

Book Review

Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring. Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain. (2013). New York: Oxford University Press, 145 pp.

Throughout history, the power of public opinion has influenced political events. As Habermas argues, critical to this process is a communications network of informal public opinion constituting a spontaneous public space, the public sphere [1]. Cohen and Arato stress the role of alternative media and social movements in the introduction of new cultural values in public spheres and, consequently, in political change and democratisation [2]. As many scholars recognise, the emergence of ICT in the network society has created new public spheres online that have offered new opportunities for political change [3–5]. This context directs us to the core of this book, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. The authors, Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, reflect especially on how digital media have allowed the formation of a new civil society online, and explore its key function in democratisation during the Arab Spring. In order to do so, they carry out a comparative analysis of cases and a multivariate factor analysis. In relation to the use of ICT and its political consequences, the reader can observe a position of techno-optimism, at the same time tempered by a moderate attitude where the authors emphasise the importance of other causal factors.

The book is organised into five chapters: 1. Digital Media and the Arab Spring; 2. The Recent History of Digital Media and Dissent; 3. Information Infrastructure and the Organization of Protest; 4. Authoritarian Responses and Consequences; and 5. Al Jazeera, Social Media, and Digital Journalism. The first chapter narrates the main events in the history of the Arab Spring and the role of digital media in each region, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt. The chapter discusses how Tunisian state-run media failed to cover the episode of Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire to protest against abuses in Ben Ali's regime on December 17, 2010. They describe how, thanks to digital media, Tunisians were made aware of political corruption and were able to share their common experiences in the run up to what became the revolution. As they underline, by January 14, when Ben Ali escaped from Tunisia, collective protests had already broadened across North Africa, especially in Egypt, where social media (namely Facebook, blogs and Twitter) became logistical tools and created citizen solidarity in order to mobilise against President Hosni Mubarak. The authors show how coordination through mobile phones made the subsequent demonstrations in Tahrir Square possible, which led to Mubarak's resignation. The chapter explains how social media and SMS (short messaging service, the 'text' facility of mobile phones) played a key role too in the spread of protest in the rest of Arab world (Algeria, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya, Yemen, etc.), because they provided a vehicle for sharing news ahead of the country's state run media. The authors highlight the main consequence that ICT provoked in this process: "[...] *digital media helped turn individualized [...] dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness [...]. [...] the new information structure has had an impact on political communication and public opinion formation*" (p. 25). That cultural function prevailed in the five phases of the democratisation wave that they outline: a *preparation phase*, that helped activists to define the most important political goals and build solidarity online; the *ignition phase*, that allowed mobilisation through alternative virtual news; a phase of *street protests*, that were coordinated through digital networks; a phase of *international buy-in*, where international attention was achieved with the use of digital media; and, finally, the *climax phase*,

the political change. The political influence of the new civil society online and the international and networked public opinion are the central examples that they then use to explain the consequences of ICTs throughout the book.

The second chapter describes the history of the online public sphere which emerged in the period 1995–2010, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, predating the Arab Spring. As the authors explain: “*Today, in many authoritarian regimes, public opinion forms online*” (p. 35). Briefly and with different examples they outline how new information infrastructures and social media allowed social organisation, and how this often represented the only autonomous spaces in the collective debate. They stress that this virtual sphere emerged progressively, linked to technological development and social unrest in each region. They consider that such spaces were crucial because citizenry could introduce novel discussion topics; inequality between elites and the people, political corruption and abuses, and the right of the people to criticise their leaders without censorship.

These experiences from the mid-90s onwards made possible the public spheres that emerged online during the Arab Spring. This is the theme of the third chapter, which provides the deepest content of the book and presents useful analytical tools to empirically evidence the main features of the online public sphere in Tunisia and Egypt. The authors focus here on the role of Twitter, blogs, streaming videos and other social media, and they emphasise analysis of Twitter in particular, arguing that Twitter becomes notably revealing in terms of understanding the evolution of the main topics of the online conversations during the revolution. Their analysis reveals how an increase in Twitter followers occurred in relation to political change issues, and how the highest levels of Twitter traffic coincided with the main political events (like the presidents’ resignations). In this way, the ‘evolution’ of the tweets shows the power of this tool to spread protest to other regions and to divulge information to other countries. Analysis of the blogosphere also yields some particularly interesting information. The authors reveal how the keywords ‘liberty’ and ‘revolution’ first appeared in Tunisian blogs days before the revolution and, when the protest broke out, the keyword ‘revolution’ became the primary topic of online posts. As they describe: “*In Tunisia, the blogosphere anticipated what happened on the ground by days*” (p. 52). They examine the political sphere online in Egypt too. Here they focus on the websites of political parties and pressure groups (from November 2010 to May 2011), and demonstrate how the volume of news produced online by political actors increased in this period, as did the volume of links that came from social media, especially Facebook. Finally, they briefly underline the role of streaming videos, but they do not develop this matter as much as the previous analysis.

