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**The Uses of Seriousness:
Arab Journalists Tweet the 2011-12 Uprisings**

Tim Markham
Birkbeck, University of London
t.markham@bbk.ac.uk

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The promise of social media

It may be argued that the transformative power of social media derives from the fact that it eludes not only the temporal constraint of the news cycle, but narrative structures and news values that have long been divorced from any noble principle of public service. If the news that appears spontaneously and organically as a trending topic on Twitter is not exactly pure, then it is, the argument runs, less sullied by professional gatekeeping and commercialism, whatever the commercial status of particular social media forums. Social media is especially precious in the Arab world where news is over-determined not only by narrative conventions and profit-seeking, but also interventionist editorial policy, a culture of deference in the newsroom and simple corruption. But is this a fair depiction of Arab journalism or a generalization based on preconceptions of the Middle East? The evidence would suggest the former. Pintak and Ginge's (2009) definitive study of pre-Arab Spring journalism demonstrates unequivocally that Arab journalists are under no illusions about the obstacles they face and most would concede that they are themselves obstacles to 'unconstructed' news insofar as partisanship is an accepted norm across print and broadcast journalism in the region.

This could be interpreted as symptomatic of a generalized resignation amongst Arab journalists and there is a pervasive sense of low expectations about the trade's regional capacity for professionalism, independence and fairness, but it is also a matter of motivation. Three-quarters of journalists surveyed reported that political reform is the main goal of journalism – three times as many as those who see it as their job simply to report. About half of Pintak and Ginge's respondents self-identified politically as 'democrat' and while most were young and secular, a clear majority thought that government interference was the chief obstacle to doing their work professionally, rather than religious concerns or corporate pressure. From a western perspective it is interesting that for Arab journalists the key issues facing their region were political reform, human rights and poverty – well ahead of both Palestine and Iraq. It is also worth bearing in mind that Arab journalists tend to be paid erratically and meagrely. Precarity of employment is a given, which raises the question of how journalists remained motivated enough to do their job when change on the scale of the Arab Spring was neither expected nor reasonably aspired to.¹ I would suggest that the answer to this lies not in seeing Arab journalists as a worn down though essentially noble and indefatigable tribe, heroically persevering in spite of everything, but instead in looking at the level of everyday experience. This means examining what makes it meaningful to engage in a particular set of practices, with explanatory factors ranging from simple habit and day-to-day gratifications that have little to do with status or abstracted ideas about journalism's mission, to an embodied disposition conceived in the Bourdieusian sense (see especially Bourdieu 1977: 72) of durable and adaptable anticipatory structures that guide behaviour at the level of instinct. This chapter identifies an epistemological orientation to the world amongst Arab journalists that holds the filtering, ordering and dissemination of information to be of on-going intrinsic value, even while journalists inhabit spaces and engage in communicative practices distant from their traditional professional realm.

The sense of degradation in Arab journalism seems to have contributed to the widely held view that professional journalists were quickly and unceremoniously side-lined when the popular uprisings gained momentum in late 2010, rendered patently irrelevant in the face of the coming tide of citizen journalism. In part this should be seen in the light of a global shift characterized by Boczkowski (2004) as a transition from journalist centred to audience centred

media. Russell (2011: 1239) contends that journalists in the Arab world were largely reduced to 'meta-reporting', that is, relaying and reporting what people were saying about events on social media. Tight policing of news media and frequent disconnection between what was shown in official broadcasts and publications means that there was already what Couldry (2003: 664) has described as an awareness of the underlying arbitrariness of news in the Middle East, and this largely secondary reporting during the uprisings can only have heightened this sense. Proclamations about the sweeping aside of professional journalists in this period are also predicated on a partly self-selecting focus, including by media commentators and academics researching this area. Hermida et al. (2012) analyse the sources used by National Public Radio's Andy Carvin, for instance, who predominantly relied on non-professional sources, although he used traditional means to establish their reliability. In other cases it appears that the rationale for scholars researching a particular sample is because a new and potentially intriguing set of practices emerged amongst creators of user-generated content, rather than because it has passed a certain threshold. Hanska-Ahy and Shapour (2012), for instance, look at the growing professionalization of amateurs submitting footage to the BBC Persian and Arabic news desks, showing an awareness of editorial process and facilitating the validation of their content.

