CONTENTS

Editorial
91–93 PAUL GROSSWILER

Articles
95–114 Bracketing the Gutenberg Parenthesis
THOMAS PETIT
115–130 Modern Arab uprisings and social media: An historical perspective on media and revolution
ROGER P. MELLEN
131–142 Ecological journalism and the role of perception
CHRISTINE M. TRACY

Pedagogy
143–162 Feedback: The impact of textual channel variance on student learning
KEITH MASSIE

Probe
163–176 Why I am not going to teach public speaking online
ARTHUR W. HUNT III
Modern Arab uprisings and social media: An historical perspective on media and revolution

ABSTRACT
Journalists and other observers claim that new social media brought about the wave of current popular uprisings in the Middle East. This article examines - with an historical perspective within the intellectual framework of media ecology - this idea of new media as the cause of revolution. It concludes that while new media are an important factor behind these recent revolts, they do not cause revolution. Shifts in communication technology have a major influence on the way we interrelate and organize our society. The very structure of the World Wide Web makes control of information extremely difficult for autocratic governments and is indeed a strong force for popular movements, democratic change and freedom.

KEYWORDS
revolution
social media
Facebook
YouTube
history
Middle East
Arab Spring

INTRODUCTION
The Internet, cell phone video and social media sites have been given a great deal of credit for launching the recent revolutions and popular actions in several Middle Eastern and northern African states. Massive demonstrations in Egypt, for example, were reported to have been inspired and coordinated...
through the use of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Photographs and videos from cell phones have sent images of brutality around the world, prompting outrages against dictatorial and violent regimes. Recent revolutions in several Arab countries have been organized around messages and images sent through social media websites. Some of these uprisings have been successful; some have not. This is not the first time that new forms of communication have been given credit for a revolution. The claim has often been made that newspapers and political pamphlets instigated the American Revolution. The role of new media within the recent popular uprisings in the Mideast can be understood better when viewed through the lens of history and with the assistance of the intellectual framework of media ecology. This article explores the question: Did new social media cause revolution? By examining previous analyses of the role of media within political revolution, we can better understand the interplay between new social media and the current popular uprisings in the Middle East and northern Africa. While widely used digital media may have enabled and assisted some of these mass actions, critical examination indicates no direct causality. Digital social media interact with a large and complex series of political, social and cultural factors to help to either overthrow or support oppressive dictatorships. However, the very nature of new media has a tendency to empower greater numbers of people and certainly can be viewed as a threat to extremely hierarchical political structures. Indeed, new media may have been critical in enabling many of these popular uprisings.

UPRISINGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

‘[T]he revolution started on Facebook... if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet’, according to the young man who is credited with starting the Facebook website that is said to have launched the revolution in Egypt. Wael Ghonim modestly deflects credit for his own social activism (quoted from a CNN Wolf Blitzer interview, as cited in MacKinnon 2011). He is not alone in suggesting that the new social media ignited revolution in many Arab countries. A number of journalists have pointed to the influences of modern communication technology – and they specifically point to the website named after a young Egyptian killed by police – as mobilizing the protestors: ‘It gave a space for the young people to interact with each other and to plan together’ (Kirkpatrick and Preston 2011: A10). Another analysis concluded that: ‘Twitter and other social media united protestors and allowed widespread grievances to centralize and foment into revolution’ (Griffith 2010). At a recent Arab Media Forum, participants could not agree on whether social media caused the recent ‘Arab Spring’, or merely facilitated popular uprisings, but the consensus of the journalists, researchers and audience members was that modern web communications were a crucial element of modern political activism (Al Lawati 2011).

Ghonim is credited with setting up a Facebook page in memory of a young man killed while in the custody of Egyptian police, as shown in Figure 1. According to a report in The New York Times, this website demonstrates just how powerful social media tools can be. Video recordings on cell phones that later show up on YouTube, the mass organizing power of Facebook pages and messages shooting instantly through Twitter accounts established a power not anticipated by many governments around the world. However, this news report also acknowledges: ‘it is almost impossible to isolate the impact of social media tools’ (Preston 2011: A10), from the other political,
cultural and social forces in play in Egypt and in other countries. The analyses of historians and media ecologists help us to understand the influence that such media changes can have on social conscience and a political structure.

