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Social Media Activism and State Censorship

Thomas Poell, University of Amsterdam

1. Introduction

Over the past years, commercial social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Sina Weibo, have started to play a central role in protest communication and mobilization. Particularly striking is the use of these media during recent protests in the Middle East and China, as the regimes in these regions have made elaborate and aggressive efforts to control internet communication. This chapter investigates how social media activism takes shape in the context of pervasive censorship and state repression.

Examining this question, the first major protest event that stands out are the Iranian post-election demonstrations of 2009. During these demonstrations over two million tweets pertaining to the protests were sent by several hundred thousand users (Gaffney 2010). Although doubts were later raised whether more than a few hundred of these users were actually located in Iran, the massive exchange of tweets did suggest that social media were quickly developing into vital platforms for sharing news about political contention in dictatorial settings, in which it is difficult for international news organizations to operate. The growing importance of social media for activism became even more evident in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions of early 2011. During these uprisings, million of tweets tagged #sidibouزيد, #tunisia, #28jan, and #egypt were exchanged (Lotan et al. 2011). Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, protesters in Tunisia and Egypt themselves shared a lot of news and information through Facebook (Tufekci and Wilson 2012). Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the rapidly growing Chinese microblogging website Sina Weibo became the go-to platform for protest communication. While China has, over the last decade, not seen any large-scale protests against the central government, an ongoing stream of political and social critique, as well as calls for local and regional protests flows through Weibo on a daily basis (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2012; Yang 2012).

These instances of social media activism are particularly striking, as the Iranian, Chinese, and Tunisian state, and to a lesser extent the Egyptian state have become infamous for their far-reaching efforts to control internet

communication. Moreover, these instances are remarkable, as the global online environment as a whole is increasingly characterized by surveillance. The recent release of secret documents by Edward Snowden shows that the US has developed several extensive online surveillance programs, of which PRISM and UPSTREAM are the most well known. Through these programs, the National Security Agency (NSA), with the collaboration of major telecoms and internet corporations, keeps systematic track of phone calls and monitors online communication within the US, but also internationally (Bamford 2013). Overall, as Deibert and Rohozinski (2012, 21) argue, states around the world have “moved rapidly to regulate, shape, intervene, and exercise power in cyberspace across all its spheres”. The Chinese, Iranian, and Tunisian efforts to control internet communication are symptomatic of this development, but they also stand out in the willingness of these states to openly use violence and systematically censor communication. Each of these states has, over the past years, jailed dozens of internet users, especially bloggers, for voicing political critique (Kelly and Cook 2011). Furthermore, these countries have massively blocked national and international websites, including major social media platforms, and filtered internet communication on the level of keywords, developing highly targeted forms of internet censorship. Finally, both China and Iran have resorted to offensive online measures, such as denial-of-service attacks against oppositional websites, and hacking of social media accounts of political dissidents. (Deibert et al. 2010, 2012)

This chapter critically examines how these aggressive censorship practices shape social media activism. In doing so, it also interrogates how the corporations that manage the major social platforms operate in the face of pervasive internet censorship. How do the technical and commercial strategies of these corporations affect activist communication and mobilization in authoritarian settings? And, of course, the investigation looks at the activists themselves. How do they, in the process of challenging dictatorial regimes, tactically navigate the social media landscape, which is simultaneously shaped by the controlling efforts of states, and the commercial interests of social media companies?

2. Social media ≠ neutral tools

In popular scientific discourse, social media are often portrayed as tools used by protestors and blocked by dictatorial regimes. Writer and consultant Clay Shirky (2011) argues, for example, that “social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements, just as most of the world's authoritarian governments are trying to limit access to it”. In a similar vein, Larry Diamond (2010, 70) describes social media as “liberation technology” that “enables citizens to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections,

scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom”. Simultaneously, he emphasizes that “authoritarian states such as China, Belarus, and Iran have acquired (and shared) impressive technical capabilities to filter and control the internet, and to identify and punish dissenters”. This understanding of social media as effective tools for activist mobilization and communication, which regimes try hard to block and control, also resonates in many of the press reports on the recent protests in the Middle East and China. These reports tell tales of large numbers of protestors rapidly being mobilized through social platforms, as well as of quickly circulating social media reports originating from the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Teheran, and Beijing.