However, overall proportions are more difficult to gauge. Lotan et al. (2011) present a quantitative analysis of tweets and retweets during the Arab Spring, noting in the first instance that the largest categories of actor were, in descending order, bloggers, then journalists, activists, internet robots ('bots') and finally mainstream media organizations. The latter, despite there being fewer of them, were predictably responsible for a large proportion of tweets. Interestingly, the rate at which these were retweeted tended to decay rapidly after an initial flurry, whereas individual professional journalists were much more successful at building momentum over time through retweets. This clearly points to the on-going relevance of professional journalists in a social media environment and may also be indicative of the kind of valorisation of individual over institutional authority seen in the west in recent decades, and now potentially gaining traction in the contemporary Middle East. Lotan et al. also find that journalistic activity on social media is not evidence of an embrace of citizen journalism. Most professional journalists remain markedly sceptical about incorporating UGC into their work. It is true that they will sometimes rely on 'crowdsourced elites' – non-journalists who have been validated and elevated as a trustworthy source by large numbers of followers including, crucially, peers. For the most part, though, journalists in this study opted to source information through professional networks.

The durability of professional networks is perhaps a sign of insecurity in the context of social media, though a sense of professional allegiance should not be underestimated in a region where the relationship between journalists and the institutions of state is often attritional. This last point bears qualification, however. There is a tendency in some scholarly writing on journalism in the Middle East and North Africa to speak of the state as an inherently wily apparatus, emphasizing the furtiveness and guile needed to elude it where possible and negotiate with it where not (see for example Khondker 2011). Interviews with journalists in Egypt bear this out to an extent, though in language which highlights the prosaic and logistical obstacles and frustrations of day-to-day practice rather than personal and collective investment in a game of cat and mouse. Navigating around obstacles and maintaining autonomy from surveillance and interference is thus a matter of professionalism, obviating recourse to the tropes of furtiveness and subterfuge that Said detects beneath the surface of much writing by Westerners and Arabs alike on Arab culture. The heightened and sometimes conflicted status of interpersonal trust in Arab journalism is then not reducible to cultural stereotype, but nor are we compelled to conclude that it is the same as for journalists everywhere. Instead, after Rinke and Roder (2011), we can look to other distinct historical features such as the privileged position of oral communication in many Arab societies, which by necessity foregrounds one-to-one interaction over other forms. We return to this theme below.

Given some cautious framing of our starting point, to what extent have professional journalists themselves *felt* sidelined by the Arab Spring and to what extent is this sidelining the product of projections by media scholars and commentators? Papacharissi and Oliveira (2012: 267) surmise that journalists have felt confused and torn between their roles as reporters, editors, critics and individuals. This goes beyond being pulled in different directions. It requires a shift in orientation to one's work, from a relation of mutual exteriority of subject and object of knowledge, to 'finding one's own place in the story'. The idea of journalists positioning themselves outside a developing story is perhaps an antiquated and specifically modernist account of journalistic epistemology, especially given the evidence demonstrating the centrality of political reform to professional motivation. Anxiety over the expectation to constantly and personally position oneself in relation to a story is reasonable and Papacharissi and Oliveira rightly emphasize the increasingly dispersed nature of agency in social media (2012: 279) that overshadows individual motivations and concerns. To misquote them slightly, hashtags do not feel the same anxiety, happily mixing fact and opinion, the respectful and irreverent, the prosaic and profound. Starbird and Palen's (2012) research is also relevant here, showing how complex and easily misunderstood the work done by retweets is. For our purposes while it is clear that journalists are often effective in generating retweets, motivations for retweeting and reasons for selecting who to follow and by whom to be followed are impossible to map and account for. The result is that, while excellent research has been done to track the spread of tweets across networks (see especially Lotan et al. 2011), to speak definitively of the agency of a tweet across its lifespan is impossible. We can say with certainty that it does not remain the journalist's alone, its meaning inevitably changes across the networks through which it is distributed, but nor can we simply say that its agency is collective.

