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## Deliberate Design or Unintended Consequences: The Argumentative Uses of Facebook During the Arab Spring

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# Deliberate Design or Unintended Consequences: The Argumentative Uses of Facebook During the Arab Spring

## **Abstract**

By looking at the argumentative uses of ‘status updates’, we discuss how Facebook design and context of use influenced opportunities for deliberation during the Egyptian phase of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Our basic point is that, somewhat against the grain of much debate on designing precise tools for supporting online argumentation, many benefits for open and critical argumentation result, in this case, from unintended, indeed parasitic, uses of online technologies. This is evident in the ways that (seemingly) politically trivial, “commercially colonized” and entertainment-oriented technologies such as Facebook or YouTube become major arenas for deliberative mobilization and serious argumentation.

## **Keywords**

Arab Spring, argumentation, argumentation design, dialectical trade-offs, Facebook, online deliberation

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## 1. Introduction

To say that the internet's impact on public deliberation is a double edged sword verges on triviality. Like virtually any other communication technology, such as newspapers and television (Habermas, 1989/1962; Postman, 1985, 1992), the internet has both beneficial and detrimental effects on political discussion in the public sphere; every mention of the democratizing impact of the internet can be counterbalanced by some less than laudatory practices. Hence, whereas some take the internet to be primarily (though with cautious provisos) a "liberation technology" (Diamond, 2010), others hasten to expose "the dark side of internet freedom" (Morozov, 2011). Without going into the numerous details of this rather perennial debate, we want to articulate one argument that seems to powerfully illustrate the balance of considerations on both sides. If networked communication does fuel critical debate among "progressive emancipatory resistance movements" that help topple corrupt regimes and aid in mobilizing people for important causes in democratic societies, it can just as well serve as a major vehicle for "non-progressive reactionary movements" that find new life in often inconspicuous online communities (Cammaerts, 2009, p. 556; see Sunstein, 2007). Therefore, the IT savvy and the networked force of some Tahrir (Liberation) Square regulars in Egypt may be just as startling as that of Anders Breivik's "delusional universe" ("Norway massacre").

The question of the effect that internet technologies have on politics at large, and the quality of public deliberation in particular, cannot be straightforwardly answered.<sup>1</sup> Academic research hardly produces authoritative conclusions based on robust and representative findings. The internet influences public deliberation through a conglomerate of various online technologies multiplied by various, sometimes unforeseen, uses of these technologies. Grand generalizing statements regarding deliberation technologies, while appealing, seem thus dependent on too many variables that cannot be thoroughly examined all at the same time. In contrast, meticulous research that scrutinizes one instance or aspect of the technology's impact on public deliberation (e.g. the quality of a given type of argument in a specific type of online forum) runs the risk of myopic narrowness that undercuts the possibility of arriving at gratifying generalizations.

Aware of these limitations, we will seek to strike the right balance by relating the crucial controversy regarding the internet's usefulness for public deliberation to a particular research problem within argumentation theory. Namely, by looking at the argumentative uses of 'status updates', we will discuss how Facebook design and context of use influenced opportunities for deliberation during the Egyptian phase of the 2011 'Arab Spring'. Our basic point is that,

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<sup>1</sup> Nor, strictly speaking, can it be seriously asked as one, all-embracing research problem.

somewhat against the grain of much debate on designing precise tools for supporting online argumentation (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009), many benefits for open and critical argumentation result, in this case, from unintended, indeed parasitic, uses of online technologies. This is evident in the ways that (seemingly) politically trivial, “commercially colonized” and entertainment-oriented technologies such as Facebook or YouTube become major arenas for deliberative mobilization and serious argumentation.

