

A Networked Public

WHEN MY GRANDMOTHER WAS ABOUT THIRTEEN YEARS old and living in a small Turkish town near the Mediterranean coast, she won a scholarship to the most prestigious boarding school in Istanbul. Just two years earlier, after she had completed the fifth grade, her family told her that her formal education was over. As far as her family was concerned, that was more than enough education for a girl. It was time for marriage, not geometry or history.

My grandmother didn't know her exact birth date. Her mother had said that she was born just as the grapes were being harvested and pressed into molasses in preparation for the upcoming winter, and just as word of the proclamation of the new Republic of Turkey reached her town. That would put her birthday in the fall of 1923, when a new world was struggling to emerge from the ruins of World War I. It was a time of transition and change for Turkey, for her family, and for her. The new central government, born from the ashes of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, was intent on modernizing the country and emulating European systems. It pushed to build schools and standardize education. Teachers were appointed to schools around the country, even in remote provinces. One of those teachers remembered a bright female pupil who had been yanked from school, and, without telling her family, entered her in a nationwide scholarship exam to find and educate gifted girls. "And then, my name appeared in a

newspaper,” my grandmother said. She told me the story often, tearing up each time.

It was a small miracle and a testament to the unsettled nature of the era that my grandmother’s teacher prevailed over her family. My grandmother boarded a train to the faraway city of Istanbul to attend an elite school. She was joined by dozens of bright girls from around the country who had made similar journeys. They spent their first year somewhat dazed, soaking in new experiences. They all excelled in their classes, except one. Almost all of them flunked Turkish, their native language.

The cause was not lack of smarts or hard work. Rather, it was something we now take for granted. A national public sphere with a uniform national language did not exist in Turkey at the time. Without mass media and a strong national education system, languages exist as dialects that differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and even grammar, sometimes from town to town.¹ These studious girls did not speak the standardized “Istanbul Turkish” that would emerge through the mass media and the national education system in the coming decades.

Like the other students, my grandmother had grown up without any real exposure to mass media because there were none where she lived.² Fledgling radio broadcasts were limited to a few hours a day in a few big cities. Standardized mass education was just starting. Newspapers existed, but their readership was limited, and my grandmother rarely encountered one. Without such technologies, her world and her language had been confined to her small town and to the people who saw one another every day.

These days it seems unlikely that citizens of the same country might have difficulty understanding one another. But it is historically fairly new that so many of us understand one another and have common topics to discuss, even on a global scale. Even European languages like the French language became standardized into the Parisian version—derived from a hodgepodge of dialects—only after the emergence of the French Republic and the rise of mass media (newspapers). Political scientist Benedict Anderson called this phenomenon of unification “imagined communities.” People who would never expect to meet in person or to know each other’s name come to think of themselves as part of a group through the shared

consumption of mass media like newspapers and via common national institutions and agendas.³

The shift from face-to-face communities to communities identified with cities, nation-states, and now a globalized world order is a profound transition in human history. Because we have been born into this imagined community, it can be hard to realize how much our experiences, our culture, and our institutions have been shaped by a variety of technologies, especially those that affect the way we experience time and space.⁴ Technologies alter our ability to preserve and circulate ideas and stories, the ways in which we connect and converse, the people with whom we can interact, the things that we can see, and the structures of power that oversee the means of contact.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, changes to the architecture of our societies mostly happened through the newspapers, railroads and telegraph, followed later by telephone, radio and television. In the early twenty-first century, digital technologies and networks—computers, the internet, and the smartphone—are rapidly altering some of the basic features of societies, especially the public sphere, which social theorist Jürgen Habermas defined as a people “gathered together as a public, articulating the needs of society with the state.”⁵ Gerard Hauser explains this same concept as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them.”⁶ It should be understood that there is no single, uniform public sphere. Instead, different groups of people come together under different conditions and with varying extent and power, sometimes in “counterpublics”—groups coming together to oppose the more hegemonic public sphere and ideologies.⁷

Habermas focused on the emergence of a public sphere in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through interaction and idealized reasoned dialogue among people in settings other than the privacy of homes, especially in cities.⁸ Cities can also alter how we interact by gathering people in large numbers and creating places for interaction outside of private spaces. Thus, the public sphere was facilitated by the rise of spaces like coffeehouses and salons, where people who were not immediate family members mingled and discussed current affairs and issues that concerned everyone.

The dynamics of public spheres are intertwined with power relations, social structures, institutions, and technologies that change over time. My grandmother, for example, would never have been allowed inside the Turkish version of coffeehouses where people discussed politics among their community since they were (and still are) male-only places. French salons were accessed mostly by the wealthy. Newspapers require literacy, which was not always widespread. Before the internet, broadcast mass media meant that millions could hear the same message all at once, but if you wanted your message heard, it helped if you owned or had access to a radio or television station or a newspaper. And so on.

As technologies change, and as they alter the societal architectures of visibility, access, and community, they also affect the contours of the public sphere, which in turn affects social norms and political structures. The twenty-first-century public sphere is digitally networked and includes mass media and public spaces, such as the squares and parks where many protests are held, as well as new digital media.⁹ I use the term “digitally networked public sphere” or “networked public sphere” as a shorthand for this complex interaction of publics, online and offline, all intertwined, multiple, connected, and complex, but also transnational and global. “Networked public sphere,” like the terms “digitally networked movements” or “networked movements,” does not mean “online-only” or even “online-primarily.” Rather, it’s a recognition that the whole public sphere, as well as the whole way movements operate, has been reconfigured by digital technologies, and that this reconfiguration holds true whether one is analyzing an online, offline, or combined instantiation of the public sphere or social movement action.

