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Cyberactivisim in the Process of Political and Social Change in Arab Countries

El ciberactivismo en el proceso de cambio político y social en los países árabes

Dr. Xosé Soengas-Pérez is Professor of Audiovisual Communication in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) (jose.soengas@usc.es) (http://orcid.org/ 0000-0003-3246-0477)

Mohamed Assif is Researcher at the University of Hassan II Casablanca (Morocco) (mohamedassif19@gmail.com) (http://orcid.org/ 0000-0001-7879-4443)

ABSTRACT

This research analyses the contribution of cyberactivism to the political and social change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, as well as the opinion of young Arabs on the present context. Meaningful information has been extracted from regular interviews to 30 undergraduates over a five-year period. These students had already participated in the process boosting the Arab Spring in 2011, and they keep practising cyberactivism ever since. The use of a mixed method research allows for carrying out a study where quantitative elements are complemented by qualitative ones. Findings show that Arab countries have not yet shaken off the former structures that supported the regimes preceding 2011, which are those that hamper the consolidation of a modern country. At the moment, there are still two conflicting realities between millenary traditions and values connected to revolutions and symbols of progressivism in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In a context where the unity of action action is needed, cyberactivism plays an essential role, as it brings together critical citizens in a common and virtual space. These groups are committed to change, they keep in touch with the outside world and beyond censorship, they make protests visible to the international arena, and monitor government actions.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación analiza la contribución del ciberactivismo al cambio político y social en Túnez, en Egipto y en Libia, y la opinión de los jóvenes árabes sobre la situación actual. Para disponer de información relevante sobre estos hechos se ha entrevistado periódicamente durante los últimos cinco años a 30 universitarios que ya habían participado en el proceso que impulsó las revueltas de 2011 y que siguen siendo ciberactivistas desde entonces. La utilización de una metodología mixta permite realizar un estudio donde los aspectos de carácter cuantitativo se complementan con contenidos cualitativos. Los resultados demuestran que los países árabes todavía no se han desprendido de muchas de las estructuras que sostenían a los regímenes anteriores a 2011, que son las que dificultan la consolidación de un sistema moderno. En este momento en Túnez, en Egipto y en Libia todavía conviven dos realidades que provocan un choque permanente entre las tradiciones milenarias, muy arraigadas en determinados sectores de la sociedad, y los valores asociados a las revoluciones, más progresistas. En un contexto donde es necesaria la unidad de acción, el ciberactivismo juega un papel fundamental porque congrega en un espacio virtual común a la ciudadanía crítica comprometida con el proceso de cambio, permite organizarse, mantener contacto con el exterior al margen de la censura oficial, hacer visibles las protestas en escenarios internacionales y vigilar las acciones del Gobierno.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Cyberactivism, critical citizenship, citizen empowerment, Arab countries, Internet, social policy, networks, youth.
Ciberactivismo, ciudadanía crítica, empoderamiento ciudadano, países árabes, Internet, política social, redes sociales, jóvenes.

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1. Introduction

Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyans societies witnessed extraordinary events during the Arab uprisings in 2011, which led to the fall of authoritarian regimes (Álvarez-Ossorio & Gutiérrez-de-Terán, 2011; Majdoubi, 2011). Changes generated expectations, but most of them were unfulfilled because the solid structures that maintained governments were not abolished and were integrated into society for a long time (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2015; Morales-Lezcano, 2012). When consolidated power structures are not completely eradicated, this makes modernization and progress difficult. Also, there are always political, economic and social factors involved in project changes, as many citizens find it difficult to get rid of acquired privileges, conquered or inherited, or they just prefer to keep the traditions because they do not want to adapt to a new scenario. (Martín Muñoz & Moure, 2006).

