The Arab Spring As Meta-Event and Communicative Spaces

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Abstract

The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, immediately labeled "the Arab Spring," are best described as processes rather than outcomes. Despite being a common area of media focus due to decades-long geopolitics, the Arab Spring, as a mediatized meta-event, has led to the reemergence of the region as a discursive territory. The communicative spaces that opened up during and in the aftermath of the uprisings allowed for a multiplicity of topics to reenter public discourse across local, national, and transnational scales. In the process, seasoned debates such as religious sectarianism and democratic institutionalization gained magnitude. More specific debates such as Turkey's role as a model/antimodel added new discursive aspects to the multitopic ensemble. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the communicative and scalar dimensions in the mediation of the Arab Spring by way of taking the debates on Turkey as a case in point.

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town of Sidi Bouzid in protest against harassment he was experiencing from local authorities (he would later die as a result of the injuries sustained by his self-immolation). Bouazizi's act triggered a wave of protests in Tunisia, prompting the longtime ruler Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali to resign after twenty-three years in power. The protests then spread, first to Egypt, and then on to Libya, Syria, and Yemen,

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among others. The well-documented aftermath of this public outrage was the fall of a number of other authoritarian regimes, including those of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gadaffi in Libya.[1]

As is the case with most transformation processes, the events and social phenomena that collectively constitute "the Arab Spring" are not be understood as having clear-cut outcomes or endpoints. Despite the tendency of international news media to use frames of immediacy and expectancy (of results), it soon became clear that the Arab Spring embodied the complex characteristics of what we call a mediatized *meta-event*. Akin to other spatiotemporal change processes of a heavily mediatized nature—such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the global climate change debate—the Arab Spring morphed into a regional phenomenon awash with transnational discourse on its causes, constituents, and consequences. Added to this was the global momentum brought about by the similarities clearly discernable between the Arab Spring and other "movements of the squares" (Burkart and Christensen 2013) due, among other factors, to their horizantalism (or *horizantalidad*, as it was known in relation to the Argentine protests of 2001) and networked, mediatized character.

Within the short time frame since the start of both the MENA ("Middle Eastern and North African") uprisings and other concurrent global protests, such as the "Occupy" movements, a sizable body of popular and academic writing has been produced on the subject. For example, referring to the protests in Cairo, New York, London, and Athens, Slavoj Žižek (2012) called 2011 "The Year of Dreaming Dangerously" and opined that we have entered an era of new political reality. Alain Badiou (2012) drew parallels between the Arab Spring and the European revolutions of 1848. His analysis points to the return of emancipatory universalism, despite, we should note, the countercurrents of racism, sexism, and capitalistic domination. More specifically, within literature that addresses media and society, Castells (2012) foregrounded the role of the Internet in protest movements and political change; of course, it should be noted that this techno-centric position is not without its problems. A significant portion of literature (going back to the postelection protests of 2009 in Iran) focuses on the role of individualized technology and social media in the organization and execution of social movements (e.g., Gillespie 2013; Halverson et al. 2013; Howard and Hussain 2011; Khondker 2011).

It is the ultimate purpose of this article to stimulate debate on the Arab Spring (and surrounding media coverage), and to do so via theoretical reflection, and the placement of some empirical flesh on the conceptual skeleton we propose. We do so by addressing two related aspects: the mediated communicative spaces and scalar dynamics (i.e., shifts from local to regional to global significance) that have given the so-called Arab Spring longitudinal and global dimensions. Events both during and after the protests prompted public debate on a range of topics from local conflicts to the future of capitalism and the global order, thus linking the Arab Spring to broader concerns over social unrest and visions of change. As a case in point, we then present a study of newspaper articles and reader comments on regional power-broker Turkey's providing a socioeconomic and political blueprint for the Arab world.

The purpose of the empirical part is not to specifically link the regional events to the Turkish context or to reflect on Turkey's role per se. Nor is the empirical material meant to be an all-encompassing look at communicative spaces surrounding the Arab Spring. Rather, the Turkish example was selected as a case study for examining an ephemeral communicative space, and the multiple discourses that opened up in that space due to Turkey's complex role as a Muslim, militarily powerful, Western-allied country. At the time of the Tunisian uprising, Turkey was thirty years divorced from its latest military coup, and thirteen years from a 1997 "soft coup" where an Islamist-leaning government was forced from power through threats of military intervention; the country has been held up as a model for how a predominantly Muslim nation can maintain a democratic, secular political system with a vibrant economy (Bengio 2012; Tugal 2012).

