SYMPOSIUM

Teaching the Arab Uprisings: Between Media Maelstrom and Pedantic Pedagogy

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The recent protests and revolutionary movements in the Middle East, which commenced in late 2010, constitute a cataclysm not only in the way we understand the relation between states and publics in each respective country, but also in the manner the region is taught. Significantly, Arab media studies has emerged as a vital and extremely functional subject of immediate relevance to the studies of Middle East politics. The explosion of media worldwide and in the region has created new connections, increased information flows, and forged new opportunities for solidarities and transnational dissident identities to emerge.

Pedagogically, the Arab uprisings and revolutions unsettle the curricula on regional history, politics, economic, society, and culture, while also producing voluminous discourses that serve as educational tools through illustration, documentation, and archiving. In fact, political science, like other disciplines, has adapted to the instantaneity of news and the pace of change in the region. This article provides a look at the print, electronic, and online media that have emerged in and about the Middle East in the context of teaching about the region. By looking at the transformations to the canon, we assess how scholarly production in the form of multidisciplinary digital inquiry serves as a contemporary form of mediated pedagogical advancement.

For instance, media institutions, ideologies, discourses, and audiences have all been discussed as the line between media production and consumption became increasingly blurred. From the role of state broadcasting and transnational satellite television to citizen journalism and cyberdissidence, the demarcation between sites of construction and consumption have been radically altered, thereby making novel theorization inevitable.

Quite simply, the uprisings in the region highlight some of the integral and yet unresolved questions in communication studies concerning the traction and salience of media effects. They also demand a new terrain in media scholarship that revisits the role of reception, reasserts the fallibility of passive audiences, and revisits the mechanisms of media mobilization.

Although the uprisings may have a significant role to play in reshaping the way we teach the Middle East in many disciplines, it has also solidified and confirmed both the vitality and utility of the novel and once-underestimated sub-discipline of Arab media studies. From the dichotomies of state and social media to television spectacles and audience-generated content, the uprisings precipitated the urgency to analyze Arab media as agents of both stagnation and change, thereby confirming the need for more succinct, rigorous, and nuanced media research on the region.

Some fundamental new territories are in need of investigation and examination in Arab studies. The virtual simultaneity of the uprisings and the permeability of dissidence discourses from Tunisia to Bahrain and from Egypt to Syria have made it imperative that public expressions of regional allegiance and solidarity and identification with pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiments be discussed from a mediated standpoint. Since the early 2000s, debates surrounding the pan-Arab discourses of satellite television led to a reworking of the region's media classification and taxonomy, but these have since been overlooked and undervalued largely because of the absence of any efficacious way of substantiating these observations. However, the explosion of activism across the Arab world and the contiguity of protestation from one locale to the next, despite the particularities of each context, have made it crucial for the mediated interplay of geography and political expression to be examined.

Pedagogically, not only are the Arab uprisings and revolutions a significant unsettling of curricula on regional history, politics, economic, society, and culture, they possess the ontological capacity to destabilize much of the theoretical premises on which media studies as a discipline has been anchored. This means that canonical texts in media and communication studies must be revisited particularly their fundamental assumptions about the relationship between the triad of state, public, and media. Now, the Arab revolutions are forcing their way into virtually every discussion of media research irrespective of regional emphasis. No analysis of the political role of social media can speak to the influence of networks on public organizing and mobilizing without recognizing the new chiasm with the Arab uprisings.

The Arab world now has the largest concentration of broadcasters and media production sites of any area with its population, and the region is pushing the boundaries of media research and instruction. Today more manuscripts, academic and popular, are published about Arab media than any other comparable region. And as the uprisings continue, not only are the margins of media and communication studies being reevaluated, the centers are also being shaken to their epistemological core.

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INFANTILIZING VERSUS PROBLEMATIZING

Typically, the US media's treatment of Middle Eastern politics and affairs tends toward the narrowcasting variety. Documented by numerous studies of news, entertainment, and film over the past three decades, depictions and portrayals of the region and its people are often vilifying, demonizing, and totalizing (Lind and Danowski 1998; Merskin 2004; Said 1997; Shaheen 2003). For this reason, it came as no surprise that the early days of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were met by the American press and a small cadre of European media with skepticism. Many of the traditional motifs associated with Arab and Muslim publics were reproduced whole-cloth including the supposition that these uprisings were orchestrated from their outset by violent Islamist groups. In the days and weeks that followed the initial outburst of protests in Tunisia and Egypt, it became strikingly clear that the traditional characterizations of these popular movements were not corroborated by reports from the field. The international media's accounts, especially round-the-clock coverage on Al-Jazeera English, helped disseminate an image of these uprisings that dispelled many of the preconceived perceptions.