Yet this kind of undifferentiated collectivization is prevalent in the literature (see for instance Soguk 2011; Tagma 2011; Newsom 2011), and I would argue that it is this conceptualization that allows for normative projection by scholars and Western media audiences onto Twitter and other platforms. Papacharissi and Oliveira, for instance, posit that netizens of the Arab Spring, having thrown off the shackles of traditional mainstream media, now qualify as subaltern counter cultures in Nancy Fraser's sense (1992). It is significant that the removal of constraint is given to be sufficient in order for a democratic polity to emerge, one whose demands – here, the right to be heard – appear natural enough but in fact cleave to a fairly narrow construction of politics in terms of human rights and of human rights as being primarily about voice. Fraser's model of recognition, while nuanced and alive to the conflicted realities of contemporary public engagement, overestimates the control that we as individuals and societies have over how we are recognized (Fraser and Honneth 2003). There is a further unresolved issue around disengagement, namely our presumption to understand how it is lived phenomenologically. More pertinently, much writing on the Arab Spring so far insists that while social media may not be representative, their lack of structure allows for a voice to emerge more or less organically, a voice that is democratic, progressive and liberal. In short, a voice that we find familiar, that we are comfortable talking to and find easy to urge on.

None of this is intended to deny the role that social media has played in the Arab Spring and other protest movements such as that in Iran after the 2009 elections. On an organizational level there is ample evidence that it has been an effective tool, with Tufekci and Wilson (2012) showing for instance that Facebook users were more likely to have attended the first day of mass protests in Egypt in January 2011 than non-users. Howard and Hussain (2011) paint a vivid picture of the subversive uses to which social media can be put in response to the harnessing of social media by authoritarian regimes for surveillance purposes, pointing to practices of *sousveillance*, for example the uploading of videos of police brutality, which are also enabled by new platforms. However, media scholars and commentators, mainly in the West but to a significant extent among Arab researchers as well, have focussed disproportionately on social media, in part simply because they are new, but also because they offer an attractive narrative of shapeless and unstoppable people power, a malleable and adaptable object in

which we can invest emotionally and onto which we can project our own subjective ideals. This is not to suggest that emotion has no role in academic research. It inevitably motivates research in terms of subject selection and the application of normative frameworks. But comments from scholars such as Axford (2011: 682) explicitly referring to events as ‘almost unbearably poignant’ should make us aware of the affective work being done by the Arab Spring for those reporting and analysing it.

Arab journalists tweet the 2011-12 uprisings and unrest

The aim of the present research is to begin to differentiate the undifferentiated Arab social media onto which various investments are projected and to shed some light on users who have received comparatively little attention due to the valorisation of ‘people power’ during the Arab Spring. This means looking at the tweets of professional, usually institutional, journalists, as well as non-professional commentators and activists by way of comparison. Two relatively short timeframe periods were selected, both from early- to mid-2012: the build-up to and aftermath of the appointment of Mohammed Morsi as President of Egypt, and the visit to Syria by UN special envoy Kofi Annan. Subjects were selected by searching Twitter for users who include the Arabic word for ‘journalist’ (صحافي) in their profile and had tweeted using the Arabic hashtags for Egypt (#مصر) and Syria (#سوريا). It was decided to exclude those who turned out to have described themselves as former journalists, but given the labour market in journalism in the Arab world it was decided to include those who described themselves as freelancers, so long as there was evidence of their being published in recognized titles or by known broadcasters. This produced a sample of thirteen profiles on Twitter, including seven journalists employed by private print publications, one broadcast journalist (also private) and five freelance journalists. Their tweets (370 in total) were then categorized according to type of user, (predominantly one way dissemination, predominantly interactive and predominantly retweets), content and type of language used. This last category falls short of a full discourse analysis, but distinguishes content which is deliberative, rhetorical, reportorial and conversational.

In their analysis of mainly American journalists’ tweets collected by the aggregator Muck Rack, Lasorsa et al. (2011) find that professional journalists on Twitter tend to be fairly restrained and professional, speaking more freely than they would in news copy but holding back some details about the intricacies of their work in order to preserve a degree of mystique. This can be thought of as strategic candour, the classic, usually tabloid trick of suggesting intimacy while being careful to maintain the integrity of one’s brand. This potentially allows the journalist to cultivate a particular kind of authority and to carve out a unique function, as Hermida et al. (2012) explain:

In a networked media environment, the journalist emerges as a central node trusted to authenticate, interpret and contextualise information flows on social awareness streams, drawing on a distributed and networked newsroom where knowledge and expertise are fluid, dynamic and hybrid. (Hermida et al 2012: 11)

