-called “Twitter

Revolution” in Iran in 2009. Here, bloggers and activists were active in using digital media to both organize and portray to the rest of the world the protests in Iran. Crucially, the ubiquity of mobile phones and digital technology ushered in moments of virality centred around regime brutality. The death of 26-year-old Iranian protester, Neda Agha-Soltan, filmed on a mobile phone, was potentially one of the most widely witnessed state-led killings in human history. At this point, it became clear that digital technology had ushered in a new form of citizen-led crowd-sourced regime accountability. As a corollary, though, it created an urgent new priority for state intervention and policing.

In terms of mobilization, one of the most profound impacts of digital technology has been the ability to document egregious state actions against its citizens. From Egypt to Bahrain, it was believed that new technologies would be key in the fight against decades of autocratic rule. This optimism was especially profound given the fact that Arab media systems, in particular, were tightly controlled and that mobile phones and social media allowed means of subverting top-down forms of media control. The uproar surrounding previously better-hidden acts of state brutality validated the notion of “liberation technology.” Mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter and more traditional online forums would supplant the pen and eradicate the need for the sword in resisting state oppression.

On a very basic level, the hope and promise of these technologies provided a morale boost for emerging social movements in the Middle East and elsewhere. Images of protesters holding up signs with the Face-

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book or Twitter logo in Cairo and Tunis indicate at least the perception that these tools were important in galvanizing optimism and energy towards social change, infusing people with a sense that change was possible in this new digital era.

In many ways, they were, but digital technology does not operate in a vacuum. In Egypt, for example, in 2010, internet penetration was relatively low, but the number of youth under 15 was about a third of the total population. Declining economic prospects coupled with years of activism from a nucleus of engaged lawyers, human rights activists, and other civil society activists were probably the main drivers of organized protest rather than social media per se. This “youth of the Internet” were also savvy in their use of YouTube and other social media technologies, disseminating images of state brutality both at home and abroad. It is a truism in social media movements that regimes tend to be slow to adapt to innovative mobilization techniques, creating a lag in effective policing of these new political opportunities. This can leave them on the back foot, at least temporarily, thereby creating a honeymoon period in which the use of social media for organizing is relatively open. In this, networks can effectively build and sustain the organizational capacity of movements, which was partly the case in Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and Tunisia in 2010 and 2011.

However, in addition to network building, a key aspect of social media within the Arab world has been the ability to connect and amplify local politics to the outside world, including Western media. This was particularly true of US-based platforms like Twitter and Facebook, which were perhaps more of a bridge between regional activists and foreign audiences than a potent organizing tool. Indeed, in places like Bahrain, long-established traditional online forums were probably more popular and useful for indigenous activists. The international environment at the time also shaped the milieu in which social media and the Arab uprisings occurred. Under Barack Obama’s presidency, the US had foregone overt attempts at democratization as had occurred under Bush and focused more on promoting human rights as a form of foreign policy. This human rights concern made the usual Western pillars of support for the dictatorial regimes of the Gulf more fragile than they had been before. Regime brutality, disseminated virally and globally on Twitter, was bad for the US-Middle East allies, at least for a while.

Sustaining media interest abroad is key to generating the kind of political pressure necessary to threaten authoritarian resilience in the MENA region, where eternal patronage is important in maintaining “robustness.” Of course, the nature of this might vary depending on the patron: the trajectory of what happened in Syria was different from what happened in Egypt. Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime contributed to a drawn-out and tragic war. Western support for Mubarak diminished rapidly in Egypt, but his successor, the democratically elected Morsi, was soon replaced by Mubarak 3.0, General Abdel Fattah el Sisi. To drive the point home, digital media and social media use have grown under Sisi, yet it is clear that authoritarianism has not diminished. Indeed, it is only one of many complex variables that now help sustain and garner political mobilization.

Digital technology is just a part of a media ecosystem where extant and established power nodes already function

It is also crucial to remember that digital technology is just a part of a media ecosystem where extant and established power nodes already function. An assemblage of existing political networks and legacy media outlets (such as Al Jazeera in Qatar and Al Arabiya in Saudi Arabia) sustain regional and international interest in MENA politics. Similarly, these networks function as both drivers and sustainers in support of revolution and/or counter-revolution. Just as we have seen the UAE and Saudi-connected media entities, including Al Arabiya, rally against the perceived empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Al Jazeera has been accused of supporting the Arab uprisings. Along with their massive social media reach, these channels pit competing pro and anti-status quo narratives against each other to ambiguous effect. Regardless of their effect, it is incorrect to assume that social media simply has a uniform revolutionary ontology.

