

RELIGION, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE: REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIM WORLD IN ACADEMIC ANALYSES OF THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

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Abstrak: Artikel ini meruntuhkan konstruksi dominan dan penggambaran dunia Muslim dalam literatur tentang media sosial dan keterlibatan masyarakat dalam kaitannya dengan Arab *Spring*. Pembacaan kritis literatur tentang media sosial dan 'Musim Semi Arab' menunjukkan bahwa analisis oleh para sarjana dan komentator Barat masih didasarkan pada 'dualisme modernis' dan pemahaman orientalis. Artikel ini dimulai dengan menelusuri sejarah teknologi untuk menyatakan bahwa analisis potensi pendidikan dan sipil media sosial dalam konteks Barat pada umumnya, adalah kelanjutan dari argumen tentang teknologi sebelumnya dalam kaitannya dengan pembangunan masyarakat. Namun, ketika datang untuk menganalisis media sosial dan keterlibatan masyarakat khususnya di dunia Muslim, kecenderungan ini akan dikacaukan dengan pola yang sudah terbangun, yaitu Orientalisme. Dampak keseluruhan kecenderungan ini menyebabkan pembatasan mayoritas argumen dalam paradigma essentialis atau determinis.

Kata kunci: dunia muslim, musim semi Arab, media sosial, teknologi, pencerahan, globalisasi neoliberal

Abstract: This article deconstructs the dominant constructions and portrayals of the Muslim world in literature on social media and civic engagement in relation to the Arab Spring. A critical reading of literature on social media and 'Arab Spring' shows that analyses by Western scholars and commentators are still grounded in 'modernist dualism' and orientalist understandings. The article starts by tracing the history of technology to argue that analyses of social media's educational and civic potential within the Western context in general, is continuation of arguments about earlier technologies in relation to societal development. However, when it comes to analyzing social media and civic engagement particularly in the Muslim world this tendency gets muddled with another well-established trend, that of Orientalism. The overall impact of this tendency results in restricting majority of arguments within the essentialists/determinists paradigm. Such analyses essentialize the technological aspects of social media as universal and constitute the West as civilized, democratic, multicultural, and progressive. On the other hand Muslim world is represented as uncivilized, undemocratic, uncultured, and chained in past traditions. Thus, there is a need for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the social media and civic engagement in the Muslim world, which can be conceptualized by framing the issues within a postcolonial critique of neoliberal globalization.

Keywords: muslim world, Arab spring, social media, technology, enlightenment, neoliberal globalization

Introduction

Off lately the role played by social media in bringing about political change in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been a hot topic for researchers in diverse fields of study in Western countries. Popularly known as the Arab Spring, political developments taking place in many countries in MENA have been attributed to social media to the extent that many

commentators have described the dissent and discord in Muslim societies as 'social media revolution'.¹

¹ Such terminology is highly suggestive, and it directs the attention of readers away from the socio-political and historical contexts of particular societies to a universal use of social media, which results in freedom and democracy—hence revolution and not revolt. Interesting is the fact that those taking part in the revolution are not termed, in most of the literature, as revolutionaries (which has a positive connotation) but as rebels (which has a negative connotation).

For example, Wael Ghonim, the young Google executive and the author of 'Revolution 2.0' became very popular when he said "If you want to liberate a country, give them the internet.". In an interview to CNN Ghonim credited Facebook and its founder Mark Zuckerberg as an inspiration stating "This revolution started on Facebook, I want to meet Mark Zuckerberg someday and thank him personally" (<http://www.wired.com/2011/02/egypts-revolutionary-fire/>).

In many instances just the titles of articles are highly suggestive of two interconnected issues first, Islamic societies are dictatorships and second, social media as grounds for revolutions and democracy. For example, consider the following titles with a subtext of this discursive collusion: 'The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam' by Howard, Philip N. (2010); 'The Upheavals In Egypt and Tunisia: The Role of Digital Media' by Howard, Philip N., and Muzammil M. Hussain. (2011); 'Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?' By Marwa Mazaid. (2011); 'Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring' by Howard, Philip N., and Muzammil M. Hussain. (2013); 'Information Technologies, Meta-power, and Transformations in Global Politics' by Singh, J. P. (2013). Such titles and statements not only imply that social media is a panacea for the oppressed people in MENA but they also take the focus away from the roots of actual social and political problems. Therefore, majority of the literature on civic engagement ends up discussing social media's role in treating the symptoms of civic problems and not highlighting the real causes of civic and social injustices.

Although it cannot be denied that social media benefit people in some situations. However, mere implications that social media have the ability or inbuilt structure and capability to unite and mobilize people undermines not only actual socio-economic, religio-political and

historic problems but it also hides that fact that in actuality social media have most innovatively been used for tremendous profit generation by a hand full of technology producers and by those involved in most un-civic activities such as, trolls, pornographers, drug dealers and hackers, political extremist and vigilantes. Such articulations have resulted in a perception that social media not only provides a platform for civic engagement but also encourages oppressed to seek social justice and freedom from tyrant 'sultans' towards a path to Western style democracy², an abstract that is increasingly being questioned by progressive intellectuals and politicians within Western context.

An array of journalists, scholars working in the fields of international relations and political science and those researching interactive technologies have studied and analyzed the role of social media in the political change in the Muslim world. There are two important points that need to be considered while reading these analyses of the role social media have played in civic engagement. First, current research on the efficacy of social media for civic engagement and social change in the MENA region predominantly uses an oriental lens³ to

² Elizabeth May, leader of the Green Party of Canada and Member of Parliament in her interview to Monica Pohlmann published on Friday, Nov. 21 2014 said: "We are a democracy only in theory. In practice, we're an elected dictatorship. Canadians no longer feel empowered; they are passive consumers. They have abandoned the notion that they have rights and responsibilities in running the country. It's very hard to wake people back up to the fact that they have power. Forty per cent of Canadians don't vote. In the by-election in Fort McMurray-Athabasca last June, only 15 per cent voted. Unless we change the system, the next elected dictator could be [Justin] Trudeau or [Thomas] Mulcair, and we might like the decisions better, but it's still not a democracy. Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/elizabeth-may-on-our-elected-representatives-we-are-a-democracy-only-in-theory/article21678923/>.

