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Zahera Harb

The Arab world witnessed an influx of satellite channels during the 1990s and in the early years of the first decade of the new century. Many analysts in the Arab world applauded this influx as a potential tool for political change in the Arab countries. Two stations were at the heart of the new optimism: Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the two most prominent 24-hour news channels in the region. Al-Jazeera proved to be more controversial because in its early years of broadcasting it managed to break taboos in the Arab media by tackling issues of human rights and hosting Arab dissidents. Also, its coverage of international conflicts (primarily Afghanistan and Iraq) has marked it as a counter-hegemonic news outlet. For the first time, the flow of news went from South to North. Some scholars who study Arab satellite media, and Al-Jazeera specifically, have gone so far as to suggest that it has created a new Arab public sphere (Lynch, Miladi). However, the political developments in the Arab world, mainly the recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and what is now happening in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, have raised questions as to how credible these suggestions are. And are we going to claim the same powers for social media in the Arab world?

This article takes the form of a personal reflection on how successful (or not) Arab satellite channels are proving to be as a tool for political change and reform in the Arab world. Are these channels editorially free from Arab governments' political and economic interests? And could new media (notably social networking sites) achieve what satellite channels have been unable to over the last two decades?

1996 saw the launch of Al-Jazeera, the first 24-hour news channel in the Arab world. However, it didn't have much of an impact on the media scene in the region until 1998 and gained its controversial reputation through its coverage of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (see Zayani; Miles; Allan and Zelizer; El-Nawawy and Iskandar). In the Arab world, it gained popularity with its compelling talk shows and open discussions of human rights and democracy (Alterman). But its dominance didn't last long.

In 2003, Al Walid Al Ibrahim, son-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (1921-2005) established Al Arabiya, the second 24-hour news channel in the Arab world, just before the start of the Iraq war. Many scholars and analysts saw in this a direct response to the popularity that Al-Jazeera was achieving with the Arab audiences. Al Arabiya, however, didn't achieve the level of popularity that Al-Jazeera enjoyed throughout its years of broadcasting (Shapiro). Al Arabiya and Al-Jazeera Arabic subsequently became rivals representing political and national interests and not just news competitors. Indeed, one of Wikileaks' latest revelations states that Al-Jazeera changed its coverage to suit Qatari foreign policy. The US ambassador to Qatar, Joseph LeBaron, was reported as saying:

The Qatari prime minister, Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, had joked in an interview that Al-Jazeera had caused the Gulf State such headaches that it might be better to sell it. But the ambassador remarked: "Such statements must not be taken at face value." He went on: "Al-Jazeera's ability to influence public opinion throughout the region is a substantial source of leverage for Qatar, one which it is unlikely to relinquish. Moreover, the network can also be used as a chip to improve relations. For example, Al-Jazeera's more favourable coverage of Saudi Arabia's royal family has facilitated Qatari-Saudi reconciliation over the past year." (Booth).

The unspoken political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar on Lebanese domestic disputes, over Iran, and over the Palestinian internal conflict was played out in the two channels.

This brings us to my central question: can Arab satellite channels, and specifically Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya, be regarded as tools for democratic political change?

In the recent revolution in Tunisia (spring 2011), satellite channels had to catch up with what social media were reporting: and Al-Jazeera more so than Al Arabiya because of previous encounters between Al-Jazeera and Zein Al Abidine bin Ali's regime (Greenslade, *The Guardian*). Bin Ali controlled the country's media and access to satellite media to suit his interests. Al-Jazeera was banned from Tunisia on several occasions and had their offices closed down. Bin Ali allowed private TV stations to operate but under indirect state control when it came to politics and what Ben Ali's regime viewed as national and security interests.

Should we therefore give social networking credit for facilitating the revolution in Tunisia? Yes, we should. We should give it credit for operating as a mobilising tool. The people were ready, the political moment came, and the people used it. Four out of ten Tunisians are connected to the Internet; almost 20 per cent of the Tunisian population are on Facebook (Mourtada and Salem). We are talking about a newly media-literate population who have access to the new technology and know how to use it. On this point, it is important to note that eight out of ten Facebook users in Tunisia are under the age of 30 (Mourtada and Salem). Public defiance and displays of popular anger were sustained by new media outlets (Miladi). Facebook pages have become sites of networking and spaces for exchanging and disseminating news about the protests (Miladi). Pages such as "The people of Tunisia are burning themselves, Mr President" had around 15,000 members. "Wall-posts" specifying the date and place of upcoming protest became very familiar on social media websites. They even managed to survive government attempts to disable and block these sites. Tunisian and non-Tunisians alike became involved in spreading the message through these sites and Arab transnationalism and support for the revolution came to a head. Many adjacent countries had Facebook pages showing support for the Tunisian revolution. And one of the most prominent of these pages was "Egyptians supporting the Tunisian revolution." There can be little doubt, therefore, that the success of the Tunisian revolution encouraged the youth of Egypt (estimated at 80 per cent of its Facebook users) to rise up and persist in their call for change and political reform.

