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THE 'KILL SWITCH' AS 'SUICIDE SWITCH': MOBILIZING SIDE EFFECTS OF MUBARAK'S COMMUNICATION BLACKOUT

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This article discusses the effects of the Internet communication blackout, or 'kill switch', unleashed by the regime of Hosni Mubarak during the first days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. It argues that while the regime hoped that the blackout would stop the mobilization and disrupt the activists' internal coordination, this move ended up having more of a positive mobilizing effect than a disruptive one. This was for two main reasons. First, the 'kill switch' shattered the consensus in favour of the regime and the passivity of middle-class youth. Second, by excluding the possibility of a virtual distant connection with the protest, it forced many sympathizers to turn into supporters of the movement by physically joining the occupation in Tahrir Square. Reflecting on the implications of these findings the article concludes by asserting that the role of social media as a means of mobilization is highly complex and ambivalent, and that it has to be understood in complementarity with, rather than in opposition to, face-to-face interaction and street-level communication.

KEYWORDS

Arab spring, communication blackout, digital activism, protest mobilization, social media

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In revolutions as in many social phenomena there are 'tipping points' (Gladwell, 2000): days or hours that, with the wisdom of hindsight, can be seen as decisive in steering events one way or the other. In the case of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the tipping point was undoubtedly 28 January. While protests began on 25 January, it was on 28 January that demonstrators won the battle with the security forces on the streets, burned down the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) and set ablaze tens of police stations all over the country. President Mubarak took another 15 days to resign from the post of president he had held for 30 years and which he intended to bequeath to his son Gamal. Yet, from 28 January the fall of his regime appeared irreversible. Through the events of that day Mubarak lost the support of a sizeable number of Egyptians, and the repressive apparatus he directed lost control of the streets. The arrival of army tanks in Cairo on the evening of 28 January graphically manifested the fact that the regime was not capable of maintaining public order.

If 28 January 2011 makes for an interesting case study for students of social movements and political science researchers, it is also a highly promising object of analysis for those media scholars interested in the impact of social media on contemporary activism. To these researchers 28 January presents a fundamental paradox that invites us to question many of the assumptions underlying contemporary debates, and in particular the idea that social media automatically have a mobilizing effect. In fact, 28 January was the first of five days of almost complete electronic communication blackout. But it was also a day that saw a huge escalation in the volume and energy of the mobilization against the dictatorial regime headed by Hosni Mubarak.

In the early hours of 28 January the Mubarak regime decided to take the ultimate step in order to disrupt the movement's communications: it pulled the so-called 'kill switch'. The Egyptian internet was shut down with only one ISP (internet service provider) left functioning – the one serving the stock exchange, as though it was vital that finance at least should go on as normal. At the same time mobile networks also stopped working, sending the country into a situation of total electronic communication blackout. However, this extreme measure failed to achieve its ostensible aims. If Mubarak wanted to limit the turnout of people in the streets by disorienting them and scaring them away he seemed to obtain exactly the opposite outcome. On that day a huge mass of people took to the streets. In Cairo alone, compared to the estimated 20,000 to 50,000 people who had taken to Tahrir on the 25 January, more than 200,000 people flooded central Cairo. Instead of being de-mobilizing as Mubarak's men had hoped, the kill switch was met by a surge in mobilization. But how was that possible? It is an established fact that internet and social media constituted crucial mobilizing devices to publicize the demonstrations of 25 January, and in motivating people to join (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). So why did Mubarak's communication blackout not achieve its aims?

In this article I want to delve into the apparent paradox of 28 January, as a case

study to explore the general question of the role of social media and mobile media as a means for social movement mobilization. Current debates have overly emphasized the positive impact of social media as means for protest mobilization (see for example Shirky, 2010, 2011). However, the events of 28 January suggest a more complex and ambiguous picture for the impact of social media on protest mobilization. Analysing 15 interviews conducted with middle-class Egyptian activists (those with the highest degree of internet connectivity and mobile phone ownership), I will argue that the kill switch turned into a 'suicide switch', which ended up giving more energy to the protests that took place on 28 January and on the following days than would have happened otherwise. This paradoxical effect is down to two fundamental reasons that will be discussed in two separate sections in the article:

- First, the kill switch shattered the consensus in favour of Mubarak of young, media-savvy middle classes, the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook* (Facebook youth) for whom internet connectivity and the use of mobile phones had amounted to a fundamental symbol of individual freedom. The move made the regime appear rash and irresponsible, and widened the gulf between the state apparatus and the population and, in particular, internet-connected young people, winning new converts to the pro-democracy movement.
- Second, the kill switch made it practically impossible for movement sympathizers to maintain a mediated interpersonal connection with what was going in the streets and to keep in contact with their friends and relatives. As a consequence, the kill switch contributed into sending these passive sympathizers to the streets, thus increasing protest turnout.

