When virtual reality meets realpolitik: Social media shaping the Arab government–citizen relationship

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Since most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an unprecedented extent, public analyst and researchers have rushed to reflect on and explain the phenomena, often attributing a 'change agency' to social media as such. This argumentative research collects evidence from literature, recent surveys and focus groups in order to contextualize our understanding of the role of social media and its usage in reshaping the Arab government–citizen relationship: Are the traits of social media significant enough to single them out and discuss their specific impact on the government–citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an 'agency' of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And in view of the actual use of social media: What are the options of containing emerging 'destructive' phenomena and 'improving' the government–citizen relationship? Answers are outlined to support contextualized design of social media technology and regulation: (1) Arab citizens basically support democratic concepts; however (2) social media as such do not act and therefore do not 'create' e.g. democracy; rather (3) social media enable a new political sphere for Arab citizens, nevertheless challenged by realpolitik; and (4) social media need care taking in terms of shaping political communication and shaping the media itself in order to serve well as mediator among citizens and between citizens and government.

1. Introduction

The term 'Facebook revolution' had emerged along with observations that most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an extent as it was not witnessed before. Since then the role of social media usage in changing the political landscape is debated, especially in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, including many voices expressing optimistic opinions how social media could improve the relation of citizens among each other and towards their governance system. The technologies and applications summarized as social media share certain characteristics such as enabling social networking based on online profiles, sharing structured (e.g. "I like") and unstructured information in manifold ways; it is a fast, ubiquitous, and repelling control due to its decentralized usage and processing structures. However, are these traits significant enough to single out social media and discuss their specific impact on the Arab government–citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an 'agency' of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? And as the masses take over and flood the social media also with indecency, hate messages, shit storms etc.: what are the possible options of containing emerging 'destructive' phenomena and 'improving' the government–citizen relationship?

The usage of social media in the Arab region has received considerable attention from authors and commentators being mainly concerned with understanding the phenomena and its relation to the political development of these countries. However, this paper takes a design-oriented perspective: trying to build on insights from research in political science, digital government as well as information and communication science, it aims not only to understand the role of social media in context but also to outline ways forward: for the stakeholder involved as well as for designing social media technologies, both of which are expected to reshape the Arab government–citizen relationship. Accordingly, the line of argument to answer the above questions unfolds as follows:

1. The Arab government–citizen relationship is unique in its history and in its stakeholder expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs.
2. The power of social media to induce political change in Arab countries has been analyzed from various perspectives, however instrumental views are to be preferred over views advocating agency in shaping the government–citizen relationship.
3. The Arab cyberspace of social media initially provided a free sphere for information exchange, opinion sharing and mobilization; however, the often hailed empowerment of (opposition) activists increasingly is confronted with realpolitik taking over the electronic grounds.

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4. In conclusion, civil societies in Arab countries should not surrender to realpolitik (#3) but strive to proactively define and take care of the role of social media in shaping the government–citizen relationship: based on expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs (#1) and the previous experience of using social media (#2), achieving transparency and accountability should be high on the agenda, along with taking care of the media design itself.

The first two arguments are solely based on literature review. The third and fourth arguments combine extant research with data from recently published surveys and focus group meetings of 2011 and 2012. A special focus is on Egypt as one of the countries prominently linked to the 'Arab Spring' and with the highest number of social media users in the region.

The structure of this article follows the above four arguments. Prior to these sections the most relevant data is reviewed regarding social media usage in Arab countries and Egypt in particular. Finally the line of argument is concluded, and limitations as well as future research are discussed.

2. Usage of social media in Egypt and other Arab countries

The use of internet and smart phones is a function of the economic situation, and the Arab countries are quite diverse in this respect. Not surprisingly, the internet subscription has the highest penetration in the oil-rich Gulf states (50–80%), while population-rich countries such as Egypt (35%) and Algeria (14%) still suffer from a digital divide (data as of June 2012; source: internetworldstats.com).