While this conceptualization of social media is highly attractive and easy to comprehend, it leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of how social media activism unfolds in dictatorial settings. It wrongly suggests, as Evgeny Morozov (2011) has pointed out, that freedom and democracy can simply be promoted by increasing the availability of social platforms. As various critical theorists have made clear social media do not function as tools. Instead these media are entangled in complex sets of socio-economic, political, cultural and technological relations, which very much premeditate and steer *whether* and *how* these media become effective as platforms of activist mobilization and communication (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Langlois et al. 2009).

Exploring these relations, it is, first, important to see the development of social platforms in the context of what has been labelled ‘information capitalism’, ‘communicative capitalism’, or ‘cognitive’ capitalism, which can be defined as “a mode of accumulation in which the object of accumulation consists mainly of knowledge, which becomes the basic source of value, as well as the principle location of the process of valorisation” (Moulier Boutang 2011, 57; see also Dean, 2009; Fuchs, 2011). Knowledge production, as Fuchs (2011, 280) makes clear, not only involves corporations producing knowledge goods, but also everyday mediated activities, including “users of MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and so on who produce informational content”. In the case of social platforms, the most valuable informational content is user metadata, which allows corporations such as Facebook and Google to profile users and develop targeted advertising and services (Fuchs 2011; Van Dijck 2013).

These commercial strategies are important because they directly inform the technological architectures and policies of social platforms, which are first and foremost designed and managed to facilitate user profiling. Youmans and York (2012) show that this particular techno-commercial focus can conflict with the interests and needs of activists. Drawing from several case studies, the authors demonstrate that the policies and user agreements of social platforms, including those of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, have resulted in the banning of anonymous activist users, the removal of activist content, and the handing over of sensitive activist user information to governments.

The present investigation will further develop this examination by interrogating how the evolving technological architectures of social platforms affect activism. Work in the tradition of software studies makes clear that these architectures -the customized sets of protocols and algorithmic processes that characterize social platforms- very much steer user activity (Beer 2009; Chun 2011; Langlois et al. 2009). The challenge is to trace how such technological steering affects the character and efficacy of activism.

Second, pursuing this exploration, the chapter examines how social media activism takes shape in the context of the evolving state efforts to control internet communication. Current research shows that the techniques and practices of internet censorship have dramatically evolved over the past decade. In its 2012 publication, *Access Contested*, the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) makes clear that over the years internet censorship tactics have become more varied, and more focused on directing online user activity, instead of simply blocking access to particular content. These tactics include “more ‘offensive’ methods”, such as “computer network attacks” and the “projection of ideas favourable to a state’s strategic interests”. They are “layered on top of the basic filters and blocks established during the previous era”, and are combined with the intimidation and arrest of bloggers and online activists (Deibert 2012, 10). While state repression and more offensive methods have been most openly practiced by dictatorial regimes, these tactics have very much developed in a global online environment increasingly characterized by surveillance. Both major internet corporations and states everywhere have made surveillance a central element of their operations. And, as recent evidence and research indicates, these different forms of surveillance are strongly entangled with each other. State-led surveillance is made possible by corporate collaboration: telecoms and social media companies provide access to a wealth of user data, whereas the security industry delivers the necessary surveillance technology (Fuchs 2013; Hayes 2009). The rise of this security-industrial complex is by no means restricted to the US, as surveillance technologies are exported globally, and virtually every national state tries to force internet companies to cooperate with its surveillance programs.