Having discussed the reasons why the kill switch proved a mobilizing factor in the protests of 28 January, the article concludes by advancing some general remarks about the ambiguous role of social media as a means of protest mobilization and its implications.

Social Media and Mobilization

The year 2011 has been a year of protest and 'the year of the protester' as celebrated by *Time* magazine, which famously dedicated its 'person of the year' cover to the people taking to the streets from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Zuccotti Park in New York. In the vibrant and sometimes frenetic debate generated in the news media and in academia by this momentous wave of global protests, the lion's share has gone to the discussion about the impact of social media like Twitter and Facebook. The protest waves of 2011 were 'Facebook revolutions' or 'Twitter revolutions', pundits and journalists readily suggested, pointing to the importance these media played in organizing and publicizing the protests. These assertions often posit the existence of a positive correlation between the use of social media, with their capacity to channel information, and the volume and intensity of people's participation in protests (see,

for example, Shirky, 2011). Yet, it is precisely this casual link that has proven the most difficult to demonstrate.

Current debates about social media and activism are, like other debates about the connection between new media and society, characterized by a cleavage between techno-optimists and techno-pessimists. Among the former, particularly influential has been the work of Manuel Castells on network with its depiction of contemporary society as a 'network society' (1996). For Castells (2004), networks constitute the dominant morphology of contemporary societies, whereby the availability of cheap micro-electronics make such organizational forms more efficient than highly hierarchical 'pyramids' of the state, the military, bureaucracy and traditional corporations. While Castells' analysis has been mainly developed during the initial phase of the web – the late 1990s and early 2000s – some of his theorizing is also relevant for an understanding of the so-called Web 2.0 characterized by an emphasis on interactivity and user-generated content. Castells has tried to capture the logic of current internet communications with the notion of 'self mass-communication' (2009: 416) to express the way in which individuals and small groups can broadcast their messages to large audiences. For Castells, the advent of self mass-communication bears promises of autonomy from bureaucratic structures and increasing possibilities of flexible organizing. A similar line of thinking has been followed in recent years by social media gurus such as Clay Shirky. For Shirky, social media are new tools that make group-forming 'ridiculously easy'. According to Shirky, 'now that group-forming has gone from hard to ridiculously easy, we are seeing an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups' (2008: 54).

While theorists like Castells and social media gurus like Clay Shirky (2008, 2010) are convinced that new media, and social media in particular, automatically have a positive effect on organizing and mobilizing operations, other authors are less convinced that this is the case. In recent years a number of theorists have warned of the risks involved in the use of these forms of communication. The king of techno-pessimists is the Belarusian Evgenyi Morozov who, in his book *Net Delusion* (2011), has taken aim at those authors who see widely available connectivity and devices as somehow automatically sparking street protests. He criticizes techno-optimistic visions that maintain that 'technology empowers the people who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever tool comes along each year' (2011: xii). For Morozov, new media breed narcissism and laziness, as encapsulated by his term 'slacktivism', that is activism for slackers. Moreover, through the internet and social media in particular – Morozov points out – state security can gather precious information about activist identities and doings that can be used to repress social movements. While the internet was expected to help people advance the cause of democracy it has often turned out to be yet another instrument in the hands of the repressive apparatus of the state.

If the problem with Castells' and Shirky's analysis of the current media landscape is unbounded optimism, in the case of scholars like Morozov we are instead faced with an excessive pessimism. Morozov and writers of similar persuasion, like the *New Yorker's* Malcom Gladwell (2010), are right to highlight the fact that the use of social media in activism raises a number of risks. However these scholars are excessively dismissive of the opportunities these forms of communication offer to activists. Instead of sticking to a techno-optimistic or techno-pessimistic position it is imperative to adopt a balanced view of the effect of social media on activism, considering how these forms of communication are adopted within specific social movements, rather than assessing their properties in the abstract.

We know from a number of authors (Bentivegna, 2006; Mosca, 2008) that the effects of the internet on social and political mobilization are complex, and present both opportunities and risks. This is to a great extent because, while internet-based communication and mobile media provide us with new forms of connection with distant others, they also take attention and time away from our physical surroundings (Ling and Campbell, 2011). In his research on mobile media, Ling has for example noticed how the mobile telephone 'sets up a barrier between ourselves and our physical situation', and thus contributes to the creation of 'virtual walled communities' and 'supports the development of cliques' (2004: 190). As Marshall McLuhan noted, while electronic communication extends our senses, it also numbs our perception (1964: 51) and can thus entrap us into a 'closed system' of communication in which we can lose contact with anything lying outside of it. This tension between connection and isolation that underlies mediated communication is a crucial element that must be taken into account in trying to understand the impact of social media on contemporary activism.

