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INTRODUCTION:

# **Social Buzz, Political Boom? Ethnographic Engagements with Digital Militancy**

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It took us a long time to realize that the power of a technology is proportional to its inherent out-of-controlness, its inherent ability to surprise and be generative. In fact, unless we can worry about a technology, it is not revolutionary enough.

—Kevin Kelly, co-founder *Wired Magazine* (2006)

This is the paradox of ambient awareness. Each little update—each individual bit of social information—is insignificant on its own, even supremely mundane. But taken together, over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends' and family members' lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting.

—Clive Thompson, *The New York Times* (2008)

## **Ethnographic Contributions to a Public Debate on the Politics of Social Media**

As revolution and repression rumble through the Middle East for a second year, and occupations and anti-austerity protests sweep the US and Europe, the appraisal of social media's political edges has become a topic of popular debate. Not surprisingly, there have been few clear conclusions about how social buzz corresponds with political booms, with most commentators unable to agree on anything other than an affinity between increases in turbulent political currents and surges in social media usage.<sup>1</sup> There is an almost obsessive quality to the recursion of inconclusive commentary about the role of new technologies in politics. It is as if the mass media, anxious about their own place in the media ecology, is worrying out loud about what Kevin Kelly (2006) called social media's "out-of-controlness." As a corrective to glib pronouncements about the agency of social media following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, some thoughtful commentators and academics have sought to contextualize recent political developments (e.g., special sections and forums in *Cultural Anthropologist* and *American Ethnologist*; see Elyacher and Winegar 2012, Haugerud 2012). These interventions show that the relationship between social media and political upheaval is one of association at best, and that political change is overdetermined. More compelling (if not necessarily sufficient) frameworks for understanding political change take into account how multiple forces, such as histories of political contestation, geo-politics, demographics, and ethno-religious fissures, combine to effect political change. The essays in this special section contribute to this corrective effort.

The texts published here contribute to an emerging ethnographic literature about how political actors use social media technologies, and how social media companies become political actors. How do anti-authoritarian activists and security states seek to harness the power they sense lurks behind social media? How do they take up the tools of social media to spin and pivot towards their political goals? The essays in this "Social Thought & Commentary" section demonstrate that social networking applications have no inherent political allegiances and, like technologies before them, derive their politics from the people who make them, and the people who distribute and receive content through them (though in social media the categories of creator, distributor, and receiver are increasingly blurry).

Rebecca Stein, Charles Hirschkind, and I encountered media politics situated in dynamic interludes between media events. Stein researched Israeli officials as they sought to integrate social media into government bureaucracies in ways that would play to their political advantage. She details how the Israeli state latched onto YouTube and Facebook despite their uncertainties about how to use them as propaganda tools. The Israeli Defense Forces, for example, had to recalibrate its obsessions with control and command by strategically sharing classified images of military operations with the public, figuring out the right settings for enabling public comment, and along what lines to censor that commentary. Hirschkind interviews blogger and longtime Egyptian activist Alaa Abd Al-Fattah, who situates the revolution of 2011 within a recent history of oppositional politics, from the Egyptian human rights movement to the activists' responses to events, from 9/11 to the second intifada. Al-Fattah describes the feedback between the modalities of online posting and intertextual signage in Tahrir Square, breaking down the binary between online and offline activism propagated by the pundits. For my part, I go behind the walls of Facebook to interpret the symbolism of its office space, interview employees who manage the Facebook brand, and question the logics behind Facebook's global expansion. All three essays focus on the complexities that lie behind facile discussions about social media as an abstract set of technologies, or a liberatory tool. Additionally, the essays introduce us to people who use these technologies and help to shape them; their ends are either explicitly political or laden with political implications. Together they present three views of the politics of social media: the bureaucrats of a security state (Israel), an activist trying to mold politics amidst post-revolutionary tumult (Egypt), and the employees of a social media corporate juggernaut (Facebook). However, it is important that these perspectives not be misread as types. I agree entirely with Stein (this issue) when she writes:

The case of Israeli state usage complicates both poles of this popular narrative about digital media—that is, both the notion of new technologies that organically liberate from below, and of states invested chiefly in their repression from above. Contra the digital democracy theorem, the Israeli state case points to the plastic nature of digital tools and platforms, illustrating the highly variable political functions and ends that social media can serve.