For many years social media remained a 'Western' means of communication with relatively high numbers of users only to be found in North America and Europe. However, the Arabization of web content and the launch of the Arabic Facebook in 2009 have dramatically changed the adoption of social media in the Middle East. Practically all Arab countries still witness enormous growth rates regarding Facebook usage: in November 2012, for example, Egypt had close to 12 million Facebook users (rank 21 worldwide; source: socialbakers.com) compared to less than 1 million just four years ago. Due to its population size Egypt has by far the most Facebook users in the region, however the penetration rates are much higher in other countries such as Qatar (87%), UAE (67%), Bahrain (53%), Lebanon (38%), Kuwait (32%), Tunisia (31%), and even Saudi Arabia (21%) compared to Egypt's 15% (source: socialbakers.com). An online survey conducted in 2013 by the Dubai School of Government (Alshaer & Salem, 2013) revealed that Facebook is the most popular social network, followed by Google +, and 54% of survey respondents indicated using Facebook more than once a day, while 30% used Google + at the same frequency.

Twitter is similarly on the rise, but the absolute numbers are far less compared to Facebook. The number of active Twitter users in the whole Arab region was estimated just above 2 million at the end of June 2012, with only Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and UAE having reportedly more than 100,000 Twitter users (Dubai School of Government, 2012). Accordingly, only Kuwait showed a significant penetration rate of 13%, followed by Bahrain (5.3%), with all others with not more than around 3% or far less. In mid-2012 the social network LinkedIn has more than 4 million members in the Arab region, and the Arab Social Media Report concludes: "Twitter penetration remains behind that of LinkedIn — except in Kuwait — indicating that job hunting and professional networking services through LinkedIn are more relevant in the region than the informational, social and political uses of social media that Twitter provides." (Dubai School of Government, 2012, 22).

Other social media of outstanding relevance are YouTube and text messaging, followed by blogs and picture sharing tools (e.g. Flickr). For example, YouTube reportedly accounts for 167 million video views daily in the Arab region, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, followed by Egypt, Morocco and UAE (Dubai School of Government, 2012).

Based on the 2013 online survey data, Alshaer and Salem (2013) report about trends of internet usage in the Arab region which extend into all areas of social life such as socializing, education, shopping, entertainment, news, and government interaction; out of which online shopping is the least developed (the majority of survey respondents do not shop online). Notably, the internet is the primary source of news for 36% of the respondents, 29% get their news from social media while another 28% get it from traditional media sources.

Social media users in Arab countries are comparatively young of age. Youth between the ages of 15 and 29 continue to make up around 70% of Facebook users in the Arab region, and just above one third of the Facebook users are female (Dubai School of Government, 2012). However, demographics have a significant impact on the Arab Spring. For example, at the time of the 2011 revolution one third of the Egyptian population was between 15 and 29 (source: UN Population Survey), and the suffering from massive unemployment and other social grievances especially in urban areas (greater Cairo, Alexandria) coincided with the highest adoption of social media compared to the rest of the country and to other age groups. Analyzing the data of media usage in Egypt, Lim (2012, 235) concludes: "[…] social media are the media of the urban youth."

3. The Arab government–citizen relationship

The government–citizen relationship in Arab countries seems to be unique. In 2010 Diamond noted that none of the independent Arab states of the Middle East and coastal North Africa are a "democracy" in which governments are established based on perceived free and fair elections by its citizens. Certainly, the tribal, colonial or even Pharaonic history of these countries has been dominated by strictly authoritarian leadership. However, between the mid 70s and the mid 90s of the last century the number of democracies worldwide went up from 40 to 117, leaving only the Arab region untouched by this dynamic development (Diamond, 2010).

A number of researchers set out to explain this Arab "democracy deficit". Many propositions have been made, often concluding that Islamic belief leads to a political culture hostile to democracy (most popular by Huntington, 1993). Surprisingly, based on extensive survey data, it was found by Tessler (2002) and Jamal and Tessler (2008) that (a) support for democracy in the Arab world is as high as or even higher than in any other regions, and (b) religious orientation of citizens cannot explain the persistence of authoritarianism in this region.

In search for alternative explanations, authors turn to structural and geopolitical arguments. Diamond (2010) has summarized that in many, if not most, Arab states

- Economies are mainly centralized due to their dependence on oil and gas export.
- Low level taxations reduce the need of accountability of state activities.
- Civil societies and political oppositions are weak and co-opted.
- Secret-police and intelligence apparatus are sophisticated and highly penetrating.
- Foreign aid has heavily supported autocratic regimes over decades.
- The lack of Arab unity and the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict rather lead to a standstill than foster any kind of political development.

