



When virtual reality meets realpolitik: Social media shaping the Arab government–citizen relationship



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ABSTRACT

Since most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an unprecedented extent, public analysts and researchers have rushed to reflect on and explain the phenomena, often attributing a ‘change agency’ to social media as such. This argumentative research collects evidence from literature, recent surveys and focus groups in order to contextualize our understanding of the role of social media and its usage in reshaping the Arab government–citizen relationship: Are the traits of social media significant enough to single them out and discuss their specific impact on the government–citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an ‘agency’ of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And in view of the actual use of social media: What are the options of containing emerging ‘destructive’ phenomena and ‘improving’ the government–citizen relationship? Answers are outlined to support contextualized design of social media technology and regulation: (1) Arab citizens basically support democratic concepts; however (2) social media as such do not act and therefore do not ‘create’ e.g. democracy; rather (3) social media enable a new political sphere for Arab citizens, nevertheless challenged by realpolitik; and (4) social media need care taking in terms of shaping political communication and shaping the media itself in order to serve well as mediator among citizens and between citizens and government.

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1. Introduction

The term ‘Facebook revolution’ had emerged along with observations that most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an extent as it was not witnessed before. Since then the role of social media usage in changing the political landscape is debated, especially in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, including many voices expressing optimistic opinions how social media could improve the relation of citizens among each other and towards their governance system. The technologies and applications summarized as social media share certain characteristics such as enabling social networking based on online profiles, sharing structured (e.g. “I like”) and unstructured information in manifold ways; it is a fast, ubiquitous, and repelling control due to its decentralized usage and processing structures. However, are these traits significant enough to single out social media and discuss their specific impact on the Arab government–citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an ‘agency’ of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And as the masses take over and flood the social media also with indecency, hate messages, shit storms etc.: what are the possible options of containing emerging ‘destructive’ phenomena and ‘improving’ the government–citizen relationship?

The usage of social media in the Arab region has received considerable attention from authors and commentators being mainly concerned with understanding the phenomena and its relation to the political development of these countries. However, this paper takes a design-oriented perspective: trying to build on insights from research in political science, digital government as well as information and communication science, it aims not only to understand the role of social media in context but also to outline ways forward: for the stakeholder involved as well as for designing social media technologies, both of which are expected to reshape the Arab government–citizen relationship. Accordingly, the line of argument to answer the above questions unfolds as follows:

1. The Arab government–citizen relationship is unique in its history and in its stakeholder expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs.
2. The power of social media to induce political change in Arab countries has been analyzed from various perspectives, however instrumental views are to be preferred over views advocating agency in shaping the government–citizen relationship.
3. The Arab cyberspace of social media initially provided a free sphere for information exchange, opinion sharing and mobilization; however, the often hailed empowerment of (opposition) activists increasingly is confronted with realpolitik taking over the electronic grounds.

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4. In conclusion, civil societies in Arab countries should not surrender to realpolitik (#3) but strive to proactively define and take care of the role of social media in shaping the government–citizen relationship: based on expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs (#1) and the previous experience of using social media (#2), achieving transparency and accountability should be high on the agenda, along with taking care of the media design itself.

The first two arguments are solely based on literature review. The third and fourth arguments combine extant research with data from recently published surveys and focus group meetings of 2011 and 2012. A special focus is on Egypt as one of the countries prominently linked to the ‘Arab Spring’ and with the highest number of social media users in the region.

The structure of this article follows the above four arguments. Prior to these sections the most relevant data is reviewed regarding social media usage in Arab countries and Egypt in particular. Finally the line of argument is concluded, and limitations as well as future research are discussed.

2. Usage of social media in Egypt and other Arab countries

The use of internet and smart phones is a function of the economic situation, and the Arab countries are quite diverse in this respect. Not surprisingly, the internet subscription has the highest penetration in the oil-rich Gulf states (50–80%), while population-rich countries such as Egypt (35%) and Algeria (14%) still suffer from a digital divide (data as of June 2012; source: internetworldstats.com).

For many years social media remained a ‘Western’ means of communication with relatively high numbers of users only to be found in North America and Europe. However, the Arabization of web content and the launch of the Arabic Facebook in 2009 have dramatically changed the adoption of social media in the Middle East. Practically all Arab countries still witness enormous growth rates regarding Facebook usage: in November 2012, for example, Egypt had close to 12 million Facebook users (rank 21 worldwide; source: socialbakers.com) compared to less than 1 million just four years ago. Due to its population size Egypt has by far the most Facebook users in the region, however the penetration rates are much higher in other countries such as Qatar (87%), UAE (67%), Bahrain (53%), Lebanon (38%), Kuwait (32%), Tunisia (31%), and even Saudi Arabia (21%) compared to Egypt’s 15% (source: socialbakers.com). An online survey conducted in 2013 by the Dubai School of Government (Alshaer & Salem, 2013) revealed that Facebook is the most popular social network, followed by Google+, and 54% of survey respondents indicated using Facebook more than once a day, while 30% used Google+ at the same frequency.