## 2. Colonization of the colonizers

The impact of online technology design on public deliberation, and argumentation in particular,<sup>2</sup> has been an object of study for a few traditionally disconnected disciplines, like computer and political science (see Davies & Gangadharan, 2009; Wright & Street, 2007). Below, we will make use of some crucial insights from the work of communication scholars pursuing a methodical study of online argumentation designs (Aakhus, 2002, 2007; Aakhus & Jackson, 2005; Jackson, 1998; de Moor & Aakhus, 2006; Weger & Aakhus, 2003). Inspired by the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (van Eemeren, 2010; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; van Eemeren et al., 1993), an argumentation design perspective aims specifically at investigating the argumentative details of computer-mediated deliberation. This happens in three main steps. First, argumentation practices (what *is* the case) are contextually analyzed in order to investigate the impact of various features of design on the shape of argumentation. Second, such analysis allows for an evaluation of the practice against an ideal of reasonable public argumentation (what *ought to be*), such as the pragma-dialectical model for critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Finally, a possible redesign best approximating the ideal in the given circumstances can be proposed (what *can be*).

Two intriguing problems within the study of the influence of technologies on the shape and quality of argumentation merit further investigation. First is the problem of “dialectical trade-offs” which occur whenever two or more ideal (dialectical) requirements, such as openness and orderliness, conflict with each other in actual implementation of an argumentation design (Aakhus & Lewiński, 2011; Lewiński, 2011b). This problem seems to be an instantiation of a general

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<sup>2</sup> Following prominent deliberation theorists (Bohman, Cohen, Habermas), we treat argumentation, in the sense of dialogical reason-giving, as a constitutive element of (collective) deliberation. In deliberation, argumentation is used for the specific purpose of opinion- and will-formation that supports the process of decision-making. Crucially, argumentation is constitutive of deliberation in that the quality of argumentation determines, to a great extent, the quality of deliberation at large.

<sup>3</sup> But, possibly, also other models of democratic communication (see Freelon, 2010).

difficulty in theorizing about deliberation.<sup>4</sup> For instance, one can prioritize in practice the critical, or epistemic, aspect of a deliberative ideal by crafting slow-paced and thorough argumentation that aims at critically examining and settling issues “beyond reasonable doubt” (as in legal procedures). Alternatively, the decision-making or action dimension can be taken up, in which case a design is meant to support constructive and efficient argumentation leading straight to desired results. It seems that what commentators praised online communication during the Arab Spring for is this latter aspect of deliberation. Some have even drawn an analogy between the Arab revolutionaries’ tweets or Facebook messages and pre-internet activists’ flyposters and placards (Doctorow, 2011). Such evaluations say little about the shape and quality of arguments and conclusions and instead turn to the efficiency of discursive mobilization. Indeed, many online technologies, in contrast to print, are hardly designed for thorough and elaborate critical discussions that have the capacity of fueling slow, long-term changes (Habermas, 1989/1962). So, one should exercise caution in praising the right technology for the right benefits it brings.

This brings us to the second problem – unintended consequences of designed communication tools. Intentional design of any technology never works in a simple cause-effect manner, in which a design is a golden bullet that alters its users’ practices exactly along the intended lines. Rather, “[t]he consequences of design for practice are interactionally emergent” since “design occurs as an intervention to which human actors respond, often attempting to fit new devices to their pre-existing practices” (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005, p. 429). In the best case, “people’s use of the technology is adaptation to its design features”, in the worst, it is a “struggle against its design flaws” (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005, p. 414). Study of unintended consequences typically investigates various failures that result, prominently, from the gap between technical functionalities and users’ communicative needs and routines (de Moor & Aakhus, 2006). But one may also think of beneficial effects of “maladaptation” to new technologies.