³ I draw upon Said (1979) articulation of Orientalism which he explicates as follows:

Anyone who reads, teaches, writes about or researches the Oriental; a style of thought based on the ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'; a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient; a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having

analyze the role of social media in bringing about social and political change in Muslim/Eastern societies. While the stated purport of these investigations is to understand the role of social media in creating conditions for civic engagement, the imagery that is evoked reaffirms Western biases about Muslim/Eastern world. In this sense the dualism evident in the Modernist theorizing (civilized /uncivilized, religion/secularism, good/bad, etc.) is quite pronounced in dominant theorizations about social media and civic engagement when it comes to the role it has played in Muslim world. I argue that any analysis needs to be sifted through the 'oriental sieve'⁴ before it is considered neutral, disinterested, impartial and, unbiased analysis of the particular topic being examined. Second, most of the views on social media and their educational potential follow the historic pattern of arguments i.e. technological determinism, that were made about use of technology⁵ in general and its use in educational settings in particular⁶.

authority over the Orient.” (p. 2-3). Said (1979) explicates the extreme extent to which Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were shaped by the colonial practices of the Western world. Human and natural resources in these regions were exploited and justified as a project of Western industrialization and expansion. Western elements of colonialism included the slave trade, the study and representation of Eastern cultures by anthropologists, writers, and artists; the cultivation of foreign markets for manufactured goods; and the representation of indigenous peoples as savage heathens in need of occupation, education, civilization, and Christianity. The orient thus created/constructed is the 'other' of the Occident. Such othering persists in the Western understanding and scholarship to date. For example, This Othering is manifested in various ways in U.S. society from television shows about sleeper cells to racial profiling and even to the overrepresentation of news coverage of peoples and events presumably associated with Islam (Bayoumi, 2008; Abu El-Haj, 2010; Jackson, 2010).

⁴ 'Oriental sieve' deconstructs the hidden orientalism; it can be done through critical reading of the texts or using discourse analysis or a number of other methods. However, the initial requirement is detail knowledge about 'orientalism' and how many Eastern/Muslim cultures have been socially constructed over last few centuries.

⁵ Earlier technologies such as radio, television and then early computers

⁶ While there are conflicting views about the actual outcomes of placing technology in classroom some argue it has improved quality and delivery of education while others argue

Grounded in technological determinism, these analyses fail to present a nuanced picture of the developments, changes and processes in the political and social spheres in the MENA region. These developments and changes are a result of complex processes and ground realities that demand a nuanced and complex analysis of the role of social media in the so-called Arab Spring. As Comunello and Anzera write: “ Internet scholars tend to have little familiarity with Middle Eastern political systems, while International Relations scholars often show a superficial knowledge of social media and the related social processes”.⁷ In order to overcome this problem these scholars combine insights from both disciplinary approaches. While this approach will definitely provide a better analysis than using an isolated disciplinary approach, however the holistic analysis the authors are aiming for is impossible to attain without combining various multidisciplinary approaches with postcolonial framework. As it is, the continued use of technological determinism blinds us from appreciating the social and political realities on ground. A continued framing of issues in/through Orientalism not only perpetuates the modernist dualism (backward East VS the developed/enlightened West) but also obscures the complexity of the processes, and the differences between various societies that are lumped together as “Arab”.

it has not had any significant impact on educational outcomes. It is clear that the type of 'InfoTech student' promised by McKenzie (1993), is nowhere to be seen. McKenzie (1993), argued that the use of new technologies will help the students to become: “[an] infotective—a student thinker capable of asking appropriate and powerful questions about data (with analysis) in order to convert the data into information (data organized so as to reveal patterns and relationships) and eventually into insight (information that may suggest action or strategy of some kind). An infotective solves information puzzles and riddles using all kinds of clues and new technologies...An infotective is a skilled thinker, researcher, and inventor (pp. 4-5).

⁷ F.Comunello & G.Anzera, “Will The Revolution Be Tweeted? A Conceptual Framework for Understanding The Social Media and The Arab Spring”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23(4), 2012, p. 453-470.

Thus, the “Arab Spring” is seen as disenchantment among the people of the region translated into a desire for a Western style democracy through the Western technology/social media.

In order to understand the historic trend in theorizing the educational and social potential of technology one has to revisit major theoretical orientations on technology. Essentialist/deterministic theories of technology (i.e., substantivist and the instrumentalist positions on technology) are the major theoretical orientations that frame the literature on the relationship between technology and society especially when it comes to explaining the role of new technologies a.k.a. social media in Muslim/Eastern world. It is important to have an overview of these perspectives in order to trace the debate, which started with theoretical and conceptual contextualization of the role of technology in education and which is now being extended to role of social media in civic engagement and civic education. However, it is important to note that theorization about technologies (including new developments like Web 2.0/social media) is different when this takes place within the context of Western world. In the Western context the debates focusing on technology and society do not construct the users of technology as antagonists that are battling unjust orders/governments. They are represented as neutral consumers of technology who can enhance their educational and civic skills by using social media. On the other hand, the imagery invoked is quite different when social media's role is being explored in the context of MENA. In contrast to the Western users/consumers of technology the Muslim subject is portrayed as either backward who still has to embrace this messiah or as an antagonist who is using or might use technology to combat the unrepresentative governments and authoritarian state. Here, discursively, technology is represented as a democratizing force/space, a gift from the West that can change social

attitudes and political landscapes. In this sense technology/social media are represented as akin to science (another gift from the West) that can separate religion from politics and the polity. Walter Armburst terms this tendency as the ‘great white hope’.⁸

In the following section I briefly describe: (a) essentialist/deterministic theories of technology that frame the literature on the relationship between technology and society, (b) how these theoretical orientations frame arguments about educational potential of technology for social-change, both the earlier advocacy or demonization of computers and more recently social media, and (c) how concrete positive issues and outcomes are pinpointed when role of social media is being explored for educating people in the West but how arguments become representational and liminally interpellating when educational and civic potential of technology is being explored in Muslim societies.

