

Media –political Complex in the era of Media Convergence: Lessons from the Arab Spring

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Abstract

Media-political complex—the collusion between the political class and the media to manipulate rather than inform— has suffered major setbacks in Middle East and North Africa where horizontal communication now holds sway. Although the effect of citizen empowerment to the changing political development in the Middle East is documented, the extent to which sharing of information through formal and informal channels is contributing to the rapid social change in the region is unknown. This study intends to fill that gap. The goal of the study was to examine the perceived impact of new communication platforms such as social media in stimulating demand for citizen participation in governance and agitation for open society in the hitherto closed societies of the Middle East and North Africa. Interviews of a purposeful sample of 15 respondents including a 5-member focus group drawn from diplomats, youths, and journalists from the region sought to illuminate the pace of change resulting from changed communication patterns. Emergent themes regarding the region’s perceived promise and opportunities for political and economic growth was extracted question by question from the interview data, validated through constant comparison, and then triangulated with those themes that were identified from the focus group. The results from this study provide a framework for governments in democratic transition, policy makers, civil society, students, and researchers interested in the political growth and economic development of the Middle East. Also, the study is an addition to the body of knowledge about the desire and struggle for democratization in the Arab world.

Introduction

In February 1982, an estimated 20,000 people were killed by forces loyal to former Syrian leader, the late Hafez al-Assad in an attempt to halt an uprising in the Syrian city of Hama. Two years later, another massacre of nearly 30,000 people occurred in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe by Robert Mugabe's forces while in June 16, 1976, the infamous Soweto uprising resulted in 176 deaths, mostly defenseless children.

The three historical events share common threads: All were perpetrated by repressive regimes; the dictators manipulated public opinion by shielding the truth through effective control of the news media. Up to this day, public knowledge of these events depended on the version of what government- controlled media reported. Media coverage of issues and events especially in undemocratic countries has tended to demonstrate the unholy alliance between media practitioners and politicians characterized by vertical flow of information from the rulers to the ruled. The hobnobbing of media and political institutions fits what media sociologist Michael Schudson in his book: *Sociology of News* referred to as "mediatization" of politics. Schudson wrote: "the relationship between media and political institutions is so cozy that it is difficult to decipher any differences" (p. 147). In the Arab world, for instance, media ownership vastly lay in the hands of governments, and most media organizations operated under strict governmental supervision and control. Typical of media-political complex, (Abdel Rahman, 1985, 2002; Boyd, 1999; Mellor, 2007; Rugh, 2004) believed that governments in the Middle East and North Africa control the media in order to misinform, uninform, and disinform the population and thereby render them incapable of effectively participating in debates on public policies. If the killings in Syria, Zimbabwe, and Soweto that occurred in the 1980's should occur today, the outcome would be different with the availability of multiple communication platforms outside the control

of the powers-that-be. The revolution that toppled dictators in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen as well as challenging other despots in Syria and Iran demonstrate that the public sphere as a platform for discussion and debate on public affairs has shifted from the conventional vertical flow to horizontal flow of information increasingly constructed around the masses using global communication networks (Stepanova, 2011).

In the past decade or more, a majority of the people around the world accessed information through a media system controlled and/or owned by their governments. Throughout the former Soviet Union and China, government control of media was total. The same situation applied to much of Africa, Arab, and Latin American countries. Today, the media ecology has changed, so have different societies in terms of demands for openness, participation, and good governance.

Although so much credit has been given to the social media (al-Abdeh, 2012; Blake, 2011; Lynch, 2011; Karla, 2011) for its catalytic effect in stimulating political change in vastly undemocratic societies in the Middle East, it is also argued that a constellation of forces including more informed civil society, new and traditional media, as well as old fashioned interpersonal communication. This paper investigates the shift in control of political communication from the unholy alliance between the media and governmental institutions. In what is termed the media-political complex an equivalent of the military-industrial complex popularized by Dwight Eisenhower in 1961, the study will examine the evolving relationship between the media and politics as both institutions aspire to serve the public good.

