

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Lecture

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"Plato's Digital Cave? The Arab Uprisings as Battles of Representation"

Abstract

In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato stages his famous allegory of the cave in which prisoners ascribe forms and meaning to shadows projected on the wall by a fire between them and the outside world, and mistaking these projections with reality. Like Plato's cave, the battles of representation unfolding in the Arab uprisings are haunted by shadows. Blogs and social media are in many ways a large echo chamber shared by the foot soldiers of the uprisings, cyber-dissidents, Arab and foreign intelligence agencies, and a motley crew of loose cannons and crackpots. In that version 2.0 of Plato's cave, words, sounds and images circulate, faceless, source-less, often without an address or a signature, challenging our ability to comprehend communication practices and casting a shadow of doubt over astonishing claims made about the power of digital media during the popular rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and others.

Informed by 13 months of field research in the Arab world between June 2012 and August 2013, this paper develops the trope of "Plato's Digital Cave" to critically addresses deeper historical and epistemological factors that have shaped academic and journalistic discussions of the Arab uprisings, focusing on the role of media in social and political change. I will first discuss the hype surrounding media technologies in the Arab uprisings, then I will focus on previous revolutionary moments—the French Revolution in 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919—where revolutionaries used media creatively against entrenched power. Then the paper moves to a discussion of American modernization theory and the enduring framework it has created, in the US and worldwide, for understanding political change in the Arab world through a combination of technological determinism and historical presentism.

The main thrust of my paper is therefore an articulation of a history of media in Arab popular uprisings with an intellectual history of theories about Arab political change and the role of media in such change. Seeking an exit from the sterile determinism-presentism nexus, the last section of the paper advocates (1) an expansion of our understanding of what we mean by "media" to include the human body, which I argue is the indispensable medium in times of insurrection, and (2) the elaboration of a more complex view of representation that enables us to better understand communication and human agency in revolutionary times. The paper elaborates an "epistemology of the cave" as an overall approach for understanding media and communication in the Arab uprisings, and more generally, in rapid social and political change.