Educational Potential of Social Media: A Continuation of Historic Trend

It is a common understanding that technology, especially in relation to information and knowledge, has become one of the most important and transformational aspects of contemporary life. Technology serves as a means of carrying out daily life activities in most societies. Recent trends in theorizing about technology (especially in critical/postcolonial theory, but also in feminist, post-modern and environmental theories) critique the essentialist arguments and make a case for making the vital connections between the social and the technical. As long as these are seen as disconnected domains, any meaningful understanding of our existence is not possible. However, for a long time the humanities and social sciences rejected

⁸ W. Armburst, “A History of New Media in The Arab Middle East”, *Journal for Cultural Research* 16(2-3), 2012, p. 155-174.

the discourse on technology as unworthy.⁹ Historically, common sense instrumentalism looked at technology in a neutral manner, requiring no particular explanation; thus, it was pushed aside as an aspect of private life and taken to be irrelevant to the questions that concerned the thinkers of the great tradition in political theory such as Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke.¹⁰

The developments in the biological and social sciences in the late 18th and 19th centuries, firmly rooted in the idea of progress promised by technology, forced the latter into the theoretical discourse of modernity. By the end of the 19th century, the writings of Marx and Darwin had begun to influence ideas about technology, so that by this time technical progress was believed to have set humanity on the path towards freedom and happiness. At the same time, in opposition to this 'technology as progress' trend, we do find a grand tradition of romantic protest against mechanization—the 'substantive theorists' who argued that technology was not neutral but that it embodied specific values. The technological tools we choose to employ determine our way of life.

It is from this point that I start mapping the debate on technology. No explanation of technology's educational and civic potential can be fully comprehended without looking at the central concern of the debate about technology, i.e., how far technology conditions social change. Technological explanations generally seen as neutral have been used to beseech certain images associated with certain types of societies. It is assumed and argued that in the Western context placement of technology within educational realm will lead to further progress of already democratic and free individuals. On the other hand, in Muslim societies it will 'enlighten'

masses usually termed as 'rebels' to demand Western style democracy and freedom from tyrant 'dictators' and 'sultans'.¹¹ Explanations couched in such dualistic way obscure the vital and important links between national/societal public and political spheres and how the local issues are connected to the global economic context. Technology is thus made essential part of the equation without problematizing the power relations it embodies.

Theoretical Perspectives on Technology the Essentialists/Determinists

Technological determinism provides a technology-led theory of social change where technology is seen as a main force in moving society forward. Technical developments are seen as the prime causes of changes (good or bad) in society, and technology itself viewed as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. Human factors and social arrangements therefore become secondary to technology. Technological determinism is visible in the works of futuristic commentators. For example, Large's *The Microelectronic Revolution* (1980). More recently literature and reports published by institutes such as McKinsey Global Institute identifies different technologies that will transform life.¹²

The essentialists/determinists trace their pedigree to a vast array of scholars, philosophers

⁹ W. Feenberg, *School and Society*, (2nd Ed.), (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), p. 2.

¹⁰ L. Winner, *Citizen Virtues in a Technological Order*. In A. Feenberg and A. Hanny, (Eds.), *Technology and The Politics of Knowledge*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995). P. 152.

¹¹ J. Goldstone, "Understanding the revolutions of 2011: weakness and resilience in Middle Eastern autocracies", *Foreign Affairs* 90(3), 2011, p. 8-16.

¹² See for example 'Disruptive technologies: Advances that will transform life, business, and the global economy, a report from the McKinsey Global Institute published May 2013. Also see books such as Brynjolfsson Erik and McAfee Andrew (2014) *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*; Patrick Purcell (ed.) 2006 *Networked Neighbourhoods: The Connected Community in Context* Springer; Laberta Catherine (2011) *Computers Are Your Future*; Volti Rudi (2013) *Society and Technological Change*; Thompson Clive (2014) *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better*.

and literary icons such as Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, Mark Twain, Henry Adams, John Ruskin, William Morris, George Orwell and Kurt Vonnegut. Even Karl Marx is included on the basis of his base-superstructure model. The essentialist/determinist view is based on the assumption that there is only one 'essence' of technology and that it is responsible for the major problems or solutions of the modern world¹³. Furthermore, technology and its advancement are viewed as automatic and unilinear.

This school of thought however, is not homogeneous. It can be broadly divided into two groups: substantivists and instrumentalists. What differentiates these groups is the optimistic and cheerful faith of the instrumentalists in the doctrine of progress (through technology) and the gloomy and pessimistic assumption by the substantivists that technology is inherently biased towards domination. In the following space I sketch the basic theoretical assumptions on which each of these groups bases its arguments.

Substantive Theory of Technology

The substantive view of technology is also referred to as the 'sociological approach' or 'technological value determinism'. Adherents of this approach view technology as a force in its own right; a force that shapes societal values and has no rivals. In extreme cases technology is seen as an evil, destructive force.¹⁴ Substantive theory is best known through the writings of Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger. The main argument of substantivists is that technology leads to the making up of a new brand of cultural system that reorganizes the social world, as an object of control from which there is no escape. They argue that technology is a product of the culture,

a force in itself that overrides all traditional or competing values; in the end it destroys humanity and nature.

