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**New directions of internet activism in Egypt**

**Abstract:** Research on new media has always highlighted the assumption that in authoritarian contexts, communication technologies provide political activists with ampler space than available in the heavily policed physical world. However, social and political changes taking place throughout Egypt and the Arab region reflect a shift. In a country like Egypt, where only around 30% of the population have internet access, the vibrant digital media scene is relocating itself once more in public spaces. Digital initiatives, such as Askar Kadhibun (Lying generals) and Musirrin (Steadfast), are transforming online media material into older (pre-modern) modes of traditional media, such as graffiti and traveling street performances. This constitutes a shift towards the ascendancy of popular cultural production, and a challenge to the reification and sacrilization of digital media in a context where poverty and illiteracy play a major role in both the dissemination of information and in political mobilization.

**Keywords:** digital activism, social non-movements, Arab uprisings

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**1 Introduction**

The monumental socio-political and cultural changes that have recently swept over Egypt and other Arab countries have left a strong mark on the map of media and communication in the region. This is particularly evident in the field of new and social media. The uprisings have ushered digital media into a new route (which had already not only been maneuvering under the heavily policing authoritarian regimes, but were also still in an uncertain position with regard to visibility and accessibility as a result of the high rates of both illiteracy and poverty in the region). Even though the “techno-Utopian hypothesis” has always had its “skeptics” (Morozov, 2011), it would be hard to imagine that believers in the enormous potentials of information and communication technologies (ICT) have not been rejoicing over recent uprisings in the Arab region, which exhibit with varying degrees the victory of ‘digital resistance’ over long-
entrenched dictatorships. Whereas it would be difficult to underestimate the role of ICT in the current Arab uprisings, it would also be misleading to analyze this phenomenon from a standpoint blind to the historical and regional specificity of national contexts. Internet activism which had been in vibrant motion in most Arab countries a few years prior to the uprisings has witnessed significant shifts which cannot be studied in isolation from their contextual socio-political and cultural underpinnings.

2 Facebook revolutions?

Opinions vary with regard to the degree of influence exerted by new and social media on the recent uprisings in the Arab region. The coordination of the January 25, 2011 events in Egypt was carried out largely on Facebook and other social media sites. The Kollina Khaled Said (We are all Khaled Said) page, for example, launched on June 10, 2010, after the death of a young man in Alexandria, Egypt, at the hands of policemen, attracted 400,000 followers between June and December 2011, and was highly instrumental in coordinating the initial protests (Profile, 2011). On the other hand, the start of the uprising in Tunisia in December 2010 did not follow an initial single digital event. Within a third context, the call for mass protests in Syria was largely an internet-based campaign, though the initial call for demonstrations in February did not amount to much. However, a few weeks later, the uprising there broke out and gained fast momentum (ASMR, 2011, p. 4).

Regardless of whether social media (and digital communication in general) is the main instigator of the Arab uprisings or only one of their potent tools, there is enough evidence in recent research on the use of ICT in the region to suggest that those events were (and still are) highly linked to the use of digital media. Research has shown that the rate of internet use in the Arab region has almost doubled since the start of the uprisings. A recent report produced by the Dubai School of Government has shown that the use of Facebook in the Arab region has grown by 30% during the first quarter of 2011 (ASMR, 2011, p. 9), and that in March 2011, the Twitter population reached 6,567,280 (ASMR, 2011, p. 16). The report also highlights the fact that during the events of early 2011, Facebook in Egypt and Tunisia was used primarily to coordinate the protests and raise awareness of the uprisings both locally and internationally, and only secondarily and with a much lower percentage for entertainment and social networking (ASMR, 2011, p. 6).

