Merzak Allouache’s latest feature, *Normal* (2011), poses the question, from its very beginning, whether its film-within-a-film should have an alternative ending. As uprisings spark off in nearby Tunisia and Egypt, an Algerian director reassembles the cast of his two-year-old drama-documentary in hopes of persuading them to appear in fresh footage that captures civil unrest in their own country. Not everyone involved agrees with the idea, let alone on how it should be handled. Can such events be shoehorned into work that began under seemingly different premises? What are the numerous implications of capturing such activities anyway, especially in their initial throes? How does one start and how does one stop representing unfinished processes like these? Parallel dilemmas about rewriting and reediting have troubled those of us contributing to this dossier, too. It has not been easy for any of us to wrap up, particularly when we are so evidently addressing an uneven and incomplete struggle, rather than a tidy event, a heterogeneous cluster of dissent that simultaneously seeks inspiration from neighboring countries and beyond (*Normal* itself asks, as in Tunisia, so in Algeria?). The protracted production practices of academic publishing, like those of feature film, will always fail to achieve what the quick-fire coverage offered by other formats, such as Twitter or online journalism, can. Therefore the urgency of an immediate response to rapidly changing events has not been our primary objective here.

At the same time, these protests have been vitalized by unforeseen and unprecedented media engagement, garnering the media an even more multileveled involvement in politics than is typically the case, and thus positioning media scholars in a dynamic yet thorny position. As has been roundly recognized, citizen journalism has filled certain voids created by censorship, biased state-sponsored coverage, press-permit denials, and the intimidation of both professional and nonprofessional commentators. Furthermore, the media have helped mobilize a people and catapulted its activists into unusual positions of...
authority. Few could have predicted blogger Slim Amamou’s passage from a Tunisian interrogation cell to the Ministry for Youth and Sports within a few short days (a position he hastily relinquished). Nearly a year later, Egypt’s leading Tweeter, Sandmonkey (Mahmoud Salem), along with other social media activists, stood in the parliamentary elections but failed to win popular support. With 67 percent of the vote shared between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi al-Nour Party, the movers and shakers of the so-called Facebook revolution are not, in the end, the faces assuming orthodox political power, perhaps because that platform does not boast particularly high per capita penetration in Egypt (7.66 percent), with only 1 percent of all Internet content delivered in Arabic anyway.1

Meanwhile, more customary relationships between the state and the media hold strong. There has been widespread terrorization—intimidation, torture, assassination—exact upon those who risk and lose their lives reporting and whose footage has been routinely captured and wielded as counterinsurgency evidence. The power of the old guard as exacted through the media cannot be underestimated either. This explains why Maspero, the Egyptian state media building, has become a major site of both massacres and demonstrations, with footage of local atrocities regularly projected onto its edifice by protesters.

All the while, production schedules for the region’s once-buoyant film industries have stagnated, largely because audiences are timorous about venturing out to theaters.2 The cancellation of last year’s Cairo Film Festival on account of Egypt’s dire economic straits is testament to the reduced local financing for audiovisual material from the region. Although Arabs are certainly producing a flurry of interpretations of their situation, the revenues largely accrue in the pockets of foreign companies like YouTube. Who, then, is profiting from these revolutions?

While the regional governments have been quick to discredit amateur reportage—setting up bogus online forums (e.g., the Syrian Electronic Army), passing off staged footage as actuality,3 and declaring visual proof of their brutality to have been doctored in Photoshop—they, too, have staked claims on the incidents and aftermath of January 2011. Anniversary celebrations in Egypt were framed by the state as commemorating clear-cut victories of its own making, its efforts just another battle in the war to brand, determine, and own the proceedings. Normal's central questions about the ethics of representing revolution could not be more pertinent. What are the consequences of

1 Alex Shalaby, “Flash Forward: The New Egypt, Investing in Our Future,” Mobinil, http://www.iesc.org/Data/Sites/1/SharedFiles/egyptforward/presentations/ExecRoundtable_ShalabyMr.AlexPresentation.pdf, 13, 18 (accessed February 17, 2012). It should also be noted that Internet access varies significantly in the countries that have witnessed uprisings. Internet penetration in Yemen, for instance, is decidedly low, whereas heavy government censorship shapes access patterns in Libya and Syria. For further analysis of these differences, see “Twitter, Facebook and YouTube’s Role in Arab Spring [sic],” Social Capital Blog, January 26, 2011, http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/twitter-facebook-and-youtubes-role-in-tunisia-uprising/.


3 See, for example, this clip from Syria’s Al Dunia channel, for a sense of a staged televisual event and the debates surrounding such manipulations: “The Syrian Regime in the Square—A Satire” (my translation), YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuMdNDTbr_k (accessed February 17, 2012).
packaging up these intifadas as events rather than processes? The manicuring, even invention, of such narratives by dominant geopolitical forces—often in ways that ape mainstream cinematic drama—is something that Aaron Bady’s contribution to this issue probes more fully.

Nor should a collection of essays like this one be considered exempt from any scrutiny of incentive. The uprisings have, inevitably, been transformed into a parade of commodities, including the one you are currently reading, most of which do not apportion their profits to the struggles’ continuance, whereas those that might aver to aid resistance can come laden with debilitating and duplicitous provisos. The Egyptian telecommunications giant Mobinil (famous for its connivance in shutting down the phone networks in January and February of 2011) recently launched a campaign that brazenly capitalized on revolutionary iconography, overwriting it with supportive sound bites from international political actors (Figure 1). Is it any wonder that the demonstrations of late have incorporated precious few of the previous placards thanking the social media for their contributions? Graffiti and banners denouncing state media still remain (Figures 2–4).

Outside the nation-states directly involved, the Cannes Film Festival made Egypt its first “guest country” in 2012, screening fare quick off the protests’ starting blocks, including the portmanteau movie 18 Days (Tamant’ashar Yom; 2012), whose contributors included Sherif Arafa and Marwan Hamed, both of whom had previously worked on Hosni Mubarak’s 2005 presidential campaign. What is significant about early offerings like these, including Tahrir: The Good, the Bad and the Politician (Ayten Amin, Tamer

4 Taher, “Egyptian Cinema in 2011.”
Ezzat, and Amr Salama, 2012), is that none of them appears to stem organically from a revolutionary production ethos, and few, unlike Normal, are happy to raise the question of ulterior motives for the inclusion of such topics in their personnel’s career portfolios. Other questions emerge: What should insurrectionary media look and sound like? And, more fundamentally, how should it be made? Unlike nonhierarchal, non-profit-making media collectives which work more resolutely as a part of the revolution—like Mosireen (which organizes, trains volunteers, and freely loans equipment to document the daily struggle) or Kazeboon (which holds unsanctioned guerrilla screenings of civil rights violations in public spaces)—these films unquestionably relay the events but still uphold most of the conventions of cinematic representation, infrastructure, elitism, and modes of manufacture of old. It might be ventured that such approaches sit at odds with deeper revolutionary ideals. Can the cooperative disposition of Tahrir transfigure media production? At least the improvised performances mobilized by Normal convey some of the uprisings’ confusion, their un-premeditated action, and the necessity for debating cultural workers’ political efficacy. But, still, the tenets of competition for finance, stardom, career building, and profit generation through the commodity value of “the latest new thing” remain, and the same goes for much academic commentary.

Similar principles course through nongovernmental organization (NGO) philanthropy streams. Barely a month after the first wave of protests, the Brussels-based al-Mawred al-Thaqafy, via donations from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute, announced its “one-time initiative to fund the production of original works . . . that are to be created in response to or in the context of the current wave of revolutionary activity and popular uprising in the Arab region.”5 At best, such schemes, which demand single-name rather than collective bids, insist on reactionary and individualistic modes of creativity. At worst, they espouse the soft-power rhetoric of aid, encouraging submission to these agencies’ loaded agendas of “strengthening democratic values” and “promoting international cooperation.”6 If experience serves us correctly, a particular conception of revolution (likely diverted away from unmasking the complicity of overseas policy and investment) may well be allocated a place of privilege next to older, similarly loaded topics so beloved of charitable support (ones such as Islamic “fundamentalism” and the local violations of women’s rights), which drastically curtail how Arabs are subsidized to represent themselves.7 Unsurprisingly, then, suspicion of foreign interest is strong on the ground and mounting by the day, prompted in no small part by how Western military aid and multinational media corporations alike have acted in cahoots with a host of anti-insurrectionary forces, including in Iraq and Palestine. Such diplomatic and capitalistic matrices are detailed and critiqued more fully in Miriyam Aouragh and Helga Tawil-Souri’s contributions to this feature.


7 For a fuller and more incisive account of international NGOs’ complicity with and role in spreading particular brands of neoliberal ideals, see Hanan Toukan, “Art, Aid, Affect: Locating the Political in Post–Civil War Lebanon’s Contemporary Cultural Practices” (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2011), esp. 151.
Within these prevailing conditions, what can an English-language, American-owned journal say about the uprisings? More particularly, can we derail academia’s propensity to inscribe rather than to be a useful part of a fight for autonomy? Here, our frustratingly ponderous modus operandi, our disciplinary resolve to hook together and explain sociopolitical complexities, may be of some merit. All the articles in this In Focus are inspired by decades of study within these spaces and unwaveringly stress a continuity of struggle amid the media landscapes of the Arab world, interrelationships that undermine the damaging implications of foregrounding or appealing to international agency. Karim Tartoussieh’s essay, for instance, examines how homegrown movies and talk shows assessed the Mubarak regime’s shortcomings well in advance of help from Facebook, Tumblr, WordPress, and YouTube. Walter Armbrust’s analysis of Rami the Protester (Rami al-I’tisami; Sami Rafe, 2008), an unnervingly precise before-the-fact prediction of the protests that were to come, unravels the trajectory of social ills and modes of remonstration that build toward the revolution’s (and the counterrevolution’s) inevitability. Add to this Tunisia’s strong catalog of politically critical cinema and how Syrian movies like On the Sand, Under the Sun (Fawwa al-Raml, Thta al-Shams; Mohamad Malas and Hala Abdalla, 1998), Cousin (Ibn al-‘Am; Mohammad Ali Atassi, 2001), and The Long Night (Al-Layl al-Tawil; Hatem Ali, 2009) outspokenly confront the issue of political prisoners. Researchers also contribute to these archives, adding a political history that can be offered up as a resource for revolutionary action.

Those of us writing from these perspectives are also (perhaps painfully) aware of how tenuous the media’s and the academy’s power is to straightforwardly generate consensus or amass the numbers of active bodies placed in dangerous situations essential to overthrowing a regime. The articles assembled in the following pages are adamant that the hardships of unemployment, police brutality, corruption, inflated food prices, and labor inequalities should take precedence over vindicating high-tech capitalism. As the denouement of Normal makes patently obvious, the problems of sexual repression and a lack of opportunities for young people that were tackled by the diegesis as it stood before the protests are entirely integral to contemporary unrest. Revolution stands not as an addendum but as a logical and imperative outcome.

These extensions of what prompts and counts as dissent are crucial. If the revolutions are to reach beyond their now-tolerated off- and online spaces of protest, be it Tahrir Square on certain Fridays or various media or scholarly outpourings, the work we do must push outward. Rasha Salti’s attention to physical presence in her article addresses this issue head-on. The necessity to relearn is perhaps one of the reasons it has been difficult for us to write; the means by which we conduct ourselves personally, politically, and professionally require reformulation, and this cannot be achieved with ease or speed. The privileges of academic discourse—to deliberate, to draw together an intricate, engaged history, and in many cases, to live beyond immediate danger—are afforded in often-compromised ways. However imperfectly, given the aforementioned constellation of constraints, we want these articles to function as a meager contribution to what has been going on, not simply as a removed commentary on them.

