

CURRENT HISTORY

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“Arab politics will be torn for many years to come between the restless, critical power of the public sphere and the determined efforts of regimes, states, and old elites to maintain their domination.”

The Rise and Fall of the New Arab Public Sphere

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On January 25, 2011, millions of Egyptians poured into the streets to join a protest against the long and autocratic rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Eighteen tense days later, the military removed Mubarak from power and promised to oversee a transition to democracy. On June 30, 2013, millions of Egyptians poured into the streets to join a protest against the Islamist government of President Mohamed Morsi. Four days later, the military removed Morsi from power.

Public Spheres

Third in a series

The formal symmetry of these events separated by two and a half years was deeply misleading. The first was an unprecedented mass mobilization rooted in an empowered public sphere, pressing novel demands on an arbitrary and unaccountable state. The second represented the public sphere's co-optation by a state that was able to manipulate the street into cheering its exercise of arbitrary power.

The difference between the two uprisings soon became apparent. On August 14, 2013, Egyptian security forces moved against an Islamist encampment at Rabaa Square in central Cairo, massacring over a thousand people in broad daylight. The vast majority of the Egyptian public applauded the atrocity. In the months and years that followed, the Egyptian media became an enthusiastic cheerleader of military rule and repression, while peddling an astonishingly toxic

brew of conspiracy theories, state propaganda, and incitement.

What happened? How did the Egyptian public go from cheering the overthrow of an autocratic regime to celebrating its revival in a span of less than four years? How were the independent, critical, and free-spirited voices of Tahrir Square seduced by the cynical hypocrisies of military rule?

The degeneration of the Egyptian public sphere mirrors broader trends in the Arab public sphere. The Arab uprising of 2011 offered a rare glimpse of transnational revolutionary solidarity, a pure expression of popular mobilization around a shared set of political demands. The following years witnessed the systematic degradation, division, and dismissal of that public sphere. Any meaningful account of Arab politics over the past half-decade must fully engage both cross-cutting trends: the awe-inspiring rise of a mobilized Arab public capable of imposing the popular will on previously unaccountable regimes, and the subsequent reconquest of the public sphere by those regimes.

The Arab uprising proved conclusively that the generational transformation associated with information and communications technology mattered. But *how* it matters remains very much in question. Emancipatory narratives of the inevitable democratizing effects of empowered, wired publics are difficult to sustain.

Wealthy, internally powerful states such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar appear quite capable of balancing Internet access and modern education with extreme autocracy. Autocratic states that have permitted more political contention, such as Egypt, seem adept at manipulating,

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co-opting, and selectively repressing the new public. Weak and failed states like Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Syria show how easily publics can be ripped apart by violent polarization.

Arab publics have been dramatically empowered, and that trend seems likely to accelerate. But the new publics are evolving within a context of shattered states, violent polarization, and illiberal attitudes, offering little hope that liberal democracy will be the ultimate outcome of such generational changes.

During the revolutionary heat of January and February 2011, the Arab public sphere became a force unto itself, a carrier of modular protest forms and slogans that spanned borders and overwhelmed the repressive power of states. But over the next two years, the media became a primary arena for political conflict and a key source of the polarization, fear, and uncertainty that undermined democratic transitions. In the era of authoritarian resurgence marked by Egypt's July 2013 coup and the proxy wars that ripped apart Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the Arab public sphere has been recaptured as a mobilizational tool for regimes and a carrier of extreme forms of sectarianism.

The authoritarian recapture of the Arab public sphere is an important feature of the current phase of the region's political history. Far from being an artificial deviation, it accurately reflects the realities of power in the contemporary Middle East. But it is unlikely to be permanent. The inexorable spread of information and communications technologies has created a generation of Arab citizens with radically different expectations, competencies, and media habits compared with any that came before. Arab politics will be torn for many years to come between the restless, critical power of the public sphere and the determined efforts of regimes, states, and old elites to maintain their domination.

POTENTIAL AND PATHOLOGY

Understanding the new Arab public sphere requires balancing several contradictory trends. The explosive growth of social media and diverse publication platforms has created a historically unique information ecosystem. The public sphere has evolved into a contentious arena densely packed with broadcast platforms, Internet sites, newspapers, and social media. It has utterly

transformed in just two decades, turning the Arab Middle East from an informational black hole into a media-saturated region.

This new media environment holds enormous potential for creating new types of politics, culture, and society—but it is also fraught with pathologies that could easily undermine its potential. As the power of the Arab public sphere became manifest, so did the imperative for states to control, exploit, or subvert it. Within weeks of the revolutionary fever's onset in January 2011, Arab states were already figuring out how to turn its popularity and influence to their advantage—or, at least, how to deflect its power.

