“More than Just a 'Kill Switch': Digital Activism and Modulations of Control in the MENA Region”

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The extent to which Facebook and Twitter caused the breakdown of long-standing regimes in the MENA region has been explored by countless media outlets. Certainly the increased use of social media services and the networking capabilities of the internet have changed the way we conceive of and practice activism, as well as the way information is organized and transformed into action items. Yet despite rapid technological changes that have provoked a need for a creative multi-disciplinary approach to looking at the use of digital technologies in the Arab world, essentialist narratives still persist in attempts to make generalizable conclusions about the way the internet impacts authoritarian rule. Techno-optimist tales of the proliferation of a Western-inspired “libertarian cyber agenda” are saturated in developmentalist narratives, while concerns over the ability of authoritarian regimes to ‘turn-off’ the internet still reflect colonial and Cold War images of Oriental despots. The confluence of the two discourses results in a world picture in which online activity is either restrictive or not, rather than productive of certain normative subjectivities. This further occludes the role of western global media assemblages in increased online surveillance. In an effort to begin the decolonization of new media narratives in the MENA region this paper explores the difference between censorship through network shutdowns and the more subtle modulations of control through netfiltering. In the case of Tunisia the latter resulted in widespread network errors and difficulty finding out and disseminating information about the uprising but in a way that was too indistinguishable from more common outages to qualify as international news, while the Egyptian media blackout in 2011 gained vast international attention. These varying approaches to control, I argue, call for a political economy and media archeology of internet service providers alongside the traditional analyses of state practice.