*
Spectators to Revolution: Western Audiences and the Arab Spring’s Rhetorical Consistency

by AARON BADY

The time has come for us to leave our seats in the auditorium and create the next scene ourselves.

—Alaa Al Aswany

When a Tunisian fruit seller named Mohamed Bouazizi doused himself with gasoline and fatally immolated himself in 2011, his death inaugurated what many now call the Arab Spring. If his was the speech of a subaltern—the figure whose voice is structurally written out of dominant political narratives—then the fact that his self-immolation was heard is remarkable. The fact that his death was both transmitted to global audiences and has translated into concrete political action, with startling rapidity, needs to be understood. Instead of being pathologized or passed over in silence, his death has been read and rewritten as violence, first as a sacrifice and resistance, requiring reverence, and then as violence done to him, requiring reaction. Thousands of marchers at his funeral chanted, “Farewell, Mohammed, we will avenge you. We weep for you today, we will make those who caused your death weep.” And the world has heard them.

What accounts for the way an event like this one—hardly unusual, in and of itself—came to be so widely seen and heard? How did the routine violence of economic exploitation and political exclusion become subjectively sensible to global audiences? How did Bouazizi’s death become “grievable” beyond his immediate circles of friends and family? Most important, how did his suicide come to be retroactively

perceivable as a violence done to him, by a Tunisian state to whose illegitimacy that redefinition came to testify and bear witness?\textsuperscript{5} These are not questions that can be answered in strictly political terms or understood only by reference to concrete grievances, privileges, or governance. Narrating the story of the Arab Spring in terms of concrete political events—the protest to repeal Egypt’s notorious emergency laws, for example, or the fall of autocrats and the holding of multiparty elections—would leave out the transformation in broader public perception that these events have inaugurated and would not take into account the changing modes by which politics is mediated. As Ebrahim Moosa puts it, the “jubilation, conversations, speeches, greetings, protests, banners, deaths, wounds, and other expressions” that have accompanied the demands and objectives of revolutionaries and protesters collectively represent what he calls “the order of the sensible,” which is distinct from the simply political, and which has come to dramatically reframe and reorganize the way in which political events and possibilities in the region can be understood. And as Moosa puts it, although the political end results of the Arab Spring are far from certain, “there is one certainty: the people have changed the order of the sensible.”\textsuperscript{6}

Behind the deserved triumphalism of this claim, however, I want to ask whether other kinds of violence still fall outside the realm of the subjectively sensible. As we mourn Bouazizi, for example, do other lives remain ungrievable? How does the change in sensibility that Moosa describes also limit its own extent, defining down and constraining the very historical possibilities that are being opened up? And whose sensibility is it?

To answer this last question, the first thing to note about Bouazizi’s inauguration of the Arab Spring is the fact that it has been a fundamentally retrospective reinscription: his suicide could be signified as a sacrifice in mainstream Western media only after the Arab Spring had become manifest, only after the unprecedented mass protests in cities across the region gave it retroactive legitimacy and visibility. If his death “inaugurated” the Arab Spring, in other words, it could be seen to do so only after the Arab Spring had made that redefinition possible.

At the same time, however, an origin story like Bouazizi’s gives the Arab Spring its human legibility; by reference to the violence of Bouazizi’s death, this disassociated series of events becomes a singular thing, an Arab Spring, which can be named and understood as such. As Hamid Dabashi puts it—through a brilliant reading of Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman’s \textit{Divine Intervention} (Yid Ilhiyya; 2002)—the Arab Spring can be understood as “a mode of narrative montage in which we sequence and

\textsuperscript{5} As Talal Asad has pointed out, especially in Western media, the spectacle of the Islamist suicide bomber is an iconic figure whose status as “terrorist” testifies first to the illegitimacy of the act and then to the legitimacy of the targeted regime. But as Bouazizi’s act has been retroactively invested with powerful social sanction, the legitimacy of his act reinscribes that figure precisely in reverse, making manifest the illegitimacy of the Tunisian state. Talal Asad, \textit{On Suicide Bombing} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

edit specific historic events in the Arab world and give them a rhetorical consistency that banks on our dreams and thrives on our hopes. That act of creative and critical montage is what makes the Arab Spring both plausible and meaningful.”

Yet if a “rhetorical consistency” emerges from this inconstant montage of events, the “we” of Dabashi’s statement remains strikingly (and perhaps necessarily) ambiguous, an ambiguity my own language has had no choice but to adopt. For if the Arab Spring is bound together by its spectatorial logic—which becomes visible only as we tease apart origin and consequence, and discover their mutual co-implication—then the perspective which is formed necessarily prescribes and circumscribes the form that the Arab Spring will be allowed to take. When Tahrir Square is the primary point of mediation by which the violence of the Arab Spring becomes meaningful, then Mohamed Bouazizi’s martyrdom becomes subordinated to the event that made it sensible and comprehensible, the spectacle of Tahrir Square. And when the comprehensibility of the latter is what makes the former meaningful, we privilege the spectator’s ability to understand—to spectate meaningfully—as the point at which the subaltern can be recognized as speaking, the precondition for his or her legibility.

A very particular narrative of the Arab Spring is implied by this spectatorial position, in other words, as a function of Tahrir Square’s prominence. To make a list: the revolution must be peaceful; it must be secular; it must be a mass movement (but must particularly include the urban bourgeoisie); it must be above and outside of electoral politics; it must demand the ouster of a gerontocratic despot (and not target the United States or Israel); there must be signs and banners (in English, if possible); there must be Internet-savvy youth; it must be televised; and above all, it must have a clear ending.

To put it simply, this perspective leaves a great deal outside the frame. For what becomes of the forms of dissent—say, the hundreds of Egyptian police stations that protesters burned to the ground—that do not match this model? What of the many sites of protest that were not so neatly arranged in a centrally located and photogenic square in Cairo? Just as a very particular version of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. will often be held up as the ideal type of civil disobedience (a model from which no divergence can be seen as legitimate), Tahrir represents a similarly normative standard for acceptable Arab revolution. In other words, while Tahrir literally means “liberation” in Arabic, the example of Tahrir Square has come to name (and constrain) a very specific and limited form of appropriate liberation.

Without passing judgment on any of these particulars, I want to suggest that the specific spectatorial authority that is implied by this mode of narration is perhaps the most important part of it, the position from which the spectator not only makes the event meaningful but also passes judgment on it. It is the spectator who has, to use Edward Said’s powerfully polemic phrase, “permission to narrate,” and who does so, first, by

8 In Butler’s terms, this is the point at which “apprehension” becomes “recognition.” Butler, Frames of War.
9 See also Miriyam Aouragh, “Framing the Internet in the Arab Revolutions: Myth Meets Modernity,” in this issue’s In Focus section. Aouragh questions how the “Facebook revolution” narrative “imposes a particular understanding of activism,” one which has “little meaning for the multileveled struggles taking place off-line.”
reference to the kind of revolution which is possible to comprehend, and second, by
the exclusion of the forms of dissent whose illegibility marks their incomprehensibility.10 Within “the” order of the sensible, this form of sensibility remains privileged.

In the public statements made by world leaders and diplomats in January and February of 2011, for example, the pose of the interested spectator urging “restraint” was both strikingly consistent and strikingly authoritative. I’ll list a few examples, whose tedious regularity should make my point: on January 25, State Department spokesman P. J. Crowley urged, “All parties should exercise restraint, and we call on the Egyptian authorities to handle these protests peacefully”; on January 28, Hillary Clinton urged “that there be a restraint on the part of the security forces”; on January 29, Barack Obama said his focus was on “calling for restraint, supporting universal rights, and supporting concrete steps that advance political reform”; on February 4, the European Union issued a statement declaring that it was “following with utmost concern the deteriorating situation in Egypt” and urged that “all parties should show restraint”; on February 10, Obama stressed that “it will be essential that the universal rights of the Egyptian people be respected,” and that “there must be restraint by all parties. Violence must be forsaken”; and on February 17, Pentagon spokesman Colonel Dave Lapan called “on all parties to exercise restraint and refrain from violence,” noting that “as a long-time ally and home to the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet, Bahrain is an important partner, and the department is closely watching developments there.”11

Of course, as many have noted, this pose of the disinterested interest of the detached spectator has represented a colossal historical amnesia: the foundations of Mubarak’s rule were the very concrete bonds he formed with Europe, the United States, and Israel. The idea that the United States ever had the choice to remain an interested but uninvolved spectator directly mystifies something very basic about the situation. And this is precisely why such statements were necessary: vocally urging restraint takes the place of concrete sanctions or active interventions on the side of the protesters (such as ceasing to passively intervene on the behalf of their oppressors through ongoing continuity of support). The pose of nonintervention—the pretense, for example, that the Fifth Fleet’s location in Bahrain is compatible with the Department of Defense “closely watching developments” there—aggressively asserts a non-intervention that is contradicted by the facts (such as the very recent appointment of

“Miami Supercop” John Timoney and former Metropolitan Police official John Yates to train Bahrain’s police force.12

It is with this mystification in mind that we should note how exclusively the Western media has covered ongoing struggles in the region by reference to the relatively brief period between mass public mobilizations in the beginning of the year and the formal ouster of Ben Ali and Mubarak. The eyes of the world were glued to images of the mind-boggling crowds that overwhelmed the efforts of the Egyptian state to threaten or compel them to leave. Their presence seemed to speak for itself, in a language that required no translation to be understood by global audiences: as long as they were present, the illegitimacy of the Egyptian regime was both self-evident and exacerbated by any and all violence used to dislodge the protest. When the military appeared to take the side of the protesters, the drama seemed to have come to a triumphant conclusion.

But, of course, the spectacle of Tahrir has not been so easy to replicate, nor has the revolution been as globally televised ever since. After its wildly successful sneak preview in Tunisia, the West’s Tahrir Show was released to such rave reviews in Cairo in the weeks after January 25 that a variety of sequels were quickly rushed into production (each with a “day of rage” and similar efforts at mass mobilization in squares named or renamed Tahrir). But these sequels have tended to fare poorly: of the uprisings that have occurred in seventeen of the Arab League’s twenty-two member states, perhaps only Libya’s revolution has accomplished any kind of fundamental, structural transformation. The Tahrir show has been suppressed in Syria and canceled in Yemen, and plans for a screening in Saudi Arabia seem to be on indefinite hold. Showings in Iraq and Palestine were scheduled, but the tickets were never made available, whereas in monarchies across the rest of North Africa, the Tahrir show seems to have gone straight to video. And in Bahrain, the theater owners simply burned the place down.

If it seems callous or simplistic to speak about these popular uprisings like movies or TV shows, then this is precisely my point: the West has, for better or for worse, assumed the role of critical spectator with respect to the world-changing events of 2011. And I mean this in a very concrete way: by fetishizing the massive crowds in Tahrir Square as the thing itself, we have translated the form through which so many of us followed those events—Al Jazeera’s live streams, videos on YouTube, and (occasionally) evening-news photography—into a critical understanding of those events as having actually been defined by that form.