Rheingold (1993), while presenting an optimistic account of the pioneering years of the “virtual community”, pointed out what seems to be a grossly underestimated phenomenon – that it is through unintended, indeed parasitic, uses of many online technologies that the internet established its deliberative, liberating credentials. To start with, the internet grew from a secret military project aimed at securing efficient command and control in case of a nuclear war. That is, it was conceived as just the opposite of what we think of it

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<sup>4</sup> See Benhabib (1994) and Bohman: “Deliberative democracy seems caught on the horns of a dilemma: if it establishes its moral credentials of legitimacy via an ideal procedure, it cannot underwrite its epistemic claims; if it establishes its epistemic claims, they can only be underwritten by standards that are not only procedure-independent, but also independent of deliberation” (1998, p. 403).

now. The same applies to crucial internet technologies such as e-mail and Usenet that were not created as the comprehensive communication and discussion tools as we know them today. Hence, it is thanks to creative and often subversive communicative uses of what was meant to be a highly specialized, elite information technology that the internet has become a major arena for public deliberation.

This process seems to be continuing nowadays. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter were developed as essentially commercial platforms geared towards entertainment and semi-personal communication among, initially, privileged and educated Americans. If ever taken to be the “media of the public sphere” such platforms undoubtedly fall under the Habermasian dictum of “the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives” (Habermas, 2006, p. 422). One can think of the much-publicized circumstances of Facebook creation as an example of competitive market cruelty. Discussion regarding the internet’s democratizing potential often addresses the imminent commercialization of public debate and typically produces grim conclusions (Dahlberg, 2001; Sunstein, 2007). It thus seems that the path these technologies took to becoming vehicles for emancipating (quite ironically, sometimes, anti-American) revolutions is very long. So how come?

We suggest that this happens via the process of the colonization of the colonizers. Rather than defending and protecting the “pristine” venues enabling the ideal speech situation for rational critical discussion, the practice of internet users seems to be pointing to a parasitic re-appropriation of the market-oriented tools for the purposes of a genuine extension of the public sphere. Zuckerman (2011) has recently pushed this argument to the limits: it is *exactly because of* the enormous popularity of politically trivial online places such as Facebook or YouTube that critical deliberation can take place on these sites. According to him, carefully crafted technologies that are intended to be used for emancipation through critical deliberation can also be carefully targeted and disabled by oppressive regimes (one of the major points in Morozov’s critique of the liberating power of the internet). Benevolently “parasitic” uses of popular entertainment platforms make precise targeting impossible – it’s no easy task for regime censors to trace and watch thousands of suspect YouTube videos and read all the critical comments they generate. Further, a complete shutdown may bring about reverse effects. A politically apathetic person who simply wants to enjoy watching cute cats flushing toilets on YouTube and check the latest gossip on Facebook will become increasingly suspicious of a regime’s credentials if the website is continuously down. That is, by completely blocking access to Facebook or YouTube, regimes may be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Therefore, citizens needy of a venue for critical deliberative engagement may turn to “shutdown-proof” popular technologies that are seemingly useless as forums for

argumentation – yet another instance of “making do” in less-than-ideal situation for critical discussion (Jacobs, 2002).

Designing deliberation technologies invites a series of dialectical trade-offs that create problems for deliberation – but it also opens up unforeseen and unintended uses. The tensions inherent in intentionally designed deliberation technology might seriously undermine the realization of the opportunities for deliberative engagement and critical discussion projected by ideal models. Such tensions are further transformed by actual practices of online discussants (let us call them “micro-transformations” as opposed to Habermasian “structural transformations”). Importantly, in the process of the colonization of the colonizers, actual uses of communication technologies bring about more organic, spontaneous deliberations emerging from “unlikely” sites. Yet, such transformative uses cannot fully obviate dialectical tensions – while solving some, they produce new ones. This is evident in the argumentative uses of the “status updates” on Facebook in Egypt during the spring of 2011.

### **3. Argumentative uses of status updates on Facebook**

Assuming a widespread familiarity with the technicalities of Facebook, we immediately turn to describing “status updates”. Facebook users are able, indeed expected, to regularly share “what’s on [their] mind” with Facebook ‘friends’.<sup>5</sup> Status updates, similarly to other activities, appear on the user’s personal “wall” as well as on their friends’ “news feeds”. They are usually textual messages, but may be accompanied by images, videos or links. Typical examples may be: “eating grannie’s cake, happy!” or “feel like having a haircut, shall I do it?” Such updates can be “liked” but also, importantly, commented on by Facebook friends. The author of the status update can reply to such comments, and others may join in, so that in effect a semi-synchronous discussion develops (currently there is no space limit for comments, but they tend to be brief). This typical kind of social media functionality is intended to keep the circle of Facebook friends updated but, less than obviously, it also creates a potential site for critical discussion.