All of this background frames how stakeholders form their expectations towards citizen participation in political affairs. The level of personal piety is higher in the Arab world, and historically the connection of Islam and politics is strongly legitimated (Tessler, 2002). People rather hold an instrumental view of democracy, and they disagree among themselves to what extent Islam should play a role in politics (Jamal & Tessler, 2008). The ongoing debate about to what extent Islam in general and specific Islamic concepts such as *shura* (consultative deliberations) are actually compatible with Western conceptions of democracy (e.g. El Fadl, 2004; Parray, 2010), is only an indicator

that expectations towards participatory politics and legitimacy are still under development. In short, people in the Arab world want "democracy," but the understanding of this term and the related values can be expected to differ significantly from the views held in other parts of the world.

4. The power of social media to induce political change

Throughout the last years research has started to explore the relation of social media and politics. Topics of interest are, among others, how social network sites have an impact on political attitudes and behavior (e.g. Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010), whether they actually lead to a collaborative government–citizen relationship (e.g. Brainard & McNutt, 2010), and what kind of research paradigms are suitable for exploring the related phenomena (e.g. Skinner, 2011).

Special attention has been devoted to the "Arab Spring" during which it seemed obvious that social media played a significant role in the uprisings of several Arab countries in 2011 and after. In that year the term 'Facebook revolution' had been coined and embraced by international media, and popular jokes tell the story of e.g. how former president Mubarak had been ousted by social media. Without doubt, most activists participating in the recent uprisings in Arab countries have been using social media to an unprecedented extent — but does this indicate any kind of power of social media to induce political change?

Since then the role of social media usage in changing the political landscape has been debated. The driving force is not only the urge to understand the witnessed phenomena, but the interest to draw conclusions about the potential of social media to improve the government–citizen relationship. In the literature we find arguments for different types of roles to be attributed to social media in that context:

- *Cause*: Of course, nobody would assume that social media itself can overthrow any regime. However, some authors present arguments that do indicate a causal relationship, for example: "The Arab Spring had many causes. One of these sources was social media and its power to put a human face on oppression" (Howard et al., 2011, 2). It refers to the fact that only social media was able to share the emotions and breed the identity of the opposition forces as it was achieved through the famous Facebook group "We are all Khaled Said", the story being supported by videos on YouTube and images shared on blogs (cf. Lim, 2012). Another argument (Reardon, 2012) is that social media was causal for involvement of new political forces. Instead of only few of the urban poor and the terrorist/guerrilla groups were involved, protesters now tended to be young, tech-savvy and included women. These groups could only have been mobilized through social media.
- *Catalyst*: In search for an appropriate analysis, Howard et al. (2011) summarize that social media "played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring" (p. 2) and "helped spread democratic ideas across international borders" (p. 3). And the second Arab Social Media Report (Dubai School of Government, 2011) finds "empirical evidence suggesting that the growth of social media in the region and the shift in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions, and influencing change" (p. 24). The role of social media is considered to be an important catalyst as it helped in accelerating the revolution. This capability is mainly attributed to social media being more socially embedded and difficult to control compared to the preexisting media. While such kind of analysis is frequently replicated, the unique contribution of social media is still difficult to pinpoint. For example, Howard et al. (2011) state that "a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground" (p. 3). Certainly, there is data to support such kind of observation, but the sequence in time does not reveal anything about the causal or catalyst relationship.
- *Tool or tactics*: Wael Abbas, a prominent Egyptian blogger, is quoted in a Social Capital blog with this statement: "Social media is a tool. But the

revolution is a decision of many people." (Socialcapital, 2012) This blog finds social media being instrumental in mobilizing protesters, undermining a regime's legitimacy, and/or increasing inter-/national exposure to a regime's malpractice and summarizes that: "Everyone agrees that social media add new arrows to the quivers of social activists." Indeed most of the analysts and commentators put forward that social media have been a decisive tool for information sharing, opinion building, mobilization, and coordination of action (Khondker, 2011; Youmans & York, 2012). However, it is not only the activist perspective that matters. Social media is also considered as being instrumental within a wider perspective of civic development, e.g. as a set of "long-term tools" that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere (Shirky, 2011).
- *Just as any media*: The history of revolutions and all other uprisings shows that activists always utilize the media of their time. Accordingly, academic media analysts are often careful in attributing any unique influence to social media, for example: "Social media was not causal. It told people to go here, to do this, but the reason was social influence, not social networking" (Kathleen Carley was quoted in Reardon, 2012). Or: "Social media wasn't a catalyst. The events it describes were the catalyst" (Huan Liu was quoted in Reardon, 2012).