For substantivists the consequences of what technology does are more important than the apparent, superficial benefits. Ellul, for example, argues that "technique has become autonomous" and the "technical phenomenon" has become the defining characteristic of all modern societies regardless of their political ideology.¹⁵ Heidegger also supports this view. He argues that in our obsession with the transformation of the world, technology has completely overtaken us and that human beings have now become raw materials to be used in technical processes.¹⁶

When it comes to use of social media for educating people, scholars voicing apprehensions and reservations, fall under substantivist view of technology. In the western context these concerns are raised by weighing social media's positive contributions against possible misuse of technology such as: issues of virtual integrity, identity theft, cyber stalking and bullying etc.¹⁷ tensions resulting from collapsing of personal and professional contexts especially use of social media by faculty and students.¹⁸ and that use of social media is primarily for entertainment and thus results in a decline of interest in social issues.¹⁹ In the context of the Muslim world the concerns change into the fear, anxiety, panic and

¹⁵ J. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, J. Wilkinson, Trans, (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. 7.

¹⁶ M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 17.

¹⁷ D. Bateman & J. Willems, "Facing off: Facebook and Higher Education", in Laura A. Wankel, Charles Wankel (ed.) *Misbehavior Online in Higher Education, Cutting-edge Technologies in Higher Education* 5, (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Chapter 5, 2012), p.53 - 79.

¹⁸ G. Veletsianos, R. Kimmons, & K. French, "Instructor Experiences With A Social Networking Site in A Higher Education Setting: Expectations, Frustrations, Appropriation, and Compartmentalization, *Education Tech Research Dev* 61, 2013, p. 255-278.

¹⁹ D. V. Shah, J. Cho, W. P. Eveland, & N. Kwak, "Information and Expression in A Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation", *Communication Research* 32, 2005, p. 531-565.

¹³ Essence can broadly be defined as intrinsic and natural attributes only on the basis of which a thing can be understood.

¹⁴ W. Leiss, "The Social Consequences of Technological Progress: Critical Comments on Recent Theories", *Canadian Public Administration* 13, 1970, p. 248-53.

alarm regarding how use of social media is leading or can lead and unite users towards the formation of Muslim Ummah by strengthening a sense of Muslim community.²⁰ Rise and growth of militant Islamism.²¹ unity of Muslim brotherhood, use of technology by Muslim terrorists, gender equality and secularism versus Islam and gender inequality.²²

Instrumental Theory of Technology

The instrumental approach to technology is sometimes also referred to as the 'anthropological approach to technology' on the grounds that technology represents a given possibility of which we can take advantage in order to make ourselves better or worse. This argument draws upon the age-old view of human beings as toolmakers and tool users. Technology in this sense is seen as value-neutral, a tool or a gadget, hospitable and amiable to the liberal democratic tradition. It is seen as neutral and subservient to values established in other social spheres, e.g., politics or culture, with no values of its own. Thus, in the instrumentalist view, technology has a precise place in public policy i.e., as an instrument of politics.²³ Most of the government policies around the world are based on the instrumental view of technology. It is also the most common view of technology in the debate on the role of technology in education. Technophiles or advocates for putting computers in the classrooms in 1980s fall under this group.

Scholars and educators advocating the use of technology argued for an immediate and spirited introduction of technology in the

educational realm in early '80s. Prominent among the earlier proponents of computers are scholars such as, who view technology, especially computer-based environments, as progressive arenas for social exchange and learning.²⁴ Furthermore, they viewed technology as neutral and thus capable of providing the basis for an educational renaissance that will create a generation of problem-solvers well prepared for the information age. They argued that computers will enhance learning and provide insight in a more productive and engaging manner than traditional teaching.²⁵ Although many prophecies and predications about how computers would revolutionize education and produce a generation of infotechs were never fulfilled.²⁶ Nevertheless, techno-advocate group has expanded considerably with the developments in technologies especially after the full-scale emergence of social media by early to mid-2000.

Interest in researching impacts of social media is also a result of more funding opportunities mostly supported by private technology firms but also by many governments. Social scientists and educators are thus encouraged to explore how participation in social media can fulfill certain social and academic purposes.²⁷ The same arguments that were used in 1980s for introduction of computers in the classrooms have now been extended to the use of social media. Researchers argue that, owing to their interactive platform, social media such as Facebook allows students for collaborative exchange of ideas.²⁸ Critical thinking and

²⁰ L. Brouwer, "Dutch-Muslims on the Internet: A New Discussion Platform", *Journal of Muslim Affairs* 24(1), 2004, Taylor and Francis Group, p.47-55.

²¹ I. Chilwa, and A. Adegoke, "Twittering the Boko Haram Uprising in Nigeria: Investigating Pragmatic Acts in the Social Media", *Africa Today* 59(3), 2013, p. 83-102.

²² al-Rawi, "Framing the online women's movements in the Arab world", *Information Communication & Society* 17(9) 2014, p. 1147-1161.

²³ D. W. Jr. Shriver, "Man and His Machines: Four Angles of Vision", *Technology and Culture* 13, 1972, p. 534-538.

²⁴ W. C. Norris, "Improving Education Through Technological Innovation", *T.H.E. Journal*, June, 1985, p.65-68.

²⁵ B. Kurshan, "Creating the global classroom for the 21st century", *Educational Technology* 31(4), 1991, p. 47-50.

²⁶ J. A. McKenzie, *Power Learning in The Classroom*, (California: Corwin Press, Inc. 1993), p. 138.

²⁷ M. Magro, J. K. Sharp Ryan, & S. Ryan, "Investigating Ways to Use Facebook at the University Level: A Delphi Study". *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* 10, 2013.