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Nevertheless, with the increasing entanglement of the political realities in many of the countries experiencing outbursts of activism, even the prevailing discourse of peaceful protester versus violent tyrannical regime quickly became muddled and blurred. Because of this turbulent and topsy-turvy coverage of the uprisings, a teaching moment has emerged. Not only does the pure volume of coverage on the Arab uprising present one of the largest inventories of information and knowledge on any revolutionary movement in history, it also offers an opportunity, in real-time, for problematization of both the uprisings and their representation.

For media, communication, and critical cultural studies, these uprisings are simply the most landmark instructional incidents in recent memory. To scholarship on social media, the sociology of the digital, technology studies, and new media, how innovations were used to organize, motivate, and mobilize for street action is now exemplar for research on cyberactivism. Furthermore, the use of technology to document and disseminate information from the "ground" has facilitated one of the most urgent and compelling discussions about citizen journalism to date. Given the sheer volume of reporting from nonprofessionals in the Arab world today, with some established networks relying almost entirely on such content, raising questions regarding credibility, distance, partiality, reliability, accuracy, and professional ethics loom large.

Within regional studies, aside from the need for a body of literature that addresses the precursory conditions to these uprisings, a gulf is growing between what appears to be a dearth of relevant and timely scholarship on one side and the comparatively immediate reporting from the news media on the other. Classroom discussions dedicated to elaboration of authoritarianism, labor action, social psychology, representation, and numerous other subjects are no longer impermeable to the news media milieu that forms a backdrop to instruction. The organic, active, and sometimes participatory experiences unfolding simultaneously to the pedagogic practice in the classroom pose a threat to the contiguity of the educational experience. For instance, sociological readings of Egyptian collective psychology and political expression a la Galal Amin are greatly interrogated by news of mass protests in the streets of most Egypt cities (Amin 2000). And such examples are aplenty.

However, rather than perceive the near-daily news from the region as a disruptive force to the curricular linearity of the educational experience, it is quite likely that a natural synergy might emerge from an engaged deliberation between scholarship and the news. Not only does it benefit both the scholarly community (educators and students alike) to avoid the divorce between academia and the present, it may also be the best-suited approach to instruction in these times of expedient and multipolar change. More than any previous time, students are actively embracing open-source distribution of information and knowledge and acquiring information through communication across channels and nodes of social media once considered mere distractions. Furthermore, today's student is actively seeking confirmation and corroboration given the increasing accessibility of knowledge. To avoid the segregation of the academic experience from the popular and public debates on the Middle East and the uprisings, it is advisable to dispel what might become a schizophrenic discursive environment that admonishes the news rather than problematizes it, and glorifies dated scholarship rather than historicizing it.

TEACHING REVOLUTION

A compelling example of a multidisciplinary teaching moment involving the uprisings took place during a graduate seminar in communications at Georgetown University. The course, "New Media: Community, Innovation, & Dissidence," was comprised primarily of students enrolled with little to no knowledge of the Middle East but with familiarity with media and communications literature. As the class meeting coincided with some of the largest protests in Egypt against president Mohammed Morsi, the instructor decided to turn this time into an active experiential interaction with the protest movement. To demonstrate mediation of social mobilization and the use of technology, the instructor divided the students into

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four groups. Each was tasked with a responsibility related to following the events unfolding in Cairo—the social media (Twitter and Facebook) team, the news and literature research team, the interaction with the "field" team, and the documentary team whose task was to archive the whole experience using video and collect testimony from classmates about the learning exercise.

The social media group set up a Twitter handle and began locating, following, and re-Tweeting news from Cairo. They also joined various Facebook groups that relayed information about the protests. The news and research team scoured the news and scholarly literature about Egypt and the revolution, identified what was relevant to the protest movement, and relayed it to the social media group for distribution. The third group, the interactants, used Skype to call Cairo-based activists and journalists to get by-the-minute reporting from the field. They called the editor of local English-language newspaper *Egypt Independent*, Lina Attalah, to get an analysis of the scene, activist Nadine Sherif with the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), and on-the-ground reporter from Tahrir, Lina Wardani. The outcome of this exercise, according to the students, was the most engaging and thought-provoking of all the class meetings for the course. In addition, the instructor recognized a significant uptick in student interest in the material and a spike in their curiosity and ability to process information about the course content. Furthermore, the knowledge acquired about the Middle East by the students in the short two-hour class meeting was truly startling.

While this example has its topical, thematic, and temporal specificities, it does, however, speak to the remarkable utility of technology and simultaneity to advance access to knowledge, introduce novel material and ideas, and embellish the educational experience. It is extremely useful for educators to contemplate ways to utilize the abundance of news content and communication innovations to assist in compelling knowledge acquisition and bringing to life scholarly literature.

