Module 4

Moreno-Almeida, Cristina, and Shakuntala Banaji. 2019. “Digital Use and Mistrust in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring: Beyond Narratives of Liberation and Disillusionment.” *Media, Culture & Society* 41 (8): 112541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718823143>.

Moreno-Almeida and Sahkuntala conducted a study spanning four countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where they surveyed 15-35 year olds to understand how civic networks were forming and what their purpose was. Their overall goal was to determine the nature of the relationship between digital media and mistrust (2019, 7).

The data was collected in as controlled a manner as possible when working with such a sensitive topic in authoritarian states. The authors listed many issues in their section on methods and research design and they specifically tried to get as many samples as possible that would avoid only getting results from predominantly well to-do citizens (Moreno-Almeida and Sakhuntala 2019, 6-7). I’ll argue that the groups they’ve managed to get in contact with represent both the most at-risk like the LGBTQ and feminist group CHOUF and more of the common working class group like the Trainee teachers union or the football ultras.

This case study was related to data governance in that it is a question of management and ethics from the point of view of the governed. Moreno-ALmeida and Sakhuntala cite a number of sources that proclaim the great importance of social media during the Arab Spring as if social media were a fully trusted medium of communications (2019, 1). What the authors found was that there was a substantial amount of distrust in these platforms. With the countries being authoritarian and monitoring communications, encrypted platforms like Whatsapp were used only sparingly and with no-trust protocols like altered phone numbers or misinformation traps. Platforms like Facebook were used much like they are in the West with anonymous organization pages posting information but not revealing anything identifiable about members or organizers (Moreno-Almeida and Sakhuntala 2019, 9).

The case study also pointed out that very few people actually have access to the internet (Moreno-Almeida and Sakhuntala 2019, 1-2) and that organizations were aware of this. A good example from the case-study is that of Manich\_Msamah. This organization spread their messages through analog means like guerilla artwork rather than digital means like Facebook (Moreno-Almeida and Sakhuntala 2019, 13).

The authors also point out that there is an interesting reversal done by CHOUF. CHOUF conducted similar operations to the state surveillance system to vet potential members before allowing them to become a part of the inner circle (Moreno-Almeida and Sakhuntala 2019, 10). CHOUF effectively turned the usually negatively associated means of creating distrust through digital surveillance into a trust building apparatus within the organization.

No real legislation is mentioned in this article. However, we can turn to outside sources to look at a selection of laws that highlight why there is distrust in the digital space in these countries. One good example is from Tunisia, Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code of 2001, which has been used to prosecute people based on what they posted on Facebook or Article 52 and 53 of Decree-Law No.115 on Freedom of the Press, Printing and Publishing which gives blanket prosecution rights on offending authorized religions and article 57 which simply states anything that “... offends dignity, or any term of contempt not involving the accusation of anything specific” (Amnesty International 2020, 8-11). Such laws effectively grant the state a blank check to charge defendants for anything done online and in effect codifies state censorship to be whatever the state wants it to be at any moment.

My overall takeaway from this case study is that the new media offers innovative paths for collaboration in authoritarian states but it is not the definitive means of organizing or communicating. It is simply one tool in the toolkit of organized resistance. It also really only affects those wealthy enough to have access to such means of communicating. The authors were right to be skeptical of the sweeping claim of new media’s inherent goodness. I see this similar to the hype in 2019 onwards about Web3, crypto, and 5G. These new things were meant to revolutionize communications and that somehow these technologies would allow grass-roots movements to organize or communicate in a way that would completely change the existing order. What we have seen so far is that while these are novel technologies, there is no true peer-to-peer, encrypted communications that is not at risk of corporate or state surveillance. The authors also conclude that further observations would be needed to see if digital media does increase trust by anonymizing and creating non-state controlled means of distributing/gathering information or if it becomes like traditional media and is inherently untrustworthy.

References

Amnesty International. 2020. “Outdated and Flawed Laws Used to Restrict Speech in Tunisia.” *Criminal Prosecutions of Online Speech*, (November). MDE 30/3286/2020.