Journalists occupying this position tend to sustain a professional tone in their tweets, albeit one which accommodates more subjective terminology and interpretation. Comparing tweets by Western news organizations, journalists and others, Harlow (2011) concludes that individual journalists were significantly more likely to use frames other than the classic and delegitimizing ones that Gitlin identified in media coverage of protests three decades ago, including frames of accountability, sympathy and justice. Looking at Arab professional journalists, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) note that most soon felt comfortable resorting to terms such as ‘pure’, ‘noble’ and ‘selfless’, words that are loaded but not necessarily unprofessional, and surely no more biased than the self-evidently situated tweets of journalists from the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* in the UK. This kind of tweeting was certainly replicated in the present sample, but by fewer than half

of the journalists investigated. The remainder consisted of retweets, apparently factual reporting and finally in numerical terms the largest category, what Hamdy and Gomaa (2012: 202) refer to as 'rhetorical and visual imagery ranging from interfaith prayers to dreams of a successful revolution'. Setting aside retweets, let us look at each category in turn, beginning with that which is perhaps the most problematic for any research into Arab media: high rhetoric.

Analysing florid language

A good deal of rhetorical and platitudinous content is to be expected in tweets from any part of the world and in that sense it is not surprising that a large amount of tweets from Arab journalists were simple expressions of support for democracy, freedom or peace. But the tweets are often florid and highly rhetorical in tone, full of references to hearts ('My heart aches for the soul of Egypt', 'The heart of Egypt is filled'), crying ('The city cries', 'Syria cries for its children'), eyes, love, smiling and death with extensive use of emotive metaphor ('when dignity committed suicide', 'electoral earthquakes') and value statements about shame, honour and respect. It is essential that our initial response to this content takes into account certain particularities of Arabic language and avoids simplistic generalizations about Arab culture. As regards the first it should be borne in mind that the translations of the Arabic text are literal rather than contextual and that written and spoken Arabic is a highly metaphorical, referential and often circuitous language. References to the heart, eyes and head are legion and cannot be taken as evidence here of passion or excitability amongst Arab journalists or to support more ingrained preconceptions of ardour or evasiveness in Arab culture. Trombetta (2012) notes that Western academics often fail to understand the nuances of Arabic expression, with repetition and allusion encoding rules for expressing deference, respect, trust and humour ('the department of love in my heart is closed for maintenance'). This is by no means a dead-end, and it will be seen in what follows that we can unpack the implications of a journalistic culture where reaching for universal statements is the norm. But it does mean provisionally reserving judgement on whether Arab social media as used by journalists is more or less vacuous or serious than that of the US or UK.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is a wariness in much Western scholarly work around writing about the role of Islam across different Middle Eastern and North African societies. This is certainly understandable given the confessional and demographic complexity of the region, though the question remains how best to deal methodologically with references to God, the Qur'an, specific Islamic sects and religious principles, all of which are common. Rinke and Roder (2011: 1275) start with the bigger picture, writing of the importance of recognizing the distinct 'communication culture' of the Arab world comprising three key features. The first is the centrality of one-to-one communication. This was mentioned above in relation to the oral tradition and the recognition of trust and authority, but it is specifically relevant here in that the authors contend that a higher proportion of communication between Arabic speakers on social media is one-to-one than in other cultures. This is significant insofar as it underpins the observed durability of individual journalistic authority in social media and at the same time it militates against the valorisation of many-to-many communication as a new and newly-democratic form of leaderless, non-hierarchical deliberative space, at least in the context of the Middle East and North Africa. Secondly, while it is easy to dismiss expressions of support from outside nations undergoing political upheaval as well meaning naivety, they underline a point made by many previously, that with the broad intelligibility of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the relatively recent waxing of transnational broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, we should take seriously the viability of pan-Arab communication and thus a potential pan-Arab public sphere. This latter notion has been dismissed since the time of Nasser as a wishful fantasy of common Arab identity and an overreaching statement of geopolitical clout,

but the routine broadcasting of MSA in the home, workplace and public spaces has made pan-Arab deliberation a quotidian, unadorned fact for many.²

