CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE ARAB NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

A SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

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A brief summary of the findings of a collaborative research project carried out by the Access to Knowledge for Development Center at the American University in Cairo, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Innova Tunisia, and the Arab Policy Institute.

The digital environment in the Middle East and North Africa is a far different place than it was in 2011 when protests movements swept through many countries in North Africa and the Middle East. More citizens are online and engage in civic discourse. The networked public sphere now better represents the full spectrum of social and political perspectives. The blogosphere that was once the center of individual expression and discussion now plays a minor role. The networked public sphere has moved to Facebook and Twitter. And while early adopters and digital activists still hold positions of prominence in digital forums, the traditional information power brokers and offline institutions have invested more in shaping this environment. Governments are more active participants. The networked public sphere is also more highly polarized than it was five years ago. For many of the early pioneers of digital activism, the environment is less conducive for productive dialogue and less useful for organizing and launching campaigns and for inspiring collective action. Some report opting out of the more highly contentious debates online altogether, retreating instead to online spaces in which private conversations can be held. For those that hope to use online discussion spaces to promote social and political change, the environment is now more challenging. Online spaces of today better reflect the complexity of the offline world—the range of thought, the partisan maneuvers and power struggles, and the risks of speaking out in public forums. This may indeed mark the end of an era, but it neither signals the end of digitally mediated collective action nor does it negate the utility and impact of alternative online media. Civil society must now find new tactics and strategies to navigate this new context that is in many ways more mature and more democratic but is also clouded by partisanship and at times threatened by hostile governments.

We summarize here the observations and findings of a two-and-a-half-year collaborative project to study the Arab networked public sphere and to better understand the role of digitally mediated communication in civic engagement. Research teams based in Cairo, Tunis, and Cambridge approached this effort using a variety of tools and methods to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, including social network mapping, content analysis, interviews, surveys, and focus groups. Social network maps based on Twitter users for Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain, and a region-wide blogosphere map helped to inform the study, along with topically focused digital media analysis that drew upon a broader set of media sources and platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online media sources. Nationally representative surveys were conducted in Egypt and Tunisia to understand how the general population interacts with and interprets the online world. Interviews and focus groups went into further depth, engaging with citizens that are active online and that represent different social and political perspectives. Each of these complementary approaches helped to inform and reinforce the observations we summarize here.

BROADER PARTICIPATION ONLINE

In Egypt, the advent of more active users in online spaces and particularly in social media communities in the aftermath of January 2011 has expanded the networked public sphere to include a greater proportion of citizens online. This has brought offline realities and dynamics to the virtual spaces of online media. This is shaped by the political divisions between the strong supporters of the regime and the military institution at one end of the spectrum and the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist supporters on the other.

The networked public sphere has become less of an elite space previously occupied by a community of early adopters. The expansion of the networked public sphere populace now increasingly includes traditional mass media organizations and the state. Nevertheless a participation gap still persists.

In Tunisia, we have witnessed a rapid transition from a top-down authoritarian regime that tightly controlled the media and information environment to the emergence of a more distributed, less hierarchical and multi-directional information system that allow individuals greater latitude to participate in the production and framing of news and information. Internet and social media significantly contributed to transcend geographical and socio-economic boundaries and facilitated collaboration among the elite, the rural areas, and the urban middle class. One sign of these changes in Tunisia is that Arabic content is increasingly used in online discussions.

THE SHIFT IN PLATFORMS

A well-known migration has taken place from the spaces of the blogosphere and the more broadly open web, where deeper and longer conversations took place, to the more interconnected networks of Facebook and Twitter. This has brought changes to the networked public sphere. Interactions on social media are hastier in nature. The culture of hyperlinking amongst early adopters and veterans of the blogosphere was not replicated in the realm of Facebook in the case of Egypt. In both Egypt and Tunisia, Twitter remains a more limited and politicized space for a relatively smaller community. In Tunisia, the Twitter network is structured around a mix of topics, including political, technology, and digital rights, and appears to be populated by users who are highly educated and lean towards progressive social and political perspectives. In Egypt, Twitter better reflects the current political divisions there.

Facebook is a more widely adopted multi-use platform where users engage in political discussion but also congregate around social topics driven by personal ties.

In some instances in Egypt, users bypass the limitations of each platform by creating several accounts on both Twitter and Facebook, ones that are for public consumption and engagement and others for personal use.

In Tunisia, traditional media organizations are learning to coexist with social media. Several media organizations that have barely survived the digital transformation now use Facebook as a primary platform for disseminating their reporting and articles.

POLARIZATION, POLITICIZATION, AND CONTENTION ONLINE

Online spaces now better reflect offline realties. Offline political polarization and contagion has migrated to online spaces. In Egypt, the networked public sphere has reproduced the polarization that overwhelmed Egypt following the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood and their replacement with a pro-military government. Mass media have instrumentalized online spaces to serve this condition of polarization by selectively quoting divisive voices from social media.

The norms and ethics of online behavior also appear to be changing. In Tunisia, bloggers who were initially interested in culture or entertainment shifted to political activism. By tracking engagement with media in Tunisia, we see that levels of participation are strongly correlated with content dealing with violent interactions. In Egypt as well, the depictions and discussions of violence are increasing.

Broader participation online in Egypt has meant new norms and behaviors that stand in contrast to the set of basic values shared by veteran online communities. Many note a decline in civility online that has coincided with growing polarization. In light of offline political contagion and violence it has become increasingly common for false information to spread online. The dissemination of information online is also increasingly reflective of the different users' biases.

SIGNS OF OPTING OUT

There are signs of disheartened users from across the political spectrum deciding to opt out or to selectively disengage as a result of fatigue with hostility online. Some users have chosen to retreat to more private forums.

NECESSARY STEPS IN A TRANSITION

The broader cross section of society joining the networked public sphere and engaging in discourse and debate online is a step in a broader process of democratization. The networked public sphere has opened the door for equality of opportunity to engage in civic and public life and this has since unsettled the relationship between citizens and the state. Addressing the broad range of social and political issues for each of these countries is natural and necessary and offers more opportunities to pursue and identify common ground. This is the central challenge for the next phase of digitally mediated collective action.