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF MEDIA AND REVOLUTION

History cannot predict the future, but lessons from the past can help us to better understand what is happening now. Media historians have been writing about the interplay between media forms, politics, revolution and government for many decades. While few see new forms of media as actually bringing about political revolution, many view the changes in media technology as being a critical catalyst for major changes in society, religion and governmental structure. As historian Jonathan Coopersmith wrote: 'No one should comment on the revolutionary aspects of modern communications technologies without first understanding their roles in earlier revolutions' (1997: par. 7).

Economic historian Harold Innis viewed technological change as an extremely important force on cultural and social change, and theorized that changes in communication technology were the central influence (Carey 1968). As perhaps the first media ecologist, Innis ([1951] 1964) came at the problem from his background in political economy, and taking a broad view he recognized that such changes in communication go beyond immediate social change and even profoundly influence entire civilizations. Looking back at ancient cultures, Innis saw that new media forms brought not simply
revolution or political change, but rather ‘led to the emergence of a new civilization’ ([1951] 1964: 3, 33–34). Changes in the dominant communication medium disrupt the control over information or the institutional monopoly over knowledge, and each new medium emphasizes a different dimension: time or space. For instance, earlier civilizations that utilized a more durable medium, such as writing on stone or clay tablets, had a time bias. The written word had a longevity that led to institutions that were hierarchical, but the inability to easily transport laws and other messages written on a long-lasting but heavy medium led to political decentralization. The introduction of light media such as paper and papyrus led to a greater ability for information to travel (a space bias rather than the earlier time bias) and allowed for a centralized government over wider spaces, such as in ancient Egypt (Innis 1972: 7). In Europe, the written word on parchment emphasized time over space (because of its durability and heavier weight) and supported monastic control over knowledge and church political power versus state power. Printing and papermaking led to an emphasis on space through a greater ability to let knowledge travel and a political emphasis on nationalism, market economy and centralization of power. The importance of time is de-emphasized with printing. Innis theorized, but space and politics became more important (1972: 143–69).

As Neil Postman summarized Innis: ‘New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the thing we think with. And they alter the nature of our community: the arena in which thoughts develop’ (1992: 20, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Innis (1972) suggested that: the spread of printing led to the religious wars of the seventeenth century and that the introduction of radio led to a clash between the printed word and the spoken word. That led again to war – World War II (Innis 1972: 191). Communication media and the biases inherent in each new medium do cause cultural instability, Innis theorized, and bring with it social and political change. With the rise of the printing press came nationalism and representative government ([1951] 1964: xii, 1972: 167).

Applying these theories to the present situation in the Middle East could certainly lead us to believe that a shift to new media would also cause cultural, social and political change.

Marshall McLuhan (1964) extended Innis’ concepts beyond time and space to view media as extensions of human senses. While agreeing that forms of mass media are important influences on culture and society, McLuhan boldly and controversially stated the medium is the message, or that the form of the medium is more important than are the words or thoughts communicated within the medium. While influenced by Innis’ theories of time and space, McLuhan examined how such changes in media alter how individuals use their senses and how people think. While he did not write of political revolution, he wrote of a revolution of thought that followed the spread of the printing press, noting the importance of the characteristics of the communications medium and theorized important cultural transformational qualities of such media. McLuhan viewed electronic media as extensions of the human nervous system and theorized that radio was a medium that abolished time and space (1962: 9–28). Electronic media help to bring about the ‘retribalization’ of man, demeaning traditional ideology and organization, breaking through now at the political level. As new media have this influence upon successive generations, young people view their world and think about it differently because their media (the primary means that the world is communicated to them) are different from those used by their parents and grandparents. This
can cause intergenerational conflict (Carey 1968: 287–89), something seen as an element in the protests in Egypt and other nations (Laqueur 2011).

While historian Elizabeth Eisenstein sees McLuhan’s work as ahistorical and at times lacking in coherent argument, she does see his views as worthy of further exploration by historians (1980: x, 41). Her work examines the revolutionary changes that occurred in Europe as use of the printing press spread, focusing more on religious and scientific developments than on government and politics. She concludes that the development of the new medium of the printed word, as it spread through Western Europe following Johannes Gutenberg’s development of the metal movable-type printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, was critical to revolutionary changes in religion and science.