Little did Wael Ghonim and his friends on the "Kolinah Khaled Said" ("We are all Khaled Said") Facebook page know where their call for demonstrations on the 25 January 2011 would lead. In the wake of the Tunisian victory, the "We are all Khaled Said" page (Said was a young man who died under torture by Egyptian police) garnered 100,000 hits and most of these virtual supporters then took to the streets on 25 January which was where the Egyptian revolution started.

Egyptians were the first Arab youth to have used the Internet as a political platform and tool to mobilise people for change. Egypt has the largest and most active blogosphere in the Arab world. The Egyptian bloggers were the first to reveal corruption and initiated calls for change as early as 2007 (Saleh). A few victories were achieved, such as the firing and sentencing of two police officers condemned for torturing Imad Al Kabeer in 2007 (*BBC Arabic*). However, these early Egyptian bloggers faced significant jail sentences and prosecution (*BBC News*). Several movements were orchestrated via Facebook, including the 6 April uprising of 2007, but at this time such resistance invariably ended in persecution and even more oppression. The 25 January revolution therefore took the regime by surprise. In response, former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and his entourage (who controlled the state media and privately owned TV stations such as Dream TV) started making declarations that "Egypt is not Tunisia," but the youth of Egypt were determined to prove them wrong. Significantly, Mubarak's first reaction was to block Twitter, then Facebook, as well as disrupting mobile phone text-messaging and Blackberry-messaging services. Then, on Thursday 27 January, the regime attempted to shut down the Internet as a whole. Al-Jazeera Arabic quickly picked up on the events in Egypt and began live coverage from Cairo's Tahrir Square, which resulted in Mubarak's block of Al-Jazeera's transmission in Egypt and the withdrawal of its operational licences. One joke exchanged with Tunisian activists on Facebook was that Egyptians, too, had "Ammar 404" (the nickname of the government censor in Tunisia). It was not long, however, before Arab activists from across the regions started exchanging codes and software that allowed Egyptians to access the Internet, despite the government blockades. Egyptian computer science students also worked on ways to access the Worldwide Web and overcome the government's blockade (Shouier) and Google launched a special service to allow people in Egypt to send Twitter messages by dialling a phone number and leaving a voice message (Oreskovic, *Reuters*). Facebook group pages like *Akher Khabar's* "Latest News" and *Rased's* "RNN" were then used by the Egyptian diaspora to share all the information they could get from friends and family back home, bypassing more traditional modes of communication. This transnational support group was crucial in communicating their fellow citizens' messages to the rest of the world; through them, news made its way onto Facebook and then through to the other Arab nations and beyond. My own personal observation of these pages during the period 25 January to 12 February revealed that the usage of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter changed markedly, shifting from being merely social in nature to becoming rapidly and *primarily* political, not only among Arab users in the Arab world, as Mourtada and Salem argue, but also throughout the Arabian diaspora.

In the case of Libya's revolution, also, social media may be seen to be a mobilising tool in the hands of both Libyans at home and across the Libyan diaspora. Libya has around 4 per cent of its population on Facebook (Mourtada and Salem), and with Gaddafi's regime cracking down on the Internet, the