Besides the ambiguous role of new media in facilitating social connections while at the same time isolating people from their surroundings, we also need to bear in mind the complexity of the process of mobilization and the presence of different stages within it. Trying to capture the working of mobilization in social movements Klandermans usefully distinguishes between two types of mobilization, what he calls 'consensus mobilisation' and 'action mobilisation' (1984: 584). Consensus mobilization: 'is a process through which a social movement tries to obtain support for its viewpoints. It involves (a) a collective good, (b) a movement strategy, (c) confrontation with opponents, (d) results achieved' (1984: 586). In this context media are seen as key since, in order to confront opponents a "'paper war" is waged to promote or to discourage the mobilisation of consensus' (1984: 586).

The case is altogether different for action mobilization. This 'is the process by which an organisation in a social movement calls up people to participate' (1984: 585). Unlike consensus mobilization, this process is seen as firmly rooted in local and face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, while Klandermans observes that action mobilization is

partly independent from consensus mobilization, he maintains that 'action mobilisation cannot do without consensus mobilisation' (1984: 586). In a later essay, Klandermans and Oegema (1987) see the process of mobilization as characterized by different stages, from a 'generalised preparedness' to act in support of a certain cause, to a 'specific preparedness' to participate, ending with 'actual participation'. Comparing the two analytical schemes, one can see generalized and specific preparedness as pertaining to the category of consensus mobilization, leaving actual participation to cover what Klandermans in his previous essay calls 'action mobilisation'.

Building on Klandermans' model, the question to be asked when discussing the influence of social media and of modern technologies of communication in general is which of these different stages – 'generalised preparedness', 'specific preparedness', 'actual participation' – are we talking about when positing the existence of certain effects of social media on patterns of participation. In other words, when people claim that social media were key in sparking a specific social movement are they arguing that they were important for preparing people 'in general' and 'specifically' for the mobilization? Or that they had an effect in sending them to the streets, or both? The kill switch provides us with something akin to a reverse case study, allowing us to assess this question and to see whether the unavailability of social media on 28 January really constituted an obstacle for mobilization as techno-optimistic accounts would lead us to believe.

Sending Egypt Back to the 1980s

On the night between 27 and 28 January 2011 the Egyptian government took an unprecedented move, switching off all internet communications in the country. Just after midnight, in a matter of minutes, all the major service providers of the country – Telecom Egypt, Link, Etisalat and others – were shut down. To do this, the government exploited the presence of a series of infrastructural bottlenecks in the Egyptian network and its own ownership of the cables that carry most Egyptian electronic traffic. The technical details of how the government performed this operation is still an object of debate among researchers and engineers, and has also been the subject of a trial, in which Mubarak and other personalities of the regime have been fined tens of millions of dollars in damages. Only one ISP, Noor Data Networks, which served the Egyptian stock exchange, was unaffected by the attack, in order to allow the Egyptian 'Bursa' to continue its operations. On top of the internet blackout, in the morning of the same day mobile phones were also shut down (Vodafone, Mobinil and Etisalat) in most areas of the country and, in particular, in urban areas, virtually sending Egypt back to the 1980s, when the internet and mobile phone yet had to make their appearance as mass consumer services.

The communication blackout unleashed by the government was in some ways unprecedented. Governments of authoritarian countries like China and Iran are well known for their careful censorship and monitoring of internet communications, for their adoption of ways of filtering, and for the temporary or permanent blocking of specific

websites that they believe will affect national security. Yet never had a government of a major country carried out such an all-encompassing electronic communications shut-down for such an extensive period of time. While the reasons for the Mubarak government's actions were clear, the decision proved to be counter-productive. Having been confronted with the rise of a social movement that had skilfully used the internet as a mobilizing and coordinating platform, the regime had legitimate reasons to believe that by shutting down electronic communications it would strike a fatal blow.

