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Debate

Networks and Internet into Perspective[1]

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The angry Parisians that gathered on the ramparts of the Bastille on that fateful day of July 1789 were unlikely to own mobile phones; nor had they enjoyed many chances, in the weeks leading up to the big event, of being updated on developments by bloggers or twitters. Still, they made it there. And they made it in sufficient numbers, with sufficient unity and commitment, to start what can be safely regarded as a quite successful and impactful mobilization. Of course, had they been able to rely on contemporary technologies, they would have assembled more quickly, and probably in greater numbers; but so would have, presumably, the tanks and helicopters of good king Luis.

Should we then conclude that technologies be irrelevant to the making of 'revolutions' (as well as, more broadly, of sustained challenges to powerholders)? Or – more specifically – that they made no difference to the evolution of the events that took, and are still taking, place in most North African and Middle East countries since January 2011? Of course not (for one thing, communication technology – in that case, printed media – actually DID play a major role even in the development of modern social movements: Tarrow 2011, ch.3). But perhaps we should remember that technologies do not make collective action. Men and women do. They do so, it goes without saying, within the context of their times. But this is not a purely – nor a mainly – technological context. It is at best a multidimensional context, in which technology interacts with other factors to shape patterns of collective action. Among those factor are certainly the relational settings in which protesters are embedded, and which are at the same time created or re-shaped by the unfolding of collective action (Diani and McAdam 2003).

Media scholar Ramesh Srinivasan (2011) is very much along the same lines when he writes, in reference to the recent Egyptian uprisings: ''By fixating on technologies and the few youth that actively use them, we ignore a much more powerful narrative — the story of how synergies are created between classes to mobilize as a network without depending on social media. In Egypt, these networks may include family connections, neighborhoods, mosques, and historical institutions, such as the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood. New technologies hardly erode or overwhelm these classic models of communication and information sharing.''

Srinivasan's perspective is a welcome warning against an overly technological view of the Arab spring. At the same time, it would be misleading to frame current discussions on the role of ICT in recent protests (or collective phenomena at large, e.g. the August 2011 riots in England) as a conventional polarization between technology 'skeptics' and 'enthusiasts'.

[1] I am grateful to Claudia Padovani for her insights on the role of social media in mobilization processes.

For all their variation in emphasis, earlier analyses of the Arab spring (for a synthesis: Khamis and Vaughn 2011) display an underlying consensus on the fact that while communication technology does not cause collective action, it significantly affects its context and shapes its forms (Howard 2011). From a relational perspective, as human communication is channeled through networks (Monge and Contractor 2003), it makes sense to wonder what kinds of relational structures were in place in the Middle East before the 2011 uprisings; what the role of the new communication technologies was in reinforcing and/or altering those structures, and creating new ones (Zhuo, Wellman, and Ju 2011); and what technologies performed what functions at what phase of the protests (Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Srinivasan 2011).

What are, then, the forms of collective action that ICT could contribute to? We can differentiate at least between four different "modes of coordination of collective action": an 'organizational' mode, in which the boundaries of the collective actor overlap with those of specific organizations, and there is no systematic resource exchange between organizations; a 'coalitional' mode, in which resource are exchanged through dense networks but in a largely instrumental way, i.e., with identities and commitments remaining within the confines of specific organizations; a 'social movement' mode, in which dense resource exchanges occur between organizations that also feel part of a broader, longer term political project; and a 'communitarian/subcultural' mode, in which actors experience a sense of commonality that cuts across the boundaries of specific groups but there is no systematic exchange between organizations (Diani forthcoming).

In Western societies, the emergence of social movements can be seen as the process through which specific groups and associations progressively abandon a purely organizational logic of action, aiming at strengthening their monopolistic representation of specific niches of public opinion/issue publics. They gradually move into coalition activity, which in turns produces stronger inter-organizational links and the emergence of broader, longer term identities. Sometimes, the bonds and the shared understandings which are forged in those occasions are strong enough to create long lasting solidarities and collaboration between the actors involved, thus setting in motion a social movement process proper. A social movement dynamic may also emerge from the growth of systematic ties between actors embedded in the same subcultural milieu (Diani forthcoming).

A brief - and admittedly cursory - recognition of some aspects of recent collective action in the Middle East (Diani 2008) suggested a fairly different model than the one dominant in the West. Collective action seemed to stem most of the times directly out of **communities**, drawing upon the non-explicitly political networks and solidarities they provide. In a weak civil society with weak voluntary associations, meeting points include the neighborhood, the bazaar, and particularly the mosque (which is much more than a cult place). In authoritarian settings, forms of resistance do not necessarily overlap with the political (e.g. Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003, 31). Muslim activists have indeed been particularly effective at furthering community ties through largely non political activities. Not only have they drawn upon existing ties in local communities to further mobilization in support of their causes: they have also created new networks through the participation of their activists in several types of community activities (e.g. Clark 2004).