3. Social media activism and surveillance in the MENA region and China

The question is how these political and techno-commercial mechanisms take shape in dictatorial settings, and how they steer social media activism. Addressing this question, the various detailed studies on the Egyptian revolution are especially helpful, as they show that both online and offline mobilization efforts were very much shaped by the Egyptian censorship system and the always-imminent danger of police repression. First, social media were evidently important in this context because the Egyptian state

tightly controlled the national television channels and the major newspapers. Social media made it possible to broker connections between previously disconnected groups, and provide platforms for expressing grievances against the dictatorial regime (Gerbaudo 2012, 58-59; Lim, 2012, 244). Second, this is not to say that social media communication was unproblematic. As Gerbaudo (2012, 62) emphasizes, a major obstacle in the mobilization process was the “mutual distrust among Facebook users” and the “fear of police repression”. For this reason, along with the fact that the majority of the population was not online, let alone active on social media, offline personal networks and face-to-face communication were especially important (Lim 2012; Rinke and Röder 2011). Third, since the state controlled mass media essentially functioned as propaganda channels for the Mubarak regime, satellite television, especially Al Jazeera, played a crucial role in spreading information on the uprising to the Egyptian masses (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Castells 2012; Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). Thus, what the different studies show is that the uprising was articulated through a complex media configuration, which was partly shaped by the protestors themselves, but also for an important part by the Egyptian censorship system. Social media were an essential element in this configuration, but so were the mainstream media and various offline means of communication.

Important insights in how state censorship and repression shape social media activism can also be obtained from research on recent protests in Iran and China. Rahimi (2011, 173) describes how Iranian state-led cyber warfare against the protestors of the 2009 presidential elections had an immediate “sociopsychological” effect. He maintains that in this period “paranoia” over the dangers of using antifilter software “spread like wildfire”, most likely as a result of the attempts of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps to monitor oppositional online activities. He depicts a climate of fear and uncertainty concerning online information, as large numbers of websites are filtered and blocked, and misinformation is spread through fake oppositional websites to deceive activists and stifle dissent. This account is confirmed by Freedom House, which maintains in its report on post-election Iran that self-censorship in Iran is currently “very extensive, particularly on political matters. The widespread arrests of reporters and activists after the election, as well as perceptions of pervasive surveillance, have created fear among online journalists and bloggers” (Kelly and Cook 2011, 192).

These observations partly correspond with the research on Chinese internet censorship. Like Iran, the Chinese state massively blocks websites, filters online content, and in governing internet communication very much relies on self-censorship on the part of social media users and internet companies (Qiang 2011; Yang 2009). Yet, an important difference is that the Chinese state has, over the past years, started to use online protest in its governing process. Gang and Bandurski (2011, 39) maintain that the Chinese government increasingly considers online communication as the “voice of the public”. The internet allows Chinese politicians to read citizen’s views

in raw, unfiltered form, allowing them to identify and fix problems before they provoke popular unrest (Shirky 2011, 5, 26). Following this approach, social media protest, especially focused on local and regional issues, has been given a lot of space to develop.

Taken together, current research provides important insights in how social media protest communication in the MENA region and China is simultaneously shaped by the strategic manoeuvring of activists, as well as by the controlling efforts of dictatorial states. What is still largely missing, with the exception of Youmans and York's study, is research that examines how social media's techno-commercial mechanisms affect activism in these regions. And, more importantly, missing is research that considers how activist strategies and techno-commercial and political steering become entangled with each other in dictatorial settings.

4. Case Studies

To interrogate these interconnections, the investigation will draw from three case studies on online contention in Tunisia, Iran and China. The first case study examines the role of Twitter in the Tunisian revolution. This study is based on a content analysis, building on digital methods and emergent coding, of a set of +100.000 tweets with the hashtag #sidibouid, collected between 18 December 2010 and 15 January 2011, when long-term president Ben Ali fled the country (see Poell and Darmoni (2012) for methodology). In addition, 10 semi-structured Skype interviews have been conducted with Twitter users, central to the #sidibouid communication. The second case study draws from 20 semi-structured interviews, conducted through Google Talk, with college-educated Iranian bloggers. It investigates how these bloggers have coped with internet censorship and state repression over the past years (Poell and Zarrinbakhsh forthcoming). The last case study explores how Sina Weibo was involved in two short episodes of political contention, which generated a lot of traffic on the Chinese internet in 2011. It draws from collections of most circulated weibos, the Chinese equivalent of tweets, on the two episodes (Poell, de Kloet and Zeng 2013).

