A big wind of change and revolution is blowing through the Arab world, potentially ushering in a new era in the region’s history. Political maturity and courage have finally come to the Arab people as they revolt against authoritarianism, political inheritance and state corruption. The Arab citizen is being shaped as we speak, free from the chains of subjectivity. Since the Tunisian revolution began, much has been written about the role of social media as, depending on what term you use, facilitator, catalyst, or instigator of the popular uprisings. The Arab world has certainly witnessed a mushrooming of the blogosphere and digital activism over the past few years and political blogging has been hailed by many as a major force and vehicle for change and reform in the region.

The Arab blogosphere arose because young people were frustrated with the restrictions imposed by the state-regulated boundaries of the Arab public sphere which is closed off to most modes of free expression and joint citizen action. The public sphere as defined by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas is the domain in which public opinion can be formed and which can be accessed in principle by all citizens and where they can address all matters without being subject to coercion. Ideally, the public sphere is an inclusive space which is characterized by diversity of opinion and critical debate.

Stifled Expression
In Arab countries, arbitrary state regulation of action and expression in the public sphere has strangulated any form of criticism towards...
regimes and most of the critical perspectives towards socio-economic and cultural issues. Although opposition parties have been present in most Arab countries, either their leadership has languished in prison or exile, or parties modified their rhetoric to an extent that they no longer constituted a threat to the regime, or sometimes even colluded with it.

The work of civil society organizations has also mostly been curtailed and limited to ‘soft’ non-political topics, thus depriving them of a grassroots presence. Most Arab regimes have acted with suspicion towards the most innocent non-political activities; the ban on gatherings under state of emergency laws is the unofficial motto of repressive Arab regimes. Any collective action (e.g. a group of young people clearing their neighborhoods of rubbish – as happened in Syria) is opposed and put down because a) it is an independent action by people not organized or regulated by the state, and b) citizens forming groups, committees, etc., however informal or non-political, are viewed as a possible prelude to organized action against the regime.

The media in the Arab world, directly and indirectly controlled by the state, has mostly been unable to carve an independent space for itself in the public sphere, hampered by rigid editorial lines and forced to portray events through the lens of stagnant state ideologies.

Advances in new mass communication technologies which have revolutionized expression and collapsed boundaries between people (both within and across countries), have allowed young Arabs to relocate civic action and expression from the suffocated (physical) public sphere to the internet, and in so doing, they have created a new virtual public sphere.

A New Power
The political significance of blogging and social media as a whole is evidenced by the fact that in recent years, Arab regimes have cracked down on bloggers with increasing rigor and ferocity. Although this crackdown was most visible in Egypt, which has the biggest blogosphere, other countries such as Morocco and Syria have also detained and jailed bloggers for online activism. Most Arab states do not have laws specifically regulating the internet (although some like Syria have blocked Facebook and Twitter in the past). However, this has stopped neither internet censorship nor the persecution of bloggers, with security considerations being commonly invoked as justification for restricting free online speech (and press freedom in general). Whether online or offline, Arab regimes seek to control the free flow of information, thus controlling individuals. Bloggers have not only been targeted for directly attacking the regime; more often than not, they have been arrested for exposing corruption or public mismanagement.

Arab regimes undeniably possess seemingly limitless power and means of repression which they regularly use with brutal efficiency against dissent.

However, bloggers and online activists have amassed a different and more subtle kind of power. Advances in video and photography technology which have not only made digital cameras and video recorders accessible to lay people, have allowed online activists to document, photograph and record human rights violations, government negligence, police violence and other incidents of daily life, and share them with the vast online community. Once this information is online, it is impossible to eliminate or stop it from spreading. Written testimonies and witness accounts are now powerfully augmented with audiovisual documentation and quickly
disseminated online. As the Egyptian revolution in particular showed, there is a clash between traditional public mass communication via state newspapers and television which require massive physical infrastructure, and new channels of virtual political mobilization which require minimum physical tools.

The Sceptics

There have been and there still are skeptics who perhaps justifiably play down the role and impact of the blogosphere and social media because these domains are perceived as limited to the elite given that the number of illiterate and computer illiterate individuals in the region is still alarmingly high. A common skeptical perspective of social media’s role is that expressed by American-Jordanian journalist Rami Khouri who, writing in the New York Times in July 2010, is sweepingly dismissive of social media’s role in change in Arab societies. Khouri - who following the revolutions has adopted a more positive take - maintained that not only have thousands of bloggers not triggered change in the MENA region, but that young people use digital media mainly for entertainment and “narrow escapist self-expression.”

A more nuanced criticism of the overhyping of the role of social media in effecting radical change is Canadian writer and journalist Malcolm Gladwell’s much commented-upon New Yorker article in October 2010, “Small Change: The Revolution will not be Tweeted.”

Gladwell is dismissive of the power of social networking in effecting change, and posits that the role played by Facebook and Twitter in protests and revolutions has been greatly exaggerated. Social networks, he claims, have encouraged a lazy activism whereby people consider themselves active if they “like” a cause on Facebook but not actually do anything about it. This is because real activism, according to Gladwell, requires strong personal ties which are forged in person, where as social networks are built around weak ties and therefore do not form the basis for effective activism. Citing examples from U.S. history, he states that “events in the early 1960s became a civil-rights war that engulfed the South for the rest of the decade – and it happened without email, texting, Facebook, or Twitter.”

“We seem to have forgotten what activism is,” writes Gladwell. The problem here is that Gladwell’s argument is constrained by his narrow definition of activism, which is limited to street protests and direct action. Activism, especially in the Arab World, has also been about changing people’s perspectives of their governments, fostering previously forbidden debate (which in itself is an act of defiance under authoritarian regimes) on citizenship issues; in this respect, the revolution is being tweeted as we speak.