The debate is not settled, however it is also acknowledged that understating the impact of social media must also include its integration with other media (e.g. Khondker, 2011). First, social activists and influencers tend to act across all media, whatever fits best the circumstances at hand. And second, the integration across media itself adds new potentials. For example, in order to overcome the social media shutdown during the Egyptian Revolution, many had used the "Speak-To-Tweet" service powered by Google and Twitter which allowed posting a 'tweet' on Twitter by calling a designated international phone number and leaving a voice message. Another example is how amateur videos uploaded on YouTube are often re-transmitted by TV channels, especially when professional journalist cannot access the facts on the ground (e.g. videos posted by the Syrian opposition).

Therefore, a direct relationship of causality between social media and political change cannot be assumed. Social media may have its contribution; however this always depends on the circumstances and the historical context (Dahdal, 2012). As El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) conclude: "There needs to be a complex network of events, forces, and people in order for social media to be effective in political change." This contextual view is supported by Stepanova (2011, p. 4): "The new ICT networks are likely to have a critical effect in countries where the governing regime has little or no social base […]. If a governing regime is not alienated from the mass public but is at least partially mass-based, there are significant limits to what even advanced ICT-based social media/protest networks can achieve."

Since the role of social media in relating citizens and government can only be understood in context, the remainder of the article explores the practice (Section 5) and the potentials (Section 6) of re-forming the government–citizen relationship in Egypt and the region.

5. The Arab social media between a free space and realpolitik

Social media are different to preexisting media types as they support not only content consumption but also content provision and relationship building through massively decentralized usage. Information flows and related data transmission and processing depend on internet connectivity and dedicated servers usually outside the Arab region.

Social media in the Arab world are basically built on the same technologies and applications as elsewhere. However, the launch of the Arabic Facebook in 2009 has dramatically changed the adoption of social media in the Middle East (see Section 2). The majority of Arab respondents to a recent survey even believe that most social activity is nowadays virtual (Alshaer & Salem, 2013). Research has found that cultural variations are also manifested in social media (De Angeli,

2009; Omoush, Saleh, Yaseen, & Atwah Alma'aitah, 2012). While Arab youth seek to liberate from numerous restrictions (such as sex discrimination, power distance, family obligations, rules and values), their attitudes online are still influenced by the cultural values of the Arab nation (Omoush et al., 2012).

At first, it seemed that social media provide a new free space that caters not only the liberation of the individual, but also collective political activism. Governments in the region were initially not prepared for the unfolding dynamics and could not force anything on social media usage unless by cutting off internet or applying extensive filtering. However, "the platforms were not designed to cater to activist users" (Youmans & York, 2012, p. 317): On one hand, governance of social media is driven by commercial considerations, and the platforms' rules and architectures may constrain political engagement (Youmans & York, 2012, p. 317). On the other hand, no cyberspace has remained simply an exterritorial "global village" for freedom seekers, but the internet has always been subject to the extension of realpolitik,[1] namely an extension of the battlespace and an extension of the marketplace (Manjikian, 2010). Both aspects have a significant impact on the practice of using Arab social media.

The first occasion within the Arab region when social media attributed a significant influence beyond the control of the regime in power was during the uprising in Iran for several months in 2009 (cf. e.g. Morozov, 2009; Sohrabi-Haghighat, 2011; El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2012). While, for example, Twitter proved being useful to pass by censorship, the circumstances in the social movement itself (such as lack of strategy, organization, and mobilization potential) were not in favor to help the 'Twitter-powered' protests achieving a break-through. And the regime adapted swiftly in applying counter-measures such as deploying false messages into the network, cracking down on Twitter account owners and campaigning against social media usage based on threatening their users. In order to contain the uprising the Iranian government tried to marginalize the social media users as non-religious, sending out the message to citizens: when using social media you are the denying the national consensus and thus destroying the government–citizen relationship.

Meanwhile the number of social media users in the Arab countries is in the millions, thus simple marginalization cannot succeed any more. While all political stakeholders in the region are now struggling to embrace social media for their purposes, we find increasing reports about malpractices. For example, in Iraq it has become popular to read online stories about corruption among government officials as well as online news reports with free access to breaking stories; however this comes along with several severe problems as Nasrawi (2012) reports: "Dozens of such websites describe themselves as digital news outlets and have no easily identifiable ownership. It is difficult to know who is behind the sites, […] Many suspect that some of these media outlets have been involved in dirty political campaigns. [...] In their war of words, the sites usually employ anonymous abuse, attributing controversial news to unnamed sources. […] The [two] faked stories were apparently posted in order to frustrate Al-Maliki's opponents by claiming that Washington was standing firm behind the Iraqi prime minister." And so forth.

