

After the Arab Spring

HOW THE MEDIA TRASHED THE TRANSITIONS

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The Arab uprisings of 2011 erupted in a region shaped by a decade and a half of revolutionary transformations in the world of Arab media. This revolution was driven by satellite television, local radio, semi-independent press outlets, and the Internet.¹ These new media played a vital role in the 2011 political uprisings. The new media brought critical news and opinion to a broad public, gave voice to the voiceless, built ties between activists and ordinary citizens, and linked local protests into a powerful master narrative of regional uprising.

The political uprisings affected the media landscape directly, enabling the rapid launching of dozens of new independent television stations, newspapers, and websites. Within a few years, however, most of the attempted democratic transitions had failed—and the media had had something to do with it. Media organs that had proved crucial to the uprisings degenerated with dismaying rapidity into highly partisan platforms serving state authorities or political factions. Why did the media *both* drive the wave of uprisings that rocked the Arab world in 2011 *and* contribute to the failure of those uprisings to consolidate democratic institutions?²

The failings of Arab media in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring are a cautionary tale. They warn us about the pitfalls that line the path to developing a plural public sphere during a transition away from authoritarian rule. In the Arab world, many of the same things about the media that facilitated the sudden emergence of mass protest movements proved harmful to the consolidation of democratic transitions. The failure to reform state media, the intense fear triggered by radical institutional uncertainty, and struggles over the identity and power structures of transitional states played out within an ecosystem of partisan and

polarized media that helped to drive social polarization and political disenchantment. Authoritarian resurgence or outright state failure were the all-too-likely outcomes.

Arab media played a destructive role during the attempted transitions for three major reasons: *political capture*, the *marketing of fear*, and *polarization*. First, the media proved susceptible to political capture by states, political movements, or old elites.³ Transnational satellite-television stations such as Al Jazeera, which had once served as a virtual Arab public sphere, morphed into partisan actors supporting the interests of their state patrons and local proxies. State media sectors resisted meaningful reforms, leaving widely viewed state television as a potent weapon in the hands of the security apparatus and the old regime. Most new television stations and other mass media were owned by wealthy, politically ambitious businessmen or political movements, and they tailored their coverage accordingly.

Second, both mass media and social media magnified the fear and uncertainty that inevitably accompany transitions. Both types of media heightened fears by publicizing worrisome information, ideas, and rumors as well as by encouraging slices of the public to self-segregate into echo chambers where only such polarizing information tended to circulate. This was seen nowhere more intensely than in Egypt, where politicized court rulings, poorly designed and endlessly delayed constitutional talks, and spiraling existential divides between Islamists and their enemies created openings for authoritarian restoration. While early in the Arab Spring the media had tended to support revolutionary enthusiasm by marketing hope for real change, by the middle of 2011 accounts of the violence that was breaking out in Libya, Syria, and Yemen were frightening viewers into more pessimistic expectations.

Finally, political capture and institutional uncertainty created the ideal conditions for intense polarization. Media outlets typically sought out a distinctive political niche and catered to that constituency to the exclusion of others. Islamists watched one set of television stations and Twitter feeds, while anti-Islamists watched an entirely different set. Those outlets that attempted to remain evenhanded often struggled to find an audience. Thus Al Jazeera went from a primary source for news across ideological lines to an outlet that catered to Islamists, while being shunned by their enemies. The media in transitional states such as Egypt and Tunisia rapidly polarized as the moment of revolutionary enthusiasm gave way to hard political combat over the extent of reforms, the distribution of power, and the identity of the state. In failing states such as Libya and Yemen, there were no reliable national media, and outlets aligned with this or that local or ideological faction became the primary source of information. On social media, self-segregation into ideological or sectarian clusters drove politics toward the extremes, ate away at common ground, and made conflicts and divisions worse.

At least some blame for the failure of the Arab transitions lies with the destructive effects of the new media environment. The media contributed to the failure of Egypt's transition and almost sabotaged Tunisia's. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, fragmented and polarized media contributed to polarization, provided a key vehicle for proxy warfare by regional powers, and shaped the logic of violence. Even states that successfully deflected popular mobilizations through political and constitutional reforms, such as Morocco and Jordan, used media to build support for the process and to undermine support for protesters.

The Arab Media Before and After the Uprisings

The role that the Arab media played after the uprisings can only be understood in light of history going back decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, most Arab countries developed intensely repressive forms of censorship and state domination of the media. While the specifics of national systems of control differed, mass media generally served as a tool for controlling information and mobilizing people in the service of power.⁴ Highly sophisticated citizens were able to seek out independent sources of information, such as VOA or BBC radio broadcasts, but most citizens continued to rely primarily on national media.

