SOCIAL MEDIA
GO TO WAR

Rage, Rebellion
and Revolution in
the Age of Twitter

EDITED BY
RALPH D. BERENGER

MARQUETTE BOOKS LLC
Spokane, Washington
In Memoriam

[Photo](image)

John Calhoun Merrill
1924-2012

Scholar, Educator, Author, Ethicist, Colleague and Friend

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Foreword

Mohammad Ibrahim Ayish

There is broad agreement that the social media revolution of the past decade marks a turning point in our history of the 21st Century and beyond. The mind-boggling metamorphosis in the speed, engagement and reach of our communicative experience has come to define our consciousness not only of micro personal relations with others, but of macro social, cultural and political issues pertaining to society and the state as well.

An abundant flow of statistics on what seems to be a growing social media ubiquity has only served to reinforce our convictions in the ever-expanding power of new media to re-define the face of human history in drastic ways. Thanks to reliable and accurate measures, we are now periodically informed of new media penetration levels, usage patterns and user profiles. It is through those measures that we have come to learn how Facebook, with its 900-million user base, has turned in 2012 into the third most-populated “entity” on earth after China and India. We, as Facebook users, are described as “citizens of the Facebook Republic.” In the same way, it has also been brought to our attention that over 500 million subscribers are on Twitter, generating billions of tweets every day. Of course, when we look at the geographical locations of those “virtual republics,” we find them mostly concentrated in Europe, Asia and North America. Ironically, in the Middle East, where social media have been glorified as drivers of the “Arab Spring,” Facebook subscribers account for no more than a meager 4% of total world social media users. But, as one of the writers in this volume suggests, the right 4% can make a difference beyond their numbers.

Our seemingly well-entrenched convictions of social media power have also come to be formed by stunning pieces of evidence that demonstrate how an efficient management of Web-based user-generated content can yield impressive results based on sheer user engagement. Between 2008 and 2012, Team Obama created a 13-million voter data base, the largest and the most comprehensive in history. Obama’s posting of a photograph of him embracing his wife moments after the announcement of his victory over GOP challenger Mitt Romney was reported as social media’s most-shared image ever, garnering over 35 million views in one day alone. In March 2012, “Kony 2012,” a 30-minute documentary about Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony, was viewed more than 100 million times in just under a week,
making it the most viral video in history. And when numbers talk, we tend not only to concede, but to get tempted to “idolize” those tools by weaving myths about their irresistible spells. I always found the “Day of Judgment” joke about former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak chatting with the late Egyptian Presidents Sadat and Nasser quite intriguing. When Nasser was asked about the cause of his death, he mentioned: “poison” and when the same question was addressed to Sadat, his answer was “assassination.” Mubarak’s answer was: “Facebook.” In mid-May 2012, as I spoke at a conference in Bonn on the role of social media in the Arab Spring, I was flabbergasted by some passionate comments suggesting that “if you have a Facebook account, you can start a revolution.”

But to view global discussions on social media as misinformed and mythically-colored is to turn a blind eye on accumulating evidence suggesting how powerful those virtual tools are in our real-world life. There is compelling evidence that social media are most effective when it comes to mobilization, coordination, and networking, especially in crisis situations. The insightful discussions and results offered by chapters in this volume show how instrumental social media have been in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Iran, Thailand, Cuba and the U.S.. However, what I have found rather unfortunate is the fact that social and conventional media are sometimes viewed as mutually-exclusive and antithetical. But as established by other research works, a symbiotic relationship between both forms of communication would always ensure some degree of mutually assured co-existence. In the Middle East, both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya channels are heavy users of social media content while cybermedia networks carry video postings from the two broadcasters.

Social media, as a scholarly field of investigation, will most likely continue to experience some ferment for many years to come. In many ways, this condition seems reminiscent of the intellectual tensions the broader field of communication went through in its decades-old development. At this point, however, it is clear that conventional media theories would not be much helpful for understanding the dynamics of social media processes in a highly-interactive communication environment. Traditional communication theories are turning increasingly irrelevant as user-generated content continues to define cyberspace and as conventional print media outlets consider migration to virtual space to escape pressing financial hardships. In broader terms, these transitions are features of the convergence phenomenon that will not only shape how we communicate our messages across multimedia and Web-based platforms, but also how we conceive of the communication process as interactive, engaging, user-initiated and drawing on multiple media forms. Shifts in our conceptual and methodological approaches to emerging social media investigations are envisioned to be rather sweeping with profound implications for a wide array of concepts that we have taken for granted in our conventional academic media training. And one of them is the notion of media effects. In the emerging social media landscape, the notion of a passive audience has proven to be rather odd and
antiquated as intelligent and self-motivated users take control of their online communications.

As we in the scholarly communities grapple with the complicated issues associated with social media, the release of this volume could not be timelier. In 2004 and 2006, I had the honor of contributing to Ralph Berenger’s internationally-acclaimed books on *Global Media Go to War: Role of News and Entertainment During the 2003 Iraq War* (2004) and *Cybermedia Go to War: Role of Converging Media During and After the 2003 Iraq War* (2006). The two volumes, drawing on empirical findings and insightful discussions, were quite an addition to global debates on media roles in conflict situations. Based on numerous reviews of the two works, it was clear that both, as parts of what Berenger sees as a trilogy of media and war, were filling substantial gaps in our knowledge about issues like embedded journalism, media ethics and cyber activism. I believe this third part of the trilogy on *Social Media Go to War* will not fall short of earning that scholarly recognition. I find the theoretical views of new media processes offered in this volume like “critical mass” “collective action,” and “diffusion of innovations” quite useful in helping us understand the dynamics of the new communications landscape. We all realize that revolutions in human history pre-date technology as they are driven by deep-running social, cultural and political concerns. The wide diversity of contributions from scholars around the world does not only show growing recognition of this qualified social media role in social change, but it also demonstrates keen interest in demystifying this emerging field and setting it on sound conceptual and methodological grounds. I see this extremely important for enabling our future scholars and policy makers to better deal with this challenging communication landscape!