We have carefully analyzed status updates, together with friends’ comments, of one among 4.5 million Egyptian Facebook users<sup>6</sup>—Farid Antoun (hereafter: FA)<sup>7</sup>—posted in Arabic over the period covering the beginning of the

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<sup>5</sup> Depending on privacy settings, the status updates may also be available to the broad public.

<sup>6</sup> As of January 2011 (“Arab Social Media Report January 2011”). This number has doubled by the end of 2011 (“Arab Social Media Report November 2011”).

<sup>7</sup> FA is a Facebook friend of the second author. (The second author did not contribute any comments over the period analyzed.) Prior to the study, we have received FA’s written consent allowing us to use his Facebook page for analysis. Full records of the exchanges are available from the second author.

Egyptian revolution in 2011.<sup>8</sup> Without claiming generality based on large-scale data, we selected this example—quite unexceptional in our experience of social networking conversations and thus worthy of closer scrutiny—for an explorative study of how Facebook users make tools designed for social networking into fora for argumentation.

In the period between 1 January and 28 February, 2011, FA posted 9 status updates. The updates were all about matters of public significance. They were nevertheless diverse and included expressions of states of mind in response to various public events, clear expressions of opinion, and announcements of future events. For example, on 25 January, the day the Egyptian revolution began, FA expressed his concern in a status update that quoted a well-known poem: “May you be safe, Egypt / May peace be upon you, my homeland/ May you be safe at all times”.<sup>9</sup> On 24 February, he responded to the circulating rumors that an attack carried by Egyptian army tanks destroyed the walls of the Coptic Monastery of Saint Pishoy by saying “I think it’s not at all the time for talks about destroying a monastery wall here or there. We don’t want to come back to the stupidity of the past and the talks of sectarian tension”. FA’s status updates received an average of 56 comments and 31 likes from his friends.

We paid special attention to the exchange of comments following FA’s status update on 11 February, the day on which Hosni Mubarak’s resignation was announced. About half an hour before the announcement, FA updated his status to “We’re now in the post-Mubarak era / Difficult is post-Mubarak / Very difficult”. The update triggered the longest exchange in the period examined; it received 137 comments from 37 different friends. Despite the seemingly non-argumentative nature of the status update, the exchange of comments was to a large extent argumentative. The concern expressed in the update was understood by many as an expression of opinion concerning the situation in Egypt, something like “we’re facing very difficult times after Mubarak”. FA did not provide arguments supporting this opinion in the update itself, but only in a few comments he posted later. However, almost immediately, friends who shared his misgivings about the post-Mubarak era advanced arguments, for example, mentioning the looming “phantom of the Muslim Brotherhood”. Those who disagreed counter-argued: “This popular movement, people who are no longer afraid and who are expressing such awareness towards their country, will make anything after Mubarak merry”.

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<sup>8</sup> Our choice of Arabic does away with one major objection that the impact of the internet media on Arab Spring is largely overblown, since it’s only a tiny elite of English-speaking Arabs, often living abroad, who employ such media. The second author is a native speaker of Arabic – all translations are hers.

<sup>9</sup> The poem “Eslami ya Misr” (“Be safe, o Egypt”) was written by the Egyptian poet Mostafa Saadeq Al-Rafe’ie (1880-1937). It was adopted as the Egyptian national anthem between 1923 and 1936.

