Technologies of Liberation and/or Otherwise

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A year and a half after the Iranian uprising in 2009, unprecedented popular uprisings in several Arab countries provided some of the most evocative moments of power meeting its opposite, in decisive and surprising ways. In a matter of weeks, powerful hereditary/republican regimes in the region, including in Tunisia and Egypt, crumbled under relentless pressure and opposition from highly mediated "street politics." The uprising and revolts that shook Iran in the aftermath of the 2009 electoral coup, and the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt that toppled the governments in these countries in twenty-eight and eighteen days, respectively, had three significant similarities. First, the Arab revolutions, like the 2009 uprising in Iran, were, in the first place, revolts against dictatorship and in direct opposition to the ruling regimes. These uprisings, like many such movements against despotism, were also marked with demonstrations and the visible participation of young people. Second, all three happened at a time in which, unlike 1979 (the time of the Iranian Revolution), the world was not divided into two camps, but rather was confronted with US hegemony and globalization of financial capital. And finally, they all happened at a time when advances in communication technologies, and in particular the Internet, have allowed for a much faster circulation and dissemination of information—hence the constant association of these revolts with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth.

Indeed, some of the main ways of explaining the Iranian uprising of 2009 and the Arab revolutions have revolved around new technologies. Terms such as "Twitter Revolution," "WikiLeaks Revolution," and "Facebook Revolution," by associating these revolts with digital technologies, not only point to the potential of new technologies, but also more significantly claim that such tools were the main engine and agents of social change in the region. Certainly this view is not entirely false. The imaginative use of new technologies to disseminate information, to focus the collective minds of population, to break down the barrier of censorship, and to pave the way for the emergence of a "public," was not simply a figment of western journalists' imagination. Not for the first time in history the very technologies that are often invented for commercial and military purposes also produced the spin-off effect of social movements. Raymond Williams brilliantly demonstrated this fact with particular reference to literacy: "For there was no way to teach a man to read the Bible which did not also enable him to read the radical press. A controlled intention became an uncontrolled effect."[1]

However, if a single incident, or a technology, or a revelation about the glamorous lifestyle of the ruling elites, can spark a revolution on its own, then we have to demonstrate that in every context and location the same phenomenon produces identical results. In that case we are confronted with a question of why the desperate act of Muhammad al-Bu ʿAzizi ignited the Tunisian revolution but the repeat of the same act in Algeria could not. Similarly, an explanation that puts new technologies at the heart of debate about the why and how of the Arab Revolutions not only has to demonstrate that Arab Revolutions

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would not have happened if there was no Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or WikiLeaks, but also has to explain why the imaginative use of the very same technologies failed to produce the same result in Iran. These terms of course vanished as soon as the big media corporations left the squares of major cities in the Arab World. The buzzwords had served their purpose, at least for the mainstream media. No one has used these terms even though the struggle in these countries has continued since the fall of Mubarak and Bin ʿAli.

Yet digital technologies are still treated in isolation, and much of the recent literature about the role of digital technology in the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East is laden with optimism and the inevitability of change and progress. Technologies, with their absence or limited diffusion in the global south regarded as a significant index of its underdevelopment, are still praised for their revolutionary and transforming powers. The Internet and electronic media were seen as powerful weapons for mobilization of unarmed citizens against repressive states with real arms. Less emphasis is placed on the way that imperialist forces, not to mention dictatorships, have used and are continuing to use technologies, not for progress but for blocking it, not for civilized purposes but for barbarian ones, and not to quash fear but to inculcate the fear of God. The effective use of social media by Islamic State has dented neoliberal fascination with alternative uses of new technologies and has shown that there is nothing inevitable about the use of these tools: they are the direct outcome of broader social and economic policy and as such are subject to alteration.