Libyan diaspora has often been the source of information for what is happening inside the country. Factual information, images, and videos were circulated via the *February 17th* website (in Arabic and in English) to appeal to Arab and international audiences for help. Facebook and Twitter were where the hash tag “#Feb17th” was created. Omar Amer, head of the UK’s Libyan youth movement based in Manchester, told Channel 4: “I can call Benghazi or Tripoli and obtain accurate information from the people on the ground, then report it straight onto Twitter” (*Channel 4 News*). Websites inspired by #Feb17th were spread online and Facebook pages dedicated to news about the Libyan uprisings quickly had thousands of supporters (*Channel 4 News*). Social media networks have thus created an international show of solidarity for the pro-democracy protestors in Libya, and Amer was able to report that they have received overwhelming support from all around the globe. I think that it must therefore be concluded that the role Arab satellite channels were playing a few years ago has now been transferred to social media websites which, in turn, have changed from being merely social/cultural to political platforms. Moreover, the nature of the medium has meant that the diasporas of the nations concerned have been instrumental to the success of the uprisings back home.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that broadcast media have been totally redundant in the revolutionary process. Throughout the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, Al-Jazeera became a disseminating tool for user-generated content. A call for Arab citizens to send their footage of unfolding events to the Al-Jazeera website for it to re-broadcast on its TV screens was a key factor in the dissemination of what was happening. The role Al-Jazeera played in supporting the Egyptian revolution especially (which caused some Arab analysts to give it the name “channel of revolutions”), was quickly followed by criticism for their lack of coverage of the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. The killing of peaceful protestors in Bahrain did not get airtime the way that the killing of Egyptian pro-democracy protestors had. Tweets, Facebook posts and comments came pouring in, questioning the lack of coverage from Bahrain. Al Arabiya followed Al-Jazeera’s lead. Bahrain was put last on the running order of the coverage of the “Arab revolutions.” Newspaper articles across the Arab world were questioning the absence of “the opinion and other opinion” (Al-Jazeera’s Arabic motto) when it came to Bahrain (see *Al Akhbar*). Al Jazeera’s editor-in-chief, Hassan El Shoubaki, told Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* that they were not deliberately absent but had logistical problems with the coverage since Al-Jazeera is banned in Bahrain (Hadad). However, it can be argued that Al-Jazeera was also banned in Egypt and Tunisia and that didn’t stop the channel from reporting or remodelling its screen to host and “rebroadcast” an activist-generated content.

This brings us back to the Wikileaks’ revelation mentioned earlier. Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Bahraini protests is influenced by Qatari foreign policy and, in the case of Bahrain, is arguably abiding by Qatar’s commitment to Gulf Cooperation Council security treaties. (This is one of the occasions where Al Arabiya and Al-Jazeera appear to have shared the same editorial guidelines, influenced by Qatari and Saudi Arabian shared policy.)

Nevertheless, the Bahraini protests continue to dominate the social networks sites and information has kept flowing from Bahrain and it will continue to do so because of these platforms. The same scenario is also unfolding in Syria, but this

time Al-Jazeera Arabic is taking a cautious stance while Al Arabiya has given the protests full coverage. Once again, the politics are obvious: Qatar is a supporter of the Syrian regime, while Saudi Arabia has long been battling politically with Syria on issues related to Lebanon, Palestine, and Iran (this position might change with Syria seeking support on tackling its own domestic unrest from the Saudi regime).

All this confirms that there are limits to what satellite channels in the Arab world can do to be part of a process for democratic political reform. The Arab media world is not free of the political and economic influence of its governments, its owners or the various political parties struggling for control. However, this is clearly not a phenomenon unique to the Arab world. Where, or when, has media reporting ever been totally "free"?

So is this, then, the age of *new media*? Could the Internet be a free space for Arab citizens to express their opinion and fulfil their democratic aspirations in bringing about freedom of speech and political freedom generally? Is it able to form the new Arab public sphere? Recent events show that the potential is there. What happened in Tunisia and Egypt was effectively the seizure of power by the people as part of a collective will to overthrow dictators and autocratic regimes and to effect democratic change *from within* (i.e. not having it imposed by foreign powers). The political moment in Tunisia was right and the people receptive; the army refused to respond violently to the protests and members of bin Ali's government rose up against him. The political and social scene in Egypt *became* receptive after the people felt empowered by events in Tunis. Will this transnational empowerment now spread to other Arab countries open to change notwithstanding the tribal and sectarian alliances that characterise their populations? Further, since new media have proven to be "dangerous tools" in the hands of the citizens of Tunisia and Egypt, will other Arab regimes clamp down on them or hijack them for their own interests as they did the satellite channels previously? Maybe, but new media technology is arguably ahead of the game and I am sure that those regimes stand to be taken by surprise by another wave of revolutions facilitated by a new online tool. So far, Arab leaders have been of one voice in *blaming the media* for the protests (uprisings) their countries are witnessing—from Tunisia to Syria via Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya. As Khatib puts it: "It is as if the social, economic, and political problems the people are protesting against would disappear if only the media would stop talking about them." Yet what is evident so far is that *they won't*. The media, and social networks in particular, do not of themselves generate revolutions but they can facilitate them in ways that we are only just beginning to understand.

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