²⁸ M. L. Khan, D.Y. Wohn, & N.B. Ellison, "Actual Friends Matter: An Internet Skills Perspective on Teens'

problem-solving skills and the opportunity to connect with diverse people.²⁹

While examining the role of social media and their educational and civic potential within the Western context scholars following instrumental theory of technology discuss issues such as: constructive impact on student-teacher communication when professors 'friend' students,³⁰ enhancement of civic engagement, and political participation thus active participatory citizenship,³¹ collaborative exchange of ideas and acquisition of critical problem solving skills,³² multiple audiences, better chances of "dialogic argumentation",³³ debate on civic and community issues support, motivation and encouragement of peers, critical thinking and collaboration, development of community of practice, connectedness among the students, self-directed learning, and mentoring, multiple audiences and debate on civic and community issues.³⁴

Majority of studies noted above focus on psycho-sociological aspect of students'

engagements in social media such as Facebook.³⁵ Recently increased attention is directed to examine the potential of social media as an educational environment. Literature in this respect shows that there is a strong indication that students prefer Facebook,³⁶ to other knowledge management systems used at universities such as Moodle, Web CT etc. Overwhelming use of Facebook by students has led educators to seriously examine the role Facebook can play in educational environments.³⁷

Some researchers argue that social media such as Facebook offers exciting possibilities for effective cultural integration and intercultural understanding,³⁸ show that virtual space can play a significant role in providing cultural and textual information to young people and help in their cultural adaptation. Observed the power of social networks in minimizing the gaps between cultures.³⁹ While examining Facebook's impact on acculturation report positive social learning outcomes.⁴⁰

However, when it comes to the context of the Muslim world the focus of academic researchers changes to what Armburst calls the 'great white hope'.⁴¹ The subtext of this body of research is that social media will provide a final platform for the disenchantment of Muslim

Informal Academic Collaboration on Facebook. *Computers & Education* 79, 2014, p. 138-147.

²⁹ M. Magro, J. K. Sharp Ryan, & S. Ryan, "Investigating Ways to Use Facebook...", *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* 10, 2013.

³⁰ L. Helvie-Mason, "Facebook, "Friending," and Faculty-Student Communication, in Charles Wankel (ed.), *Teaching Arts and Science with the New Social Media Cutting-edge Technologies in Higher Education* 3, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011, p.61-87.

³¹ J. W. Stanley, & C. Weare, "The Effects of Internet Use on Political Participation". *Administration and Society* 36, 2004, P. 503-527.

³² R. Beach, & C. Doerr-Stevens, "Learning Argument Practices Through Online Role-Play: Towards A Rhetoric Of Significance And Transformation", *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 52(6), 2009, p.460-468.

³³ D. B. Clark, & V. Sampson, "Assessing Dialogic Argumentation in Online Environments to Relate Structure, Grounds, And Conceptual Quality", *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 45(3), 2008, p. 293-321.

³⁴ A. Shaw, et al, "Understanding Youth Civic Engagement: Debates, Discourses, and Lessons From Practice", *Community Development* 45(4), 2014, 300-316, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2014.931447

³⁵ N. Ellison, et al, Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society* 13, 2011, p. 873-892.

³⁶ L. Deng & N. J. Tavares, "From Moodle to Facebook: Exploring Students' Motivation and Experiences in Online Communities", *Computers & Education* 68, 2013, p.167-176.

³⁷ K. A. Karl & J. V. Peluchette, "'Friending' Professors, Parents and Bosses: A Facebook Connection Conundrum", *Journal of Education for Business* 86(4), 2011, p. 214-222

³⁸ M. Magro, J. K. Sharp Ryan, & S. Ryan, "Investigating Ways to Use Facebook...", *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology* 10, 2013.

³⁹ I. Birky & W. Collins, "Facebook: Maintaining Ethical Practice in The Cyberspace Age", *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 25(3), 2011, p. 193-203.

⁴⁰ A. Y. Yu, et al, "Can Learning be Virtually Boosted? An Investigation of Online Social Networking Impacts", *Computers & Education* 55(4), 2010, p. 1494-1503.

⁴¹ W. Armburst, "A History of New Media in The Arab Middle East", p. 161.

masses which will lead people to seek freedom from tyrant 'sultans' towards a path to Western style democracy.⁴² Social media usage will help Muslim masses to challenge the authority of traditional Muslim leadership.⁴³ Social media will help Muslim women to finally achieved freedom from oppression of their religion and Muslim men.⁴⁴

Representation of the Muslim World In Research on Social Media and the Arab Spring

As stated above within the Western context a sizeable body of literature falling within substantivist and instrumentalist framework identifies gaps in educational and civic fields that can be filled with the help of computers and social media. These include: lack of or insufficient collaborative exchange of ideas; lack of or weak critical thinking and problem-solving skills; lack of opportunity to connect with diverse people; weak student-teacher communication; little or no civic engagement; a major gap in political participation and active participatory citizenship; lack or little debate on civic and community issues; non-availability of or little interaction with multiple audiences, lack of or weak "dialogic argumentation and debate on civic and community issues; lack of support, motivation and encouragement of peers; need for development of community of practice; gaps in connectedness among the students; and gaps in or lack of self-directed learning, etc.

When it comes to role of social media in Muslim societies the debate between the substantivists and the instrumentalists turns towards what social media can do for those who want to rebel from existing tyrant oppressive

religious regimes and how can social media be used by those tyrant oppressive religious regimes? Instrumentalists argue that social media are crucial educational tools for masses,⁴⁵ which will help them, liberate from the oppression of undemocratic and religious Muslim/Eastern governments. On the other hand, substantivists,⁴⁶ argue that social media, on their own, might have little educational potential to liberate oppressed masses and can be used more potently by oppressive and authoritarian regimes to control and/or further subjugate the masses.

