

## Rethinking Digital Technologies in the Middle East

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In 2003, while a graduate student working on my dissertation, I wrote an article on the Internet in postrevolutionary Iran that looked at the politics of the emerging technology in a country undergoing major political changes.<sup>1</sup> In the context of political rivalries between reformists and conservatives, the Internet, I argued, “as an advancing means of communication,” played a key role in the struggle for democracy by opening up a virtual space of dissident activism. Euphoric in spirit and utopian in outlook, the article ended with the following quotation from an Iranian dissident: “At night, every light that is on in Tehran shows that somebody is sitting behind a computer, driving through information roads; and that is in fact a storehouse of gunpowder that, if ignited, will start a great firework in the capital of the revolutionary Islam.”<sup>2</sup> These “information roads,” I concluded, could play a significant role in the emergence of a new form of political society in Iran and beyond.

Six years later, while doing research on the relationship between the Internet and electoral politics in Iran, I encountered what I assumed to be the very revolutionary moment I had envisaged in 2003: a “cyber-revolution.” The protests challenging the presidential election results, I observed, took place in not only urban spaces, but also cyberspace, where activists engaged in contentious activities such as hacking, sharing news, or spreading information about rallies.<sup>3</sup> Its designation as the “Twitter Revolution,” a term first used to describe the Moldova street protests in spring 2009, underlined a shared belief in the power of the Internet as an agent of democratic change in a country where citizens are deprived of civic and political rights. With the Arab Spring in 2011, digital media again assumed a prominent role. Indeed, many saw digital media as a driving force behind the protests that eventually toppled several authoritarian regimes in North Africa.

But then the skeptics appeared. Although not the first to make such claims, Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell looked critically at the role of the Internet in politics, which dampened the enthusiasm around social media by underscoring technology’s dark side. Morozov, partly responding to the 2009 Iranian elections, advocated the view that the Internet has served as a device for surveillance and state control.<sup>4</sup> For Gladwell, true social movements and high-risk revolutionary currents revolve around face-to-face social relations (i.e., strong ties), and not armchair activism online.<sup>5</sup> The Internet does not liberate, but rather obfuscates and depoliticizes activism in the true sense of face-to-face encounters in “real” time. It is not characterized by revolutionary empowerment, but by loss of power and, at its worst, state control over citizens.

Since 2009 a flurry of new research has continued to exacerbate the liberation–control dichotomy associated with digital technologies.<sup>6</sup> The debates have focused on how the Internet either has helped people to organize and mobilize action on the street level—to various degrees and toward various outcomes—or has promoted state power through filtering or surveillance practices. These discussions have also remarked

on functionalist tendencies, as the new technology is assumed to essentially *function* in terms of organizing, mobilizing, facilitating, strategizing, networking, mediating, exchanging, and connecting people with people, people with institutions, institutions with states, and states with citizens. In such narratives, the Internet has meaning as a communicative apparatus of either change or control. What the epistemic community of scholars seems to primarily agree upon is the functional paradigm that digital media imprints on politics.

The impact of digital technologies on politics, I suggest, is really a question of the sociology of knowledge. It is about how activists, advocates, and key thinkers, as well as ideas, rituals, and texts, produce ways of imagining technology, and discourse about it, in particular disciplines of knowledge; it is also about how individual or groups of writers, thinkers, and policymakers push ways of thinking about technology in political terms. What is absent in our academic discussions, however, is how our historically specific conceptions of technology are shaping political implications of technology.

This criticism would certainly apply to my own work: I have imagined technology within a set of values, institutions, and shared symbols and concepts in my particular social group (a network of academics researching and publishing on media technology), through which I concurrently imagine my social identity. For years I have imagined the Internet to be revolutionary, not only because the people who use it consider themselves revolutionary or think about it in revolutionary terms, but also due to the range of metaphors I have used—for example, “crowdsourcing,” “information highway,” “network of networks”—to convey a fluidly transformative understanding of the technology I was studying.<sup>7</sup> This has been the performative limit of my knowledge, the metaphorical structure of my experience with technology, as someone who writes, analyzes, and publishes in an academic community. Consider this short essay a confession of a liberation technologist.