In what follows, we first offer a brief discussion of the communicative and scalar dimensions of the Arab Spring and how, as a mediatized nascent construct, it has quickly led to the opening up of abundant public discourses on political and cultural questions. Within those online discussions and debates, and within the context of the media stories linking Turkey to the Arab Spring, we identify and analyze three topical areas: *leadership, religion*, and *human rights*.

The Local-Global Loop and Communicative Spaces

As a conceptual lead-in, it is important to provide the geopolitical framework on which the study rests. This is more than a question of simple historical background information, but rather a nuanced understanding of how the phenomenon known as "the Arab Spring" generated a unique interaction between local, regional, and transnational geopolitics and a broad array of popular communicative forms.

What is noteworthy about the chain of events that followed the Tunisian uprisings in late-2010 is the way in which a local issue—the harassment of an individual street vendor—was transformed into a national, then regional, then transnational wave of protest and demand for democratic change. The specific geopolitics of the region and its international echoes yielded a spatial loop. For example, the Shia-dominated Bahraini uprisings in 2011 led the ruling Sunni monarchy to side with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States, while the popular opposition (Shia) was seen in relation to the transnational bloc of Iran, Syria, and Hizbullah. Thus, in the following months and years, the global dimension became more amplified, due to the strategic interests of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States, and their opposition to the possibility of the Shia movement's gaining prominence in the region (El Alaoui 2013). In sum, there existed a geopolitical feedback loop wherein local events and politics received international attention, which then rebounded back, influencing power geometries at the local/regional level (and back again).

This is not to say, of course, that the domino effect of democratic aspirations seen in the MENA region over the past three years is entirely unique. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the early-1990s was also a case study in such a domino effect, yet this collapse was not marked, at least in the popular imagination, by having a genesis in such a hyperlocalized issue as the one that took place in Tunisia. And, while the fall of

the Berlin Wall was predicated on the demise of the Soviet Union, the toppling of a series of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region could not be explained by the fall of a local hegemon. In addition, while we remain cautious of overemphasizing the role of technology over sociopolitical fault-lines that eventually cracked, the events surrounding the Arab Spring were indeed marked by intense levels of both internal and external communication flows and the use of mobile and online applications. In that sense, although there is nothing inherently unique about such geopolitical loops in general—throughout history, local events have affected the transnational which have in turn affected the local—one aspect that does set the Arab Spring loop apart is the role of the media ensemble (mobile and online applications in connection to television and news media) in creating and shaping a whole range of communicative spaces. In other words, because of the ways in which the parts of this ensemble interact with each other in a complex, *rhizomatic*, way (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) in a specific geopolitical context, certain dynamics ensued. The affordances of speed, visibility/transparency, and connectivity proved key in this process.

When it comes to the evolving nature of the public sphere in general, and particular communicative spaces, a great deal of emphasis was placed singularly on social media and micromedia feeds; however, news media remain an important source for the majority of people, and public discourse is generated also in response to mass media texts (which themselves feed into and from more individualized platforms). The concept of "ephemeral communicative space" (Christensen and Christensen 2008) was developed to explain how certain zones emerge as extensions of preexisting communicative spaces within which debates take place in more limited time frames (such as short-term discussions of national image and politics following major international sporting victories).

The notion of "ephemerality" is invoked because it links to the notion of the media "event," as well as highlighting the fact that these communicative spaces can open and close at a relatively rapid pace. While initially the concept of ephemeral spaces was linked to the transitory discursive nature of certain events (such as the Super Bowl, the Oscars, or a World Cup final), the *technological zones* that accommodate such discourse should themselves be considered ephemeral. As a case in point, the reader comments sections underneath online newspaper articles encourage such short-termism, and a relatively brusque form of political communication, yet point to key undercurrents and sensitivities in the public debate. Comments are rarely posted more than a few days after an article is published, contributing to the liminal nature of reader comment interaction.