Eisenstein calls the printing press an ‘agent of change’, and she describes it as the ‘crucible’ within which modern science, the Reformation and the Enlightenment were formed (1980: 269–70, 703–04). She views the rapid spread of the printed word as revolutionary and cautiously notes that the printed word could indeed have a subversive nature, against both political and religious powers, as the spread of printed ideas can never be completely controlled (Eisenstein 1986: 186–205). If the printed word could have such a subversive influence against political powers, one could certainly theorize that modern, electronic, instantaneous messages could have an even more dramatic effect than did print.

While media ecologists have embraced the views of Eisenstein, McLuhan and Innis, many other historians have a more conservative attitude towards the interrelationship between media and revolution. Historians have identified the spread of the printed word as one of the enabling factors behind the American Revolution in the eighteenth century. Charles E. Clark (1994) observed that there was an explosion in the number of newspapers being published in the American colonies just before the Revolution, although there are no accurate circulation numbers. He concluded that the spread of printed word prior to the dispute with Great Britain helped to break down barriers between people, making a less stratified, more unified American society, but he did not suggest that newspapers were the sole cause of the conflict (Clark 1994: 3–5, 7, 256–57, 272 and fn 12). David A. Copeland theorized that colonial newspapers evolved into ‘political machines that fired a revolution of colonies against the mother country’, and he noted that their influence went well beyond merely the subscribers to the newspapers through public readings and discussions in taverns and coffee houses (1997: 12, 18). It was the sharing of news between colonies – a sort of informal news service that emerged as printers clipped stories from other newspapers – that helped to develop the shared identity and unification needed for a successful revolution (Copeland 1997: 274). Perhaps it is Facebook and Twitter that today are supplying that same sense of community to modern revolutionaries.

The standard view of progressive historians was that newspapers and pamphlets were important propaganda tools for the American patriot cause (Davidson 1941; Schlesinger 1957; Bailyn [1967] 1992). David Ramsay, an early historian who also lived through the Revolution, has often been quoted as saying: ‘In establishing American independence, the pen and the press had merit equal to that of the sword’ (1789, quoted in Schlesinger 1957: vii; Weir 1980: 99; Walett 1977: 157). In exploring propaganda and the American Revolution, Philip Davidson focused only on newspapers and pamphlets, suggesting that while almanacs were more widely distributed, they were too dated to be of value for the propagandist (1941: 216–23). More recently,
I discovered influence from the almanacs in their content as well as their form. There is evidence that literacy spread through use of the ubiquitous colonial almanac, which helped to erode social barriers, thus enabling large numbers of people to think independently and even to imagine a Revolution (Mellen 2009: 99–132) and a new nation (Anderson [1983] 1991). As new printed material helped to change styles of thought, so too may modern digital communications be allowing for greater independent thinking by Middle Eastern youth, making possible a re-imagining of the political structure of their society.

As John Adams wrote in an 1818 letter to Hezekiah Niles, the important transformation was not the Revolutionary War itself, but rather the transition that came prior to the fighting: 'This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people was the real American Revolution' (as cited in Schlesinger 1957: 4). James Schlesinger theorized that the press, 'instigated, catalyzed and synthesized' other forms of propaganda, such as preaching from the pulpit and mob actions (1957: 46). He concluded that newspapers formed a unified and effective propagandist influence leading up to the Revolution. While Schlesinger did not allege that the printed word caused the Revolution, he did suggest the fight would not have been successful without the press.

During the late eighteenth century, revolution in France came despite heavy government censorship of the press. During the final years of the monarchy, democratic ideals slipped through the censors inside of foreign news that was consistent with the national foreign policy, for example the revolution in America. The French-language press outside of the national borders actively smuggled in the printed words that were officially banned. Writing of the French revolution, Jack Censer explicitly rejected the idea that the press caused the revolution, but he cautiously concluded that the press was a precipitant to the revolt – one of many factors leading to the revolution (1994: 212–13). In exploring the press and the same French Revolution, Jeremy Popkin wrote that foreign-based French-language gazettes were a factor in moving France away from an absolute monarchy to a more representative government, as these periodical publications opened the eyes of the readers to opposition politics, even though their content was less than revolutionary in character (1989: 120).

In a work of collected essays on Media and Revolution, Jeremy Popkin and Jack Censer argue against the idea of media wielding a great deal of power, and they note that the writers they introduce reach varying conclusions about the connections between revolution and media (1995: 1–4). One of the contributors – again writing about the French Revolution – comes close to claiming that the revolution was largely the creation of journalistic rhetoric. The media did not cause the revolution, in his view, but rather the two were so closely intertwined that they were virtually one and the same (Rétat 1995: 5).