Even at its height, there was always something a bit ominous about the populist conviction of the Arab public sphere. Commonplace assertions of what “the people” want are almost always wrong—indeed, such claims should be taken as a signal of either ignorance or a partisan agenda. It is simply not true that “Egyptians” support something or that “Syrians” demand something else. Even a cursory observation of their deeply contentious public spheres reveals that Egyptians and Syrians clearly disagree among themselves about these things. After all, a public sphere is constituted by its arguments, not by a stifling consensus.

Recognizing the vitality of difference and argument also helps us to avoid easy conflation of these deeply divided publics with invocations of an idealized, unified “people” whose identity and interests are monolithic. It may well have been true, as the most popular protest slogan claimed, that “the people want to overthrow the regime.” It was certainly true that large numbers of mobilized individuals had come together in unprecedented forms of collective action in pursuit of that shared goal. But such a desire was by no means universal, as attested by the subsequent restoration of populist military authoritarianism in Egypt and the deep divides which ripped apart the Yemeni and Libyan transitions.

For all their very real internal shortcomings and mistakes, the Arab public spheres did not simply self-immolate. The regimes that survived the initial onslaught systematically clawed back their places of power within the public sphere, recolonizing those zones of public discourse that had been seized by activists and restoring the cen-

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sorship, divisions, and fear which had inhibited such popular challenges in the past.

A LONG EVOLUTION

The idea of an Arab public sphere long predates its actual existence. During the peak era of pan-Arabism in the 1950s, Arab nationalists dreamed of a unified Arab nation. A shared language and a common political history offered foundations for transnational identification beyond what could be found in Europe, Asia, or other regions. This public was cultivated not only by cultural identity but also by a shared political narrative. Political rhetoric routinely invoked Arab unity, shared culture, and common political concerns such as the Palestinian cause.

But while this era certainly featured a shared space for political communication, it would be difficult to consider it an actual public sphere in the sense intended by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who introduced the concept in his 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Participation was limited to state mouthpieces such as Cairo's Voice of the Arabs radio broadcasts, with virtually no opportunity for critical engagement or debate in which the public could discuss political matters that affected it—the factors stressed by Habermas.

Even that deficient public sphere went into occultation during the 1970s and 1980s. In those post-Arabist years, almost every country in the region was dominated by state-owned or -controlled media that exercised an iron grip over public political expression. Television was reserved for the state. Political publications, put out by political parties or civil society organizations, did circulate in some areas, but they had limited reach and operated under tight political constraints. The Arab world of these decades was the epitome of politics in the absence of a public sphere.

In the 1990s there were some tentative signs of the emergence of public sphere sites, particularly in countries that underwent limited political openings in the early years of the decade. Jordan's tabloid press hosted surprisingly substantive arguments about national identity and politics. Yemen and Kuwait featured robust *diwaniyas* (political salons) and rambunctious newspapers. Meanwhile, Gulf-funded satellite television stations began broadcasting across the region, offering entertainment mixed with a careful dose of tightly managed news.

Al Jazeera, the news station launched by Qatar in the mid-1990s, deserves the credit it often receives for revolutionizing the Arab public sphere. Indeed, Al Jazeera positioned itself as a public sphere for all Arabs, presenting the news within an explicitly pan-Arab narrative frame. Its journalists and program hosts openly identified with Arab causes such as Palestine and resistance to the occupation of Iraq. They also promoted democratic reform as one of the core Arab causes, offering a platform for dissidents and democratic activists to share a stage with everyone from Islamists to Nasserists to Israelis.

Al Jazeera's other great innovation was to replace the Arab media's typical heavy-handed presentation of a single political line with a celebration of argument and disagreement. Its official slogan, repeated in promotions throughout every day, was "The opinion . . . and the other opinion." Its programs gleefully shattered political taboos, encouraged angry arguments on sensitive issues, and offended virtually every Arab regime.

Al Jazeera's immense popularity forced its competitors to adapt. Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, as well as external powers like the United States, launched transnational television stations of their own to compete with Al Jazeera. National media also evolved in the face of dwindling audiences. The 2000s witnessed the launch of a wide range of semi-independent television stations and newspapers in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon. Al Jazeera's revolution helped to usher in a rich, robust, and diverse public sphere.