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Introduction: Social Media

Go to War

Ralph D. Berenger

The Reuters cover photograph by Mohammed Abd El-Ghany is illustrative. Demonstrators outside the American Embassy in Cairo burn a U.S. flag on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, partly protesting a YouTube video trailer of a yet-released movie on the Prophet Muhammad by an Egyptian-American filmmaker. Surrounding the flag burners are dozens of young men recording the event on their mobile phones, iPads or with miniature video cameras, ostensibly to post on various social networking sites. Tweets spread news of the protest around the world. Just three months old, the new government of Mohamed Morsi was embarrassed when the Muslim Brotherhood sent an English tweet expressing concern over the safety of U.S. embassy workers while the protests were taking place, and Arabic tweets supporting the demonstrations. A state department public affairs officer responded, “thanks. By the way, have you checked out your own Arabic feeds? I hope you know we read those too.” Public diplomacy compressed in 140 characters. Welcome to the new world of social networking.

While these examples, from a single event, show how social media are used in times of conflict, the idea for this book germinated during the fractuous early days of the Arab Spring of 2011 when several long-standing regimes fell like dominoes in popular rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and were shaken in others like Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria, where a civil war raged into 2013. Other Middle East governments scrambled to soothe their troubled masses while tightening up security and monitoring more closely what was transpiring in cyber space. A key factor in these public outbursts of anger over the status quo was the readily availability and use of social media, notably YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, among others.
Role of Social Media in Mobilizations

Scholars are undecided about how much of an impact social media usage had on the events featured on these pages. However, something different was at play in the countries they studied, and the wide-spread use of social media immediately became the intervening variable in public mobilization effects around the world. Nowhere was this more evident than the U.S. General Election of 2012 with the re-election of Barak Hussein Obama, whose campaign set the water mark in social networking and outreach, much of below the radar of his opponents and political pundits, who were predicting a closer – if not different – outcome November 6, 2012. The only factor that seems to have made a difference in the U.S. election was the heavy and sustained use of social media by Team Obama over several years prior to the November vote. While the evidence is overwhelming in the United States, the causal relationship of social media to other events in other places, such as the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East, are less apparent. Skeptics of social media’s influence point to the decidedly elite aspect of these tools of information and communication technology (ICT). In a region like the Middle East where millions of people exist on less than $2 a day, access to computers and mobile phones are restricted to those who can afford the technology and connection
Introduction

fees. Others point to the low numbers of social media users as being insufficient to cause a critical population mass that leads to change (See Table 1).

To some extent there was a double megaphone effect to social media messages. Originally intended for friends and family, digital video and photographs from hand-held smartphones and tablets found their way to social networking pages like Flickr MySpace and Facebook, and, in turn, were mined by international news agencies to fill gaps in their own coverage. Each stage added a wave to the images, magnifying their importance.

Perhaps dissatisfied with mediation by gatekeepers, a new form of journalism developed: citizen journalist, where an ordinary citizen could provide context to what the images showed. Though most were not of broadcast quality, the blurry, shaky images took on another level of meaning for viewers: video vérité – video where truth, immediacy, dramatic impact and credibility are more important than strong production values; videos that take their audiences where they have never gone before – straight into the heart of conflict – from an ordinary person with whom viewers can identify. As the technological quality of micro cameras and hybrid mobiles, extending the reach of users into cyberspace via G-4 uplinks, almost impossible to block by control-minded regimes, improved and become more available, it was clear that the “power in the palm” was transformational to those who felt set-upon and voiceless in their societies.

They could seek psychological comfort in communicating with others in the same boat, and discuss ways to improve their situations. Not that those regimes were oblivious of the new empowerment tools of social media, especially hand-held mobile telephones; it was just that they could do little to control them beyond bullying, arresting and demonizing the users. Regimes quickly found that shutting down the Internet (Twitter was another question since it used a different platform) was problematic. The Internet has become an integrated cog in the machinery of governance. Regimes themselves used the Internet to maintain control, communicate with others in the regime, and conduct commerce essential to its survival. Boas called this the dictator’s dilemma (2000). On the one hand authoritarian regimes needed to stay connected to the outside world and their own security forces; on the other protesters found that G-4 technology was nearly impossible to block, which allowed them to organize and mobilize dissent. Hence, international media, always quick to label things regardless of the accuracy of their claims, called various uprisings as “The YouTube Revolution,” the “Facebook Revolution, “the YouTube Revolution”and the “Twitter Revolution,” or whatever new mechanism was used for mobilization in uprisings and rebellions across the region – and around the world. This myth was, of course, promulgated by the protesters and regime proponents alike, perhaps some argue, as an anthropomorphic attempt to
Table 1: Internet Users, Population and Facebook Statistics for Middle East and North Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>37,367,226</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>4,700,000</td>
<td>13.4 %</td>
<td>3,566,140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>1,248,348</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>961,278</td>
<td>77.0 %</td>
<td>375,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>774,389</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>61,320</td>
<td>8.1 %</td>
<td>42,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>83,688,164</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>21,691,776</td>
<td>26.4 %</td>
<td>11,341,180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>6,086,495</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>283,699</td>
<td>4.8 %</td>
<td>22,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>87,302,819</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>622,122</td>
<td>0.7 %</td>
<td>598,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>78,868,711</td>
<td>250,000</td>
<td>42,000,000</td>
<td>53.3 %</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>31,129,225</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>2,211,860</td>
<td>7.1 %</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>7,590,758</td>
<td>1,270,000</td>
<td>5,313,530</td>
<td>70.0 %</td>
<td>3,693,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>6,508,887</td>
<td>127,300</td>
<td>2,481,940</td>
<td>38.1 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>2,646,314</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>1,963,565</td>
<td>74.9 %</td>
<td>824,880</td>
</tr>
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<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>4,140,289</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>2,152,950</td>
<td>52.0 %</td>
<td>1,571,900</td>
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<td>Libya</td>
<td>5,613,380</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>391,880</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
<td>560,080</td>
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<td>Morocco</td>
<td>32,309,239</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>15,656,192</td>
<td>49.0 %</td>
<td>4,576,280</td>
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<td>Oman</td>
<td>3,090,150</td>
<td>90,000</td>
<td>2,101,302</td>
<td>68.8 %</td>
<td>520,840</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palestine (West Bank)</td>
<td>2,622,544</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>1,512,273</td>
<td>57.7 %</td>
<td>1,025,480</td>
</tr>
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<td>Qatar</td>
<td>1,951,591</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1,682,271</td>
<td>86.2 %</td>
<td>727,980</td>
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<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>26,534,504</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>13,000,000</td>
<td>49.0 %</td>
<td>5,536,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>10,085,638</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>106,000</td>
<td>1.1 %</td>
<td>95,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>34,206,710</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>4,200,000</td>
<td>9.3 %</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>22,530,746</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>5,069,418</td>
<td>22.5 %</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>10,732,900</td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td>3,865,984</td>
<td>36.3 %</td>
<td>3,103,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>8,264,070</td>
<td>735,000</td>
<td>5,859,118</td>
<td>70.9 %</td>
<td>3,190,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>24,771,809</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>3,691,000</td>
<td>14.9 %</td>
<td>633,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaza Strip</td>
<td>1,710,257</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL MENA</td>
<td>531,775,163</td>
<td>4,041,400</td>
<td>141,570,428</td>
<td>26.6 %</td>
<td>46,699,160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORLD TOTAL</td>
<td>7,012,519,841</td>
<td>360,985,492</td>
<td>2,405,510,175</td>
<td>34.3 %</td>
<td>937,169,820</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