Taken together, techno-zones and spatial dynamics then enable a multiplicity of topics to enter public discourse through mediated interpretations that surround the issue. In addition, these zones and the relatively uninhibited discourses they encompass lead to a process of what Bennett (1982) defined, in referring to the continuous reinscription of a text through interpretations, as the "incrustations" that build up on and around a cultural artifact (Bennett examined film, but his concept remains salient). In the case of the Arab Spring and Turkey, the incrustations are made up of a broad array of discourses, associations, and opinions regarding local, regional, and transnational points of reference. Some aspects of the public discourse are thickly embedded

in the geopolitics of the region and specific locales, and some are of a more emergent, time-specific, tangential nature such as the issues linked with secularism and democracy on the basis of the discussions around the current Turkish Prime Minister's personality and ruling style.

Clearly, in relation to political communication, the more significant the overall issue is perceived to be, the thicker the incrustations, bringing us to the "event" nature of the Arab Spring. The concept of the "media event" was developed by Katz (1980) and Dayan and Katz (1992) via a merger of both social scientific mass communication and cultural studies traditions to understand how broadcast news covered particular happenings (cf. Couldry et al. 2009). As Katz (1980, 2) wrote,

> The paradigmatic media event is one organized outside the media but which may well be transformed in the process of transmission . . . The element of high drama or high ritual is essential: the process must be emotion-laden or symbol-laden, and the outcome be rife with consequence.

Dayan and Katz (1992) looked upon media events as occasions "where television makes possible an extraordinary shared experience of watching events at society's 'centre,'" (Couldry 2003, 61) while Fiske (1994) drew attention to the importance of transborder flows and the need to understand media events in relation to such flows.

In an effort to link the idea of events to the global arena, Couldry et al. (2009, 9) advocated for the need to understand media events as by-products of an increasingly complex global domain, traversed by multiple nodes of connectivity that influence societal institutions (such as media and politics) and the more subjective domains of the public and individuals. In other words, the production and reception of media events become more dispersed and complex, and media events are increasingly more global in nature (Hepp 2004). Nationally bound, chronologically specific, and live-broadcast events are less the norm today, whereas the "mobilization of collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and subjunctive orientation" (Cottle 2006, 415) has taken precedence (see also Christensen, forthcoming; Christensen, Nilsson, and Wormbs, forthcoming).

In the current discussion, mediated communicative spaces (combining short-lived and durable forms) help us better grasp both the dynamics leading up to the events (e.g., mobilization of dissent and rapid networking) and the ensuing flows of discourse in their aftermath, making the Arab Spring an enduring construct able to sustain compound debates. Sakr (forthcoming) in this special issue, for instance, discussed how TV talk shows in Egypt provided, for years, a space of social critique (of the regime) and how those televised spaces of voice[2] connect with online and mobile platforms, over time intensifying the debate. Going back to media events, Couldry (2003, 55) suggested,

> If James Carey (1989: 18) is right that "the ritual view of communication" addresses the media's role in maintaining society through time, then media events are the times, often as short as a week, when the media does this most actively.

While it remains to be the case that due to short issue attention cycles and issue fatigue in the mass media, discourse that surge around events such as the death of a leading political figure tend to be short-lived, the specific geopolitics of the MENA events combined with the complex communicative dynamics give the Arab Spring a *meta-character*.

Study Frame

As noted in our introduction, the purpose of this article is to propose a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding the Arab Spring as (what we describe as) a *meta-event*. In an effort to contextualize the Arab Spring in relation to its geopolitical and multiple communicative dimensions, a combination of articles and reader comments from elite U.S./U.K. publications were analyzed. The articles were used as the "point of origin" for the comments, yet the bulk of the data and subsequent analysis revolved around the *dialogical relationship* between those articles and the online commentary (which we define as a techno-zone generative of public discourse). In their study on reader comments, Manosevitch and Walker (2009, 6) noted,

> Reader comments to online opinion journalism have the potential to promote public deliberation in a number of ways. Readers may provide insight on aspects of the issue not considered in newspaper content. In particular such comments may elicit testimonies from personal experience or specify individual concerns and implications necessary for creating an effective solution.

