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Social Media: New Mechanisms and Some Analytic Cautions

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Social Media and Mechanisms

- Information Flows
- Visibility
- Network structures

Nothing is virtual.
(But bits and atoms are different).



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There is no new versus old media.
(There is, indeed, a new ecology).



Authoritarianism and Collective Action Problems

- Prevent information flows -- isolate
- Create «pluralistic ignorance» -- dissuade
- Disproportionate punishment of dissenters -- repress

Collective Action

Tunisia 2008 to Tunisia 2011

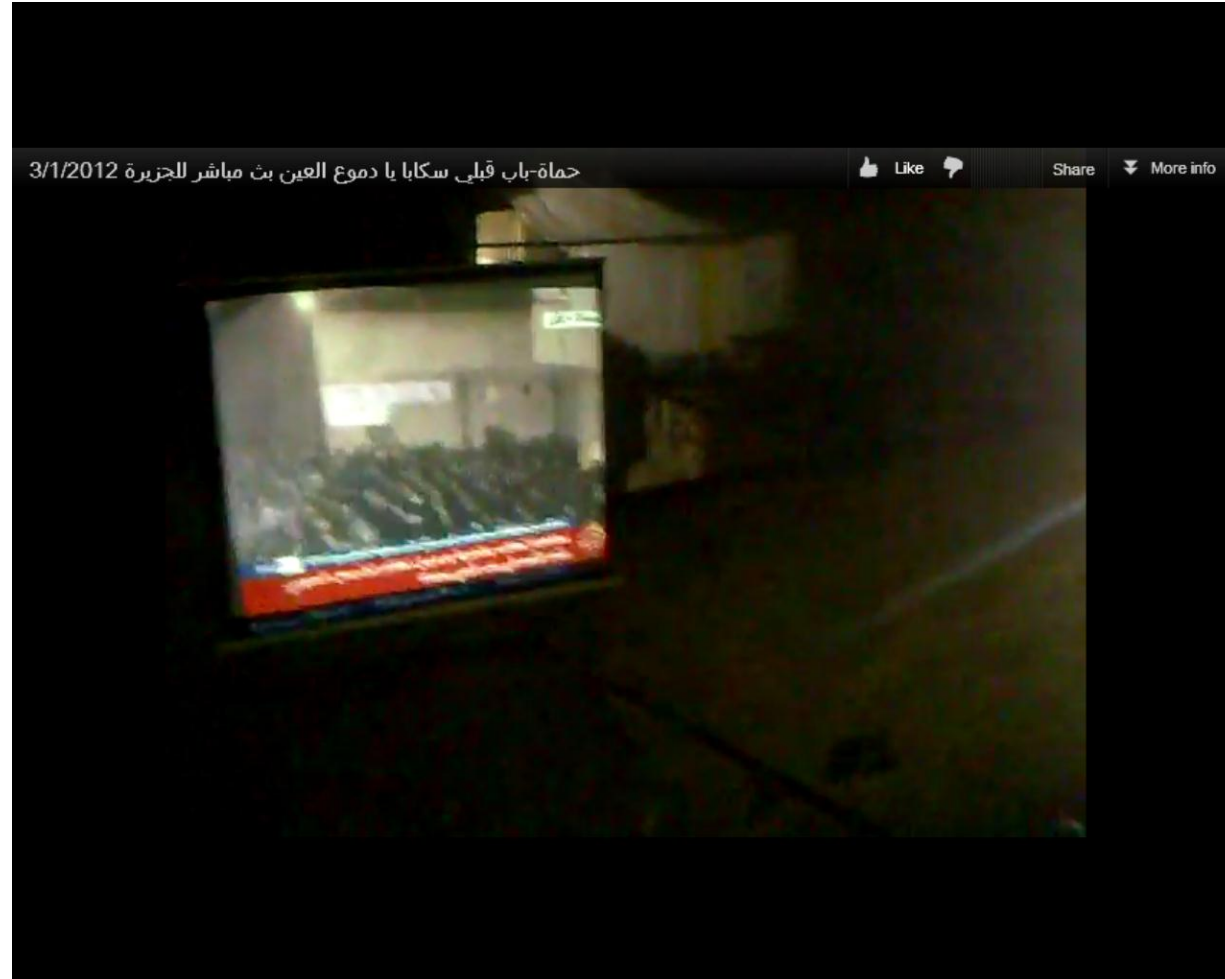
- Gafsa 2008



Sidi Bouzid, 2011



Public is a Meta-Concept.
(Era of pluralistic ignorance may be over)



Coordination

What do today's kid have over Hitler and Napoleon?



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Visibility

Breaking Censorship / «Microcelebrity» networked activists



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Evolution

Everyone is learning.
(Nobody will be Mubaraked)



Participation is not Utopia

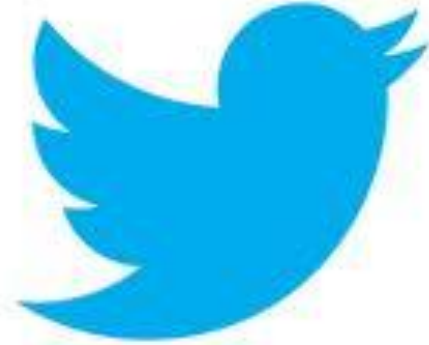
Surveillance isn't just about governments
(And knowledge is not peace)



Pitfalls of Social Media Analysis

- Drosophila!
- Selecting on dependent variable.
- Where is the denominator?
- Overdrawing the analogy.
- Missing the ecology.
- Not knowing (sometimes decades) of deep social science on the very topic.
- Network structure doesn't talk as much as you think it does
- Humans are reflexive—they are not gas molecules or flies. They will game systems.