The openness has slowed down in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya because of impediments caused by diverse internal and external factors, which have conditioned the evolution of society in a moment when radical changes had begun and were viewed with suspicion in segments of the population that were critical to the process since the beginning of the uprisings (Shawki, 2014), and also in western countries, which have had their geopolitical and geostrategic alliances jeopardised (Belaali, 2011; Khader, 2015; Martínez-Fuentes, 2015; Michou, Soler-i-Lecha & Ignacio-Torreblanca, 2013). Many of the implemented reforms were designed to give the regime more power and not to consolidate democracy, depriving citizens of rights provided and agreed (Naïr, 2013). The authorities have controlled and persecuted opposing political groups. For instance, in 2013 the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in Egypt because their followers represented a movement that questioned norms still in force two years after the triumph of the revolutions in 2011.

The fact that a country is officially a democracy does not guarantee a full development of individual and collective rights, because in many Arab countries elements and operating schemes that promote and tolerate authoritarian attitudes remain hidden (Izquierdo-Brichs, 2009). In a free society, there are co-habitation rules, and citizens have guarantees, and opportunity freedom and equal opportunities, both the individual and the collective are respected, and so what is different. When there is an excessive political and social control, pluralism is reduced, and fundamental rights are no guaranteed, although being the basis of democracy, and citizens rebel and protest, and seek ways to avoid authoritarianism and to denounce injustices (Naïr, 2013).

As noted above, the liberalizing process of Arab countries has encountered different obstacles that have impeded integral and rapid advances. The most non-conformist sectors of society have seen on the Internet and social networks an ideal tool for cyberactivism, from where they can channel criticism against abuses of power by authorities and program and perform protest actions (Majdoubi, 2012; Ortiz-Galindo, 2015). In this context is where it is appropriate to place and analyse the keys of citizen empowerment in Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyans societies (Peña-López, 2009; Tufte, 2015), an attitude belonging to the renewal process in 2011 initiated by a relevant proportion of citizens with significant involvement, especially youth people, who had references to other forms of government and cohabitation, and also knew the keys of active fight thanks to their contacts with cyber-activism movements in Europe and the Americas (Betancourt, 2011; García Galera, Del Hoyo-Hurtado & Fernández-Muñoz, 2014; González-Lizárraga, Becerra-Traver & Yánez-Díaz, 2016; Menéndez, 2012; Sampedro, 2014; Szmolka, 2012).

Getting in touch with other cultures is a crucial factor when a process of change begins as it makes it possible to know other ways of living (Ortiz-Galindo, 2014). In this regard, the Internet and social networks allowed relations with the outside world and contributed, first, to the social raise that resulted in Arab revolutions in 2011 (Dahlgren, 2011; Roces, 2011), and later to make more visible current protest movements, which are also integrated into cyberactivism (Ortiz-Galindo, 2016a; Tascón & Quintana, 2012).

The most developed societies sometimes work as a mirror and referent for other countries, but the importation of rules is not always possible, as in many cases the necessary conditions to address attitudes that demand radical changes. That is why education, information and knowledge are essential to assimilate values such as tolerance, which works in contexts where democracy is consolidated, where pluralism and diversity exist, and where ideas and ideology are respected (Camacho-Azurduy, 2005).

In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, as it happens in every country, customs that configure people´s identity are rooted, with transversal connections that cover anthropological and sociological aspects, revealed in living arrangements and coexistence models. That is why we should talk about the dependency to which the transformative process is subjected in Arab countries, as well as the difficulties in living within a society in which millenary and highly conservative customs are installed, absorbed and admitted. Also, rules that prevent or hinder a publicly critical

attitude with certain issues and a free behaviour are still in force (Hourani, 1992). In this regard, cyberactivism plays an important role as it allows citizens to communicate beyond official venues (Ortiz-Galindo, 2014; García & Del Hoyo, 2013.) However, this possibility does not imply nor guarantee integration as most of the rule-breaking activities are developed in clandestine spaces and do not have public impact.

Thanks to technology, there exist new forms of access, distribution, and consumption of information. The Internet and social networks are both a tool for communication and content dissemination and, together with WhatsApp, they have changed the way people communicate and relate both in space and time level as technologies have modified spaces and times (Castells, 2012; Sádaba, 2012). One of the contributions of cyberactivism is that it has removed barriers that existed in Arab countries and has improved knowledge (Ortiz-Galindo, 2016).