As the journalist Rami Khouri has pointed out, even the term Arab Spring is essentially external to the region it describes, a term used to make sense of an event from which we are excluded and forced to observe from afar; most Arabs simply use the words revolution (thawra in Arabic), uprising (intifada), awakening (sahwa), or renaissance (nahda).13 But while the seasonal metaphor implies the historical inevitability of summer, it would be a mistake to presume the completion of a struggle that is still so

fundamentally in question, especially in Egypt; as many have pointed out, post-Tahrir Egypt may simply represent the continuation of Mubarakism, but without Mubarak.

Even the term’s etymological origin urges a particular kind of caution. Arab Spring was first used by conservative American commentators in 2005 to interpret a variety of (ultimately short-lived) democratic developments in the Middle East as vindication for George W. Bush’s “freedom agenda,” the neoconservative theory that toppling dictator Saddam Hussein would open the floodgates to democracy in the region.14 The use of spring in this sense is almost certainly derived from the Prague Spring of 1968, the attempt at political liberalization and democratization in Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia, which ended when the Soviet Union crushed the reforms by force. But even before that was the 1848 Springtime of Nations—in German and French, the Völkerfrühling and Printemps des Peuples—a pan-European series of revolutionary uprisings that also almost uniformly resulted in counterrevolutionary repression, perhaps most famously in the return to power of a Bonaparte in France.

What these historical precedents have in common, in other words, is that they were popular uprisings that were put down by military force, the very outcome that currently goes most unnarrated in the Western media. And the absence of that which has been left on the cutting-room floor—of that which fails to catch the West’s interest—has left us with little in the way of interpretive tools for understanding the manner in which the Arab Spring has continued or has failed. For to reduce the Egyptian Revolution to the events around Tahrir Square itself, to the period between January 25 and Mubarak’s departure on February 11, would be to fetishize the form of protest over the substance of the revolution it brought to a fever pitch, which both long preceded that seventeen-day period and continues even now.

Dreaming of Counterrevolution: 
*Rami al-I’tisami* and the Pre-Negation of Protest

by Walter Armbrust

In 2008, a little more than two years before the January 25, 2011, revolution in Egypt, Khalid Galal’s mainstream comedy *Rami al-I’tisami* (*Rami the Protestor*) predicted certain important elements of the form that the revolution would take. With even greater prescience, *Rami* anticipated the discursive battle that would be waged against it, both during the mythical eighteen days leading up to Mubarak’s fall and in the months afterward.

The Film. *Rami the Protestor* depicts a “Facebook revolution” inspired by the April 6 Youth Movement’s failed attempt in 2008 to organize a national general strike in support of a wildcat strike planned by textile workers in the delta industrial town of Mahalla al-Kubra. *Rami’s* “protestors” are feckless rich kids led by Rami Sultan, son of the politically connected chief executive officer of the Egyptian-American Company. In an effort to impress a girl, Rami organizes a sit-in. He has no cause. The goal of his protest is merely to change the national anthem, a notion that comes to Rami while he and his friends idly invent Facebook groups during a hashish-smoking session (Figure 1). To his surprise, the idea attracts some two hundred thousand Facebook followers. The media take notice, and a popular talk-show host invites

Figure 1. Rami smokes a joint while trying (and failing) to play the old national anthem on his guitar in Khalid Galal’s *Rami the Protestor* (Rotana, 2008).
Rami to appear on his program. Rami arrives just as the host finishes interviewing a passionate labor leader, who pledges to further the workers’ cause by engaging in an unauthorized strike and a sit-in at the corporation’s headquarters. Rami then finds himself in the national television spotlight, totally out of his depth. With no genuine political cause to champion, he desperately parrots the union leader from the previous show, thereby inadvertently raising the stakes of his own fake protest by promising to turn it into a sit-in at the headquarters of the prime minister.

The next day, a protest actually begins outside the office of Ra’fat Hamid, the prime minister. Ra’fat, wary of media attention and scrutiny by foreigners, allows the sit-in to continue. As the protest grows, Rami’s would-be girlfriend actually does become impressed with his “movement.” She joins him and turns it into a “five-star sit-in,” with catered food, a membership fee of five hundred Egyptian pounds (more than many salaried workers make in a month), tents for the protestors to sleep in, and a nightly *i’tisam barty* (sit-in party). Everyone wants a piece of the action. Foreigners—specifically the American embassy—do indeed take notice, and they like what they see. The Americans pressure Rami’s wealthy father into providing lavish financial backing for the sit-in, and he complies, assuming that his cooperation will bring him lucrative American contracts. Rami’s “cause” also attracts local attention. A group of poor people evicted from their illegal occupation of land by a rapacious developer join the protest. Their leader is Kaka, a thief and a *baltagi* (thug) who knows Rami because he stole his mobile phone and held it for ransom. Islamists also join the protest—the last group to do so, but the one that the government fears the most. They are led by Abu al-Mawahib, a bearded fanatic in a stereotypical white *galabiyya* (gown).

Although fear of negative media attention ties the hands of the beleaguered prime minister at first, he ultimately emerges as a man of conscience stuck between the rock of frivolous and inarticulate “demands” by the youthful, rich-kid protestors, and the hard place of his responsibility to keep the machinery of government moving. Ra’fat holds a sword of Damocles over the protestors’ heads, in the guise of a detachment of Central Security Forces soldiers. But he orders them to contain the demonstration, not to break it up. As Rami’s national-anthem stunt evolves into a lavish five-star nightly *i’tisam barty*, the soldiers become victims: they are simple folk forced to stand by impotently while observing a performance of debauchery that alternately tempts them and shames them. Ultimately, the sit-in does prove explosive. However, the spark that lights the fuse is not the political tension between the government and the protestors but the social tensions within the three groups of protestors. Each group suspects the other of making a deal with the government to achieve its own aims, even though none of them can articulate any demands more serious than changing the national anthem. Secret deals are in fact brokered, but on all four sides (the three protest groups plus the prime minister’s office), the plotters are subordinates rather than the leaders. It all comes to grief when the Islamists—the edgiest of the three groups—start throwing Molotov cocktails. The tent cities of all three groups go up in flames. Only one person dies: an innocent Central Security Forces soldier, slain while trying to protect the rival groups of protestors from hurting one another. Rami’s final act in the protest is to show both his contrition and his patriotism, by covering the slain soldier with an Egyptian flag. A brief epilogue shows Rami as a successful and socially conscious “youth businessman,”
owner of a chain of factories called the Egyptian-Egyptian Company (in pointed contradistinction to his father’s Egyptian-American Company). Rami’s productive enterprise employs both Kaka, his erstwhile mobile phone jacker and lower-class protest rival, and Abu-Muwahib, the leader of the Islamist group, who has forsaken his white galabiya for a sensible dark business suit.

_Rami_ was a counterrevolutionary film before there was a revolution. It narrates a configuration of many of the social elements, political actors, and events that would become prominent in the actual January 25 revolution. The film’s antirevolutionary stance is clear from the straightforward retelling of the film presented here: the essential unseriousness of the protestors, the lack of any real issues to champion, the ridiculously gentle and sympathetic portrayal of the Central Security Forces and the prime minister.

**The Hidden Hand.** _Rami_ depicts the escalation of the revolution as the outcome of manipulation by the “hidden hand” of the United States. In the actual revolution such claims were a staple of state and state-allied television and newspapers from the very beginning. “Foreign hand” conspiracies were often politically illogical—products of a strange anti-Egypt coalition that included the United States, Israel, Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah. Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah play no role in _Rami_, but the film does feature a scene in which the US ambassador speaks on the phone in Arabic with a stereotypical, conventional-media version of a Hebrew accent, urging Rami’s father to support his son’s political activities. The hidden hand is actually a hidden face, named “Mr. Daniel,” shown with a distinctly American flag in the frame. The unseen face together with the ambassador’s Old Testament name and suspicious accent suggest an invisible Israeli hand moving the hidden American face.

Of course, foreign powers do meddle in Egyptian affairs very significantly. The United States currently gives around $1.3 billion per year in military aid, which effectively keeps Egypt tied to the tenets of the Camp David Accords. Governments and individuals from the Arab Gulf states also exercise significant influence over Egypt’s economy, Islamic charities, and media. None of these forms of foreign influence are mentioned in either _Rami_ or in actual antirevolutionary media rhetoric about the dangers of foreign interference. Antirevolutionary diatribes focus on human rights and democracy-promoting NGOs—never on the far larger flows of cash from the US government and the Arab Gulf states. The NGOs often do have political agendas tied to foreign powers, but their financial backing is small compared to the expenditures of the US military and the Gulf states. Moreover, it is never entirely clear who is using whom. Egyptian activists may well use foreign funding for purposes independent of their foreign patrons; they are, in any case, effectively banned from seeking domestic funding for their own agendas.


**Bribes.** In the actual January 25 revolution, antirevolutionary media angrily accused protestors of coming to Tahrir Square only because “someone” was bribing them with meals from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Keeping fed did indeed become an issue, as sit-ins extended from days to weeks, and individual volunteers did sometimes bring food to the mu’tasimin (protestors conducting sit-ins) in the square. By contrast, the KFC accusations were an extension of the foreign-hand rhetoric. Meals from KFC, extremely expensive in local terms, were supposedly part of a well-organized and lavishly funded plot. In reality, the KFC branch in Tahrir Square, easily located by virtue of its garish red and white sign, became the location of a field hospital. The accusations also became a rich source of humor. Protestors created placards proclaiming, “KFC yurid isqat al-nizam” (KFC wants the fall of the regime), or that “il-khawaga kantaki” (Kentucky “gringo”) says “al-sha’b al-masri tili’ (i)spaysi ’awi” (“the Egyptian people turned out to be ‘very spicy’”—playing on KFC advertisements for “spicy chicken”).

Rami’s anticipation of the KFC accusation, two years before the revolution took place, is pitch perfect. After one day of protesting, his rich-kid friends, bored and hungry, get up to leave. Rami reluctantly agrees to get them some ful and ta’amiyya sandwiches (stewed fava beans and falafel, the cheapest food possible). A mischievous friend of Rami’s then shouts to the weak-kneed protestors, “Rami is going to treat everyone to Cook Door!,” a local fast-food chain even more out of range of an ordinary person’s budget than KFC. But expensive fast food is not enough. Rami also provides beer and hashish for the hard-core party animals. By the time the protest evolves into a “five-star sit-in,” the kids are eating catered French cuisine and sushi.

It is worth noting that in the real revolution, the KFC accusation came with insinuations of sexual misbehavior in the protestors’ tent cities. Here, Rami is again prescient. On the decisive first night of the sit-in, Rami entices wavering protestors to spend the night “away from mom and dad” (wink, wink, as meaningful glances are exchanged between some of the young couples). In the real revolution many skeptical adults were intensely suspicious of the sit-ins’ moral tenor. Prostitutes were in fact a problem. The protestors suspected that they were paid by counterrevolutionary forces and sent to ply their wares in an effort to generate bad publicity. When prostitutes (real or suspected) were spotted, they were usually firmly expelled from the sit-ins.

