

The Arab Web and the Social Biotope

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ABSTRACT

This short contribution tries to approach several concepts of social theories to provide a different point of view on what really happened in the Arab Near-East during the period called the Arab Spring. Following Doueihi's concept of conversion to digital humanism, we try to understand the Web in its transformative power, in time and place. We consider that the Arab Spring was preceded by a spring of the Arab Web, which worked as an environment, a biotope for change.

Author Keywords

Arab Near-East; Web impact; Society; Transformation;
Digital humanities; Social Theory;

ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES: Sociology.

INTRODUCTION

Our attempt to contribute to Web Science research with a culturally contextualized approach to understand the impact of the Web on the Arab Near-East society started 4 years ago. The call for an interdisciplinary study of the Web came as a liberating call for us: Traditional Sociology has reached some sort of a dead end trying to understand the fundamental logics of the impact of the World Wide Web on society. Quantitative methods could provide us with accurate observation of trends, collective intelligence patterns or empirical truth. And the recent events in the region, known as the Arab Spring, were providential: traditional Arab societies would suddenly adopt the Web to communicate and exchange, mobilize and learn pacific ways to ask for change. If empiric observation could give us an accurate statement of this reality, we were not convinced that the role played by the Web, as a transformation technology, was limited to this socio-technical dimension.

This short contribution will combine different social approaches to explore the idea that the Web is not just a

tool that creates change. The Web has a deeper and earlier impact. It creates a kind of biotope for change.

THE WEB AS A CONVERSION

Doueihi's concept of "conversion" [3] shows a radical transformation of perspective in the religious point of view. It is a process by which elements of the ancient world are transmuted and converted into the new world, the digital world. The cyberspace is characterized by the existence of a convergence between time and space: people do not need to be in the same place at the same time to communicate. The web removes spatio-temporal barriers. The digital revolution [2] [3] is essentially a civilizing process that contributes to the emergence of a new digital "culture". This process of digitalization has transformed the basic structures of our culture and it is necessary to take into account this new context. If this is a new culture, we must approach it in its human dimension. Because it shapes the human, digital creates new digital humanism. Digital humans are not mere users of technology, but they are made by digital technology. The digital humanities attempt to apply the methods of Humanities to digital analysis.

According to Doueihi, Digital Humanism [2] [3] is the result of a convergence between our cultural heritage and a complex technique that has become a new place of sociability. We should not consider technology as something opposed to human. There is no conflict between man and machine, but rather a convergence between technology and culture. The "convergence" means that the digital dimension is already a culture, a civilization.

Moreover, digital humanism as a cultural identity is the subscription of an individual to norms and values of a culture. Unlike social identity that places the individual in small groups of belonging; cultural identity puts individuals in the society in which it operates: "The construction of identity is a highly dynamic process in which the person is defined and recognized by its way of thinking, acting and wanting in the social and natural environment in which it operates." [2] [3]

With the creation of a "digital environment" [3], a new order of citizenship is emerging through tools such as blogs, wikis and social software. Within this new order, the concept of friendship is revisited: in fact there is a new way of structuring social relations and practice of social

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WebSci'13, May 2–4, 2013, Paris, France.

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networks. New communities and network societies are being formed. "Virtual community" refers to group of persons who meet via the Web and share common interest or values. Online social interaction plays an increasing role in the overall organization of society. A hybrid communication is under development: it combines the physical space and the cyberspace. Furthermore, according to Castells, the web allows the creation of networks communities as new form of interactions: "More and more people are organized, not only in social networks, but also in social networks that communicate by computer. Therefore Internet does not create network individualism." [1]

The specific elements in a virtual community are:

- Self-efficiency: In a virtual community time and energy given to the community are rewarded immediately and proportionally to the effort. This does not seem to be the case in the offline world, where social recognition is built over time.

- Support actions are made visible: On the web, there is a social obligation of reciprocity. To be rewarded, actions must be perceptible, documentable. The users come to waive their anonymity to be better recognized as donors. Their identity can be hidden behind a nickname but thanks to their contributions, they are recognized as active members of a living community.