The authors reinforce the causal role of ICT in the democratisation process in the fourth chapter, where they analyse how governments tried to control and censor the information infrastructure. They explain how countries such as Tunisia and Egypt failed in this matter, and how this helped the development of the revolution. And finally, in chapter five, the authors stress the importance of online media in spreading news to the national and transnational spheres. They analyse the specific case of Al Jazeera, which covered the alternative news ignored by state-run media, became the main news agency for the international media and used social media as a valued source of information to swiftly provide fresh news content. Additionally, the authors emphasise how Al Jazeera’s news coverage is likely to have protected the activists in Tahrir Square from a bigger reprisal.

In the concluding chapter the authors assert that: “*The Arab Spring [...] is historically unique because it is the first set of political upheavals in which all of these things were digitally mediated*” (p. 119). Taking a moderate position on the place of technology in social and political change, they offer an analysis of ‘conjoined causal conditions’ which intervened in the development of the protests (average income, unemployment rate, internet and mobile phone penetration, levels of censorship, wealth distribution,

natural resources, etc.). They compare these different variables within a useful set of tables to reflect the complex results of the democratisation wave, utilising ‘fuzzy logic’. They describe the function of digital media within this framework, and highlight how ICT was crucial in providing the necessary infrastructure for social movements and collective action. They conclude that digital media undermined the domestic balance of power, changed the opportunity structure for social mobilisation and contributed to the “cognitive liberation” of citizenry. In this way, as they had already described in the introduction chapter (pp. 6–9), they confirm that: “*The countries with [...] a fragmented civil society with few technology resources, had less successful uprisings. [...] there were different political outcomes, but that does not diminish the important role of digital media in the Arab Spring*” (pp. 125–126).

This work is particularly interesting to the research community since it offers helpful analytical tools to assist future research. Social movement studies, which have proliferated since the 1960s, have shown the great difficulties in empirically demonstrating the interrelationship between democratisation and collective action, due to the plurality of causal variables involved in this process [6]. The more recent field of ICTs and their consequences for collective action, which arose in the mid-1990s and especially during the first decade of the 21st century, increases this complexity. Additionally, the speed with which the Arab Spring advanced and the radical consequences of the events that occurred, have encouraged researchers to seek answers to a diversity of questions, but it is hard to offer profound explanations in such a brief period. This book offers an interesting panoramic view of the role played by ICT in the democratisation of Arab countries from a global perspective. Such a broad approach provides the main keys to understanding this new context across the Arab world, and the text is recommended as a starting point for scholars seeking a broad understanding. However, the book is not aimed at those researchers who seek to study in-depth specific cases of social movements and their role in social change. Readers can find in this work a general analysis of the alternative public spheres brought into being through digital media in the diverse Arab regions, but they will not find detailed descriptions related to particular collectives and their interactions with the public sphere.

The study is notably focused on the formation of public opinion in the preparation, ignition and international awareness phases of the Arab Spring. It would be interesting to explore in more depth the street protests phase, which was coordinated digitally. The authors mention the importance of the role of ICT in the emergence of new democratisation tactics and in the organisation of the street protests, but they do not explore this matter as fully as it deserves. It would have been interesting to describe the main changes in the repertoire of mobilisation actions and to explain in more detail, with practical examples, the digital coordination process in the streets.

Finally, since the authors analyse how social movements use digital media, it would have been helpful to make some reference to the main research tools of social movement theory. Resource Mobilisation, Political Process and Collective Action Frames theory could add more robustness to the book’s explanations. Additionally, although the authors mention some studies related to ICT and democracy, it would be of interest to incorporate a deeper dialogue with this research community and to discuss parallel studies.

However, and overall, we can consider this book a very welcome approach to uncovering the complex relations between social movements, democracy and ICT. The analytical tools will be of interest to researchers, not only from Arab Spring studies, but also from other wider fields related to digital media and social change.

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