**Thugs, Poverty, and the Urban Fabric.** Kaka, the mobile phone thief who leads the poor faction at the sit-in, is a baltagi—a “thug.” In film and television, a baltagi is usually a burly man in a leather coat, perhaps with scars on his face. Kaka, in contrast, sports mismatched clothes and an infectious smile. Nonetheless, Kaka repeatedly brandishes his matwa (switchblade)—perhaps the most stereotypical signifier of the baltagi (Figure 2). In one scene, Ra’fat, the prime minister, actually allows auditions for alternative national anthems and flags. Kaka’s idea for a flag is “red with crossed switchblades.”
“Why this thuggishness?” Kaka answers, “Red because it’s the color of blood, and switchblades so that anyone who thinks of horning in on Egypt will get slashed.”

In the real revolution, ballagiyya were famously deployed by the regime in the so-called Battle of the Camel in Tahrir Square. The attack failed, sealing the regime’s fate. However, after the fall of the regime, the term ballag was turned back on the revolutionaries by the ruling Military Council, which issued a thuggery law (qanun al-ballaga) that empowered military courts to imprison tens of thousands of liberal activists without any pretense of legal representation for the accused.

Rami straightforwardly connects poverty to criminality by conflating it with ballaga, and it ties both to Cairo’s ‘ashwa’i neighborhoods (literally “haphazard,” but conventionally glossed as “informal”). Most ‘ashwa’i constructions are actually built by the same companies that operate in the “formal” sector and with the same materials and techniques. The majority of Cairo’s approximately eighteen million inhabitants live in the ‘ashwa’yyat, and their socioeconomic profile is roughly the same as that of the city proper. Nonetheless, the ‘ashwa’yyat receive little of the state’s expenditure on either infrastructure or social and economic welfare. In contrast, Rami’s suburban neighborhood encompasses only about 4 percent of Greater Cairo’s population, but the combined area of New Cairo and New Giza, the planned suburban developments on the east and west sides of the Nile, is roughly twice the size of the existing city of Cairo.

In Rami’s world, the new suburban developments implicitly exemplify progress and modernity. Conspicuously, the film displaces the prime minister’s office from its real location in central Cairo near Tahrir Square to the new suburbs, binding Rami and the government into a positive (even morally positive!) construct in contrast to Kaka’s poverty and criminality supposedly bred by his ‘ashwa’i location. Rami’s suburban Cairo, with its affluent 4 percent of the population, absorbs immense proportions of Egypt’s public and private investment. The film gives no hint of this unfair imbalance. The solution to Kaka’s ballagi-inflected poverty lies ultimately in Rami’s magnanimous capitalism—he ends up as Kaka’s and Abu-Muwahib’s employer.

Conclusion. A brief excursion through the parallel worlds of Rami and the January 25 revolution suggests that the relationship of the revolution as an event with the social structures within which it occurred bears further scrutiny. We tend to see the revolution as a violent tear in the fabric of normative social structure. But the revolution can also be seen as an articulation of long-standing discourses. All the forces that contended for power in the revolutionary situation that prevailed throughout the year after January 25, 2011, were depicted in Rami the Protestor. Moreover, the film was not so much about an impending event as it was about the reaction to the event. Rami was a presumably unintended learner’s manual for reactionary rhetoric. As of February 2012, Rami may tell us more about the fate of the revolution than progressive films about the revolution or than prerevolutionary films about its underlying conditions. The vision of Egypt

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3 My description of urban Cairo draws on David Sims, Understanding Cairo: Logic of a City Out of Control (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2010).
promoted in *Rami* is, to be sure, depressing for anyone who hopes to see a revolutionary outcome in which social and economic justice prevail. In *Rami*’s world, desire for radical change is silly and counterproductive. Problems, such as they are, can be managed through a magnanimous capitalism steered by enlightened captains of industry. A more sinister side of the film can be discerned in its stoking of xenophobia in the interest of obscuring the truly iniquitous relations of power between those who control the state partly through real alliances with foreign powers and those who suffer from the state’s repressiveness. But if our goal is to understand the revolution, then whether or not we like the film, there is insight to be gained from *Rami*’s prerevolutionary narration of how antirevolutionary rhetoric is voiced.

* Framing the Internet in the Arab Revolutions: Myth Meets Modernity

by Miriyam Aouragh

With the exception of the Palestinian intifadas, the Middle East and North Africa region is witnessing its greatest popular uprisings of recent times, challenging the dreadful “regime change” approach of US and NATO imperialism. Contrary to conventional analysis about ideology and resistance—namely as belonging to the past—present politics in the region manifest anticapitalist and anticolonial continuity.

The Palestinian comparison provides interesting insights about the dialectics of technology: namely that the Internet is both inherent within military strategies and an organic part of resistance. Mounir Maqda, of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa group in the Ein al-Hilwe refugee camp, gave an insightful hint during our meeting at the time of my fieldwork in Lebanon (March 2004): “When Salah al-Din liberated Bait al-Maqdis [Jerusalem] he used pigeons to exchange information with his army leaders because it was the fastest means of communication. Now Internet technology is.” Referring to Salah al-Din and the reconquering of Jerusalem, perhaps the most poignant of all comparisons, Magdy takes the Internet’s role within political struggles seriously. As his reference to the pigeons suggests, one simply seizes on the best communication alternative available in his or her time.

Technology is essential for modern capitalism: economic survival without the Internet is unfeasible. Time and space are constructed as part of the “condition” of capitalist globalization (and technological
advances are a key factor), as David Harvey has argued. And this is why, for instance, the only available ISP left operational when the Egyptian regime cut off the Internet was the one providing the stock market connection. Helga Tawil-Souri discusses the spatial implications with reference to the revolution’s technological infrastructures in this In Focus. In terms of political protest, too, nothing substitutes for people in the street; this is where we discover our common ground, and this results in the most effective activism. Kimmelman identifies two particular features of space and place. First, localities house our memories and energy; second, public protest and (physical) assembly, crystallizing the rules of the games, reveal themselves. The geographic power of Tahrir, via Madrid and Barcelona, then reaching the Occupy movement (covering more than nine hundred cities) in the United States in less than one month, is therefore significant. In other words, when the parameters of political change are grounded and confrontational, we should actually question the very premise of wanting to bypass material-geographic features in discussions about the Internet helping to overcome time and place challenges. If a social media community is about being together alone, than being off-line comes down to being commonly together; it is in this dynamic that people experience directly the “praxis” of revolution.

Time matters, too. If we fast-forward from Salah al-Din in the twelfth century to the present, today’s metaphorical pigeons are traversing cyberspace and mobile phone networks, tweeting and texting, because this offers the fastest mediation across time and space. An important characteristic of the Internet is the combined effect of speed and easy sharing, and thus instant communication. In this fashion, mediation allows those outside to view or tap back into the local. Bypassing time-space constraints permits the inclusion of global publics in local affairs, thus enabling the shared construction of collective memory.

Confusion of Technology and Modernity. Studies into Middle Eastern Internet have all too frequently fallen into fearmongering, considering the Internet as a tool to recruit, propagate, and organize terrorist threats. This essay refutes such assumptions while also challenging Islamophobic postulations about Arabs, especially postulations that take Western experiences as the model for modernity. An example of modernity stimulated by technology in the context of the Arab revolutions can be found in the following comment: “They pronounced themselves as ‘the Facebook generation,’ signifying that they were no longer the non-modern Egyptians of the past.” These views ignore how strongly Arab or Muslim politics are shaped by historical, political, and

3 Involvement through international solidarity and pressure on foreign governments is also relevant. It would be worthwhile to study how the US or British administration shifted its position and how relevant this was in the end.
economic transformations, and they forget that modernity does not imply secularism. When modernity, technology, and Islam are juxtaposed, it does not take long for technology to be understood as enabling Muslims to “develop,” thus becoming more “civilized.” This paradigm goes hand in hand with the idea that social media play an important role in “developing a sense of modernity,” because, as the argument goes at least, “much like Western societies, parts of Egyptian society are transforming away from traditional groups and towards more loosely structured ‘networked individualism.’”

A tendency to focus on certain social practices while ignoring other, more important dynamics became apparent when the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings reached a crucial climax. At this point, labor unions had started to coordinate transport from different locations, and workers were throwing their weight into the revolutions by starting strikes. It was baffling that this did not become a central point of the mainstream debate. In response to the question of why this was neglected, blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy (also known as “3arabawy”) gave the following salient answer: “I really don’t know what to say. The workers have been staging the longest and most sustained strike wave in Egypt’s history since 1946, triggered by the Mahalla strike in December 2006. It’s not the workers’ fault that you were not paying attention to their news.”

Selective representation is a well-known symptom of Orientalism. Whereas members of the Muslim Brotherhood (considered remnants of the old-school leadership-oriented hierarchy) were not considered technology-savvy actors, there was a broadly shared admiration for leaderless actors, such as Wael Ghonim. Furthermore, the “native” or “local” was viewed as a single entity, even though, in actuality, the protests and confrontations between the people and the state were carried out by socialists, conservatives, liberals, Islamists, self-centered opportunists, and reactionary capitalists. Further, as the revolution intensified, the internal differences became increasingly apparent. The so-called ideologically recalcitrant (i.e., political) groups were at the base of the revolution, together with human rights groups, NGOs, labor unions, and football clubs. In light of this, the views about a “new,” Internet-inspired, secular generation come across as wishful thinking. The Arab revolutions may, ultimately, relieve us of such, mostly Eurocentric, projections.

Online networked societies are generally considered more democratic, more autonomous, and less controlled than non-networked societies, but there are no concrete empirical examples of how this exactly plays out in the Arab revolutions. What we do know by now is that revolutionary change does not rely on spontaneous, unorganized

acts, and it is not helped by the tyranny of structurelessness. In other words, revolution needs organized determination. This demands a disciplined structure with accountability that enables activists to generalize from complex (uneven) realities. Contrary to the fetishizations of networked autonomism, the Arab revolutions are more in tune with a Gramscian democratic centralism. Whereas Gramsci considered self-activity the soul of resistance, he also stressed the importance of independent organizations as a key element—not as a substitute by the vanguard but as the organized body of oppressed classes.

Deliberations about the revolution carried, at times, Orientalist echoes, resonating with narratives about tribal Arabs reminiscent of those presented in the nineteenth-century world exhibitions. Arab activism seemed like an exhibition, its figures susceptible to an astonished Western gaze. These depictions caused much annoyance. Egyptian blogger Alaa Abd El Fattah responded: “Hey frigging American analysts how about we let Tunisians, who actually lived what happened decide how relevant twitter and Wikileaks were?”

Preferring technology over human agency conveniently avoids dealing with the very issues many were protesting about, such as corruption, neoliberalism, and subservience to imperialism. In addition, this approach sidesteps the technological context of the Middle East and North Africa. The region has a quickly growing Internet penetration rate. Even when we leave out Israel and unrepresentative (expat-dominated) Gulf countries, the Middle East and North Africa account for the largest social media growth and the highest numbers of new users of social networking globally.

Public opinion has been shaped by Wikileaks stories about corruption scandals and YouTube videos unveiling torture practices. The Internet archives people’s bravery and resolve, and thus these recorded events are in turn of great value for other activists. Despite these changes and the importance of long-distance (political) participation, online mobilization is not a decisive actor in political transformations in terms of local mobilization. Moreover, Internet tactics are embedded in material conditions that determine local maneuvers. Several balanced contributions have explored different angles of the revolutions, including (but not limited to) the Internet. It is vital to

point out here that social media are not key tools for reaching a “critical mass”; Twitter was accessible to no more than 1–2 percent of the revolutionary population. Where Web 2.0 usage increased in 2011 and 2012, it was particularly as a result of the protests, not as a cause of them.