Methodologically, the reader comments placed after news articles are ideal sites for the harvesting of public opinion on a wide variety of topics, in large part because the sites allow for anonymity, and, thus, a relatively unbridled environment. The fora also open up for a broad cross section of issues and themes not possible within single articles or editorials (Manosevitch and Walker 2009).

This primary consideration then begs the question of whether to examine a relatively small number of articles and comment sections to provide a deep understanding of how issues are addressed and understood within the context of one story or one newspaper; or, as Henrich and Holmes (2013) noted, the alternative option of looking at a smaller number of articles from a broader scope (in terms of time and/or outlets) of sources. It is this latter option we have decided to use, as it provides for a larger cross section of opinions and discourses for examination.

The data were obtained via a search of three publications: *The Guardian* (the United Kingdom), *The Economist* (the United Kingdom), and *The Washington Post* (the United States). These two newspapers and one news magazine were selected as they represent what can loosely be called "elite" media outlets, and thus agenda setters. For each of these publications, we used internal search engines to locate articles published between December 1, 2010 and December 31, 2012. This search yielded a total of 107 articles, from which we selected articles where Turkey was a significant actor in the piece; in other words, where discussions on Turkey were more than peripheral. This

then narrowed down the number of articles to just below 40. The reader comments from these articles were then read, and those comments with Turkey as the primary focus were included.

The Arab Spring and Turkey: News Stories and Reader Comments

What became clear was that, in the body of the newspaper articles, and in scalar terms, the Arab Spring was linked to Turkey at the global/transnational level. As we discussed, what began as local political protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya (and beyond) evolved into larger international events, and, thus, the resultant discourse on and around these events also moved to the global realm. In other words, when discussing Turkey and the "Turkish model" in relation to the Arab Spring, the three publications maintained a transnational, global perspective. After an analysis of material printed in *The Guardian, The Economist*, and *The Washington Post*, the predominant themes around which readers engaged in debate and discussion included (1) leadership, (2) Islam, and (3) human rights. It is important to remember that the themes that emerged in the readers' comments section do not necessarily reflect the predominant subjects addressed in the article(s), but, as noted earlier, it is this element of diversity and spontaneity that makes the comment sections so valuable.

Leadership

One of the most interesting and prominent issues to emerge from the online articles and comments connecting Turkey to the events of the "Arab Spring" was the personality and political cache of Turkish Prime Minister, Tayyip Erdogan. In many of the articles, Erdogan was pitched as a popular and influential figure within the Arab world, thus propelling his standing from national leader to transnational role model. For example, in an *Economist* piece written fairly early in the Arab Spring process, the Turkish Prime Minister was described as "brimming with confidence," and his role in the region as being at an all-time high:

> On the Arab street, Mr Erdogan's salvoes against Israel over the Palestinians have made him a hero. Turkey's high-profile diplomacy, its successful economy and its drive for new markets have made it the envy of many Arab leaders. It is little wonder that so many pundits have taken to talking up a "Turkish model" as a way forward for Egypt. (*The Economist*, February 17, 2011)

Similarly, in *The Guardian*, Erdogan's political capital in the broader MENA region was trumpeted:

> As the Arab spring unfolded across the Middle East, Erdogan initially took credit as an exemplar and guide. Muslim Turkey's secular democracy, with one foot in the west and one in the Middle East, was held up as a model. When he toured Egypt and Tunisia last year, Erdogan was hailed as a hero. (*The Guardian*, October 24, 2012)

This coverage of Erdogan's image in the wake of the Arab Spring protests triggered a wide variety of reader discussions, a number of which brought the discourse of Erdogan as transnational role model back down to the national/regional level by focusing on Erdogan's reputation as a quasi-authoritarian figure within domestic Turkish politics. One of the most common methods for taking the "transnational Erdogan" and rebranding him at the national level was to link him (politically and historically) to the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, or to Turkey's Ottoman history:

> Erdogan is an ambitious man bent on restoring Turkey's former power under the Ottomans and as such the "mercurial" part of his actions are a reflection of the necessity to react to events in ways designed always to enhance his position. Erdogan loves to play both sides because this enhances his power but the west should note that this will lead Turkey to be a continually unreliable partner. (Reader Comment, *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2012)