Comunello and Anzera while providing an extensive review of the debate between substantivists and the instrumentalists argue that the focus of both groups is on the same eight dimensions of social media usage. They list those eight dimensions as: (i) Ideology and planning, (ii) Training and tactics, (iii) Communications, (iv) Deployment and rapid response, (v) Costs, (vi) Flexibility, (vii) Resilience, and (viii) Propaganda/media diplomacy.⁴⁷ The authors' labeling of the eight dimensions in itself is highly suggestive of how literature portrays some sort of guerrilla warfare going on with the use of social media in Muslim societies. The language used to explain the use of social media under each dimension further invokes certain imagery; this is in contrast with the imagery of the innocent/naive Western citizen engaged in learning about civic issues. The citizens in Muslim societies are represented as revolutionary, insurgent, insurrectionary, terrorist masses.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ M. De Boer, "The Continued Importance of Broad Popular Support in Political Violence The Heptagonist", http://heptagonpost.com/De%20Boer/The_Continued_Importance_of_Broad_Popular_Support_in_Political_Violence (accessed 28 June 2012).

⁴⁶ E. Pilkington, "Evgeny Morozov: How Democracy Slipped Through the Net. The Guardian, 13 January", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/jan/13/evgeny-morozov-the-net-delusion> (accessed 29 October 2014).

⁴⁷ F. Comunello & G. Anzera, "Will The Revolution Be Tweeted?", p. 453-470

⁴⁸ L. Jackson, "Images of Islam in the US Media And Their Educational Implications". *Educational Studies* 46, 2010, p. 3-24.

⁴² J. Goldstone, *Understanding the revolutions*, p. 8-16.

⁴³ R. Shaery-Eisenlohr, "From Subjects to Citizens? Civil Society and the Internet in Syria", *Middle East Critique* 20(2), 2011, p. 127-138,

⁴⁴ al-Rawi, "Framing the online women's movements in the Arab world", p. 1147-1161.

This imagery resonates with the current Islamophobia and demonization of Islam as a violent religion and hence goes unquestioned and unnoticed by readers who are reading about neutral topic of what social media can do for civic engagement. For example, while discussing the role of social media under the dimensions of ideology and planning both groups of scholars (substantivists and instrumentalists) focus on the questions such as: are social media “formidable instrument for quickly spreading ideologies, doctrines and thoughts?”. Similarly, in the context of training and tactics, social media are discussed in terms of “effective instruments in rebel training, with special regard to coping with security forces using specific tactics and showing how repression squads operate and perform, especially in urban guerrilla warfare”.⁴⁹ The term rebel is used for general citizens. Comunello and Anzera are primarily interested in looking at the role of social media in the Middle East as articulated in the debate between two groups of scholars i.e., substantivists and instrumentalists whom they term ‘techno-realists’ and evangelists’. Their summing up of the debate between two groups provides important insights into how Middle East is discursively constructed. Terminology used by both groups comprising the dominant voice in literature evokes certain imagery. Consider the following phrases ...“deal with the military, capable repression forces (such as Arab security bodies), or ruthless paramilitary units (often part of the coercion system acting in the neopatrimonial states)...”; “Protestors risk arrest, injury or death...”; “core of the rebellions can avoid being dangerously exposed during transfers or meetings, all occasions to be retaliated against or ambushed by security squads.”; “low level of diffusion of the web and the low access rate to digital technologies in Arab populations”; “rebels can deceive police with fake announcements of mobilization.”; security forces

can use social media to spread false information, frighten people, ambush rebel forces, manage the public debate on the reasons behind protests, or damage the reputation of rebels by false accusations.⁵⁰ Such terminology only reinforces well-established stereotypes about Muslim societies as primitive, violent, authoritative, redundant, oppressive, and uncivilized.

The dominant representation about protests throughout several Middle Eastern and North African countries is itself reflective of inherent bias, implicit prejudice and orientalism and thus needs to be analyzed and deconstructed. For example, the most common term used i.e., “Arab Spring” that is used in almost all academic analyses under review implies that there was a winter before social media hit the Arab world. Winter implies cold and dark and spring brings with it the news of life and hope. Similarly another frequently used term “Arab awakening” (see for example, CIMA Arab Social Media report, 2011) carries a hint that the Arab world was sleeping and social media is the alarm that woke-up the Arab world. The term “Arab Rising” also carries a subtle suggestion that something that was in decline has now begun to rise. Heinter in his analysis of legal dimensions of civilian’s right to protest and the state’s right to defend also falls pray to such articulation. For example, in setting the context for his international legal analysis he cites Salman Shaikh’s CNN interview, “... the citizens of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and other countries yearned for dignity, justice and opportunity”. Reading Heitner, D. can leave the reader with an impression that had it not been for social media the protests in MENA would not have been possible. For instance Heitner argues, “New communications technologies such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, as well as the global proliferation of cell phones, have been perceived as indispensable tools to organize

⁴⁹ F.Comunello & G.Anzera Will The Revolution Be Tweeted?, p. 463

⁵⁰ F.Comunello & G.Anzera Will The Revolution Be Tweeted?, p. 463-464.

protests, galvanize public support, incite armed rebellion, and seek the support of allies and the international community".⁵¹ Such essentialist line of reasoning poses a number of problems for a vast majority of Western readers⁵² already conditioned by stereotypical images of the Orient. First, as it has been argued above liberatory tools a.k.a social media are developed in the West and had it not been for West the MENA societies would have continued in slumber, inactivity, inertia or non-awakening state for ever. Social media have also been labeled as 'liberation technology, a term coined by the Center on Democracy, Development and Rule of Law at Stanford University. Second, such analysis takes the focus away from how external forces looted and plundered MENA societies during the colonial period and how they continue to do so under the current phase of neoliberalism, which many critical theorists have termed as a new form of colonization. Third, such analysis overly focuses on internal oppression of citizens by their authoritarian governments and thus takes the agency away from MENA citizens to analyze their situation within a global context. Statements such as, "Dissidents could also use social media to document abusive actions by the regime, express political views or aspirations incompatible with those of the regime, garner sympathy and material support from the international community, or otherwise aid a military or political victory over the regime".⁵³ give far too much credit to social media (and external

assistance) then dissidents and the causes that form the roots of the dissent and which involve far more than just authoritarian leaders. Such articulations are in consonance with the dominant discourses on the Arab/Muslim world through which the region, its people, and their societies are understood in the West. Such discursive articulations now also permeate the narratives on social media and its impact on the Arab world.