Are the Sceptics Asking the Wrong Questions?

Egyptian blogger Hani Morsi offers a thoughtful critique of Gladwell’s article in a 2-part blogpost entitled “The Virtualization of Dissent: Social Media as a Catalyst for Change,” and outlines social media’s role in providing change.

Morsi’s response to Gladwell, is that instead of asking “Is social media necessary for popular uprising?”, the question should be, “Is digital activism a true catalyst for social change?”

Morsi starts with the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt and the Iranian Green Revolution, activist movements which relied substantially on social media, namely Facebook and Twitter, to publicize their views, mobilize citizens, and also crucially to organize their activities.

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In Egypt, according to Morsi, social media played a role in reviving a dormant public consciousness and involving it in a dynamic social discourse. Social media has had a long-term influence since the controversial presidential elections of 2005; the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube did not suddenly come into use during the 18 days of the revolution. 25 January 2011 was just the “boiling point” reached after several years of increasingly vocalized dissent, both virtual and real. The process of the virtualization of dissent means that vocalized dissent shifted from real space where it had gone into hibernation to a space that “the Patriarchs do not understand: virtual space”, and then back to “real space in the form of strong confrontational popular action.” Because the regime could not understand or grasp this space, it first tried to detain and intimidate digital activists, and then ultimately, during the revolution, completely shut down the medium, “a move which only betrayed how weak they [had] become and added fuel to the fire”.

Morsi adds that digital activists who shifted confrontation against the regime from real space to virtual space are mostly not representative of the vast majority of Egyptians; the profile is usually of “young, educated, tech-savvy middle/upper-middle class”. However, “this minority… spoke for all of Egypt.”

“By taking the war for reform to their virtual turf, away from the regimes clamp down on political action in real space, then funnelling it all back out to real space in the form of a mighty wave of revolt, they have reclaimed Egypt.”

25 January 2011 was just the “boiling point” reached after several years of increasingly vocalized dissent, both virtual and real.

And on the link between offline and online activists, Gharbeia says:

“In most cases they were the same. Many activists were introduced to activism and incorporated in the groups of activists by first making contact on the web. The Internet was a medium of theorising, campaigning, and organising. All in all it was a method of ‘activating’ the community.”

He adds:

“Some of us have been proposing for long that ‘blogging’ was just the name of the phase, and that we should not limit ourselves to a certain, temporal technology. This is like asking a hundred years ago about “the role the telephone will play in revolutionizing the word.”

Most bloggers agree though that there is a danger in overplaying the role of social media in

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5 Interview conducted on 10 March 2011.
Arab revolutions. As Saudi blogger Ahmed Al-Omran says:

“Many analysts would like to overplay the role of social media in the recent uprising for two reasons: a) providing a simple narrative of events instead of digging deeper into the complexities of the revolutions; b) it’s sexy. It’s far sexier to call this “The Twitter Revolution” instead of trying to explain what actually happened. I believe that social media played an important role in helping people to organize and communicate in these uprisings, but in the end it was the people’s will and determination that has overthrown the dictators.”

6 Interview conducted on 2 March 2011. Ibid.

7 Ibid.

As Palestinian-American social media expert and founder of www.7iber.com Ramsey Tesdell says:

“While social media usage has recently exploded, it must be noted that social media is just a tool used to organize and distribute information. It may be faster and more fun than other tools, but they remain just tools.”

The continuous oppression of the Arab people, the lack of government transparency and unemployment are the real motivating factors behind demands for political reform. People are using new social tools to create new public spaces of expression to call for change.

Tesdell reminds us that ultimately,

“Tools are just tools and without us, humans being social, sharing, listening and creating new information, then they are just tools. The motivation for the revolutions was political, social and economic not because we have Facebook and Twitter... These tools did help bring mainstream media attention to the issues and this helped dramatically as more and more people became involved and push the revolutions to the tipping point.”

Convergence of Medias and Activisms

What the Arab revolutions, uprising and protests have injected in the social media debate is that activism should be taken as a whole, and that there should not be differentiation between traditional and digital activism, as if there is no continuity between them and each occurs in isolation. Every age brings with it newer, faster and more powerful tools of communication, thus a better way of understanding how the Arab revolutions came about is to consider that traditional activism was enhanced, amplified and empowered by digital tools.

Moreover, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc cannot be separated from Al-Jazeera not just in terms of affecting the course of uprisings and revolutions (Al-Jazeera’s live capture of iconic scenes and its broadcast of citizen-shot videos initially uploaded on YouTube played a major role in the ‘branding’ of the revolutions”) but also the rapid spread of information, videos, testimonies, etc. We should also mention the live blogs of major international TV stations and newspapers, such as the BBC and the Guardian newspaper, which also played an important role in gathering information and facts on the ground, as well providing considerable space for citizen voices in the uprisings. This is the new age of mass communication: multiple sources of information which are also conduits for change and expression.
Both the fanciful branding of revolutions as ‘Facebook revolutions’ on the one hand and the outright dismissal of the role of social media and blogs in revolutions on the other hand, miss the point. The former over praises the tool while ignoring the people wielding it, and the latter places too much emphasis on individuals and disregards the tools they used to disseminate information and organize action. Conceptually, it has to be understood that social media is an intrinsic part of the lives of many Arab people, especially younger generations, and thus can no longer be separated from other forms of communication, expression or action. Ownership of the Arab revolutions will always belong to the Arab people and not to Facebook or Twitter or any of the other online tools. But we can also praise the often ingenious way in which digital activists and even ordinary citizens used these tools to analyze, expose and mock at authoritarian regimes, which helped keep alive a spirit of resistance amongst young people.