The action performed by Mubarak government was one aimed at neutralizing what in military terms is called C4 (command, control, communications and computers) capabilities. In the military field, in the time of the so-called 'information society', destroying the enemy communication infrastructure has become one of the fundamental priorities of fighting armies, as recently demonstrated in the 2003 war against Iraq, and before then in the 1998 NATO strikes against Serbia. In both cases, the military gave priority to targeting the enemy's telecommunication system in the very first phase of the attack in order to stop it from acting in a coordinated fashion. In the social movement field communication has become of similar importance for ensuring the coordination of collective action (see for example Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001) and it is therefore unsurprising that state authorities attempted to target movement communications. By severing the communicative links allowing the pro-democracy movement to move coherently, as one body or, to use a metaphor often employed by contemporary activists, as one swarm of bees (Hardt and Negri, 2004), the regime hoped to deprive it of its capacity to act coherently. But as we will see in this article, this did not turn out to be the case.

To contextualize the impact of the kill switch, it is important to bear in mind that this action did not take activists completely by surprise. This was due to a number of reasons. First, for all its shocking proportions, the action taken by the government the night before 28 January was just the culmination of a strategy of communication disruption that the regime had set in motion since the very first day of protest. On the afternoon of 25 January, when protesters were in Tahrir Square for the first time, the government shut down Facebook and Twitter for several hours. But activists quickly reacted by using mirroring services, and the government decided to restore access to both social media websites later that evening. Furthermore, some activists had made contingency plans to counter the possibility of such an occurrence by collecting email addresses of peers, or by setting demonstration meeting points well in advance on the movement Facebook pages. For example, Ahmed Samih, director of a human rights non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cairo, recounts he had 'prepared an action plan about what we were going to do when internet and mobile phones are cut off. It was not a surprise that in one day they would cut the internet and mobile phones' (interview with Ahmed Samih, Cairo, 17 July 2011). Thus, while the action taken by

Mubarak's government caused much disruption, as testified by the accounts of many of my interviewees, who struggled to get in contact with their friends and comrades, people took measures to mitigate its impact.

Bearing this point in mind we can now move to assessing the impact of the kill switch on mobilization and coordination operations within the Egyptian revolutionary movement by looking at the testimonies of participants in the protest. The analysis draws on interviews conducted in Cairo between June and August 2011 with 15 middle-class activists (refer to the Appendix for details about the nature of the sample). The interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling and the interviews lasted for around one hour. In the following two sections I use passages from these testimonies to assess the impact of the kill switch, first on 'consensus mobilization' and second on 'action mobilisation' (Klandermans, 1984).

Alienating the Internet Youth

The use of the kill switch ordered by Mubarak government had a positive effect on the mobilization, first and foremost because it alienated from the Mubarak regime the so-called *shabab-al-Facebook*, the 'Facebook youth' or 'internet youth', thus acting as a source of consensus mobilization for the pro-democracy movement. This Facebook youth was a section of the population that the same regime had carefully tried to accommodate in previous years and, in particular, under the premiership of Ahmed Nazif. Nazif who was premier from 2004 to 2011, had previously been Minister of Communication and had put much effort into improving internet connectivity and the internet penetration rate during his time in power had increased from 9 percent to 24 percent of households (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). The minister himself vaunted his effort as one aimed at opening spaces for democratic expression. For example, when heckled by a group of 6 April activists at Cairo University, he replied that they 'are the same young people who used the Internet to express their opinions!' (Shapiro, 2009).

The promises of political liberalization that Mubarak's regime had made had been to a great extent tied precisely to promises of media reform, as exemplified by the limited degree of interference of the regime on the internet in Egypt (Hofheinz, 2005). Therefore when the regime decided to curtail both internet and mobile phones in order to halt the surge of the pro-democracy movement, this move quite understandably produced a reaction of disdain from that same internet youth that Nazif had tried to win over. The decision of the government to shut down the internet basically deprived a crucial sector of society of the medium of communication with which it had identified its desire for modernity and economic and cultural advancement, and which it used in its everyday life for both work and personal purposes. By shutting down internet communications the government made many people who, up to that point been in the ranks of the undecided, tilt towards 'generalised' and 'specific preparedness' to participate in the pro-democracy movement, to use Bert Klandermans' (1984) categories.

The type of psychological mechanism triggered by the government's action is well explained by Noor Ayman Noor, the son of Ayman Noor, who stood against Mubarak as a presidential candidate in 2005.

Over the last several years the former regime had gotten us so addicted to our mobile phones, so addicted to our computers, and to the internet and so many things ... and suddenly we wake up one morning and we have nothing. Many people, also those who were not planning on going down, decided that they had to come down and join the others. (interview, Cairo, 14 September 2011)

Young middle-class people felt humiliated to be deprived of one of the small rewards the regime had given them to maintain their loyalty or at least to defuse their antagonism. Furthermore, many perceived the government's action as utterly irresponsible. 'What if there is an emergency and I cannot call an ambulance? What if there is someone dying and I cannot get a doctor to come down?' (interview with Mustafa, Cairo, 5 September 2011) were some of the questions going through many people's minds. Finally, understandably, the government's action did not go down well with business and, in particular, with telecommunications firms. The communication shut-down meant an almost complete standstill for many enterprises in the country for several days. All in all, the decision appeared as one taken in a rush, without any official explanation, making the government look not only repressive but also incompetent. As a consequence the action contributed to eroding the consensus in favour of the government while at the same time winning new sympathizers to the pro-democracy movement.

