



New media and the Egyptian revolution: The ironies of mediated communication, the fetishisation of information and the shrinking of political action*

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abstract

The Arab Spring illustrates for many the democratic potential of new media; its ability to facilitate political action through consciousness-raising. Seven years later new media has become a fixture of activism yet its emancipatory role is more ambivalent and ambiguous than ever. My analysis of new media is focused on its formalistic qualities adopting Virilio's framework of accelerating society to analyse how the medium of the message shapes our experience with information. In particular, the dangers of high-speed information closing off a space to critically reflect, disconnecting knowledge from action. My paper argues using Žižek's work that ideology works to not merely repress knowledge but to sever the connection between information and action, and consequently, the enthusiasm for *consciousness-raising* ends up fetishising information. Then, I draw on Dean's notion of *fantasy of participation* to examine how consciousness-raising can create an affective substitute of politics, which diverts us from efficacious political activities. Lastly, I investigate the Egyptian Revolution, to discern how new media and consciousness-raising might supplement, rather than inhibit, political change.

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Introduction

When the events of the Arab-Spring unfolded in the West, it happened over Facebook and Twitter. Protestors shared and tweeted what was happening in Tahrir Square for the whole world to see. This generated a lot of enthusiasm for new media and its ability to facilitate democratic politics.¹ We also see the belief in consciousness-raising's political efficacy in the accolades given to Wikileaks and prevalence of social media campaigns. The underlying assumption is that if people only knew the true state of affairs they would be defiant instead of compliant. Marx uses the concept of false consciousness to describe how capitalist ideology can subjugate the workers and hence once they become aware of their true condition, they will mobilise against it (Sloterdijk, 1987: 20). If subjugation is linked to ignorance, information can awaken us from our domination and the injustices of the world, it enables the first crucial step to politicisation. Given that instantaneous modes of communication have given us greater effective means for consciousness-raising, because of its ability to disseminate information at an unprecedented efficiency, new media is seen through this lens as a politically empowering medium.

On one hand information plays an undeniably necessary role in politics – people need to be aware of a political issue to engage with it, yet paradoxically whilst people are more informed than ever of issues from Climate Change to exploitative labour conditions, this may have increased the outrage but this has not necessarily translated into political action, let alone change. In 2014, BBC found that Chinese factories manufacturing Apple iPhone 6 treated their workers poorly and sourced their minerals from illegal tin mines. Whilst this generated outrage and news coverage, politically people did very little, if anything and Apple products have not changed its practices nor suffered a decline in sales (Bilton, 2014; Huddleston, 2014). Žižek (1989), argues ideology no longer exists in *knowing*, but in *doing*, as he puts it, ideology is no longer the old Marxist formula 'they do not know it, but they are doing it', it is now, 'they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it' (1989: 8). With this disconnection between knowledge and action, consciousness-raising for the sake of consciousness-raising only fetishises information.

This paper adopts Arendt's understanding of action as rooted in natality, to begin something new, which occurs through the space of appearance where people act in concert. Online engagement (sharing and liking) does not constitute an action, as politics demands physical and spatial organising of people in a public space; it

1 New media is digital mediated communication including social media, websites, blogs and other online platforms.

in itself cannot create these radical new beginnings (Arendt, 1958). This does not preclude that digital media can be utilised to create political action; it can be a tool to mobilise people to act collectively. However, as this paper will illustrate consciousness-raising, informational sharing-based activism can also create the opposite intended effect-inaction. There are many criticisms of new media, for example how it reproduces and even amplifies pre-existing power structures, such as entanglement with corporations (Charles, 2012: 6; Dijck and Poell, 2018: 7). Others critique the content that it circulates from poor-quality journalism; sensationalist or celebrity-focused news bites and in recent times; fake news (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Stives, 1994). While these criticisms are valid, my research does not delve into these debates, instead, it focuses on how the medium of new media transforms the communicative experience; how the process of conveying and receiving information structures our engagement with it (James, 2007).

Whilst new media can be utilised by activists in advantageous ways, however, my paper aims to go beyond taking the middle-ground which treats it as a neutral tool that can be wielded for good or bad, rather I want to analyse how the technology itself affects our relationship with information. I adopt the core insight of McLuhan's aphorism *Medium is the Message*; the very form of technology has social and political implications (McLuhan, 1964: 15). To sum up: 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral' (Basalla, 1998: 7 in Srnicek and Williams, 2015: 152). By taking the first step in problematising the fixation on information within activism, we can then develop a more critical understanding of new media, which better equips us to facilitate political action in the digital age.