are based on data mainly from the US Census Bureau and Official Bureaus. (5) The most recent Internet stats come mainly from data published by Nielsen Online, ITU, Facebook and other trustworthy sources. (7) The countries in bold were involved in the Arab Spring. Source: InternetWorldStats.com

deflect blame the technology if the demonstrations got out of hand and hurt people in the process. That is not to say there were not many acts of bravery displayed in all the places covered in this book. It’s hard to take to the streets when regime loyalists are throwing firebombs and firing rifles from tall buildings while vilifying protesters on social media, or, in the even more bizarre in the case of Egypt, unsuccessfully trying to panic demonstrators by riding horses and camels into crowds the day after President Mubarak made what many thought was a conciliatory and sincere televised address to the nation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media present a difficulty for purists of the definition of mass communication. The same discomfort occurred when the Internet burst on the scene in the 1980’s as a popular form of communication with all of its allied interactive tools including e-mail, Web sites, video and archives, search engines, and Weblogs. Social media expanded the narrow definitions of mass communication, especially key defining components: anonymity of message receivers, and whether this form of information and communication technology (ICT) was narrowcasting to small groups or broadcasting to a larger audience. Social media, in their early forms, did not seem to meet the “anonymity” standard. It was regarded, essentially, as a person-to-person or small group community. Facebook and Twitter obliterated such a pristine and lean definition of mass communication.

One must look at the characteristics of social media to better understand the dilemma this new type of communication poses for media scholars. Here are some of the characteristics – as the tools change, expand and mutate, there will be others:

• **Ubiquitous.** Social media sites are abundant locally, nationally and internationally. Some of topic specific and others general; some require subscription, others registration and still others require only the ability to access them from computers or telephonically with instruments such as smartphones.

• **Didactic.** Paraphrasing Edward R. Murrow on television, social media can teach. To fully utilize the technology, users have to learn how to navigate social media sites, how to upload videos, how to post tweets of 140 characters, how to edit videos to tell a story, and how to connect with other users, and how to attach files for redistribution. They also have to learn how to manage their resources,
store material received or for future upload or distribution, and how to manage their “friends” lists.

- **Open and transparent.** Social media sites and posts are there for the world to see. Its openness allows for inclusion of a diverse community or communities, but as Evgeny Morozov points out in *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), that openness and transparency comes with a risk of unwanted intrusion by others. Or as Ben Bagdikian observed 40 years earlier in the *Information Machines* (1971), electrons have no morals: they serve patriots and tyrants with equal fervor.

- **Coexistional.** Users of social media build relationships, share emotional content, and seek out others with similar interests and views to seek a form of self-empowerment. This often goes beyond seeking to communicate with a user’s primary group that includes families and kinships, to reference groups, to whom the user wants to identify, and casual groups that come and go over special interests.

- **Interoperable.** Social media users work across media platforms to communicate, including sound, still and motion pictures, semiological symbols (e.g. words, emoticons) and a lexigraphy all its own, often substituting numerals for such as LOL, RFLOL, IMHO and the ever-popular exclamation, OMG! Interoperability is the ability of two or more operating systems or components to exchange information and use that information in other systems or components of systems. Thus, a tweet from Twitter can be copied and sent by e-mail to others or posted on a social network site such as MySpace or Facebook, or to click on the original tweet’s link and respond directly to the original message on some other system.

- **Community focused.** While not an exclusive provision, social media users are essentially interested in things and events that to the user have proximity, salience, and timeliness, and which they think hold similar value to other members of their community. In this sense, *community* has an expanded meaning that transcends geographic boundaries. These are communities of the mind, so to speak, functioning in virtual space, and sometimes with virtual netizens who use user names, avatars or identicons. But these visual representations of real persons are accepted as members of the cyber community.

- **Mobile and transportable.** A hallmark of the tools of social media is that they are mobile. They can and are used everywhere the user is at at moment of contact. Smartphones and electronic tablets equipped with still and motion image cameras, an Internet connection and the skill to use the apps installed in them gives the user an unlimited ability to generate content to share with others.
Introduction

**TECHNOLOGY DISRUPTION THEORY AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Every technological innovation in the field of communication has caused disruption in how members of societies relate to each other, and each has resulted in a paradigm shift in civil discourse and behavior, sometimes with unintended consequences. Social media’s impact on societies and cultures is no different.

The invention of writing contributed to the establishment of settlements and empires, and expanded knowledge. The printed word, even as hieroglyphs chiseled into stone, was more enduring than oral traditions. Writing was at the core of the Greek Academy and Lyceum, and by extension, Western civilization itself. The innovation of the printing press allowed societies to transfer knowledge interculturally and led to the Age of Enlightenment where science and reason militated against religion and superstition. The invention of photography changed the ways people viewed events. The telegraph defeated spacial and temporal confines, and with undersea cables linked continents. The telephone extended personal voice communication and replaced telegrams as the fastest way to connect with people. Motion pictures added realism of actual and transferred cultures, often with disruptive effects as social norms were often stretched. Radio added immediacy that changed lifestyles to fit the synchronous nature of the medium, and gave rise to propaganda studies and practices. Television replaced radio as the favored mass medium for immediacy of information and entertainment in audio-visual form, but during the Vietnam War the battleground was introduced to the livingroom. Audio tapes of Ayatollah Khomeini speeches were smuggled into Iran and “cultivated” a disgruntled Muslim population to rise up and remove the Shah in 1979. The facsimile machine was used extensively to keep protesters informed during both the Tiananmen Square uprising in China in 1989, and the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991. The Internet expanded further individual abilities to access information quickly and in huge quantities, and to interact with others over a mass medium that converged printed words, photography, video, and telephonic communication that could be archived and retrieved both synchronously and asynchronously. Finally, devices were introduced to empower individuals over social media sites to have their voices heard across platforms, to form unions, and to mobilize others in common actions. All of these communication innovations changed Humankind in ways big and small – most often disrupting the status quo in the process, changing collective behavior, and challenging authorities.

