

Chapter 16

Online Activism and the Arab Public Sphere: The Case of YouTube and Human Rights Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

YouTube has enabled new forms of political dissent in Arab societies. This article examines the development and rise of YouTube in the Arab world. In particular, it looks at how this video exchange site is invigorating the online public sphere's vigorous demand for political reform and respect for human rights. Specifically, this investigation explores how social networking capabilities have made YouTube an effective asset in dissidents' arsenal among Arab activists. To examine the vibrancy of this fledgling online public sphere, the chapter scrutinizes how activists incorporated YouTube videos to shed light on human rights abuses, specifically police abuse, corruption, and brutality in two Arab countries, Egypt and Morocco. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the new campaigning modes that the Internet and YouTube have facilitated.

INTRODUCTION

The “Arab Spring” has promised to end the entrenched history of human rights violations in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia as well as in other Arab authoritarian states. However, the long struggle against these abuses commenced years prior to the 2011 mass protests as an unprecedented era of virtual politics and activism took shape within Arab societies. At the forefront of these shifts, the Internet and other new communication technologies have been central forces for change (e.g. Seib, 2007; Lynch, 2007; Ibahrine, 2008; Douai, 2009). A few years after its inception, YouTube soon became an important tool for publicizing Arab regime's human rights abuses both locally and globally. This chapter seeks to understand the strategic role that YouTube has carved in those human rights advocacy campaigns and political reform struggles in Arab societies. Preliminary evidence suggests that YouTube has been effective in highlight-

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ing police abuse cases and prosecuting perpetrators. This work thus contributes to a growing body of research that underscores the vital role of communication and information technologies in promoting human rights worldwide (Metzl, 1996; Brophy & Halpin, 1999; Weyker, 2002; Hick, Halpin, & Hoskins, 2000; Ron, Ramos, & Rodgers, 2005).

Within the above framework, Arab citizens have similarly harnessed the site's video exchange capabilities to expose political corruption, police brutality, and demand political reform in the same way bloggers have countered official narratives and/or media blackouts on local events (Al Malky, 2007; Douai, 2009). YouTube and the new breed of social media have grown more effective as favourite political instruments for several reasons. Some reasons include high levels of anonymity, global reach, technical simplicity, absence of professional pre-requisites, and local/global organizing tool capabilities. Significantly, YouTube is hosting and abetting a new political discourse in which readers vent their frustrations and heap their scorn online before moving offline. The first tremors of this movement toward harnessing YouTube's social networking and video exchange capabilities appeared in 2007, as videos of police brutality and corruption in Egypt and Morocco were posted online.

YouTube in the Arab world has emboldened an emerging online public sphere and bolstered popular demands for political reform. Arab citizens are appropriating the new forms of mediated communication to call attention to the abuse of the state (Azimi, 2007), invigorating the Arab "public sphere" debate (Lynch, 2007; Douai, 2009). This investigation explores how these social networking capabilities have made YouTube an effective asset in dissidents' arsenal. To comprehend the vibrancy of this fledgling online public sphere, the study examines how YouTube has helped shed light on human rights abuses, specifically police abuse, corruption, and brutality in the region. The main question this chapter addresses is: How have activists incorporated YouTube in their campaigns for political and democratic reform in Arab societies? To answer this question, it analyzes the reach and implications of four videos publicizing corruption and police abuse cases in Egypt and Morocco. Specific attention is paid to the videos' political impact and global implications on the struggle for political reform in Arab societies. After reviewing the political impact and history of YouTube, the chapter analyzes how this communication technology has become an effective platform against Arab authoritarianism.

YOUTUBE POLITICS: A BRIEF REVIEW

The story of how new media have assumed a reformist, if not a "liberationist," mantle in the Arab world may be well-worn (Seib, 2007; Ibahrine, 2008), but it deserves to be re-told. Authoritarian rulers have long co-opted traditional mass media and used these outlets to strengthen their grip on power and subdue political adversaries (Pintak, 2008). International non-governmental organizations have documented this state of affairs and accumulated an oppressive record of infringements on political and individual liberties. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders, and Freedom House have routinely placed the region among the ranks of states that regularly violate universal human rights, the right to free expression and the right to communicate (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2010). State owned mass media were effectively used to "gloss" over these violations, or dismiss these international reports as politically motivated and grossly misinformed (Dayem & Mahoney, 2010). "New" media, particularly the rise of web-enabled social media, have opened a ray of hope for activists and alternative voices to break up the strangling arm of the state, tell the story in their own voices, and construct alternative narratives that refute the dominant line (Ibahrine, 2008).

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