In June and November 2012 focus group meetings were conducted, each with almost the same group of about ten academic members of an Egyptian university, about the use of social media in the political debate in Egypt. Participants confirmed that social media are a suitable source for forming opinions, attracting more and more citizens to join ("even 'dinosaurs' now appear on Facebook"). Pitfalls include misinterpreting prestructured online indications (e.g. the "I like" button in Facebook mostly reflects information interest but not opinion support) and being deceived by online predictions (e.g. regarding election outcomes) that turn out to be not accurate. Meeting attendees also

confirmed the malpractice of social media: rumors and bad language increase, spreading hate messages is getting viral, and agents with unknown agenda spark the debate. In result, radical opinions take over the debate while moderate users tend to turn away.

Since social media, especially in the Arab region, is now attributed to power which everyone can seize, the struggle for social media domination is in full swing. The battle is on not only in the political sphere but also even more in the consumer market (Hall, 2012) as well as in online debates about social issues (e.g. religious matters). However, the absence of any rules and control often leads to more or less scrupulous practices from pretending false identities and sharing fabricated opinions, spreading rumors and disseminating false information, sending hate messages and igniting flame wars — all of these are often enough based on an agenda which are not owned by the users themselves but by their money source. Apparently, the 'freedom' of the social media does not lead automatically to a culture of using social media which promotes multifaceted discussion based on tolerance and willingness to embrace new thoughts; instead in-group thinking prevails and sectarianism is on the rise (Haque, 2012).

These developments have a significant impact on the activists' collective action. While allowing anonymity in social action is essential for protecting liberty and privacy, misusing anonymity for covering unethical and uncivil communication has reached an extent where social media operators, safeguarding their business interests, have no choice but insist on revealing real identities and being more prohibitive in controlling content and communication practices (Youmans & York, 2012).

Activists and analysts both will remember the role of social media in supporting the overthrow of some oppressing regimes in the Arab region, and some of the good news carry on: Finding nowadays practically all Egyptian ministries being active in Facebook, and remembering the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) being keen on reaching out to citizens after the ousting of former president Mubarak (Klischewski, 2012), are clear indicators that the government in Egypt (similarly in other Arab countries) accepts social media as a tool to relate to their citizens. Political actors from all strands study carefully e.g. Obama's online election campaign in order to learn from and form their own social media strategies. Comparing Arab e-government efforts with those of other countries, Halpern, Rozaidi, and Ki (2012) found that governments and political leaders in the Arab world are not behind in adopting interactive applications for political participation and responsiveness of citizens; however, they also found that Arab governments provide comparatively less access to relevant information.

Only few years after the inception of social media in the Arab world, citizens massively use these tools and follow up government activities online. However the initial free space, prominently used by activists, is now occupied by actors and their practices from all corners of the society. All stakeholders involved use social media by their interest and within their given frame of cultural and historical conditions. Within this amalgam, the re-shaping of the Arab government–citizen relationship in relation to social media is already underway, and it will depend on the interaction of the driving forces to where this will lead.

6. Setting the agenda for re-shaping the Arab government–citizen relationship

The Arab Social Media Report (Dubai School of Government, 2012, pp. 3–4) published results regarding the influence of social media on societal and cultural changes in the Arab World. The survey was conducted between March and May 2012 and received almost 5000 responses from eight Arab countries, with the target demographic mirroring the demographic makeup of each country. For example, support for the statement "Social media played a role in empowering me to influence change in my community/country" ranged between about one third and one half in the various countries, and between 47 and 65% of respondents stated that they are "more open to tolerating

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[1] Describing a "positive, materialist, no-nonsense, interest only, matter-of-fact way of dealing with naked power relations" (Latour, 2005, p. 4).

different points of view." Looking at the half-full glass, this could be good news, but at the same time it indicates also that skepticism and in-group thinking strongly prevail.