**Corporate Information and Communications Technology as Liberator?** In addition to the partial notion of modernity discussed already, the uncritical treatment of social media is another striking characteristic in mediated narratives of revolution. The neoliberal conditions underlying many Internet tools shape both the patterns of usage and the potential outcomes: people make their own history, but not according to their own chosen means or conditions. The sociopolitical value of technology also fluctuates because corporate products incorporate cultural hegemony, as in the case of the dominance of certain languages or import sanctions on certain software (as in Iran and Syria).

The overwhelming prominence of Facebook and Twitter as agents of change thus whitewashes corporate capitalism and colonial practices. Corporate complicity has long been clear in Palestine, and it provides a good antidote to the celebratory discourse. Microsoft openly supported the Israeli army during Ariel Sharon’s war on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with militaristic slogans on huge billboards (Figure 1), and Israeli intelligence uses Facebook to trace Palestinian activists and to monitor people who want to visit the Occupied Territories (in order to refuse them entry). The online real-estate agent Google Maps and social-network profile listings may ignore Palestinian sources and localities or just categorize them under “Israel.”

Internet projects also result in indirect impediments for Arab activists, in particular through foreign (mostly US) public diplomacy funding. Iran, Syria, China, and Korea are often singled out because of concerns about Internet freedom. While the US State Department has courted Arab Internet activists and created the “Alliance of Youth Movements” Facebook group, it offers little “help” to activists in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine, because the states they resist are important allies. Of course, this

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21 Or information is simply deleted, as when Facebook took down many pro-Palestinian pages, including the group Third Intifada’s page, which had more than 350,000 followers.
lack of help is not always to be begrudged, because “guilt by association” brings the risk of delegitimizing activists: appropriation by Western politics earns one the “collaboration” stigma and discredits opposition groups. Paradoxically, some of the states that promote Internet freedom projects with heart and soul simultaneously export Internet tools that are used to oppress dissidents. The Blue Coat software (which makes it easy for authorities to trace activists) sold to Syria is a case in point. During the first revolutionary weeks in Egypt, the complicity was most starkly demonstrated when Vodafone and France Telecom disseminated intimidating state-propaganda messages to their mobile phone clients amid the turmoil, and when they followed the Egyptian regime’s orders to cut the Internet and mobile connections (Figure 2).

The repeated insertion of corporations such as Facebook and Google into the center of these narratives created another, less visible dynamic. To help deconstruct utopian social media discourse, it is important to scrutinize that discourse’s emphasis on youth. Reading between the lines, “Internet youth” are considered middle class and “secular,” and the very descriptor “Internet youth” conflates technology and demography. Because a very high percentage of the region’s population are younger than thirty, age is certainly important to discuss. And this demographic state of affairs


23 The Microsoft billboard picture in Tel Aviv and a letter from Gush Shalom to Bill Gates can be found at the Innovative Minds website (http://www.inminds.com/boycott-news-0022.html; accessed May 20, 2012). For more on Vodafone’s complicity, see, for example, Juliette Garside, “Vodafone under Fire for Bowing to Egyptian Pressure,” Guardian (UK), July 27, 2011.


clearly impacts the future relevance of the Internet. There is unequivocally a digital divide in absolute terms in terms of age of Internet users, but this fact alone does not get us very far in terms of identifying a specific youth-enabled Internet agency ascribed to the revolutions in particular. Many of the “older” participants (e.g., labor unions, NGOs) were also using the Internet to disseminate and archive messages.

The “youth” demarcation seems to run parallel with the modernity argument detailed earlier here. The *National Geographic* article “Young, Angry, and Wired,” in which Arab youths represent a “generation of waiting” that, somehow, social media have helped awaken, feeds directly back into the old Orientalist paradigm. Excited by the fantastic power of social media, pundits such as the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman have pushed two suggestions: the inspiration for these actions cannot be local (native), and the actions are, above all, a result of technology. Such proclamations often conjoin with signifiers like non-violence, non-hierarchy, and non-ideological. The promotion of a new, youthful, Facebook politics imposes a particular understanding of activism as a harmless intervention, but, unsurprisingly, these analyses have little meaning for the multileveled struggles taking place off-line. Complex realities refute the copy-and-paste-style frameworks that narratives or labels such as “Orange Revolution” (Ukraine, 2004), “Cedar Revolution” (Lebanon, 2005), and “Green Revolution” (Iran, 2009) suggest as explanations for mass political protests.

We must also consider the selection of specific spokespeople to represent the young and wired revolution. The example of Wael Ghonim, the symbolically appealing ambassador of the “Facebook revolution,” is revealing for several reasons. Ghonim is not simply a “Western-imposed” outsider. He was one of the secret administrators of the “Kuluna Khaled Said” Facebook group and helped mobilize the January 25 protests. His emotional television appearance helped tip the scale; the preplanned protest the next day was one of the decisive blows to Mubarak.

The dynamics around Ghonim became a conduit for an emphasis on technology and praise for “liberalism.” Besides his Facebook page, his position as a manager for Google proved extremely important to the techno-discourse. Moreover, the ideological instrumentalization of Ghonim’s liberal reformism worked to promote a certain political ideal. The *Times*’ (United Kingdom) leading editorial about the impasse of the Arab revolutions not only demonstrates an inability to grasp the local dynamics but also clearly signifies how the “wired youth” became conflated with new liberal hopes:

28 This is brilliantly deconstructed by Bélen Fernandez in *The Imperial Messenger: Thomas Friedman at Work* (London: Verso, 2011).
30 Breaking down in tears as he was confronted with pictures of killed protesters on television, Ghonim’s emotional appearance almost straight after his release from police custody on February 6 was a crucial tipping point in generating support from wider sections of society who joined the street protests on February 7. His television appearance obviously mattered more than social media. In fact, his tweets about going back home and rebuilding Egypt were rather obstructive in the revolutionary sense.
“The demonstrations threw up no leaders, no coherent alternatives, no democrats inspiring their nations with new visions and new hope. What has become of Wael Ghonim, the Google manager who rallied the Tahrir crowds?"31

Contrary to such essentialist representations, there are internal differences among the online networks, and this is exactly where the “youth” label also comes in handy: such a general label obfuscates class and political differences among the wide variety of youths. A stark iteration of Ghonim’s class politics appeared when he declared on Twitter that the revolution was over, calling on people to return to their jobs after President Hosni Mubarak made a few meager promises. Millions were still protesting against Mubarak and his corrupt gang, fighting for their rights to have equality (e.g., jobs with fair pay). Fellow activists were outraged.32 Blogger 3arabawi (Hossam el-Hamalawy) responded via Twitter and his blog: “Middle class activists have been urging Egyptians to suspend the protests and return to work, in the name of patriotism, singing some of the most ridiculous lullabies about ‘let’s build new Egypt,’ ‘Let’s work harder than even before.’ Those activists want us to trust Mubarak’s generals with the transition to democracy—the same junta that has provided the backbone of his dictatorship over the past 30 years.”33 Merely a year after the revolution started, Ghonim has already published a book in which a narrative about his role as an important catalyst of the revolutions is merged with his role as a geek: Revolution 2.0.34 The intensity with which the media overemphasized Ghonim’s personal actions should be carefully critiqued.

Conclusion. As most would agree, the Internet did not cause the revolutions—let alone determine them—but it did contribute to them. Whatever its role, if we insist on identifying a determinant, then the tremendous endurance and bravery of the people is what was most important. Without that, we would not be having this discussion. Social media cannot provide the needed conviction or discipline, let alone stop lethal tear gas or bullets. That is why the major challenge haunting activists is to translate appealing online discourses and aesthetics and dazzling Web 2.0 tools into collective off-line action. It is this hardship that renders the idea of an Internet revolution so awkward. Or, as Monasosh wrote on Twitter on January 31: “You want Mobarak out? Stop whining, get off your asses and join us in the streets #Jan25.”

Admittedly, focusing on social media sources offers a digestible form to help us understand a controversial and complex content. It probably also compensates for the inability to grasp what is being communicated in Arabic in other mediums, on the streets, or between the lines. Taking all of this into consideration, claiming that the Internet has no relevant political ramifications is not in tune with reality. We do have

31 The described impasse was not about the fact that the demands of the protesters were not being met. On the contrary, it seemed to suggest that the revolutionaries should get their act together, similar to what Ghonim himself alluded to before. “Spring Watch” (editorial), Times (UK), July 27, 2011.
33 El-Hamalawy, “#Jan25.”
to readjust our analytic compass: the demands and actions of the people themselves (old, young, wired, nonwired) are key. In revolutions, the medium is not the message. Perhaps this complex and contradictory reality is why the Arab revolutions have been genuine and have created a global paradigm shift inspiring people across the world, with Tahrir-style sit-ins forming an essential part of the Occupy movement.

The Yacoubian Building: A Slice of Pre–January 25 Egyptian Society?

by Karim Tartoussieh

In a 2011 interview on the privately owned Egyptian satellite channel CBC, Emad El Din Adeeb, the political commentator and founder of the media production conglomerate Good News Cinema, offered his analysis of the Egyptian Revolution of January 25, 2011, the rise of the Islamists as an electoral bloc, and the last days of the Mubarak regime. Toward the end of the interview, the presenter, Lamis El Hadidi (curiously, Adeeb’s sister-in-law), gave her guest the opportunity to respond to viewers’ questions and comments that had been relayed to her via Facebook; many of the viewers accused Adeeb of hypocrisy and of being a remnant and a beneficiary of the ancien régime. Interestingly, in defending himself, Adeeb asked the audience: “How can I be part of the old guard or affiliated with the Mubarak regime when I was the one who produced the film The Yacoubian Building [‘Imarat Ta’qubiyan; Marwan Hamed, 2006]—one of the most important films in Egyptian cinema in the last decade to tackle the moral bankruptcy of the regime and to expose the social and political malaise that blighted Egypt during Mubarak’s tenure?”

Contrary to how pundits have labeled the Egyptian uprising as a Facebook and Twitter revolution, I argue that analyzing it in terms of digital activism alone cannot do justice to years of on-the-ground anti-neoliberal and pro–labor rights activism. Furthermore, other media formats have played a key role in social mobilization and in voicing discontent. Transnational satellite channels, independent newspapers, both commercial and independent films—that is, old media formats—contributed, alongside their new media progeny (SMS messages, cell-phone films, Facebook, Twitter), to the technological scaffolding of

the revolt. The proliferation and popularity of political and social (both religiously inflected and secular) talk shows gave people the opportunity to discuss, inter alia, corruption, policy, harassment, sectarianism, poverty, and unemployment—key issues fueling the uprising. Moreover, in the past five years, the ascent of a commercial cinematic genre which Viola Shafik dubs “shantytown film” has helped provoke debates about informality, poverty, corruption, and extremism.\footnote{Viola Shafik, interview with the author, Cairo, Egypt, March 15, 2010.} The growth of a strong independent film movement has enabled young filmmakers to circumvent both governmental and street censorship, allowing these film activists to explore topics that are deemed taboo for commercial, mainstream cinema with greater ease. Indeed, the very nature of independent filmmaking in Egypt allows its community to discuss social issues and taboos more freely, because independent films do not require a license from the Egyptian censor’s bureau, which has to approve screenplays before movies can go into production. Also, because independent films are mostly shot in digital formats, they frequently bypass the need for a public screening license, airing instead in art galleries and cultural centers, and at local film festivals.