The first section of this paper draws from Virilio's analysis of contemporary society as *accelerating* society. Virilio discusses how new media qualitatively change our experience of receiving information and how the high-speed information it circulates is mindlessly absorbed and not properly processed. The effects of high-speed information and how it affects our (un)consciousness are analysed through Žižek's psychoanalysis. The second section uses Dean's notion of fantasy of participation to provide a framework for understanding how the experience of propagating information creates the illusion of political activity, satisfying participants desire to be political, in lieu of political action (Dean, 2009). My last section analyses the Egyptian revolution dubbed the Twitter revolution. For many it demonstrates new media's democratic potential. I argue the link between the presence of new media and the success of the uprising have been overemphasised at the expense of obfuscating the long-term, face-to-face organising that was essential to the success of the revolution. Using the theorists discussed, I examine how Egyptian activists navigated through the channels of

high-speed information to avoid the fantasy of participation and fetishising information, whilst they did not reject it as a tool; they were mindful and wary of its political limitations and importance. I conclude that new media may have a positive supplementary role in facilitating political action, but the fixation and fetishisation of new media and consciousness-raising undermine this by diverting passions and energy from the sometimes less glamorous but ultimately more politically efficacious activities of long-term organising and protesting. Some accuse McLuhan of being too pessimistic, however as he claims 'There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening' (McLuhan and Fiore, 1989: 25). This paper is in the spirit of the willingness to contemplate what is happening.

Accelerating, over-information and the unconscious

Virilio is a cultural theorist who writes on the phenomenological experience of technology. He paints modernity as driven and defined by acceleration, where speed and efficiency are the core values of this high-speed world (2000a, 2000b). Under the rationale of acceleration, high-speed networks become a ubiquitous mode of communication, which proliferates and circulates sound-bite information, whilst discursive and theoretically based knowledge come to be regarded as a luxurious waste of time (Virilio, 2000a). For media enthusiasts, the increasing capacity to connect and communicate an expediently vaster amount of information to a larger audience could rejuvenate democracy with information networks becoming the agora of the modern age. Virilio challenges this optimism towards technology arguing that rather than being a source of enlightenment, it transforms our experience of reality in disempowering ways. Though Virilio's theory can be hyperbolic with his dystopia vision of modernity, his phenomenological approach to critiquing technology provides analytic tools which enable us to examine the effects of new media, how receiving high-speed information does more than change the rate of information circulation and increase connectivity. It also transforms our relationship with it (James, 2007: 2; Virilio, 1997).

One of the most illuminating illustrations of the mechanism behind high-speed information circulation is the 2013 art piece *Bit.Fall* by Julius Popp (Popp, n.d). *Bit.Fall* replicates the phenomenological experience of high-speed information society by manifesting the process in material form. The art installation is a machine that releases droplets of water from a high platform in a calculated pattern to form words, similar to how printers create words with pixels. These words are only visible for a few seconds; once the top of a word takes form, the bottom has already begun to dissolve producing a puddle of water. The puddle of

water is pumped back up again to form new words and the cycle continues. Being linked to the Internet, the machine forms words based on what is trending, thus creating a connection between the machine and culture.



Figure 1: Bit.Fall by Julius Popp, © Julius Popp

Bit.Fall articulates how the effects of information are shaped by the medium; the fleeting presence of the words fails to provide us enough time to properly process and reflect upon it.

Water, an amorphous medium, becomes a carrier of cultural information that is only perceptible for a split second and then disappears again. This aspect of *Bit.Fall* refers to the ephemeral nature of cultural information and values: while we do perceive them, we are truly unable to grasp them. (Popp, n.d)

This ephemeral nature of cultural information and values is analogous to the high-speed information of our new instantaneous modes of communication, in particular, social media which favour short sound bites.

Lash (2002: 1) describes ideological systems as a set of beliefs interwoven to form a historical and/or political narrative that constitutes our understanding of the

world. Ideologies cannot be expressed by high-speed information which favours the superficial immediate over the narrative, compressing the complexities of time and history (Harris and Taylor, 2008: 182). Mere facts, data and statistics lack any meaning unless they are situated in a historical and socio-political context, without this framework of meaning, information cannot be an object of critique (Virilio, 1997). New media can increase the accessibility of discursive forms of knowledge (online Journals for instances), however, in our accelerating society, more often they function to provide sound bites and palatable visuals for speedy consumption (Harris and Taylor, 2008; Lash, 2002). For example, Twitter, one of the most popular social media sites, has a 140-character limit. Another popular facet of Internet culture is memes, which political organisations utilise to capture the supposedly elusive attention of the millennial. These sound-bite ways of communicating can constrain critical thought in two different but related senses. Firstly, the formalistic properties of new media do not provide the time needed for critical reflection and secondly, as a non-narrative mode of communication, it lacks the framework for critical thought.