Arab Spring and Influence of the Media

Scholars and political pundits hold different views regarding the influence of the media – both old and new – in shaping events that led to the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Media scholar and historian, Michael Schudson pointed out that “while the new media

clearly played a role, even a large role, in the Arab spring, so did (notably in Egypt) organized labor, higher education, study abroad, Islamic pride, and other factors” (Personal Communication, February 24, 2012). Lynch (2011) also argued that while uploading images into Facebook and Twitter were innovative tactics that propelled the change in the region, the dissatisfaction with the status quo, the generational aspiration for political change, and intense pan-Arab identification have contributed to the success of the uprising. Bishara (2012) acknowledged the contribution of Arab intellectuals and the resistance to oppression and the Arab youth whom he said used the new media to open the Arab society to the rest of the world. Lynch (2011) and Bishara (2012) analyses suggest that the people of that region have been talking about change using the traditional horizontal communication platforms. In other words, the mobilization of the citizens has been ongoing and it was an event waiting to occur regardless of the social media. The assumption may be correct because as Schudson (2012) noted “we have lots of instances of dictators overthrown before Facebook.” The upheavals of 1919 that followed the inspiration of Woodrow Wilson made its way around the world by telegraph (Anderson, 2011). In the article: *The revolution will be tweeted*, Blake (2011) wrote that “twitter isn’t the maker of political revolutions, but a vanguard of a media one” (p. 2). In Blake’s view, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are parts of the contemporary news ecosystem which provided timely information to traditional news organizations that conveyed events in the region to the entire world. In the same vein, (Shirky, 2011) argued that the ability of citizens to undertake collective action and engage in free speech as demonstrated in the Arab Spring was fuelled by a new communication landscape that is participatory, networked, and accessible to many people. Deane, Mue, and Banda (2002) used the term information revolution-complex to describe the potential of the Internet and mobile telephony to provide extraordinary platform for

geographically disparate people to mobilize towards a common goal, share experiences, and present their opinion on public policies and events.

The debate about the influence of the new media in the Arab Spring inevitably draws attention to the different aspects of media effects theories. The traditional history of media effects research typically suggests that the media is so powerful that it influences audience's behavior in a determined fashion. The assumption is that a mass society of fragmented individuals is mere passive consumers of media fare. The stimulus-response theories or bullet effect theories of the media is clearly an over simplification of uniform media influences (Nabi & Oliver, 2009). In this regard, it may be an exaggeration to attribute the success of the Arab spring solely to the power of the social media. The change in the transmission of media messages brought about by new technologies is consequential and therefore made media's effects on audience a controversial topic (Kurtz, 2010).

In his classic work: *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann stressed the role of the news media in robustly influencing audiences' perception about important issues. Other scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Berelsen, and Gaudet (1944); Hovland (1964); and Klapper (1960) emphasized limited media effects. In Klapper's view, audience members were typically perceived as selecting and utilizing media messages that reinforced existing opinion, abilities, and beliefs, rendering the role of media more typically that of a sustainer and supporter than agent of change. Arab Spring was therefore not the making of the media. The agitation for change was not brought about by the media but the protest may have been accelerated by the intense mobilization of the youths who utilized every available means of communication notably the social media. Anderson (2011) maintained that the global diffusion of information and expectations exemplified in the revolt that occurred in Egypt was not the result of the Internet

and social media. Young activists, he said, had been sharing ideas, tactics, and moral support. The sharing of ideas and effective mobilization was reinforced when the government in Cairo shut down the Internet and the social media (Sharaf, personal communication, March 6, 2012). According to Sharaf, “shutting down the Internet was a mistake because the government action forced the youths to the streets to demand change.” The suppression of channels of communication became a tipping point. For the Arab youths it was a watershed moment that marked the end of “dialogue with the regime to a period of dialogue with people” (al-Sheikh, 2011).

In his 1956 book *The Power Elite* the American sociologist C. Wright Mills distinguished between a 'public society' and a 'mass society' in terms of the communication patterns that characterize both. In public society, communication is horizontal providing opportunity for sharing of experience among equals who can provide instant feedback. Mass society on the other hand is characterized by vertical communication flow whereby the elite convey information to largely passive audience that does not talk back to information sources.

For many years, the political class and the media in Arab societies have more or less adopted Mills' conceptualization of mass society with unbridled control and monopoly ownership of the media in order to maximize political control over their peoples.