The same survey found that respondents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE "strongly concur that their connection with, understanding of, and contribution to their societies and fellow citizens have been facilitated and enhanced through the use of social media" (measured agreement between 71 and 92%), but no survey data was collected that could shed light on the government–citizen relationship. And asking about reinforcing identity within the networked virtual communities of the eight Arab countries, the survey found that the 'national identity' was reinforced strongest (66–85%), feeling like a 'global citizen' came second (69–80%), and reinforcing 'religious identity' was the relatively lowest ranking (60–80%). The report concludes somehow optimistically "that social media may — for now — have the ability to influence a more globalized society while de-emphasizing religious differences" (Dubai School of Government, 2012, p. 4).

Given also that the support for democracy in the Arab world is as high as or even higher than in other regions of the world (see Section 3), we can conclude that there is a considerable demand by the Arab citizens to improve the relation to their governments, and social media has been widely acknowledged as one of the important arenas to implement these improvements.

The use of social media can also be seen as part of a development towards open government, i.e. the government itself implementing the principles of transparency, participation and collaboration (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010). For example, in Egypt the government has built sufficient capacity for providing citizen information services, and according to an OECD report (in which Egypt is the only Arab country mentioned; OECD, 2010) the Ministry of State for Administrative Development (MSAD) is basically committed to developing a more open and transparent government. However, equal access to online information and services remain a major problem as many Egyptians have only limited or no internet access ("digital divide"). Apparently, there is a readiness throughout Arab governments to adopt interactive applications for citizen participation while at the same time they remain reluctant to provide access to relevant information (Halpern et al., 2012; see also previous section).

For any stakeholder, when preparing for open government it is essential to understand: (a) what is an appropriate approach to analyze the requirements for dissemination of governmental data and information, and (b) how can these requirements be translated into adequate technical support for computer-based communication channels within the given information infrastructure? These questions were the driver for conducting two focus group meetings with a total of more than twenty young Egyptian citizens (conducted in May 2011 with the help of an Egyptian university student), discussing citizen informational needs and public participation in information exchange. The findings can be summarized as follows (Klischewski, 2012):

- Information regarding full transparency and stakeholder accountability is a top priority objective for all Egyptian citizens.
- Citizens highly appreciate the government's usage of social media for information sharing.
- Citizens seek information not only in retrospect but also about governmental actions in terms of detailed plans, including time frames and milestones, supplemented by periodical progress reports.
- Citizens expect that the information is easy to find and easy to understand; if matters are complex, then understanding should be supported by explanations, mediators, and/or additional tools.
- Citizens are willing to interact with the government, calling for more options to do so; however, the overall low quality of online discussion is an impediment; to this end online polls and surveys might be preferable for obtaining citizen feedback.

In Egypt, at least MSAD is committed to implementing open government principles. However, the mandate from the whole government to embark on this journey is still missing, the action plan to reach out to citizens beyond the current practice is still vague, and with the political system still under transition [at the time of writing] it remains to be seen when and how social media may contribute as a mutually accepted instrument to improve the government–citizen relationship. The findings from this case underline that using online communication channels as such is not the key; rather it needs the management of the context of government–citizen communication and the establishment of a common ground for information sharing in order to improve the relationship between government and citizens.

In all cases, civil societies in Arab countries should not surrender to increasing online dominance of realpolitik but shape up and strive to proactively define and to take care of the role of social media in shaping the government–citizen relationship. This task has two dimensions (as to counteract "the platforms were not designed to cater to activist users," see Section 5):

1. *Shaping e-participation*: Participation, one of the cornerstones of open government, has been discussed extensively. Electronic participation is also linked to the policy making life cycle (agenda setting, analysis, policy creation, implementation and monitoring), i.e. to structure the engagement of citizens according to the subtasks in each policy making stage (Macintosh, 2004). Developing and agreeing on a process-based framework for citizen–government interaction would help tremendously in identifying informational needs and defining tangible objectives for online collaboration. Since traditionally and historically citizens have only little experience with policy creation and implementation, it might be recommendable to initially focus more on achieving transparency and accountability (relating to monitoring and analysis; see also Section 5) as well as collective agenda setting.

2. *Shaping the media*: The need for action to shape the social media has been clearly articulated by Youmans and York (2012, p. 324): "Social media firms will continue to limit anonymity, prohibit certain content, and depend on community policing, while at the same time governments undoubtedly will seek to increase their leverage against firms and pursue strategies of infiltration and surveillance." They recommend six strategies to maintain or enhance social media as tools for collective action: using power as consumers; use the law; appeal directly to the governments; work to advance industry self-regulation; pressure large social media companies through long-term, iterative, incremental advocacy; embrace the development of 'civic technologies' (depending on an open architecture that is free to accept whatever structures and content users wish to build). It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate these strategies in detail; however, this enumeration reveals that the options to influence social media are many and that both technical and regulatory aspects have to be taken into account.