The third feature highlighted by Rinke and Roder is the intricate interweaving of Islamic tenets and customs into Arabic language. In particular they refer to the centrality of *نَسَب* (nasab), meaning family solidarity, and *الأمة* (al-umma), or the international brotherhood of Islam, concepts which are usually implied rather than explicit and widely misunderstood outside the Islamic world. Looking specifically at Egypt, Western media discourse has frequently treated Islam, conflated with specific branches of Islamism, as a threat to the nascent democratization of the Arab Spring. But in looking at the present sample of tweets as well as academic research, what is striking is how comfortable, or 'unembarrassed', as Soguk (2011) puts it, journalists and citizen journalists are about the integral role that Islam plays in everyday and political communication. As with any analysis of language it is important to separate categories of religious references in the sample. First, there are ubiquitous phrases such as *إن شاء الله* (God willing) and *الحمد لله* (praise to God) which are of little import. Second, there are phrases which speak to the centrality of religion as an authoritative framework, but which may still reasonably be classified as rhetoric, for example: 'With God's help Egypt will survive', 'May God protect the children of Egypt' and so on. Third, there is ample evidence of opinions held by journalists on religious matters and the role that religion should play in post-revolutionary Arab nations. While many of these were straightforward avowals of the need to adhere to Islamic principles however defined, there were also widespread calls for tolerance of other faiths ('Egypt will not forget her Muslim and Coptic children') and one journalist who frequently blogged in support of rights for atheists in the region.

What is a non-Muslim, non-Arab scholar to make of this kind of social media content? For Hofheinz (2011) the most important interpretative tenet is not to presume that Islamic influence is primarily conservative, moralizing or divisive. Further, visible forms of religious/political communication such as Friday prayers at mosques should not be seen in a vacuum, since what is observed in social media is very much part of a broader trend. This is a historical shift going back to the nineteenth century of Muslims beginning to read scripture for themselves rather than relying on imams' interpretation of the Qur'an, and increasingly challenging the authority of those imams. This sea change in religious culture across much of the Islamic world, but particularly in North Africa, should itself not be thought of in isolation from the wider trend in Arab societies of individuals believing that they have the right to greater autonomy when it comes to the dissemination and interpretation of knowledge, as well as a right to an outlet or forum for their opinions. Tempting as it may be to detect in this signs of an inexorable evolution towards Western style, individualistic democratic impulses, Hofheinz is carefully ambivalent about the consequences of a growing cultural disregard for what he calls 'the long chain of authority', all of the social, political, religious and familial hierarchies that traditionally structured decision making in Arab culture. In terms of religion this has taken the form of the slow demise of the *ulama* (Muslim legal scholar) and the rise of inexpert, unqualified religious scholars, an interesting parallel to the rise of amateur authorities in journalism and social media. In both cases critics lament the spread of kneejerk or cut-and-paste commentary, but writing about the religious context Hofheinz concludes that this is simply a manifestation of contemporary forms of communication which it makes little sense to oppose.

Deliberation and wrestling

The second category of tweets in the sample contain debate between individuals and groups, either in the form of interchanges in which disagreement is expressed or, more commonly, statements of disagreement with absent others. These were sometimes quite robust in form, with those judged to be mistaken described as everything from 'morons' and 'mentally ill' to 'shameful' and 'sick in the heart'. Beyond the occasional bouts of personal abuse, however, there

was a preponderance of statements of categorical, insuperable disagreement, a widespread facility for polarization with those on the other side not simply wrong but irredeemably so. The obvious rejoinder to this is easily put: is this not the case in social media the world over? The answer is unambiguously yes, and yet there remains the question of whether there is something distinctive in Arab social media, at least as used by journalists, on top of this generalized incivility, which further detracts from constructive deliberation. There is the supplementary question of whether this possibility can be voiced without falling into the Orientalist trap – especially considering Said’s dictum that Orientalism is committed as much through well-meaning attempts at understanding as unthinking prejudice. The question was tackled by Arab media scholars and media commentators at the 2012 Arab Media Forum, held in Dubai, and speakers’ contributions provide a useful basis on which to assess this debate.³

In an opening plenary discussants raised the issue of what they called ‘wrestling’, referring to the overly combative nature of debates on broadcast news networks, but also to political debate in the Arab world generally. Beyond the usual arguments about sensationalism and oversimplification, the possibility was raised that there is something about the way that political deliberation is performed in Arab culture that prevented it from producing constructive deliberation. While not all of the panel agreed, this was thought by at least two speakers to boil down to two tendencies: a quickness to take offence, and the transition of disagreement into pronouncements on the relative moral character of the discussants. For one speaker this was emblematic of Arab deliberative inferiority, a lack of political maturity compared to the West, but there is no sound inductive reason for reaching either for essentialist explanations of Arab culture or for sweeping statements about how developed its public sphere is. There are clearly defects in that public sphere, but these are better accounted for by looking first at what makes it unremarkably meaningful to resort to umbrage and moralization and secondly to seek to identify the conditions which make such strategies possible. To the extent that either practice is widespread, and the evidence both in broadcast debate programmes and on Twitter suggest quite unequivocally that they are, the effect of each is to close down debate and preclude deliberation over any ambiguities as well as the speakers’ own situatedness. This in turn has all the hallmarks of rhetorical defensiveness and self-censorship concomitant with editorial interference and a lack of journalistic autonomy, which directs us away from Arab identity or culture as such and towards structural explanations including economic instability, patronage, clientalism and corruption (Springborg 2011).