Importantly, FA's status remained unclear regarding his position towards Mubarak's resignation. Some of his friends read it as an expression of regret that Mubarak's era is over. A good part of the exchange of comments was actually devoted to the discussion of Mubarak's end in which pro- and counter-arguments were advanced. For example, a friend commented "Mubarak needs to respect the will of the people and resign. Sorry, the interests of Egypt are above anything else". Another friend responded by questioning that Mubarak's immediate departure is in the interest of Egypt: "If he resigns the constitution cannot be amended for only the president can do that". Later in the discussion, FA made his own standpoint clear: "I don't think one ought to be sad because Mubarak is gone. The last five years of his rule were characterized by corruption. If one is sad, it's because of the unclarity of the situation and the lack of vision". In a later comment, he added: "the future of the people will be better. We just need to endure the difficult times". These comments clarified his position and removed the seeming contradiction between the worry expressed in the status update and his satisfaction with Mubarak's resignation. The exchange of comments brought about more standpoints, most of which called for particular courses of action to be taken. These came mainly in response to the question "what to do now?", which was posed as a comment.

Despite the many argumentative comments advanced, the exchange remained within the realm of social networking conventions. For example, many comments were mere expressions of concern or wishes for a better future. Political jokes included in comments expressed points of view in a 'light' and friendly way. Not unexpectedly, we also observed some considerable dialectical trade-offs. While inclusive (all Facebook friends are invited), relevant, and in principle open to critical expansions, argumentative exchanges were never too confrontational or rigorous. Despite the fact that argument norms on social networking sites are considerably looser than, say, in print publications, discussants employed politeness strategies that, in dialectical terms, prioritize opportunities for a friendly discharge of burden of proof over persistent criticism. Due in part to loose norms and avoidance of conflict-aggravation, argumentative exchanges were never 'properly' concluded as a result of explicit agreement on the force of the better argument. Rather, discussants preferred inconspicuous withdrawal from further counter-argumentation. This practice confirms the basic idea that whereas online deliberators often face opposition by "happy accidents", they attempt to avoid it in search for comfortable echo chambers (Lev-On & Manin, 2009; Sunstein, 2007).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The revolutions of the Arab Spring were not *caused* by the internet. Online

technologies were but one among many conditions conducive to the wave of upheavals in the Middle East (including power struggles within the ruling elites, desperation of ordinary citizens facing years of rampant corruption and economic hardship, failed American policies, etc.). These revolutions are thus equations with many more variables than just technology and liberation. All the same, technologies are more than a chance witness to them. Indeed, they play a crucial part by enabling public deliberation and mobilization, providing means for publicizing and archiving the brutality of ruling regimes, giving suppressed populations a new sense of agency, as well as access to uncensored information and other like-minded dissidents. The task for deliberation and argumentation scholars is to connect such macro-issues to micro-happenings of ordinary deliberations among Arab peoples in revolt.

Our proposal is to do so by focusing on the uses online arguers make of technologically designed tools for communication. If public deliberation is understood as a critical and reasoned exchange of views among citizens, then it seems to be largely taking place by a crucial re-purposing of the technological affordances offered by online tools such as Facebook. For people desperately looking for widely available deliberative venues—such as Egyptians in 2011—commercial social-networking media readily become tools of genuine deliberation. This, we hope, was clear in our case study. The crucial characteristic of social media—many-to-many communication—allows for serious multi-party argumentative engagement, a critical element desired by deliberation theorists that seriously transforms the nature of deliberative encounters (Lewiński, 2011a; Pfister, 2011). Yet, deliberative practices of Arab Facebook users seem to contain an important element of convivial socializing and thus are not nearly as argumentative as anonymous Usenet groups characterized by a preference for disagreement and long chains of persistent collective criticism (Lewiński, 2010).

If in the future our analyses allow for robust conclusions, that we are not in a position to draw here, we may be faced with a rather fascinating phenomenon. While Postman (1985) bemoaned the trivialization of serious debate by entertainment, we may be dealing with the “criticalization” of the trivial. The crucial question remains to what extent the nature of the point of departure--the fun of social networking--will limit the quality of the (hoped for) point of arrival, critical argument in public deliberation.

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