It is precisely this plasticity that anthropologists are well positioned to explore through ethnography. By complicating facile mappings of social media usage along a vertical power axis, these essays enrich the public debate about the politics of social media.

### **From Ambient Intimacy to Ambient Militancy**

There is much work to be done situating the politics of social media in the literature on media anthropology and the growing field of the anthropology of online communities. One useful theoretical concept is “ambient intimacy,” a popular rephrasing (Reichelt 2007) of “ambient virtual co-presence” coined by anthropologists Misuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe (2005) to describe the mobile technosocial lives of Japanese teens. Ito and Okabe write:

These [mobile e-mail] messages define a space of peripheral background awareness that is midway between direct interaction and non-interaction. The analog is sharing a physical space with others that one is not in direct communication with but is peripherally aware of. Many of the emails exchanged present information about one’s general status that is similar to the kind of awareness of another that one would have when physically co-located, a sigh or smile or glance that calls attention to the communicator, a way of entering somebody’s virtual peripheral vision. (2005:14-15)

Since Ito and Okabe’s research in the early 2000s, “virtual peripheral vision” has become increasingly central to social life, with a proliferation of media platforms promoting peer-to-peer interaction, from Twitter and Facebook to text messaging and instant messaging services. This “virtual peripheral vision,” “ambient virtual co-presence,” or “ambient intimacy” has also become a part of the landscape of social movements, and has unexplored political consequences.

I suggest that we need to think beyond “ambient virtual co-presence” (Ito and Okabe 2005) or “ambient intimacy” (Reichelt 2007) to consider *ambient militancy*, defined as the way political actors engage with the virtual co-presence created by peer-to-peer technologies. Scholars have demonstrated that despite the looseness of the connections in the technosocial world of ambient intimacy, the peripheral background awareness that is its hallmark can come to play a central role in social life (Komito

2011, Ito and Okabe 2005). But how does ambient intimacy work when social life is explicitly political or military? I do not propose to answer the question, but think it is one we should be asking. State internal security bureaucracies and intelligence agencies, interested in surveillance, co-optation, and control, have been asking it for a few years already (Nakashima 2012, Theohary 2011, Drapeau 2009, Gal 2008).

Political scientist Navid Hassanpour (2011) argues, contra the Internet connectivity-spurs-revolution thesis, that strategically slowing connectivity (as Iran does when facing the threat of protest) rather than cutting off Internet connectivity (as Mubarak did) is a more effective way to keep people off of the streets. Hassanpour shows that immersion in social networks can actually have a negative impact on coherent, effective, and timely collective action. Like Hassanpour, we are interested in how connectivity is enmeshed in a broader field of participatory politics.

Each of these pieces addresses an important aspect of social media: the illusion of newness, political propaganda, and the context within which media platforms are produced. In Hirschkind's piece, Al-Fattah makes clear that online organizing does not hold a monopoly on participatory politics, and old forms of organizing are interwoven with emergent ones. For example, the "C'mon Let's Write the Constitution" movement Al-Fattah is working with sends volunteers into the rural areas to involve Egyptians from many backgrounds in the drafting of the new constitution, a strategy that was inspired by the process employed by the African National Congress as it wrote the 1955 Freedom Charter in South Africa. Stein reports on how the Israeli Defense Force only turned off the open comment feature on YouTube after a one day deluge of critical postings during the 2008-2009 incursion into Gaza. Over time, the Israeli government has become savvier, vigilantly monitoring its Facebook wall to balance its social media censorship and propagate its own viral content or "memes."

Parallel to the question of how political actors use social media is the question of how politics is embedded in the production of online technologies (Malaby 2009), which I address in the context of Facebook's Palo Alto offices. The office space itself becomes a site for the performance of the company's ethos—divided between its mythic "hacker" origin and its corporate present. I focus on Facebook's emphasis on winning market share, its quantitative focus, and tactics of market domination. Through an analysis of its office space and interviews with employees, I interrogate Facebook's ambiguously phrased mission "to make the world more

open and connected,” its quantitative drive, tactics of market domination, and the geo-politics of its expansion. By ethnographically engaging with the question of ambient militancy, these essays contribute to a reorientation of the public debate away from hype about the revolutionary power of social media and toward a contextualized treatment of the politics of emergent technologies. ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Illustrative of this is Shirky and Gladwell's debate in *Foreign Affairs* (Shirky 2011, Gladwell and Shirky 2011).

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**Foreign language translations:**

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