Their influence on and offline also reflects a lack of the horizontalization of politics as envisioned by techno-utopians. They are, after all, the most followed

Arab news sources on social media. As such, agenda-setting filtered through the policy lens of certain GCC states is thus more likely to be amplified on digital media in the broader Arabic-speaking context. This itself creates a polarity in the digital public sphere in which specific national interests dominate the discourse.

The Dark Side

The fetishization of technology is somewhat a general product of post-industrial society, spurred on by the ubiquity of technology, as well as aggressive marketing from tech firms who profit from the datafication of subjects and the perception that their products potentially lead to freedom from authoritarian rule. While there are moments where the benefits of technology validate this optimism, contextual factors, such as a political economy, regime type and socioeconomic idiosyncrasies, remind us that technological determinism is an inadequate paradigm to view how the world works. Indeed, social constructivism – how technology interacts with unique contextual factors – is equally important.

The reality is that, even with an increasingly globally-connected world, social constructivism and technological determinism combine to create unique outcomes shaped by social, economic and political systems. Within authoritarian contexts like the Middle East, resources, tools and technologies are often utilized in ways that best preserve the maintenance of the status quo. Just as tanks or armed vehicles, ordinarily used in war or external conflicts, are turned to repress domestic protest movements, technologies marketed as tools of social engagement and friend-making are co-opted as a tool of regime intimidation, propaganda and surveillance. Moreover, it is not just regimes. In many MENA countries, authoritarian regimes often enjoy some support from segments of society, who will also use social media as tools of counter-revolution.

International Re-organizations: The Rise of Gulf Digital Hegemony?

This digital revolution in the MENA has also brought with it digital superpowers. If traditional media power

is the symbolic power concentrated in the institutes of television, radio and newspapers, then digital media power is that same power as manifested through digital resources. Social media power is the ability of entities or regimes to utilize those platforms to extend their hegemony domestically and internationally. To be effective in this use of power through digital resources, ownership of infrastructure, whether directly or through investment, is critical. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are perhaps the most significant social media superpowers in the MENA region and the Arabic-speaking world. Saudi Arabia is one of Twitter's biggest markets and the owner of large media conglomerates such as MBC.

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The social media power of Gulf states and the ubiquity of the Arabic language across a diverse geographical region comprising multiple states results in the dominance of narratives on important political issues. When the Tunisian President Kais Saied took power in an autoup in 2021, the dominant information on Twitter reflected the Saudi and UAE narrative, which legitimized Saied's move as necessary in order to combat rising Islamism. Regardless of whether one agrees with the autoup in Tunisia, the narratives in the digital space raise questions of information sovereignty. Indeed, anyone searching for information about Tunisia in Arabic would have been more exposed to the foreign policy discourse of certain Gulf states simply because of their social media hegemony. When an explosion ripped through Beirut in 2020, the dominant narratives on Twitter emanated from the Gulf, immediately placing blame on Hezbollah. These are but two examples.

Similarly, these powerful states are somehow able to manipulate the social media space when they are confronted with their own political scandals. When Khashoggi was murdered, the false Saudi narrative that emerged at the beginning of October 2018 was

the most dominant on Twitter in terms of volume of tweets, yet in Saudi, Khashoggi trended the least on Twitter than in any other Arabic state. The reasons for such paradoxes still remain unknown but clearly point to some sort of algorithmic manipulation and censorship. Similarly, other countries like Turkey have demonstrated a willingness to shut off social media access during times of political unrest. Depending on the state and ICT infrastructure, states can localize internet shutdowns around “trouble spots,” as happened in Bahrain in 2016, where one village was subject to a year-long internet curfew.

Social media has also been crucial in the proliferation of hate speech and censorial harassment. Journalists deemed critical have found themselves the target of virulent malinformation campaigns, being doxed and attacked by numerous high profile figures in the region. Thousands of bots have spread sectarian hate speech, particularly anti-Shia hate speech. In many cases, these often amplify existing television content that is sectarian in nature. Indeed, these forms of intimidation tie into more traditional forms of coercion. The arrest, imprisonment, or killing of journalists and activists has had a chilling effect on and offline. The high profile and gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi also ushered in a new era of fear. After all, if the murder of a US-based journalist could be done in such an audacious fashion, then nothing is off-limits. This chilling effect has a corollary impact on the social media space and creates a dissent vacuum. This vacuum is filled with pro-government influencers lauding the regime and reminding potential dissidents of the consequences of criticism. Traditional offline coercion enables the co-optation of social media space by those wishing to demonstrate their loyalty and allegiance to the regime and its policies. This is underpinned by draconian laws, which severely curtail criticism of governments or government entities.