A model that explains deliberative cultures by recourse to underlying economic structures is, however, vulnerable to allegations of broad-brush functionalism. But this is not a matter of mechanistic prediction, arguing that if you have a precarious labour market and institutionalized corruption then you will necessarily end up with the kind of political deliberation seen in the contemporary Middle East. Rather, we should start from observed realities as evinced in social media and by regional experts and ask what makes the routines of that culture naturally meaningful. Economic structures by this way of thinking are not extrinsic forces of domination but constraints worn in everyday life, at the level of pre-reflexive cautiousness or defensiveness. And even here these practices are not only instinctive responses made according to a naturalised kind of cost-benefit analysis, but something experienced as affect. As is familiar from Fox News in the US or the *Daily Mail* in the UK, practices of polarization, pontificating and mutual refusal to agree the premises on which a debate will proceed provide a kind of comfort in the form of group membership and a lack of ambiguity. It also offers protection from exposure of inadequacy – not by way of sweeping generalizations about standards but again at the quotidian level, in line with sociological accounts of committee meetings where difficult decisions are sailed over and heated debate focuses on more trivial or symbolic matters where members’ personal competence is not fundamentally in question. What is significant about this approach is that it allows simultaneously for a refusal simply to judge Arab media culture as a whole, as well as a rejection of uncritically giving Arab journalists and activists a voice, whatever they have to say. This precludes the crasser conclusions sometimes

seen in mass media commentary about the Middle East needing to ‘catch up’ to Western civil society, but nor does it insist, as is widespread in the academic literature, on a grounded theory approach in which a new and more authentically local politics will emerge and in which the responsibility of the Western academic is passively to observe. Without being either neo-colonialist or patronizingly wishful, it is possible to point out for instance the implications of a broad acceptance of bias either as a necessary evil or a positive motivation. This does not necessitate a wholesale subscription to Habermasian principles of communicative deliberation, but it does allow us critically to assess the limits of political discourse in an arena where mutual expressions of categorical difference are common.

Breaking the news

Finally there are tweets where journalists are, apparently, simply breaking the news. Looking at the appointment of Morsi as president and Annan’s Damascus talks, there is no shortage of personal commentary, with one expressing a hope across several tweets that the military will not overreach, another placing his faith in the ability of the military to maintain stability if the political situation were to descend into chaos. But there is also a good deal of straightforward reporting of expected times of announcements, their contents and reactions of other parties, as well as some analysis of likely implications. This could be interpreted in purely instrumental terms, with journalists making good use of social media to convey facts about events as they develop. Alternatively, in line with the tendency towards detecting democratizing forces at work in social media, we could interpret this as journalists taking to a new medium to educate the public and hold officials and other elites to account. There is little to back this up in the tweets themselves, with an absence of metareflection on what journalists think they are doing when reporting through social media. This is to be expected, as whatever the guiding principles of a particular journalist are, they are likely to be subsumed in the routines of professional practice rather than explicated; this is also consistent with the propensity of journalists to hold back some ‘backstage’ work when self-presenting online (Goffman 1959). However, with the pervasive sense of hopefulness in the academic literature on the Arab Spring there is a temptation to imbue such practices of reporting with a kind of noble ordinariness, a laudable dedication to getting the facts out there, in spite of or because of the pressures and uncertainties they face. To do so, though, would amount to the wishful projection that I have sought to resist here, a desire to uncover heroic commitments to political reform and freedom of speech which, while undoubtedly widely held aspirations amongst Arab journalists, are unlikely to manifest themselves in day-to-day practice.