> Erdogan acts more and more like a wanna-be Sultan—Attaturk must be somersaulting in his grave. (Reader Comment, *The Economist*, February 17, 2011)

In addition, when Erdogan's global reputation or aspirations were mentioned in reader comments, they were often couched in terms of a "narrow" worldview, caused in large part by a sectarian, provincial Islamism at odds with secular globalism. The concept of an Erdogan ideological and religious "lens" was mentioned in numerous reader comments (including the one above), many of whom considered the leader to be hiding a deeper agenda in his policies:

> Erdogan and the AKP view the world through the lens of civilizational conflict. This becomes clear when the AKP becomes an advocate for the Islamist side when it is allowed to interject itself between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, or between Europe and Iran. (Reader Comment, *The Guardian*, June 27, 2012)

> Erdogan is definitely a true dictator, or let's say, an Oriental despot in spirit and mentality. His authoritarian character is shaped by his fundamentalist narrow Islamic worldview. Erdogan thus cannot stomach even a wild criticism. So there is no single dissenting voice in his party. What is even more dangerous is that Erdogan sees the world, peoples, and things through his narrow, ignorant (he is kind of illiterate) Islamist spectacles. (Reader Comment, *The Guardian*, October 25, 2012)

Of course, Erdogan had his defenders, and his role in reshaping Turkey in the wake of three military coups d'etat in twenty years led to several comments regarding his contributions, as well as how Erdogan and Turkey should be differentiated from other "Middle Eastern" leaders and countries. For example,

> Mr. Erdogan is the most successful prime minister in history of the Turkey. Every 10 years military coup became a culture, prime ministers and many people sentenced to death. Not any more. Bloodless reform has taking place in Turkey and it is a miracle. Turkish people are Muslims but Turks can not be considered Middle Eastern way of Muslims, anyone goes to Turkey will see that. Like Christian democrats in Europe. Turks are not fanatics and everybody knows that. (Reader Comment, *The Economist*, June 3, 2011)

Religion

As one would expect when discussed in relation to the Arab Spring, the connections within and between Turkey, the ruling AK Party (AKP), and Islam were a topic of heated debate in the reader comment sections. The three newspapers generally took a measured tone (as they did in relation to the role of Prime Minister Erdogan), pitching Turkey as a "model" in the region. The following is typical of the descriptions of contemporary Turkey in light of the Arab Spring uprisings:

> The political evolution of the AKP in Turkey since the 1980s demonstrates the adoption of not only free elections but also of the secular Kemalist State institutions. (*The Washington Post*, January 27, 2013)

This model, however, was not without internal strife, as noted in *The Guardian*:

> Head east from Greece and we find a moderate Islamist government of the Justice and Development party ruling Turkey, committed to pluralism and making great economic strides, but also worrying its secular elite with prosecutions, reforms and policy actions, which put the country's future path in doubt. (November 10, 2011)

These perspectives were also perpetuated in *The Washington Post*, with the claim of a Turkish model for the Arab Spring countries repeated. In many ways, however, the following quote from *The Washington Post*, while admittedly simplistic, crystallizes the ways in which the "Turkish model" was presented in relation to the Middle East region:

> There have always been three styles of Islamic society in the Mideast: the Arab style, the Iranian style, and the Turkish style. (*The Washington Post*, March 2, 2012)

The suggestion here is that, unlike "the Arab style" that is secular-authoritarian, or the "Iranian style" that is theocratic-authoritarian, the "Turkish style" is oriented toward what *The Guardian* (December 3, 2011) calls, "an essentially pragmatic approach to the country's largely secular institutions" whereby Islam is placed in the background while avoiding tensions with the military and, "attempting to raise both living standards and the economy."