The working of the process of conversion facilitated by the kill switch is illustrated in the testimony of Nora Rafea, an activist based in Cairo. Nora recounts how the kill switch made her cousin, who had previously criticized the revolutionary movement to switch sides and join the protests:

My cousin was initially very sceptical of the revolution. Before the 28th he really criticized us and wrote on his status: 'Are you guys joking? A revolution through Facebook? What the hell, there is no hope.' And then the moment they shut down the communications this person turned 180 degrees and said OK, this is too much, I am going to take to the streets. It was a changing point for him. He found that action ridiculous and he joined the streets. And in the morning I saw his wife and she told me that he had gone to the demonstrations. And I couldn't believe it. (interview, Cairo, 18 July 2011)

For Nora's cousin as for many other people the kill switch was the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back. If discontent with Mubarak's regime was widespread, few people thought that things could change and that the regime could fall. The fact that the government wanted to shut down social networks became evidence not only of its ruthlessness but also of the fact that it was scared of the capacity of common people to self-organize. The show of force made by the government in using the kill switch paradoxically cast in a clear light its actual weakness. If it was so strong, why would it feel was necessary to resort to such an extreme action?

The action taken by Mubarak's government also created serious inconsistencies in the official version circulated by the regime's propaganda. Until 28 January, when the demonstrations had become so widespread that it was impossible to conceal their existence even for those living away from central metropolitan areas, state-owned newspapers and television channels had continued to pretend that nothing serious was happening on the Egyptian streets. On 26 January the governmental *el-Ahram* daily newspaper had reported that the people who had gathered in Tahrir Square had done so in order to congratulate the police forces. The day chosen for the first demonstration was in fact 'Police day', a national holiday across Egypt, but it had been picked to denounce police behaviour rather than to celebrate it. As Sally Zohney, a 27-year-old activist points out the regime was in a state of 'complete denial'. According to Mustafa Shamaa a 20-year-old student of Nile University: 'the action of the government made people really angry. How come you are doing this? On state TV you are saying that there is no protest and then you are switching off the internet and mobile phones?' (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011).

The kill switch made evident the moral bankruptcy and bad faith of the Mubarak's regime. It was a stark demonstration that the state-owned media were spreading false propaganda and at the same time it revealed in the clearest way possible that some of the claims of the demonstrators about the regime's wickedness were true. Thus the event contributed to the movement's 'consensus mobilisation', attracting new sympathizers to the protests, some of whom would immediately make the leap from 'general preparedness to participate' to 'specific preparedness to participate', to 'actual participation' by taking to the streets the following day. Thus the action taken by the government contributed to alienating a constituency that was crucial in maintaining the balance of consensus in favour of the regime. This sudden shift in the balance of consensus to which the kill switch contributed among several other factors, including police repression, was decisive in facilitating the fall of Mubarak's regime.

Sending People to the Streets

Whenever there is a demonstration it is always understood that the turnout of people on the streets does not exhaust the total number of those in favour of a specific cause. In

social movements there always tend to be more sympathizers than actual participants, and the passage from general 'sympathy' to actual participation is not automatic at all. In fact, often sympathizers end up not participating, given the costs associated with actual participation, including, in the case of revolutionary action, the risk of being seriously wounded or killed (Oegema and Klandermans, 1994). To use a technical terminology widely adopted among social movement theorists, only a section of the 'mobilisation potential' of a social movement is transformed into 'actual mobilisation'. The extent to which this transformation takes place depends on a number of factors, including the degree of one's connection to thick social networks of friends and comrades, and one's reception of media and movement messages.

At a time of 24-hour live news coverage, live tweeting, and video streaming, sympathizers of a cause have a number of possibilities that can allow them to earn a vicarious experience of participation without taking directly to the streets. In fact, some of my interviewees who had not taken to the streets on 25 January – often because their parents would not let them go – recounted how they spent the day glued to their computer screen following events on the internet, while continuously ringing their friends who were in Tahrir Square. This availability of information and of mediated personal connections arguably does not automatically facilitate actual participation as some techno-optimists seem to believe. In fact, it can also set the conditions for a pure spectatorship of a movement's action in a way that can hinder actual protest turnout and thus prove counter-productive for social movements. This situation strongly resonates with the idea of 'slacktivism' as used by Morozov (2011) to talk about a form of online activism that is never transformed into physical participation in the streets.