This changed in the 1990s and 2000s, when Al Jazeera's free-to-view satellite broadcasts shattered state monopolies on information and ushered in an era of competitive transnational Arab television. Competition from abroad forced most national television stations to modernize and adapt. Some countries, such as Egypt, developed a diverse and cantankerous political press. By the late 2000s, most Arabs had hundreds of free satellite channels from which to choose, while Internet access became almost ubiquitous in key cities. These changes transformed the Arab world from an informational black hole into a media-saturated society.

Rather than emphasize a single platform such as Twitter, Facebook, or satellite television, it is most useful to understand them as forming a singular media ecology: Broadcast-media content circulated frequently via social media, while social media became an important source of images, video, and information for the mass media (this was particularly the case regarding content from conflict zones such as Syria, where few journalists dared to tread). Broadcast, print, and social media formed symbiotic relationships with one another, while international media began drawing content from Middle Eastern social media. In Saudi Arabia and much of the Gulf, Twitter was the key site, while in North Africa Facebook was more widely used. Television ruled almost everywhere.

The Arab information environment had three distinctive features compared to other regions that have experienced waves of potential democratization. First, each Arab country was embedded in a transnational

Arabic-language media ecosystem. Second, the degree of direct and indirect state control over Arab national media was comparatively high. Finally, social media introduced new dynamics not seen in democratic transitions of decades past. Let us consider these features in turn.

1) *Transnational broadcasting.* Al Jazeera and other Arabic-language transnational television stations played a key role in publicizing the early Tunisian protests of late 2010 and early 2011, framing them for a huge Arabic-speaking audience as part of a broader Arab story of popular uprising. These broadcasts facilitated a “scale shift,” as local struggles became linked together within a common narrative framework that helped to spread protest from one country to another. The diffusion of protest from Tunisia to Egypt and then to virtually the entire region is difficult to imagine without this unifying media environment.

The transnational media soon degenerated into an arena for regional power struggles, with Al Jazeera serving the interests of the Qatari regime and Saudi-owned media outlets closely aligning themselves with Riyadh’s regional policies. Bahrain was one turning point, as Arab stations either ignored the dramatic events there or else slanted their coverage of the Bahraini popular uprising in sectarian terms to justify the Saudi-led military intervention. In Libya and Syria, most pan-Arab stations openly campaigned for chosen rebel groups, and then for particular factions within those insurgencies. Al Jazeera came to be identified with Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia’s Ennahda, while other stations peddled wild, sensational stories that fed anti-Islamist anger and suspicion.

This partisan turn, along with images of state collapse and horrific violence coming from Libya and Syria, likely contributed to the fading of enthusiasm for popular uprisings. Partisanship also dashed any hopes that transnational media might provide a neutral forum in which the various vying national-media narratives could coexist and perhaps even come into dialogue with one another. Transnational broadcasting, so essential to galvanizing and spreading the uprisings, thus did little for democratic consolidation and in fact contributed to the trashing of the transitions.

2) *National media.* A transition away from authoritarian rule should in principle entail the emergence of a more open national public sphere able to monitor domestic politics and hold politicians to account, devote sustained attention to local issues, and become the site for national opinion formation. In some states, the early days of the Arab Spring did witness the budding of a wide variety of new national media, from television to radio to newspapers. Truncated legal and institutional reforms and a swiftly rising tide of polarization soon destroyed the young blossoms, however. By undermining the political consensus on national identity and basic “rules of the game,” national media promoted not the flowering but the trashing of transitions.

Egypt and Tunisia, the two countries where protestors put autocrats to flight, are cases with much the same tale to tell when it comes to national media. While Tunisia's media had long been rigidly controlled

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and Egypt's comparatively rambunctious, both countries had seen limited media openings take hold in the decade before the uprisings. New media platforms blossomed when long-entrenched dictators fell, but a dearth of resources and experience left the new initiatives in both Egypt and Tunisia open to capture by wealthy interests, political movements, or the state. Failure to reform state media left intact a powerful weapon that old elites could seize in order to defend their threatened status.

It is worth briefly explaining why reforming the media proved so difficult.⁵ Amid intense polarization and with rules up for grabs, every player feared that a hated political rival might swiftly seize control of a "commanding height" such as a suddenly freer media sector. In a zero-sum game played without settled rules in a highly polarized arena, every move toward institutional reform was interpreted as a political purge aimed at permanent institutional capture. Egypt's newly elected President Mohamed Morsi or Tunisia's Ennahda party, for instance, had every reason to seek fundamental change in the institutions at the heart of the old regime, from the Interior Ministry to state broadcasting, and most revolutionaries would agree that such change was essential.