When a society is subjected to ongoing renewal processes, the commitment undertaken by a critical and active citizenship, who is a transforming agent, the main character of change and the leader of the strengthening of democracy is very important (Delgado-Salazar & Arias-Herrera, 2008; Diani, 2015). The drivers of protest actions in Arab countries are educated and informed citizens, who know their rights and clamor for a common, shared and unrestricted space, with freedom of action and movement, to interact and access on an equal basis to all the material and cultural goods that belong to them. Their proposals are identified with values that stand for economic and social equality of all citizens and reject historic privileges that still exist in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya that benefit very specific sectors and foster inequality. And these citizens have found in cyberactivism an appropriate instrument to channel ideas and fight for their goals (Tascón & Quintana, 2012).

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2. Material and methods

Arab youth played an important part in the emergence and development of the revolutions in 2011 through the Internet and social networks (Soengas-Pérez, 2013). And we start from the assumption that their contribution to the political and social change remains crucial. For this reason, five years afterward, it is interesting to determine the role of cyberactivism in a convulsed society, and what is the view of those cyberactivists on the present situation. In order to check it, 30 young Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyans were interviewed, ten by country, aged between 25 and 30 years, who participated in the Internet and social networks in the process that boosted the revolutions in 2011 and continue as cyberactivists ever since.

Young people interviewed have a university education and enough knowledge and ability to rigorously assess and analyse changes, and their profile makes them privileged and qualified observers as they have lived over the past decade between Spain and their countries of origin. This circumstance gives them a suitable perspective, as they have referents that allow them to compare two different realities.

Besides frequency, attention is given to qualitative aspects of messages and actions programmed and made through the Internet and social networks; that is to say, reasons, context, contents, and goals of cyberactivism in Arab countries: why it continues to exist, under which circumstances social networks are used to maintain alive protests, and what are the strategies. And it is also relevant to know needs, aspects with which they are satisfied and of which they are critical, issues with which they have a concern, and obstacles they face and immediate and future goals.

Interviews were conducted online from 2012 to 2016, twice a year, in June and December, to have regular

information on all the issues raised in the research. Thus it is possible to assess changes and to observe the evolution of cyberactivism.

The surveys consist of 50 questions related to the various ways of thinking, acting and being fulfilled, which is considered necessary to explore in line with the research objectives.

3. Analysis and results

72% of young people interviewed have had a constant cyberactivity on the Internet and social networks since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, at least three days a week, with greater intensity when there are punctual problems that require special attention –for instance if a restrictive law is passed or arbitrary detentions take place. 20% reduced their participation after 2011 for over a year, but have progressively taken over the activity once they saw the governments did not make most of the changes initially announced. And the remaining 8% also maintain loyalty to social networks, but collaborate in a regular manner, usually in moments where actions are intensified to put pressure on a particular issue.

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By disaggregating data by country, the most active young people in social networks are the Egyptians, who carry out 38% of the activity registered during the research, followed by Tunisian (35%) and Libyans (27%). If separated by sex, findings show that men spend more time on social networks (65%) than women (35%).

81% assure that they are committed to the process of modernization undertaken by their country responsibility, belief, and duty, and deem cyberactivism necessary because it is effective, relatively safe, and can operate outside political control and regime´s censorship, and it is affordable for most citizens. In addition to being an instrument of struggle, 62% consider the Internet and social networks as release vehicles, enabling them to channel worries and share with citizens with the same concerns.

87% consider themselves privileged because not all their compatriots have the same resources and knowledge. They are connected, but there are many isolated citizens for economic or cultural reasons because isolation responds to many factors. And 81%, as mentioned above, think it is compulsory to fight to make a better society, and a way to do it is to turn cyberactivism into a representative of the most unprotected citizens and to use knowledge, resources, and experience of those who are in a more comfortable position to denounce authoritarianism of governments and overcome corruption and inequalities.