Technological disruption theory holds that new ways of sending and processing information occur too rapidly for controlling authorities, such as governments, to formulate policies and procedures to govern them. Disruptive technology theory was advanced by Clayton Christensen (1997) to explain how technologies shifted think-
Social Media Go to War

Ralph D. Berenger

ing of marketers in how best to reach audiences for their goods and services, sometimes resulting in flawed strategies that moved marketers out of their comfort zones and away from established customer bases. An example of this might well be the rush by media organizations to report directly from social media reports, many of which turn out to be inaccurate or even hoaxes (Kington, 2012).

The digital era swept around the world at nearly the speed of light as computers improved speeds and storage at a dizzy pace, and the World Wide Web and Internet allowed countries to leapfrog from mechanical to global interconnectivity over the Internet, and climb several rungs up the modernity ladder. Along with its introduction and adoption came concerns about the digital divide (the gap between those with Internet access and those without it), the digital dilemma (allowing open access to sites and information with cultural, political and religious inappropriateness), and, as was born out in the Arab Spring of 2011, the “dictators dilemma” – the advocacy of e-commerce and e-government without effective ways of controlling the flow of information that is communicated (Boas, 2000; Ackerman, 2012). The lessons apparently were not learned of Tunisia’s and Egypt’s attempts to block communication during social unrest; Syria’s leadership pulled the plug on all social networks and the Internet in late November 2012.

One of the factors often cited (perhaps embellished) by scholars for the success of the Arab Spring was the ability of protesters to mobilize over Facebook, Twitter, e-mail and SMS messaging and videoing, and to document on YouTube governments’ excessive responses to peaceful protests. Not that governments did not try to stem the digital tide (Morozov, 2011). Tremendous resources were devoted by security personnel to track down bloggers, disrupt messages with disinformation campaigns, infiltrate organizations, monitor or shut down Internet Service Providers, and even, as in the case of Egypt, pull the plug entirely on the Internet for a brief period of time. None of the measures were meaningfully successful, and many Internet scholars are predicting the same outcome for the Syrian regime’s effort.

Following international criticism of the way Iran’s government reacted to post-election protests in 2009 and the cyberattack in 2010 by the highly sophisticated Stuxnet virus that damaged key uranium refinement centrifuges, Iran announced it was building its own Internet and closing off most of its population from direct Western sources of information (Berenger, 2011). Across the Gulf in the United Arab Emirates, Dubai hosted the United Nations’ World Conference on Information Technology in December 2012, which was expected to propose and discuss sweeping changes to what kind of information was allowed into member countries (Touré, 2012). Among the ideas tossed around was an Internet tax, and tighter restrictions on what can be sent through cyberspace. One critic said that turning over to bureaucrats a fine-tuned, cheap and efficient system like the Internet was akin to “handing a Stradivarius to a gorilla” (Crovitz, 2012). Just prior to that meeting, UAE’s President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan issued a decree that imposes prison sentences
Introduction

for anyone criticizing Emirati rulers or their policies, or calling for demonstrations against the government over the Internet and through social media in the country, generally regarded as one of the Middle East’s most progressive and tolerant nations (Kippreport.com, 2012). These are steps by just two of the many countries in the Middle East fretting over the disruptions attributed to new information technologies.

While social media use did contribute to the discussion of the Arab Spring, other, more deep-seated aspects were tapped. A small percentage of the millions of protesters who took to the streets in the Middle East actually had Facebook or Twitter accounts. But some of them did, and social media was a factor in mobilizing demonstration leaders and setting the agenda of traditional media in what was defined as news. For four long-serving heads of states in the Middle East, the social disruptions cause by communication technology was more than an abstract theory. Other countries were not immune to the effects of social disruption caused by digital devices. A recent example was the eavesdropping on digital communications of politicos and celebrities by British news media, which was exposed in 2011 (Chozick 2011). However, digital media products are also easily manipulated by hoaxers or even media personnel, which can disrupt professional media practices and hurt credibility with audiences (Berenger & Taha, 2012).

MAKING OF A TRILOGY

This is the third in a series by Marquette Books to examine how media are used in times of turmoil. The first, *Global Media Go to War: Role of News and Entertainment During the 2003 Iraq War* (2004), concentrated on how international news agencies behaved during that conflict, and to some extent introduced studies of proto-social media like Weblogs, which were in their infancy; e-mail, which was then barely a decade-old form of digital communication; and chatrooms and listservs. But it also looked at the way traditional media behaved and covered the war, especially the international satellite channels such as BBC, CNN, and the Arabic upstarts, Al Jazeera, broadcasting since 1997 and Al Arabiya, which went on the air in 2003 just before the intervention in Iraq led primarily Anglo-American forces. The second, *Cybermedia Go to War: Role of Converging Media During and After the 2003 Iraq War* (2006) delved into how traditional media were exploring the digital world through their Web sites by posting digital images and video; how organizations and groups used e-mails to mobilize anti-war protests; and even how the terrorist organization Al Qaeda was using the digital realm to recruit fighters and report on attacks that otherwise might have been uncovered by international media. A chapter in that book probed the use of video phones, but clearly it did not anticipate what influence, five short years after its publication, mobile telephony was going to
have in social change, nor did it foresee the rise in prosumerism and citizen journalism, and the roles these would play in setting the agenda for how stories were reported in the mainstream, traditional or legacy media platforms.

As with the previous books in this series, contributors range from established scholars to those just starting their academic careers, and they reflect a global perspective. Most of the contributors were writing English as a second or third language. Though edited for style and clarity, each chapter retains the “voice” of the author or authors, which the editor hopes will add vibrancy for the reader. The discerning reader will notice that, from time to time, there might be slight variances in the spelling of names or uses of articles. While every attempt was made to standardize spelling of Arab names, there might be some that have slipped past proof-readers. For example, the West often spells the deposed Libyan leader’s name as Moamar Khadafy, while the preferred spelling translated from Arabic is Muammar al-Qaddafi. Depending where one comes from in the Middle East, the article “al” is used interchangeably with “el” in front of proper nouns. Sometimes both are lower or upper case and hyphenated before the family name; sometimes they are not. Such is one of the many challenges of English-language writers in the Arab world.