THE INTERNET PHENOMENON

This public sphere became even more richly layered with the spread of the Internet and the advent of social media. Internet usage in the Arab world has grown exponentially in recent years. Arabic has become the fourth most used language on the Internet. What was once a phenomenon limited to well-off urban youth has quickly become ubiquitous. Arab newspapers moved aggressively into the online space, which allowed them to overcome long histories of censorship and high costs that had limited their reach in print. Television stations developed comprehensive online platforms, whether on their own sites or on YouTube, which allowed even wider dissemination of their programming.

Young Arabs eagerly adopted social media as well. In the early 2000s, Arab bloggers became political innovators, playing a key role in the

organization of movements such as the Egyptian Kefaya campaign against the possible succession of Mubarak's son to the presidency and the Kuwaiti Orange Movement, which demanded political reforms. Online activists discovered new ways to circulate video clips of protests or police abuse and cultivated forums to discuss contentious political issues. Later in the decade, Facebook emerged as a key site for the nascent public sphere, with politically focused pages hosting regular, intense arguments and debates about ideas, identities, and strategies. Twitter would become another key outlet for citizen journalism and political discourse, especially in the Gulf.

These social media should not be understood in isolation from the broader public sphere. They layered onto the proliferating print and broadcast media to constitute a dense, rich informational ecosystem offering multiple points of access for sustained engagement, the dissemination of ideas and information, and the negotiation of new narratives. Ideas, images, and networks moved easily across multiple platforms. Al Jazeera and other television stations broadcasted video footage disseminated by citizen journalists online. Popular online activists writing in English became key interlocutors for the international media. Stories published in newspapers or broadcast on the air drove online discussions. Such socially mediated discussions tended to flow through clustered communities of the like-minded, however, cutting against their more positive contributions to the public sphere.

ONE PUBLIC OR MANY?

The Arab uprising was a truly remarkable moment of transnational unity. For several months in early 2011, publics simultaneously mobilized across nearly a dozen different countries to demand fundamental political change. The struggles were reported and framed within a common narrative on multiple satellite television stations broadcasting to an Arab public. They were discussed endlessly on social media spanning borders in radically new ways.

Ideas translated into action. Protesters in Change Square in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, adopted slogans from their counterparts in Cairo's Tahrir Square nearly in real time, not necessarily because they were directly communicating with each other but because they were observing their imagined colleagues on television and social media. The experience of a unified Arab public formulating

authentic demands and pressing them on governments and powerful security states through non-violent collective action was almost an ideal form of a political public sphere.

The self-understanding of the Arab uprising as an Arab uprising was constructed and nurtured within a genuinely shared public sphere. Media in a shared language was necessary but not sufficient for the manifestation of such a public sphere. Identification across borders required an active narrative construction of similarity, placing events in different countries, holding wildly divergent local meanings, into a single, coherent storyline. Complex local politics submerged into a unitary image of "the people" against "the regime." All regimes were portrayed as the same in their corruption, arrogance, and violence. "The people" brushed aside tribal, regional, ethnic, and religious differences, while standing in for uneasy and transient coalitions of Islamists and secularists, leftists and disgruntled capitalists, dedicated activists and the momentarily mobilized.

This unified Arab public sphere was, however, the exception rather than the rule. It could not be sustained. National public spheres would inevitably be denser, richer, and more consistently engaged than these broader and more diffuse regional publics. Such a fall from unity should not be seen as a negative thing. For talk to be translated into democracy, a public sphere must ultimately articulate the interests and identities of citizens making demands on the government of a state. Transnational publics are by definition weak ones, given the absence of any institution to which articulated demands could be addressed.

If the shift from transnational to national publics was ultimately necessary and potentially good, the fragmentation of those national publics was less so. The Arab public sphere and most of its constituent national publics have been highly polarized in recent years and filled with extraordinarily intense arguments. The Arab transitions introduced profound uncertainty into national politics—not only political uncertainty over who would govern the country, but more existential uncertainty about the identity of the state, the rules of the game, and the potential for violence. Elections were held before the adoption of new constitutions, raising the stakes of initial victories while making effective political strategy difficult.

Transitions usually unfold in a post-euphoric moment of superficial unity, in which impassioned and exceptional cooperation across par-

tisan, ethnic, or ideological lines is essential to success. The mobilizing moment allows for temporary bridging of class and political divides, and for the rapid spanning of both physical and social distance through shared focus on a common issue. The Egyptian demand for the departure of Mubarak provided a singular focal point of the kind that can temporarily bring together unstable coalitions. In political transitions, though, this shared vision often gives way to competition over power, security, and values among the factions that come together during the mobilizing period.