In short, what we have here is a panoply of media formats (both old and new) that has created avenues for disenfranchised publics to address, discuss, and debate their situation. Hence, I believe that a digitextual analysis, one that seeks to investigate continuities and ruptures between old and new media formats, is crucial to understanding the mediated precursors of the Egyptian Revolution.\footnote{On digitextual analysis, see Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, eds., \textit{New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality} (New York: Routledge, 2003).} Undoubtedly, the role of social media (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) has been potent throughout the region. In Egypt, where emergency laws in place since the assassination of President Sadat have resulted in the stifling of political life in the public sphere, social media has helped mitigate the sense of atomization that comes from both draconian extralegal measures and the neoliberal imperative that has become de rigueur in Egypt for the past decade. YouTube videos of police torture within police stations, cell-phone clips of the beating of the Alexandrian youth Khaled Saeed in an Internet café, and Facebook groups dedicated to organizing boycotts, sit-ins, and civil disobedience have undoubtedly made people aware of many of the excesses of the regime and its security apparatus, thus enabling them to debate these issues and form responsive virtual communities. But social media cannot be read as the original or the sole means by which the Arab media has directly addressed concerns about repression; such assumptions inexcusably bury a long, active, and complex network of media production in the region. Discontent has been brewing for quite some time, and \textit{The Yacoubian Building} is a prime example of a cinematic cry that preceded the revolution.

When released in the summer of 2006, \textit{The Yacoubian Building} became a smash hit. Hailed as the most expensive and lavish production in the history of Egyptian cinema (costing around $3 million, by far the most expensive film at that point in time), it wowed local audiences and became the most profitable film of the summer. \textit{The Yacoubian Building} subsequently toured the world, from Berlin to Paris and New York, soliciting a flurry of favorable critical responses from Egyptian and international newspapers.
and publications, including the Israeli daily Haaretz. The Yacoubian Building is based on Alaa Al Aswany’s best-selling and multiply translated novel of the same name. Both the film and the novel are set in the 1990s and utilize an existing building in downtown Cairo to provide a microcosm of Egyptian society. Through the film’s episodic narrative structure, we are introduced to the different inhabitants of the building and the drastic changes that have been taking Egyptian society by storm throughout the past half century. By providing a sensationalist account of the status of politics, religion, and sexuality in Egypt, and thus flirting with a classically taboo triad, The Yacoubian Building attempts to expose the rabid corruption of government officials, the dire economic poverty of the lower classes, the rampant Islamic radicalization of disenfranchised Egyptian youths, and the sexual frustration that plagues an entire society.

Through this narrative structure, the audience is introduced to the inhabitants of the Yacoubian Building. Zaki El Dessouqi (played by Egypt’s most prominent comedian, Adel Imam), the womanizing son of a Pasha, ends up marrying the poor roof-dweller girl Bouthania, saving her from economic hardship and sexual harassment. Another resident is Hajj Mohamed Azam, a wealthy and highly shady businessman who exhibits all the customary pietistic features of the new surge of religiosity that has inflected Egyptian society since the 1970s. Taha El Shazli, the son of the doorman of the building, is refused entry into the police academy because of his “low” social standing, and this leads to his Islamist radicalization. Finally, the most controversial character of the film is Hatim El Rashidi, a well-known gay journalist and erotic flauneeur who walks the streets of Cairo in search of forbidden love.

The book was adapted for screen by Waheed Hamed, a staunch secularist and veteran scriptwriter and journalist whose creative and intellectual output includes many films and television serials. Islamism and homosexuality are not new terrain for Hamed. For example, he dealt briefly, yet I believe more effectively, with homosexuality in his film Dil al-Samaka (The Fish Tail; Samir Seif, 2003); he has tackled issues of government and official corruption in many movies, such as His Excellency the Minister (Ma‘ali al-Wazir; Samir Seif, 2002); and he has explored the roots of fundamentalism and Islamic militancy in television serials such as Al ‘A’ila (The Family, 2009). Hamed is often seen as holding an antiestablishment position because of his fierce criticism of state corruption and, specifically, because of his interest in showing how state corruption colludes with and is directly responsible for breeding terrorism. However, I would suggest that Hamed’s stance, though both liminal and capricious, be viewed as one that is sanctioned, if not welcomed, by the establishment. For example, during the height of the violent terrorist attacks in the country on tourism and high government officials, Hamed was solicited by Egyptian State Television to write the screenplay for The Family, which confronted the phenomenon of fundamentalism head-on. Furthermore, His Excellency the Minister, which unravels the pandemic of official corruption, was produced by the Media Production Company—a branch of Egyptian television.

4 Within the class-based structure of Egyptian society, the doorman (bawab in Arabic) has typically been allocated a low position.

5 It is interesting to note that Hamed’s wife, Zeinab Sweedan, held the position of head of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union for several years—a highly prestigious position appointed by the minister for media and information.
Such projects were condoned as a display of the state’s tolerance and respect for freedom of expression.

_The Yacoubian Building_ can therefore be considered a strategic move on behalf of a regime that is hard pressed to implement political reforms or open up windows for freedom of speech and expression, even cosmetically or through foreign pressure. The tactical calculation that the film could provide a harmless safety valve for a frustrated populace, while proving the government’s commitment to protecting and enhancing freedoms, has backfired. Ironically, the scenes of police brutality and excesses can be read as precursors of YouTube videos of torture that mobilized people toward the January 25 uprising. In other words, these issues were being discussed in public forums beforehand. This becomes particularly clear when one examines the YouTube video taken by a cell-phone camera showing the young Khaled Saeed being tortured by police (one of the videos that went viral on the Internet and became a rallying point for activism before and during the revolution). Such spectacles of violence are plainly reminiscent of the scenes of abuse and police excess that many Egyptian films, including _The Yacoubian Building_, have exposed.6

Interestingly, vocal opposition to the release of the film did not come from the Egyptian government, but rather from Islamists, who have been the target of systemic state brutality for more than fifty years. The _Yacoubian Building_ controversy reached parliament when some independent members linked to the Muslim Brotherhood called for its ban on the grounds of its moral bankruptcy, particularly its representation of homosexuality.7 However, this popular appeal for censorship should not be seen as unique to _The Yacoubian Building_. In fact, recent years have witnessed the transformation of cinema culture into a war zone in which battles over representation have been fought. Examples of this trend abound, including the movie _I Love Cinema_ (Bahib al-Sima; Oussama Fawzi, 2004), which was pulled for its representation of Copts and led to street demonstrations and a plea for the Coptic Orthodox Church to intervene.

In conclusion, by virtue of having the oldest and most established media and film production industry in the region, Egyptian professionals in this sector share a long history of grappling with societal and political problems, despite both the iron hand of official censorship and (mostly Islamic-inflected) street censorship. Such restrictive and intimidating disciplinary apparatuses have not prevented various media players from creating media products that have consistently sought both to entertain and to promote civil unrest within Egyptian society.

6 One example of this type of film is Youssef Chahine and Khaled Youssef’s _Chaos, This Is_ (Hiya Fawda; 2007).
Egypt’s Uprising and the Shifting Spatialities of Politics
by Helga Tawil-Souri

Shortly after being released from his twelve days in prison, Wael Ghonim, the Google executive who had launched the “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook page, tweeted: “#Jan25 is Revolution 2.0.” Two days after Mubarak stepped down, Ghonim further suggested: “Our revolution is like Wikipedia. . . . Everyone is contributing content. You don’t know the names of the people contributing the content. . . . Everyone was contributing small pieces, bits and pieces. . . . We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And that picture—no one is the hero in that picture.”¹ Not surprisingly, Ghonim’s technologically deterministic language and metaphors draw on liberatory and democratic aspects of media technologies used during the uprising, including Twitter, Facebook, and Google programs such as Moderator, all of which suggests that Egypt’s revolution happened because of social media.

The catchphrase “Revolution 2.0” would be oft repeated and echoed in euphoric accounts of Egypt’s revolution as a Twitter revolution, a Facebook revolution, a social media revolution, or more broadly, a new-media revolution. Enough has been written to counter claims of the Egyptian uprising as being one driven (solely) by new media technologies.² And important interventions have been made since January 2011 (as well as before), highlighting that Facebook and Twitter use did not spring up overnight and that new media uses exist separately from a broader landscape of political expression outside the mediated realm.³ Although Ghonim’s statements do not specifically address issues of space, the idea that everyone—everywhere and

anywhere—participated in the “revolution” alludes to an aspect of media that has yet to be critically addressed: the spatial “de-centeredness” of the uprisings.

Ghonim himself had begun the Khaled Said Facebook page while living in the United Arab Emirates, and its users were from within Cairo, as well as across Egypt, the region, and various parts of the world. The significance of the uprising in Egypt highlights the collapse of state power between local and global forces, a transformation that results from the conjuncture of different media (new and old) and the shifting spatialities these media allow. Writing after the fall of the regime, and during a period in which demonstrations and contestations over the future of Egypt are still volatile, it is easier to see the particular role of media, and yet also to recognize the importance of place. It is also important to note that by “state” I mean both the Mubarak regime and the geographic sphere over which the regime tried to impose its hegemony and control. In light of ongoing tensions over the future of Egypt’s political reformulation and the role that military leadership, Islamist groups, and other groups will play in that reformulation, the discussion of the state (as a controlling regime and a spatial sphere of control) remains relevant, yet also elusive.

A number of scholars and activists have contextualized the uprising within the broader media landscape. As Armando Salvatore has argued, there was a range of “preparatory” contributions from literature, movies, and television serials. Cairo and Egypt were already filled with millions of voices, well before the events of January 2011. In other words, expressions of opposition had been circulating across different media for decades. As one of the most prolific and widely read oppositional Egyptian journalists, bloggers, and tweeters, Hossam El-Hamalawy (better known as “3arabawy”) claimed, “the revolution has been ten years in the making.” The political processes that led to the uprising in 2011 have deep historical and cultural roots. But it is not simply a matter of temporality that needs to be considered; it is also a matter of spatiality. Although demonstrations on the streets of Egypt had taken place for decades, it was images of the Second Palestinian intifada broadcast on pan-Arab satellite channels that first brought out masses of demonstrators onto the streets of Egypt in 2000, followed by even larger demonstrations in protest against the war in Iraq, which drew more than thirty thousand people to Tahrir Square in March 2003. It was during those demonstrations that Egyptians took to the streets and began publicly to voice opposition to Mubarak. Thus, events that took place far away, yet were beamed into Egypt, also helped lay the groundwork for local demonstrations. What all these examples highlight is that opposition to the oppression, poverty, corruption, and brutality of the Mubarak years has been addressed across a range of media, by actors of different religious, political, and ideological inclinations, across geographic locations. Sometimes these expressions of discontent were in direct response to events on the ground in Egypt, and sometimes they were not.

In a speech broadcast on Egyptian state television on February 10, 2011 (the eve of Mubarak’s last day), the newly minted and short-lived Egyptian prime minister, Omar Suleiman, demanded that Egyptians get back to work and stop watching foreign satellite television. Although he did not invoke Al Jazeera by name, it was clear what he meant. His concern was not simply that Al Jazeera had been broadcasting live scenes of the uprisings in Cairo, Alexandria, and across Egypt, but that the network had fueled antidictatorship fervor (according to the dictatorship) in broadcasting the Tunisian uprising throughout December 2010 and January 2011—just as it had brought the Palestinian intifada and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into the living rooms of Egyptians.