Also implicit in articulations of social media and civic engagement in the Muslim world, there seems to be a wishful belief that social media in the Muslim world will provide the same space which the dramatic revolutions in science, philosophy, provided Western societies from the mid-decades of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century. Indeed the post 9/11 rhetorical articulations of Islam and persistent oriental lenses used to analyze anything related to Islam paints a picture of Muslim societies in a state worse than the intellectual darkness which resulted in cultural and economic deterioration of Western Europe in dark ages. Political upheaval caused by the French Revolution was a result of Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality for all; these ideals were based on upon principles of human reason. Religion on the other hand was considered as antithetical to reason. Connections made between the use of social media and the so-called Arab spring also reflect the desire of the Western world/scholars for Muslims to denounce their religious beliefs and enter the age of reason by separating religion and politics.

Similarly, the modern (self)-pre-modern (other) binary also colours analysis of the latest political development in the MENA region. It will not be too far fetched to say that even some of the more discerning scholars such as Phillip Howard seem not to be able to escape the discursive articulations of the dominant discourses. For example, is of the view that social

⁵¹ D. Heitner, "Civilian Social Media Activists in the Arab Spring and Beyond: Can They Ever Lose Their Civilian Protections?", *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 39(3), 2014, p. 1207-1249.

⁵² Also many Eastern readers whose still get informed through Western knowledge systems and thus are hegemonized by Western perspectives. They still get to see their own images through colonial mirror and seek affirmation of their identities by Western scholarship.

⁵³ S. Khamis & K Vaughn, "Cyberactivism in The Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted The Balance", *Arab media and society*. Summer, 2011, p. 1208.

media not only help start democracies,⁵⁴ but also help entrench existing ones, and that the networked design of social media is the key factor threatening authoritarian regimes. Notwithstanding a fleeing effort to escape technological determinism in understanding the relationship between socio-political protest in Egypt and social media. Khamis and Vaughn cannot seem to escape it altogether. According to them, “despite the degree of political dissatisfaction that was generally shared among the Egyptian people at large and the availability of shared knowledge and information in the political arena, there was a need to find the missing link between public anger and resentment of the ruling regime on the one hand, and actual public mobilization to bring about real change on the other hand. Political activism in the real world, aided by cyberactivism in the virtual world, succeeded to find this missing link.”⁵⁵

Most of the recent analyses of social and political changes in the Muslim world and the role played by social media in bringing about these changes are grounded in the combination of technological determinism and orientalist framework. Such scholarship strives to find and highlight the flaws in these societies and justify these in the name of empirical evidence. Thus, low rate of Internet penetration in Muslim/Arab societies is articulated and understood as a sign of their backwardness and not lack of infrastructure or resources. While the culture of developed world never gets problematized, ‘cultural backwardness’ of Middle Eastern and Muslim societies is constantly emphasized in literature no matter what the issue under discussion is. It is, thus not surprising that in the emerging

⁵⁴ P.N.Howard, et al, Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring. Project on Information Technology & Political Islam, 2011, <http://pitpi.org/index.php/2011/09/11/opening-closed-regimes-what-was-the-role-of-social-media-during-the-Arab-spring> (accessed 11 November 2014).

⁵⁵ S. Khamis & K Vaughn, Cyberactivism in The Egyptian Revolution, p. 10-25

academic literature on use of social media in Muslim societies, certain topics have gained much more prominence than general concerns highlighted in the Western context. For example, while analyzing the role of social media for their educational and civic potential scholars are excessively tied up with social media’s use for repressing and monitoring the movement of protesters by the nondemocratic governments,⁵⁶ and how social media can be used to struggle against dictatorships and authoritarian governments.⁵⁷ Even when the topic of discussion is progressive and hopeful like the potential of social media in reshaping the public sphere there are constant reminders for the readers through use of terminology such as ‘conservative dilemma’ plaguing dictatorships that this conservative region is polar opposite/ ‘other’ of the liberal democratic West.⁵⁸ As Walter Armbrust rightly argues, “...the academic literature on new media in the Arab world uncritically mirrors a distorting emphasis on politics above all other human activities in the Middle East, and is, moreover, indicative of a crude understanding of politics.”⁵⁹

Even those advancing a more nuanced analysis, such as Muzammil Hussain cannot escape the articulating power of the dominant/Oriental discourses when talking about the MENA societies.

Consider, for example the authoritarian/democratic and modern/pre-

⁵⁶ E. Morozov, “Facebook and Twitter are Just Places Revolutionaries Go, The Guardian, 7 March”, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians> (accessed 11 November 2014).

⁵⁷ B. Etlng, et al, “Political Change in The Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing”. *School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) Review* 30(1), 2010, p. 37–49.

⁵⁸ C. Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, The Public Sphere, and Political Change”, *Foreign Affairs* 90(1), 2011, p. 28–41. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clayshirky/the-political-power-of-social-media?> (accessed 4 October 2014).

⁵⁹ W. Armbrust, “A History of New Media in The Arab Middle East”, p. 160.

modern binaries in the following passage from Hussain's article:

"Ultimately, opportunities for technology use are structured by the infrastructure providers and regulators, who in many authoritarian cases are the repressive states themselves. In advanced democracies, these infrastructure providers are private sector owned (e.g., Comcast Corporation), or in the case of some European states, are jointly owned by the state and private enterprise (e.g., TeliaSonera, owned by the government of Sweden and private investors)".