These virtual communities once stabilized can become real communities. As a place of free expression, cyberspace allows people to communicate and discuss their ideas. The web becomes a new public sphere and an alternative or parallel public sphere in certain regimes. For example, during the Arab Spring virtual communities became real communities which had a real impact on the ground.

THE TIME OF THE WEB ACTION

If we try to combine profound knowledge of a specific environment, in terms of social structure, political system, economic situation, with the dynamic observation of how links, networks, macrostructures of information form on the Web, a lateral approach is mostly needed. As Hendler and al. [10] wrote it, "The Web is different from most hitherto-studied systems in that it is changing at a rate which is of the same order as, or maybe greater than, our ability to observe it." Synchronized and non-coordinated actions performed by actors in a very short period of time have immediate consequences, in terms of shapes of collaborative knowledge. Permanent content creation on microblogging sites, Content Management System or collaborative platforms produces an infinite number of micro-interactions between users, creating a meta-network of awareness, at different levels. This involuntary synchronicity of the "Actor Web" [11] gives it a collective identity that produces common actions [12]. The chaotic and non-harmonic construction of a common decision on the Web emerges under the play of highly complex forces.

Tufekci [13] explains that this "permanent fight for the control of the time of action" has a direct influence on repressive government decisions in periods of civil unrest. These decisions mostly consist in anticipative counter-revolutionary events, based on the high cost of individual failure and organization (impossibility of setting up gatherings or great difficulties to communicate among actors). Web Actors exist outside the strict dimension of the time of action, for they would be highly receptive to pressure and their online mobilization would not benefit from the "synchronicity advantage". Undisciplined groups compensate their lack of discipline and order by using the Web link as a way to structure their action. The authoritarian regimes have a hard time with efficient reaction against "wirearchies" and this gives a decisive momentum to online mobilization. Therefore, it could be possible, if we leave the confined dimension of recorded data, to approach the Web actors as agents of change and social transformation in the timeline of political action.

THE SPRING OF THE ARAB WEB

"Twitter Revolution", "Facebook Revolution", "Wikipedia Revolution", "E-Revolution", "2.0 Revolution": too many labels trying to qualify the role of Web technologies in the process of social and political transformations happening in the Arab World. Where the Web should be considered as a factor and not a cause, the new determinism of Western Media has a clear tendency to produce prescriptive discourse. For the first time in the Arab World, political mobilization has the familiar face of globalized protest and the tools and techniques used by protesters to relay information are the same as the ones used in London or Madrid. If the technology is global, the Arab Spring is just another effect of a larger pattern that might reach other political spaces like China for example. By focusing on politics and by exacerbating the role of technology, new determinist analysis fails at avoiding the traps of a new Orientalism, creates "Lawrence of E-Rabia" [14]. We consider that it's impossible to understand the forces at play in the Arab revolts if we don't try to see what was, in regards of what has not yet been achieved. To name it the Spring of the Arab Web is a direct reference to the performativity of the Web, an influence that goes back to the origins of social transformations in the Arab world, long before the events of December 2011 in Tunisia. It is also a clear differentiation with the concept of Arab Spring: the transformation cycle, initiated by the introduction of new technologies allowing a better usage of the Web in most of the Arab countries, started back in 2000. Following the worldwide trend of virtualization of the economy, Arab countries have heavily invested in high-tech infrastructures. Countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco or the Arab Emirates have provided their populations with increased Internet capacities and democratized access to online connection, through affordable mobile devices. From 2000 to 2010, upload and download speeds have been multiplied by 1000 (From 2k to 2M). Users have taken advantage of