Thanks to digital technologies, ordinary people have new means of broadcasting—the potential to reach millions of people at once. We also have methods of interpersonal communication that can easily connect many people who are not in the same physical space, or even people who do not know each other at all. Ubiquitous cell-phone cameras have greatly increased the ability of citizens to document wrongdoings and potentially move the conversation beyond “authorities said, activists claimed.”¹⁰ The authorities, too, have changed and altered their tactics to control and shape the public sphere even though their aims have remained similar. Producing information glut, inducing confusion and distraction, and mobilizing

counter-movements, rather than imposing outright censorship, are becoming parts of the playbook of governments that confront social movements.

Although the recent changes have been rapid, digital technologies are not the first technologies that have affected how we interact over space and time and have shaped our sense of community, identity, and the public sphere. Looking at some past transitions is helpful in understanding the scope and scale of newer ones. Writing, for example, is among the earliest technologies that changed the relationship between our words and the passage of time.¹¹ We are so used to writing that it is difficult to imagine societies without it and to realize that writing is a technology that shapes our society. Before the invention of writing (a long process rather than a single breakthrough), people relied on memory in passing on knowledge or stories. This affected the type of content that could be effectively transmitted over time and space; for example, a novel or an encyclopedia can exist only in a society with writing. An oral culture—a culture without any form of writing—is more suited for poetry with repetitions and proverbs, which are easier to remember without writing down, that are committed to memory and passed on. Writing is not important only as a convenience; rather, it affects power in all its forms throughout society. For example, in a society that is solely oral or not very literate, older people (who have more knowledge since knowledge is acquired over time and is kept in one's mind) have more power relative to young people who cannot simply acquire new learning by reading. In a print society, novels, pamphlets, and encyclopedias can be circulated and made widely available. This availability affects the kinds of discussions that can be had, the kinds of people who can have them, and the evidentiary standards of those discussions.

The power of technologies to help shape communities is not restricted to information technologies. Transportation technologies not only carry us, but even in the digital era they still carry letters, newspapers and other media of communication. They also alter our sense of space, as does the architecture of cities and suburbs. Indeed, the wave of protests and revolution that shook Europe in 1848—and were dubbed the People's Spring, the inspiration for referring to the 2011 Arab uprisings as the "Arab Spring"—were linked not just to the emergence of newspaper and telegraphs, but also to the railways that increasingly crisscrossed the continent, carrying

not just people who spread ideas, but also newspapers, pamphlets, and manifestos.¹²

In her lifetime, my grandmother journeyed from a world confined to her immediate physical community to one where she now carries out video conversations over the internet with her grandchildren on the other side of the world, cheaply enough that we do not think about their cost at all. She found her first train trip to Istanbul as a teenager—something her peers would have done rarely—to be a bewildering experience, but in her later years she flew around the world. Both the public sphere and our imagined communities operate differently now than they did even a few decades ago, let alone a century.

All this is of great importance to social movements because movements, among other things, are attempts to intervene in the public sphere through collective, coordinated action. A social movement is both a type of (counter) public itself and a claim made to a public that a wrong should be righted or a change should be made.¹³ Regardless of whether movements are attempting to change people's minds, a set of policies, or even a government, they strive to reach and intervene in public life, which is centered on the public sphere of their time. Governments and powerful people also expend great efforts to control the public sphere in their own favor because doing so is a key method through which they rule and exercise power.

The dizzying speed of advances in digital networks and technologies, their rapid spread, and the fact that there is no single, uniform public sphere complicate this discussion. But to understand dissident social movements and their protests, it is crucial to understand the current dynamics of the public sphere. Digital technologies play a critical role in all stages of protest, but they are especially important during the initial formation of social movements.

In 2011, a few days after yet another major protest in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt, Sana (not her real name) and I sat in a coffee shop close to the square where so much had happened in a few months. In the immediate aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the protesters' spirit and optimism seemed to shine on everything. Even corporate advertisers were using the theme of revolution to sell soft drinks and other products. Ads for sunglasses highlighted revolutionary slogans and colors.

Sana came from a well-off Egyptian family that, like many, had maintained a fiercely apolitical stance before the revolution. Politics was never discussed at home. She was a talented young woman who went to one of Egypt's best universities, spoke English very well, and, like many of her peers, had a view of the world beyond that of the older generation that still ruled Egypt and the timid elders who feared Mubarak's repressive regime. She told me about feeling trapped and about frustration with her family and social circle, all of whom rebuffed her attempts at even mild discussions of Egyptian politics. She could not find a way to cross this boundary in the offline world, so she went on Twitter.

In an earlier era, Sana might have kept her frustrations to herself and remained isolated, feeling lonely and misunderstood. But now, digital technologies provide multiple avenues for people to find like-minded others and to signal their beliefs to one another. Social media led Sana to other politically oriented young people. Over a strong brew in a trendy Egyptian coffee shop, she explained that she had gone online to look for political conversations that were more open and more inclusive than any she had experienced in her offline personal life, and that this had led to her participation in the massive Tahrir protests.