In the case of the Arab uprisings, existential uncertainty caused by the transition and the absence of stable new institutions combined with a socially mediated new public sphere in toxic ways. Social media was justifiably celebrated for its contributions to the organization and spread of the 2011 uprisings. While social media did not itself cause the uprisings, it clearly helped to organize the protests and to communicate them to relevant internal and external audiences. However, what helped during uprisings proved pathologically destructive during transitions. Social media contributed to worsening political and social polarization by spreading violent images and frightening rumors with great speed through relatively closed communities of the like-minded.

LOST INDEPENDENCE

Arab states were slow to recognize the threat that this new public sphere posed to their domination of society. The Arab uprisings forced them to confront the new reality. But states proved depressingly capable of responding to the challenges posed by the emergent public sphere. Their reconquest of the public sphere unfolded across each of its levels, from the national to the transnational, and from broadcast to social media, with varying degrees of success.

At the transnational level, Al Jazeera in particular proved to be a victim of its own success. Its power had long resided in its ability to occupy a unique space as the central node of the Arab public sphere. Its perceived independence from any state's agenda and its openness to a wide range of voices set it apart from its competitors. This reputation did not survive the Arab uprisings.

As Qatar's regional ambitions grew, Al Jazeera came to be seen as an instrument for its foreign policy. Al Jazeera's perceived alignment with Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia cost it dearly as polarization increased. Its relentless advocacy for Syrian and Libyan rebels allowed for little nuance. The more its coverage followed the Qatari foreign policy line, the more it came to resemble any other state-controlled media platform.

Other stations were as bad, or worse, in their subordination to the foreign policies of their sponsors. In the months following the uprising, the transnational broadcasting component of the Arab public sphere was largely superseded by the diktat of state interest.

National-level television stations also struggled to retain an independent public sphere orientation. State television continued to be dominated by holdovers from the old regimes in transitional countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, and was still

a servant of regime interests everywhere else. The new private television stations that blossomed in many countries were controlled either by political movements or by wealthy, politically ambitious individuals. Egypt's OnTV, owned by the telecommunications mag-

nate Naguib Sawiris, served as a crucial platform for revolutionary activists in early 2011. Within a year, it had degenerated into a political weapon against the Muslim Brotherhood and a mouthpiece for Sawiris's political party. Egypt's television stations became notorious for their partisan agitation, absurdist commentary, and political attacks on activists and Islamists.

The online public sphere struggled to compensate for these failings of the mass media. Across much of the region, governments moved to curtail the online public through enhanced surveillance and control over Internet access. States invested heavily in technology to monitor and shape social media platforms. Online discussions of political topics were derailed with legions of automated bots, paid trolls, or enthusiastic loyalists. In the Gulf states, individuals were arrested for tweeting jokes or criticisms of their monarchs. These high-profile prosecutions were clearly meant to deter others from joining such discussions.

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The online public sphere did not always help itself. The common tendency toward self-segregation in social media manifested itself in the worst ways across the Arab world with flows of rumors, violent imagery, and polarizing rhetoric. Whether it was Sunni-Shia sectarianism in the Gulf or Islamist/anti-Islamist conflict in Egypt and Tunisia, the trend toward intensified polarization could be seen everywhere. It had manifold roots in the transitional political process, but it served the interests of the state by dividing and polluting the unity that had once given the public sphere its power.

NO GOING BACK

The Arab public sphere today looks far different, and less normatively appealing, than it did only a few short years ago. The unity and positive vision for change that drove the uprisings has disintegrated. Sectarianism and polarization have wreaked havoc on national and transnational cohesion. Violence, extremism, and war take up the space once occupied by peaceful movements for democratic change. Media platforms that once carried thoughtful arguments are now dominated by demagogues and charlatans.

These negative trends have all been exacerbated by the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the rise of

the Islamic State, and Egypt's military coup. Syria's war has been a crucible for extremism, jihadism, and sectarianism. Its horrors have also been a cautionary tale for Arabs hoping for change, showing graphically how bad things might get should they press their demands. The wars in Libya and Yemen have similarly dampened the regional public sphere, while ripping apart national publics into warring camps. The July 3, 2013, coup that removed Morsi from power had ramifications far beyond Egypt's borders. It palpably affected transitional politics in Tunisia and Libya, while striking a deathblow to the efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in mainstream democratic politics.

For all the gloom, however, it is worth reflecting on just how rapidly and deeply the structure of Arab politics has changed. There is no prospect of reversing the spread of Internet access or the fundamental changes in the expectations and competencies of Arab citizens. The coming years may see a return to the public spheres familiar from an earlier authoritarian era, where smaller communities cultivate alternative spaces for the negotiation of new ideas and identities. Such efforts will not immediately force political change, but they will set the terms for the next great upheavals, which will inevitably come. ■