Explaining Word Choices

The series takes a few liberties in the use of war in the titles. While the first two books focused on the military conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan in 2003, they did explore several less bellicose topics, particularly politics and the general behavior of small and big media, who were engaged then as now in a life struggle for survival in shifting, competitive economic times. In this volume, the meaning of war was again expanded to include some armed but mostly unarmed conflicts such as social justice and democracy demonstrations, mobilization, advocacy, and citizen journalism – necessitated in places where traditional media were unavailable for various reasons. This book is also more international that the previous ones with chapters on social media uses in Cuba, Georgia, India, Thailand, and the United States in addition to Middle Eastern countries, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Tunisia.

While it might seem strange to apply militaristic language to political contestation, the struggles over who controls policies in a country is just as important as the battles over who maintains a superiority of arms and military prowess. In November 2012, the United States held its regular General Election, which was hotly contested. Many of the non-lethal weapons of war – mostly propaganda techniques – were used to mobilize, to demonize “enemies,” to gain the support of proponents and neutrals, to out-strategize the opposition, to divert resources (and make the other camp do so as well) then to crush foes with a clear, uncontested, decisive triumph. It was just like war, complete with victors and vanquished and collateral damages with ordinary people caught in the crossfire. Some political scars will take time to heal, if ever.
Capitalistic media also practice elements of warfare in the competitive nature of professional newsgathering and distribution. Media organizations always try to “scoop” their opposition on stories, woo-away advertisers, and win a larger market share in the process.

Individuals, too, engage in wars of ideas about how they – and others – should conduct their lives. The most obvious examples of ideological warfare are political elections, mobilizations and uprisings.

Another liberty taken with language by authors in this book is the use of revolution, in place of insurrection, uprising, rebellion, protest or demonstration, especially in Egypt and Tunisia. Henry Kissinger famously tells the story of a conversation with Mao Zedong back in the 1970’s. “Mr. Chairman, what do you think of the 1789 French Revolution?” Mao smiled slyly. “It’s too early to tell.” The same could be said of the revolutions that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. In the case of Egypt, the term might have more salience than in Yemen, which kept its government after Ali Abdullah Saleh departed; in Libya, where Muammar al-Qaddafi was caught and assassinated; and in Tunisia, where the system of government remained but with new government officials after Zine Ben Ali fled into exile. Revolutions mean upheavals in governing systems, not just regime change, mostly followed by reigns of terror where old scores are settled and opposition cowered into obedience. But Egypt might be a different case since that seemed to be a truly dramatic change in governance. Not that it started out that way. The military forced Mubarak’s resignation and established military from February 2011 to June 2012. In that way it more resembled a military coup d’etat than a revolution, but, true to its word, the military council stepped aside and held free elections, resulting in the election of conservative Islamists, which quickly moved to solidify their new powers. So maybe Egypt did go through a kind of revolution after all. As Mao instructs us, time will tell.

**HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED**

Twenty-eight chapters by 39 authors have been grouped by topics into four Parts to afford the reader a sense of continuity as they navigate this book: Part I, Power, Politics and Publics: Ideologies, Theories and Policies Underlying Social Media; Part II, Precursors of the Arab Spring: Social Media Use Around the World; Part III, The ‘Persian Spring:’ Iran’s Presidential Election Protests; and Part IV, Social Media and the ‘Arab Spring.’
Part I, Power, Politics and Publics: Ideologies, Theories and Policies Underlying Social Media

What role did theoretical constructs and ideology play in the various uprisings, rebellions and revolutions that spread around the world from 2008 to 2013, and what impact did social media have on them? Five chapters try to explain, in theoretical, philosophical and policy terms, what was in play during these turbulent five years.

Leading off this section, senior scholar John C. Merrill takes us on a flight of fantasy in a discussion of ideological forces driving upheavals, and what regime leaders might do about them if they wanted to stay in power. In “Plane Talk: the Ethics of Direction.” The philosophical question of “what would Kant do?” is turned sideways by “Mack A. Velli,” a self-described political consultant en route to advise Bashar al-Assad in civil war-torn Syria.

In separate chapters, Steve Dick and Katharine Allen reprise theories of mass communication and apply them to social media. Dick applies a theory of resonance to social change by way of diffusion, critical mass and depravation models that might help us predict when the next rebellions will take place. Allen ponders a new paradigm in communication theory applicable to social media and activism.

Sohail Dahdal revisits the idea of Arab Nationalism through a historical perspective and his study of Al Jazeera, a popular television series Bab al Hara, and how social media’s role has contributed to building that identity.

Lt. Col. Jennifer A. Berenger completes the section with a study of changing policies in the U.S. Department of Defense concerning service personnel’s use of social media in times of conflict, and the problems the military have encountered, including the massive security breach that resulted in disclosure of sensitive material on WikiLeaks.

Part II, Precursors to the ‘Arab Spring:’ Case Studies of Social Media Use Around the World.

Social media did not emerge unexpectedly as a factor in the Arab Spring, as some have suggested. They had been used several years earlier to connect like-minded people in various causes, and to correct official pronouncements or criticize government policies. Excluding the various intergovernment attempts to engage in cyber warfare, public participation can be traced back to the founding of various social media mechanisms. Leading off this section of case studies, Byron T. Scott and Ellada Gamreklidze report in Chapter 7 on how social media were used during Georgia’s war with Russia in 2008, and the 2010 TV hoax that created a public panic similar to Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds.”
Perhaps a preview of how Facebook could be used to mobilize people to civic action in the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 occurred three years earlier in 2008 when a local strike went international and the April 6th Youth Movement was born. The loosely connected Facebook group would play a role in Egypt’s Arab Spring, recounts Basma Botros and Melanie Mills in Chapter 7.

Speaking of youth mobilization, Martin A. Parlett gives readers an insider’s account in Chapter 8 of how Barack Obama used social media to win the U.S. presidency in 2008 and re-election in 2012 through “controllessness” and an understanding of how today’s young Americans use social media to coalesce around a compelling political figure, presaging how political campaigns will be conducted in the future.