In contrast, in the 2000s there seemed relatively little space for other modes of coordination of collective action. Despite the high numbers of service-providing NGOs, addressing issues of education, health, or capacity building, explicitly **political organizations** were rare – barring major exceptions like Hamas, Fatah, Hezbollah, or Muslim Brotherhood. The creation and maintenance of **coalitions**, especially among left-wing, secular and Islamic actors,

was complex and usually limited to the least controversial issues. Finally, the chances for large-scale **pro-democracy movements** were also fairly limited (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003; Schwedler and Clark 2006; Diani 2008). There seemed to be at least three reasons for this state of affairs:

1) the high salience of multiple cleavages within Middle-Eastern societies - not only the divide between Islamic and secular activists, but also clanic and tribal fractures – rendered it very difficult to promote and maintain coalitions and social movements in the Middle East;
2) the high levels of repression resulted in dramatically higher costs of going public than in the West, and was particularly harmful to those forms of collective action based on associations, coalitions, and movements, which most explicitly require public discourse and public communication;
3) the fact that the elites were more strongly rooted in ascriptive, non universalistic ties to their constituents/clients made it difficult for them to play the brokerage and leadership roles, required to keep broad coalitions and social movements together.

Has the Internet contributed to address those problems, thus facilitating the Arab spring? Regarding the overcoming of traditional barriers, many have noted how even the Arab uprisings confirm the general principle that digital forms of communication ''bring together otherwise remote and disparate groups.'' (Williamson 2011). This need not be on a purely political ground, as what were originally non-political interactions on the web may ultimately lead to explicitly political ones (Saletan 2011). With particular reference to Egypt, Zhuo et al. (2011) have stressed in particular the contribution of ICT in facilitating the collective action capacity of the more advanced sectors of the urban middle classes. ICT would have enabled to overcome the barriers to the emergence of a professional middle class, posed by a society fragmented through clan/religious lines and scarce in professional associations. While the use of Internet is still restricted to a minority of the population in Middle Eastern countries (Ghannam 2011, 5), it is very popular among the youth and those who subscribe to a more individualistic lifestyle and to values of modernity, and therefore among some likely candidates for participation in the street protests of the Spring (Bayat 2011); many observers have also pointed at its rising rate of growth in the last few years (Beckett 2011; Howard 2011). However, other observers have expressed doubts, with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg voicing for example his skepticism regarding the role of the social network in the uprisings.[2] On a more structural and less anecdotal ground, critics have noted that the extent of Internet access in the region bear no correlation to the occurrence of revolts, with Internet penetration being much higher in Persian Gulf countries than in Egypt or Syria, were massive protests occurred (Saletan 2011); they have also pointed at the massive role played by unions – especially unofficial ones – in the conflicts building up to the Spring revolutions and in the uprisings themselves, particularly in Egypt (Gresh 2011).

Many analysts have also emphasized the contribution of ICT to reduce risks of repression and its costs: ''Key tools for the modern revolution are digital because they ……. create channels to bypass traditional state control of the media so the outside world can see what is going on. Alongside traditional activism and action, the tools of the trade today are the internet (for information dissemination and news), social media (to connect and coordinate), mobile phones (to capture what happens) and digital, particularly satellite, television to report it.'' (Williamson 2011). New forms of communication are also less exposed to

[2] See http://blogs.ft.com/fttechhub/2011/05/facebook-eg8/#axzz1VDOdSDfA (accessed on 23.8.2011).

repression than traditional media like the press or radio or TV, if not for other reasons, because of their ubiquitous nature (Beckett 2011). It seems undeniable that ICT facilitate external pressure and monitoring on government's behavior in an unprecedented way, in particular exposing the behavior of local elites to scrutiny from international media (Srinivasan 2011); connect protestors in one country to protestors in similar conditions (the Tunisians followed the inspiration of the Egyptian 6th of April Youth Movement and set up an analogous group on Facebook back in 2008); create a sense of community among people who would easily feel isolated because of the repression of civic life (Zhuo et al. 2011).