There is much more to be said about the aftermath of the movements in which Sana participated, but the initial stages of these movements illuminate how digital connectivity alters key social mechanisms. Many people tend to seek people who are like themselves or who agree with them: this social science finding long predates the internet. Social scientists call this "homophily," a concept similar to the notion "Birds of a feather stick together."¹⁴ Dissidents and other minorities especially draw strength and comfort from interactions with like-minded people because they face opposition from most of society or, at the very least, the authorities. Digital connectivity makes it easier for like-minded people to find one another without physical impediments of earlier eras, when one had to live in the right neighborhood or move to a city and find the correct café. Now, people may just need to find the right hashtag.

Sana was different from those in her immediate environment. She had been unable to find people who shared her interests in politics and were motivated enough to brave the regime's repression. When she turned to

Twitter, though, she could easily find and befriend a group of political activists, and she later met those people offline as well. They eventually became her social circle. She said that she finally felt at home and alive from being around young people who were engaged and concerned about the country's future. When the uprising in Tahrir broke out in January 2011, she joined them at the square as they fought, bled, and hoped for a better Egypt. Had it not been for social media leading her to others with similar beliefs before the major uprising, she might never have found and become part of the core group that sparked the movement.

Of course likeminded people gathered before the internet era, but now it can be done with much less friction, and by more people. For most of human history, one's social circle was mostly confined to family and neighborhood because they were available, easily accessible, and considered appropriate social connections. Modernization and urbanization have eroded many of these former barriers.¹⁵ People are now increasingly seen as individuals instead of being characterized solely by the station in life into which they were born. And they increasingly seek connections as individuals, and not just in the physical location where they were born. Rather than connecting with people who are like them only in ascribed characteristics—things we mostly acquire from birth, like family, race, and social class (though this one can change throughout one's life)—many people have the opportunity to seek connections with others who share similar interests and motivations. Of course, place, race, family, gender, and social class continue to play a very important role in structuring human relationships—but the scope and the scale of their power and their role as a social mechanism have shifted and changed as modernity advanced.

Opportunities to find and make such connections with people based on common interests and viewpoints are thoroughly intertwined with the online architectures of interaction and visibility and the design of online platforms. These factors—the affordances of digital spaces—shape who can find and see whom, and under what conditions; not all platforms create identical environments and opportunities for connection. Rather, online platforms have architectures just as our cities, roads, and buildings do, and those architectures affect how we navigate them. (Explored in depth in later chapters.) If you cannot find people, you cannot form a community with them.

Cities, which bring together large numbers of people in concentrated areas, and the discursive spaces, like coffeehouses and salons, that spring up in them are important to the public sphere exactly because they alter architectures of interaction and visibility. Online connectivity functions in a very similar manner but is an even more profound alteration because people do not have to be in the same physical space at the same time to initiate a conversation and connect with one another. The French salons and coffeehouses of the nineteenth century were mostly limited to middle- or upper-class men, as were digital technologies in their early days, but as digital technology has rapidly become less expensive, it has just as rapidly spread rapidly to poorer groups. It is the new town square, the water cooler, the village well, and the urban coffeehouse, but also much more. This isn't because people leave behind race, gender, and social class online, and this isn't because the online sphere is one only of reason and ideas, with no impact from the physical world. Quite the opposite, such dimensions of the human experience are reproduced and play a significant role in the networked public sphere as well. The difference is the reconfigured logic of how and where we can interact; with whom; and at what scale and visibility.

Almost all the social mechanisms discussed in this book operate both online and offline, and digital connectivity alters the specifics of how the mechanisms operate overall rather than creating or destroying social dynamics or mechanisms wholesale. Twitter became a way for Sana to find like-minded others. This is analogous to the role offline street protests play as a way in which people with dissenting ideas can find one another and form the initial (or sustaining) groups that make movements possible.

For example, on April 15, 2009—the day on which tax returns were due in the United States—protests were held all over the country called by the Tea Party Patriots, a right-wing movement with strong views on taxes and their use. Some protest locales were sunny, but others were rainy. An ingenious long-term study later looked at how the weather on that day had affected the trajectory of the Tea Party movement born of those protests.¹⁶ Researchers compared areas where protests could be held to those where protests were not held because of being rained out—a naturally occurring experiment since the weather can be considered a random factor. Compared

with rainy locations, places where the sun shone on tax day, and thus could hold a protest, had a higher turnout in favor of the Republican Party in subsequent elections, a greater likelihood of a Democratic representative retiring rather than choosing to rerun, and more changes to policy making in line with Tea Partiers' demands. Sunny protest locations spawned stronger movements with "more grassroots organizing," "larger subsequent protests and monetary contributions," and "stronger conservative belief" among protest participants.¹⁷

The rain on that initial day of protest had significant long-term effects on the fortunes of the Tea Party movement. The main driver was simple, but not surprising: people met one another at the protests that could be held and then continued to organize together.

Finding other like-minded people, a prerequisite for the formation of a new movement, now often occurs online as well. The internet allowed networks of activists in the Middle East and North Africa to connect before protests broke out in the region in late 2010 and early 2011. Drawing strength from one another, often scattered across cities and countries, they were able to overcome what was otherwise a discouraging environment and to remain political activists even amidst the repressive environment partly because they could find friends.