Public society as opposed to mass society is emerging in the Arab world with increasing speed because of the shortcomings of the traditional media in reporting reality accurately. According to Hind (2011) people are able to communicate among themselves with modern communications technology thereby overcoming the reliance on the traditional media. Consequently, Hind said, “politically motivated publics are starting to assemble online and in the real world” (p. 2). Deane,

Mue, and Banda (2002) used the term “information revolution—complex” to describe the transformative effect of new forms of information sharing brought about by new channels of communication. So, while the media-political complex may be on the decline in the Arab world, information revolution-complex seems to be evolving and on the rise. The institutional media’s proclivity to report only the political and economic establishments without regard to ordinary citizens seems unsustainable and negates public participation. As David (1997) observed national systems of political communication are determined by the interaction of media institutions and institutions of government and politics.

Media Democratization, Civil Society and Transitional Democracies

The role of a truly democratized media environment in empowering civil society to propel the forces of democratization has engaged the attention of many scholars (Ette, 2000; Horwitz, 2005; Berger, 2002; Lee 2009; Langer 2001). Both Langer (2009) and Ette (2000) explored the concept of media democratization in Australia and Nigeria and identified common elements required for a democratized media system: deregulation, access, diversity, empowerment, literacy, independence, and social change. These elements are clearly absent in the Arab world where decades of dictatorships have undermined citizens’ rights and freedoms. Horwitz (2005) admitted that any communications system that is left to the machinations of a few would threaten free expression of viewpoints and will ultimately undermine democratic process. Horwitz’s views reflects Judge Alexander Addison opinion in 1799 in which he wrote “give to any set of men the command of the press and you give them the command of the country, for you give them the command of public opinion, which commands everything” (Sloan, 1998, p. 119). The rigid control of the media through censorship or ownership or other methods that encourages information authoritarianism is emblematic of countries in Middle East and North

Africa. In a survey of diverse citizens of Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, Loveless (2009) concluded that political attitudes in democratizing countries were firmly rooted in their heritage with little or no influence from outside. Therefore, the exposure of closed regimes to raw information and opinion, according to Lynch (2011) represented the power of public ideas and game changer for the Arab uprisings.

The struggle for democracy in the Central and East European countries with a history of dictatorships (Loveless, 2009) is similar with Middle East and North Africa, the focus of this study, where patriarchal and authoritarian rule dominate. With the shift from the traditional mainstream media to a converged media environment reflecting among other things the proliferation of alternative sources of information, the media and political institutions in the Arab world are caught up in what David (1997) described as a situation “where institutional needs clash in a dynamic of both cooperation and competition” (p. 4). The mainstream media is left with the choice of cooperating with the masses in a converged fashion with social media or hobnobbing with discredited institutions of government and politics. What is clear is that the mainstream media risks being irrelevant in the public sphere if it ignores the epoch shift in media democratization and information sharing.

Media democratization is viewed in different ways. For example, the battle for a New World Information and Communication Order spearheaded by UNESCO is considered an attempt to decentralize, and democratize information and communication resources in a balanced and equitable format between the North and South (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 2004). The commission conceptualized democratization of the media as a process that ensures greater citizen participation in a way that the volume of information exchange among the population is noticeably high and reflective of social representation. In this

regard, the individual is not just a mere communication object but active partner in information flow. There is also a growing movement for the democratization of the news media that fight against media concentration, censorship, monopoly, and commercialization (Senecal & Dubois, 2005; Langer, 2001). The right to communicate is also part of media democratization. All these conceptualizations find expression in media convergence because every interested individual is free to be an active contributor to the media content in a media landscape that is accessible, ubiquitous, and fragmented.

Citizens' activism in determining media content can have significant impact in democratic processes especially in the media industry itself. Kidd (2005) provided evidence to show that media professionals can be held accountable to their audience by activists. Kidd explained how a radio station in San Francisco was forced to change a decision on a local program following a protest by its listeners who wanted the reinstatement of a music program and a community forum designed to hold the station accountable to the citizens. As this episode demonstrated, there is a reversal of role: the news media no longer mobilize the citizenry; instead the citizens mobilize the media (Schudson & Tift, 2005). The action of San Francisco radio listeners captured what Senecal and Dubois (2005) called "informational and communicational activism" (p. 254). Senecal and Dubois pointed out two benefits inherent in audience activism: it nurtures democratic principles in the media and also within the broader political space. Hackett and Megan (1999) argued that the struggle for democratic media is a precursor to democratic politics. Hackett and Megan surveyed 34 activists including members of the Union for Democratic Communication and concluded that America's media system is not sufficiently democratic. Majority of respondents in the study favored reforms in the media especially in broadcasting where they wanted a regulatory body that is elected, accountable and