These case studies will be supplemented by the wide variety of current research on social media activism in the Middle East and China. In combination, this material provides insight in how protestors in different parts of the world have used social media in the face of elaborate state efforts to control their communication. In turn, to understand how states have tried to steer social media activism, the inquiry will build on the rich body of research on internet censorship, which has especially been developed by ONI and Freedom House. Finally, the investigation draws from software studies and political economic research. These approaches, which have been discussed above, help to interrogate how the technology and business models of social platforms direct activist communication and mobilization. So far, these different research perspectives have largely been developed separately. This investigation will

show that it is vital to combine perspectives to understand how social media activism is configured in the context of ubiquitous internet censorship and state repression.

5. Controlling states

Particularly striking is how pervasive censorship forces internet users to become highly self-conscious with regard to how they use language and present themselves online. To communicate with each other about contentious issues, many users in especially China and Iran adopt symbolic language, misspell potentially forbidden words, and hide their identity by adopting a pseudonym.

For example, one of the interviewed Iranian bloggers, who works as an editor for an online magazine, maintains that she had “to change the word ‘Dictator’ to ‘Dic-ta-tor’ and the name of the poet Sexton to ‘Sekston’ to avoid filtering”. Another Iranian interviewee recounts that in 2009, she tried to blog about participating in the protests around the presidential election, but was afraid to write about it directly. So she used “codes” to describe the people in the streets, such as “we the people with mineral water bottles at hand” (Poell and Zarrinbakhsh forthcoming). A similar use of coded language can also be observed in China. Qiang (2011, 210) gives the example of the widely used wordplay on the official Chinese euphemism for censorship, which is carried out under the slogan “constructing a harmonious society”. “The word ‘to harmonize’ in Chinese (*hexie*)”, he explains, “is a homonym of the word for ‘river crab’. In folk language, crab also refers to bullies who exercise power violently.” Consequently, the image of the crab has become “a new satirical, politically charged icon”. And, “photos of a malicious crab travel through the blogosphere as a silent protest.”

The use of pseudonyms is another tactic widely employed by internet users facing censorship and state repression. One of the Iranian interviewees contends that “anonymity gives a sense of liberation, it allowed me to say things that I would otherwise not say” (Poell and Zarrinbakhsh forthcoming). Amir-Ebrahimi (2008, 102) notes that, in Iran, especially “women and youth who write about their personal or private life, as well as those who address political and social issues, do so under a pseudonym”. Similar observations can also be made concerning China and other the Middle Eastern countries. Using a pseudonym, however, does not make one invisible for state authorities. Qinglian (2008) stresses “those who think that employing online pseudonyms will allow them to safely speak their minds misunderstand the nature of the surveillance systems. The Chinese government’s Golden Shield Project allows officials to track any internet poster’s IP address and true identity.”

At the same time, the frequent use of symbolic language, pseudonyms, and misspelling can also be read as forms of self-censorship. They can be interpreted as the result of states successfully steering internet users away

from directly expressing political critique, and confronting central state authorities. This certainly appears to be the case in China. The Chinese regime has been rather permissive of online parody and critique directed at especially local and regional governors, as these forms of contestation can be used to check and curtail local administrations. Yet, simultaneously, it has aggressively thwarted any attempt to mobilize protests against the central government. Analysing millions of social media posts from nearly 1,400 different social media services all over China, King, Pan, and Roberts (2012) discover that the Chinese censorship system is specifically “aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content”. These authors also found that “posts with negative, even vitriolic, criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored”. Similar observations were made in our case study on contentious communication on Weibo. A lot of jokes and critique aimed at the government remained uncensored. Yet, posts that hinted at joined action were deleted. Occasionally, when a scandal or protest has the potential to escalate, the Chinese state has taken further preventive measures. This happened, for example, in February 2011, when Chinese-language websites called for a “Jasmine Revolution” in major Chinese cities. In reaction, the state severely curtailed social media activity: “post forwarding and photo publishing were suspended, and searches for the word *jasmine* were blocked” (Canaves 2011, 77).