Yet every effort in this direction struck fear into political opponents, who worried that Islamists would simply take over these institutions in order to impose their own rule. Attempts at reform led civil society and journalists to rally against what they viewed as Islamist moves to capture the media and the state. The failure to reform broadcast media and major newspapers left these organs in the hands of elites who had benefited from the old order and so feared change.

Egypt has always had a more robust and contentious public sphere than other more tightly controlled Arab authoritarian regimes.⁶ The Mubarak regime kept a tight grip on broadcasters while the intelligence services enforced certain red lines, but Egyptian newspapers featured regular criticism, independent columnists, and critical journalists. Well before the revolution, Egypt's media had evolved into a mix of state-run dinosaurs, respected private daily newspapers, and pugnacious tabloids, joined more recently by activist blogs and social media.

When the revolution broke out as 2011 dawned, most independent Egyptian media rallied behind the protests. Television stations such as

ONTV hosted influential political talk shows and programs that drove the national agenda.⁷ The sight of top generals being grilled on live television seemed like an early sign that a classic liberal-democratic public sphere was coming into being. So did the robust debates that began appearing in print as leading dailies opened their pages to a wide range of new writers and let old limits on political criticism drop.

Yet it would not last. The momentary unity of the postrevolutionary media quickly degenerated into a polarized, sensationalistic, and toxic environment that fostered the worst political trends. State-run media remained largely intact and quickly resumed old habits.⁸ They complied when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which ruled Egypt from February 2011 until the June 2012 presidential election, refused to allow serious scrutiny of the military. Challengers to the old regime came in for press attacks.⁹ Activists and demonstrators were demonized as foreign-backed agents of destabilization and blamed for the country's ills. In October 2011, misleading and inflammatory reporting led to bloody attacks on protests that Coptic Christians had been holding outside the offices of Egyptian state broadcasting.

When the Muslim Brotherhood's Morsi was elected to the presidency in June 2012, it settled nothing. State institutions rebelled at the prospect of Islamist rule; there arose no unified choice of transitional path, the Brotherhood flailed aimlessly in its efforts to impose order; and society split. Both state-run and private media organs campaigned against the Brotherhood, combining scare-mongering about Islamist ambitions with heavy coverage of economic and social breakdowns that stoked popular discontent. Outlets that had once been known for criticizing the powerful began acting as apologists for the revived security state, while once-marginal conservative figures surged to the center of the public sphere. Lavishly supportive coverage of anti-Morsi demonstrations in late June 2013 set the stage for his removal by a military coup in early July—a step that most of the media eagerly cheered.

After that, the regime drew the media in even tighter.¹⁰ Journalists and television hosts competed to see who could most enthusiastically mouth the official line. The Muslim Brotherhood's protest encampment at Cairo's Rabaa Square was treated as cause for alarm, while the security forces' behavior in massacring more than a hundred people there in August 2013 drew sympathetic coverage. Figures who had backed the revolution were forced off the airwaves, harassed, or even arrested in what liberal politician Amr Hamzawy calls a "neo-fascist" time in the history of Egyptian media.¹¹ The surgeon and television comic Bassem Youssef, whose satirical show had been so effective in subverting Morsi's presidency, found his program canceled almost before it had begun its first season after the coup.

Although Tunisia's transition has fared better than Egypt's, national media in both countries have followed a similar path. Limited experi-

ments with semi-independent broadcasting notwithstanding, Tunisia's media were more rigidly controlled than Egypt's under the old regime.¹² After the revolution, journalists and citizens leaped at the chance to build a real media sector. In 2011, a new press law scaled back the worst restrictions. In 2012 came the creation of a new oversight body outside the Information Ministry.¹³ And the 2014 Constitution includes robust protections for the freedoms of speech and the press.

These reforms went farther than anything seen in Egypt, but still fall short. The old guard continues to dominate national radio and television. Owners of private television stations often use them to promote their own personal profiles and pet political agendas.¹⁴ Meanwhile, political movements such as Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes (which has emerged as Ennahda's main rival) have acquired stations of their own.¹⁵ As in Egypt, the growth of partisan media has encouraged the public to split into hostile, mutually uncomprehending camps.