From the perspective of the regime, then, there has existed a tension between the forces of localization and globalization, thus proving the relevance of place. On the one hand, place matters: revolutions do not happen in the virtual realm; they are rooted in specific local contexts and must take place in the streets and squares. Freedom of expression continues to be contingent on the freedom of assembly. On the other hand, place becomes less contextually important through the landscape of media: messages emanate from across the globe, whether about national events or not, so that both the state and its opponents are influenced by and respond to wider audiences, interests, and events. This is not new to social media but, rather, is part of a larger transformation brought by media globalization. The result is an uneven spatial landscape in which we witness a diffusion and expansion (e.g., of media flows, of influences, of citizens’ access) and simultaneously a disintegration and shrinking of the regime’s national power (echoing long-standing discussions of globalization as a threat to a national regime). The result is a fragmentation of a regime’s authority and an increase in the points (or spaces) that contribute to antiregime opposition, both locally (inside the state) and globally (outside the state). This shifting spatiality shrinks regimes’ room for maneuverability. In other words, the conjuncture of media and mediated events ends up “collapsing” the spatial reach of the regime. The collapse is both metaphorical and material, involving political weakening, changing economic flows, and a shifting geographic manifestation of power.

Despite the Mubarak regime’s stringent media policies, by 2011 the Egyptian media landscape was varied, even if not fully pluralistic. This was a process that had been materializing since the 1980s, tied to economic liberalization, and known in Egypt as infitah (opening). A state policy toward economic liberalization first instituted by President Anwar Sadat in 1974 and continued by Mubarak in the ensuing decades, infitah paradoxically went hand in hand with policies directed at social and political oppression—a not-uncommon result of dictatorial regimes mixing economic openness and political control. Accompanying these neoliberal measures was a natural corollary: wealth was concentrated and centralized in the hands of a tiny segment of

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the country’s elite, immiserating a vast majority. The neoliberal policies of “opening” in Egypt ought not to be understood, however, as an aberration within a neoliberal system, but rather as a key feature of capital accumulation. *Infitah* was significant not simply because of the privatization and poverty that became widespread, but also by virtue of the way that it opened the floodgates for media that would provoke the collapse of a national metanarrative. To put it simply, globalization was a serious challenge to the regime’s media hegemony. Under “open skies,” Egypt was gradually made accessible to foreign media (e.g., increased numbers of foreign journalists, media investors, technologies), while the Egyptian population simultaneously enjoyed the proliferation of media outlets and technologies (Sheikh Qaradawi’s televised speeches, satellite dishes, cellular phones, and so on). These processes are deeply spatial as well as political.

Before *infitah*, media merely reproduced and disseminated the state-defined national discourse, building legitimacy into the monopoly that the regime claimed. This hegemonic discourse collapsed with the forces of liberalization, openness, and commercialization—processes that have been ongoing since the 1980s. The regime, on a symbolic level at least, became less self-contained and exclusive. It continued trying to control the kinds of information people received, and it certainly did so through its state-run media, but as the media and technological landscape expanded, the state increasingly lost control over its own image and over its citizens. What shifted in the past decades, then, is the regime’s need to project itself in a landscape that was increasingly beyond the national, as it had to contend with both local and global media voices. The uprising highlighted this shifting spatiality of politics, in the ways the regime attempted to prevent both local and global connections: its jamming of Al Jazeera signals, its shutdown of Internet and telephone connections, and its heightening of its own propaganda on state-run television and in newspapers. But it is important to recognize that this process of collapse had long preceded January 2011, whether in the regime’s decision to permit Al Jazeera in and out of Egypt and to allow Internet and telephone services (in fact, Alexandria is an important hub in fiber-optic connections for the entire Mediterranean region) or in its loosening its media policies vis-à-vis television and the press.

Another way to conceptualize the Egyptian uprising as one of shifting spatialities is to look at what was happening on the ground, even in a place as specific as Tahrir Square, and to recognize that it was also global. The demonstrators were voicing their anger and demands against the Mubarak regime and camping out in Tahrir Square (and other places across Egypt) as a direct and localized challenge to Mubarak, but they were also performing for a much wider audience. Thus, it is not only the state that is influenced, challenged, and responding to a larger landscape of media globalization. Protestors were, too. Consider the following three examples.

One clever play on the events in Egypt was the redrawing of the Egyptian flag with the Al Jazeera logo rather than the national symbol of the eagle of Saladin (Figure 1). The redrawn flag speaks volumes about the power of Al Jazeera as an “offshore” (and potentially democratizing) agent, about the influence of the “outside” on Egypt, and about the way in which the protestors were speaking back to the outside.

Arguably, there was one word that encapsulated the demonstrators’ demands: *irhal* (the Arabic imperative for “leave” or “go out”). *Irhal* had been used in anti–Ben Ali demonstrations two countries to the west only a few weeks earlier (along with its French equivalent, *dégage*). *Irhal* became the calling card of the Egyptian protestors, and even though the word made sense locally (calling for Mubarak to leave), there was also a way in which it was a direct influence from Tunisia. *Irhal* thus represented a convergence of the local and the global, as well a convergence of media factors from Al Jazeera broadcasts to Facebook posts. In one example, rocks had been laid out to spell *irhal* in multiple languages (Figure 2). *Irhal* and *dégage* had been co-opted from Tunisia, and it was a message being sent to Mubarak, but in the multilingual rock formation, it was also a performance directed back for the whole world to see. What this example highlights is the spatial shift of politics that was happening inside Egypt (locally) but was influenced by and speaking back outside Egypt (globally).

Throughout the uprising, there was no shortage of signs, posters, chants, songs, and graffiti, many of which played on the language of media and addressed Egyptians’ media needs, or, more broadly, Egyptians’ knowledge and incorporation of global media and technologies. Two images that circulated across global news sites and the Internet, for example, were of a man holding up a sign that read “I want my Facebook,” and another of a man holding up a multicolored sign with the word *Egypt* spelled out in recognizable multinational high-tech icons (the G of Google, the Y of Yahoo!, the T of Twitter, and so on). What these examples represent is that the uprising was
a manifestation of a cosmopolitan political culture, one which had been vibrant for decades and which had also obviously incorporated global media and technologies.

The spatial reach of the regime was collapsed in other ways, too. And here, social media were equally important, as were cellular telephony, text messaging, and television. New media was used most notably as a space from, through, and within which communication happened between different players across national borders. Well before the January 2011 demonstrations, the Egyptian organizers drew their knowledge and strength from Silicon Valley marketing techniques, the Serbian youth movement Otpor!, American political thinker Gene Sharp, and discussions with Tunisian Facebookers. But very local forces were also fundamental, relying on sources ranging from Egyptian soccer fans, who were all too familiar with how to deal with large-scale “demonstrations” and how to face an often violent police force, to the Muslim Brotherhood, who knew how to disseminate its messages below the radar of state surveillance.

The revolution, then, was communicated, planned, organized, and shaped by both older and newer media technologies (e.g., leaflets, graffiti, television, street performances, telephone, text messages, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, newspapers). The influences and the networks emerged over many years, and across geographic spaces, incorporating and responding to events within and outside of Egypt. The state, long ago having adopted “open” policies, had opened itself up to the challenge of local and global forces outside of its control. As Ghonim suggested, everyone had contributed little bits and pieces of content, not only on Twitter, not only in 2011, not only by the “Facebook kids,” and not only inside Egypt. The uprising in Egypt was not the revolution of a network, but a network of revolutions across media platforms, across time, and across spatialities.

Against this horizontal proliferation of technology, content, and information, the vertical lines of the regime’s control collapsed. Its maneuverability narrowed, downsized in the face of global events and local voices. Although, of course, the process of media globalization is unevenly dialectical, the regime’s desperation to manage—if not to backtrack on—these shifts was highlighted during the initial days of the uprising. The five-day shutdown of the Internet and mobile telephony, combined with the interception of Al Jazeera signals and the jailing and threatening of journalists (national and international) and the regime’s sending of its own propagandistic text messages, communicated at least two important facts. First, it demonstrated the regime’s panic and desperation to contain and suppress the uprising. Second, by mobilizing even more antiregime fervor and essentially forcing people out onto the streets to know what was going on, it also demonstrated that the uprising was never simply a virtual one. Although claims were made that people had woken up to the “blackout” and thought themselves in North Korea,9 this was never really the case: Egypt had already been one of the region’s largest media producers and consumers, a country networked through satellites and fiber-optic cables, open to foreign journalists and technologies, with an already vibrant, if not completely democratic and pluralistic, media and

technology landscape. What the range of media, over the past decades, both within and outside of Egypt, about and not about Egypt, resulted in was an increase in the scope, intensity, and forms of overlapping spatialities. The points from which the uprising was manifested were many, inside specific locales in Egypt and outside of it, but increasingly not under the regime’s control. Media helped expand spatiality; and local uses continued to fundamentally matter: in the face of these local uses, the regime was deposed. Egypt was not North Korea but rather quite maftuha (open).

When thinking about how political kinds of practices and communicative genres are underwritten and sustained by media technologies, and considering how the political itself is transformed today, one cannot separate “old” media from “new” media, just as one cannot separate the local from the global. What the conjuncture of these forces (new, old, local, global) results in is a politics that increasingly cuts across local, national, and global boundaries. The revolutionary role of the media was not that in and of itself it managed to uproot Mubarak’s dictatorship but that it allowed for the uprooting and the deterritorialization of state-controlled and anti-regime communication. *

 Shall We Dance?

by RASHA SALTI

I live in Beirut, and in the last days of the uprising in Tunisia, I was increasingly drawn to watching the news obsessively, but by January 26, and for the remaining seventeen days, my life was pretty much on hold as the uprising in Egypt unseated Hosni Mubarak. I was glued to the television set and my computer screen simultaneously, zapping, following bloggers, Facebook, and Twitter postings. History with a capital H was unfolding in front of my eyes; I was a spectator and witness. Very quickly, the Mubarak regime prohibited international and regional journalists from filming and dispatching reports, so news editors began to broadcast videos recorded by insurgents who used mobile phones and lightweight video cameras. The broadcast of the audiovisual chronicles of the insurgency have radically transformed the rules of journalism as well as the rules of watching news or being at the receiving end. Within days of the eruption of the insurgency in Syria (March 15, 2011), the government, taking a cue from the Mubarak regime, began to expel journalists working for international and regional media. A month into the insurgency, the broadcast of news and footage was entirely fed by amateur video from insurgents, recorded by mobile phones and, to a much lesser extent, lightweight video cameras.
For almost a decade now, with the emergence of bloggers, relatively affordable and user-friendly video technology, software, and websites enabling the swift upload of videos and worldwide access that systematically eludes censorship or prohibition, citizen journalism has come to be regarded as a solid counter to the ruthless and politically circumscribed hegemony of mainstream global media networks. The invasion of citizen-journalism videos into mainstream media during and because of Arab insurrections in particular will certainly mark a new chapter in the history of the paradigms, practices, and regulations of broadcast news.