Most people think of Cuba in terms of a closed society where free expression is non-existent and governments’ eyes are everywhere, but Katharine Reed Allen dashes that notion in her case study of blogger Yoani Sanchez and her Generacion Y in Chapter 9. The chapter concludes with an interview President Obama gave Sanchez in 2009.

Like the April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt, Tunisian citizen journalist’s experimentation with social media goes back to 2008 with the coverage of the uprising in the Tunisia phosphate mining region around Gafsa, a harbinger of what was to come two years later, recounts Catherine Cassara in Chapter 10.

Melissa Wall and Treepon Kirdnak study Thailand’s Red Shirt v. Yellow Shirt upheaval in 2010 though a study of YouTube videos in Chapter 11 and explore how the videos attempted to create new political space in that Asian country.

Back in the United States, doctoral students Tim Macafee and J.J. De Simone apply quantitative measures in Chapter 12 to Wisconsin’s budget controversy and social media use by individual students and groups on both sides of the issue that led to a recall election of Governor Scott Walker.

Rounding out the case studies section, Margaret D’Silva, Siobhan Smith and Journalist Girish Nikam in Chapter 13 look at the case of Dr. Binayak Sen, pediatrician and civil rights activist, and the role social media played in ratcheting up public opinion to free him from an Indian jail in 2011.

Part III, The ‘Persian Spring:’ Iran’s Presidential Election Protests

Before the Arab world boiled over in 2010-2011, Iranians had their own “Persian Spring” following the 2009 presidential re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Five chapters from European, American and Pakistani writers examine what transpired.

Doctoral candidate Irfan Raja gives readers in Chapter 14 a historical overview and critical perspective of how Iran’s relations with the West has developed over the years, how the West views President Ahmadinejad and Iran’s ambitions in the Middle East, and how social media sites and devices – particularly mobile phones – have
contributed to global information flows about the June 2009 anti-government demonstrations.

In Chapter 15, Journalist Cora Werwjtzke and Scholar Jurgen Wilke am up to review how German media covered the protests and how social media were used to get the story out of Iran. The writers conclude that social media did not play as large a role in the uprising as many outsiders thought.

Emily A. Ehmer continued the investigation into social media use by Iranians in Chapter 16, particularly the posting of YouTube videos, including the now legendary “Neda” video, which shows the final moments of a young Iranian woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot during the June 2009 protests.

Bojana Romic scholarly analyzes in detail the “Neda” video, which won a Peabody Award for the anonymous videographer, in Chapter 17 from the perspective of a studium image with no internal power and the impact it had on viewers. The drawings in the article are the author’s renditions.

Concluding the section is Rune Saugmann Andersen’s study of Danish newspapers and how #IranElection was expropriated by media and news agencies. Chapter 18 shows how user-generated content was remediated to add credibility to reports from what the author calls citizen micro-journalists.

Part IV, Social Media and the ‘Arab Spring’

Before late December 2010, the North Africa/Middle East region was like dry tinder waiting for someone or something to strike a match. The region was filled with millions of frustrated people, increasingly wary of their self-interested, aging leaders who lived in luxury while their citizens suffered poverty, unemployment and social injustices. Social media provided an outlet for their anger, and for a while, only cyber space seemed the only escape from dismal, material reality. Then a young Tunisian street vendor, suffering yet another insult to his dignity, set himself on fire to protest his maltreatment at the hands of symbols of the regime, and the sparks spread throughout the Middle East. Regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Libya fell like jasmine petals in the Arab Spring, and others were shaken. This section examines what happened.

Catherine Cassara and Lara Lengel trace Tunisia’s uprising through a maze of social media mechanisms including mobile phones, Facebook pages and YouTube videos, and find in Chapter 19 that the barrier of fear, so carefully constructed by the Ben Ali regime as a social control mechanism, fell apart in Tunisia when citizens began to speak out through social media.

Breaking the fear barrier is also a theme of Radwa Mobarak’s Chapter 20 study of youth awareness and activism following the beating death of Khaled Said in Alexandria. The author interviewed demonstrators in Tahrir Square, and investigated why youth were willing to break the “Spiral of Silence” that had kept the public in
check for over 30 years.

Like Neda Agha-Soltan of Iran, and Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi before him, the death of Khaled Said sparked protest. Saddaf Ali and Shahira Fahmy focus their Chapter 21 article on how social media spread Said’s story and photograph, calling him an icon of the Egyptian Revolution.

In Chapter 22, Hanan Badr uses frame analysis to determine how social media became contestation mechanisms for protesters and Mubarak regime supporters in the early months of 2011.

William R. Davie and five other scholars cooperate on a comparative study of American and Middle Eastern students from two universities in each region to determine their views on a variety of social media and political topics, including their opinions on whether President Barack Obama deserved a second term. Chapter 23 also reports on polls the researchers conducted on energy, regional security, the Iraq War, health care, foreign policy, human rights and immigration.

Elizabeth Iskander and Mina Monir find in Chapter 24 that social media increasingly acted as platforms for exposing lies and corruption of the Egyptian government, and how the new media were used by the interim government of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces to push its own agenda following Mubarak’s resignation.

Lara Lengel and Catherine Cassara again team up to investigate the role of music and identity in North African uprisings in Chapter 25. The authors compared the musical styles of Tunisia and Egypt as protest anthems.


In Chapter 27, Naila Hamdy and Lindsey Conlin report on their study of women and whether they were empowered during the Egyptian Revolution, concluding that tweets and re-tweets of women helped spark the uprising in January 2011.

Hania A.M. Nashef, among other things, also investigated tweets from a woman in Jordan – Queen Rania, wife of the country’s monarch, King Abdullah, and ponders in Chapter 28 whether the royal tweets acted as a safety valve on the pressure cooker during Jordan’s Arab Spring protests.

Finally, Chapter 29 attempts to connect the dots of the preceding chapters to put them into perspective.

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twitter-and-the-dictators-dilemma/


NOTE

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Part I

Power, Politics and Publics:

Ideologies, Theories and Policies

Underlying Social Media
After suffering through the check-in and boarding process at Kennedy airport in New York, I finally settled in my window seat. I would soon be on my way to Beirut and the journalism ethics conference. The conference, I knew, would be like dozens before – dragging out the regular theories and proposing ways to “do good” when communicating. But, even though I would probably hear the same old thing, I was looking forward to seeing many old friends. Maybe the ends do justify the means – at least sometimes.