It is sometimes assumed that activists in the initial wave of a networked movement do not know one another well, or may be online-only friends. There were certainly some people in the Middle East and North Africa who fit that mold, but many of the committed activists had overlapping and strong friendship networks that interacted online and offline. Some of those networks stretched across many countries thanks to easier travel and international organizations that connected activists across the region at conferences and other shared events. However, some had indeed first met online but then had used digital connectivity to find one another offline as well, just like Sana. Even those who used pseudonyms online often knew each other offline.

Such tight networks allow people to sustain one another during quieter times, but that is not all they do. These networks also play a crucial role when protests erupt.

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Activists can become catalysts for broader publics who can be mobilized, but to make a significant impact, large social movements require the participation of large numbers of people, many of whom may not have much prior political experience. These people usually do not seek out political and dissent outlets and thus are less likely to encounter dissident views. This is why people in power are greatly concerned with controlling the broader public sphere, especially mass media.

For decades, authoritarian states in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries in the Arab world built up extensive control and censorship of the mass media, the most powerful society-wide means of information dissemination. The public sphere was closed, controlled, characterized by censorship, and ruled by fear. Egyptian media did not report news that reflected badly on the government, especially news about protests. People feared talking about politics except with their close family and friends—and sometimes even with them. In this climate, many people in the Middle East did not know whether their neighbors also hated the autocrats who had ruled with an iron fist for decades.

Digital technologies, along with the satellite TV channel Al Jazeera, changed this situation.¹⁸ In 2009, Facebook was made available in Arabic, greatly expanding its reach into the growing digital population in the Arab world. Facebook wasn't the first site to which activists were drawn, but it was the first site that reached large masses. Activists generally are among the earliest adopters of digital technologies. When they are asked about their technology use, many activists recite a long history, describing how they seized on the first tools available. For example, Bahraini activists told me about discovering Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—essentially the chat channel of the early internet—long before such sites were well known. My first encounter with smartphones, including early BlackBerries, goes back to anti-corporate globalization activists in 1999 who embraced the technology almost as soon as it came out, ironically when its use was otherwise mostly limited to high-level businesspeople.

However, Facebook is different from earlier digital technologies. It came out as computers and smartphones were already spreading, and many

ordinary people quickly adopted the platform because it allowed easy connectivity with friends and family. This gave it strength. Since it was so widely used, it couldn't be shut down as easily as an activist-only site.

About one year after Facebook rolled out its Arabic version, toward the end of 2010, things started heating up more openly in the Arab world, first in Tunisia, which had been ruled for decades by the autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. To understand the impact of Facebook, ponder an earlier protest, just as the site—and digital connectivity—was getting started in the region.

In 2008, Ben Ali had endured organized, persistent protests in the mining town of Gafsa in central Tunisia. The Gafsa protests erupted after the residents objected to a corrupt employment scheme that ensured that mostly relatives of those already in power and people closely connected to the regime were being hired. The police were unable to quash the unrest, so the military was called in, and many leading trade unionists were jailed. Their relatives started a hunger strike to draw attention to their protest. Ben Ali responded by suppressing the story, and effectively silencing news of the city.¹⁹ Town residents were united and persisted in struggling for months, but their actions were like a tree falling in a forest where there were few people besides themselves who could hear it. Despite stalwart efforts, they were unable to get most of the news of their protests out to a wider world.²⁰ A few months later, mostly unheard, exhausted, and broken, they folded. Ben Ali continued to rule Tunisia with an iron fist. The residents' lack of success in drawing attention and widespread support to their struggle is a scenario that has been repeated the world over for decades in countries led by dictators: rebellions are drowned out through silencing and censorship.

Less than two years later, another round of protests broke out in Tunisia. This time they occurred in Sidi Bouzid, a small town near the coast, after the self-immolation of a street vendor, Mohammad Bouazzizi—an individual act of desperation after he was humiliatingly treated by the police and his fruit cart was confiscated. As Tunisians took to the streets in Sidi Bouzid, Ben Ali tried the same strategy he had used against the people of Gafsa. In 2009, at the time of the Gafsa protests, there were only 28,000 people on Facebook in Tunisia.²¹ But by the end of 2010, the number of

Tunisians on Facebook had exploded to 2 million. The burgeoning blog community in Tunisia had also forged strong ties during campaigns to oppose censorship. Remarkably, food, parenting, and tourism blogs were in dialogue with the political blogs in the fight to stay online in the face of a repressive regime.

The protests took most of the world by surprise, but now Tunisian groups like Nawaat, a small Tunisian anticensorship and internet-freedom organization that had been working together for many years, were there to help people in finding, vetting, and spreading information. The Nawaat activists were tightly plugged into groups like Global Voices, a grassroots citizen journalism network that spans the globe. Global Voices holds conferences every other year so that people from different countries in the network can meet one another face-to-face. Neither Nawaat nor the Tunisian section of Global Voices was very large, but they became crucial bridges for local information to journalists abroad, as well as a significant resource for Tunisians, making the suppression of news about the protests more difficult. Global Voices was able to use its preexisting relationships with Tunisian bloggers and its accumulated digital know-how and social capital to get the word out quickly and widely.