The pulling of the kill switch by Mubarak's government precluded the possibility of that distant and personalized spectatorship of protest action. All the channels of communication available in a normal situation were not working. Live reporting on the internet was shut down and no contact with friends and relatives on the ground was available. The only available source of information about events on the ground was through television reports. But apart from Al-Jazeera, which was initially taken by surprise by the unravelling of events, the kind of extremely biased pro-government reporting offered on the national channels, was becoming less and less believable by the hour. If one wanted to get an understanding of what was going on, one had to take himself to the streets. Thus, on 28 January many people were drawn to the protests out of sheer sympathy and 'curiosity' as Noor Ayman Noor suggests, saying 'curiosity kills the cat'. An example of this phenomenon is the story of Kamal, a 23-year-old accountant who initially was very reluctant to join the protests: 'but then I heard that there were many people in the streets ... and I decided that I had to join ... that I had to come down and see what was going on there' (interview, Cairo, 2 August 2011).

Apart from curiosity, what led many people who did not intend to take to the streets in

the first place, was concern about their own friends and relatives. The kill switch made it practically impossible to be reassured as to their safety and thus forced many who were worried about the condition of their loved ones to take to the streets. Abdallah a 24-year-old militant supporter of the football club Al-Ahly, for example, recounts:

Some of my friends they ran into the protests because the phone was off and they couldn't get in touch with their brothers and sisters. So they went to the protests to look for them and they made the numbers increase. I know a lot of people who did that. (interview, Cairo, 24 July 2011)

Similarly Marwa, a 33-year-old journalist, recounts how:

On the 28th many people participated because of what they saw and heard about Facebook. But on the 28th they participated and I guess a lot of people were there just because there was no telephone. Some people went out on the streets to see what was happening, to look for other people. (interview, Cairo, 24 July)

Because of the unavailability of mobile phones, for many, finding their own friends in the protests proved to be an almost impossible task. Many of my interviewees report having found their friends or relatives only in the midst of Tahrir Square. One of my interviewees recounts of having looked for several days for his brother who was also in the protests. The communication blackout thus meant that many of the people who were in the streets ended up being by themselves for much of the time. But this situation did not seem to bother people too much, since, as Mohammed, a student of political science sums up, 'we are all brothers, we are all Egyptians. You don't know the others by name, but in the square it was as though everybody knew Mustafa, knew Mohammed, knew Ali. Everybody acted as though he knew everybody else.' To make up for the disruption of the forms of 'microcoordination' (Ling, 2004) offered by mobile media and new media alike impossibility people 'made do' by supporting one another in the square regardless of whether they knew each other.

For all the practical problems the communication blackout unleashed, it was remarkable for me to find out how, for many people, the event proved to be an exhilarating experience that made them aware of their over-reliance on communication technologies. The shut-down of electronic communications was taken by many as a chance to concentrate fully on what was going on in the protests, rather than being constantly distracted by distant people and events. An example of this experience is offered by Mustafa a student and activist at Nile University in Cairo:

Of course I wanted to know about other people, for example about marches coming from Giza. I wanted to know what was going on and I wanted to.... My dad and my mother wanted to call me and they couldn't. And my dad was supposed to arrive that night at 12. He didn't know that phones in Egypt were off. He kept calling and calling. But I don't think that having phones would have fastened [sic] things up. This was the day that ended this battle. I don't think it would have made things faster. It would have been the same. (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011)

Sally, similarly reflects how:

It felt weird at some point. I want to ... oh I don't have my phone! I want to call people ... oh! But then you just.... It is just bigger than the person. The whole situation is just beyond, you feel protected. You don't need to call anyone. Even if at times I was alone and my father was elsewhere I don't need to call him. You trust the trust and the unity and everything was beyond expectations. (interview, Cairo, 22 July 2011)

As Sally's quote suggests, the absence of mobile phones and internet connections created an immersive experience of protest, in which the fact of not being engaged in mediated connections, liberated energy to dedicate to an immediate context of proximity, and in which to regain a sense of locality. Some people drew from that day some lessons about the importance of focusing on what you have at hand, rather than continuously worrying about what happens elsewhere, as illustrated by the testimony of Mustafa:

When I am in the protest, sometimes people call me and tell me come back ... and this leads me to think what should I do? Should I continue or should I leave? But since the phones were switched off I was just doing one thing and I am concentrating on what I am doing and there is no distraction I continue until the end ... and sometimes when I go to protest I turn my phone off ... (interview, Cairo, 5 September 2011)

The kill switch facilitated the development of a thick face-to-face experience that was crucial in sustaining collective action for several days in Tahrir Square and central Cairo, in which it did not seem to matter too much to people that they did not have internet connection or working mobile phones. If social media had been important in launching the protests they did not seem to be necessary in order to sustain it.