Spectators’ expectations of mainstream media have also radically changed. As everyday folk become everyday actors—heroes—of the insurgency, testifying live from the heart of the action, a lived experience unmediated by a “professional,” the act of watching extends into witnessing, often inching toward “experiencing vicariously.” Rarely has watching a political event of such stature live been so empowering as to impel spectators into engaging with their own political reality in ways unimagined previously.¹ Egyptian insurgents testify widely that watching the unrelenting protests in Tunisia showed them that they too could depose their despot. In spite of tangible differences in the local specifics of each country, there is vast evidence of how insurgents in Syria, for instance, have emulated and borrowed strategies, tactics, and idioms from their brothers in Egypt, and vice versa. In other words, insurgents were and remain observers of one another’s insurrections, and there is notable evidence of a dialogue and an almost immediate, seamless cross-fertilization. Insurgents in Syria carry placards that speak in Egyptian slang or reiterate slogans from Tahrir.

In countries where the inaugural chapter of the insurgency seems to be concluded, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, initiatives (sponsored by public institutions and civil society organizations) that aim to compile and organize audiovisual material abound. The archival challenge is daunting. How can this body of audiovisual production be categorized? As citizen or alternative journalism, eyewitness reporting, amateur video, personal chronicles, propaganda, and/or resistance videos? What paradigms should guide the indexing of this catalog: the event filmed, the intention motivating the person behind the camera, the position of the camera, the visual language used, the staging (if any)? Journalism “mediates” a live event, but to what extent are these videos an unmediated record that transmits the live experience raw? Do these videos break new ground in the way people (“average folk”) record themselves in the public domain and write themselves into history? To what extent do these videos require translation, linguistic and cultural, to “speak” to a worldwide audience without acceding to the universalism that has conventionally been provided by the mediation of journalism?

Further complicating things is the fact that insurgents have not been the only media producers. Regimes and their various security apparatuses have created a noteworthy body of their own amateur personal chronicles, eyewitness reports, and propaganda videos. In one YouTube video, an army soldier films his battalion to the sound of

¹ It would be relevant and interesting to explore comparisons with 1989 and the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc in Europe, specifically considering the absence of twenty-four-hour news networks and the tight control of pro-Soviet governments over the dissemination of information.
patriotic military song that praises the fearlessness of the military and the virility of soldiers, as they jump into jeeps and trucks and prepare for assault—on their own people. The torture of a male teenager in a police station was also released on the Web, recorded by one of several officers in the interrogation cell. We see him crouched naked, forced to kiss the boot of one of the officers and crying in terror as they sneer and snicker. Like their opponents, they have disseminated their footage on the Web, and they have broadcasted it on the news media they control. In Egypt, in the few years prior to the insurgency, the security apparatuses had become quite adept at using mobile phone cameras to film torture in police stations to scare their victims into silence and submission. They disseminated the videos on CDs and DVDs “informally” to instill terror, demonstrate impunity, and coerce total compliance from their victims. One of the most notorious instances was the case of Imad el-Kabir, the microbus driver whose torture and sexual abuse were filmed in a police station in Cairo, and who decided to take his torturers to court, at the risk of his own safety and the humiliation of his having endured sexual abuse becoming public knowledge.

Filming using mobile phone cameras, transferring footage to personal computers, using software to make videos, and screening them as short films was also widespread among a young generation of aspiring artists in Egypt. In 2007, a group running an independent performance space in downtown Cairo and in Alexandria organized a mobile phone film festival. They even built viewing booths and spread them across campuses (University of Cairo, Ain Shams, and Helwan). Two years earlier, they had organized a remarkably successful independent film festival that took place at the same time as the official Cairo International Film Festival. They worked without securing permission from official bodies, and their success attracted a great deal of positive attention from the press (locally and internationally) at a time when the government-run festival was mired in scandal and aroused furor from the press, to the extent that the police came and shut down the screenings on the last day of the program. The following year, the organizers were refused permission to hold a second festival, so they decided to hold training workshops for amateur filmmakers on how to make films with their mobile phones. The following year, these very short films were screened publicly. Human rights activists were also becoming acquainted with the medium and used their mobile phones to record abuses by the police and security forces. These videos should be considered antecedents to the audiovisual archive of the insurgencies.

When investigating similar preinsurgent practices in Syria, it is important to note first that access to YouTube as well as Facebook was and remains officially and formally banned. However, people had figured out how to bypass prohibitions. Control over use of cameras in public (lightweight as well as mobile phone) along with film production was a great deal tighter than in Egypt, but also self-censorship and suspicion permeated the social fabric to a striking extent. Artists, filmmakers, poets, writers,

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and playwrights used allegory and metaphor to express criticism and subversion. That said, in the past few years, a remarkable number of exhibitions, films, plays, and novels have dared to forge more boldly a realm and language of critical expression. In 2003, Omar Amiralay’s tour-de-force documentary *A Flood in Ba’ath Country* (*Tufan fi Balad al-Ba’ath*) was released in Europe and screened on Arté, the French-German cable network. The filmmaker traveled to a village close to the Euphrates dam, one of the Ba’ath regime’s “great achievements” in the early 1970s. He wanted to plumb the regime’s power structure and the harbingers of its ideology and, at the same time, to expose its vacuousness. He filmed a schoolteacher and the head of a tribe, who is also member of Parliament. The village is as poor as it was in the 1970s. The film remains banned in Syria but is available widely in the underground market of pirated DVDs. When it was due to premiere in the Arab world at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage in 2004, the Syrian ambassador in Tunisia intervened, demanding the film’s withdrawal, and the festival organizers complied. Filmmakers attending the festival threatened to walk out, and the film was “re-instituted.” Between 2005 and 2007, Amiralay ran a workshop training emerging Arab filmmakers in documentary cinema in Amman; two of his Syrian pupils, Rami Farah and Reem Ali, directed the short films *Silence* (*Samt*; 2007) and *Foam* (*Zabad*; 2006) that were also banned in Syria. During the insurgency, filmmakers have been detained and tortured, and others, like novelist Samar Yazbek and filmmaker Oussama Mohammed, have been forced into exile because of death threats.

The common denominator of the body of videos produced across countries that have experienced insurgencies is that, first and foremost, they address the civic imaginary of the viewer, whether produced by insurgents or by the regimes’ own security departments. The media produced by insurgents are at war with the media produced by those in power; the first speaks the language of emancipation (speaking, doing, and recording what the regime has prohibited), and the second speaks the language of fear (uninhibited administration of violence, and the threat of social collapse and chaos); the first articulates the idiom of individual agency within newly forged plural, diverse citizenship, and the second reinforces the language of sectarian community and difference; the first has marshaled creativity using the arts, playfulness, humor, theatricality, and the carnivalesque, and the second has rallied the endorsement of famous stars from pop music and television serials.

The seductive power of the raw in vivo, in situ video record is tremendous. Yet it cannot stand in for the actual experience of being there, nor does it convey the full complexity of the political subjectivities being formed. Thus, as spectators, we can only be speculative in sketching the contours of these new political subjectivities.

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4 By way of example, in April 2011, a small group of independent-minded filmmakers headed by Oussama Mohammed and Orwa Nyrabia, known not to be affiliated with the circles of power, published an appeal to filmmakers worldwide, denouncing the regime’s violence and urging it to respect human rights. The “Petition from Syrian Filmmakers” rallied world-famous signatories such as Jean-Luc Godard and Catherine Deneuve. A couple of weeks later, a group of filmmakers affiliated with the regime published a counterappeal in which they claimed that their country was victim of a conspiracy and that their regime needed their support in the fight against terrorism. Signatories included high-profile Syrian television and film actors such as Jamal Suleiman and Soulaf Fawakherji. The Mubarak regime had also mobilized famous stars to chastise insurgents on state-run television, film stars such as Adel Imam and Yousra and the pop-music icon Tamer Hosni.
Being there, standing in Tahrir, in the processional marches on Alexandria’s seaside corniche, or hemmed in, in a street in Homs, Harasta, Douma, or Idlib in Syria, is first and foremost a physical experience. The crucible of this reclaiming of political agency, rearticulating of the civic self, and forging of a new body politic is the body. In socially conservative societies like Egypt and Syria, where the organized and outspoken political opposition force protesting against despotic regimes was political Islam—which is underpinned by ideologies that abnegate, demonize, and police the body—this new political subjectivity promises to coalesce, come into being, and engage with the religio-political in unexpected and interesting ways.

They probably exist, but I have yet to find videos that capture the intensity of the lived experience of being there. No matter. Perhaps that is not the point of the everyday video chronicling of insurgencies. Nevertheless, one can easily observe the centrality of the body in the daily chronicles of street protests in Syria, specifically in one of the most surprising features of the insurgency, namely the dancing. Invariably, in freezing cold and excruciating heat, at night and during the day, and even in some funeral processions, insurgents dance the *dabkeh*, a traditional folk dance common to the Levant celebration. In the case of funerals, the *dabkeh* is performed only when the deceased is young. Syrian insurgents perform a version of the *dabkeh* in which dancers stand side by side, their arms stretched on the shoulders of one another, forming a chain of solidarity and moving in synchrony. *Dabkeh* is not exclusive to men, neither traditionally nor in the Syrian insurgency; in video recordings of protests in cities known to be very socially conservative, such as Aleppo, women visibly accompany their male counterparts.5

Dancing as an insurrectional practice has deeper implications beyond this recentering of the body. Foremost is the choice to claim moral high ground using a pacifist, festive, joyous, and life-affirming language. The dancing stands in stark contrast to the regime’s reactions, the ruthless organized military counterattacks on so-called armed gangs of thugs deployed across the Syrian territory in the pursuit of a US-Israeli conspiracy to destroy Syria, and the bloodthirsty underground of Salafist groups seeking revenge on the regime. In addition to dancing, Syrian insurgents have marshaled carnivalesque, performative, theatrical, artistic, playful, and humorous strategies with a creativity that seems boundless. To Western observers, some of the actions could easily be described as “classically” situationist, in spite of the fact that Western conceptual artistic practice is absolutely not common knowledge to the intelligentsia, militants, or artistic communities. In one instance, residents of Damascus woke up one morning to find the water flowing blood-red in the many fountains that adorn the city’s roundabouts, public squares, and gardens. Insurgents had colored the water with dye. Within hours, the army drained the fountains dry. The next morning, the Barada River that rings Damascus was entirely red. In another instance, insurgents collected

hundreds and hundreds of ping-pong balls on which they inscribed slogans from the protests. They unleashed them from the top of Qasiyun Mountain, which overlooks Damascus and on whose flanks the military junta has built fancy villas. Their spill into streets, yards, and homes was startling, their noise deafening, the messages they carried ominous. In its miraculously steadfast and tireless commitment to reject indulging the regime’s language of violence and terror, these creative strategies contribute to forging a new civic engagement and political subjectivity.

For decades, the Arab world seemed doomed to a sentence of ironfisted rule by despots and their offspring. One of the strongest arguments for the US invasion of Iraq, defended by some Arab intellectuals and analysts, was the promise of unseating Saddam Hussein, one of the most ruthless Arab despots. The outcome of the invasion has thus far been more horrific than hopeful, for reasons too long and complicated to expand on in this concluding note. Nevertheless, although the toll of human casualties has been staggering, more chilling is the anonymity with which Iraqi deaths are shrouded, in contrast to casualties among the US and allied armies, each identifiable by person. In an attempt to undermine this contempt for Iraqi lives, a group of activists established an Iraqi body-count website on which each victim is identified, to the extent that information is available, by name, age, or description of features. Although the website is a commendable initiative in restoring some form of justice, it also seems a hopelessly moribund political act. The revival of the body in the Arab insurgencies, as the crucible of a sui generis subjectivity, in spite of the body count, is the real beginning for restoring dignity to the living and the dead.
Contributors

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