these opportunities to level their Web practices with the rest of the connected World. As Francis Pisani [Pisani, personal communication] put it, the innovative Web user in the Arab World is educated, has an intercultural profile and tends to imitate Web behaviors of the “Western World”. Even if the concept of modernity always refers to the central model of the westernized world, it is possible to say that these new opportunities for the Web Actor of the Arab World brought obvious change in Arab societies. For the first time, the Arab Web Actor is contributing, is participating and more interestingly, listened to. This evolution can be compared in sociological and political terms as what O’Reilly [15] describes as the adoption of the new Web 2.0 business models in western economies: The web as a platform where immediate, mobile production of content can be uploaded in no time on large and free repositories on the Cloud. When this transformation takes place in a “modern”, democratic environment, the main consequences are economic. The first motivation of Web users is not to reconsider the system that gave them these new innovations. But in societies where access to freedom of speech via free and democratic technologies is considered as a social promotion, or as an access to private environments, far from familial or security constraints, the disruptive effect really defers. Nadine Wahab, in *Meta Activism*, explains this process [16]: « Since the Egyptian government had made the brick-and-mortar world so unfriendly to free expression and the Internet was so readily available to just tweet, update Facebook, or send a quick blog post, it became the obvious space to express your thoughts”. Each piece of information produced on the Arab Web will then act like a seed in spring: ideas will grow, spread and perform change. Links will work as the underground rhizomes of the future social and political ecosystem. This process, observed from a western vintage point was understood as follow: the Spring of the Arab Web must be nurtured by external forces to gain in vigor and power. The disastrous example of “The Gay Girl in Damascus” Blog is a pure illustration of the misconception that external intervention can actually promote. Here again, Clay Shirky [7] is right in saying that “despite this basic truth -- that communicative freedom is good for political freedom -- the instrumental mode of Internet statecraft is still problematic. It is difficult for outsiders to understand the local conditions of dissent”.

THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECT

The transformative forces of the Arab Web have been at work in the Arab society for more than 10 years. Intellectual identities, cultural values have been built online, far from the authoritative structures. A consequence of the time advantage given by the Web technologies, vertical local powers couldn’t really anticipate the change: The Web was seen as a commercial tool and local practices were perceived mostly like personal communication or entertainment. Local structures were also stuck in what Briggs [17] calls the “conservative dilemma”: “a state

accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public’s”. The construction of relations between individuals on web social media creates a disruptive effect in the Arab society, where traditional values are deeply collectivists, if we consider Hofstede’s cultural dimensions [18]. The individual dimension of “self” is difficult to apprehend outside the societal structure and the Web creates an original situation: connection, sharing, collaboration, participation encourage autonomous attitudes, individualized actions, in the traditional sphere of relations to “others”. From the underground and hidden “obscure side” of non-authorized relations, the Arab Web actors create a new “*karama*”, a new generosity, where digitalized practices and claims crystallize in a generational mix. This disruptive effect goes way further than just the political transformation that is observed by the Occidental commentator. The spring of the Arab web has created a digital generation, living within new structures, moving the traditional boundaries of identity, religion and culture. Three examples of this emancipation can be found on the Web itself: - Even the traditional appearance of the Arabic language is altered by the rupture. The immense development of Arabizy, this new writing where numbers, signs and Latin letters mix to form an easy, fast and international Arabic language on the Web, is a clear example of the construction of a new Arab language at the core of a redefined identity. Here again, Web technologies work as a biotope for experimentation and adoption. – Surprisingly, the religious structures of Islam have taken great advantage of their early understanding of the powers of online communication. Cyber-Islam, with leading media figures like Amr Khaled, develops new relations with the believers and creates a new realm of perceptions: the all-powerful political and radical Islamism of the 90’s seems downgraded by the new rules, forms and language of cyber-Islam. – If the Arab Web is the place for an individual “coming out”, it was obvious that the ultimate taboo of Arab cultures, the “body”, would also be used as a weapon of defiance, of personal expression, of individual construction. One of the most blatant examples is the initiative of *Alia Al Mahdy*, the Egyptian girl who protested with silent pictures of her naked body, published on her blog. This manifesto is not only a violent expression of destruction of the established rule, but also reflects the passage from an intimate construction of digital identity to what Lacan called “extimité”, or exteriorized intimacy.

Conclusion

The Spring of the Arab Web has now the shape of a social palimpsests. The new writings of the social sphere reinvent a reality, without erasing the past. The digital cultural origins of the Arab revolutions lie in the co-constitution of Web and born-again Arabism. The Egyptian and Tunisian cases show the complex relations between virtual spaces and networks, between software and language, between standards and usages. The use of Social theories in Web

Science reveals that the web is a new space of socialization where new social links are structured. The Web as a biotope allows the creation of new cultural identities and virtual communities.

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