The crucial role played by digital media during the uprisings would not come as surprising if we viewed it against the background of the systematic control of traditional media by authoritarian regimes in the region. In Egypt, for example, the post-1952 military rule established the practice of imposing heavy restriction on the exchange of information represented in traditional media such as the press, the radio and television. This has been the practice of regimes which have ruled the country since then. One of the manifestations of this mechanism of control was the creation of the “Ministry of National Guidance, an institution equivalent to present-day Ministry of Information in most Arab countries, to facilitate the use of the media in the service of its political agendas – a move also aiming to guarantee the uniformity of media discourse” (AbdulQader, 1986, p. 228). This type of ‘hegemony by consent’ has been vital to the continuation of autocratic rules in the region despite their obvious lack of popularity. According to this arrangement, both state-owned and private media (notably newspapers and television) in Egypt came to fall subject to huge restrictions by, if not direct control of, the state. National TV and journalism come directly under the directives of the Ministry of Information, while private local satellite channels are subject to soft-to-medium censorship, and restrictive measures varying between disruption of service and closure by the authorities. Some of the private newspapers, which have been launched during the past decade, such as *al-Masry al-Yaum* (founded in 2002), and *al-Shuruq* (founded in 2009) have enjoyed a larger margin of freedom, though they still came under the heavy hand of state censorship, and were largely dependent on state-owned technical facilities such as print houses.

However, it was evidently much more difficult to use the same tactics of surveillance and control with new media. The introduction of digital communication in the Arab region started during the mid-1990s, with Egypt introducing internet in 1993 and later broadband in 2000 (Freedom House, 2012, p. 1). This expectedly provided other means of disseminating information than the heavily policed, state-sponsored traditional media sphere. However, almost two decades following the introduction of digital communication in Egypt, there was still ample room to believe that the expanding internet community would pose a threat to the status quo. Fierce authoritarian regimes throughout the region appeared unshaken by the advancement achieved by an avid, active, and creative (and mainly youthful) internet population. This does not negate the fact that digital communication in the region had been struggling to carve a space for a more egalitarian field of information exchange and self-expression. Concomitant with the expansion of internet use at the beginning of the 21st century, the region witnessed several nascent political and social movements organizing
themselves digitally, such as *Kifaya* (Enough) in Egypt, and *Gerefna* (We are fed-up) in the Sudan.

Recent years also brought about a perceptible increase in the number of internet users in the Arab region. For example, according to an Egyptian Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies report, in January 2011, internet users in Egypt (which is incidentally the largest internet population in the Arab region) amounted to 23.51 million users, with about 32.76% of Egyptian households using internet from home, and around 1.5 million DSL subscribers (Egyptian Ministry of Information and Communication Technology [EMICT] Report, 2011). This migration away from state-sponsored sources of information to the freer and multi-layered cyberspace has paved the way for an unprecedented “ascendancy of online engagement” (Ghannam, 2012, p. 6) on the part of politics and social movements, and helped loosen the grip of autocratic regimes on the exchange of information. It has also created an alternative space which made up for the limitations of physical public space (Aboubakr, 2013, p. 234)

3 Coverage of the uprising between mainstream and social media

With the outbreak of the January protests, and for the first two or three days which witnessed unprecedented large gatherings in public spaces, violent clashes, casualties and mounting tension, ordinary non-politicized Egyptians were faced, some for the first time in their lives, with the huge inadequacy of traditional media (particularly TV and newspapers) in covering the events. This was partly attributable to the nature of traditional media per se (such as scarcity and delayed reportage) but was also and most importantly the outcome of the perceptible failure of these media to provide an adequate and objective coverage of events (ASMR, 2011, p. 6). During the initial stage of the uprising, the pressure to falsify events was so huge that two prominent TV anchors both working for the state-owned Nile News Channel resigned their jobs, citing pressures on them and the channel in general to falsify events and incite the audience against protesters.

Here, social media became vital to disseminating reports from the ‘battlefield’, and to coordinating action. A consequent shift was the perceptible increase in the migration of print readers to digital news sites, with a large number of users also following print media on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Ghannam, 2012, p. 16). The use of Facebook in Egypt during
the events also rose by 17% (for the first quarter of 2011) compared to the same period in 2010 (ASMR, 2011, p. 5). Research has also demonstrated that more people were getting their information about what was happening from social media than from any other source (ASMR, 2011, pp. 9, 13). This prompted the Egyptian authorities, in a desperate attempt to curb the protests, to cut off internet and mobile phone services all over the country with the third day of protests (January 28, 2011). Mobile phone service was partially resumed at the end of the same day, despite the fact that texting was heavily restricted until February 6. Internet service was down in most of the country until February 2. The few days following the resumption of service witnessed a flooding of crude reportage and commentary on social media sites. This development could primarily be seen as a reaction to the inadequacy of traditional media coverage, but can also be seen as a consequence of a development on the ground, where people have turned the public spaces of protest into sites of media, cultural, and artistic production, which then needed concomitant dissemination by the media (Aboubakr, 2013, p. 236).