From the same critical point of view, it should be noted that pseudonyms, as well as anonymous logins, are not just employed by internet users to veil their identity, but that both the Chinese and Iranian regimes have in different ways exploited online anonymity. Yang (2009 50-51) points out that the infamous Chinese “internet commentators”, which are said to be paid 50 cents for each message they post, tend to sign into popular online forums “with anonymous user IDs, like any other internet user”. Under the veil of anonymity, they try to guide the direction of public discussion in accordance with the principles of the state propaganda departments. This resonates with the above discussed observations by Rahimi’s (2011) concerning Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, which spreads misinformation through fake oppositional websites to deceive activists.

Whereas the Chinese and Iranian state have, over the past years, succeeded in shaping online communication and steering social media users away from directly confronting central authorities, the Tunisian and Egyptian states have evidently not succeeded in this effort. In the pre-revolutionary years, both states certainly have taken repressive measures against bloggers, and especially Tunisia developed a sophisticated censorship system. However, from the research and press reports on the 2011 revolutions, it also becomes clear that neither state interfered much with Facebook. Under these conditions, the Facebook page “We Are All Khaled Said”, created in June 2010 to protest the violent death of Khaled Said at the hands of police officers, could develop into a platform where mostly middle class Egyptian youth

expressed their grievances against the Mubarak regime. It was also from this page that the call was launched and circulated for a mass demonstration on 25 January 2011. (Gerbaudo 2012; Lim 2012) Although this by no means explains why the Egyptian protests were successful, it does indicate that there are vital differences in how dictatorial states steer and control social media activism.

6. Commercial mechanisms and technological steering

Responding to popular claims concerning social platforms as activist tools, the corporations managing these platforms have, albeit cautiously, positioned themselves as protesters' allies. Famously, Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, has promoted the platform, when it made its initial public offering (IPO), as an emancipatory and liberating tool. In February 2012, Zuckerberg wrote in a letter to investors: "By giving people the power to share, we are starting to see people make their voices heard on a different scale from what has historically been possible. These voices will increase in number and volume. They cannot be ignored" (Reuters 2012).

Yet, as the research of Youmans and York (2012) indicates, the commercial mechanisms of social media and the needs of activists do not necessarily match. This is not to say, however, that they inevitably clash with each other. On the one hand, social corporations, as they depend on the collection of user metadata to facilitate targeted advertising, have a strong interest in drawing as many users as possible. Consequently, these corporations have tried to develop their platforms in ways that accommodate at least some of the activist needs. Responding to user feedback and recommendations by security experts, Google has, for example, greatly improved the security on its different services, including Google Plus, Gmail, Docs, and Search. By default, users now access these services over HTTPS encryption, which layers the standard HTTP on top of the SSL/TLS cryptographic protocols, making Internet communication more secure (Eckersley 2010; Sullivan 2011). This is obviously particularly important for activists in dictatorial settings.

On the other hand, the same commercial mechanisms that occasionally correspond with the needs of activists also frequently undermine their activities. This is most directly evident in some of the user agreements and policies of social platforms, discussed by Youmans and York (2012, 318-21). Particularly problematic for activist users in dictatorial settings are the 'real name' policies of some of the major social network sites, including Facebook and Google+. The terms of service of these sites require users to provide their real name and information, which is in the corporations' interest as real identities are easier to monetize. This policy has clashed with efforts on the part of some activists to remain anonymous. A striking example of this is the temporary deactivation of the 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook

page. The page was created by former Google executive Wael Ghonim under the pseudonymous account ‘ElShaheed’ (‘The martyr’). In November 2010, just before the Egyptian parliamentary elections, Facebook deactivated the account and more importantly the page, citing that the account violated Facebook’s terms of service. Although the page was eventually re-launched, it shows the potential tension between the commercial strategies of social platforms and the needs of activists. In a similar vein, social media corporations have removed activist content. Most social media corporations police their platforms through community mechanisms, allowing users to report each other for terms of service violations, including offensive content and spam. These mechanisms greatly lower the cost of monitoring user-generated material, but they also give state agents and regime supporters the instruments to battle activist social media content, which is what happened during the Arab Spring. While wrongfully removed content can be restored, or circulated through other channels, the content management strategies of social media corporations are clearly prone to abuse.