A 75% admit that they are now better coordinated than during the uprisings in 2011 because they have understood the value and capacity of the Internet and social networks, and they have found out that by organizing themselves they are more effective and more protected. Although 73% say that when they expose themselves, they are aware that they take on significant risks, they are usually cautious and are careful that the government does not have access to their plans to prevent a scheduled event or retaliate. The majority of their initiatives bother the regime because they contemplate modifying existing laws that affect individual freedoms and collective rights, and the Government considers them a challenge.

65% value the unity of action, but 52% argue that a person, in order to feel useful, first needs to develop his/her potential as an individual and then as a member of the environment to which he/she belongs.

The strategies of Arab cyberactivists are conditioned by the resources they have and by the range of action they have to avoid risks as recognized by 70% of respondents. That is why they try to optimize the possibilities offered by the network. One of the main objectives of the 63% is to strategically make their actions visible because they think

that it is more efficient to use the Internet and social networks to highlight the democratic deficiencies of the country in international forums. A 60% of cyberactivists believe that some foreign governments have great pressure on many Arab countries to force changes, especially those affecting human rights.

In order to rigorously assess the current situation in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, it is necessary to know the role of the different players. A 78% of the respondents recognize that in these three countries, as in most countries, there is a clash of cultures with different interests, and the forces of each sector vary in a circumstantial way due to the instability of the system. In this context two very different and confronted scenarios arise: first, there is a permanent confrontation between those who represent tradition and those who support modernity and progress, as both tendencies include incompatible values. Second, there is a lack of correspondence between what is official and real, which requires a constant distinction between both realities to understand many actions and positions, especially as regards freedoms and protocols. And 74% qualify that, in addition to the cultural differences that exist between generations, there are some ways of thinking in the private sphere that do not always correspond to public behaviors, and for this reason, conflicts occur at family, social and institutional levels. An 83% of respondents recognize that they act differently in each context. They adapt to circumstances by prudence, fear or respect for customs. For the same reason, a seventy-one percent, when talking about certain topics, express themselves more freely in circles that do not belong to their family, social or work environment because they feel free of many conditioning factors, while other subjects only approach them in intimate circles or of extreme confidence to have no problems. Thus, for a 64% there are a number of constraints, which include ideology, traditions, and religion, which often become barriers, sometimes invisible to external observers that impede social progress and full exercise of individual and collective freedoms.

One of the characteristics of many Arab countries is that there is little social transversality as recognized by 77% of respondents. Most citizens live in small and enclosed environments without contact with other realities. Certain places, both public and private, are only accessible to very specific profiles. Therefore, one of the permanent claims by 91% of cyberactivists is that there is greater permissiveness and there exists a common social space for coexistence. However, they recognize that this would entail the removal of many taboos based on traditions and religion and preserved thanks to politics.

Cyberactivism allows permanent contact with other cultures and 69% consider that external influences are sometimes enriching, but 53% believe that certain foreign contributions clash with traditional values and are a risk to the cultural identity of the Arab countries. This identity is based on a way of behaving that, in many cases, is inconsistent with the Western principles, both in public and private spheres since the roles do not always correspond. A 45% argue that most of the ancestral customs that remain in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya do not support norms contemplated in the basic parameters of any Western democracy, and put this down to the fact that more and more voices question that schemes copied from the US and Europe are intended to be implanted in some Arab countries as if they were the only valuable and fair form of government. All the respondents recognize that in most Western countries there are consolidated democracies, but for 53%, as mentioned before, it is a mistake to try to introduce values from other places without recognizing the particularities that form part of the essence of each territory. Thus, a 32% regret that, as a result of the uprisings in 2011, the own traditions of Arab countries have been neglected, based on the culture of sharing, and have promoted ways of life from Western countries that invite citizens to compete. A 17% even say that, at present, cultural cohesion in some Arab countries has been lost and society is more unstructured.