To be ready to play key roles in movements that emerge quickly, activists must maintain themselves as activists over the years even when there is little protest activity or overt dissent. Following the revolution in Tunisia, I interviewed many members of Nawaat and Tunisian Global Voices contributors, some of whom I had already known for many years. I asked them what had sustained their political work before the revolution, and the widespread global attention. Many cited the Global Voices organization. “It kept me going,” one of them said to me, “because they were the people who were listening to me when nobody was, and cheering me on when nobody was. I might have given up had it not been for them.”

With a community of digitally savvy activists and a nation that had higher rates of use of social media tools and more people equipped with smartphones than before, the 2010–11 protests took a different path from those in 2009. Unlike the Gafsa protests, pictures of Sidi Bouzid protesters defying the police quickly spread in Tunisia and abroad. The region-wide satellite TV station Al Jazeera also played a key role by broadcasting

video taken from social media on its channel that was accessible to many people inside the country. Despite killing dozens of people, after weeks of protests, the police and the army were unable to contain the movement. As the unrest spread, Ben Ali fled to exile in Saudi Arabia.

Until that time, most of the world had not noticed the events in Tunisia. Remarkably, the very first mention of Tunisian protests in the *New York Times* appeared on January 4, 2011, only one day before Ben Ali fled. Just like the autocratic rulers, many in the West thought that the internet would not make much of a difference in the way politics operated, and they did not anticipate the vulnerability of Ben Ali. He was forced out as the widespread and already existing discontent in the country erupted online and offline—discontent that in earlier eras had fewer modes of collective expression or synchronization available to it.

Tunisia was not an aberration; it was the beginning. After Ben Ali's fall in neighboring Tunisia, the political mood in Egypt also started to shift. The ignition of a social movement arises from multiple important interactions—among activists attempting to find one another, between activists and the public sphere, and among ordinary people finding new access to political content matching their privately held beliefs.

In 2011, why didn't Mubarak's regime crack down harder on online media? Partly because back then, many governments, including Mubarak's, were naïve about the power of the internet and dismissed "online" acts as frivolous and powerless. Indeed, authorities in many countries had derided the internet and digital technology as "virtual" and therefore unimportant. They were not alone. Many Western observers were also scornful of the use of the internet for activism. Online political activity was ridiculed as "slacktivism," an attitude popularized especially by Evgeny Morozov.

In his influential book *The Net Delusion* and in earlier essays, Morozov argued that "slacktivism" was distracting people from productive activism, and that people who were clicking on political topics online were turning away from other forms of activism for the same cause.²² Empirical research on social movements or discussions with actual activists would have quickly dissuaded an observer from such a theory. Most people who become activists start by being exposed to dissident ideas, and people's social networks—

which include online and offline interactions—are among the most effective places from which people are recruited into activism.²³ However, because of the appetite in the Western news media for anything that scorned (or hyped!) the power of the internet, contrarian writers like Morozov quickly rose up to fill that space. Ironically, these provocatively written articles were often used in the competition for clicks online, and often paired with equally unfounded analyses hyping the internet in simplistic and overblown ways.²⁴ Morozov especially specialized in scathing, polemical commentary full of colorful insults that often mischaracterized the views of his opponents (“targets” might be a better word).²⁵ This style helped create an unfortunate dynamic where nuanced and complex conversation on the role of digital connectivity in dissent was drowned out by vitriol and over-simplification, as the “sides” proceeded to set up and knock down strawman, helped by a heaping of personalized insults, which made for entertaining reading that could go viral online, but muddied the analytic waters. In that environment, an underdeveloped concept of slacktivism—a catchphrase that insulted activists and non-activists using digital tools without adding to understanding the complexity of digital reconfiguration of the public sphere—took hold.

This broadly erroneous understanding of the relationship of people to the internet, along with an oversimplification of how it affects social movements, stems from a fallacy that has long been recognized scholars, and one that has been dubbed “digital dualism”—the idea that the internet is a less “real” world. Even the terms “cyberspace” and “virtual” betray this thinking, as if the internet constituted a separate space, like the digital reality in the movie *Matrix* that real people could plug into.²⁶

All these misanalyses were also fueled by the ignorance of people in positions of power who had not grown up with digital communication technologies, and were thus prone to simplistic analyses. Government leaders around the world remain remarkably incognizant of how the internet works at even a basic level. As of this writing, one still encounters reports of top elected officials (and Supreme Court justices) who never use computers. Their aides print their e-mails. This degree of technical ineptitude among the people who run many governments poses problems for Western countries, but it proved to be crippling for dictators in countries whose rule depended on controlling the public sphere.

If the internet is virtual, what harm could a few bloggers typing in an unreal space do? Besides, while the internet was often characterized as politically impotent, it was also seen as a place for economic activity and development, and for consumers too. Some activists told me that they had taken to setting up “technology” companies to disguise their political activism from the doltish authorities. For years, because of the obliviousness of officials, political activists in many countries, including Egypt, were allowed to write online relatively freely. There were pockets of censorship and repression, but they were hit-and-miss rather than broad and effective attempts to suppress online conversation. (However, since the Arab Spring, regime after regime has been forced to recognize that a freewheeling, digitally networked public sphere poses a threat to entrenched control. See chapter 9 for an in-depth exploration.)