More difficult to reverse are changes in the architecture of social platforms. Informed by their evolving business models, as well as by aggressive competition, social media corporations constantly tinker with the architectures of their platforms. Such architectural changes can fundamentally affect how activists communicate with each other, and they can undermine the often-vulnerable practices of contentious communication in dictatorial settings. This is precisely what happened in the case of Google Reader, which, for several years, was a vital platform for Iranian and Chinese bloggers to exchange news and opinions. The service could play a pivotal role because it allowed users to share otherwise blocked news items and blog posts, and most crucially, attach comments to these items. The well-known Iranian blogger Amir (2011a) explains why the service made it possible to circumvent filtering: ‘Google Reader is not in a separated domain and thanks to its https protocol, it is hard to filter by the government (To filter Google Reader the whole google.com domain should be filtered).’ Since many other social platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr, and many international news websites, such as the BBC and CNN, were often blocked in Iran, Google Reader could serve, according to Amir, as a crucial social platform and news spreading website.

That is until October 2011, when Google scraped the social functionality of the service, and shifted it to its new social platform Google+. Alan Green (2011), one of Google’s software engineers, announced that “many of Reader's social features will soon be available via Google+, so in a week's time we'll be retiring things like friending, following and shared link blogs inside of Reader”. These were precisely the functions that made Google Reader such an important platform for many Iranian internet users. Google’s decision drew a storm of protests in the Iranian blogosphere (Amir 2011b; Visual Vortex 2011). In the hope of changing the corporation’s mind, many Iranians, along with many Chinese internet users, signed a petition started by

Brett Keller (2011) to “save Google Reader”. The petition quickly received more than 13,000 signatures. But these efforts were to no avail, as Google, engaged in a global competition with Facebook, was set on developing and promoting Google+. Iranian internet users were certainly not happy with what Google+ had to offer. Amir (2011b) stressed that unlike in Google Reader, users cannot share the full content of a blog post in Google+, one can only share the link. If the linked blog or news site is filtered, which is often the case, it is not possible to access the blocked content. Eventually, in 2013, Google decided to discontinue its reader altogether (Poell and Zarrinbakhsh forthcoming).

These changes to Google Reader are an example of the kinds of architectural changes that social media corporations, including Facebook and Twitter, implement on a regular basis, reshaping user activity and, consequently, activist practices in correspondence with their global commercial strategies. Activists, like other users, have little control over these technological developments, just as they have little insight in how social media’s algorithms and protocols exactly steer their activities and process their data. Commercial social media corporations have a competitive interest in black boxing the backend of their operations. Moreover, they have a strong interest in limited access to the data that is shared and generated on their platforms, as this data allows them to target personalized advertising and services at their users. Consequently, activists neither have control over the social media architectures through which they communicated, nor over the data they collectively produce through Twitter hashtags, and Facebook pages and groups. Like any other user, they are left to guess what exactly happens with this data, which is evidently particularly problematic for activists facing dictatorial regimes.

7. Activist strategies

Resisting commercial steering and authoritarian state control, activists have developed a range of strategies to tactically manoeuvre the complex social media landscape. A prominent strategy, discussed above, is to veil one’s real message and identity by using symbolic language, pseudonyms, and misspelling. Although research indicates that these methods are widely used and also allow users facing dictatorial regimes to continue communicating about controversial topics, they are not unproblematic. Not only do such veiling efforts provide users with an unjustified sense of security, as technically sophisticated states have a variety of methods at their disposal to track and identify users, they can be also interpreted as the result of states successfully steering internet users away from directly expressing political critique and confronting central state authorities. Additionally, these strategies do not liberate activists from the commercial mechanisms of social platforms.