Krips (2007) uses Adorno's critique of mass media to explicate two methods of disseminating ideological lies; denotatively and connotatively. The former is an explicit deceptive message; the latter is when the lies are delivered within the form. In the same vein as Virilio, Krips argues, the power of manipulation in an advertisement is most potent connotatively:

...the lie encoded at the level of form rather than content, despite its transparency, it sneaks under the audiences critical radar and affects what they do. (Krips, 2007: 2)

The *contents* of information are conveyed to the consciousness of the receivers, whilst *the form* of the information affects the unconscious aspects of the mind. Even the most politically radical content can thus be nullified by the medium in which it is communicated (*ibid.*). New media can circulate information more efficiently but the trade-off is we become overwhelmed by the information, unable to properly digest and engage with it. We suffer from what Virilio describes as overinformation, the constant bombardment of information, which is continuously circulated, proliferated, passively absorbed and consumed (Virilio, 2001). Over-information inhibits our ability to contemplate and reflect (Virilio, 2000a). This gives information a silencing rather than empowering nature, as with the audience of *Bit.Fall*, we become paralysed, we can only passively absorb incoming information which unprocessed becomes part of our unconscious understanding of the world (Virilio, 2000a). It is important to note that my analysis is situated in the current western context of liberal democracies, where there is the freedom of the press and fairly free flow of information (though not without its own issues concerning media moguls and monopolies).

This is different from other places in the world, where there is state-controlled media, the censorship of information or just the lack of information.

Multatuli wrote a book called *Max Havelaar* in 1860, which revealed the poor working conditions in the Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth century to the Dutch public. This sparked public uproar in Holland and a successful-campaign against these conditions including the Dutch Ethical policy, which is said to have led to the end of Dutch Colonialism (Toer, 1999). In fact, the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer applauds it as ‘the book that killed colonialism’. It is unfathomable to imagine that if a book got released tomorrow on Apple’s poor labour condition, it could end Apple’s commercial success. While the Dutch public was genuinely oblivious to the poor labour conditions in the Dutch East Indies, more often now, journalistic reports on labour conditions merely confirm our implicit understanding of how the world operates; we would be more surprised to hear that Apple treats and pays their workers fairly. This is because the knowledge that the wealth of modern western societies is dependent on cheap mass production merely confirms our implicit understanding of how the world operates. The pertinent question of *how do we change these oppressive structures?* is neglected whilst information outlets continue to report incidents of exploitative labour conditions, feeding the circulation of information for daily consumption.

As a result of the over-information and the high-speed circulate of information, without the time to reflect upon the knowledge we receive, it gets pushed into the background and becomes disavowed beliefs and unconscious knowledge (Lash, 2002: 3). Žižek (2004) defines this as the unknown known; ‘the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about even though they form the background of our public values’. The unknown known holds an unusual position, it simultaneously informs yet fails to affect our actions. It resides in the background-not fully integrated into our conscious decision-making process, yet is concurrently knowledge we possess. Awareness-raising proclaims to be conscious-raising, yet there is a lack of critical engagement, what occurs is perhaps better described as *unconscious-raising*. According to Freudian theory, the analysts job is to interpret and decipher the unconscious desires of an individual. Once the unconscious desires are realised, the problem is resolved (Geuss, 1981). In the social world, the mere acknowledgment of implicit unconscious knowledge is not enough to resolve political problems. Unlike the Freudian unconscious, where the obstacles towards achieving ones self-interest are internal, ideology is sustained by external social institutions thus to overcome the self-deceptive ideological nature of the unknown known, a different approach is needed, namely, structural transformation of repressive social institutions (Žižek, 1989). As Geuss states;

...in cases of ideological delusion, enlightenment does not automatically bring emancipation in the sense of freedom from external coercion exercised by social institutions; much less decrease of suffering and frustration. If anything enlightenment is likely to make awareness of frustration rise. (Geuss, 1981: 75)

Hence, political campaigns need to do more than diagnose society; they need to facilitate political action. In our increasingly image-saturated and informational world, mass media's power to affect our unconscious is more profound than ever. It severs the connection between knowing from doing and pushes humans from deliberated action to impulsive interaction, from autonomy to automatic responses. It transforms our society to what Virilio terms as automatic democracy, 'A reflex democracy without collective reflexion' (Virilio, 2000a: 109).

The fantasy of participation

New media is heralded for its accessibility and greater participation it enables, anyone with Internet access can start a blog or Tweet and further, it permits greater engagement and interactivity by participants through comments, re-tweet, liking, disrupting the one-way relationship of mass media. It not hard to be excited by the new possibilities these technological advances enable, however, there have been criticisms against the veracity of this optimism. Dean (2009) in *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies* argues that democracy is realised in communicative capitalism by the increased accessibility, interactivity and participation that new media has afforded, yet democracy has failed to fulfill its promises of collective empowerment. Whilst this paper does not abandon the democratic project, it does take up some of Dean's analysis and critique of communicative capitalism, as they illustrate how the promise of empowerment offered by interactivity is often empty.²

The passivity of the audience is the key aspect, Dean proposes, for Debord's discussion of mass media, and, further, that Debord's 'arguments thus proceed as if the problem of the spectacle remained, for all its dispersion, ultimately a matter of top-down control, of actors and spectators' (Dean, 2010: 109). Dean argues, however, the problem we face today is even more radical and pervasive.