Drosophila: The problem of Model Organism



Selecting on Dependent Variable

#Jan25 people are...

... people tweeting on a hashtag

Where is the Denominator?

- Many «big data» studies argue that X people use this more than Y people, etc...
- Without a sense of the denominator (i.e. the sample). Without a sense of the sample such conclusions can't be made.

Overdrawing the Analogy

- Networks nodes on Twitter are not «neighbors» in the same sense for all kinds of flows
 - Information?
 - Influence?
 - Exposure?

Missing the Ecology

- Information flows are not limited to one platform...
- Yet, almost all our analyses are...
- Yet, the key change has been to the ecology as a whole!

Not knowing previous research

- For example: two-step influence model
- (There is decades of work on this)!
- Many similar issues with many papers

Overreading the Network Structure

- For example!

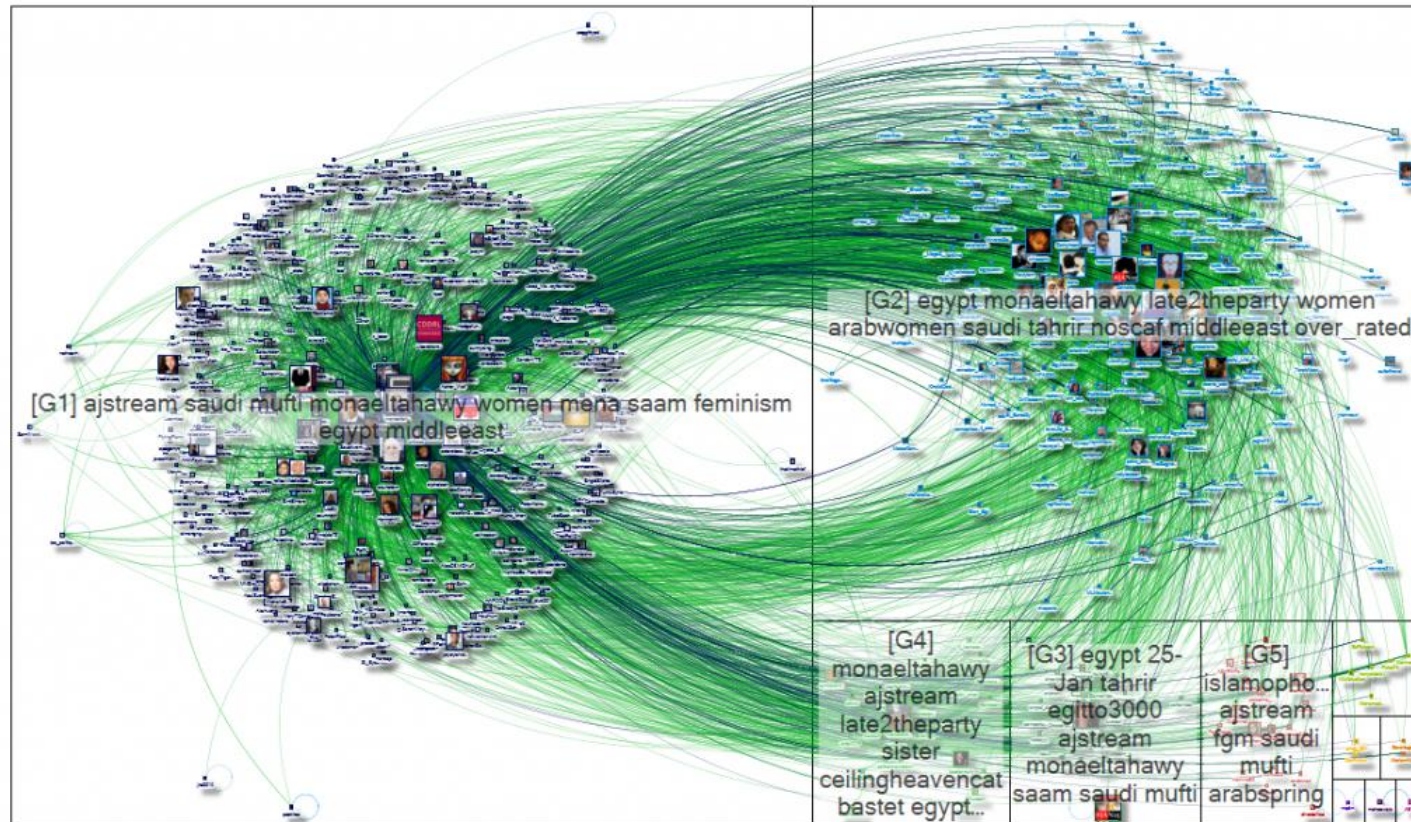
Bridges are Weak Ties

only under certain STRICT conditions

- Not all weak ties are bridges even under those conditions
- It is often not possible to infer tie strength and other key variables from network structure...

Missing Human Practices

- Sub-tweeting
- Hiding in plain sight



People are reflexive

- Kony2012
- Trending topics
- Facebook news feed



Thank you. Questions/Comments?

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