Gilbert Seldes originally proposed an historical hypothesis that revolutionary communication changes are followed by changes in the structure of society (1968: 9). James Billington examined revolutions in the western world and saw the link between media and revolution as so crucial that it may even validate the hypothesis 'that every revolutionary change in the means of communication is followed by a change in the entire structure of society' (1980: 306–08). However, the editors of this collection warn against overly simplistic approaches, or answers to the cause of revolutions in general. The chapters here on China and the former Czechoslovakia downplay the role of media in those revolutions (Popkin and Censer 1998; Wasserstrom 1995: 189–219;
Johnson 1995: 220–30). While rejecting the idea that media can be the sole cause of revolution, Popkin and Censer agree that revolutions in history have tended to be marked by a simultaneous shift in the type of communication media in that society. While denying any direct causality, they conclude that, ‘the sudden alteration of media systems does indeed appear to be one of the defining characteristics of revolutions’ (Popkin and Censer 1995: 4, 9). Of specific relevance to the current situation in the Mideast, they write, ‘In addition to the multiplication of media outlets, revolutionary crises do generally seem to be characterized by a shift toward forms of communication that can be produced and distributed most rapidly and hence have the fastest impact’ (Popkin and Censer 1995: 24).

In contrast, a journalist writing of the fall of the Soviet Union observed that it was the new information technology and the loosening of press censorship that led to the dismantling of the USSR. Scott Shane (1994) supports the idea of information revolutions prefiguring political upheavals, suggesting that such an explosion of new media swept the former communist nation from 1987 to 1991. While he acknowledges that many factors were at work, especially economic difficulties, he says: ‘The most important of these forces was information. Information is the most revealing prism through which to view the essence and the end of the Soviet Union. Information slew the totalitarian giant’ (Shane 1994: 6).

Looking back at major political shifts, even historians sceptical of technological determinism acknowledge an interrelationship between changes in media technology and revolutionary changes. Historians see shifts in media technology and control as important influences on shifts in government. Media ecologists theorize an even stronger relationship, with the view that shifts in media have a strong influence on changes in society and political control. However, even media ecologists recognize that methods of communication are only one of many influences on society, that media are just one part of a complex human culture that includes many diverse influences. Most observers do agree that these media shifts are extremely important.

ARAB SPRING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Just as historians have observed media changes prefiguring past revolutions, journalists and other observers report the widespread use of cellular phones, computers and related social media in conjunction with recent political upheaval in the Mideast. The use of modern social media have shifted the patterns of communication around the world. Prior to anti-government protests in Egypt, for example, government abuses were widely reported on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, allowing for the spread of subversive information without government control over the messages.

One widely viewed Facebook page, ‘We are all Khaled Said’ (Ghonim 2011), was set up in memory of that young Egyptian who died in police custody in June 2010, as shown in Figure 1. The page graphically displayed the apparent results of police brutality suffered by Said, including pictures of him taken on a cell phone at the morgue, showing injuries apparently inflicted by Egyptian police (Kirkpatrick and Preston 2011). This was one of many rallying points for dissidence located in cyberspace. Activists posted links to videos on YouTube showing official vehicles running over protestors and other acts of violence by government groups. Just a little more than one month after Said’s death, an English version of the Facebook page in
his honour appeared. (There was originally a Facebook page in Arabic and it eventually appeared in many languages). There was an immediate call for a peaceful protest: ‘Fourth Silent Stand will be on 23rd July – The anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution 1952’ (Ghonim 2011). Enough people gathered in protest in July 2010 to have the event reported in the Egyptian press (Anon. 2010). By early next year, this Facebook page hosted calls to move beyond simple protests, to begin a ‘peaceful uprising against torture, poverty, corruption and unemployment in Egypt’ starting on 25 January. ‘Stand up for your rights Egyptians’ (Ghonim 2011) was the call to protest on this website. According to another post, ‘The aim of this page is to bring people together from all nationalities, races, backgrounds & from very different points of views together’. By 11 February 2011, the popular uprising – whose protests were heavily announced on Facebook and Twitter – forced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign after 29 years of autocratic rule.