2 Dean challenges the belief that new media breaks down hierarchies, she points to how a few sources command a majority of the online traffic, that the reach of websites, blogs, twitter accounts are not equal, new media is not a horizontal platform. New media still exists within the same socio-economic world as traditional media, as a consequence, it mirrors and reinforces the same existing hierarchies rather than breaking them down.

The spectacle has become something we do not merely receive but we participate in, and sometimes under the guise of political activism. Dean uses Žižek's notion of interpassivity to demonstrate how the experience of raising-awareness creates the illusion of political action (Dean, 2009). For Žižek, the shadowy double of interactivity is interpassivity; they are two sides of the same coin. We can be passive while active via the Other, for example, a parent deriving satisfaction through their child's success. We can also be active while passive via the Other. For Žižek, when his VCR records TV shows this satisfies his desires to relax passively in front of a TV without actually watching the TV show, which gives him more time to engage in other activities. Hence, passivity and activity are better understood not as opposites but interrelated; activity is not the same as political action and passivity is not the opposite of action. If an object enjoys passively in our stead, we do not have to bother with passive responses, and we can concentrate on more important activities. The very denial of our passive responses paradoxically hinders our ability to politically act, as we saw above the dangers of losing the space to think and reflect.

Tamagotchi is a popular Japanese digitalised, high-maintenance toy pet that demands the owner to feed, play with and nurture it. For Žižek, the success of Tamagotchi can be understood by interpassivity's capacity to act in one's stead; it can replicate the desire to nurture and care for a real pet without the same responsibilities and commitment (1999). Similarly, by engaging in digital substitutes for political action such as signing a petition or sharing a political article, we satisfy the desire to make a political difference while maintaining one's individualistic a-political lifestyle; 'You think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive...' (Žižek, 1999: 149). Dean describes the affective illusion of engaging in politics as the Fantasy of Participation.



Figure 2: From the passive audience of the spectacle to the interactive and participatory audience of the spectacle (Gao, 2014).

Dean describes our current society as a communicative capitalist society where the public does not envisage themselves with direct political power. Instead, they believe their civic role is to participate in a debate that will influence political decisions implemented by their elected representatives. This view treats citizens as contributors to a discussion – their primary goal is to have their voices heard. Since the internet has the ability to instantaneously connect millions of people, it appears as an exciting opportunity for democracy, where the accessibility and connectivity of different opinions provide elected representatives a better understanding of the constituency they represent. This conception treats democracy (falsely) as a matter of people putting forward their opinion and waiting for politicians to do their job, rather than engaging in political action themselves. Political opinions under communicative capitalism become individualised packaged products, which elected representatives can pick and choose. Dean describes this disconnection between information circulation networks and official politics as the illusion of political participation. While we are caught up in an illusory circuit of supposed participation, real political outcomes are at risk of being managed behind the scenes by lobby groups, social institutions and the economic market, meanwhile, the collective will of the people is bypassed.

A prime example of this disconnect for Dean is the dissent mounted against the Iraq War. Bush responded to the myriad of opposing views simply as a demonstration of Americans' constitutional right to freedom of speech (Dean,

2009). Bush denied the expression of dissent as relevant to America's foreign policy. Bush's acknowledgment of the criticism is what Dean (2010: 61-84) describes as the *whatever* response. The whatever attitude is typical of how the information network of new media deflects and negates criticism, not through censorship but by undermining the significance of the criticism as just another point of view. The whatever response acknowledges the utterance of a viewpoint but fails to engage with it either in a supportive or oppositional manner. The sanctity of freedom of speech remains intact but the political power of the message is subdued. Instantaneous modes of communication trap us into a spiral of exchanging information for the sake of increasing communicative connectivity; people become satisfied with having their voices heard. Dean argues that *prima facie* increased participation suggests unprecedented control over how people relate to information. However, in many ways, it is more dangerous than mass media because at least the audience of mass media is self-aware of their passivity and may rise against it, whereas the participants of new media falsely believe they are engaging in politics. The experience of contributing to the circulation of information creates the psychological satisfaction of political action without the political outcomes (Dean, 2009).

