NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN ONLINE POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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INTRODUCTION

What has happened to digital activism in the 10 years since the Arab Spring? The answer to this question can be divided into four sections. First, I will give you a short history of digital activism before and during the Arab Spring in 2011. Second, I will outline three major changes to the political environment that have affected online activism since 2013. Third, I will provide seven observations about how digital activism has changed between 2013 and 2021. My assessment may be a little cynical, so finally, I will try to provide some hopeful predictions about the way forward.

HISTORY

As you may know, the Arab Spring was the culmination of social and political movements that began almost two decades before, with the Second Intifada in 2000 and later events including the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, the Damascus Spring, the Egyptian elections in 2005, the April 6 strikes in 2008, and finally the Egyptian Revolution and the rest of the Arab revolutions.

In the mid-2000s, cameras, cellphones and blogging were the most used tools of digital activism. Blogging in particular took hold in the Arab world, where it was full of fresh ideas criticizing state and society.

Blogs opened a new horizon in terms of providing a variety of perspectives on one society - Independents, secularists, Islamists, and leftists all had blogs. But their perspectives were not interconnected, they were more like isolated islands. Bloggers read each other in a spirit of discovery, many of them were getting to know the rest of Egyptian society for the first time. Decades of Mubarak’s oppression had prevented Egyptians from getting to know one another, and had put them on divided, often conflicting, paths.

After blogs came social media platforms, which helped connect people, events and ideas in ways that had not previously been possible. Social media platforms were a good tool for a fragmented society that hadn’t spoken among its fragments in a long time, and that didn’t have the capacity to mobilize large numbers. Social media was successful in mobilization during the 2008 protests and the 2011 protests that became the January 25th revolution, as it came to be called.

Digital activism presented new and unknown challenges to the regimes in countries like Tunisia or Egypt where the Arab Spring began: the power to mobilize, the ease of transmitting ideas that appear simple and not directly political to large numbers of citizens, the power to imagine alternative types of protests such as the silent protests for Khaled Said and protests that started in poor areas such as Shubra and Sayyida Zeynab in Cairo. The dictatorships did not know how to confront this new kind of widespread popular activism, so they were forced into a temporary retreat. Then the regimes struck back, combining the lessons of the revolutions with their ability to mobilize the silent majority, launching the period of counter-revolution in most Arab countries.

Arab governments used the Arab Spring to understand and exploit the online and offline influence networks that had been formed. For example, the Egyptian government learned the
tactics of popular digital mobilization, which it co-opted to launch the Tamarrod movement against the presidency of Mohammed Morsi. It also learned the mechanisms of television and sloganeering. For example, the slogans of the January 25 revolution were repeated in Cairo streets, but this time to bring down the regime of Mohammed Morsi, and later to oppose any civil participation in military rule! Even Sisi had to adopt a slogan for his authoritarian campaign to “stabilize” Egypt, the now-infamous “Tahya Masr,” which is now so closely tied to Sisi’s rule that it’s hard to imagine it was chanted in the streets for days during the January 25 revolution.

To go back to the perspective of average citizens: In 2011, people woke up to a new reality: There’s this website called Facebook, and it started a revolution. Millions of Egyptians joined Facebook, a popular perception emerged that being on Facebook meant that you would be able to make a change, whether in your office, your neighborhood, or the state. There were many stories following a pattern, an average Joe airing a grievance against power, for example, a man in a village in the Nile Delta posting about injustice by a local municipality, or a university student posting about mistreatment by a professor. All these people joined Facebook, and later other social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

THREE MAJOR CHANGES TO THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT THAT HAVE AFFECTED ONLINE ACTIVISM SINCE 2013

Today, three things are different: One, there is near-complete representation of Egyptian, and maybe even Arab, society on social media; Two, social media is being used as a public square for discussions, not just organizing; Three, other spaces for discussion have been shut down.

Before 2011, Facebook users were generally a hodgepodge of middle-class youth, those who were politically active even before the revolution - all posting about politics - or silent, inactive users. Since 2011, we have seen millions of citizens who mix public and private uses of Facebook. To them, Facebook is the place where saboteurs organize against the Egyptian state, a place where for example, publishing photos that make Egypt look bad is a taboo. Part of the State’s adaptation was to turn average users into informants by encouraging a “see something, say something” approach, where the “something” was anything that could make the regime look bad. Egyptian security agencies also began to informally control Facebook groups and pages.

The second change in the digital environment since 2013 is that there has been a rise in active users who have not traditionally been politically active against the regime. Many stories appear online, continuing today, about incidents of sexual harassment or embezzlement of public funds, to issues of corruption both big and small. For example, local civil servants who talk about the corruption in their workplace. Regardless of whether they consider themselves political, most users seem to consider social media as the natural place to air grievances, this kind of use is important, it continues, and the effect will not end anytime soon.

Third, between 2013 and 2021, a series of events took place that are important for understanding the state of affairs in digital activism today. Thousands of politically active youth and opponents of the regime have been jailed across the Arab world. The online space that was reserved for progressive and democratic voices has disappeared, it is now a mix of voices, some progressive, some conservative, some authoritarian, and some who oppose discussing politics on digital
platforms altogether. Most political parties have also been disbanded and have disappeared from the public space. The offline space is firmly shut.