Because of the heavy restrictions imposed on state-owned and independent media alike, new and social media became the primary vehicle for disseminating information and surplus popular cultural production, which continue until now to poke fun at symbols of the fallen regime and its counter-revolutionary cadre. However, it is difficult to say that that represented a radical shift in the role of these media. It rather strongly accelerated a shift they had been undergoing for some time before the start of the uprising. Indeed, new and social media had been functioning along the same lines of representing an alternative mediascape for some time, especially with the coverage of similar (if less violent) clashes such as the strike of textile workers in April 2008, and a little earlier the uprising of the judiciary in 2005, itself a reaction to constitutional amendments clearly engineered to guarantee a smooth transfer of presidency from an aging Mubarak to an inexperienced and widely unpopular son.

4 New (digital) actors

The sporadic moments of protest and unrest which Egypt had witnessed before the outbreak of protests in 2011 had also already produced new actors who were slowly emerging as new forms of social and political movements on the scene. Examples of these appear in the activism of Kifaya (Enough), al-Gabha al-Wataniyya lil-Taghir (The national front for change), Sitta Ebril (6th of April) and Kollina Khalid Said (We are all Khalid Said). Those were not the traditional partisan or labor union forces, but were primarily informal collectives of popu-
lar forces that were closer in structure and conduct to social non-movements as conceived of by Asef Bayat in his 2010 *Life as politics*. Bayat points out that, bearing in mind the importance of assessing the historical specificity of the term ‘social movements’, it having evolved to describe “political performances that emerged in Western Europe and North America after 1750”, the most important characteristics of social movements are “an organized and sustained claim-making on target authorities”, and a “repertoire of performances, including associations, public meetings, media statements, and street marches” (Bayat, 2010, p. 4). Bayat also points out that, historically, social movements have operated in technologically advanced western societies, mostly by embedding themselves in larger organizations, thereby implicitly adopting those organizations’ ideological frameworks as well as their “methods of claim-making” (Bayat, 2010, p. 19). This degree of institutionalization characterizing the operation of traditional social movements does not appear in the behavior of movements such as *Kifaya*, *al-Gabha al-Wataniyya lil-Taghir* and *Sitta Ebril*, which were more loosely structured and less ideologically driven.

These movements cannot be said to strongly and uniformly reflect the concept of “social non-movements” introduced by Bayat. Bayat’s investigation of social non-movements is primarily focused on what he calls the “new subaltern of the neoliberal city”, lacking structural affiliations that could channel their protest (Bayat, 2010, pp. 11–13). In that sense, the term is mainly concerned with more informal and spontaneous forms of expression and practices than these movements profess. Nonetheless, movements like *Kifaya*, *al-Gabha al-Wataniyya lil-Taghir*, and *Sitta Ebril* profess stronger affinities with Bayat’s conception of the term in that, unlike traditional social and political movements, they chose to work with ‘popular forces’ rather than with established political and social movements such as parties and professional syndicates. They focused on immediate local demands, were mostly loosely structured, and lacked a coherent organizational body (Bayat, 2010, p. 6).

One of the most outstanding features of social non-movements in Bayat’s formulation, and one that brings the term closer to the behavior of those popular movements in Egypt which appeared during the past decade, is the centrality of street activism for social non-movements. Bayat points out that social non-movements undertake their mobilization and activism by going directly to the streets rather than launching their campaigns from “headquarters”, thereby implicitly taking the conflict with the authorities to the area of “control of public space and order”. This active use of public space, Bayat points out, embeds the practices of non-movements in the practices of everyday life of ordinary non-politicized people, as well as opens up more possibilities for imitation of
those practices of protests by others, thereby mobilizing more “non-collective actors” in a non-ideological or post-ideological alliance (Bayat, 2010, pp. 6–21).