The Kony 2012 campaign is a prime example of the fantasy of participation at work. In March 2012, a 30-minute video of the Military Leader Joseph Kony was released by the Invisible Children organisation. It condemned Kony's human rights violations and urged people to make Kony famous by sharing the video and plastering their city with posters on April the 20th. The video quickly went viral on social media receiving 70 million views on YouTube, unprecedented for any online campaign video (CBS news, 2012). Despite the initial overwhelming positive online response, two months later the poster-plastering event was a dismal failure. Of the 21,000 people who stated on Facebook that they would attend a postering event in Vancouver, only 17 showed up; In Sydney 19,000 clicked attending on the Facebook event but only 25 people showed up and similar stories occurred around the world (Hager, 2012; Herald Sun, 2012).

The Kony 2012 campaign initial success in grabbing peoples' attention relied on the immediacy of slick visual props and emotive language but it failed to build a sustainable movement because it catered to the sound-bite audience and received the appropriate response. In countries such as Canada and Australia there was minimal if any offline campaign building, yet, the producers of the Kony 2012 campaign believed people around the world, who had no personal connection with or commitment towards the campaign prior to watching the video, would then become actively involved. The low attendance can be explained by our desire and energy aimed at creating political change having been diverted into interactive, interpassive activities such as sharing a video; the fetish object (that

is; social media platform) is active in our place, while the political issue remains unresolved. The campaign remains one of the most successful online campaign in terms of likes, shares and online impact, yet it quickly lost momentum (Barcia, 2013). This is in part because the information was valued for what Lash (2002) calls its exchange value, its ability to circulate at high-speeds measured by the numbers of Internet hits and shares, rather than its ability to incite political change. Whether the message is received; whether it is understood or reflected upon becomes neglected. By privileging the transmission of the message over its effect, one treats the instrument as the aim, discarding and forgetting that these awareness-raising campaigns are undertaken on the premise to create political change, whether these changes are to curb carbon emissions or end state corruption.

The fantasy of participation redirects our energies from political action into the continuous information circulation of creating exchange value; here experience and action come apart. Virilio evokes Kafka's imagery of modern society of this deception; 'The masses are rushing, running, charging through the age. They think they are advancing but they are simply running on the spot and falling into the void...' (Virilio, 2000a: 31). The feeling of running on the spot imitates movement, one performs the same gestures and it manifests the same affective responses (you feel tired and sweaty) yet there is a crucial difference: the lack of movement. The current obsession with awareness-raising imitates political action but it fails to change the scenery of our current political landscape. In the accelerating society, we are thrown into mindless frenetic activities to keep ourselves busy, eliminating any time to pause and think (ibid.: 159). 'The frantic activity of the fetish works to prevent actual action, to prevent something from really happening' (Dean, 2009: 31). This illusion of action risks circumventing the process of reevaluation, where activists pause to rethink their tactics instead of continuing to reflexively feed the information circulation (Dean, 2010: 121-125).

So far, my analysis of consciousness-raising in the digital age has been highly sceptical of its democratic potential, however, my work should not be mistaken as a call for complete disengagement, which is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. The problem is not creating a Facebook event for a demonstration; that is neither going to make nor break it, rather it lies in the fetishisation of information which lends itself to the belief that new media's ability to circulate information with unprecedented efficiency is politically enlightening and represents empowering technological progress.³ As we have seen, this high-

3 This is disregarding a whole range of problems centered around the veracity of information circulating. As the problem of 'false news' becomes increasingly

speed information circulation favours sound bites over discursive narrative based knowledge, which undermines our ability to critically reflect and act upon it. To overcome the disconnection between knowledge and action, we need to slow down and re-think our engagement. Equally important, we must avoid the dangers of heralding the interactivity of online engagement as a new form of democratic participation. Such a perspective lends itself to the fantasy of participation, where new media instead of supporting political action becomes a diversion from it. The following section will look towards Egyptian activists of the 2011 revolution to illustrate how they navigate the pitfalls of information fetishism. Here we will find that the revolution was the culmination of slow traditional forms of networking, community and skill building.

New media and the Egyptian revolution

There is perhaps no event that generated as much accolades for new media's political influence as the Arab Spring, which the media named Twitter and Facebook revolution (Charles, 2012: 180). Mark Pfeifle, a former American national-security adviser, said in regards to the 2009 Iranian presidential election protest 'Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy' (2009). Scholarly works vary in the role they attribute to new media during the Arab Spring, however, they seemingly all dispute the simplistic narrative offered by the 'Twitter/Facebook revolution'. As Garbuado argues, the focus on technological tools obscures the role of on-the-ground and face-to-face organising; it confuses what were the true agents of change; the Arabic people (2012: 6, 8). This confusion can be seen most poignantly in Pfeifle's proclamation that Twitter, rather than the Arabic people should be rewarded the Nobel peace prize.

By investigating the Egyptian revolution, this section aims to discern and bring to light the role and limitation of new media's ability to instigate political action by consciousness-raising. As we will find, the analysis shows that the uprising was not a spontaneous event instigated by social media but rather the culmination of years of organising and protesting.⁴ Whilst from a western perspective, dissent

prevalent, due to arguably the fast nature of new media, the push to create click-bait material is stronger than to educate and inform.