This crowding out of traditional debate and the rise of robot accounts (or bots) has a dystopian potential for civil society. This phenomenon invokes the spectre of an autonomous digital sphere, where online discussions are more akin to a simulation of a public sphere desired by authoritarian leaders – crowding out legitimate debate and deliberative democracy in favour of propaganda, disinformation and harassment of those who oppose the official narrative.

This is far from theoretical. Over the past five years, hundreds of thousands of bot accounts have been

deployed to lionize Mohamed bin Salman and Mohamed bin Zayed, promote the anti-Iranian tweets of Donald Trump, and whitewash the murder of Khashoggi – to name but a few examples. Accounts have been used to simulate (astroturf) public opinion of Saudis, with thousands of accounts falsely purporting to be Saudis calling for maximum pressure and even war with Iran. Although bots are relatively unsophisticated, their ability to increase the popularity of URLs and other content highlights their utility as tools for amplifying pro-authoritarian propaganda. Even in a global context, certain Middle Eastern states are notable in their prowess for social media manipulation. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are among the biggest manipulators of Twitter in the world, second only to China. This puts them ahead of Iran and Russia, two actors with well-publicized histories of social media manipulation. We also know that the data provided to reach this conclusion is not complete and thus likely downplays the true scale of manipulation. Given this manifest desire to manipulate digital space, the prospect of more sophisticated technologies in the hands of authoritarian regimes does not bode well.

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Perhaps more alarmingly, the rapidly evolving sophistication of natural language processing technologies such as GPT3 already shows that the next generation of bot accounts will be far more convincing and plausible. The same is true of deep-fake videos and images, which have already been weaponized and used to trick editors into publishing pro-regime propaganda in the Middle East.

The Politicization of the Digital Public Sphere: Digital Orientalism

In the meantime, the intersection and power relations between the global North and global South

need to be recognized as a critical node in modulating digital authoritarianism and potential totalitarianism. This has been particularly true under recent geopolitical reconfigurations. Under Donald Trump, the reversal of Obama's conciliatory approach towards Iran, which itself mobilized numerous resources to convince publics so often exposed to anti-Iranian propaganda, was vital in ushering in what can be termed a Middle East post-truth moment.

Under Trump, the US State Department has been accused of launching information operations that attacked US citizens who were not critical enough in their reporting on Iran. Similarly, journalists covering Iran find themselves the victims of large anonymous Twitter mobs attacking them for any criticism. Iran has responded in kind, creating its own vast disinformation network that seeks to promote its own agenda. Trump's newfound alliance with the Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia, was seen as one of the reasons for Saudi Arabia and the UAE getting the green light for the isolation of Qatar in 2017, an event that spawned an unprecedented digital disinformation operation. The profound geopolitical shifts led to enormous resources for propaganda to mobilize public opinion to support potentially unpopular or radical courses of action.

Taking a state-centric approach is also problematic in the age of despatializing technology and globalization. Big tech companies are increasingly a key node in the expression of authoritarian practices. The existence of a moderating function under the control of private companies outside the MENA region introduces new modalities to the power and function of digital technology. Whistleblowers from inside companies like Facebook and Twitter have highlighted how these companies are less concerned with moderating information in countries that are less likely to cause a PR problem for them. In other words, a form of digital orientalism emerges, in which social media companies are happy to monetize data from inhabitants of the global South but with minimum concern for the collateral damage that the use of those products causes.

Indeed, authoritarian countries allied with the United States are less likely to have their social media activity censured, even when deployed against activists and journalists. This has been evident in the treatment of the Israel and Palestine conflict. Social media companies censor pro-Palestinian content, often

at the behest of Israeli authorities, leading to a reduced visibility of Palestinians in the online sphere. This raises serious ethical questions about how social media companies are siding with an occupying state. Having said this, pro-Palestinian activists have still utilized social media to significant effect to highlight the violence of the Israeli occupation.