Although such movements do not usually receive adequate attention, since they do not fit into our prevailing notions and conceptual categories of organized political movements or traditional social movements, as, for example, defined by Tilly (2004), those nascent socio-political movements represented a new form of activism on the Egyptian political scene. They were instantly popular, attracting wider audience and more perceptible support even among traditional political forces. They grew out of a wide popular disillusionment with traditional opposition parties, which have been for decades ineffective in introducing significant changes into the political status-quo. They also came to partially fill a gap created by the inadequacy of most professional syndicates, which were in turn either too weak and internally divided to operate, or dominated by factions of ‘nominal resistance’. The latter were opposition forces who had perceptively struck a pact with the regime according to which they won minor political gains (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, but also some ‘secular’ political parties).

The approach of the new social non-movements (Bayat, 2010) was also novel and invigorating. Lacking homogeneity, coherent organizational structures, proper ‘headquarters’, and traditional media bodies, they took directly to the streets, mixing their activism with people’s practices of everyday life (Bayat, 2010, p. 11). This type of popular movement was to continue to flourish even after the initial phase of protest was over, operating away from organized politics in a primarily ‘amateurish’ style. Their activism continues to be organized around a wider involvement of non-politicized citizens in the collective endeavor of the core group, and they are involved with the authorities in a tacit battle over control of public space (Bayat, 2010, pp. 19–20). The choice to work with popular movements and to launch campaigns “from the streets rather than from campaign headquarters” (Bayat, 2010, p. 6) grants such non-movements a considerable expansion of territoriality which significantly makes up for the limitations imposed by the regime on shared public space. In this new structure, digital media become simultaneously a vital tool and a necessary condition for the social and political mobilization with which these non-movements are concerned.

With the fall of Mubarak and the onset of a violent and intricate ‘transitional’ period, these nascent non-movements were called upon more urgently than before to represent an alternative voice in ongoing battles. The transitional

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2 This could be gleaned from the huge protests they are managing, although statistical data on their reach and political impact remain missing.
period, which continued for about 18 months until the presidential elections in June 2012, witnessed a battle over power between right-wing Islamists (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood), who were the most organized faction of traditional opposition, and the governing Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF). This often focused on immediate political gains, while it abandoned what most activists deemed the ‘goals’ of the revolution.

While Islamists have already had a long history of municipal and syndicate authority and popular presence, which had cemented their position in society especially among the under-privileged strata, SCAF, the heirs of Mubarak’s not-quite-fallen regime, already had a strong grip over large sections of public life through a long-established tradition of media control. Formal political parties did not have much to contribute to that ongoing battle, and people’s frustration was growing as they witnessed SCAF resume Mubarak’s autocratic tactics and politics of dealing with the opposition. SCAF also adopted Mubarak’s media strategies of control over traditional media and arrest of journalists and bloggers. They were even fiercer in that they expanded the scope of military trials for civilians. During the first six months of the rule of SCAF, there were an estimated 12,000 civilians undergoing military trials, a number nearly five times that of civilians who had undergone military trials during Mubarak’s 30-year rule (Stop Military Trials for Civilians, 2013). SCAF were also more ruthless in curbing private media reportage and citizen journalism.\(^3\)

One of the major points of weakness that emerged during that phase was the inability of the newly emerging untraditional forces to connect with people and meet them on their grounds – an area where both right-wing Islamists and SCAF had ampler experience and advantage. This pointed towards the need for a modified type of activism by the new political actors, especially with the various atrocities committed against protesters during the ‘transitional’ phase, which were led by SCAF and went unprotested by the forces of right-wing Islam. The launching of the presidential elections campaign early in 2012 pointed out the vacuum even more strongly. Here, existing revolutionary forces did not project themselves as readily adequate for the moment, caught up as they were in their lack of political experience, amidst a binarism that had ripped society apart.