4 Wolover argues this over-emphasis of the new media's role in the Tunisian uprising was more prominent in Western media than Arabic new sources. Whilst both western and Arabic news sources identify the human agency and social media as key factors in the revolution, Aljazeera always framed Western new media as a tool; in contrast, Western news sources put social media at the forefront (2016). Wolover

from Egyptians is most visible online, it is how most learned about the revolution, this visibility overshadows the lively anti-Mubarak political atmosphere of the streets, of physical spaces that varied from cabs and mosques to coffee shops. It is these spaces that helped build resilient politicised communities and enabled the mass mobilisation of millions on Tahrir Square.

One of the clearest indications that social media's role has been overblown is how few Egyptians actually engaged with it, only 0.00014% of the Egyptian population had a Twitter account, while only 16.27% were Internet users (Murthy, 2013: 95). Most of the Tweets were in English, directed towards the global western media. Many of the social media famous activists, whilst well known internationally, were not recognised by local Egyptians. Furthermore, the internet connected mostly middle-class Egyptians. New media alone could not account for the millions of protestors at Tahrir Square on the 28th of January (Garbuado, 2012: 65).⁵ El-Nawawy and Khamis argue that whilst the Internet has low audience penetration, it still had a significant impact by revitalising the civil society of Egypt, it facilitated political dialogue and accountability; '...enabling the exchange of political discussions and deliberations online and, most importantly, through exposing the government's many dysfunctions and malpractices' (2013: 85-86). They also note that a vibrant media landscape did not always correspond to street level political mobilisation, because how autocratic governments sometimes allowed an outlet for the people to express their anger to prevent it from manifesting in more radical action (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013: 1). Online communicative networks provide this outlet, the fantasy of participation that displaces the space for actual political action.

Badran (2014) and Isamli (2011) both argued that the mobilisation of millions of Egyptians, which toppled Mubarak's rule, was the result of years of on-going demonstrating and protesting from 1998. Isamli cites numerous examples, from a 10,000-textile workers strike in 2008 to an 11-day occupation by tax collectors (2011: 37). Badran (2014: 275) identifies three key movements, the pro-Intifada, anti-Iraq war and Keyefa that made the Tahrir Square occupation possible, whilst

attributes the difference in reporting in part as a form of Orientalism, the belief that Arabic nations needed Western technology such as Wikileaks and social media to overcome their oppressive conditions.

5 This built off the thousands of protestors on January 25th who protest against the police, the key tool of Mubarak's repressive regime, on the national state-media run celebration of police day.

the first two focused on regional issues rather than targeting Mubarak, they nonetheless challenged Mubarak's legitimacy, in particular, his emergency law.⁶

These demonstrations also broke down the taboo of street demonstrations, helped overcome the fear of police brutality, planted into the collective imagination street protesting as an effective channel for dissent, adding it to the Egyptians repertoire of contention (Badran, 2014: 281; Isamli, 2011). The Iraq war movement saw the Tahrir Square be occupied for the first time since 1972 and after the second pro-Intifada demonstration, they became a weekly event (Badran, 2014: 280). These protests also facilitated building coalitions. Previously disparate groups of activist through the campaigns by NGOs become an organised and skilled network (*ibid.*: 275). The Kefeya movement of 2005, which Merlyna Lim (2012) attributes as the birth of the anti-Mubarak movement, saw demonstrations become increasingly targeted at Mubarak. The next key anti-Mubarak sentiments came from the resurgence of the Egyptian Labour movement, where wildcat strikes became extremely prolific (*ibid.*: 234). The strength of the labour movement played a crucial part in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Srnicek and Williams went as far as to argue that their participation transformed a general protest into a near general strike, by shutting down the country, to become a tipping point in toppling Mubarak (2015: 34).

Kefaya did utilise the emergence of the blogosphere to spread ideas, especially between groups of different political orientation, even after its decline in 2008, the blogs were still utilised to spread news of police brutality (Lim, 2012: 237, 239). The administrator of the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page, Wael Ghonim, one of the prominent pages opposing the regime, was able to safely report on police brutality from Dubai (Gerbaudo, 2012: 63).⁷ New media has the advantage of distance and anonymity which helps circumvent the censorship of an autocratic government. The downside of this distance is that it does not support the creation of trust, solidarity and comradeship, which are needed for people to feel empowered to take action on the streets, especially when there is the risk of police brutality and repression (*ibid.*: 61). As we saw above, the regional demonstrations were crucial in overcoming this fear.⁸ As a consequence,

6 Since 1981, Egypt has been under emergency law, allowing the arrest and detention of citizen without trial under the decree of the Minister of Interior (Ismali, 2011).