As police used rubber bullets and other forms of violent crowd control in an attempt to stifle the demonstrations, a young generation of technically proficient protesters defended their resistance with small tools they had in their pockets. Activists recorded images of the demonstrations on small cell phones and then posted these pictures and videos on YouTube and other websites, immediately spreading word of the protests throughout the world, as shown in Figure 2. As Jennifer Preston and Brian Stelter reported, ‘the most powerful weapon against shotguns and tear gas has been the tiny camera inside their cellphones’ (2011: A11). That comment is remarkably similar to that quoted here earlier: ‘the pen had merit equal to that of the sword’, but that of course was referring to the American Revolution some 250 years ago (Ramsay 1789).

While the embattled governments are often able to control old media such as newspapers and locally broadcast television, in at least some cases officials could not censor the messages in the new media. As James E. Katz,
director of the Rutgers Center for Mobile Communication Studies, observed: ‘You finally have a video technology that can fit into the palm of one person’s hand and what the person can capture can end up around the world’ (Preston and Stelter 2011: A11). Activists uploaded their cell phone videos to YouTube where Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based television news network, picked them up and then distributed the images by satellite around the globe. While dictators cut off Internet access and attempted to limit media coverage, controlling media access has never been easy and digital media has made that more complex. Autocratic regimes could control printing presses and broadcast stations, but satellite television signals beaming in from other countries are not so easy to censor. While the Egyptian government did attempt to cut off all Internet service, cell phones and Al Jazeera’s satellite television signal, they were not successful and they were unable to stop the protestors (Griffith 2011). Television engineers figured out another delivery system and put Al Jazeera back on the nation’s television sets, despite the government’s efforts (Pintak 2011). When authorities censored Facebook sites, shut down Twitter or attempted to completely end all Internet access, activists found proxies or alternative pathways (Ghannam 2011a).

A new communication model replaced the old model of journalists as gatekeepers, recording, selecting and transmitting messages to a mass audience. Instead, normal citizens and activists recorded shocking images of oppressive violence and then spread them through social media. Television networks such as Al Jazeera and CNN then picked up these Internet images and retransmitted them, reinforcing protestors’ complaints against their governments. According to Katz, ‘This is the dagger at the throat of the creaky old regimes that, through the manipulation of these old centralized technologies, have been able to smother the public’s voice’ (Preston and Stelter 2011).

In some experts’ views, the new technologies are important tools for empowering people in democratic movements. Commentator Kaylee Hartung claims that the new social media were ‘instrumental’ (2011) in empowering the people of Egypt, according to her posting on CBSNews.com. This article notes how Twitter was first seen as a tool for democracy in Iran in the protests following the 2009 elections. In the more recent popular mobilizations, activists in Tunisia and Egypt used Twitter hashtags, such as ‘#Tunisie’ and ‘#Jan25’, allowing worldwide audiences to follow the uprisings (Ghannam 2011a). A recent report for the Center for International Media Assistance estimates that some 60 million Arabs are now connected to the Internet. Author Jeffrey Ghannam sees an increase of freedom of expression spreading through the Arab world, breaking down government-controlled media monopolies and increasing citizen engagement in politics: ‘These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency and seek to hold governments accountable’ (2011a: 3). In a recent forum, academics referred to social media as ‘game-changers’, and the panellists noted that without the new media the protests might not have happened. The key issue of the new media’, according to David Dixon, an associate professor of communication arts at Malone University, ‘is no control’ (Goshay 2011). As Salma Ghanem noted, the asynchronous nature and the ability to communicate anonymously has led ‘to a reduction of social norms and constraints’, allowing for more freedom to question authority, a practice not typical in Arab culture (2011: 4, 12, 28). The Internet helped the protests to spread from Tunisia and Egypt to other parts of the Arab world and North Africa.
In 2010, United States Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called for the use of the Internet and new communication technologies to tear down authoritarian states. She suggested that new information systems are forming a new nervous system for the entire planet, making information more free (2010). One critic of Clinton’s comments noted that oppressors have also successfully used the Internet, and Evgeny Morozov uses the term ‘digital Orientalism’ (2011: 243) to deride the idea that in societies ruled by repressive leaders the Internet can only be a force for freedom for positive political changes. He argues that technology is not deterministic, rather that it interacts with people and politics and can support either democracy or dictatorships. However, while Clinton did announce that, ‘[…] the Internet can serve as a great equalizer’ (2010), she also noted that some governments are using new communication technologies to crack down on dissent. In Egypt, for example, the Interior Ministry under the Mubarak administration had 45 people whose sole job was to monitor Facebook, keeping track of the opposition. Harsh laws in many Middle Eastern countries led to prison for writers accused of libel, sedition or blasphemy (Ghannam 2011b, 2011a: 5–9).