At the same time, even sophisticated ICT technology may be repressed, as it has been repeatedly aired by commentators and communication people, including Google's chairman Eric Schmidt.[3] Or, its credibility may be undermined through the creation of fake 'citizens' networks' by governments themselves (Saletan 2011). It is often the case that more modest, less sophisticated, and/or 'older' technologies like ''cell phones, text messages, CDs, flash drives, Twitter'' prove more effective than those directly based on Internet access: ''a ''distributed infrastructure'' of connecting devices can outflank central control. You don't have to link every device to the Internet; you just have to transfer your photo of the government thugs' latest atrocity to somebody else's device before your phone gets confiscated.'' (Saletan 2011). For example, when in late January the Egyptian government blocked access to Internet from PCs, mobile phones still operated (Zhuo et al. 2011, 1).

Regardless of the extent of the impact of ICT on the protests, there is considerable, if anecdotal, evidence pointing at the diffusion processes taking place across the Arab world thanks to the circulation of news made possible by ICT. This is not to say that national specificities not be valued nor recognized: for example, at least some Egyptian activists are keen to point out the differences between their national cases and other episodes of contention, most notably the Tunisian revolt, portrayed as far more 'spontaneous' than the Egyptian one (Khasim and Vaughn 2011). At the same time, several accounts stress the role of successful events in neighboring countries in spurring collective action in new settings (e.g. Zhuo, Wellman and Yu 2011; Williamson 2011).

It seems plausible to expect diffusion mechanisms to have operated also in relation to elites' behaviour. While Arab political elites were already alerted to the importance of developing an adequate ICT infrastructure in their countries (Ghannam 2011, 7), the role of ICT in the protests seems to have translated into ''a new understanding of the power of communication. Arab governments always knew it was important. But now they have seen how it can topple regimes and change leaderships that had been in power for decades…… governments have [also] realized that it was the failings of state-run media which gave the digital channels of communication such power. We saw, for example, the same accusations of foreign infiltration or Islamic extremists meddling in domestic affairs wherever there were democratic uprisings. At its most extreme, radio and T.V. broadcasters simply resorted to screaming and name-calling as they blamed foreign powers for their alleged roles in events'' (Al Sharif 2011). It is also plausible to suggest that the great international visibility of the protests highly increased the costs of both repression and an extension of the conflict in political and economic terms. This led the elites, if not to support the revolts, at least to oppose repression, and ultimately to facilitate the fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.

Admittedly, the evidence on the relevance of online networks and more broadly ICT is still anecdotal and far from conclusive. Having said that, while it seems difficult to challenge the importance of new media in the Spring uprisings, and the contribution they may have

[3] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13935470 (accessed on 23.8.2011).

given to the strengthening of ties and solidarities between members of a previously dispersed urban middle class, it seems difficult to subscribe entirely to the rhetoric of the 'Internet revolution'. An enthusiastic advocate of the centrality of the Internet attributes the continuation of the Egyptian protests even after the Internet was blocked on January 28th to the fact that by that time the process had already started, thanks to ICT, and could no longer be stopped: ''momentum was already building and the Egyptians already knew their route to the streets. That's why when the Internet was blocked around the country in the early hours of Jan. 28, as well as a total blackout on all mobile networks, it never affected the ongoing protests and actually backfired on the government: netizens marched into the streets instead of checking Twitter trends online'' (Zidan 2011). Others, however, might rather take this example as proof of the partial, if non negligible, role of ICT, stressing the limited diffusion of ICT among participants and their reliance, if anything, on older technologies like mobile phones (Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Srinivasan 2011).

The most important point to retain is, ultimately, that technology may contribute differently to different types of collective action (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). ICT may certainly facilitate the spread of shared beliefs among sectors of the public opinion that already share certain basic characteristics (e.g. young age, or a certain level of education), but it is more difficult so see its impact over a much large population with limited Internet access. Likewise, ICT may surely contribute to the rapid growth of *ad hoc* coalitions among actors, united by their opposition to corrupted autocrats, and support a short-times revolt. It is, however, more doubtful whether it can create from scratch the longer-term solidarities that are an essential component of sustained collective action in the form of social movements. The strong uncertainty that has characterized Egypt and Tunisia after the fall of local leaders is probably compounded by the lack of the strong inter-organizational ties that are commonly found in protest movements in established democracies. While we have witnessed a flourishing of organizations in the aftermath of regime fall, and while there was already evidence of thriving civil society in some of the Middle-Eastern countries (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003), the capacity of organizations to secure continuity to collective action appears still limited. It is hard to imagine ICT to operate as a substitute for the ties created by associations and social groups. Having said that, it would be short-sighted to deny that ICT gave a substantial contribution to what appear largely as 'communitarian' forms of collective action: it facilitated the creation of boundaries between people that shared a similar condition, the emergence of common grievances, and the coordination of protest activity. Not enough to secure a long term transition to a stable democracy, but probably enough to speed up the fall of discredited regimes.

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