So in light of how our knowledge of technology involves ways of imagining self and reality, I ask the following: What possibilities do digital technologies entail for the region and beyond? How do such technologies bear on citizenship, class, gender, regional politics, and/or sexuality? The answer to these questions is not straightforward, precisely because technological imaginaries, digital or otherwise, do not take place in isolation, but rather within contentious fields of human desires, fantasies, illusions, or even delusions, with which a host of experiential and interpretative possibilities are implicitly or explicitly in clash.

While digital technologies are not “blank slates,” imagining them as empty conduits can be a powerful metaphor with which to reckon. When we speak of digital technologies as “just tools” for expression, mobilization, organization, or surveillance, we are already *reading* into the technology a *tabula rasa* of technological determinism with a distinct operational significance. We *de-neutralize* the technology we imagine as neutral and, in so doing, endow it with a magical force of empowerment or disempowerment. This is how technology becomes operational—not just through networks and interactive communication, not just by organizing electoral campaigns and rallies or by mobilizing dissent on the streets of Cairo or Tehran, but through *frames of meaning* that actors use to generate political cooperation or conflict. Equally important is how these frames reconfigure ordinary meaning when the technology becomes unavailable, considerably slowing the flow of connectivity but in return making it more effective, especially

during political uprisings when a negative space permits the means to imagine reality in alternative, radical ways. As Navid Hassanpour has shown in the case of the sudden interruption of mass communication during political protests, as happened in Egypt, the absence of technological communication can accelerate mobilization and expand decentralized dissent.<sup>8</sup> This is primarily, I suggest, because of the opening of a space for imagining politics in the absence of technology. In this negative imaginary space, perception of political action *without* technology would instigate action because of technology's absence.

It is precisely these technological imaginaries, in the presence or absence of technology, that will configure the ways in which citizenship, class, gender, and sexuality are performed in complex public spaces of everyday life for varied political purposes. Either in urban streets or on digital highways, technological imaginaries leave their imprints in the ways they are employed, described, inscribed, instituted, challenged, and (re)configured to shifting contexts of cosmopolitan experiences of urban life in Algiers, Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Manama, Rabat, and Tehran. These imprints are present in what William Raymond calls "structures of feeling," a set of perceptions and values shared by a particular generation—the sort also shared by Internet activists such as Wael Ghonim, in the case of Egypt, and Mohammad Sadeghi Esfahlani, in the case of Iran, who frame the Internet as a revolutionary means of communication for the purpose of political activism.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of digital technologies, then, is a matter of lived practices. It is about situated experiences as sites of contention and negotiation, experiences that ultimately undermine the simplistic binary between freedom and control and open up spaces of activism on the everyday street and digital levels, where identities and solidarities are forged but hardly devoid of power relations. These solidarities are shaped somewhere between strong and weak ties, and between street protests in urban neighborhoods and online activism. The desires, experiences, and visions are still alive in the forces that shape digital technologies today in the Middle East and beyond.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Babak Rahimi, "Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 7 (2003): 101–15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>3</sup>See "Obama Speaks about Economy, Provides Plan; Protests Continue in Iran," *CNN*, 17 June 2009, accessed 29 December 2014, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/090617/cnr.05.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>Malcom Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010, accessed 29 December 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3>.

<sup>6</sup>For a sample, see Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, eds., *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet* (New York: Verso, 2014). For an exceptional work with a very original argument, see Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>See Navid Hassanpour, "Media Disruption Exacerbates Revolutionary Unrest: Evidence from Mubarak's Natural Experiment," *Social Science Research Network*, 7 August 2011, accessed 29 December 2014, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1903351&download=yes](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1903351&download=yes).

<sup>9</sup>See Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012); and Tara Mahtafar, "The Face Behind Mousavi's Facebook," *Tehran Bureau*, 18 November 2009, accessed 8 January 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/11/the-face-behind-mousavis-facebook.html>.