As I sat gazing out the window and adjusting my knees to the cramped space behind the seat ahead of me, I was jolted by someone dropping into the seat beside me. Here was a short, stocky man with coal-black hair, holding a book and a newspaper. I introduced myself. He replied with a business card, “Mack A. Velli – Political Consultant.” He then opened his book and began reading. I thought: This is going to be a dull trip. But I was wrong.

This little man, after some 10 minutes with his book, looked over at me and said in a clear voice: “I am from Italy and have been doing some work in Washington for a ‘high profile national political candidate’ who shall remain nameless. Call me Mack.” He said he was now on his way to Syria to advise to the ruler “on the current situation.” I let him know where I was going, and he said he was much interested in ethics, and with that we engaged in sessions of conversation, broken periodically with naps, restroom visits, reading, and occasionally snacks on peanuts, or airline meals on the 12-hour flight. I realized that this man was no lightweight in the ethics department and that our conversations would make my direct flight to the Middle East an interesting and informative experience.

Plane Talk: Mack A. Velli and the Ethics of Direction

John C. Merrill
I found rather quickly that he did not share my basic ideas about ethics, which, as he reminded me, were too closely mired in the general moral notions of Christianity and democracy.

“You say you believe in individual freedom and that you have a pluralistic view, a personal or self-centered emphasis on ethical action, and a largely skeptical and antagonistic attitude toward a strong authority in government,” he said. “I think self-determination of ethical behavior is socially destructive. What we need is direction and strong moral and political authority. Those who build upon the people build upon the mud.”

I replied: “Authorities are generally bad. Look at the Middle East – most of the leaders there are closed-minded, greedy, ego-centric, and malevolent, and don’t seem to care much what the people want. And they are in trouble. Take Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen for example: They dumped their dictators after popular uprisings…”

“And what do they have now? The military is still the authority, despite electing members of the Muslim Brotherhood to control the parliament and the president’s office, and you see that the people still have little or nothing to say about the governance of Egypt. And other countries might have what looks like civilian governments in place, but that may well be temporary without strong leaders at the top doing whatever it takes to stay there. Security and social stability are more important than passive democracy. And there must be a strong central power to assure the smooth-running of government. It’s no accident that strong leaders have lasted as long as they have in the Middle East, and for almost 30 years autocratic rule has been the most successful form of governance. Only when the leaders ‘bought into’ the notion of democracy – a concept that most people cannot even define – that their power was endangered. They were pressured into liberalizing their societies by Western powers to become ‘more democratic’ or lose financial assistance. Problem was, even those Western powers could not define what a democracy is or what it really does.”

I had a hard time agreeing with Mack, but I resumed the conversation after a short nap. “How can you believe that authoritarianism is preferable to democracy? Look at Libya – and Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Syria, and Iran. See what strong authorities have done there.”

Mack smiled. “Yes, look at them. They had far more stable governments before this entire ‘people’s rebellion’ business. Now look at them, wandering aimlessly with no social cement. Sure, their leaders were strong authorities; that’s exactly what they need. You say you are a student of philosophy; then you should know that Plato, Hegel, and Marx and people like them were right in their belief that the people must be loyal and dedicated to the state – even if the government must use force, coercion, bribery, and fear to win their ‘hearts and minds’.”

Somewhat shocked by those words from Mack, I quickly assured him that peo-
ple “like them” – and why didn’t he mention the Borgias, Henry VIII, Stalin, Franco, Hitler, Mao and Idi Amin? – caused more social harm than good. And certainly they deprived the people of their freedoms of expression. I told him that I might bend somewhat in the case of Plato, who would have as the authority a “philosopher king” who could structure society in a wise and just manner – maybe just like those who rule Gulf countries. But, I told Mack that I wasn’t even sure about Plato, whose Republic is often misinterpreted and misquoted.

Mack: “The problem with the more recent regimes you mention is that the leaders were not strong enough. They were not dedicated to viability, to success, to controlling the direction of the people. They wobbled here and there – much like the government of your country wobbles ideologically – not seeming to have the fortitude of conviction. For example the U.S. wants to stamp out terrorism in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen. So, what do they do? Look to the UN and NATO for support and talk of sanctions and whatever. Oh, yes. I forgot. Your CIA and Navy Seals did finally get rid of Osama bin Laden for all the good that will do. There will be other bin Ladens to take his place, and some of them won’t be as compassionate. In fact, killing bin Laden was a negative action, for the strong leadership and strong will of the terrorists will likely avenge his death in terrible ways.”

I asked Mack if he didn’t think American intervention around the globe showed a sufficiently strong will along with a sense of morality.

“Where is their will? What is their mission? Why should they not police their own country with its crime, illegal immigration, poverty, racism and large disparities between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor – just like you find in the Middle East. Yours is a weak, indecisive government that is heading into the shadows of obscurity in spite of the desires of a democratic citizenry, whatever those desires might be. Where is the American determination to actually do something? As one of your former presidential candidates was fond of saying, ‘words are plentiful; deeds are precious.’ Being bogged down here and there around the world is not enough. Wishing for a better world is not enough. You should either deal with these situations forcefully – or you should get out and go home and take care of your own problems. If you want to police the world, you need to be willing to crack heads until ‘thy Will be done’.”

I shook my head, and replied that I thought we were talking about ethics – and he was settling on political philosophy.

“What’s the difference? The actions of a government and the reactions of a people do constitute ethics in a broad sense. Is the government providing leadership or is it simply masking its authority with talk of democracy? Should the people follow or lead, knowing full well that ‘the people’ cannot provide any kind of coherent leadership – there simply are too many of them with too many opinions about definitions of what democracy and social justice – the catchword of these recent Middle East uprisings – mean? We need to realize that in the long term all states will gravi-
tate to authoritarianism of one kind or another – and this will be a more monolithic system than your so-called democratic system, which is really nothing more than a weak and splintered authoritarian one.”

“But, Mack,” I said, “authoritarian regimes such as you prefer do not engage in humanitarian efforts because it is the moral and right thing to do. Authoritarians are morally irresponsible so far as helping other nations – and their own peoples in times of natural disasters or conflict. In every catastrophe, my country provides the world huge amounts of aid – in supplies and in money with no strings attached. I can’t recall Hugo Chavez’ government in Venezuela doing that, or the rich Gulf states contributing equally large amounts of foreign aid as the United States routinely does.”