It is therefore important to remember, or rather to highlight again, the role of technology, communications technology included, in facilitating imperialist expansion and interventions. This is not to overplay the role of technology, but rather to focus on a different kind of *use* and *abuse* of it. In assessing imperialist interventions the issue has not just been about the motives behind expansion (oil, gold, spices, etc.) but also the technological means. As Daniel Headrick argued in 1979, historical assessments of the 19th-century expansion of European empires almost exclusively dealt with their motives and policy and ignored the "tools" of their expansion internationally.[2] He divides these tools into three categories, each having a different purpose. The first category is the tools of penetration (steam boats in particular), which allowed European Powers to expand beyond the coast and deep into colonies vis-à-vis rivers. The second set of tools was military technologies, which continue to be used. Headrick notes that the "last bit of 'progress' in the evolution of the gun arose in response to the special needs of empire." One particular invention, dum-dum bullets (which tore great holes in the flesh), was so vicious "that Europeans thought it too cruel to inflict upon one another, and used it only against Asians and Africans." He further asserts that by the 1890s "the age of raw courage and cold steel had ended, and the era of arms races and industrial slaughter had begun."[3] "Surgical strikes," "precision bombing," and drone attacks are only the latest phase of industrial-scale slaughter. The third set of tools emerged out of the "communications revolutions" (telegraphic cables, railways, canals, etc.). Undoubtedly, and as Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike have suggested,[4] technological development and the rise of global media were not without contradictions, and also undoubtedly, the lasting legacy of European empires and US dominance since the end of World War II has been about not just the fascination with technologies but also the ideologies that have shaped and framed the formation and perception of the state and economy. It is not just the

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telegraph or Twitter that should be the focus of analysis, but also the social systems in which these tools are born and diffused.

THE MANY LAYERS OF TECHNOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

It was famously reported that during the Iranian uprising in 2009 the US government had asked Twitter to postpone its scheduled maintenance service because of Twitter's alleged significance to the Iranian uprising. The US government had made every effort to appear as if it was not intervening in Iran's domestic affairs. However, Hilary Clinton defended the decision by saying that "the United States believes passionately and strongly in the basic principle of free expression." "We promote the right of free expression," she added. The perceived importance of Twitter was such that Clinton had to confess: "I wouldn't know a twitter from a tweeter, but apparently it is very important."

Such attempts to promote the myths of "technologies of freedom" were being made at the same time that these very technologies (or alternative uses of them, particularly in the case of WikiLeaks) were being suppressed by the US government and, moreover, that US policy was contributing to censorship of the Internet in Iran. It was not until President Obama delivered his famous message for the Iranian New Year on 20 March 2012, and when he asked Iranian leaders to bring down the "electronic curtain" of censorship, that he promised to lift sanctions that disconnect Iranians from the Internet. The tragedy is not just that the US government has contributed to that "electronic curtain," but rather that it is hypocritically trying to "help" Iranians to break free of the government at a time in which US economic sanctions are making the Iranian people more dependent on the Iranian regime (as was also the case in Iraq). US sanctions threaten the livelihood and health of the Iranian people, but at least, thanks to the US government's generosity, they could access Google+! President Obama promised that despite objections from the Iranian government the US would launch a Virtual Embassy that would bring "Iranians information they cannot access from their own government-controlled media, ranging from world news to facts on U.S. policy and culture." As Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security advisor for strategic communications and speechwriting, commented, the next step was to make easily available "software and services that *Iranians have told us* are essential in order to effectively use the Internet" (emphasis mine).[5]

This policy of providing Iranians with what they allegedly told the US government was "essential" is not unprecedented in Iranian history.[6] The policy of helping the "Iranian people" this time around originated much earlier than Obama's New Year's message of 20 March 2012. In January 2010 the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the US government was searching for ways to support the Iranian opposition. In an article entitled "U.S. Shifts Iran Focus to Support Opposition," Jay Solomon suggested that the government is considering new sanctions that would target individuals and institutions in Iran directly involved in suppressing dissent in the country. It was also reported that some officials have suggested that although Obama was not considering regime change, "Washington remains committed to a dual-track approach of pursuing dialogue aimed at ending Iran's nuclear program while applying increasing financial pressure if the talks fail."[7]

Eighteen months later the hint for the "Iranians" to tell "us" what was essential for them came in two interviews that Hilary Clinton (the then US secretary of state) gave to