Another often-employed strategy is the use of internet filtering circumvention tools to evade censorship, access blocked material, and communicate

about contentious issues. Research by ONI and Freedom House has demonstrated that a wide variety of tools are used for these purposes, ranging from simple web proxies to HTTP/SOCKS proxies and virtual private network (VPN) services (Callanan et al. 2011; Roberts, Zuckerman, and Palfrey 2011). While there is a range of circumvention tools available, these tools do not appear to be widely used to access blocked material. Based on an extensive survey on the global usage of circumvention tools, Roberts et al. (2010, 2) have come to the startling conclusion “that no more than 3% of internet users in countries that engage in substantial filtering use circumvention tools. The actual number is likely considerably less”. Moreover, they maintain that users tend to choose the simple web proxies, which are less secure, instead of “more sophisticated tools”.

Although the overall use of circumvention tools in dictatorial states seems to be rather low, research on politically more engaged groups of users suggests much higher usage rates. Based on a survey implemented on a set of 244 politically-oriented bloggers, part of which can also be characterized as activists, Roberts et al. (2011a, 1) reported that “79% of respondents in heavily filtering countries use circumvention tools at least occasionally”. Hence, using circumvention tools appears to be a widely employed activist strategy in the examined regions. Nevertheless, it remains the question whether this tactic liberates activists from political and commercial steering. To reach substantial publics in the current media landscape, activists are still forced to pursue a major part of their communication and online mobilization through commercial social platforms. Moreover, as most internet users in filtering countries do not use circumvention tools, activists are required to develop communication strategies within the confines of state censorship.

Perhaps the most sophisticated and effective way in which activists have resisted political and commercial steering is by “working” the global media ecology as a whole. Our research on Twitter and the Tunisian revolution provides insight in how this strategy is operationalized in the MENA region. One of the interviewees in this research project, Nasser Weddady, the civil rights outreach director for the American Islamic Congress, explains that the use of social media is one component in an integrated approach: “We have been working for years on developing a strategy that includes the complete media machine: understanding media relationships between broadcasted media, printed media, satellite channels, and news agencies”. This also entails “identifying, recruiting, and influencing correspondents in strategically chosen places, and building relationships with them”. Weddady and the other interviewees emphasize that developing this strategy was very much the work of global diaspora networks, which had been constructed over the course of a decade. Sami Ben Gharbia recounts that the construction process started in 2002 with the first Egyptian bloggers, and picked up speed from 2006 onward because of conferences and workshops organized in Beirut: “These physical meetings helped to create a strong activist diaspora community.” In this process, Twitter and various other social media

played a vital role. Weddady relates: “We started building an audience all over the world”. Recruiting especially focused on “young thinkers, who can be potential future leaders in their countries” (Poell and Darmoni 2012).

During the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt the key task of the diaspora network was, according to Ben Gharbia, “information escape, the reproduction and structuring of information.” This involved a variety of social platforms: “Our aim was first to get the information out of Facebook because it's a closed platform. Not everybody has access, or knows how and where to find the information on Facebook. In the next step, “we publish it on a blog with a clear structure, pages, archives, where the usability of the information is refined. It can also be re-publish on YouTube. Then we tweet the URL to inform, where one can see the information.” Using blogs was important, as it allowed activists to increase their control over the curation and circulation of information, making them less depend on commercial platforms. In the case of the Tunisian revolution, especially the critical independent collective blog Nawaat.org fulfilled this function. Furthermore, by circulating information through Twitter it became “accessible to especially Al Jazeera, which was, like many other television channels, nonstop following our Twitter account.” Ben Gharbia emphasized that he and his colleagues could function as important information relays precisely because of the diaspora network, which circulated information and did a lot of translation work across different languages and dialects (ibid.)`.

By adopting an integrated communication strategy and building a global network, the activists in the MENA region were less dependent on, or boxed-in by single social platforms. They explicitly focused on circulating information across a variety of platforms. Furthermore, they were able to escape national systems of state censorship. Obviously helped by the significance of the Arab Spring protests, their global network and integrated media strategy gave them the opportunity to plug their message in the global media.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

Instead of celebrating and promoting social media as activist tools in the struggle against dictatorial regimes, this study suggests that it is particularly important to critically examine the complex political, economic, and technological relations in which activist social media communication is articulated. This requires research that combines insights from a number of theoretical approaches, and that pays close attention to the particular context in which activist processes of communication and mobilization take shape.