In a recent news article, Shane (2011) agrees that governments have been able to turn modern technologies to their own benefit, using them to suppress dissent, but he also notes the important liberating aspects of new media. He points to Iran, Syria and China as countries where authorities are successfully using Facebook pages to track down opposition leaders. Shane notes that such tools can be used to support dictatorships or to promote human rights, and he observes that in Egypt ‘the same Web tools that so many Americans use to keep up with college pals and post passing thoughts have a more noble role as well, as a scourge of despotism’ (2011: WK1).

The record of new technologies and recent uprisings in this region is a mixed one. The revolution in Egypt is just one of the populist movements sweeping Arab and other Mideast countries. The ‘Jasmine’ revolution began in Tunisia in December 2010 with civil resistance and street demonstrations forcing out long-time authoritarian leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The uprisings quickly spread to other nations through the younger generation’s use of web-based social networks. The messages effectively resonated because of a shared cultural identity through common language and religion. Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq and even Iran have had related protests, and opposition leaders have been speaking out in Morocco, Djibouti and Saudi Arabia. Some of the rulers of these countries have turned off the Internet and cell phone service and many countries successfully censor certain websites. The battle for control of information distribution, knowledge and political leadership continues. Revolutionaries overthrew Libya’s dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Syria’s government is currently struggling against a powerful and violent opposition, and in Bahrain and Yemen the protests have turned violent, and as of this writing the final outcomes for these populist revolutions are not yet clear.

What is evident is that many people – especially young people – in these countries loudly and clearly demanded change. Protestors have used modern social media as part of the mobilization of large numbers of people. Activists used cell phones for capturing still and video images of violence against protestors who in contrast were portrayed as peaceful and legitimate. YouTube and Facebook sites hosted these images and rhetoric aimed at inspiring resistance. Word of protests spread through these websites and through Twitter messages. Less than clear are the claims that
this populist revolutionary spirit enveloping the Arab world is caused by these new social media.

CONCLUSION

New media do not and cannot cause or win revolutions on their own. While historians have the advantage of distance, journalists sometimes lack the broader perspective that rules out any one single cause for such a dramatic change. Historians and media ecologists alike have continually pointed out that a multitude of social, cultural and political factors are critical in determining the success or failure of any revolution—even whether or not an uprising begins at all. In Egypt, for example, the army did not fire upon demonstrators, while in Libya, Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi retained control over enough of his military to battle back harshly against the protestors. In Syria, a well-armed military has proven difficult to overcome. The regime in Iran has been successful in using the Internet to repress opposition, while the small opposition has failed in using new media to organize massive protests. The youth in Libya are said to be not as savvy in their use of social media tools as were those in Egypt and Tunisia (Kirkpatrick 2011). Certainly, the poverty of large numbers of the residents of these countries, the growing youth population and harsh dictatorships were all major factors in stirring up unrest. As media ecologists suggest, new media are just one part of a vast and complex ecology within which we live. Journalists see a new technology: a dramatic shift in communication systems and a simultaneous cultural shift. That leads to speculation and overreaching by some as to the causes behind a revolution. As historians repeatedly conclude, revolutions do not come out of simply one influence alone, but rather out of many.

However, the shift in media use is certainly having a great deal of influence on new popular movements in the Mideast. New media are supplying important tools—new, faster and more direct ways of communication—and are an important agent of change. As people shift away from traditional media of print and television, towards new electronic, non-hierarchical social media, the ways that they think and interact change as well. Decades-old dictatorial political structures can no longer maintain the monopoly on knowledge, thought and power as they once did. Laila Shereen Sakr, an Egyptian American doctoral student, has been studying social media and the current popular movements. She concludes that there has already been a social change and there is no turning back. People have stood up against the governments. Social media activated them and turned them on’ (quoted in Friedman 2011: par. 15). As Mideast analyst Ghannam notes, ‘in the end, Facebook and YouTube are tools—and tools alone cannot bring about the changes the world has witnessed in recent weeks’ (2011b: par. 10). Such actions require motivation, not simply the tools that may allow them to happen. Viewed through the lens of both historical experience and the evidence seen by current observers, it appears that there is insufficient evidence to suggest complete causality. New media have not directly caused these popular uprisings.