\(^3\) The expansion of military trials for civilians under SCAF reached the blog sphere. See, for example, the case of blogger Michael Nabil on http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2941/press-release-regarding-recent-referral-of-egyptia.
5 Digital activism ‘on the streets’

With the lesson newly learnt, some of the emerging non-movements began to search for a niche for themselves in an expanding public sphere. As their predecessors from the last few years of the Mubarak ear, they worked on a different plain from that of organized or semi-organized political movements/parties. Not seeking immediate political power, they went back to the starting ‘goals’ of the revolution and to challenging both the despotism of SCAF’s transitional rule and right-wing political Islam, which were both clearly emerging as counter-revolutionary.

This coincided with, and was strengthened by, the atrocities committed by SCAF during that period. Within a span of about 12 months (from March 2011 to February 2012), SCAF and their allied police forces either committed or orchestrated medium- to large-scale massacres in Cairo and other major cities of Egypt on monthly bases. During one of these incidents (which later came to be called ‘The Maspero Massacre’), military and police forces attacked a peaceful demonstration in front of the state-owned Radio and Television Union building. The grave incident left 28 dead, mostly run-over by army vehicles or shot through the head or chest. Simultaneously with the massacre, army forces stormed into the nearby offices of a couple of private satellite stations (in one incident, while the news was aired live) and held news crews in custody while they ran searches for footages of the massacres, which were then confiscated.

With SCAF gaining almost full control over state-owned media and private newspapers and satellite channels alike, and with the speed with which things were developing on the ground, the need was more pressing on digital media to take on a more active role in the ongoing struggle. Since nascent social non-movements had previously (and successfully so) operated digitally, they now had the chance to expand their digital agency and make use of gains won hard under Mubarak. However, now the digital divide which had been evident in Egypt for years had to be overcome fast. With a 33% illiteracy rate (UNICEF, 2011) and a percentage of around 30% internet users (EMICT, 2011), total reliance on social media appeared more and more as a risky undertaking.

The paradigm now needed to undergo a strategic shift where digital media had to relocate themselves into the lives of ordinary (and mostly dispossessed) individuals and groups. Several non-movements which had started off as digital soon turned towards taking the digital material back to the street, through what

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4 Between October 2011 and February 2012 alone, confrontations between protesters and the security forces under SCAF left more than 160 protesters dead. For more information, see http://kelamondasa.blogspot.com/2012/02/blog-post.html (in Arabic).
could be called ‘pre-modern’ forms of communication, mainly those that do not rely on literacy, such as picture graffiti and street performances. Among these were most notably Askar Kadhibun (Lying generals) La lil-Muhakamat al-Askariyya lil-Madaniyyin (Stop Military Trials for Civilians), Musirrin (Steadfast), Salafiyyo Kosta (Salafists of CostaCoffee), and several others. Some of those were more professedly ‘political’ in nature, while others could be seen as aiming more towards raising social awareness and do-goodism. Since these non-movements are inherently loosely organized, most of them underwent several mutations along the short course of their activism. Askar Kadhibun, for example, has to-date transformed into several other initiatives such as Kadhibun Bism al-Din (Liars in the name of religion) and simply Kadhibun (Liars), while maintaining almost the same line of activism and similar tactics.

6 Askar Kadhibun and Musirrin

November 2011 witnessed bloody clashes in front of Parliament between security forces and protesters demanding a speedy transfer of power from the ruling military to a civil government and an elected president. Launched in the aftermath of these events, Askar Kadhibun set out to expose the atrocities of the ‘transitional’ military rule. It took the task of digitally documenting what it openly referred to as SCAF’s complicity and direct supervision of crimes such as abduction, torture, sexual harassment, rape and random killing. Online campaigns were initially prompted by distorted reports of such atrocities in state-controlled traditional media, as well as by digital campaigns launched by pro-(military) regime actors, accusing activists of fabricating news and doctoring visual footages to scandalize the regime. Visual material had the greatest share in the archives of the initiative. The sources were diverse: anonymous footages posted on video-archiving sites, footages compiled by activist-members of the initiative, and footages handed in by eye-witnesses.

On their Facebook page, the non-profit initiatives refer to themselves as the “internet lie-detector, an alternative – and popular – search engine (...) We are ordinary youth who are habitually referred to as ‘revolutionary movements’ but we originated in the [Tahrir] [S]quare and will remain there. We are sick of the lies of the ruling generals and thieves, and we are out to expose them. We feel it is our duty to shake awake the indifferent and the apathetic and the brainwashed and the deluded and the scared” (Askar Kadhibun, 2011).