7. Conclusion

This paper sets out in search for answering some questions related to social media usage in Arab countries and with a special focus on Egypt, which is one of the countries prominently linked to the 'Arab Spring' and which has the highest number of social media users in the region: Are the traits of social media significant enough to justify discussing their specific impact on the Arab government–citizen relationship? Are we well advised to attribute an 'agency' of social media in shaping politics and inducing political change? What are the possible options of containing emerging 'destructive' phenomena and 'improving' the government–citizen relationship?

The research approach has been argumentative; evidence has been collected from literature, from recent surveys and from focus group meetings conducted in Egypt in 2011 and 2012. Clearly, this approach has significant limitations, among which stand out the lack of rigor (in terms of methodology) and lack of comprehensiveness (as only

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portions of the relevant literature were included to substantiate the concepts and aspects involved). However, understanding and designing social media can only succeed through contextualization, i.e. to identify the relevant aspects that impact the stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors towards social media and frame the options for further development. In that sense this paper makes a contribution through drawing the attention to the relevant aspects when designing social media with the aim to improve the Arab government–citizen relationship. The findings (according to the line of argument outlined in Section 1) can be summarized as follows:

1. _Arab citizens want 'democracy'_: While Arab history and tradition have been dominated by authoritarian leadership, citizens seek more political transparency and accountability, free participation in public debates, and eventually more empowerment in the political processes. Hence, shaping public relationships based on social media can count on the support of the people.

2. _Social media do not act_: There is no evidence for a direct relationship of causality between social media and political change, e.g. no leverage to democracy. The specific impact of social media on the government–citizen relationship always depends on the social actors' strategies and behaviors as well as on the context of social media usage and the state of realpolitik. Hence, we are well advised to attribute an 'agency' in shaping politics and inducing political change only to social actors but not to social media as such.

3. _Social media enable a new political sphere for Arab citizens_: On one hand, the massive use of social media establishes uncontrolled virtual spaces of interaction, opinion building and mobilization, attracting millions of citizens (even new user groups) to freely participate in public debates. On the other hand, realpolitik increasingly occupies also the virtual reality of social life, inducing numerous distracters from improving the government–citizen relationship, and the massive adoption of social media tends to alienate moderate users. Although this field of tension is neither unparalleled nor unexpected, the way of shaping relationships in this sphere is unique. Hence, the traits of social media should be analyzed thoroughly before aiming to re-shape the Arab government–citizen relationship.

4. _Social media need care taking to function well as mediators among citizens and between citizens and government_: Just as in any other social sphere free of hierarchy and control, the in-built anarchy of social media requires a rather high level of self-discipline on the side of the users to mutually enjoy such freedom; this can only be an outcome of a long collective learning process. More specifically, most of the care taking is needed to (a) shape political communication during electronic participation in order to be able to identify information and collaboration requirements, and (b) shape the media itself through social and technical mechanisms that will enable and/or sustain political activism without being restricted by the business-related interest of the social media operators. Hence, both issues should be addressed when setting the agenda for re-shaping the Arab government–citizen relationship.

Research in e-government should indeed focus more on the use of social media in re-shaping the government–citizen relationship. Considering social media as an object of design in the area of e-government is still in the beginning. This article underlines the importance of contextualizing social media while avoiding jumping to early conclusions. However, the provision of research-based design recommendations certainly needs much more careful conceptualization and theory building as well as empirical evidence. For example, inspired by the concept of object-oriented programming, Latour (2005) introduced the metaphor of "dingpolitk" (in contrast to realpolitik) as to how to make things public — a call to focus on the things that matter and to shape arenas of communication accordingly. As design of social media needs also visions, we should not exclude any idea that might help on this path…

Acknowledgment

This paper has emerged from a keynote speech titled "When Virtual Reality Meets Realpolitik — Social Media in the Arab Spring", delivered September 5, 2012, at the IFIP EGOV Conference in Kristiansand, Norway. An initial version of the paper had been published in 2012 as Working Paper No. 34, German University in Cairo, Faculty of Management Technology (http://ideas.repec.org/p/guc/wpaper/34.html).

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