representative. This is similar to (Traber, 1995) analysis of the confusion surrounding media's role in society. According to Traber, journalists lack legitimacy in the eyes of politicians because they are not elected as politicians who have the people's mandate. In order to gain the support of the people, a media democratization movement anchored on the heels of civil society and mass movement is recommended (Hackett & Megan, 1999; Berger, 2002; Langer, 2001). While Hackett and Megan supported media democratization efforts linked with progressive movements, Berger recommended that media should be agent of civil society. Chalaby (1998) also examined the prospects of the media's role in the formation of civil society and the establishment of a public sphere in the new independent states of the Soviet Union. Chalaby argued that for the media to play effective role in civil society, policies for the media industry in those states should address the needs of the mass media separately from the needs of the civil society. Langer (2001) further demonstrated how the media can be agents of grassroots mobilization in Australia, and catalysts for protest and social movement. Jha (2007) described media coverage of social protests as an important political asset to organizations oriented towards social movements. Student unions, labor unions, civil society, and opposition political parties therefore find the news media instrumental to the expression of their grievances. As the communication revolution characterized by the digital integration of text, sound, and image represented in media convergence unfolds, civil society will find the news media an important ally in advocacy and social change.

Post-Arab Spring: Political Game Change and Regional Stability

The wave of revolutionary demonstrations and protests that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria otherwise called the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening have broad political implications for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the indeed the

entire world (Malley & Harling, 2010; Anderson, 2011; Goldstone, 2011). In the analysis of the current political developments in the region, Schwedler (2012) concluded that the success of the uprising will be determined by how people all over the world mobilize to insist that political elites everywhere respond to the genuine aspirations of ordinary citizens. The challenge therefore is how to sustain the democratic transitions resulting from regime changes that have taken place in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, including free elections and efforts to create a new constitution.

Burt (2012) acknowledged that while the Arab Awakening was political, it was at least in part triggered by economic realities: unemployment, inequality, corruption, inadequate public services. To solidify the change in the region, Burt, noted, it was important fight the high rate of unemployment among growing, well-educated, young populations. In the words of the diplomat “with regional youth unemployment at nearly double the world average, social unrest could continue” (p. 2). According to a Sudanese journalist Mahgoup Mohamed Salih, it is unthinkable to imagine that Arab countries will return to their pre-revolution periods because people in the region will continue to aspire to achieve economic development and improvement of human rights (Zaman, 2011).

In an essay on the unrest in the Arab world, Jung (2011) explored recent events in the Arab world in the context of their international and regional ramifications. Specifically, Jung examined a series of issues notably how the changes that occurred can support the move toward democracy in the region and whether a "new Middle East" was in the horizon? Jung's analysis explored the relationship between Islam and democracy, Arab culture, patriarchal political culture of the region and concluded that “the demonstrators who gathered on Cairo's Tahrir Square were not constrained by their faith in Islam, nor did the alleged traits of a specific Arab culture prevent them to join together in pluralist and egalitarian ways” to bring about change.

Therefore, the suggestion that Islam and democracy are incompatible is absurd because autocratic regimes are also found in non-Islamic countries. Analyzing the Arab Spring with a western lens tainted by the 9/11 incident has the potential to miss the larger picture of major change in a fast changing society. Lahlou (2011) stressed that the Middle East have different political, military and economic interests which require different approaches. "We cannot have a one-size-fits-all policy in the Middle East", Lahlou stated. Al-Sheikh (2011) and Anderson (2011) discredited the notion of a uniform Arab revolt because each country's situation is different as they march towards democracy. For example, Tunisia and Egypt are concerned about building democratic institutions, fashioning a workable constitution, and organizing credible elections. Libya on the other hand may be focused on creating strong civil society destroyed within 42 years of Kaddafi's rule.