The initiative uses low-cost techniques with each street showing involving a white screen and a projector, featuring a data show of the material already collected and archived on their internet site. Since its inception, Askar Kadhibun
has staged nearly 300 street showings in several cities and districts around Cairo as well as in provincial and rural areas. The Facebook page helped accumulate the material by posting a call for anyone who has footage of the crimes of the military to share them. “Help us expose their lies by posting any video footage or photo or personal testimony you can collect, because the most dangerous thing hypocritical media can do is to turn cold-blooded murder into a point of view” (Askar Kadhibun, 2011). The movement has now extended to Kadhibun Bism al-Din (Liars in the name of religion), which is using the same strategies of activism as its predecessor, this time in direct challenge to the elected Muslim Brothers president and his regime.

Established a little earlier in 2011, Musirrin is a non-profit media collective, which started off at the hands of young media professionals and students producing their own visual material and staging shows on temporary cinema screens during mass gatherings and sit-ins. The material produced was usually in the form of short documentaries relying less on narration than on footage. Later, they started, like Askar Kadhibun, to tour the provinces of Egypt with their make-shift cinema. In an interview, Omar Robert Hamilton, one of the founders of the collective, recounts that they were in a sit-in “which was very hot and tiring. So me and a few others set up a screen in the corner of the square and began showing clips from the archive of revolutionary material that was being collected at Musirrin.” They continued with their street shows almost on a daily basis, stealing electricity from any nearby lamppost, “basically building a new cinema every night”. Like Askar Kadhibun, Musirrin used visual material from a variety of sources, filmed or shot by crew members, activists, and ordinary people. The collective also made their street screenings an opportunity to exchange footages with other people, thereby expanding their archives and those of others (in El-Hamamsy, 2012, p. 47).

The founders and proprietors of the initiative demonstrate remarkable awareness of the role of alternative (popular) media in social and political movements. They write on their Facebook page: “Armed with mobile phones and cameras, thousands upon thousands of citizens kept the balance of truth in their country by recording events as they happened in front of them, wrong-footing censorship and empowering the voice of a street-level perspective.” The collective later also started providing “training, technical support, equipment, and a library, organize screenings, open discussions and events”, thereby demonstrating a desire to expand the platform of representation by the public (Musirrin, 2011).

It is also noteworthy that these non-movements collaborate extensively with each other, and that they are trying to deconstruct both the centrality of Cairo as a site of activism and the tradition of central management. Askar Kadhibun
and *Musirrin*, for example, are collaborating with 11 similar collectives such as “The National Front for Justice and Democracy”, “The Revolutionary Socialists”, “The Revolutionary Youth Collective”, “The Youth of Maspero Collective”, and several others, all of whom are quite popular youth activism movements, actively working on the streets in various parts of Egypt. Sherif Gabir, one of the members of *Musirrin*, puts it clearly: “We want the digital material to have an impact, to be able to support the revolution and act politically. Sitting on hard drives or internet social sites alone is not doing much. To reach different groups of people, you need to have your material with you out there on the street” (Gabir, 2012).

These non-movements are organized in such a way that social media (particularly Facebook) are used by a small (core) organizing group, with the activities then taken to the streets where a large number of people can participate in them. This interlocking of activism with the practice of everyday life (Bayat, 2010, p. 11) relies, as is evident from the activism of *Askar Kadhibun* and *Musirrin*, on tactics such as “social media campaigns, demonstrations, graffiti art, online statements and fliers” (Ghannam, 2012, p. 16). Other strategies of campaigning also involve the visual material being broken down into banners and placards, and used in what are called *Salasil al-Thawra* (Chains of the revolution), which are mainly human chains on major streets in Cairo and the provinces carrying posters and banners for a particular cause. Those events are then filmed and digitally archived back on the social media sites. And the circular movement goes on.