This returns us to quotidian meaningfulness, that which makes it unremarkably worthwhile to continue to break news which is often procedural rather than dramatic, in an incremental fashion on social media. Principle is likely to be a motivation at a second-order level, but subservient at the pre-reflexive level to routines of professional practice acquired across a journalistic career, alongside the additional incentives of an audience that is more proximate than in traditional media, and the satisfaction that comes with being retweeted. The latter can only be guessed at and would make interesting grounds for future research, while a sense of intimacy with journalists’ followers on Twitter especially needs to be qualified. There is little evidence in the sample analysed of interaction between journalists and followers; thus, in order for tweeting to be meaningful it must be contingent on a conception of social media as an effective means of disseminating to the public rather than something which is constantly validated. And this can be explained in fairly unspeculative and normatively unloaded terms: while the meaningfulness of social media might not be predicated on deliberation with a public, nor is it a matter of faith in the power of social media: validation more likely occurs through the act of being followed, rather than actively responded to. Whatever the form that validation takes, the crucial point is that there is an embodied, apparently stable meaningfulness in journalists’ tweeting. While the form and content of this communication is fractured and

sometimes contradictory, there is a clear sense that for professional journalists this is a culture of practices in which it is worthwhile to be invested.

It is in this context that the uses of seriousness can be set out in phenomenological terms: that is, as a defining aspect of the journalistic disposition that is experienced as a natural meaningfulness in enduring in spite of political and economic obstacles as challenges from rival forms of cultural authority. This need not be experienced as something noble, or even professional in the normative sense of the word; it is instead about *work* – the ritualistic application of journalistic practices. Through a Bourdieusian lens this might be seen in relational terms, a kind of no-nonsense professional identity that is easily distinguished from other media producers. Seriousness then is useful insofar as it helps to maintain journalism's status on its own terms, as a matter of vocation, as opposed to competing criteria against which it is increasingly found wanting: timeliness, adaptability and arguably relevance. But we have seen here that Arab journalists are as likely to engage in explicitly political communication as well as colourful rhetoric as they are to diligently stick to reporting the facts. In fact, however, that same epistemological orientation is detectable across the full range of discourse analysed in this chapter. This means looking beyond overt expressions of democratizing fervour – no doubt in large part genuine, though easily mis- or over-interpreted – as well as the fiery outpourings too simply moulded to Orientalist templates, and asking what else these forms of communication are. Underlying them all is a disposition that instinctively finds meaning in methodically and repeatedly documenting, categorizing, witnessing and assessing, an industriousness seen as much on Twitter as in more traditional professional arena, and one which does not have to be cast in romanticized terms but which nonetheless makes it worthwhile to persevere. Again cleaving to Bourdieu, this is not reducible to some kind of psychological defence mechanism but instead comes from prolonged immersion in the journalistic field, a naturalized inclination to approach whatever is encountered – whether it is momentous, threatening or banal – and to break it down and treat it as work to be done.

To suggest that Arab journalistic dispositions have uses beyond their effectiveness in reporting news is not to detract from the gravity of what is at stake in the region, but to register that a journalist's self-positioning in relation to their work is a strategic act, and one which is a normal part of any professional practice. More than anything the tweets analysed reveal an orientation of seriousness towards unfolding events. This does not equate to dourness or a relentless striving for balance or professionalism: it has been seen that journalists are like others prone to ostentatious and flamboyant language as well as personal attacks and defensiveness, and that these potentially undermine the post-revolutionary development of political deliberation. Nor is it a refusal to deal in the entertaining and trivial that pervades much social media: alongside the expressions of conviction and argumentation there were references to sport and links to Michael Jackson videos on YouTube. Indeed, an integral part of taking social media seriously is developing a facility with switching between the substantial and trivial. The broader seriousness is a durable orientation which prioritizes the epistemological and sees the world as comprising things to identify, interpret and communicate. It has been seen here that this does not necessitate glorifying the role of the journalist in a region where the trade has never been an easy one. Instead, it means looking at the uses of taking things seriously, an orientation that sizes up all eventualities for their import and communicability and which underpins the on-going, everyday meaningfulness of paying professional attention, reporting and tweeting in spite of low social status, practical constraints and allegations of redundancy.

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Notes

¹ This is not to accuse Arab journalists of a unique blindness, needless to say. Lynch (2011) argues that the events that came to be known as the Arab Spring demonstrated that academic political science is considerably outdated in its conception of authoritarianism, which has long proceeded from the premise that authoritarian regimes, and especially those of the Middle East, are inherently stable political formations.

² Wall and El-Zahed (2011) have argued, however, that MSA is an essentially elitist form of communication, and that the use of demotic Arabic by activists on social media is itself a political act.

³ <http://www.arabmediaforum.ae/en/media-center/video-gallery.aspx> (Accessed 19 July 2012).