Tunisia's transition nearly broke down in mid-2013 amid media-stoked political hysteria. As in Egypt, the media helped to mobilize discontent against an elected Islamist government. Sensational reporting on matters such as the February 2013 assassination of oppositionist Chokri Belaid, Islamist activity in the universities, and allegations of Ennahda corruption and infiltration of state institutions galvanized popular mistrust and rage. During the 2014 presidential campaign, a furious President Moncef Marzouki lashed out at the media as "sleeping remnants of the old party" and called state television a "lying and corrupt media that does not have the right to speak in the name of Tunisians."¹⁶

The Egyptian and Tunisian experiences show how unreformed national media sectors can undermine democratic transitions. In Jordan and Morocco, where royal regimes used modest reforms to preempt transitions, direct and indirect media controls served to tout the virtues of limited constitutional change while demonizing protesters and rousing fears of bloody unrest. In violent, failed states such as Libya and Yemen, the proliferation of national and local television stations aligned with particular political factions contributed to polarization, fear, and insecurity.¹⁷

3) Social media. Many had hoped that Facebook, Twitter, and the like would provide an antidote to the toxic legacy of official Arab media, but no such happy outcome has arrived. New platforms have brought change to the Arab-media world, but have not been able to escape its pathologies—and indeed have often made them worse.¹⁸

Social media rarely cause political instability in the absence of prior grievances or structural conditions, but they do act as an accelerant and intensifier of many forms of political mobilization and can facilitate sudden outbursts of intense political contention.¹⁹ Social-media platforms give the discontented tools for organizing movements, spreading information, and evading state control over the flow of news and ideas.

Social media, with its immediacy and mediated intimacy, may create a greater willingness to help a shared cause—perhaps by sending money, or even by sending oneself to a conflict zone.

What helps activism does not necessarily aid the consolidation of democracy, however. The acceleration and intensification of political communication nurtures a sense of constant crisis, while the flow of rumors through partisan and sectarian networks exacerbates social distance. Unfortunately, the very qualities that made Facebook and Twitter so useful for coordinating protests during the time of antidictatorial mobilization also made these sites troubling carriers of highly destructive rumors and falsehoods during the time of transition.

The Anti-Social Side of Social Media

There are two things about socially mediated environments—we might call them “self-selection” and “going viral”—that can make social media destructive in transitional situations. In brief, social media prompt people to sort themselves into relatively closed communities of the like-minded, and encourage them to see things in a peculiarly urgent and intense way, as information—including visceral images—cascades widely across networks at lightning speed. Individuals who embed themselves in informational clusters tend to be exposed only to confirming information, and when discordant signals appear, it is usually only to be mocked or challenged.

Debates within like-minded clusters tend to favor the extremist over the cautious moderate. This has disturbing implications for socially, ethnically, or politically divided countries. Social media are very good at cultivating a sense of aggrieved identity among an in-group and at mobilizing resentment and fury against out-groups. Cultivated hatred of internal enemies paved the way for the enthusiastic public embrace of the 2013 coup in Egypt, while sectarianism and jihadism run easily through the social media of the Gulf states.

Social media, then, served to strengthen rather than to counter the negative effects of transnational and national broadcast media after the Arab uprisings. The online drift toward social clustering and more heated conflict amplified extreme voices, gave wing to baleful rumors, and kept the center from holding. The upshot was to make meaningful reform harder, social polarization harsher, and transitions more apt to fail.

The role of the media should not of course be viewed in isolation from underlying political challenges. The pernicious effects of the Arab media emerged in transitional environments characterized by institutional uncertainty, personal insecurity, and ideological or sectarian divisions. Such uncertainty, fear, and anger created a fertile environment and eager audience for sensationalist media that fanned rumors, incited

hatred against political adversaries, and fueled divisive and demonizing narratives. In particular, transitional moments in most Arab cases revealed profound disagreements about national identity and deep fears about the future.

The same media that helped to launch the Arab uprisings proved equally effective at driving resentment, fear, and division while demobilizing exhausted publics.

Long delays and highly contested processes in the drafting of constitutions contributed to the intensity of identity disputes. Initial moments of unity gave way to growing regional, ethnic, sectarian, or ideological polarization, and set Islamists against anti-Islamists. Populist media, oriented toward mobilization, interacted with partisan and polarized social networks to drive discourse to the extremes and intensify divisions between groups.

The past two years have been depressing for those who put faith in the emergence of a new Arab public sphere. Regimes and old elites rose to the challenge and turned the new media environment to their advantage with dispiriting ease. The same media that helped to launch the Arab uprisings proved equally effective at driving resentment, fear, and division while demobilizing exhausted publics. But despair is premature. The underlying transformations in the media environment that originally empowered the Arab uprisings have not disappeared. Nor have the deep grievances that first set off the protest wave. When political conditions change, the media will likely once again accelerate and intensify protests and political challenges to the brittle new authoritarian regimes in the region.

NOTES

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