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FROM TESTIMONY TO ARCHIVE

One of the outcomes of an increasingly connected world is the remarkably expediency by which information is disseminated. For instance, in the absence of international reporting from Syria for months after the beginning of the uprising, amateur videos and accounts made their way online and on the screens of top broadcast news networks. With the pervasiveness of communication technology, namely mobile phones with photo- and video-capture capabilities, the documentation of the uprisings—from Tunisia to Bahrain—has been truly mesmerizing. This has meant that the journalists, scholars, and students alike can rely on direct testimony and anecdote to render tangible and experiential the political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions associated with these uprisings. Yet with these testimonies comes immense responsibility. The importance of avoiding the fetishization of the subject, or the victimization of the protester, or the demonization of the object, is a salient challenge that must be contemplated in tandem with the use of said material. Also, the rise of testimony and unvarnished and unedited personal narratives as privileged forms must be treated with both appreciation and scrutiny.

As testimonies accumulate, the total volume of the archives on the uprisings is immense and essentially beyond consummate and comprehensive examination. Accounts of protests, arrests, escapes, violence, battles, and massacres abound in such colossal quantities they are virtually beyond measurable comprehension and evaluation. In the coming years and decades, these accounts will constitute the inventory of scholarship on our historic times. In the meantime, what we have today is a fragmented-yet-developing canon that attempts to utilize this growing inventory. In many political science and policy circles, the emphasis is largely on reading these testimonies to glean futurist prognostication. In other social science circles, the onus is on historicizing these accounts. Alternatively, a third tier of publication and popular commentary, such as the news media and their affiliate outlets, is geared toward presentism.

Perhaps it is most useful for academics to expose their students to all of these accounts and use their differences as an example in the divergent nature of knowledge production and dissemination. For courses geared toward the ethnographic methodological approaches, it might be exceptionally illuminating to subject testimony on the uprisings to Geertz's (1973) call for thick description in ethnographic fieldwork.

BETWEEN VOLUME AND SUBSTANCE

One of the struggles of working through content generated on the uprising and determining its utility for instruction is the attribution of value. As scholars on the Middle East have been called on in an unprecedented fashion to explicate and explain the unfolding situations in the region, the overall quality of the content available has risen substantially. Today, with top scholars on the region being interviewed on the news media with great regularity, many have come out of public obscurity to reify their academic fame and create popular followings. Many have become syndicated columnists for the news media, others celebrities on Twitter. Many online portals that created platforms for the musings of academics have proliferated significantly and include such publications as *Jadaliyya*, *Foreign Policy*, *Al-Jazeera English's Opinions*, *MERIP*, *Al-Monitor*,

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and *Tahrir Squared*, to name just a few. So the challenge of locating substantive treatments and analyses is not a consequence of the scarcity of materials but rather the volume.

Nevertheless, educators must sift through large amounts of published content to identify relevant, appropriate, informative, sophisticated, and nuanced readings that can embellish the educational experience. Often what is most useful is the amalgamation of both news coverage and analyses that help contextualize the present and render context relevant to the present. For this reason, no course on the contemporary Middle East today can portend to educate students on the region without overcoming the traditional aversion to news media coverage, irrespective of the latter's limitations and incapacitations. To teach about the region in real-time is imperative.

Fortunately, the development of hybrid spaces that allow for intellectually stimulating debate by top and emerging scholars on questions pertaining to both the literature on the Middle East and the news from the region has changed the landscape for instruction. The emergence of *Jadaliyya*, an online publication on the region that caters to academics and the informed public, filled what was once a disconnect between two spheres of publishing and scholarship. As news comes streaming out of the Middle East, critical readings of the events find their way to the reading public in timeframes akin to those of news media. *Jadaliyya* tries to strike a balance between historiciziation, description of the current state, and an assessment of the impact of the current on the forthcoming. The outcome is not only to raise awareness about what lies behind or beyond the news but also to raise the overall caliber of public discourse about the events. In some instances, such portals can contribute to the literature on a given topic and perhaps provide instructional tools for classroom use. One such example is the compilation and publication of a book *Mediating the Arab Uprisings* from material collected and generated by *Jadaliyya* editors (Iskandar and Haddad 2013). The objective of such efforts is primarily to broaden the scholarly terrain to respond to transformations in knowledge production on both temporal and spatial planes. Additionally, with the landmark advancements in and ubiquity of technological innovation, students are now privy to a dizzyingly kaleidoscopic yet increasingly relatable terrain of experience. While the pedagogic impact remains immeasurable, the possibility to unsettle Orientalist motifs alone is a worthy instructional asset. ■

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