Conclusion

In this article I have analysed the consequences of the communication blackout during the Egyptian revolution. I have demonstrated how, counter to the assumptions of techno-optimists like Castells (1996, 2009) and Shirky (2011), this extreme action did not negatively impact protest participation. In fact, as we have seen, on 28 January participation was much higher than on the previous days of protest. This paradoxical result was the came about for two different but connected reasons. As we have seen in the course of the empirical analysis proposed in this article, the kill switch worked as a means of 'consensus mobilisation', alienating the middle classes from the government and pushing them into the arms of the pro-democracy movement. Moreover, it worked as a means of 'action mobilisation', pushing many people to take to the streets in order to get in contact with their friends and relatives, or out of curiosity, to see what was going on with their own eyes. Because of these two reasons, the kill switch turned out to be a 'suicide switch': a move that strongly contributed to accelerating Mubarak's fall.

Instead of disrupting the movement's mobilization and coordination operations, the kill switch contributed to convincing those who were still undecided to sympathize with the movement, and in pushing passive sympathizers to actively join street demonstrations. By taking this extreme measure, Mubarak's regime escalated the situation, which turned out to be to its own detriment. In fact, less than 24 hours after pulling the kill switch the regime had been virtually defeated, and would from that moment experience a slow collapse, culminating with Mubarak's departure on 11 February. Authoritarian regimes like Iran and China that might in the near future be confronted by a crisis similar to the one confronted by Mubarak will now think twice before pulling their own kill switch.

Having now summed the argument of this article and the different claims involved, it is important to make clear its limitations and implications. Saying that shutting down communications had a positive effect on protest participation does not entail asserting that social media have in general a negative effect or no positive effect on protest participation. It has been widely documented that social media like Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter played an important role in the phase of preparation of the protests in Egypt as in other countries (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). The paradoxical effect of the kill switch on the level of participation needs to be understood in the context of a movement that had already taken to the streets for three consecutive days and had been preparing for a big day of protest eventually supported also by established organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. Arguably, at that point in its trajectory of mobilization, the revolutionary movement no longer needed to resort to the power of electronic communication, given that its ecology of communication had shifted drastically from the internet to the streets. As Osama Nooh, an activist of the 6 April movement, one of the key organizations in the revolutionary movement, puts it, 'Before the 25th it was 80 percent Facebook, 20 percent face to face, after the 25th it was 80

percent face to face, 20 percent Facebook' (interview, Cairo, 13 January 2012).

The consequences of the kill switch are thus instructive regarding the ambiguous and complex relationship between social media and activism. They highlight how, as already suggested by Ling (2004), our mediated connections go hand in hand with isolation from our physical surroundings, a phenomenon that can negatively impact actual participation in street protests. While providing information about protest events, services like Twitter and live streaming can also allow sympathizers to maintain the position of passive spectator, without having to participate directly in street protests. The sudden breaking of mediated connections, as took place on the night of 28 January, while severing us from mechanisms of collective mobilization and coordination, also pushed people to regain contact with their physical surroundings, thus possibly acting as a mechanism facilitating protest participation.

Apart from considerations about issues of strategic effectiveness, it is also important to remark here how the case study considered in this article highlights the great symbolic power of social media, and their capacity to invoke an imaginary of participation. As we have seen, in the course of the article, the kill switch particularly angered middle-class youth who had seen in the internet a promise of political emancipation and individual freedom. Young people felt betrayed by the Mubarak's regime, which had used the relative degree of internet freedom as a small 'carrot' to win their support during previous years. By depriving young people of internet connections and mobile communication, the government's action contributed to eroding its support within a section of the population whose acquiescence was crucial for maintaining its grip on power.

Finally, the paradoxical effects of the kill switch are testament of the fact that, despite the increasingly important role played by modern communication technologies, protest continues to be, to a great extent, an 'immediate' activity, that is, an activity in which participants are deeply immersed in the surrounding physical environment and which is heavily dependent on face-to-face communication. The move taken by the government revealed the extent to which the thickness of face-to-face interactions in Egyptian society (Bayat, 2009) can quite easily make up for the elimination of forms of electronic 'microcoordination' (Ling, 2004). It is telling that, according to the Tahrir media project, the medium that was most important for mobilizing participants in the Egyptian revolution was word of mouth, whose importance was scored as over 90 per cent compared to 40 per cent assigned to Facebook (Wilson and Dunn, 2011). If the government wanted to stop participants from communicating it would have had to stop them talking to one another face-to-face rather than posting messages on Facebook. While this might well be the ultimate dream of authoritarian governments, they have yet to invent a kill switch capable of shutting down not only internet communication but also people's mouths.