First, social media activism in dictatorial settings cannot be understood without examining how systems of state censorship shape activist communication. Recent scholarship shows that states have become progressively more sophisticated in controlling online communication through a range of filtering techniques, as well as offensive methods. The presented case

studies indicate that these controlling efforts do not necessarily stop activist communication, but rather shape its character. To continue communicating about contentious issues, those within comprehensive systems of state censorship have adopted a range of tactics to veil their identities, as well as the actual content of their message. While these tactics are highly inventive and also partly effectively in challenging dictatorial regimes, at the same time they can be interpreted as forms of self-censorship. Especially in China and Iran, state censorship and repression appears to have succeeded in steering people away from directly confronting central state authorities.

Second, instead of constituting neutral or even friendly platforms from which to challenge dictatorial regimes, social media very much shape activist communication, and they do so in contradictory ways. To understand how this works, it is important to see, following political economic research, that the major social platforms are first and foremost commercial operations, focused on generating revenue by systematically collecting and analysing user data to facilitate personalized advertising and a range of services. These commercial objectives inform the user policies and management of social platforms, as well as the frequent changes in their architectures. As social media corporations have a strong interest in maximizing user activity, some of these changes and policies cater to the needs of activists. Yet, they also often conflict with these needs, especially in circumstances in which there are relatively few platforms available for activist communication.

Third, it remains important to closely examine how activists navigate the contemporary media landscape. Such an examination indicates that it is indeed difficult to emancipate oneself from political and commercial steering. Yet, especially the research on the Arab spring protests shows that there are nevertheless ways to tactically mitigate the impact of such steering. These tactics do, however, require substantial organizational efforts. By constructing global activists diaspora networks and by strategically circulating and translating content across different social platforms, activists from the MENA region were able to resist becoming enclosed by particular platforms and systems of censorship.

These observations strongly suggest that it is crucial for policy makers, activists and scholars concerned with social media activism in dictatorial settings to critically interrogate how this type of activism takes shape in complex configurations in which political, commercial and technological mechanisms mutually articulate each other. Such inquiries are important because they show that activist communication and mobilization especially become vulnerable to political and commercial steering, when these processes are primarily facilitated by a small number of commercial social platforms. Consequently, it is vital to strategically organize activist communication and mobilization across a range of social platforms, including alternative non-commercial platforms, as well as both offline on the local level and online across national and regional borders. Such strategy makes activists less vulnerable to political and commercial steering, and it enhances their control over how information circulates and is curated.

This ecology approach, however, requires a major organizational effort. The research presented in this chapter implies that it can only be successfully pursued through networks that connect the protestors on the streets to globally dispersed bloggers and activists. Through such connections the work of circulating, translating, and curating information can be shared and organized across different geographical locations. This is where policy makers and NGOs can play a significant role. Developing global activist networks and setting up alternative media platforms in challenging dictatorial regimes, attention is especially needed on the following points. First, particularly important is the security of online communication. Given the increasingly central role played by commercial social media in online activist communication, it is crucial that social media corporations are constantly pressured to enhance the security of their platforms and to take activist interests into account when technologically developing their services and managing their platforms. Second, assistance is also needed in developing alternative online platforms, to allow activists more independence vis-à-vis commercial platforms in curating and circulating their content. Finally, special attention in terms of resources and security should be devoted to the translation of online activism into offline networks of mobilizations and capacity building. The connection between contentious social media communication and offline forms of associations, as the research on the Arab Spring protests showed, are of vital importance, but are also really difficult to establish, as dictatorial regimes are very much focused on repressing such connections.

Whatever aspect of social media activism one is focusing on, it is above all crucial to continuously interrogate how the controlling efforts of dictatorial regimes, the commercial and technological steering of social media corporations and the tactical manoeuvring of activists are mutually entangled with each other. Only by critically examining these interconnections is it possible to arrive at informed assessments of, and interventions in, episodes of social media protest communication and mobilization.

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