Tilting towards Totalitarianism

A key aspect of the potential consequences of digital technology could be their role in altering the very nature of regime type in the region. While the concept of totalitarianism and even post-totalitarianism may have perished somewhat following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have never been satisfactory replacements. Terms such as authoritarian or hybrid regimes belie the fact that regimes around the world, regardless of whether they are monarchical, autocratic or democratic, engage in practices that can be seen as constituent parts of authoritarianism. Caveats notwithstanding, a central tenet of the definition of totalitarianism, at least in the Arendtian sense, has always been the desire of those in power to dominate the private and internal realm of citizen life. The erosion of the public/private boundary is very much a product of the digital age rather than being the product of a regime type. The Edward Snowden revelations about massive NSA surveillance, along with the activities of Cambridge Analytica, reveal how both private and public data and naivety around privacy demonstrate an increased intervention by authorities in our personal domain. While this in itself may be cause for alarm, a distinction can be made for places in which there is at least some recourse to accountability on behalf of citizens when confronted with massive invasions of privacy. The digital turn in the MENA has also been spurred on by the seeming ambition of the likes of MBZ and MBS, who have demonstrated the importance with which they view social media and digital technology such as spyware. Efforts by Saudi actors close to the Royal Court to infiltrate Twitter headquarters in San Francisco for the purpose of extracting private information of Saudi dissidents again reflect both an intolerance of criticism and an ambitious desire to take great risks on the international stage in order to violate the privacy of potential dissidents. Indeed,

the FBI has launched a court case that highlights the involvement of MISK, a charity owned by the Crown Prince, in infiltrating Twitter.

With technologies further encroaching into people's private lives and intrusive electronic surveillance wielded with little restraint, authoritarian regimes in the region risk becoming totalitarian

It has also come to light that Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are big customers of NSO Group, the Israeli cybersecurity company that sells Pegasus software, which infiltrates phones without the victim even having to click on any download. This spyware, which can access users' personal messages, and monitor voice calls and video calls (among other things), has been used by these regimes to infiltrate the phones of activists, journalists, princesses and heads of state, both living in the region, but also outside. It was even used to monitor close associates of Jamal Khashoggi before and after his murder. Indeed, despatializing technology allows for despatialized repression.

These new digital forms of surveillance are also forming an important basis for new digital authoritarian alliances in the region that accompany relatively radical changes in the old order. Given Israel's cutting-edge cybersecurity industry, a renewed form of overt cooperation in the region has emerged, in which Israel can extend its own influence and power by selling such technologies to states that share its own foreign policy interests. This spyware diplomacy highlights once again how technologies of control are forging alliances in the region while also buttressing a regional order supported by two of the most externally assertive states in the Gulf – the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Implicit within this is not only Israel as a critical node propping up digital authoritarianism in the region, but also the maintenance of US hegemony there.

Naturally, civil society actors and citizens have little ability to contest such intrusions. In the Middle East, the extant political systems, which often rely on one-party rule, low-quality democracy, or monarchical

states, there is a lack of mechanisms protecting citizens from the arbitrary exercise of power from the State. The protection people have against an arbitrary state is a fundamental aspect of a quality democracy. Combined with powerful digital technology and high technological penetration, the capacity for realizing totalitarianism's invasive impulses is theoretically real and real in practice. Meanwhile, privacy protections are scant, with no equivalent of mechanisms like the GDPR available, nor remotely possible given the fragile security cooperation mechanisms, even with entities like the GCC, which, prior to 2017, had appeared to offer some model for integration, although mainly in the realms of security.

Conclusion

Digital media technology has been a significant conduit for bolstering the narratives and power of regimes which generally eschew democracy in favour of creating a top-down vision for their states as well as the region. It is perhaps non-committal to argue that digital technology is neither a panacea for resisting authoritarianism nor a silver bullet for regimes to quell social unrest. Indeed, this ambiguity highlights an emphasis on techno-determinism. Instead of arguing whether the technology itself facilitates social change, the answer lies in the fact that in authoritarian regimes, where state power is arbitrary, digital technology is most likely to be co-opted for purposes of surveillance, control and repression. With this in mind, the digital turn in the MENA region is likely to abet rather than challenge authoritarianism. Furthermore, technology can offer new functionalities that extend modalities of repression to potentially alter the nature of regime type itself. With technologies further encroaching into people's private lives and intrusive electronic surveillance wielded with little restraint, authoritarian regimes in the region risk becoming totalitarian in their pursuit of social control. At the heart of this are those countries that are wealthy and developed in terms of ICT (within the GCC), and have good relations with countries specializing in authoritarian tech (such as Israel). These so-called digital superpowers, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, will be instrumental in the shift from digital authoritarianism to digital authoritarianism with increasingly totalitarian impulses.