7 Khaled Saeed is an Egyptian man who died under police custody in Alexandria after being dragged out by police forces from an Internet café. The image of his corpse went viral online and was describes by some as the 'The face that launched a revolution'.

8 In fact, a prominent blogger, Wael Abbas, posted many videos of police brutality online, was accused by supporting the police through inciting fear amongst the public (Isherwood, 2008).

many of these social media campaigns, whilst successful in raising awareness of the failures of his governance, however, were often unsuccessful in translating their online engagement into political action. For example, the first anti-Mubarak group to use Facebook was the April 6th Youth Movement; they accumulated over 900,000 likes after the arrest of their co-founder Esraa Abdel Fatah. Despite the successful online consciousness-raising campaign against censorship, the likes never translate to political action (Lim, 2012: 240). The #orabi2010 campaign met a similar fate.

The importance of strong networks is emphasised in Gladwell's article *Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted*, which he begins by discussing the civil rights Greensboro lunch counter sit-in, where four African-American students refused to leave their seats at an exclusive white establishment (2010). The first to join the sit-in was the student's dorm-mates and other close associates. Gladwell summarises that at the core of a successful political movement is discipline, sacrifice and commitment, whilst social media can be successful in getting people to share a post when someone's phone is missing because it is a low-commitment act, social media is far less successful at getting people to make sacrifices (time/energy/risk) which are needed for politically transformative actions. For Gladwell, the strength of the Civil Rights Movements was largely dependent on their ability to utilise the established communities of Church groups to spread their message, build support and mobilise people. Similarly, the Egyptian revolution was not built on ephemeral, loosely connected groups that organised through the internet. Rather the foundation for building new networks were the mobilisation and organization of pre-established strong groups in the community. The 25th January protest at Tahrir Square tapped into pre-existing communities. Cabs, coffee shops, mosques, and soccer fields were all key hubs to build and organise for the Tahrir Square protest and created a coalition of anti-Mubarak protestors (Lim, 2012: 243). In the build-up to the occupation, protestors were instructed to meet up with friends, family and neighbours in small groups, in these trusted groups, they shouted chants and slogans, which encouraged people on the streets to join. These strong knit groups help unite people through the sense of security they created before entering the more hostile space of Tahrir Square (Gerbaudo, 2012: 65).

Learning from the previous failures of anti-Mubarak online campaigns, there was greater pre-protest organising leading up to the 25th of January. The protestors experimented, practised and developed different protesting strategies and tactics in the outer suburbs (Gerbaudo, 2012). In addition, during the protest, they had war rooms to coordinate it. In contrast to the campaigners of the Kony 2012, the Egyptian protestors slowed down to stop and reflect upon their engagement; they demonstrated more awareness of the limitations of new media and dangers of

information fetishisation; and the importance of spatial mobilisation for political change. As a consequence, even bloggers went offline, from contributing to the dissemination of over 20,000 posters to building on-ground networks (Lim, 2012: 240). Many of these activists actively fought against the fantasy of participation that new media was susceptible to promote (Baron and Gunning, 2014: 283). On the 25th of January, Ghonim made a Facebook post to be defined not by their medium, but by their actions; 'today we are going to prove that we are not guys of 'comment and like' as they claim, we are REALITY on earth and we are demanding our rights and we are all participating' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 63).

On the 27th of January, the government shut down the Internet in response to the occupation in order to curb the protestors. Gerbaudo (2012) argues the kill switch reflected an ambiguity in the role of social media, it created some disorientation, as these channels were used for communication and coordination, however, the kill switch ultimately backfired. Firstly, it was viewed as a betrayal by the middle class Egyptian and roused them to join the occupation. Secondly, shutting down the Internet was the ultimate cure for the fantasy of participation: 'The internet shut-down made it impossible to maintain safe distance by following the events on the internet or talking on the phone to one's friends on the streets' (*ibid.* 69). Without the internet, the Egyptians could no longer feel active through the fetish of the technological tools; they had to be bodily present within the space of appearance. The internet shut-down also meant the protestors spent their time at the square not capturing the moment for the international audience but bonding and strengthening ties with their fellow protestors. Despite the claims that the Egyptian revolution was a 'Twitter revolution', in fact, it was the culmination of years of slow and arduous campaigning (Charles, 2012: 237).