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BBC Persian and VoA in October 2011. In both interviews she explicitly suggested that the US government would have supported the uprising in Iran if people had asked for it.[8] At around the same time Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution and Ray Takeyh, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argued in a joint article published in the *Washington Quarterly* that the dual-track policy of successive US administrations had failed and that the time had come to pressure Iran where it hurts most. In rethinking US strategy, they persisted in keeping the option of a "very limited military operation" on the table, but insisted that policymakers have to start breaking "old taboos—such as providing direct assistance to Iranian opposition groups."[9] The strategy of "doubling down" on Iran proposed by the authors had clear "cultural/technological" elements. Connecting with the Green Movement (which by then had collapsed) was regarded as a top priority, but the authors also pointed out that Iran is a place of labor, student, and ethnic minority protests, and while it is important for the CIA to be careful not to "fall into traps inevitably laid by Tehran's own security forces . . . at this point, it would be extremely productive to establish contact with Iranian opposition groups in hope of finding out what the United States could do to help them."[10] The issue of finding out what to do to help them is tied up with funding organizations and activities. Many of the initiatives involve media projects. In addition to the US government's $36 million combined budget for two official US media channels, Radio Farda and VoA, various US institutions fund other media/cultural outlets including TV channels and websites. It is hard to determine precisely how much is invested and where, but patterns of mismanagement, abuse, and corruption have been reported.[11] The point is that communication technology is not simply a force for opposition from below; it also facilitates attempts to direct opposition from "above" and "outside."

Another area that Pollack and Takeyh suggested can help the Iranian opposition and hurt the regime "lies in the overlapping areas of Internet freedom and information and cyber warfare."[12] Helping to reopen Internet services in Iran or trying to keep them open is one aspect of this policy. The other is to try to wrest control of and over information technology from the Iranian state. This is where cyber warfare is highlighted, for "the more that the success of the Stuxnet virus, which is believed to have badly impeded Iran's nuclear enrichment program, can be replicated, the better."[13] Predicting that the Iranian state will develop means of stopping Stuxnet, the authors urged "even-more imaginative design from the West."[14] The story of the US–Israel collaboration in developing Stuxnet is not denied by either state, but what is usually ignored is that the product of that collaboration was not one but three viruses: Stuxnet came first and was followed by Flame and DUQU. Another ignored dimension is that while such attacks occur in the virtual realm, their damage is real and physical. Such cyberattacks were part of the "doubling down on Iran" policy that has so far involved the killing of five nuclear scientists in Iran since 2007. "Technological interventions" have moved from creating and supporting a fifth column in Iran to waging war in the fifth domain.[15]

Obama has expanded the War on Terror and has nurtured the security state even more than his predecessor. *The Economist* reported that he has "declared America's digital infrastructure to be a 'strategic national asset' and appointed Howard Schmidt, the former head of security at Microsoft, as his cyber-security tsar." *The Economist* also reported that "[i]n May [2010] the Pentagon set up its new Cyber Command (Cybercom) headed by General Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency (NSA).

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His mandate is to conduct 'full-spectrum' operations—to defend American military networks and attack other countries' systems. Precisely how, and by what rules, is secret."[16] And in July 2011 *Reuters* cited Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn as saying that the Pentagon wants to avoid militarizing cyberspace but will treat it as an "operational domain."[17] The earliest labelling of cyberspace as a fifth domain was a reference to other military operational domains: land, air, sea, and space.