Thus, as with the issue of Erdogan's leadership, the question of Turkey's sociopolitical merger of Islam and democracy was couched in transnational terms. The comments revolving around the issue of the relationship between religion and democracy in Turkey, and the role of Turkey and the AKP as "models" for future Middle Eastern were pointed, with a number overtly aggressive, demonstrating significant ethnocentrism and Islamophobia:

> Muslim democracies??? Give us a break!!! (Reader Comment, *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2013)

> In general, the sad truth is that secular Turkey as Mustafa Kemal Ataturk envisioned it is a thing of the past. As the Turks get rejected from the EU they have no other choice but to

embrace their own Islamic identity . . . Secular Turks (especially on the west coast, such as Istanbul, Izmir, Antalya, etc) they are a dying demographic. Similar to how western Europeans are being outbred by Muslim immigrants in EU, Secular Turks are being outbred by Islamists from the rural countryside. (Reader Comment, *The Economist*, February 17, 2011)

Many more, however, were measured in their skepticism. In response to an article in *The Economist* in which Turkey's government was described as "mildly Islamist," a reader responded,

Mildly Islamist—NOT. Please, *Economist*, also note that the booze crackdown affects many businesses, too—though the legacy of these Islamist parties can be highly selective on who they bust, by way of bribery to their "charitable foundations." (Reader Comment, *The Economist*, June 3, 2011)

And, following a December 2011 article in *The Guardian* where Turkey's secular state was pitched as a model to Arab Spring nations, a reader offered,

If Turkey is your prime example of how an islamist government can run and maintain a secular society you must have very low standards. (Reader Comment, *The Guardian*, December 28, 2011)

The defense of Turkey by readers was not a rejection of the idea that the AKP is a quasi-Islamist party but rather a questioning of the extent to which Islamism was regional political blueprint. In general, many readers supported the secular, democratic credentials of the AKP government while at the same time rejecting the notion of the party as extremist, therefore considering it to be a relatively appropriate regional model. In this way, these comments were some of the few examples of readers reinforcing the globalist, transnational perspective forwarded in many of the articles:

Turkey is fast becoming a model Muslim democracy. There is no question of Turkey becoming an Islamic state. The Turks know democracy is good for them. There is no question of Turkey becoming an Islamic state. They are richer than they have ever been and want to become richer still. The AK party has played no small part. I hope Egypt, Libya and Tunisia follow the same path as Turkey. (Reader Comment, *The Guardian*, December 28, 2011)

Turkey is a NATO ally who have troops who are fighting and dying in Afghanistan, it was accepted as an ally when it was a Military dictatorship at various periods in the 50's, 60's and 80's now it is a democratic state admittedly with some problems we claim it is a mad Islamic terrorist dictatorship. It is all nonsense, Turkey has interests, the US has interests they overlap at some places but they are not the same. (Reader Comment, *The Washington Post*, January 24, 2012)

Human Rights

The final theme, which emerged as predominant in the reader comment sections of the three newspapers analyzed, was Turkey's human rights record, and how that record was linked to the broader region. In the articles linking Turkey to the Arab Spring,

Turkey's record was often described in relative terms. As *The Washington Post* (July 13, 2012)—playing again on the idea that there is a "Turkish model" of integrating Islam and politics at odds with, for example, that of Iran—put it,

> But what kind of political Islam? On that depends the future. The moderate Turkish version or the radical Iranian one? To be sure, Recep Erdogan's Turkey is no paragon. The increasingly authoritarian Erdogan has broken the military, neutered the judiciary and persecuted the press. There are more journalists in prison in Turkey than in China. Nonetheless, for now, Turkey remains relatively pro-Western (though unreliably so) and relatively democratic (compared to its Islamic neighborhood). (*The Washington Post*, July 13, 2012)

Or, as the same newspaper put it in a piece published earlier in the same year: "having repeatedly won free democratic elections, amended Turkey's constitution to expand rights for women, ethnic minorities and unions" (*The Washington Post*, January 23, 2012).