Mack: “Good point, but most of these countries do not have the tremendous amounts of money and goods that your resource-rich country has. And, I might add, that the United States of America seems to pour money into countries that are their allies or guaranteed United Nations votes, such as Israel, or into countries in strategic positions that might be of an advantage to the U.S. – such as Egypt, Panama, Japan, Taiwan and Yemen. And some well-off countries like the United Arab Emirates, Qatar or Saudi Arabia don’t need U.S. foreign aid. What about the poor, impoverished countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in South America, or in Asia? Or those poor countries that disagree with U.S. foreign policy – like Iran, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Syria or North Korea; and at times the big ones: Russia and China. Your country seems very selective as to which countries to help militarily or economically.”

I nodded in some agreement with Mack about U.S. foreign aid, but I wanted to get back to a discussion of ethics – his ethics – as it applies to journalists, and I asked him to elaborate. What did he think about American journalists and their ethics? And I wondered how he felt about a rather common belief that journalists have no solid ethics and that are too flexible – if not situational – in their actions.

Mr. Velli launched wholeheartedly into the subject. “Although your journalists are tradition-bound and rather inflexible, they too often fall for any fad that comes along. They are influenced by pressure groups, by celebrities, and by polls – or by their own biases – and act accordingly. They provide no real leadership for the society. They need strong direction. They need a common social goal, which must come from an authority. What your journalists provide is a torrent of slush and mush in the form of snippets of unrelated news and unenlightened analysis. Journalism has become in America just another form of entertainment.”

I asked Mack to give me some of the main characteristics his kind of journalist should have. He answered:

“A willingness to accept leadership, of course. And they need to seek success by being good members of the team; to understand who makes the rules and how the game is played by those rules. They should know the policy of the news medium
and adhere to this policy, respecting the authority of the editors and directors. They must be able to ignore public criticism and follow the dictates of their superiors in their medium and in the greater society.”

“But, Mack, do not publishers, editors, and other media bosses want journalists to be authentic, to be their real selves, to write stories from their hearts and heads?”

“Not at all. They have no problem with inauthenticity. After all, they have gotten where they are by being cunning and devious. When an opportunity arose, they seized it, often brutally. In cases of competition, it’s not good enough to win; your opponent must lose to an extent that he no longer is a viable threat, soon or in the future; you do what it takes to break him or her, if necessary. What they want are faithful followers, loyal and hardworking. Journalists are to be used by their bosses. They are only valuable when they are dependable and follow orders, and know where the “red lines” in any given situation that cannot be crossed without having to be reminded. I know, I know, Kant says that one should never use persons as means to an end, but then Kant was Kant, and I am Mack. It seems quite natural for some to use and for others to be used. It is a kind of naturalistic ethics. In socio-biological terms, the Alpha leads the pack, and can only be successfully challenged by a stronger Alpha. It has nothing to do with the pack liking the Alpha-leader, or the majority of the pack deciding who shall lead it. This is the way of the world and that’s the way it will always be. The strong leads the weak, who learn soon enough that might makes right, and that dominance is necessary for the pack’s survival. While these principles apply to a greater society, they are especially salient in the newsroom. Can you imagine taking a vote of reporters and staffers on whether the newspaper should come out today or what stories should lead on Page 1? No, there are few entities or organizations on the planet more authoritarian than a newsroom.”

I refrained from trying to defend Kant, and proceeded to ask Mack what he thought was the basic mission of the press. He answered quickly: social control. “The institution of journalism is a controlling one,” he said. “It exists to shape history, to impact and define history, and to use its power to keep power in the proper hands of its authorities. By and large, journalism is a power-machine that perpetuates the status quo, or if directed from above, to move society in a certain direction.”

Then I asked Mack what he thought of cooperative journalism, peoples’ journalism, citizen journalism or communitarian journalism, especially in the era of social media where cheap, relatively plentiful hand-held devices can turn almost anyone into a reporter. He was not entirely sure what I meant by those terms, but he responded immediately:

“It should be clear that I do not believe in public cooperation or participation in journalism. Collective effort in leadership? Ridiculous. When journalism leaders try to share their leadership with their audiences that is really sad because it dooms the medium to mediocrity and purposelessness. Leading a newspaper or a TV channel is not a democratic enterprise; it is an elite enterprise. It should never allow distrib-

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uted leadership led by vague notions of community consensus. Those so-called citizen-journalists who report on social media sites are different matters entirely. Governments need to control them since they pose threats to the state. China has the right idea in its Great Firewall, which filters information. Iran, too, has become highly sophisticated in restricting, disrupting, delaying and monitoring so-called citizen journalists. In fact, Iran is supplying my client, Syria, with the software to do the same thing. States have the right, if not the responsibility, to control behaviors in their societies – especially if those behaviors incite disorder.”

I interrupted, and asked: “But don’t you think journalism – citizen or otherwise – is to provide thorough and credible information for the public good so that everyone benefits?”

Mack: “You sound like John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, or John Rawls – maybe even Vilfredo Pareto – I guess you should, given your ideology and education, or should I say indoctrination. These are persons who, along with myriads of sentimentals, dwell in the mythical utopian city of Altruria. As for communitarian journalism, there is none. Ditto for people’s journalism.”

“Well, Mack, we are arriving in Beirut soon, so I guess we should end our interesting discussions. I wish you all the best in Syria. You have your work cut out for you. That country might soon erupt in civil war; perhaps even a proxy war between Iran and the West, from what I’ve been reading. But before we land, I would like to ask you one last question: What can the average citizen do about the state of journalism?”

“Very little. He can – and should – resign himself to living in the pseudo-world of journalism where images are simplified and information snippets are few enough so as not to confuse or overwhelm him. He needs to know just enough to support the people in power, the elites from politics, business, church or the military. A person should not expect much of journalism to reveal the real world, and should take the little information distributed to him in the same way as a beggar takes a coin dropped in his cup – with hopes for a better tomorrow. But he should never expect too much; he should never let his expectations exceed his reality. And if I were advising his rulers, I’d suggest they not give in to ‘The Street.’ If there were lessons learned in the recent Middle East uprisings that swept leaders from power it was this: never give a sucker an even break. Once you have your boot on the neck of your people, never take it off. That’s when troubles start. Had Zine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya taken the same action toward dissenters as did Bashar al-Assad or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, they’d still be in power.”
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