SEVEN CHANGES IN DIGITAL ACTIVISM SINCE THE COUNTER REVOLUTION

1. The platforms themselves have changed. The Arab Spring was a catalyst for many social media companies to revise their policies and engagement with the world beyond the US, and the digital technology landscape itself is a totally different world today than it was in 2011. I was asked to talk about changes in digital activism in the region, so I will keep this point short, but I work in policy and combating misinformation with several major social media platforms, so I could say a lot more about this, but I’m happy to take questions after the panel.

2. The center of digital activism is no longer online groups, like We Are All Khaled Said or the April 6 Movement pages. It is now individual influencers. There has been a reemergence of the old kind of activism that was prevalent in the blogging wave of 2005, which was made up of individuals who covered the news and wrote their opinions in short blogs. Since 2015, the influencers don’t just write blogs anymore, they use video and live-streaming and more long-form analysis or narrative. The stars of this phenomenon are names like Joe Show, Abdo Fayed, Mahmoud Hegazy, Mohamed Aboelgheit, Ahmed Mohsen and others.

3. Private institutions have been able to contain this kind of political activism, with both good and bad effects. For example, Joe Show joined Al Araby TV station in London to create a political satire show, and most of the new wave of political influencers have joined Arab newspapers and regional platforms. This has normalized the phenomenon of political influencers to a wide audience but has also put a stranglehold on the content of their speech, which in the case of some influencers like video blogger Abdullah Al Sherif, is essentially at the direction of regional power players.

4. Digital political activism has become a space of daily contestation rather than strategic confrontation. Influencer-activists are busy with hot takes, comments, interaction with followers and growing their audience. There are thousands of daily posts and comments, but little to no content on how to understand what’s happening under the current regime. “Trending” is the ultimate goal, and there have been months-long struggles between governments and opposition about who can win the trend battle on Twitter and Facebook.

5. There is a new type of activism which I will describe as infotainment. In addition to the crisis of politics in the Arab world, many discovered that there was also a crisis of information, whether on issues of equality, science, history, or public health. So a new type of infotainment has emerged that produces watchable, shareable content on science, women’s rights, sexual health, or counter-hegemonic readings of history. This type of content has spread widely, and is still on the rise, despite many attempts by institutions to sequester this type of content on private digital platforms or on TV platforms.
6. The State is also digitally active now. Intelligence services in places like Egypt, for example, were able to buy many television and media platforms that already had large online followings and use them in new and indirect ways to influence public opinion. This had the effect of reducing the size of the small margin that was available on online platforms for independent journalists and writers, and one by one, all those with independent opinions were removed. The dictatorial regimes have learned not to tolerate a free, or even semi-free media, and they have transformed these online platforms into something like military units speaking in a single voice.

7. The new model of digital activism that is based on the element of personal influence is fragile. We’re seeing it today in the mobilization against the ethnic cleansing in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, where many Palestinian influencers on Instagram are live streaming from East Jerusalem and showing the world Israeli violence. This kind of activism has influence, but it is not constructive in building a long-term political project, because it is a fragile model, vulnerable to targeting of individual influencers through actions such as threatening the revelation of personal matters or retaliation in employment, or even pressuring families to stop their family members ’online activity. It is a kind of activism that can promote and mobilize around political events but is not able to translate to long-term political work.

**HOPEFUL PREDICTIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD**

There are large numbers of individuals - an army - who are seeking political change, most of whom are not affiliated with existing political organizations with their traditional, conservative agendas, and are not embedded in regional power structures that have anti-progressive goals.

Digital activism is no longer just political, it is scientific, cultural, religious, athletic, and generally critical. It is not tied to a single platform - like Facebook and the Arab Spring - but rather it moves flexibly between different platforms such as Instagram, which was the center of Black Lives Matters activism and the current Palestinian protests, to TikTok and Twitter and maybe even Medium, which was used for a while to share the online content of news organizations whose websites had been blocked in Egypt and the Arab world.

This new kind of activism is also able to accommodate new kinds of activists. Arab youth who care about politics don’t just follow the Arab Spring activists from 2011, they support and uplift new activists who have developed new ways of flexible resistance based on fighting small battles not epic showdowns with the State, unlike many Arab Spring activists who still secretly dream of bringing down the regime.

I think digital platforms still play an important role in political, cultural, and social change in the Arab world. It is true that the role is no longer exclusive, pioneering, or even new, but it’s an important role that comes from digital platforms being the only space for social interaction after Arab governments shut down every forum for communication and discussion since the counterrevolution of 2013.
I don’t think we will be seeing a decline in digital activism anytime soon. Instead, we will see cyclical transformation tracking new platforms and new players that we haven’t heard of yet. Maybe history will repeat itself, and the next massive change in the Arab world will come from where we least expect it. This could happen, especially if we had a free internet, and safe, democratic, and accessible digital platforms.
ABOUT

Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

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