Other scholars such as Taleb and Blyth (2011) analyzed recent events in the Middle East and North Africa from the prism of complexity science reflecting the prolonged suppression of volatile political situation in the region. Both the dictators in the region and their backers in Washington and Europe created an artificial sense of stability that ignored important change processes where relationships, interactions, and simple rules shape emerging patterns (Taleb & Blyth, 2011; Hamid, 2011). The unpredictability of the Arab Spring is emblematic of man's inclination to rely on the ability to solve all problems. In evaluating the causes and catalysts of the revolution, it may be safe to assume that the convergences of political realities and media activism were more of catalysts than causes. Not confusing catalysts as causes will prevent the post Arab world from sliding in the direction of change that Belfour and Pioppi (2010) described as "modern authoritarianism and not democratization" (p. 189).

As found across the literature, the shifting communication patterns in the Middle East and North Africa in relation to sharing of information and ideas through modern communication technologies is real with profound ramifications for social change, governance activities, and democratization.

Research Questions and Method

If the convergence of old and new media was a catalyst for the Arab spring, the emerging sociopolitical milieu in the Middle East and North Africa envisages the gradual decline of the media-political complex whereby governments or individual politicians manipulate citizens. This suggested three research questions:

1. What are the potential impacts of media convergence on Arab Spring in terms of the effectiveness of the social media particularly in facilitating the revolution?
2. How effective was the traditional public sphere as platforms for horizontal communication such as mosques, markets, and other places in igniting change in the region?
3. What is the perception of journalists, diplomats, and youths in Middle East and North Africa in relation to political participation in the region?

These questions were investigated by studying the socio political realities of the Middle East and North Africa in relation to the cultural and structural obstacles to democratization and social reform in the region by conducting in-depth interviews with 14 people, most of them practicing journalists, diplomats, and youth activists from the region who live and work in New York City. The purposive sample was chosen on the assumption that journalists, diplomats, and youths were active participants in the theatre of the uprising that took place in 2011.

Data generated from personal stories, experiences, and in-depth interviews (McNabb, 2008) of the journalists will illuminate the understanding of the potential impact of media convergence on the Arab spring. Interviews of experienced journalists, seasoned diplomats, and youth activists yielded abundant information on the subject of inquiry.

Interviews took place in 2012, in person or via telephone, using the same interview guide. The journalists, diplomats, and youths interviewed were chosen using snowball sampling (Patton, 1990), whereby key interviewees recruit future study subjects from among their acquaintances who should be interviewed.

Questions addressed such issues as citizen engagement, digitization of information, sound policy formulation, and democratization.

The interview also featured questions that were designed to ascertain respondents' of assessment of the influence of digitization of information notably the growing popularity of the Internet, cellular phones, and other mobile devices in Arab countries. The interviews gave the participants freedom to question my assumptions about the Arab spring and also provided instant feedback regarding their evaluation of the importance of the study.

On completion of the interviews, I transcribed and analyzed them, using a modified version of the qualitative media analysis techniques described by Altheide (1996) and qualitative data analysis methods that are customized and interpreted in understandable form (Tere, 2006; Creswell, 2007; McNabb, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

This study examined the influence of media convergence towards political change in Middle East and North Africa especially against the backdrop of heavily political control of traditional

media in the region. Although social media played a role in mobilizing citizens for change, other channels of communication and information sharing such as cafes, mosques, and volunteer town criers played equally significant roles. Perhaps, the most significant finding is that a convergence of both the media and Main Street propelled change in the region.

RQ1: Media Convergence and Arab Spring

Clearly, social media and social networking played significant roles in the success of the Arab uprising in Middle East and North Africa. The social media fed the traditional media such as television satellite channels notably Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya with information generated through social networking of activists and ordinary citizens. One respondent argued that the social media has not only revolutionized information dissemination but has also set a pace for the traditional media. The respondent, a television journalist concluded that most traditional media organizations have adopted what he called “you report; we report” approach to integrating information from citizen journalists with those filed by their regular reporters. The study data confirmed the efficacy of media convergence defined as the integration of media content across different media such as radio, television, newspaper, magazines, and online including sharing, collaboration, and partnership among different newsrooms to deliver news to the audience at anytime, anywhere, anyhow, and on demand (Ekwo, 2011). A video uploaded to YouTube by a young Egyptian lady Asmaa Mahfouz is credited to have sparked the protest in Egypt. In the video, Asmaa called for mass resistance and door-to-door mobilization of citizens to come out and fight for their freedom. The absence of independent media in MENA countries led to the existence of a very active blogospheres where young people were able to convey information about what was going in their countries to fellow citizens and indeed the international community. Through music, and arts, young people expressed their misgivings to what was not