Another line of reasoning has been that internet is a minority of the population. This is true; even as late as 2009, the internet was limited to a small minority of households in the Middle East. However, the role of digital connectivity cannot be reduced to the percentage of a nation’s population that is online. Digital connectivity alters the architecture of connectivity across an entire society even when much of it is not yet connected. People on Facebook (more than four million Egyptians around the time of the January 25, 2011, uprising) communicate with those who are not on the site by sharing what they saw online with friends and family through other means: face-to-face conversation, texting, or telephone.²⁷ Only a segment of the population needs to be connected digitally to affect the entire environment. In Egypt in 2011, only 25 percent of the population of the country was online, with a smaller portion of those on Facebook, but these people still managed to change the wholesale public discussion, including conversations among people who had never been on the site.

The internet’s earliest adopters tended to be wealthier, more technically oriented, and better educated. This also has consequences for politics, but it is not the whole story. Two key constituencies for social movements are also early adopters: activists and journalists. During my research, I found that activists in many countries were among the first to take up this new tool to organize, to publicize, and in some places to circumvent censorship.

In my home country, Turkey, I was also among the earliest users of the internet, mostly because I wanted to freely access information, including political information that was censored in Turkey's mass media.

In 2011, a few months after the Tunisian protests, I visited Al Jazeera headquarters in Qatar and interviewed some of the young journalists who had spread the news of the then-emerging Arab Spring protests. Al Jazeera employs journalists from dozens of nations. How did they navigate the Tunisian blogosphere and social media where so overwhelmingly many videos and images were being posted? Many explained that they had been drawn to the internet as a political space from early on, and they had long-time friendships with the leading activists of the region who also understood the power of connectivity. While many Westerners were surprised by the use of social media during Middle East protests, these young journalists were habituated to it since, like their activist counterparts, they lived in repressive countries with tightly controlled public spheres.

The political internet in the first decade of the twenty-first century in the Middle East featured blogs that not only published political essays but also exposed government wrongdoing, from small outrages to large-scale atrocities, aided by their improved ability to document events with cheap cameras and cell phones that recorded and transmitted pictures and video. One well-known Egyptian blogger published videos on subjects ranging from images of women being harassed in the street to police torturing detained people. Before internet activism emerged in Egypt, these topics had rarely been discussed openly.²⁸

The region's autocratic rulers might have been somewhat perturbed by these flares of public attention on formerly taboo subjects, but they probably comforted themselves with the thought that internet users in their country were and would remain a peripheral subset of the population consisting of the technically oriented and a few political activists.

But then, Facebook arrived.

Facebook changed the picture significantly by opening to the masses the networked public sphere that had previously been available only to a marginal, self-selected group of people who were already politically active.²⁹ Facebook has been adopted rapidly in almost every country where it has

been introduced because it fulfills a basic human desire: to connect with family and friends. Once a computer was in the house, the site offered connections much more cheaply than alternatives like the telephone, especially as the price of computers dropped over time. In countries like Egypt and Tunisia with large families as the norm and with long working hours, horrible street traffic, and large expatriate communities, it was especially popular. Just one year after Facebook was made available in Arabic in 2009, it had quickly acquired millions of users.

Facebook also has specific features: such as a design that leans toward being open and non-privacy respecting. This was often a privacy nightmare, but it was also a boon to activists—it meant that things spread easily. Ben Ali briefly tried to ban Facebook, but the attempt backfired because so many Tunisians used Facebook to connect with far-flung family, friends, and acquaintances. Facebook had become too useful for too many in the general population to be easily outlawed, but also too politically potent to ignore. In that way, the platform created a bind for the authoritarian governments that had tended to ignore it in its earlier stages.

Ethan Zuckerman calls this the “cute cat theory” of activism and the public sphere. Platforms that have nonpolitical functions can become more politically powerful because it is harder to censor their large numbers of users who are eager to connect with one another or to share their latest “cute cat” pictures.³⁰ Attempts to censor Facebook often backfire for this reason. This is one reason some nations, like China, have never allowed Facebook to become established, and likely will not do so unless Facebook succumbs to draconian measures of control, censorship, and turning over of user information to the government.³¹ Additionally, these internet platforms harness the power of network effects—the more people who use them, the more useful they are to more people. With so many people already on Facebook, there are huge incentives for new people to get on Facebook even if they dislike some of its policies or features. Network effects also create a twist for activists who find themselves compelled to use whatever the dominant platform may be, even if they are uncomfortable with it. A perfect social media platform without users is worthless for activism. One that is taking off on a society-wide scale is hard to stop, block, or ban.

The arrival of Facebook introduced another aspect of the power of networked dissent. Ordinarily, people have social ties of varying strength. Some people are closer to one another and serve as one another's primary or strong ties. Other people are more distant friends, acquaintances, or workplace colleagues or have other weak ties. Traditionally, most people have strong ties to only a few people, but the number of people to whom they have weak ties may vary widely. Strong ties are very important to people's well-being and are often formed between people who tend to live or work close to each other—though immigration and moving internally for education or jobs has helped weaken that connection. People tend to try to keep up with those to whom they have strong ties no matter what technology is available. That is not necessarily true for weak ties. Without Facebook, there is little chance that I would still have contact with my middle-school friends from a place where I lived for only a few years. Through social media, people can announce significant events like births, marriages, and deaths to a wide range of people, including many with whom they have weak ties, and can maintain relationships that were never strong to begin with and relationships that without digital assistance might have withered away or involved much less contact. For people seeking political change, though, the networking that takes place among people with weak ties is especially important.