For the 80%, the changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya are not enough to guarantee a free and modern country, nor do they correspond to the promises made by political parties after 2011. A 74% define the changes as apparent reforms that do not advance at the desired and necessary pace, especially in key sectors, which are strategic and essential. They attribute the slowdown to the links between politics, economy and certain sectors of society, which are interested in maintaining privileges and traditions, and are joining forces to preserve them, and thus hinder full development of democracy. They blame these sectors for maneuvering and influencing so that many projects that were announced never came to fruition. A 34% also claim that governments often play with the population, and at the most critical times, in order to prevent the proliferation of protest acts, governments implement laws that satisfy some demands of cyberactivists and then repeal them shortly. 55% of young people consider this initiative by the authorities a way of implicitly recognizing the importance, influence, and capacity for mobilization and action of cyberactivism. However, they also maintain that this formula causes confusion, as there are advances and then setbacks incomprehensible for part of the citizenship.

83% criticize the timidity of the reforms as has already been said. However, 52%, while recognizing that it is necessary to promote renovators and solid projects, where the separation of powers is clear, say that the population needs time and pedagogy to assimilate and incorporate certain new features into their daily lives. For these young people, some changes were sudden and abrupt, and they report that many Arab citizens, especially the elderly, had to accept and comply with rules that they found strange and that went against their principles because they were accustomed to living in totalitarian regimes where traditions were confused with politics and religion. For 59%, one of the reasons why many changes have not been consolidated is that, apart from the constraints mentioned above, some of the citizens have found a new reality that they have not been able to manage.

91% of respondents, as pointed out earlier, say that at the moment there is lack of a common space of coexistence and they seek to transform a society that is, according to them, dominated by deficiencies, corruption, lack of opportunities, inequalities, repression and hatred, and turn it into a prosperous, fair and free place, where the individual, in a personal way, and citizens, collectively, can develop and feel fulfilled, regardless their religious beliefs, their political preferences, their social status and their economic potential. Almost the same percentage (90%) agree that Egyptians, Tunisian, and Libyans do not share rights and obligations at the same level because the standards are theoretically common but are not respected by all or applied equally. For 87% it is important to have access to education, to be able to develop the capacities and to have the necessary and adequate resources. 59% admit that a person's values do not always coincide with those set by society, and in that case, the common good must prevail over individual interests. And they add that social profitability can not be assessed using economic parameters and, sometimes, the fruits of actions are obtained in the long term. That is why, although the results are not always the expected, 62% say that the demands must be maintained until the rights of a full democracy are achieved. And they maintain that the Internet and social networks are the adequate platforms to program and carry out the necessary cyber activities until the marked purposes are achieved. That is why they consider it necessary to have a critical mass to keep protests going. However, 32% acknowledge that many of the claims are symbolic because they are impossible in the current political, social and economic context, where many of the structures of the previous regime remain.

The Arab cyberactivists who have participated in this research are realistic and aware of their possibilities, so their actions have short and long term objectives. The interests of young people vary according to circumstances, but 47% agree on priorities. What worries them most is, in this order, political instability, which generates social instability, human rights, individual and collective freedoms, corruption and economic precariousness. And then there are other future purposes: 35% want a more critical society and 42% a consolidated democracy, without losing the identity values, where all citizens have access to resources, knowledge, and freedoms under the same conditions.

In the following table, we include a selection of the data that we consider more representative to see the contrasts that exist in the society of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The clashes of feelings, values, and norms, typical of a society in which tradition and modernity coexist, generate numerous personal and social conflicts, which affect decisively the development of the process of change and the construction of modern society. And in this context cyberactivism plays a decisive role.

Table 1. Factors conditioning the political and social situation in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya

There is a clash of cultures	78%
There are differences between the public and private	74%
Action varies depending on the context	83%
There is little transversality	77%
There are privileges for the most powerful	90%

4. Discussion and conclusions

Cyberactivism has played a key role in Arab revolutions of 2011 and from then on young people that have participated in that process maintain a constant activity in the network. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have not made all the expected and agreed changes and, as long as no structures of a modern state that guarantee full individual and collective rights are consolidated, it is important to have an active and critical citizenship.