going right in their countries. Face book and Twitter became instant favorites of computer and Internet-savvy young generation who challenged conventional wisdom of accessing information from what a study participant called “the professional media that are not doing their job properly; they follow the flow and a lot of times they publish articles full of rumors and inaccuracies.” In Egypt, the social media is believed to have done the spade work for the eventual ouster of the Mubarak regime. As the study data revealed, people used key words on Twitter or Facebook to provide a customized or coded term to support the resistance, create awareness, cultivate networks of activists, and meeting spots. In the atmosphere of dictatorship and fear of security agencies, social media became a virtual public space for activists’ assembly and a substitute for physical spaces for meetings.

The study data supports Hammelman and Mesard (2011) analysis that:

Online civic activism triggered street activism in Egypt especially in the recruitment of early protestors that attracted the attention of Satellite television coverage that further mobilized additional demonstrators as more traditional media placed live coverage in Tahrir, Alexandria and Suez. The tools of social media— Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and text messages were catalysts for offline activity that helped to spread information about events, meeting points, and unsafe locations in Tunisia and Egypt. (p. 24)

Word of mouth communication via several shops located at different corners where people gather from time to time to share information was consequential just like Friday prayers in mosques and use of public address systems on the streets to enlist supporters of the revolution. Shared spaces characterized by communal instincts rather than personal

one, observed a study participant should be the focal point about what triggered the revolution.

Although the social media is credited with some influence in the Arab Spring, the study data demonstrated the possibility of arrogating to the social media an excessive role or impact. The social media played a role among a nexus of other factors. The effects of social media in causing change can be mediated by numerous socio economic and political challenges. January 25th movement in Egypt may have succeeded with the aid of social media but the failure of April 6th protests in the same country demonstrated the limits of social media as tools of democratic movements. According to Rosenberg (2011), Facebook attracted many sympathizers online but was unable to organize them well offline, a further confirmation that social media tools do not cause revolution but merely channels that can empower activists. Media scholar Adel Iskander expressed a similar view and concluded that “Facebook amplified, magnified and expedited the process of revolt, through providing unique networking opportunities” (Iskander, 2011; para. 4). Regardless of the opinion of pundits and scholars, the risk of either overestimating or underestimating the role of new media in the Arab spring is real. As the study data indicate, the convergence of different media platform accelerated the process that led to the uprising. Schmidt and Cohen’s (2010) prescient postulation that regimes will be taken unawareness by citizens armed with connection technologies such as cell phones and other digital devices could not be more accurate. Schmidt and Cohen emphasized that tools that connect people to information have the potential to challenge authoritarian regimes and foster collaborative enterprise between the main stream media and citizen journalists that are growing in leaps and bounds.

RQ 2: Traditional Public Sphere and Horizontal Communication

The profound social movement that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 was the result of unfolding social tensions exacerbated by massive corruption, unemployment, misrule, fraudulent electoral system, and lack of freedom. Citizens of every ilk have been talking to one another even though in muted tones about the unhealthy state of affairs in these regions. The study data showed people's angst over their governments that oppress them and at the same time receive the support of western democracies. The hypocrisy of supporting clientele regimes in the Arab world by Washington and Europe produced fundamentalist groups such as al-Qaida that resent the west. With the passage of time, however, public opinion shifted to confronting the corrupt dictators in the region in their home turf. Mosques became veritable platforms where people come to share ideas about change. The cafes and other public sphere are where people come together to talk about what is happening and share information to wider audiences. So, through informal information sharing networks, citizens started to galvanize and plan for change.