7 Digital activism turning ‘pre-modern’

This migration of digital material to the streets cannot be viewed in isolation from a perceptible and more established shift highlighted by recent research, which posits a two-way traffic between mainstream (traditional) media and digital media. Recent research has shown that the expansion of digital media has helped mainstream media gain more followers on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, while social media is allying with print media by constituting a large part of its sources and documentation (Ghannam, 2012, p. 17). This is a move highlighting the fluidity of exchange between mainstream and new media which renders mutually influential upon one other.

However, we cannot view the migration of print media into digital media, or the opposite trajectory of traditional and multi-platform media taking digital material back to the streets without putting into consideration context-specific characteristics of the Egyptian situation. Internet users in Egypt are centered in
Cairo and the major provinces, and constitute only 30% of the population (EMICT, 2011) who can afford not only internet access but also a computer or a mobile phone. Nearly 25% of the Egyptian population live below the poverty line (Poverty and Health, 2010), while there is also the crucial element of illiteracy, which makes almost 33% of the population unable to follow either print or digital media. These facts will continue to challenge the reification (and sacrilization) of digital media in the country.

By moving from the reified and sacrilized space of digital media, nascent non-movements are allying with a wide variety of people on the streets who “structurally lack institutional power of disruption (such as going on strikes)” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11), and, thus, the street becomes an arena of activism. These non-movements expand the scope of their activism and recruit more participants through the reclamation and “active use of public space” (Bayat, 2010, p. 11). The way they use both traditional and digital media, together with their unobtrusive contribution to the production of a new type of (colloquial) popular culture, create an “ecosystem that is changing the news and information channels in the region” (Ghannam, 2012, p. 19). By taking to the streets and adopting ‘pre-modern’ means of information dissemination and mobilization, these movements introduce not only a new kind of activism, but also a new direction of media behavior in the Arab region. During their activities such as street performances, data shows, flash mobs and similar open-space activities, organizers of such events, as has been previously pointed out by Hamilton (in El-Hamamsy, 2012, p. 47), invite people who happen to have digital (usually visual) material recorded on their mobile phones or other portable devices of clashes with police forces or of violent dispersion of protests to produce them for inclusion in the ‘impromptu’ show. Instead of having information ‘produced’ at computers in the ‘cyber world’, people in their active physical social space become the producers of information and news, and participate in its dissemination. This helps establish a collective identity amongst participants, which provides more potential for sustained action. By this means, “‘chic politics’ of ad hoc and short-lived interventions” turn non-movements into “contentious politics and social movements” (Bayat, 2010, pp. 23–24). By taking digital material (particularly visual material) to the streets, the image is turning mobile in other forms (Aboubakr, 2012, p. 243). This surplus of visual material constitutes a form of popular cultural product that enhances the life of activism on the streets.
8 Conclusion

Despite their widely different socio-political contexts, Arab uprisings have all had the shared goal of securing freedom of expression which had for long been confiscated by despotic regimes. One of the most effective tactics of achieving this goal seems to have been for the people to seize over their own means of expression and representation. In this respect the uprisings (especially in Egypt and Tunisia), which might not have achieved the desired political or social goals so far, are in fact more successful in achieving ‘cultural victories’ by means of taking over their voices and their rights to social space. In addition to its being a potent tool of political and social mobilization, the new type of activism introduced by new actors in the region also represents a form of popular cultural production which likewise deconstructs traditional (conservative) forms of cultural production prevalent in (conservative) Arab societies. Popular culture as the “expression of social formations” intent on emancipatory action (Inglis, 1988, p. 240) interlocked with this form of activism. This renders the ongoing revolutions in the Arab region more the sustainable cultural revolutions that had been for long direly needed than the abrupt regime change they did not quite manage to effect. In Egypt, and by extension throughout the Arab region now witnessing variations of ‘revolutions’, the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) moves to the streets and is made open to wider participation than ever before in the history of the region. This ‘cultural revolution’ is strongly tied to social and political transformations; it is both a product and a producer of those. We will, however, have to wait for a few years to see how this transformation of activism will manage its battle with neo-authoritarianism – a battle which to-date has been bravely enacted not only through a turning about of power relations in traditional political, social and cultural hierarchies, but also in the evident turning about and manipulation of information and communication technologies to serve local ends.

Bionote

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