Not all articles linking the Arab Spring to Turkey were positive, with the majority of critical coverage coming from opinion pieces or editorials (where authors are more free to articulate more pointed opinions). The following from *The Guardian* is representative of such critical pieces:

> Why should contemporary Turkey constitute the limit of our political imagination? Why should a state that parades its "development" through drones it purchases from the US, a state that imprisons professors, journalists, translators, lawyers, workers, and students and treats as terrorists the members of a political party representing millions of citizens—why should such a state be one to promote or follow? (*The Guardian*, December 11, 2011)

The response in the reader comments section to this particular article in *The Guardian* contained a fairly representative microcosm of the scope of discussion on human rights in Turkey found in all three publications. In defense of Turkey's record in relation to the treatment of the Kurdish population, readers would often point to Kurdish "terrorism," for example:

> A good article but, to a degree, overlooks the elephant in the room, Kurdish terrorism. The PKK and its fellow travelers, whether in Turkey or abroad, should stop their campaign of violence. (Reader Comment, *The Guardian*, December 11, 2011)

However, Turkey's treatment of opposition politicians led one reader to write that "Turkey claims to be a successful democracy, but for thousands of political protesters, it is anything but" (*The Guardian*, December 11, 2011).

In general, readers were critical on the issue of human rights: far more so than on Erdogan's provincialism, his thirst for power or the integration of Islam into a political platform. A reader comment from *The Economist* serves as an excellent example:

> AKP has not given Kurds any rights, Kurdish opening was no more than a window dressing exercise to fool EU. Ataturk, AKP, MHP and CHP are fundamentally the same when it comes to Kurdish rights. AKP may seem somewhat different but this is not based on the

party's willingness to raise human right standards in Turkey but because they are faced with a new reality. (Reader Comment, *The Economist*, February 17, 2011)

The Arab Spring: From Local Protest to Global Unrest

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to present a preliminary theoretical/conceptual framework for understanding the complex interplay between communicative spaces and geopolitics in the context of recent events in the Middle East and North Africa; and, how this interplay could be linked to what we have called the "global-local feedback loop" that marks what we call *meta-events* such as the Arab Spring. The second aim was to use elite U.S./U.K. media coverage of the Arab Spring, where the events were linked to Turkey, a highly influential U.S.-allied actor to understand how the mediated spaces that opened up in the technological zones of online reader comment sections reflected a topical multiplicity. This multiplicity, in turn, contributed to the accumulation of "incrustations" around, and regular reinscriptions of, the Arab Spring itself.

One core finding in our study was that the events of the Arab Spring were inscribed at the transnational level via international media outlets (both in terms of content and the fact that the outlets themselves are international), only to have the readers bring the issues back down to the national or regional levels via their comments. Turkey was pitched in many articles as a transnational, regional model (politically, economically, and even culturally) for the countries involved in the Arab Spring, yet readers often rejected that framework, preferring to redefine discussions on Turkey in strictly national terms. Thus, we might say what the articles and comments about the Arab Spring and Turkey highlighted is the extent to which media outlets and their readers played different roles within the feedback loop. While the Arab Spring has been covered in great detail, bubbling under the surface of that coverage has been short bursts of debate and discussion. In defining the Arab Spring as a meta-event, we have noted that it is marked by a *combination* of geopolitical import and complex communicative dynamics.

The flow of the Arab Spring uprisings from a localized story to transnational magnitude does not mean that there is stagnation once the global level is reached. It is important to note that as the Arab Spring protests (often symbolized by the January 25, 2011, occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo) reach their second anniversary, their power as a mediated geopolitical phenomenon appears to have remained intact. For example, the discursive incrustations (Bennett 1982) and layers of sediment (Christensen and Christensen 2008) surrounding the events that took place in Egypt continue to grow. In recent protests in Cairo against the Morsi government, a number of female protesters suffered violent sexual assaults: something that had also happened during the original protests in early-2011. The subject became one of global import, with international feminist organizations expressing solidarity with the women of Cairo, and the international media linking the assaults with violent gang-rapes that took place in Delhi around the same time. As Moore (2013) wrote, "What some (Indian) politicians fear most is that this young, educated population reminds them of the Arab spring and they are demanding change." Similarly, the Arab Spring has come to be associated with more than just protest movements in a particular geopolitical region: it has become a popular symbol as well as an analytical tool for explaining the

evolution of networked, highly mediatized resistance to both political and economic power. Whether it is questions of leadership, religion, human rights, feminism, or global capitalism, as a concept, the Arab Spring—as long as it continues as a point of focus for the international media—is in a perpetual state of discursive reproduction.

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that the protests following the Iranian elections of 2009 were also important precursors to the Arab Spring.
2. Particularly considering the supreme role of television in the public realm in places where literacy levels remain low.

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