For example, in Tunisia, the revolution that ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was triggered by the act of a single person Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself ablaze in protest of police brutality. That action was firstly spread across the country by word of mouth communication that led to a massive wave of national protests in the country. Also in Egypt, there was evidence that demand for change has been ongoing regardless of the impact of social media, a situation confirmed by Stepanova (2011) contention that the yawning gap between the ruling elite and the masses was posed to lead to a major social upheaval regardless of ICT and social media. The National Coalition for Change had proposed holding a protest for political

reform in Cairo's Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, when Egypt's then-president Hosni Mubarak was going to give a speech to celebrate Police Day (Baker, 2011). The Police Day is a day Egypt commemorates the heroic effort of that country's police that challenged British suppression in the 19th century. The Police Day is an honorable day for Egyptians because it represented Egyptian pride and nationalism. As one study participant observed the government's poor handling of the January 25th protest as well as the attempt to shut down the Internet propelled interpersonal communication that resulted in the outpouring of massive number of people on the streets of Cairo and other major cities.

In the words of the respondent: "people used public address systems to call out people on the streets. Jobless youths became very helpful in mobilizing people and they did not even resort to looting or untoward behavior. The solidarity was great."

Mosques and Friday prayers were other platforms of horizontal information flow or person-to-person exchange of ideas. Discussions on the poverty situation, the 2010 presidential election in Egypt that excluded many citizens, lack of freedom, and the future of the Arab region were regular talking points at every public space. Nothing exemplified the lack of freedom in Egyptian society like the experience of a respondent who said: "my boss fired me because the chairman called me directly on my cell phone. How come you talk directly to the chairman who are you?" At all levels—government, work places, homes, and every public sphere, the people yearned for freedom, participation, and justice.

In Libya, the defunct Kadafi regime targeted mosques and any conceivable meeting places of the opposition. To the extent that mosques became a rallying point for regime opponents to meet and share information and strategy, Khadafy embarked on destruction of mosques and the public

address systems in mosques to make it impossible for citizens to come together for prayers. The regime attacked all places where the opposition as a way to nip in the bud any potential protests. Nevertheless, the citizens were able to convey messages to one and another especially to the so called freedom fighters. Unsuspecting women disguised in different forms became effective channels of communication between local residents and freedom fighters in their hiding places. “Women played pivotal roles in the revolution assisting with medical supplies and attending to the wounded. Women were conduits for sending secret messages to the freedom fighters”. The clarion call was “*dem el shihael mayemsn haba*” which means “the blood of the martyrs would not have been in vain”. This slogan inspired many citizens and chants of the slogan conveyed support to freedom fighters and mobilized for more action against the defunct authoritarian rule of Colonel Khadafy.

All youths including Libyans in and out of the country formed efficient networking and communication mechanism that resulted in mobilizing both local and international opinion. One study participant noted that “youths without military training, picked up guns and started fighting; people outside Libya raised money, campaigned for the petition for no fly zone, and mobilized international opinion”.

The study data noted the attempt by Wahabi Muslim sect to undermine the revolution in the Arab world. Wahabi is an Islamic with origins in Saudi Arabia that is spreading across the region. The sect is notorious for indoctrinating citizens against challenging the status quo. The monarchy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia used its oil money funneled through the Wahabi religious sect to stall change in part of the region for fear of a spillover effect to the kingdom.

The influence of Saudi Arabia monarchy and the Wahabi religious sect is huge. The growing distrust of the hitherto admired Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera television channels is symptomatic of

an Arab society that relies more on horizontal person-to-person communication than mass mediated messages via traditional media. The study data indicate that “Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera are very biased in Syria; they don’t get the full story. The Sheikh of Qatar, an ally of the Saudi royal family, removed the editorial team that did excellent job prior to the revolution and now they support autocrats in the region. In Tunisia, Al Jazeera reporters are kicked out of events because the people don’t believe them anymore.” It is therefore clear that the credibility of the traditional media is still at stake in the region and does not give citizens the confidence that they can help to sustain change. Remarkably, in Tunisia and Egypt, media institutions are still dominated by the same crop of editors and reporters that cuddled with the ousted regimes. What changes, if any, have occurred or should occur within the mindset of media practitioners in the region to reflect current sociopolitical realities? The study data shows that while the media helped in the revolution it also hinders the sustenance of the change. Typically, citizens of the region want reforms not just in all political institutions but also in all media institutions.