Similarly,

"... since the aftermath of the Arab Spring, international activism and global debates surrounding digital infrastructure policymaking have become highly visible and contentious at the international level. This has in turn had a transformational impact on how democratic states have coordinated with one another in shaping their democracy-promotion efforts after the Arab Spring. Simultaneously, developing and authoritarian states have also been actively coordinating amongst each other to bring global north-anchored Internet infrastructure under their influence".⁶⁰

Articulations in the Hussain's analysis are replete with these binaries and how the benevolent West/western democracies/advanced industrialized western democracies.⁶¹ are trying to help the authoritarian Arab/Muslim/developing world through Internet/social media freedom. While Hussain seems to be supportive of the concerns that 'authoritarian regimes' endeavor to ban anonymity from the World Wide Web, which would make it easier for them to hunt

down dissidents. He does not seem to question similar practices in the 'advanced democracies' where privacy of Internet and social media users is violated by legislation such as the Patriot Act in the US.⁶²

In short, when discussing the role of social media in Muslim/Eastern countries it is difficult for most Western academics to step out of well-established frameworks of orientalism which gives centrality to politics and religion in understanding any issue in Muslim countries rather than the particular issue under investigation.

The orientalist lenses do not let the scholars see/locate the agency of the people in these societies, nor do they allow scholars and researchers to create linkages between local/micro and global/macro processes that lead to the growing disenchantment and sense of disenfranchisement among the people of these societies. Most analyses obscures the fact that in addition to the distresses caused by historic colonization, current conditions in Muslim societies are not cut off from global neo-liberal economic system where masses are being unjustly exploited by a hand full of elite well embedded in the exploitative capitalist structures. Such analyses also obfuscates the fact that there are social, cultural and political conduits in these societies that channelled the dissent and the agency of people into strong social movements that toppled the old order in many of these societies. That social media was there to be used by the people was a condition of historical times these societies and their people are situated in. Social media did not create the conditions for social change. They only helped the people to channel their agency and coordinate their synergies. Similarly, it was a tool that was also available to those in powers in these societies with which to conduct surveillance, disrupt

⁶⁰ M. Hussain, "Digital Infrastructure Politics and Internet Freedom Stakeholders After The Arab Spring", *Journal of International Affairs* 68(1), 2014, p. 38.

⁶¹ M. Hussain, Digital Infrastructure Politics and Internet, p. 38-39.

⁶² M. Hussain, Digital Infrastructure Politics and Internet, p. 43-44.

populist dissent and attempt to manufacture consent.

Ufiem Maurice Ogbonnaya while providing a comparative analysis of the causes of ‘Arab Spring’ in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya uses dominant terminology and language that not only reinforces existing stereotypes about MENA but also invokes the current media frenzy about Islam as a non-peaceful religion. According to Ogbonnaya “the Arab Spring, a pro-democracy uprising that has been sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa since December 18, 2010, is the latest of this global security crisis”.⁶³ So, not only are the authoritarian rulers in Middle East and North Africa a threat to their own people but also pose a threat to global security. It is important to consider that although further down in the arguments the author mentions other factors such as unemployment and extreme poverty, but these issues are not analyzed by properly placing them within the global context of current neoliberal economic policies and the impact of such policies in many developing countries. While the article talks about “violence, torture and execution of dissident elements”.⁶⁴ By the Syrian government in detail and provides lot of information to the readers to build mental constructs about how authoritarian governments in MENA are, it fails to provide adequate information about the working of global economic system that has led to “dire and worsening economic conditions” in Yemen.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Last 40 years have seen a multitude of social movements from Central and South America to

Asia to the Middle East and North Africa. A hallmark of these movements has been the organicity and locality of originary impetus. These movements, from the Madres of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina to the peasants in Mexico to the pot banging students used whatever technologies (white handkerchiefs, pots, pamphlets) were available and used them well. These movements employed varied means of communication, dissemination and expression (word of mouth, underground newspapers, church, radio, letter mules) and used them well. However, what can be said with confidence is that the success of these social movements was in the organic nature, local origins, and a belief in the justness of objectives. The technologies and the tools merely helped. There is no doubt that social media and new technologies are much different than some used in earlier social movements. As discussed in the first part of the paper they do offer a space that makes it easier and speedier to reach multiple audiences, convert private vices into public voices, etc. However, the way the potential of the new technologies and media has been represented in the emergent literature on social movements in MENA is akin to a messiah (from the west) that has the magic potion that will transform the ‘oppressed’ populace of the Muslim societies from the clutches of ‘despotic sultans’. Interestingly, none of the countries emblematic of the so-called Arab Spring had a Sultan. In other words, according to the articulations in the Western analyses these societies are backward, they wish to become Western styled democracies, and the Western technologies help them in doing so. Such explanations gloss over the complex social, cultural and political ethos of these societies, disregard the agency of the people, and devalue the local knowledge systems. ‘Social media’ has been present in MENA for a long time in the shape of the Arab street where conversations and multilogues over puffs of Chicha and mint tea have initiated, broadened and disseminated the discourses. It is the ‘Arab, the Asian and the

⁶³ U. Ogbonnaya, “Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya: A Comparative Analysis of Causes and Determinants”, *Alternatives: Turkish Journal Of International Relations* 12(3), 2013, p. 5.

⁶⁴ U. Ogbonnaya, Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, 2013, p. 6.

⁶⁵ U. Ogbonnaya, Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, 2013, p. 6.

Latina/Latino Street' that is the harbinger of social and political change. More holistic, historically situated, culturally and socially grounded analyses of these societies stripped of the Orientalist gaze and technological determinism will help a better understanding of the socio-political change in these societies.

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