People with strong ties likely already share similar views, so such views are less likely to surprise when they are expressed on social media. However, weaker ties may be far flung and composed of people with varying political and social ties. Also, weak ties may create bridges to other clusters of people in a way strong ties do not. For example, your siblings already know one another, and news travels among them in many ways. However, a workplace acquaintance—someone with whom you have a weak tie—who sees a piece of political news from you on Facebook may share it with her social network, her relatives and friends, a group of people you would ordinarily have no access to, save for the bridging role played by the weak tie between you and your work colleague. Social scientists call the person connecting these two otherwise separate clusters a “bridge tie.” Research shows that weak ties are more likely to be bridges between disparate groups.³² This finding has important implications for politics in the era of

digital connectivity because Facebook makes it much easier for people to stay connected with others through weak ties. Thus Facebook creates more connections over which political news can travel and reach other communities to which one lacks direct access.³³

For perhaps the first time, dissidents in the Mideast were able to quasi-broadcast their views, at least to their Facebook friends (and the friends of their Facebook friends, who could easily number in the tens of thousands). If a few people who were not overtly political “liked” or positively commented on their posts, not only were they sharing their thoughts with others, but also everyone else seeing the interaction knew that others had been exposed to this information. Through these symbolic interactions, activists created a new baseline for common knowledge of the political situation in Egypt—not just what you knew, but also what others knew you knew, and so on—that shifted the acceptable boundaries of discourse.³⁴

In 2010, a young man named Khaled Said was brutally murdered by the Egyptian police. The details are murky, but the precipitating incident was probably a petty crime. Some say that he smoked pot. There were rumors that he might have documented police misconduct. He was tortured and killed, and the police acted with impunity, as they often did. A distraught relative took a picture of his mangled face in the morgue. The photograph spread online in Egypt along with a “before” picture of him: a young, healthy man smiling, full of potential and hope, juxtaposed to a photograph symbolizing everything wrong with the country.

Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian who worked for Google and resided in the United Arab Emirates, was outraged, like many other Egyptians. He set up a Facebook page called “We Are All Khaled Said” to express his outrage. He kept his identity hidden. Nobody at Google knew what he was doing, nor did anyone else. The page quickly grew and became a focal point of dissident political discussion in Egypt. In 2015, I met with Ghonim in New York. Like many other activists I have known, he told me that he had realized the political potential of the internet early on. He was an early adopter of all things digital, going back to the initial days of the internet’s introduction in the Middle East. When Facebook came along, he quickly realized that it was not just a place for baby pictures or Eid holiday greetings.³⁵

After Ben Ali's fall in neighboring Tunisia, the Egyptian "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page became even more animated as thousands of Egyptians debated whether they, too, could overthrow their autocrat and replace the repressive regime with a democracy. Egyptians had followed the protests in Tunisia with great interest, and every day many people posted suggestions, arguments, desires, and political goals at the page. Finally, after much heated conversation and a poll of the page's users, Wael Ghonim posted a "Facebook event" inviting people to Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011. He could not know that it would eventually lead to the ouster of Mubarak.

Less than a year after those protests, I talked with "Ali," one of the leading activists of the movement, who had been in Tahrir the very first day, and also for the eighteen days of protest that led to Mubarak's fall. We were all in Tunisia at the Arab Bloggers Conference, where Egyptians, Tunisians, Bahrainis, and others who had played prominent roles in political social media had gathered. We sat in a seaside café, surrounded by activists from many Arab countries after a long day of workshops. The movements were still young, and the full force of the counter-reaction had not yet been felt. The beautiful Mediterranean stretched before us, and some people danced inside the café to rap music making fun of their fallen dictators while others sipped their drinks.

As Ali explained it to me, for him, January 25, 2011, was in many ways an ordinary January 25—officially a "police celebration day," but traditionally a day of protest. Although he was young, he was a veteran activist. He and a small group of fellow activists gathered each year in Tahrir on January 25 to protest police brutality. January 25, 2011, was not their first January 25 protest, and many of them expected something of a repeat of their earlier protests—perhaps a bit larger this year.

I had seen a picture of those early protests, so I could imagine the scene he described: a few hundred young people, surrounded by rows and rows of riot police and sometimes tanks, isolated, alone, and seemingly without impact on the larger society. During some years they were allowed to shout slogans; in other years they were beaten up and arrested. Yet they went on, year after year, on principle and out of bravery and loyalty to their friends. Then 2011 happened. Ali didn't know what to expect but confessed that

he had not expected much—certainly not toppling the regime. But as soon as he arrived at the square, he knew. “It was different,” he said. That year’s protest was larger, he said, but that was not the only difference. “People who showed up in Tahrir weren’t just your friends.”

Ali paused, searching for a way to describe the people who had shown up that year. “They were your Facebook friends.”