The Internet and social networks are safe platforms that allow cyber activists to communicate, organize, program and take necessary action to keep alive the social struggle at the local level, apart from the official censorship and the surveillance of the government. Besides, cyberactivism allows to identify shortcomings of the country and to pass on the protests and complaints to international forums, where the impact is greater, and so they are more effective.

In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, official media are still controlled by the government, and in a society in which there is an important critical mass and any press freedom, cyberactivism plays a counterweight role against the intense and continuous indoctrination exerted from the Administration. In the Arab spring of 2011, there was already an important phenomenon. For the first time, the communicative flow generated on the Internet and in social networks was outside the control of the Government, as in the network every citizen has the possibility to be an emitter and receiver and, also, to do it from any place and at any time. This makes social networks uncontrollable. And this is where part of the value of cyberactivism lies because governments can not fight against a platform that transcends their capabilities. Currently, the young Arab cyberactivists are aware of the importance and necessity of using Internet and social networks correctly and of properly planning the communication strategies to optimize resources, something that they did not do in 2011.

The scope of the network is not yet universal in Arab countries. In this sense, technology is, at the same time, an integrating and exclusive element because its access and use are limited. In some areas of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya there are problems of coverage, and in other cases, citizens do not have access to the Internet for economic reasons. This gap makes it difficult for cyberactivists to contact many isolated localities and with marginal sectors disconnected due to lack of resources.

The protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have to be placed in a context of non-conformism and permanent disenchantment felt by part of their citizens, who have not yet met the expectations created during the 2011 revolutions. Many of the young people interviewed, who are representative of a large section of the population, do not feel valued or protected by the authorities of their country, which they accuse of having interests incompatible with the public service. And marginalization has generated discontent that has resulted in the process of citizen empowerment and a movement of a critical society that channels their concerns through cyberactivism to transform personal demands into a collective struggle.

Most of the changes scheduled during the 2011 revolutions have not yet been consolidated because there are many obstacles. Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya share the same contradictions. In all three countries, tradition and modernity live together permanently, and this contrast generates clashes that hinder or impede the incorporation of new norms that have associated values of forms of coexistence that for many Arab citizens are incompatible with its principles and their beliefs as recognized by 78% of cyberactivists. Millennial traditions and customs are rooted in society. Eradicating them completely is now impossible because many structures of the previous regimes that support them remain. These customs are what sustain many moral values, which go beyond ideology because they are transversal. That is why it is difficult to separate politics from the influence of religion and traditions. Also, many citizens are reluctant to lose part of their privileges, and in the social arena, there are difficulties to incorporate progress that will improve individual freedoms and collective rights approved by international standards.

One of the reasons behind the clashes between tradition and modernity is that some changes have occurred suddenly, without time to assimilate them. Reforms, when they are very drastic, require processes of adaptation to the new reality to avoid conflicting episodes. 63% of cyberactivists recognize that in many cases the interests of citizens have not been respected and action has been taken hastily with plans designed and imposed from abroad for political reasons.

As there is no political stability, there is no social stability. The governments of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya are not stable and do not have freedom of action because they depend on other foreign governments, especially the US, which is accused by 56% of cyberactivists of imposing Western values incompatible with many of the Arab cultural traditions. These same young people describe their governments as authoritarian towards citizens and weak towards international pressures.

The ideals of cyberactivism are revolutionary, but also inclusive. Young Arabs believe that it is necessary to fight for a space of coexistence in which all sensitivities are embraced. They want a modern society, without renouncing tradition, because they believe that both are compatible. Cyberactivists advocate a critical citizen participation in which knowledge is valued rather than social position and assume collective responsibility and social commitment, maintain a sense of belonging to a territory and culture, the permanence of cultural identity, and defend individual freedom and collective rights. Their philosophy and social project consist in finding a balance where it is possible to incorporate the necessary changes to improve the welfare of citizens without losing their identity.

From the interviews carried out, it is clear that Arab cyberactivists promote claiming citizen initiatives and have the necessary elements to maintain an active struggle that channels the ideals of a critical citizenry. Besides, they demonstrate attitude, willingness, knowledge, availability of resources.

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