The US government's endorsement of the role of technology in the Iranian uprising and Obama's promise to help bring down the "electronic curtain" further promote the myth that under dictatorship "online" is the very opposite of "hard-line" (conservative factions in the Islamic Republic of Iran). As far as Iran is concerned and in the context of the War on Terror, the "visibility of bloggers in mainstream international media cannot be solely attributed to technological developments. Nor can this hypervisibility be reduced to the usual narrative of lack of freedom of speech in Iran."[18] For Sima Shakhsari, the rise and proliferation of Iranian bloggers outside Iran is a result of the fact that "knowledge production about Iran has become a lucrative business for those who provide expertise in different capacities, from testimonials in media, books and human rights reports, to research and collection of information in think tanks, state and private intelligence firms and universities."[19]

Further contradiction can be seen in the operation of US-based Internet companies in the global south. As Dan Schiller argues, "Facebook is visited by 92% of the Internet population in Turkey, 87% in Indonesia, and (merely) 67% in the United States."[20] By September 2013 Facebook claimed over 1 billion users. The uprisings in the global south and the hype about the role of social media have certainly been good for the likes of Facebook and Twitter. Yet as many have observed,[21] Facebook has shutdown some pages, including that of Khalid Saiʿd and of Mohamed ElBaradei in Egypt, for violating Facebook terms and conditions. In some cases the activists in the region, Egypt included, not only had to break the firewall of the state but also of Facebook. For obvious reasons it is impossible for activists to use their real identity to administer political pages on Facebook, but concealing one's identity (even under repressive states) is yet another violation of terms and conditions. Activists who fight against tyranny have to bypass the laws of the very same company that has seen its popularity and reputation immeasurably enhanced by being "associated" with the struggle against dictatorships. The Western focus on social media, Saleh and Wahab speculate, was "probably motivated by the desire to take credit for the Arab Revolution, given that the West is credited for the invention." Moreover, it has elided attention to "the more important, stronger, and more direct effect of the injustice perpetuated by the dictators sponsored by Western regimes."[22]

In short, the sanctions, the filters, the commercial interests, the terms and conditions of US-based digital companies, and so forth have contributed to the containment of the potential of digital technologies, but more importantly, of people. The history of media and modernity in the region is overshadowed by false binaries and a very narrow optic of modernization dichotomies: modern versus tradition, Islam versus the West, secular versus religious fundamentalism. The online versus the hard-line is a new phase of this historical narrative, a narrative which is only interested in culture and media in terms of how they cause the Middle East to fit or deviate from the narrative of the West's modernity, and to justify imperialist interventions.

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NOTES

[1]Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 134–35.

[2]Daniel Headrick, "The Tools of Imperialism: Technology and the Expansion of European Colonial Empires in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Modern History* 51 (1979): 231–63.

[3]Ibid., 256.

[4]Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets and Globalization, 1860–1930* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

[5]Ben Rhodes, "On Nowruz, President Obama Speaks to the Iranian People," *The White House Blog,* 20 March 2013, accessed 10 January 2015, http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/20/nowruz-president-obama-speaks-iranian-people.

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[9]Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Doubling Down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2011): 7–21.

[10]Ibid., 16.

[11]For problems associated with VoA, see *VOA PNN Watchdog,* accessed 10 January 2015, http://www.voapnnwatchdog.com/; and for reports of financial irregularity associated with the National Iranian American Council, see *National Endowment for Democracy,* 24 April 2010, accessed 10 January 2015, http://www.iranian-americans.com/docs/NedReport.pdf.

[12]Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Doubling Down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (2011): 17.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 20.

[15]"War in the Fifth Domain: Are the Mouse and Keyboard the New Weapons of Conflict," *The Economist,* 1 July 2010, accessed 10 January 2015, http://www.economist.com/node/16478792.

[16]Ibid.

[17]David Alexander, "Pentagon to Treat Cyberspace as 'Operational Domain,'" 14 July 2011, accessed 10 January 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/14/us-usa-defense-cybersecurity-idUSTRE76D5FA20110714.

[18]Sima Shakhsari, "Weblogistan Goes to War: Representational Practices, Gendered Soldiers and Neoliberal Entrepreneurship in Diaspora," *Feminist Review* 99 (2011): 7.

[19]Ibid., 11.

[20]Dan Schiller, "Power Under Pressure: Digital Capitalism In Crisis," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 932.

[21]Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012); Ahmad Saleh and Nadine Wahab, "Interview with Administrators of Facebook's 'I Am Khaled Said' Page," *Middle East Law and Governance* 3 (2011): 238–43.

[22]Ibid., 243.

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