Twitter is similarly on the rise, but the absolute numbers are far less compared to Facebook. The number of active Twitter users in the whole Arab region was estimated just above 2 million at the end of June 2012, with only Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and UAE having reportedly more than 100,000 Twitter users (Dubai School of Government, 2012). Accordingly, only Kuwait showed a significant penetration rate of 13%, followed by Bahrain (5.3%), with all others with not more than around 3% or far less. In mid-2012 the social network LinkedIn has more than 4 million members in the Arab region, and the Arab Social Media Report concludes: “Twitter penetration remains behind that of LinkedIn – except in Kuwait – indicating that job hunting and professional networking services through LinkedIn are more relevant in the region than the informational, social and political uses of social media that Twitter provides.” (Dubai School of Government, 2012, 22).

Other social media of outstanding relevance are YouTube and text messaging, followed by blogs and picture sharing tools (e.g. Flickr). For example, YouTube reportedly accounts for 167 million video views daily in the Arab region, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, followed by Egypt, Morocco and UAE (Dubai School of Government, 2012).

Based on the 2013 online survey data, Alshaer and Salem (2013) report about trends of internet usage in the Arab region which extend into all areas of social life such as socializing, education, shopping, entertainment, news, and government interaction; out of which online shopping is the least developed (the majority of survey respondents do not shop online). Notably, the internet is the primary source of news for 36% of the respondents, 29% get their news from social media while another 28% get it from traditional media sources.

Social media users in Arab countries are comparatively young of age. Youth between the ages of 15 and 29 continue to make up around 70% of Facebook users in the Arab region, and just above one third of the Facebook users are female (Dubai School of Government, 2012). However, demographics have a significant impact on the Arab Spring. For example, at the time of the 2011 revolution one third of the Egyptian population was between 15 and 29 (source: UN Population Survey), and the suffering from massive unemployment and other social grievances especially in urban areas (greater Cairo, Alexandria) coincided with the highest adoption of social media compared to the rest of the country and to other age groups. Analyzing the data of media usage in Egypt, Lim (2012, 235) concludes: “[...] social media are the media of the urban youth.”

3. The Arab government–citizen relationship

The government–citizen relationship in Arab countries seems to be unique. In 2010 Diamond noted that none of the independent Arab states of the Middle East and coastal North Africa are a “democracy” in which governments are established based on perceived free and fair elections by its citizens. Certainly, the tribal, colonial or even Pharaonic history of these countries has been dominated by strictly authoritarian leadership. However, between the mid 70s and the mid 90s of the last century the number of democracies worldwide went up from 40 to 117, leaving only the Arab region untouched by this dynamic development (Diamond, 2010).

A number of researchers set out to explain this Arab “democracy deficit”. Many propositions have been made, often concluding that Islamic belief leads to a political culture hostile to democracy (most popular by Huntington, 1993). Surprisingly, based on extensive survey data, it was found by Tessler (2002) and Jamal and Tessler (2008) that (a) support for democracy in the Arab world is as high as or even higher than in any other regions, and (b) religious orientation of citizens cannot explain the persistence of authoritarianism in this region.

In search for alternative explanations, authors turn to structural and geopolitical arguments. Diamond (2010) has summarized that in many, if not most, Arab states

- Economies are mainly centralized due to their dependence on oil and gas export.
- Low level taxations reduce the need of accountability of state activities.
- Civil societies and political oppositions are weak and co-opted.
- Secret-police and intelligence apparatus are sophisticated and highly penetrating.
- Foreign aid has heavily supported autocratic regimes over decades.
- The lack of Arab unity and the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict rather lead to a standstill than foster any kind of political development.

All of this background frames how stakeholders form their expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs. The level of personal piety is higher in the Arab world, and historically the connection of Islam and politics is strongly legitimated (Tessler, 2002). People rather hold an instrumental view of democracy, and they disagree among themselves to what extent Islam should play a role in politics (Jamal & Tessler, 2008). The ongoing debate about to what extent Islam in general and specific Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultative deliberations) are actually compatible with Western conceptions of democracy (e.g. El Fadl, 2004; Parry, 2010), is only an indicator

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