Tufekci (2017) makes a related point when she compares Occupy and the Civil Right Movement, the latter movement culminated with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, with over 200,000 protestors, which led to the Civil Rights Act. The success of this mobilisation demonstrated and exercised the power of an organised group of people who have developed strong ties and relationships built from years of prior organising, which involved collective decision making that enables them to make strategic and tactical manoeuvres (Tufekci, 2017: 66-68, 269-270). Those in the White house succumb to the demands of the protestors, not because of the presence of the people on the streets per se, but because of what it signal, the capacity of the protestors. Tufekci argues that digital tools provide a shortcut that may enable us to mobilise mass amounts of people with greater ease. However, mass mobilization does not only include mass communication. It foremost involves relationship building and collective strategic decision-making to ensure long term commitment. If we use the 'digital short cut' as our main means of organizing, instead of as a

supplement to traditional means, then the protest might eventually lose its collective power and capacity. While a digital based mobilisation may serve certain purposes, there will be limited, if any, repercussions, if these protests are not founded on strong communities that can strategically and collectively exercise power. The anti-Iraq protest and the Occupy movements are examples of this tendency (Tufekci, 2017: xiii). Tufekci argues that the Occupy movement, utilising social media to spread its message, succeeded in intervening in the public discourse as well as in creating a public conversation about wealth inequality. It failed, however, to create any institutional, structural or electoral change (Tufekci, 2017: 214, 215). Tufekci articulates a slightly different problem posed by digital tools than my paper but it reflects an underlying sentiment that social media is a powerful tool, a tool that can support but also undermine organising, especially when people value new media for its high-speed efficiency in accelerating activism; as Virilio warns us can displace political action.

Conclusion

Since the Arab Spring, the enthusiasm of social media was withered though not died, as Tufekci's own personal narrative reflects. As a Turkish woman working for IBM, she saw the potential of new media at the beginning of the Arab revolution, especially in a country with high censorship, however, as the years have gone past, there is now a more ambivalent or ambiguous feeling towards new media- based on her recent Ted talk even a dystopic view of technology's effects. Whilst people have been analysing and debating new media's role in activism, what has emerged is that new media is perhaps best employed the Right. Occupy discourse may have been crucial to the popularity of socialist candidate Bernie Sanders who became a serious contender for the presidential nomination but it was Twitter and reality show star Donald Trump that won the Presidential race. From the Tea party to the Brexit, and perhaps the most concerning Cambridge Analytica, we see the danger of the increasing accessibility and circulation of information, especially when it is used in harvesting the data of potential voters to influence election results (Tufekci, 2017: 215-220). Similar to Virilio's concept of over-information, Tufekci describes the dangers of information glut, where it is not censorship but oversaturation of information, which through confusion, by overwhelming us, stops people from taking action:

Challengers need attention and authority to persuade people to mobilize, while those in power merely need to keep them from acting. Muddying the waters is often good enough for the powerful. (Tufekci, 2017: 273)

In essence, it is easier for the right to utilise information to confuse than for the left to utilise it to act whilst propaganda and political manipulation is not a new phenomenon, high-speed information circulation of information has transformed it in an unprecedented way. As a consequence, in our accelerating world, we need to create the space to slow down and properly process and reflect. Coffee shops, cab and mosques were politically vibrant and transgressive spaces in Egypt because they facilitated discursive, slow discussions and reflections.

Social Media will continue to play a role in politics, as it does have certain communicative advantages, from circumventing censorship to instantaneously sharing information to a large audience. We should not shy away from these advantages, however, we need to be wary and navigate these risks in intentional and conscious ways. I speak a lot of not rejecting digital tools but being wary of them but what does this mean? How is this different from the status quo? I think the key is that political action needs to be grounded by face-to-face, slow relationships. We may use Facebook as a tool to organise meetings or event, or communicate between meeting, it helps send invites, provides a platform to store the details of the event and send people reminders before the event begins, however, the political organising, that involves building relationship, developing trust, learning to make collective decision, and strategic and tactical decision cannot be circumvented by new media. It is fitting that Jane McAlevey recent book outlines a form of political organising against the current dominated approach to activism of social media based mobilising is titled 'No Shortcuts'.

Arendt (1958) in the prologue to *The human condition* states the purpose of her phenomenological investigation as '...very simple, it is nothing more than to think what we are doing'. My paper similarly encourages people to decelerate and think about whether the increase in information circulation of high-speed information networks has in fact empowered us to engage in political action or is it reiterating our collective unconscious knowledge. The Egyptian revolution was 7 years ago, yet, whilst the enthusiasm for the democratic potential of new media has waned, the use of social media for activism has been a fixture. Communication team and digital campaigners are a staple part of NGOs, unions and even grassroots groups, and their job is to maximise likes, shares, whilst their success is measured by these same superficial metrics. It is easy to look at recent political event, from Black Lives Matter movement to the Standing Rock protest, and point to the presence of social media as indicative of its political efficacy, however, I encourage looking beyond the Tweets, as I suspect the success of these events, as we found with the Egyptian revolution, involved the presence of traditional forms of organising. Claims made about new media's emancipatory power fail to appreciate the ways it can negate the radical potential of knowledge. It is more important than ever given the range of political crises

we face and given the prevalence of new media as a platform for raising political awareness to actively fight against the fetishisation of information and the fantasy of participation, to bring forth transformative action and emancipatory change.

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