RQ3: Political Participation in MENA countries

There is almost a unanimous agreement among journalists, diplomats, and youths in Middle East and North Africa about the imperative of political participation in the region. According to the study data, government apparatuses in most countries in the Arab world are controlled by the ruling family and today demands for sharing power among citizens are growing. “The entire government machinery is from the royal family and they don’t want to share powers and yet the West supports the structures and they blame the West...today citizens want to be involved in the political process rather than just fighting the West”, one respondent said. In Egypt, the government of former President Hosni Mubarak conducted a presidential election in 2010 and declared the ruling party winner by 99% of the votes even with abundant video evidence that

showed ballot boxes being stuffed during the November 2010 election. The fraud that accompanied that election was said to have been a major impetus behind the uprising two months later. The reality gleaned from the study data was that “there was no election and if you didn’t belong to the President’s party (NDP) you would have a difficult time to vote and so there was a massive boycott”. The passivity of the Egyptian electorate supports Goldstone’s (2011) assertion that autocratic regimes “keep the masses depoliticized and unorganized through control of elections, political parties, and . . . ensure citizens are disconnected and passive” (p. 9).

In Libya, there was a complete absence of free media, freedom of expression, political parties, and any form of democracy. Citizens were prohibited from holding opinions, debates, and dialogue about the future of the country. The rights and responsibilities of citizens were limited in scope and civil society was all but comatose.

In Syria, the powerful government-backed secret service *Shabeeha* regulated individual behavior and restricted political expression that could remotely challenge the status quo. All communication channels including telephone providers and the state media are owned and controlled by the Assad family thereby making it extremely difficult for citizens to express themselves freely. “The government monitors citizens’ opinion in public and private arenas as well as information shared or expressed in all forms of media including Face book and Twitter” said one of the study participants. Citizens including government officials who want to access information and news about events in other countries have devised clever ways of making use of proxy servers and other technological devices to circumvent government intrusion into their e-mails and Face book accounts. In the climate of excessive government control of citizens’ basic freedom, it is difficult for citizens to participate in the political process. The study data clearly supports active political participation in the region because it has the potential to curb the

predatory behavior of regime leaders, encourage freedom of expression, and sustain democratic governance. The more citizens can widely share information on public officials the greater chances of enthrone accountability and transparency in public administration in the region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the contemporary political and media landscapes of the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, it explored the overlap of different media platforms especially the convergence of social media and traditional media in fostering political and social change in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring. Clearly, social media and social networking have changed political discourse in the region and indeed constitute a threat to the status quo in ways that will continuously challenge the prevailing political order of privilege and exclusion, inequality and injustice.

Whereas it is important to be cautious on the effects of social media on political participation and social movements, the lesson from the Arab Spring is that journalists and politicians in the region must not ignore the breakdown of the media-political complex that seem to have dominated the Arab world for too long. Citizens of that region have devised ways to circumvent the collusion of the mainstream media and politicians to manipulate them. The avalanche of citizen journalists is a repudiation of the performance of professional journalists who have failed in their ability to hold politicians and public functionaries accountable to the people.

This study reinforces the argument of media researchers regarding the relationship between political systems and media systems and their consequences to democratic politics. The media behavior in the Arab world is reflective of the sociopolitical circumstances of the region.

As more young people in the Arab world embrace the social media and connection technologies, political participation and civic public spaces will remain fundamentally transformed in the years

ahead. Access to the media especially the social media is as promising as it is perilous in advancing the democracy in regions with fragile civil society and weak democratic structures. The transition to functional democracy in the Arab world requires a delicate balance between utilizing the strengths of media convergence as well as recognizing the weaknesses. The power of the media is better felt when complemented with people's determination to bring about change. As previous research in media effects have shown, the influence of the media operates within a nexus of mediating factors. Social media can propel social networking that can lead to street activism which can trigger positive social change.

There is need for journalists and media owners in the region to consider sweeping reforms in the media industry to reflect changes in the political spectrum. Considering the inseparable relationship between media and politics and the fact that journalists are the midwives of democracy, it is clear that for changes in the political scene to be sustained it must be accompanied with simultaneous change in the media. Media institutions in the region must shake off the undemocratic behavior that had defined it for generations.

A number of limitations affected this study. It was conducted in New York City and not within the Arab world. It is therefore possible that the views of the respondents might be different had it been conducted in the Middle East and North Africa. I will recommend that a similar study be conducted in the region in order to capture the pulse of activists on the front line or citizens themselves. The time spent on the study as well as the timing of the study may have produced a result that would have been different if more time was allocated to it and if it was conducted at the peak of the Arab Spring.

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