These new technologies have proven to be difficult—but not impossible—to control. As the inventor of the World Wide Web notes, his original idea was of a decentralized sharing of ideas: ‘It is a vision that provides us with new freedom and allows us to grow faster than we ever could when we were fettered by the hierarchical classification systems into which we bound ourselves’ (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 2000: 1–2). As Thebo Mbeki, the deputy
vice president of South Africa proclaimed, the web can and should be used to empower people (as cited in Berners-Lee and Fischetti 2000: 102). This information-sharing system without centralized control does shift power away from government towards non-hierarchical communication. This is in direct contrast to large-scale mass media that lend themselves more easily to government censorship. The technologies of person-to-person digital messages, such as Twitter and cell phone videos combined with satellite television retransmissions, are harder to control than old-style print and broadcast mass media. While leaders such as Egypt’s Mubarak attempted to block websites, tech-savvy young people found ways around the censorship. Other governments have successfully censored the Internet and actually used sites such as Facebook to track down and punish dissenters, but many dictators in the Middle East have found such control impossible.

Each new communications medium, whether referring to the printed word when it was introduced in centuries past, television when it became widespread less than a century ago, or the World Wide Web and new social media, allows people to connect, communicate and think in new ways. Rather than depend solely on a combination of direct interpersonal communication and mass media, where one voice speaks in a one-way transmission to many, the new media are less subject to direct control by a powerful government and more open to dissent and ideas. The web has changed how governments and citizens interact and even how governments are chosen (Hendler et al. 2008: 62). Facebook pages or Twitter accounts, for example, can be created by anyone, not just those who own or control a major publishing company or television station. As the Facebook page, ‘We are all Khaled Said’, has demonstrated, a non-professional, one-person website can communicate very radical messages to large numbers of people. The very non-hierarchical nature of the World Wide Web has not only allowed for mobilization of illegal but peaceful protests, but it has also led to a more informal, more diverse structure for the new opposition, rather than support for one strong revolutionary leader.

As demonstrators in Libya, Syria and Bahrain can testify, new communication technology alone cannot successfully stand against well-organized regimes with bullets, tanks and aircraft. While new forms of media may enable revolutionary thoughts and actions, they certainly are not sufficient on their own to make a popular revolt succeed. To state that new media have caused these revolutions is an oversimplification of an extremely complex set of individual circumstances. New forms of social and Internet media do play an important and intrinsic role in fomenting revolution. In contrast, such media have also been an important tool used to reinforce many oppressive governments around the world when the leaders have enough technical proficiency to control such media for their own purposes. However, the intrinsic nature of these new media does lend itself to public dissent not easily controlled by dictatorships. These new social media have opened up new avenues of free expression, giving voice to many Arabs and others who had not been heard before (Ghanam 2011a: 23). As Lawrence Pintak concluded, for autocratic leaders in the Middle East ‘The electronic dam has burst and with it, their ability to control the flow of information’ (2011: par. 2). New media are a potent influence for popular change and an influence against autocratic regimes. These media are – and will continue to be – a force for democratic reform, freedom and popular movements in the Middle East and around the world. As Innis suggested by studying the historical relationship between media shifts and social structure, the new
media are not only likely to lead to revolutionary changes in government, they are likely to help bring about complete changes in the political and social structure.

REFERENCES


Innis, Harold (1951) 1964), The Bias of Communication, Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

—— (1972), Empire and Communications, Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.


Was%20Jailed%20Said%20He%20Was%20Part%20of%20Online%20Campaign%20in%20Egypt&st=cse\nAccessed 22 February 2011.


SUGGESTED CITATION


CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Roger P. Mellen, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications at New Mexico State University. Mellen is a journalist and a historian whose work explores the intersection of changing media landscapes and human culture.

He received his B.A. in broadcast journalism from Hampshire College, his M.A. in mass communication from the University of Denver and his Ph.D. in American history from George Mason University. Mellen's recently published book, The Origins of a Free Press in Prerevolutionary Virginia: Creating a Culture of Political Dissent, explores the rise of printing and the development of our constitutional right to press liberty. Prior to joining academia, Mellen worked for more than twenty years in local and network television news, online journalism, newspaper and radio – primarily as a newscast producer. His work has won many awards, including Associated Press, UPI and National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (Regional Emmy) best newscast.

Contact: 2034 Via Tesoro, Las Cruces, NM 88005-8216, USA.
E-mail: rpmellen@gmail.com

Roger P. Mellen has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.