Appendix: Interviewees

	Name	Surname	Age	City	Group	Profession
1	Hannah	El-Sissi	25	Cairo		Student
2	Marwa		32	Cairo	/	Journalist
3	Ahmed	Samih	38	Cairo	/	Human rights activist
4	Noor	Ayman Noor	25	Cairo	/	Musician and activist
5	Kamal		28	Cairo	/	Accountant
6	Mohammed	'Mido'	22	Cairo	/	Journalist
7	Nora	Rafea	25	Cairo	/	NGO worker
8	Nora	Shalaby	32	Cairo	Socialist	Archaeologist
9	Sally	Zohney	27	Cairo	/	NGO worker
10	Mahmoud	Al-Banna	42	Cairo	Socialist	Architecture student
11	Mustafa	Shamaa	21	Cairo	/	Student
12	Ahmed	Sabry	41	Cairo	/	Event organizer
13	Osama	Nooh	42	Cairo	6 April	Unemployed
14	Abdallah		26	Cairo	El-Ahly supporter	Accountant
15	Salma	Hegab	36	Cairo	/	Fundraiser

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FROM ARAB STREET TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: RE-THEORIZING COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING

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This article discusses the limitations of existing theorization of collective action in Arab countries, and highlights new directions for the analysis of the role of social media in the Arab spring. Underscoring the linkages between collective action repertoire, new communication technologies, and the politics of 'recognition' and 'distribution' in the region, the article discusses how new forms of political activism in the context of these countries can be better interpreted from the vantage point of a multidisciplinary approach that draws on several theoretical paradigms, mainly radical democracy theory, alternative media theory and, above all, social movement theory. It is an approach that aims at transcending technology-centered approaches, as well as cultural and social determinism in relation to Muslim-majority societies. In so doing, the article proposes various conceptual and analytical perspectives that can help future researchers deal with the multiple intersections between collective action and social media in the context of these countries.

KEYWORDS

agonistic public sphere, alternative media, Arab spring, internet, social media, social movements

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On 10 February 2010, Wael Ghonim, a prominent figure of Egypt's 25 January movement, tweeted 'mission accomplished. Thanks to all the brave young Egyptians.' The message became viral, not only on the micro-blogging and other social media platforms, but throughout mainstream media outlets. Western media reports were all keen on highlighting Ghonim's job as Google executive, and the pivotal role of digital media, from the Google search engine to social media, in bringing about this 'happy ending' to the first 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' revolutions. Of course the mission was far from accomplished; nearly one year after Mubarak was forced to step down, Egyptian militants are still trying to keep the flame of the revolution alive and burning by reoccupying Tahrir Square in Cairo in their pitched battles against the military junta running the country. Criticizing the overzealous praise of the role of social media in the Arab spring, Harvard professor Tarak Barkawi (2011) pointed out that these grotesque claims smack of eurocentricism because they credit the revolutions to 'western' technology rather than to the peoples of Egypt and Tunisia:

'To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak.'

But the media are not solely to blame for the shallow interpretations and inadequate understanding of the role of new communication technologies in political activism in the context of Muslim-majority societies. In academia, research and writing on the subject remains scant and generally inadequately theorized. In fact, analysis of collective action in the context of Muslim/Arab societies as a whole has been characterized by what Wiktorowicz (2004) qualifies as theoretical isolation since the bulk of studies in the field fail to draw on existing theoretical paradigms and limit themselves mainly to descriptive analysis of 'Muslim' politics. Indeed, until recently, public opinion and public sphere in the region have often been framed in terms of an 'Arab street', an epithet that connotes 'passivity, unruliness, or propensity to easy manipulation' (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003: 62). Moreover, existing literature on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet in political advocacy within these societies have overwhelmingly focused on fundamentalist or Islamic-oriented groups and discourses.

Addressing the above limitations, the aim of this article is to extend theoretical horizons for the conceptualization of political activism in the Arab world, and to suggest new directions for analyzing the role of social media in the Arab spring, in particular. While making a case for grounding this analysis in social movement theory, the article also points out the importance of using a multidisciplinary perspective that draws on political science, alternative media theory and network theory. Accordingly, the article starts by shedding light on the potential and limitations of current conceptualizations of