He meant that rather than the small core group of about a hundred activists, thousands of people—friends and acquaintances who were not very political, who were not hard-core activists—also showed up on January 25, 2011. His weak-tie networks had been politically activated. Although the crowd was not huge yet, it was large enough to pose a problem for the government, especially since many were armed with digital cameras and internet connections. My research of that showed that people with a presence on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, were much more likely to have shown up on the crucial first day that kicked off the avalanche of protest that was to come.³⁶

Now the annual crowd of a few hundred in the square had grown to thousands. There were too many people to beat up or arrest without repercussions, especially because the presence of digital cameras and smartphones meant that those few thousands could easily and quickly spread the word to tens and hundreds of thousands in their networks of strong and weak ties. More people joined them. These people in Tahrir Square were more powerful not only because there were more of them, but also because they were making visible to Egypt, and to the whole world, where they stood, in coordination and in synchrony with one another.

Humans are group animals—aside from rare and aberrant exceptions, we exist and live in groups. We thrive and exist via social signaling to one another about our beliefs, and we adjust according to what we think others around us think. This is absolutely normal for humans. Most of the time we are also a fairly docile species—and when we are not, it is often in organized ways, such as wars. You could not, for example, squeeze more than a hundred chimpanzees into a thin metal tube, sitting knee-to-knee and shoulder-to-shoulder in cramped quarters, close the door, hurl the tube across the sky at great speed, and always expect those disembarking at the other end to have all their body parts intact. But we can travel in airplanes

because our social norms and nature are to comply, cooperate, accommodate, and sometimes even be kind to one another.

Some social scientists (mostly economists) who imagine humans as selfish and utility-maximizing individuals theorize that people would descend into self-absorbed chaos as soon as external controls on them were lifted. But things are far from that simple. For example, it has been repeatedly found that in most emergencies, disasters, and protests, ordinary people are often helpful and altruistic.³⁷ This is not a uniform effect though; pre-existing polarization can worsen, for example, under such stress. It is true that humans can be rational, calculating, and selfish, but it is also true that humans want to belong and fit in, and that they care deeply about what their fellow humans think of a situation. From preschool to adolescence to adulthood, most of us are highly attuned to what our peers and people with high status or those in authority think. It is as if we are always playing chess, poker, and truth-or-dare simultaneously.

However, that desire to belong, reflecting what a person perceives to be the views of the majority, is also used by those in power to control large numbers of people, especially if it is paired with heavy punishments for the visible troublemakers who might set a different example to follow. In fact, for many repressive governments, fostering a sense of loneliness among dissidents while making an example of them to scare off everyone else has long been a trusted method of ruling.³⁸ Social scientists refer to the feeling of imagining oneself to be a lonely minority when in fact there are many people who agree with you, maybe even a majority, as “pluralistic ignorance.”³⁹ Pluralistic ignorance is thinking that one is the only person bored at a class lecture and not knowing that the sentiment is shared, or that dissent and discontent are rare feelings in a country when in fact they are common but remain unspoken.

To understand how fear and outward conformity operate hand in hand, think of sitting in a cramped middle row at an awful concert or lecture. You may wish to leave, but who wants to stand out and perhaps feel stupid and rude by leaving when everyone else appears to be listening attentively? Pretending to pay attention, and even to enjoy the event, is the safest bet. That is what people do, and that is what those in authority often rely on to keep people in line. Now imagine that the performer controls not only the

microphone but also a police force that will arrest anyone who shows signs of being bored or uninterested. The first person to yawn will be carted away screaming, and you know or imagine that bad things will happen to anyone who signals displeasure or boredom. Imagine that the theater is dark—a controlled public sphere, censored media—so you can hardly see what fellow members of the audience are doing or thinking, although you are occasionally able to whisper about the awful performance to the few friends you are seated with. But you whisper lest the police hear you, and only to those closest to you. Imagine that there are rumors that the police have installed microphones in some of the seats. Most of the time you sit still and remain quiet. It feels dangerous even to give your friends an occasional knowing, disgusted nudge during the worst parts of the performance. Welcome to the authoritarian state.

Now imagine that there is a tool that allows you to signal your boredom and disgust to your neighbors and even to the whole room all at once. Imagine people being able to nod or “like” your grumblings about the quality of the event and to realize that many people in the room feel the same way. That cramped seat in the middle row no longer feels as alone and isolated. You may find yourself joined by new waves of people declaring their boredom.

This is what the digitally networked public sphere can do in many instances: help people reveal their (otherwise private) preferences to one another and discover common ground. Street protests play a similar role in showing people that they are not alone in their dissent. But digital media make this happen in a way that blurs the boundaries of private and public, home and street, and individual and collective action.

Given the role of pluralistic ignorance in keeping people who live under repressive regimes scared and compliant, technologies of connectivity create a major threat to those regimes. Even in the absence of repression, pluralistic ignorance plays a role simply because we like to belong; however, the effect is weaker since people are less likely to be quiet about their beliefs. The threat that pluralistic ignorance might be undermined is one of the reasons that the government of China, for example, hands out multi-decade sentences to bloggers and spends huge sums of money employing hundreds of thousands of people to extensively censor the online world. A single blog-

ger does not pose much of a threat. But if one person is allowed to blog freely, soon there might be hundreds of thousands, and they might discover that they are not alone.⁴⁰ That is a crucial aspect of what happened in Egypt, leading to the uprising in 2011.

Thanks to a Facebook page, perhaps for the first time in history, an internet user could click yes on an electronic invitation to a revolution. Hundreds of thousands did so, in full view of their online networks of strong and weak ties, all at once. The rest is history—a complex and still-unfinished one, with many ups and downs. But for Egypt, and for the rest of the world, things would never be the same again.